Tom Lantos Human Rights Commission

Hearing
on
"Worldwide Persecution of Christians: Responding to New Challenges

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Statement of

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I applaud the cochairs of the Tom Lantos Human Rights Commission for holding this hearing on the profoundly important and too-often neglected challenge of the worldwide persecution of Christians. It is a distinct honor, as always, to work alongside this rare bipartisan effort to lift up ideals of human dignity and human rights — principles both universal and central to the American Founding — and assign them the prominent place in the conduct of United States foreign policy they deserve. Hats off to you, Congressman Smith and Congressman McGovern.

In my testimony, I address three questions:

1) What kind of problem is the problem of world-wide Christian persecution? What is the magnitude, scope, and trajectory of the problem? How pervasive and widespread is it? Also highly relevant to our policy-oriented inquiry is a further question: Are Christians the only victims of intense world-wide religious persecution, or are other communities also the victims?

2) What are the primary drivers or causes of world-wide Christian persecution? And what are the primary drivers or causes of other forms of religious persecution that target other communities — to the extent that these other forms of persecution are also significant and worthy of attention (as I will argue they are)? Are the main drivers of Christian persecution distinct from the main drivers of other forms of religious persecution, making worldwide Christian persecution entirely *sui generis* — a distinct kind of phenomenon? Or are the drivers largely the same across all forms of religious persecution?

3) Finally: Given the nature and scope of world-wide Christian persecution and given also the main drivers of global persecution, what are the strategies and tools — including policy tools — that are most necessary and appropriate if we are going to mount an effective response to this horrific problem and challenge?

Before I address these questions, allow me to say a bit about where I am coming from both philosophically and institutionally. In my own work on religious persecution and religious freedom in recent years, I have had the privilege of working closely with Aid to the Church in Need International. Aid to the Church in Need is a Pontifical Foundation founded in 1947 to support Christians who suffer and are persecuted around the world, enduring hardship and deprivation both in their pastoral life and in their material needs. For several years, I have had the privilege of contributing to Aid to the Church in Need's biennial global report on religious freedom. Here I am going to interrupt our regularly scheduled programming for a brief commercial from Aid to the Church in Need:

"For 25 years, [Aid to the Church in Need's] Religious Freedom in the World Report has assessed the health of this fundamental right [to religious freedom] in 196 countries. It is the only global study of its kind not produced by a governmental organisation, and from its first edition in 1999, it has adopted a deliberately universal perspective. Although produced by a Catholic foundation, this report documents abuses, violations and restrictions on religious freedom affecting all religious groups. Because if religious freedom is denied to one group, there is no true religious freedom for anyone."[1]

Both as a Catholic and as a scholar who has worked on analyzing religious freedom and religious persecution for some 25 years, I strongly associate myself with this universal perspective. Religious freedom is rooted in the universal God-given dignity of all human beings, such that disrespecting it in anyone, Christian or otherwise, is a grave violation of an inalienable and indeed sacred principle. As a political scientist, I am also aware of an abundance of empirical evidence that demonstrates that violations of religious freedom do grave damage to the overall social, economic, and political health of societies. Likewise, robust respect for religious freedom is strongly and causally associated with higher levels of political freedom, economic dynamism, and overall human flourishing.

[1] ACN Report 2025, p. 3.

Of utmost relevance to advocates and policymakers working on religious persecution is the fact — and here allow me to pause for another commercial — that the distinguished political scientist and expert on religious freedom Allen Hertzke has done us all a great service by collecting, analyzing and synthesizing a mountain of historical and social science evidence concerning the social and political evils that flow from religious persecution, and the social and political goods that flow from robust respect for religious freedom. Professor Hertzke has handily and beautifully summarized his decades-long research on religious freedom in a magnificent new volume: *Why Religious Freedom Matters: Human Rights and Human Flourishing,* published by Notre Dame University Press this past April. Much of what I have to say in this testimony shamelessly borrows from Professor Hertzke's vast reservoir of accumulated wisdom.

The upshot of both of these commercial interruptions is that, in my view and that of Aid to the Church in Need International, it is not just in the interest of Christians or Americans or Westerners to try to put a stop to the worldwide persecution of Christians and other religious communities. The global common good and the flourishing of the entire human family require a world in which the scourge of religious persecution is stopped, or at least diminished, and the religious freedom of everyone is respected as sacred and inviolable.

Furthermore, the relevant research also makes it indisputable that a world in which religious persecution is unchecked and expanding is in the long run a highly toxic environment for the United States of America and for core U.S. interests. A world where autocratic governments and radical non-state actors run roughshod over peaceful religious communities and wantonly trample rights of conscience is a world that is not only violent, unstable, and economically stagnant, but also implacably hostile to the hallowed propositions on which our nation was founded 250 years ago: "We hold these truths to be self-evident, that all men are created equal, that they are endowed by their Creator with certain unalienable Rights, that among these are Life, Liberty and the pursuit of Happiness." And "[t]hat to secure these rights, Governments are instituted among Men, deriving their just powers from the consent of the governed." As John Owen, the international relations theorist at the University of Virginia has demonstrated, America's primacy and security depend on maintaining an international order in which its ideals remain ascendant; when those ideals are disrespected or in decline, the geopolitical environment becomes systematically less favorable to America.

