

Persecution: Ancient Scourge, Modern Crisis

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Freedom of Religion or Belief (or FoRB), the abuse or loss of which leads to persecution, is both an ancient scourge, and also a profoundly serious modern crisis. It is right that we concern ourselves with the egregious persecution so many of our Christian brothers and sisters the world over experience: and out of love for our neighbour, and respect for the common good, we must extend that concern to all who, in this world today, are discriminated against, marginalised, beaten, threatened, tortured and killed simply because they believe something different from the majority around them. To espouse such a cause is profoundly appropriate for any Christian seeking to engage with integrity in public life today.

It is now more than seven years since *The Times* published an editorial entitled 'Spectators at the Carnage'. It began:

Across the globe, in the Middle East, Asia and Africa, Christians are being bullied, arrested, jailed, expelled and executed. Christianity is by most calculations the most persecuted religion of modern times. Yet Western politicians until now have been reluctant to speak out in support of Christians in peril.²

The Right Honourable Jeremy Hunt MP put this issue on the political agenda, very much at his own initiative and out of his own personal Christian conviction and compassion. He put it front and centre during his time as Foreign Secretary, specifically in establishing the *Independent Review into Christian Persecution* which I was honoured to lead.³ So great thanks are certainly due to Jeremy, and to others too. Fiona Bruce MP has now been

1 This is a lightly edited version of a speech delivered to mark the 175th anniversary of the National Club on 4 November 2021. It is reproduced with permission.

2 *The Times*, Editorial, 31 May 2014.

3 An interim report was published in April 2020, with the final report following in June: <<https://christianpersecutionreview.org.uk/report/>>, accessed 28 January 2022.

appointed as the Prime Minister's Special Envoy for Freedom of Religion or Belief. Fiona has taken on the brief of Special Envoy with remarkable energy and commitment in the face of some very significant challenges. I am equally pleased that the Prime Minister and Foreign Secretary have both now confirmed the appointment of David Burrowes as Deputy Special Envoy, an appointment rightly deserved given his longstanding commitment to this issue. If this subject has gained significant political traction in recent years—as it certainly has—then that in the end is not due to any human agency. I was very conscious of what you might call a strong following wind of the Holy Spirit propelling the work of the Independent Review forward.

But why does all this matter? Why did I argue in the very first of the Review's recommendations that FoRB should be 'central to FCO⁴ operation and culture'⁵ and that a commitment to it should be 'enshrined in strategic and operational guidelines'?⁶ In one sense it is obvious. The wholesale denial of FoRB in today's world is a great evil. I was shocked by the scale, scope and severity of what we found. That people should be targeted simply because they believe different things and organise their lives accordingly is a monstrous evil. That 84% of the world's population have that freedom curtailed is simply unacceptable. That 80% of religiously motivated discrimination is directed against Christians is intolerable. We simply cannot pass by on the other side.

This is a profoundly moral issue, which demands our attention. If you lift the stone of persecution and look underneath, you find some very unpleasant things: you find gang warfare on an industrial scale driven by drug crime; you find authoritarian, totalitarian regimes that are intolerant of dissent and of minorities; you find aggressive militant nationalism that insists on uniformity; you find religious zealotry and fundamentalism in many different forms that often manifest themselves in violence. So if we care about those issues we should certainly care about the persecution of Christians and about FoRB more generally.

But we can take this further. What is often overlooked in a largely secular West, which tends to underplay the significance of the phenomenon, is just how this issue intersects with issues that are of major concern to countries such as the United Kingdom (UK). Take trade as an example: plural communities in which the rights of minorities are respected are inevitably more stable and therefore make better, more secure, trading partners. Think about issues of security too: such societies that value plurality will inevitably pose less of a security risk.

4 The UK Foreign and Commonwealth Office (FCO) has subsequently been reconstituted as the Foreign, Commonwealth and Development Office (FCDO), assimilating the work formerly undertaken by the Overseas Development Office.

