

EDITORIAL: Strong shield against persecution

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Claims of persecution always deliver a jolt. That's especially true when a U.S. Christian aspires to be the persecutee. In this context, "persecution" typically means one of three things: Either somebody disagreed with this particular Christian's beliefs and said so. (What godless rudeness!) Somebody snickered at her religious behavior. (How mean!) Or someone with authority refused to allow him to exert his religious will upon others. (What's this country coming to?)

Editor Marv Knox

Such protests of persecution might appear perplexing or peculiar. Primarily they're paranoid and provincial. The [cover package in this paper](#) presents a broader perspective on persecution. Almost 70 percent of the planet's population live where religion is highly restricted. Shocking as it may sound, zoning ordinances in American suburbs, banned Scripture signs at public school ballgames and store clerks who say, "Happy Holidays" don't make the list. We're talking about places where people are beaten, imprisoned, banned from the marketplace, denied education and even killed because of their faith. Beside them, U.S. Christians' claims of persecution are pathetic.

As you might expect, one of the worst perpetrators is China, whose government is atheistic. Interestingly, however, the vast majority of religious persecution takes place in countries that are overtly religious. They're all for practicing religion—but only their religion, observed only their way. The most strident are countries politically and/or socially dominated by Islam or some strains of Orthodox Christianity.

Counter-intuitively, U.S. Christians who play the persecution card often argue against the policies and principles that ensure not only their religious freedom, but the dream that their great-great grandchildren will have the opportunity to worship and live out faith as they do today.

American religion is protected by the first two clauses of the [First Amendment to the U.S. Constitution](#): “Congress shall make no law respecting an establishment of religion or prohibiting the free exercise thereof.” Thanks to the 14th Amendment, which applied the Constitution to the states, this means no U.S. government can fund or promote religion, but neither can it limit religious practice.

Christians who rail against the status of American religion usually fault principles embedded in the Establish-ment Clause. Ironically, although these people tend to distrust government, the logical consequence of their desire is government involvement in religion. A couple of examples are public school sponsorship of prayers and government funding of faith-based initiatives. The records of other countries illustrate the dire consequences of such action: They range from the anemic state-sponsored churches of Western Europe, where vital faith languishes, to the predatory state-sanctioned religions of Eastern Europe and the Middle East, where persecution predominates.

To a lesser extent, some U.S. Christians decry the [Free Exercise Clause](#). This particularly is true when religion seems just plain weird, such as polygamous sects and animal-sacrificing cults. But it’s also true when religion feels threatening, such as mosques presided over by radical imams.

To ensure religious liberty, not only now but for their descendants, U.S. Christians will support the First Amendment and organizations that protect it, such as the [Baptist Joint Committee](#), and even ones with which they sometimes disagree, such as Americans United and the Interfaith Alliance.

Any nation's religious freedom is only as secure as the liberty afforded its minorities. So, to ensure America never succumbs to religious persecution, we must protect our minorities. If this doesn't appeal to you as a deeply moral, intrinsically ethical and historically Baptist endeavor, then let it appeal to your self-interest. Contemplate the possibility your Christian descendants will be in the minority.

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