One more preliminary matter is definitional. What is religious "persecution"? According to the latest Aid to the Church in Need report, "Persecution refers to

grave and repeated acts of violence or harassment, often carried out with impunity." The report conceptualizes persecution as the highest and most egregious level of religious repression, distinguishing it, for example, from religious discrimination, which "involves legal or social restrictions that unfairly target specific religious groups."

In line with the theme of today's hearing, then, my testimony will focus on persecution. However, I wish to emphasize at the outset that there is what one might call a porous boundary between persecution and discrimination, in the sense that governments and non-state actors appear to be increasingly aware that they can accomplish the oppression and marginalization we associate with persecution more effectively through the "softer" and more routinized methods of discrimination. The outstanding religious freedom scholar Dennis Petri makes this point very effectively: "A drop in recorded incidents [of violent persecution] does not always mean improvement. Sometimes it means fear is doing its job. My friend Dr. Ronald MacMillan has long made this point with the idea of squeeze: *persecution is not only violence but also the steady pressure that believers face in daily life*. The concept later found its way into the methodology of the [Open Doors] World Watch List, and it explains how a country such as Saudi Arabia can rank among the most difficult places to be a Christian while recording very few violent incidents. And a sudden return of arrests may tell us less about the regime's strength than about its weakness" [my emphasis].

1. Assessing the nature, scope, and trajectory of the problem

So what kind of problem is the problem of world-wide Christian persecution? What is the magnitude, scope, and trajectory of the problem? How pervasive and widespread is it? And are Christians the only victims of intense world-wide religious persecution, or are other communities also the victims?

The clear upshot of the available data and analysis is that the problem of anti-Christian persecution is massive and growing. Earlier this year, Aid to the Church in Need in the United Kingdom published an excellent report, *Persecuted and Forgotten?,* which builds on Aid to the Church in Need's wider research but with some additional analysis. The review period ran from 1st August 2024 to 30th June 2026 and assessed whether the religious freedom landscape for Christians had worsened since 2022-24. According to this report, around 220 million Christians are directly exposed to persecution. Furthermore, the report found that in just over half (55 percent) of the countries surveyed, oppression against Christians had worsened since the last report.

This picture of bad and worsening worldwide Christian persecution is confirmed by the Pew Research Center's most recent annual study of religious freedom, published in June this year. Because of significant lag time, 2023 is the most recent year for which data were available for Pew's study. Nonetheless, Pew's reporting is invaluable for understanding long-term trends in religious restrictions imposed by both governments and non-state actors. According to this latest report, "Christians were harassed by government officials or nongovernmental actors in 165 countries in 2023. This represents a dramatic increase from 2007, in which Pew found that Christians experienced harassment in 107 countries. In other words, Pew's data suggest an increase of more than 50% in the number of countries where Christians are experiencing some level of persecution between 2007 and 2023.

At the same time, the data from both Aid to the Church in Need and Pew clearly indicate that the horrific global dragnet of religious persecution takes in not only Christians but members of other major religious communities as well.

For example, "Aid to the Church in Need's Religious Freedom in the World Report 2025 concludes that [during the two-year period under review, 2023 and 2024] there have been grave violations of religious freedom in 62 countries: 24 classified as 'persecution' (the worst category) and 38 as 'discrimination' (the second most serious category), together affecting nearly 5.4 billion people." The report went on to observe that this means that "[a]lmost two-thirds of humanity…live in countries where serious religious freedom violations take place. The 62 countries classified as under persecution or discrimination are home to nearly 64.7 percent of the global population. During the reporting period, only two of these countries – Kazakhstan and Sri Lanka – showed improvement."

Furthermore, according to the report, "24 countries are ranked in the worst category — persecution. Grave and systemic violations, including violence, arrest, and repression, affect more than 4.1 billion people" in nations such as China, Nigeria, and North Korea. "In 75 percent of these countries (18 out of these 24), the situation has worsened" since our previous report in 2023.

This grim picture is again confirmed by Pew's most recent religious freedom study, which "shows that the number of countries with high or very high levels of social hostilities involving religion" — that is, religious restrictions imposed by non-state actors — "rose sharply in 2023." Pew highlights that "[a]mong the reasons are increases in the harassment of religious minorities and worldwide reverberations of Hamas' Oct. 7 attack on southern Israel and Israel's military response in Gaza.

Fifty-five countries had elevated (high or very high) levels of social hostilities involving religion in 2023. This is up from 45 the previous year…."