5 Report, note 3.

6 Report, note 3.

Or think about other human rights and humanitarian issues, which tend to be looked on with rather more seriousness in the West than does FoRB. But again, there is a clear intersection between the two. Violating a person's religious freedom frequently means a violation of other key human rights such as freedom of assembly, freedom of expression, freedom from torture and the very right to life itself. Yet that is the lot of religious minorities the world over. If the right to FoRB falls, so many other rights fall too. Thus many religious minorities, many Christians amongst them, live in much greater poverty and suffer from greater food insecurity than do members of the majority community. Many religious minorities are also ethnically distinct as well, so there are, frankly, simple issues of racism at work here too.

There is a particular intersection between the denial of FoRB and gender equality. Globally, Christian women are far more likely to be victims of discrimination and persecution, including people trafficking, gender-based violence, kidnapping, forced conversion and forced marriage, than are men or members of the majority community. Thus they suffer double discrimination: they are marginalised and abused simply because they are both women and Christians. We just cannot see this as a side-bar or special interest issue. It bears upon some deeply serious issues in today's world: issues with which Western governments should be hugely concerned, issues such as trade, poverty, security, racism, women's rights and the very right to life itself.

We cannot afford to be religiously illiterate in today's world. This is to fail to understand how and why others act as they do. That is why I argued for the FCO to 'up its game' in terms of religious literacy, so it can do its job better. Again, this is not an option or a special interest issue. If you fail to understand the influence of Confucianism as well as Marxism on the Chinese Communist Party, you will fail to understand the Chinese Communist Party. If you fail to understand the role of the Russian Orthodox Church in Russian society, you will fail to understand Russia. It is certainly worth asking as we look back on the disaster of Afghanistan whether the key role of religion was critically overlooked there too.

We can take this argument one stage further and connect it with another huge issue of our day—especially pertinent in the light of COP26. At the conclusion of the Review I wrote this:

It seems to me that we currently face two existential threats to human flourishing and harmonious communities: climate change and the systematic denial of FoRB. We are beginning to pay proper attention to the former. It is high time we paid proper attention to the latter.⁷

7 Report, note 3.

But they may be even more connected than that. In the end only plural states with a heart for the common good—a good beyond themselves, rather than their own self-aggrandisement—are going truly to care about both these issues. Put bluntly, I doubt either Kim Jong-Un or the Taliban are that concerned about climate change—and they certainly do not care about FoRB. But action on FoRB and action on climate change have common roots and spring from a common concern for the common good. Both are about the proper re-balancing of a world badly out of kilter. Both are about our determining to seek not our own self-interest, but the common good: for the health and welfare both of the planet and of all humanity. Last summer, Jeremy Hunt texted me saying that ‘the last few years have been bad globally for democracies and good for autocracies’—and it is no surprise therefore that those years have been bad too both for the planet and for FoRB. It is a sad fact that the past decade has seen a significant rise in both CO₂ emissions and persecution in the world’s two most populous countries: India and China. That, I suggest, is no coincidence. I am not saying there is a causal relationship between the two. But I do believe there’s a *moral* relationship between them.

So how are we doing, and how is Her Majesty’s Government doing in terms of implementing the recommendations of the Review? I am delighted by the way this issue has become part of the public discourse thanks to Jeremy Hunt’s initiative, and I am struck how often the work of the Review is referred to in Parliament. I am delighted too by the civil society response. Some 16 months ago, a number of civil society organisations—nearly 100 at the last count—came together to establish the UK FoRB Forum to make common cause on this issue. It was my privilege to chair it for its first year and I have now handed that on to Merv Thomas, who in many ways is the doyen of all things FoRB in this country. In addition, Fiona Bruce has since her appointment taken an increasingly active role on the Steering Group, which leads the International Religious Freedom of Belief Alliance, an alliance of 33 like-minded countries working together to champion FoRB and to call out cases of particular concern of persecution or discrimination around the world. The Alliance is a significant means of giving FoRB the prominence it deserves on the global stage. I am delighted by the Government’s repeatedly re-stated commitment to implement the recommendations of my Review. It is frequently reiterated in answers to parliamentary questions, and it was clearly affirmed in the 2019 Conservative Party manifesto and in the more recent Global Britain paper.

