

# Evangelistic Iranian Christians face persecution, Baylor professor reports

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WACO—Christians in Iran—particularly those who share their faith with Muslims—face persecution less overtly violent than in Iraq and Syria but no less real, a Baylor University religion professor told a recent global gathering in Rome.



Chris van Gorder “To live as a Christian in ideologically adventurous Muslim Iran is to face countless, daily micro-aggressions in a controlled environment that inculcates within Christians the constant perception of threat and vulnerability,” Chris van Gorder told the International Conference on Christian Response to Persecution.

Van Gorder, who has interacted with Iranian Christians 30 years and made one trip to Iran, wrote *Christianity in Persia and the Status of Non-Muslims in Iran* in 2010. More recently, he presented a paper at the conference in Rome on “Christian Responses to Persecution in the Islamic Republic of Iran and the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia.”

“I probably won’t be welcomed back” to Iran after writing and speaking about persecuted Iranian Christians, he noted in an interview.

The estimated number of Christians in Iran varies widely, from official reports of 240,000 to more than 370,000. Probably 10 percent of Iranian Christians suffer consistent, serious persecution, he noted.

### **Evangelism prompts persecution**

In particular, evangelical and Pentecostal Christians who seek to convert Muslims to Christianity—or who preach or publish evangelistic literature in the Farsi language—are targeted, he noted.

“The real dividing line is this question: ‘Do you witness to Muslim neighbors and see Christianity as superior to Islam?’” van Gorder said.

### **Second-class status**

But even the majority of Iranian Christians—Orthodox Armenians and Assyrian or Chaldean Christians—endure second-class status that takes a variety of forms, he said.

“Iranian Christians undergo constant scrutiny from the nation’s religious or morality police,” the Basij, van Gorder said.

Christians may face discrimination in the workplace, in housing or in terms of admission to a university, he said.

### **Muslim-background Christians targeted**

“Another group of Christians that has reported instances of persecution are individuals who were raised Christians but have names that identify them with a previous Muslim heritage,” van Gorder said. “Sometimes, such people are treated as apostates.”

Muslim-background Christians have been denied marriage licenses, lost their jobs and even faced the death penalty, he said.

“In accordance with Islamic law, any action deemed criminal conduct can result in imprisonment, amputation, hanging or beheading,” van Gorder said. “The most recent instance of the death penalty given to a Christian was to Pastor Youcef Nadarkhani, arrested in October 2010 for the crime of apostasy and sentenced to death for evangelizing Muslims.”

Iran has not carried out the death penalty since Nadarkhani’s case, but at least 92 Christians in Iran are imprisoned for their faith today, he said.

### **Suggested response**

In light of the continuing persecution of Iraqi Christians, van Gorder urged a four-part response:

- **Advocacy.**

The plight of imprisoned and persecuted Christians in Iraq “should be raised front and center in discussions with Iran and in agreements made between Iran and other nations or constituencies,” he said. “Religious liberties should always be included when NGOs (nongovernmental organizations) and human rights activists speak about the plight of other political prisoners in Iran.

Advocacy needs to be comprehensive—not focused exclusively on persecuted Christians, but including the Baha’i and other religious minorities, he added.

“Such governmental and nongovernmental advocacy must also be persistent in presenting their case to the vested interests and authorities within Iran,” van Gorder said. “Any and every effort should be made to inform Iranian intellectuals, religious and political leaders, and others in the nature and importance held for the maintenance and advance of religious liberties. The issue is not tangential but basic to harmonious international recognition and respect.”

- **Solidarity.**

Christians globally should listen to Iranian Christians and learn from them, he said.

“Their efforts to strengthen the status of Christianity within Iran, as well as the general well-being of the Iranian Christians’ churches in exile, should be supported in any way possible,” he said.

That includes providing them with platforms to tell their stories, raising awareness about specific cases of persecution and supplying funds and other tangible support for those affected.

- **Communication.**

“Internet use is extraordinarily large among the citizenry of the Islamic Republic of Iran, and there are a large number of bloggers within the country whose writings can be monitored for information and gleaned for a first-hand sense of what is happening within Iran,” van Gorder said.

The Internet and other media also can be used to rally support for Iranian Christians and to provide support through Bible correspondence courses and other discipleship or outreach resources, he added.

- **Prayer.**

“Prayer is seen by many as the least they can do. In fact, the Christian faith reminds us that our prayers are effectual, and they change us, as well as the situations of those who need our prayers,” van Gorder said.