In terms of Pew's analysis of government-driven religious persecution, "58 countries had high or very high levels of government restrictions on religion [in 2023] — just one fewer than the peak number, 59, recorded in 2022." China, Iran, Afghanistan, and Uzbekistan were "among the countries with very high [government-restriction] scores in 2023."

In a way that parallels the findings of Aid to the Church in Need, the upshot of Pew's report is that a large majority of the world's population lives in countries with high levels of religious persecution driven either by governments or non-state actors. As Pew summarizes the global picture: "86 countries [of 198 countries and territories analyzed in this report] had elevated levels either of government restrictions or of social hostilities, while 27 had elevated levels both of social hostilities and of government restrictions." In terms of global population as opposed to numbers of countries, Pew concluded that "about three-quarters (78%) live in places with high or very high levels of government restrictions and/or social hostilities."

Strikingly, according to Pew, "The six countries with very high social hostilities involving religion in 2023 were Nigeria, India, Israel, Syria, Bangladesh and Pakistan." This means that South Asia alone is home to half of the 6 most religiously violent countries on the planet, making the Indian subcontinent an enduring global flash point for sectarian strife, in keeping with the region's historically high levels of communal volatility and violence since at least 1947.

We have already established that the Christian community is one major and growing target of this worldwide global epidemic of religious persecution. But what about other groups? To what extent are they being targeted as well? Based on the available data, the clear answer is that other religious communities are also subject to severe persecution throughout the world. Just one data point in this regards: In all the countries with the highest and most systematic forms of religious persecution, such as China, North Korea, Bangladesh, Iran, Myanmar, and Saudi Arabia, it is not just Christians but other religious groups who are targeted with comparable or in some cases even greater viciousness and intensity.

Consider Malaysia as just one example in this regard. Malaysia is a country often touted as an exemplar of moderate Islam, but my own multiple visits to the country over the years revealed a much less edifying reality just beneath the surface. In my

visits, I learned that members of the ethnically Malay Muslim majority enjoy privileged access to government jobs, contracts, and educational opportunities. At the same time, however, the government requires that Malays formally affiliate with Sunni Islam, making even voluntary conversion to non-Muslim faiths both a religious and political crime. Perhaps most surprisingly the Malaysian state privileges one form of Sunni Islam, automatically disfavoring not only Shi'ites (who are effectively illegal and driven underground) but also all Sunnis who do not subscribe to the state-prescribed theological orthodoxy. A friend of mine from Pakistan, an open-minded Sunni Muslim who believes strongly in religious and political freedom, moved to Malaysia for professional reasons some years ago. But my friend later confided in me that precisely as a Muslim he found Malaysia intolerably repressive, and that he was preparing to move back to Pakistan — Pakistan! — because it was more theologically open-minded and tolerant of Islamic diversity than Malaysia.

In other words, many countries — even many Muslim-majority countries — that impose severe restrictions on Christian minority communities also impose surprisingly severe and extensive restrictions on disfavored Muslim minority communities, who may be as large or larger than the restricted Christian minority.

Consistent with my own extensive travels and experiences across South Asia and Southeast Asia, what my colleagues at Aid to the Church in Need and I found in our report on the global state of religious freedom is that we are witnessing a worldwide and continuing epidemic of religious persecution that is largely an equal-opportunity phenomenon — one that targets a remarkably broad array of religious expressions and religious communities.

For example, Pew found that Christians and Muslims suffer persecution on a comparable scale: "In 2023, Christians and Muslims, the two largest religious groups in the world, faced physical harassment as well as verbal and other nonphysical harassment in more countries than other groups. Christians were harassed by government officials or nongovernmental actors in 165 countries in 2023, slightly down from 166 in 2022. Muslims were harassed in 143 countries, down from 148 in 2022." What difference there is between the two groups in this regard may be due partly to the fact, as Pew notes in its analysis of global religious demography, that Christians are far more geographically dispersed than any other major religious community, in contrast to Hindus who are overwhelmingly concentrated in India, to Buddhists who are concentrated in the Asia-Pacific, and to Muslims who are concentrated in the Asia-Pacific and the Middle East and North Africa.

What Pew found with respect to the global persecution of the Jewish community is also telling. Even though the total global Jewish population is less than 16 million, or 0.2% of humanity, Pew found that Jews "were harassed in 98 countries, up from 90 in 2022." Pew reasonably attributed the increase "to antisemitic statements from a variety of sources (including social media) after the attacks in Israel on Oct. 7, 2023, by the militant group Hamas and Israel's ensuing military campaign in Gaza."

However, Pew explicitly warns against drawing from their data any reliable inferences concerning which religious group might be the world's most repressed, persecuted, or harassed. As Pew says, "Harassment is counted as having occurred in a country if one or more incidents were reported by the sources used in this study. While the resulting data indicates whether any harassment by governments and private actors took place, *it does not show which religious groups faced the most intense or severe harassment or which were the most persecuted*" [my emphasis].