But for all that, I do have some concerns: and those relate to that practical issue of putting FoRB front and centre in the Foreign Commonwealth and Development Office’s operations, as my Review commits it to do. Let me give some examples. There was a very worrying and signal failure on the part of all Western nations, the UK included, to take the great vulnerability of religious minorities seriously when it came to extracting people from

Afghanistan, despite the self-evident fact that Sikhs, Hindus, Hazara Shias and Christians were rendered extremely vulnerable by the Taliban takeover—during October 2021 over 100 Hazaras were killed in violent atrocities. Other groups were identified for help by the Government, but not religious minorities, including the extremely vulnerable Christian community: apostates in the eyes of the Taliban and therefore deserving of death. In fact a significant number of members of religious minorities *have* been airlifted out of Afghanistan—but none of them by Western governments, despite their extreme vulnerability, but rather by private individuals and charities acting on their own initiative.

Or take the case of the violence in the Middle Belt in Nigeria. It was only a couple of months ago that the then relevant government minister claimed in a letter to be ‘unaware of substantiated evidence that extremist Islamist ideology is a driver of intercommunal attacks’.⁸ That is so completely at odds with the evidence, including that cited in the Independent Review, as to be literally incredible, and of course while the FCDO continues to claim there is no religious component to the violence they will fail to come up with religiously literate responses to it.

I also remain disappointed by the Government’s resistance to the genocide amendment to the Trade Bill in the spring of 2021. As Lord Alton said at the time:

the Government has continued . . . their policy that only a Court can fully determine whether a genocide is occurring. They do so knowing that no such domestic Court is empowered to do this and that international courts will be blocked from doing so by the perpetrators of genocide.⁹

Thus business as usual is enshrined—and business as usual is good news only for the perpetrators of genocide.

This is a moment of great opportunity. Whilst I fear there has been the sound of foot-dragging on the part of some officials, there are encouraging signs in recent days of evident political will to see change; 2022 sees two very significant opportunities to see that political will put into practice. The last of my recommendations called for the implementation of them all to be independently reviewed after three years. That time is up this summer, so I urge the government to redouble its efforts to ensure that my recommendations are implemented in full, in both spirit and letter. There is much still to do. But there is still time to do it.

8 James Duddington MP, Minister for Africa, in a letter shared with Lord Alton, September 2021.
 9 <<https://www.davidalton.net/2021/03/23/genocide-amendment-narrowly-defeated-in-the-commons-300-mps-brought-the-government-within-a-whisker-of-defeat-in-the-commons-that-and-majorities-for-the-amendment-of-over-100-in-the-lords-have-d/>>, accessed 28 January 2022.

Furthermore, the UK faces another significant opportunity in that we are due to host an International Ministerial Conference on FoRB in July 2022,¹⁰ with the US Secretary of State planning to come. This is a wonderful opportunity for the UK to make a significant statement on the global stage as to the importance it attaches to this issue and I urge the government to take full advantage of it, not least by investing significantly in the Ministerial's planning and resourcing. Again, there is much still to do. But there is still time to do it if the necessary energy and commitment is supplied by officials to ensure this. There is considerable interest in the Ministerial from many FoRB champions across the world hoping to attend. So this is a wonderful opportunity for the UK and we must not squander it.

I urge the Government to grasp these opportunities: to recognise how critical this issue is in today's world and to put FoRB front and centre—not just in rhetoric but in reality. And I urge the Church to be no less engaged, committed and active on this issue; and specifically to support and promote the nationwide campaign to engage churches on FoRB, launched by Fiona Bruce and David Burrowes under the banner 'End the Persecution'.¹¹ We all have our part to play and for us as Christians, this is not optional. It is our Christian duty.

'Which of these three, do you think, was a neighbour to the man who fell into the hands of the robbers?' Jesus asked. He replied, 'The one who showed him mercy.' Jesus said to him, 'Go and do likewise.'¹²

May we indeed as his disciples go and do likewise ourselves. Where Christ calls may we not fail to follow, in addressing what was not only an ancient scourge but is an appalling modern crisis too.

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10 <<https://www.gov.uk/government/news/uk-to-host-international-conference-to-promote-freedom-of-religion-or-belief-next-summer-in-london>>, accessed 28 January 2022.

11 <<https://appgfreedomofreligionorbelief.org/press-statement-appg-forb-and-the-special-envoy-for-freedom-of-religion-or-belief-make-freedom-of-religion-or-belief-a-priority-for-the-2022-ministerial/>>, accessed 28 January 2022.

12 Luke 10:36–37.