Further placing anti-Christian persecution in a wider context, Aid to the Church in Need International — again, a Catholic organization — highlighted as one of the major top-line findings of our 2025 report that "[t]here has been a sharp rise in antisemitic and anti-Muslim hate crimes [throughout the world]. Following the 7th October 2023 Hamas attack in Israel and the subsequent war in Gaza, antisemitic and anti-Muslim incidents surged across Europe, North America, and Latin America. In France, antisemitic acts increased by 1,000 percent, while anti-Muslim hate crimes rose by 29 percent. Germany recorded 4,369 offences linked to the conflict—up from just 61 in 2022. Synagogues and mosques were attacked, individuals harassed, and hate speech proliferated online. In many cases, government responses proved inadequate, fuelling fear and insecurity among religious communities."

At the same time, none of this prevents honest analysts from recognizing that in some specific contexts Christians are disproportionately subject to violence and persecution, and that this results from some very specific factors. The leading example is probably Nigeria.

According to the outstanding scholar of religious persecution and religious freedom, Dr. Dennis Petri, Nigerian Christians are disproportionately targeted in violence, and armed Fulani militants are the primary drivers of that disparity. The upshot of his analysis seems to be that Christians in Nigeria are roughly three to

seven times more likely than Muslims to be killed or abducted by terror groups after population adjustment, depending on the region, with Fulani militants the largest single perpetrator category driving this disparity. However, Petri's own analysis emphasizes that many thousands of Muslims have also been targeted and killed by Fulani militants. He also cautions that these are relative probabilities, not counts of victims; that the conflict has ethnic, economic, and political dimensions alongside religion; and that a disparity alone does not automatically prove religious freedom violations.

2. Primary drivers and causes of Christian and other forms of global religious persecution

What are the primary drivers or causes of world-wide Christian persecution and the persecution targeting other religious communities? Most importantly: Are the main drivers of Christian persecution distinct from the main drivers of other forms of religious persecution, making worldwide Christian persecution entirely *sui generis* — a distinct kind of phenomenon? Or are the drivers largely the same across all forms of religious persecution?

Based on the reporting done by Aid to the Church in Need as well as other organizations, I believe that it is clear that there are three main causes or drivers of worldwide religious persecution, and that these causes or drivers are responsible — at one and the same time — for most of the worldwide Christian persecution and the worldwide persecution of other religious believers as well. They are:

a. Authoritarianism, in secular, Islamist, and religious-nationalist forms;
b. Violence and armed conflict;
c. Radical non-state actors.

The available evidence strongly suggests that the first of these — authoritarianism — is the single most important driver of worldwide religious persecution, including the persecution of Christians.

In some sense, the tendency of authoritarian and centralizing modern states to persecute, repress, control, and shape religion to suit their purposes has been a central feature of modernity going back to the sixteenth century. With the French Revolution and subsequent radical-Left revolutions that regarded the revolutionary Jacobins as role models, many modern political theorists and revolutionary statesmen have believed that the construction of effective and unitary nation states required the radical subjugation, subordination, and (if necessary) elimination of

countervailing religious authorities and communities assumed to be in league with reactionary forces opposed to modernization, enlightenment, and economic development. Numerous 20th century movements, including Bolshevism in Russia, the Revolution in Mexico, Republicanism in Spain, and Kemalism in Turkey were animated by this kind of ideology, creating numerous political regimes deeply hostile to religious freedom and responsible for massive campaigns of violent religious persecution. Pope Pius XI instituted the Feast of Christ the King more than a century ago in recognition of the massive worldwide influence and destructive political consequences — particularly for religious liberty and the freedom of the Church — such movements had already wrought by the early decades of the twentieth century.

Consistent with this deep-seated feature of modernity, the recent Aid to the Church in Need report to which I contributed was clear about the leading source or driver of worldwide religious persecution – in other words, the core reason why this persecution is occurring and why it is increasing:

"Authoritarianism is the greatest threat to religious freedom. Authoritarian regimes have systematically enforced legal and bureaucratic mechanisms to suppress religious life. In countries such as China, Eritrea, Iran and Nicaragua, the government represses religion through pervasive surveillance, restrictive legislation, and the repression of dissenting beliefs. Authoritarian rule is among the main drivers of persecution in 19 countries and underpins patterns of discrimination in 33 others."

Given that authoritarianism is a key driver of religious persecution, is it clear that the worldwide rise in religious persecution in recent years is at least in good measure a result of the continuing worldwide rise in authoritarianism. Such a rise has been well-documented by Freedom House and numerous other organizations.

Indeed, the latest Freedom House report explicitly highlights the link between rising autocracy across the world and a widening circle of global religious repression. According to the report, "The 20 consecutive years of decline in global freedom have been a boon for the world's autocracies, which have swelled in number and hardened their repression. In 2005, 45 countries were rated Not Free; today that number is 59." Furthermore, "Nineteen Partly Free countries have dropped to Not Free, swelling the ranks of the world's autocracies, which have become
more repressive at home and more aggressive abroad." This sharp downward decline has continued, if not accelerated, in the last couple of years. In 2025,

“[g]lobal freedom declined for the 20th consecutive year…. A total of 54 countries experienced deterioration in their political rights and civil liberties during the year, while only 35 countries registered improvements.”

The report then immediately goes on to highlight the dire implications for religious freedom: “Within their borders, this growing cohort of authoritarian rulers has tried *to eradicate ethnic and religious minority groups*; eliminate political opponents, prodemocracy activists, and independent media; and unleash corruption” [my emphasis].

But one should note here that the problem of authoritarianism is not restricted to authoritarian regimes. It is not just authoritarian regimes that practice authoritarian*ism*. The problem also is that many rights-respecting democracies have adopted or begun to adopt authoritarian practices – sometimes in direct imitation of authoritarian regimes.

This reflects the global spread and acceleration of what human rights lawyer and NGO expert Chrystie Swiney terms a “counter-associational revolution.” In the last decade or so, several major democratic governments have imposed severe restrictions on civil society organizations, including religious ones.

Consider a deeply disturbing prospect in democratic South Africa. South Africa's churches face a new and potentially serious process of state oversight: the Cultural, Religious, and Linguistic Rights Commission's "Section 22" initiative, billed as self-regulation of the Christian sector, has produced a draft Framework for the Christian sector (December 2025) that, in the view of the NGO Freedom of Religion South Africa (FOR SA), is "not self-regulation but, in effect, state regulation of religion," requiring registration of churches and ministers under state-established structures. The process has been repudiated from within: Rev. Prof. Musa Xulu, the committee's own chairperson, resigned in January 2026, setting out his reasons in a public statement and supporting affidavit. The danger lies in what similar laws have already produced elsewhere in Africa — Rwanda's 2018 law and its successors have closed thousands of churches — a parallel that observers have linked to China's "Patriotic Association" model of state-controlled religion. At this point, thankfully, FOR SA itself cautions that the threat, while real, is not "at our door": no political party supports state regulation, the responsible department has shown no appetite for legislation, and any bill would still face full parliamentary scrutiny, possible presidential referral, and constitutional challenge in the courts. But the fact that any official body in a robust democracy like South Africa, which

has historically enjoyed such high levels of religious freedom and tolerance, has even considered such a sweeping measure is not encouraging.

Another robust democracy, India, has considered sweeping restrictions on the ability of NGOs, including religious NGOs, to access foreign funding, and if they lose such funding, to continue to operate independently of government control. Fortunately, thus far, Indian democracy has demonstrated its resilience in that the proposed measure is still being considered and refined through a Parliamentary process to which both the ruling coalition and the opposition parties have access, and which is also receiving the input of civil society groups, including religious bodies.

If autocratic tendencies, whether in authoritarian regimes or even in democracies, are the single greatest root cause of religious persecution, the question becomes: Why does autocracy abhor religious freedom? *The answer, clearly, is that history and contemporary experience both suggest that self-organizing religious institutions serve as powerful and effective restraints on state power — precisely what authoritarian regimes (or would-be autocrats who wish to turn existing democracies into autocracies) do not welcome.* Any community that valorizes a principle higher than the state and seeks to establish autonomous forms of life and organization outside of the state is going to be increasingly subject to persecution by the state.

In numerous historically significant instances, strong religious institutions have often proven to be powerful and effective peer competitors with the temporal "powers that be." It is obvious, however, that this capacity to serve as a bulwark against state power, and to resist state-imposed determinations of the public good and their reflection in law and culture, can be operative only insofar as religious communities are self-organizing and possess at least some degree of effective institutional religious freedom in its various dimensions. The Investiture Controversy of the 11th century is the classic illustration. However, the background circumstances and events that led to the Magna Carta in the following century are equally illustrative.[2]

[2] Virtually all the issues that fired the burning conflict between the Archbishop of Canterbury Thomas à Becket and English King Henry II from 1164 to 1170, eventually leading to Becket's murder at Henry's behest in December 1170, pertained to institutional religious freedom. Significantly, according to the account of John of Salisbury, Becket, as he received the blows from his assassins, uttered the words, "And I for my God am ready to die, and for the declaration of justice and *the liberty of the Church*." By a complex but still definite route, Becket's resistance helped to lead — a few decades later — to the Magna Carta in 1215, the first clause of which declares, "In the first place we have granted to God, and by this present charter have confirmed for us our heirs in perpetuity, that the English Church shall be free, and shall have her rights entire, and her liberties inviolate." See, for example, the

In recent history, think of the enormously significant resistance to varying forms of political tyranny set in motion by Nahdlatul Ulama (the world's largest Muslim organization, which exists entirely outside of state control) and other independent Islamic civil society organizations in Indonesia in the 1990s, by Catholic and Protestant churches during the military dictatorship in South Korea in the 1970s and 1980s, by organizations of Buddhist monks in Burma in the mid-2000s, by churches and other religious organizations during the anti-apartheid struggle in South Africa in the 1980s and 1990s, by the Catholic Church and the Solidarity movement in Poland in the 1980s, and by the Catholic hierarchy as well as religious lay movements in the Congo in recent years.[3]

Religious institutions play a valuable role in countering government domination even when the state is not authoritarian. In democratic states, as Tocqueville observed, religious institutions may help counter the corruption, despotism, social lethargy, and cultural disintegration that tend to occur when the state exercises undue influence over determinations of the common good, public morality, and the direction of society.[4] And as Michael McConnell, Robert George and William Saunders have pointed out, societies are more likely to flourish when determinations of what constitutes the common good — and the degree to which such determinations are reflected in law and public policy — are decided by a free and equal competition between the voluntary institutions of civil society, including voluntary religious institutions, rather than the state alone. For example, Michael McConnell observes that in the American constitutional settlement, religious institutions play a role analogous to the free press. Whereas the latter is designed as a check on government and as a means of shaping public opinion independent of the state, so too are religious institutions intended to help shape public morality and the common good independent of the state.[5]

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illuminating discussion and presentation of the relevant primary source materials in a chapter entitled "The Freedom of the Church: The English Experience, 1160-1260," in John T. Noonan, Jr., *The Believer and the Powers That Are: Cases, History, and Other Data Bearing on the Relation of Religion and Government* (New York: Macmillan, 1987), 21-35.

[3] For a summary discussion of the democratizing role played by these and other religious movements in recent decades, see Toft, Philpott, and Shah, *God's Century*, 82-120.

[4] See Alexis de Tocqueville, "On the Principle Causes Tending to Maintain a Democratic Republic in the United States," in *Democracy in America*, 264-301.

[5] McConnell, "Origins and Historical Understanding," 1409-1517; Robert P. George and William L. Saunders, "Romer v. Evans: The Supreme Court's Assault on Popular Sovereignty," *Civil Rights Practice Group Newsletter* 1, no. 1 (Fall 1996).

Data on current religious persecution worldwide suggest that a second major driver is violence and armed conflict. According to the most recent Freedom House report: “While no single cause can explain the two-decade deterioration in global freedom, Freedom House data point to four factors that have presented the greatest threats to democracy and human rights.” The report then goes on to note that violence and armed conflict is among the most important of these four factors. As the report elaborates: “Violence and armed conflict directly jeopardize physical safety, but they also undermine many other fundamental freedoms, including freedom of movement and property rights. *Women and members of ethnic and religious minority groups tend to be disproportionally affected by conflicts, and in some cases they are deliberately attacked*. As conflicts drag on, they often spill across borders, attract foreign mercenaries or interventions, and make it extremely difficult for the country to create or rebuild democratic institutions” [my emphasis].

The 2025 Aid to the Church in Need report underscores this point: “There has been an exponential growth in religious communities suffering the consequences of war amid a surge in conflicts around the world — civil wars, wars between nations and regional conflicts. Armed conflicts in Ukraine, Sudan, Myanmar, Gaza, and Nagorno-Karabakh have resulted in mass displacements, church closures, and targeted attacks on religious communities.”

The third major driver of religious persecution worldwide, including Christian persecution, is violence and repression perpetrated by radical non-state actors, motivated by a wide variety of religious and other ideologies. I will only emphasize that the main category here is militants motivated by some form of Islamism, such as the Fulani militants in Nigeria I mentioned earlier.

As our Aid to the Church in Need report observes: “In 15 countries, religious extremism is a main driver of persecution; in 10 others, it contributes to discrimination. From the Sahel to Pakistan, jihadist groups expand through decentralised networks, targeting Christians and Muslims who cannot accept the extremist ideology.”

3. Strategies and tools needed to counter world-wide religious persecution, including the persecution of Christians

Given the nature and scope of world-wide Christian persecution and given also the main drivers of global persecution, what are the strategies and tools — including policy tools — that are most necessary and appropriate if we are going to mount an effective response to this horrific problem and challenge?

First, it is clear that the world is not going to see serious progress in the effort to curb religious persecution and advance religious freedom without another worldwide wave of democratization. If the greatest driver of religious persecution is authoritarianism, the greatest antidote to religious persecution is a successful world-wide effort to strengthen existing constitutional democracies and their religious freedom protections; move semi-free or partly free nations into the democratic camp; and to mount a renewed effort to plant and nourish seeds of freedom in the world's hardened autocracies.

For the last time the world saw a major movement towards greater religious freedom was during the so-called "third wave "of democratization that occurred between roughly 1974 and the post-Soviet transition era of 1989-1991. In retrospect, however, it is possible to see that the third wave enjoyed such power and momentum that it continued to crash against authoritarian regimes well after the year 2000 and included, for example, the successful transition of Muslim-majority Indonesia from the Soeharto dictatorship to full democratization under the remarkably presidency of Abdurrahman Wahid in 1999-2001. The third wave of democratization that began in 1974 ultimately carried some 80 countries from authoritarianism to at least electoral democracy, more than tripling the number of democracies from about 40 in 1974 to about 120 by the early 2000s — a wave that did not crest and recede until around 2006.

Religious freedom is secure, sustainable, and capacious only when it is part of a package of constitutional and democratic norms, institutions, and procedures. Of course, no doubt, there is enormous and perfectly understandable exhaustion and cynicism with respect to democracy promotion and democratization these days, given the failure of the Iraq War in the early 2000s and the ways in which some groups have abused or exploited democracy promotion to advance a hypertrophied human rights agenda with little connection to core democratic norms or genuinely universal human rights. But we should not lose sight of the reality that there is little prospect of moving the global needle on religious freedom without moving the global needle on the complete "package" of constitutional government and liberal democracy. Authoritarianism in its various forms is the greatest driver of religious repression, which means progress towards greater religious freedom will be

piecemeal and fragile in the absence of major political reform and a new wave of democratic transitions across the world.

Second, breakthroughs in global democracy and religious freedom will depend on the politically incorrect confrontation of cultural and religious barriers to the embrace of liberty in the Muslim-majority world. As my revered teacher Samuel P. Huntington was among the first to observe, the third wave of democratization was an overwhelmingly Catholic wave — occurring in dozens of majority Catholic nations or nations with large Catholic communities in Latin America, Southern Europe, Asia, and Sub-Saharan Africa. And this wave occurred largely because the Second Vatican Council, particularly through the Council's 1965 Declaration on Religious Liberty, *Dignitatis humanae,* broke down Catholicism's deep-seated religious and cultural resistance to political and religious freedom through the embrace of a theologically robust set of teachings on human dignity and its demands that were new in some respects but also consonant with Scripture and Tradition.

We will make little headway towards a new expansion of democracy and respect for concomitant rights such as religious freedom without a similarly dramatic theological embrace of freedom in the Muslim-majority world — which, particularly in its Middle East heartland, remains, by and large, stubbornly resistant to constitutional government, liberal democracy, and human rights. Here Indonesia and its largest civil society organization, the 100-million-member Nahdlatul Ulama, provide a template for success. Animated by a profound respect for the rights of every human being, including non-Muslims, and rooted in a theology of divine compassion, Nahdlatul Ulama combines a reverence for Islamic sources and tradition with a commitment to the flexible interpretation of jurisprudence in a way that makes it eminently possible for Indonesian Muslims — and, in principle, all Muslims — to embrace democracy, human rights, and a robust understanding of religious freedom in line with Article 18 of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights. In fact, the former Chairman of Nahdlatul Ulama, Kyai Haji Yahya Cholil Staquf, has explicitly and publicly highlighted and elevated the Second Vatican Council of the Catholic Church and *Dignitatis humanae* in particular as models for his efforts and that of Nahdlatul Ulama to reform classical Islamic orthodoxy. It is an urgent policy imperative for the United States and friends of freedom everywhere to do everything we can to support Mr. Staquf and the "Humanitarian Islam" movement he has spearheaded in concert with like-minded spiritual colleagues in Indonesia's Nahdlatul Ulama.

Third, advocates for religious freedom inside and outside government must recognize that peacemaking is an essential pathway to religious freedom. Speaking of the Iraq War and other similar conflicts, it is now clear how devastating they were — and are — for the freedom and viability of religious minority communities. It is well known that the Iraq War led to the collapse of the Christian community in Iraq, which plummeted from 1.5 million to a few hundred thousand today. It is clear that advocates for religious freedom should also be, almost without exception, advocates for the prevention of war and the cessation of war, not only in the Middle East but also in Ukraine, Africa, and Asia. Horrific civil wars and insurgencies in Africa and a general deterioration of the security situation have been pathways for the massive and ongoing persecution of religious minorities. "No justice, no peace," says the old slogan. One could say today with equal force: "No peace, no religious freedom."

Fourth, the fact that the growing problem of worldwide religious persecution is clearly an ecumenical phenomenon — an equal-opportunity source of violence, repression, and victimization for religious believers of all kinds, in almost every part of the world — means that there can and must be an equally ecumenical response. This multi-religious, multi-civilizational problem demands a multi-religious, multi-civilizational response. This is especially important given that so much religious freedom advocacy seems to be organized along confessional lines.

As Chairman Smith and Chairman McGovern are aware, I have been proud to be part of such an ecumenical effort – the G20 Religion Forum, or R20. With a Permanent Secretariat based in North Carolina, the R20 is an unprecedented global coalition of religious authorities with a mass following, who support freedom of conscience and freedom of speech, while opposing religious extremism and terrorism. The R20 was established in 2022 under the G20 Presidency of Indonesia, when the world's largest Muslim organization, Nahdlatul Ulama, convened more than 500 religious leaders and scholars at a G20 Main Event. This was the first time that religion was ever an official part of the G20 agenda.

Today, with my colleagues Professor Mary Ann Glendon and C. Holland Taylor and numerous other religious leaders and scholars throughout the world, we are organizing an R20 Summit that will take place here in Washington, D.C., at the Museum of the Bible on December 9, 2026, immediately preceding the G20 Leaders Meeting the President will host in Miami the following week.

Given the enormous geo-political ramifications of religious freedom and religious persecution for global prosperity and geopolitical stability, the R20 International

Summit will present the case for each of the following two (2) proposals before G20 leaders convene in Miami. These proposals are designed to advance what we believe should be the priorities of the U.S. G20 Presidency. Each proposal consists of suggested language for inclusion in the G20 Leaders' Declaration, followed by a brief discussion of G20 precedents that support the adoption of said proposal.

Proposal #1

Freedom of Religion, Expression, Association, and Assembly. *We reaffirm that freedom of religion or belief, freedom of opinion or expression, the right to peaceful assembly, and the right to freedom of association are interdependent, inter-related and mutually reinforcing and stress the role that these rights can play in the fight against all forms of intolerance and discrimination based on religion or belief.*

Precedent: This language is drawn verbatim from paragraph 78 of the **G20 New Delhi Leaders' Declaration**, adopted by G20 Leaders at the **New Delhi Summit, India, 9–10 September 2023**. In that declaration, Leaders emphasized that freedom of religion or belief, freedom of opinion or expression, the right to peaceful assembly, and the right to freedom of association are "interdependent, inter-related and mutually reinforcing," and stressed their role in combating all forms of intolerance and discrimination based on religion or belief. The proposed statement therefore restates and reinforces an existing G20 leaders-level consensus without creating a new substantive commitment.

The **New Delhi Leaders' Declaration** is the principal — and apparently sole — G20 Leaders' Declaration that expressly affirms freedom of religion or belief. The November 2022 R20 Bali Summit appears to have helped prepare the ground for the New Delhi Declaration's unprecedented treatment of religion and belief. By linking religious leadership to peacebuilding, social cohesion, equal dignity, and the prevention of communal hatred, the R20 supplied a G20-adjacent conceptual framework that India's successor Presidency carried forward.

Proposal #2

Persecuted Religious Communities. *We call for strengthened international action to protect religious communities facing persecution, violence, forced displacement and discrimination. We will support humanitarian assistance, safe return or resettlement, restoration of homes and places of worship, access to essential services, and accountability for crimes committed on the basis of religion or belief.*

Precedent: G20 Leaders have repeatedly recognized forced displacement as a global concern. In the **Hamburg Leaders' Declaration (Germany, 2017)**, Leaders recognized conflict, natural disasters, and human-rights violations and abuses as major drivers of forced displacement; committed to addressing the distinct needs of refugees and migrants, particularly near their regions of origin; and, where applicable, to enabling their safe return home. The **New Delhi Leaders' Declaration (India, 2023)** condemned terrorism in all its forms, including terrorism in the name of religion or belief, and deplored religious hatred against persons and religious symbols and holy books. These precedents support the proposed statement's calls for humanitarian assistance, resettlement or safe return, protection against religion-based violence and discrimination, and international action; the provisions on restoration of homes and places of worship and accountability for religion- or belief-based crimes would constitute new, more specific commitments.

The R20 and the G20 provide an excellent and immediately available vehicle for highlighting and elevating the ecumenical scourge of world-wide religious persecution. As this year's G20 host, the United States has an immediate, historic opportunity to build on the 2023 New Delhi Leaders' Declaration and affirm that religious freedom is a universal right and that it is essential for the world's most powerful nations and economies to strengthen respect for this right as interdependent with freedom of expression, peaceful assembly, and association, and as an important means of combating the growing global epidemic of intolerance and discrimination based on religion or belief.

As a small but potentially significant symbolic step towards placing religious freedom at the center of the geopolitical agenda, I respectfully request that our two distinguished Chairs, Congressman Smith and Congressman McGovern, and the Lantos Commission as a whole to join with me and my R20 colleagues in urging the President and his Administration to incorporate the above language on religious freedom we are proposing into the Final G20 Leaders Statement that will be considered and adopted by the G20 Leaders when they meet in Miami on December 14-15.