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BLUEPRINT

THE STATUS OF FREEDOM OF RELIGION IN THE WORLD

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The present situation of religious freedom around the world ¹

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Allow me to start with a quote from Mr. Bhatti's introduction to the 2014 Report issued by *Church in Need on The Status of Freedom of Religion in the World*: "Nobody should have to suffer physical violence and psychological intimidation for declaring what they hold dear and adhere to. Religious freedom is a right and a responsibility that involves everybody; all of us are entitled to express our beliefs, respecting the faith of each other."²

Recent reports on the abuse of the fundamental human right of freedom of religion and freedom of conscience, however, are very worrisome and cause for serious consideration³. While the Report treats all forms of religious persecution and intolerance, the numbers of Christians that suffer persecution, whether by murder or through discrimination, are truly alarming. Some statistics speak of 150 million Christians suffering persecution annually throughout the world and an addition 50 million Christians who are discriminated against because of their religious conviction.⁴ An estimated 80% of the cases of religious persecution is aimed exclusively at Christians which, in the words of some, clearly indicates a "global war against Christianity."⁵ Such a phrase may not resonate so well upon our ears as we are more attuned to words more politically correct and are more accustomed to focus on the positive, on interreligious dialogue, yet we cannot, or at least we should not, mince words when it comes to describing the facts, the truth of the reality which many of our brothers and sisters experience when they face execution for confessing their faith in Christ.

While the situation of freedom of religion in the world is rather devastating, especially when one acknowledges the unprecedented number of cases of violence against Christians, there remains a strong effort to keep the spotlight on these human rights violators and the perpetrators of these abuses. With these efforts there is the hope that the international community will react, that it has not lost its conscience, that it has not become too cynical or, in the words of Pope Francis, succumbed to a "global indifference". As Permanent Observer of the Holy See, I have received an ever-growing collection of studies and reports on the persecution of Christians. On several occasions, I have received and listened to the coordinators and authors of the studies and I must

¹ Address given on the occasion of the panel discussion focused on the 2014 Report produced by CHURCH IN NEED ON *The Status of Freedom of Religion in the World* in Geneva on November 5 2014 at the UN Club de la Press.

² See the full 2014 report on Religious Freedom by Church in Need under the following link: <http://religion-freedom-report.org.uk/full-report/>

³ See www.pewforum.com***

⁴ "150 à 200 millions de chrétiens persécutés!" Tribune de Genève, 24 octobre 2014.

⁵ "Sono almeno 150 milioni..." Giornale del Popolo, 24 ottobre 2014, p. 23. Original quote from John Allen.



say that their work is extremely important in keeping alive the public opinion, the public awareness of the status of religious freedom. These reports, whether country specific such as the one prepared by “Church in Need” or more globalized as the Pew Forum analysis, not only indicate that there is a developing interest in the question of religious freedom and tolerance of belief, but they also express the disquieting rate of occurrences of violations and abuses in this area. What do these reports, especially this detailed and thorough report from “Church in Need”, tell us of the situation of religious persecution?

The report manifests that an undeniable aspect of the current status of religious persecution is that violations of religious freedom, especially against Christians, are not limited merely to the countries identified as the “usual suspects”. Clearly, the most publicized violations refer today to the Middle East, in those Muslim majority countries, which tolerate, or at least fail to clearly and publically denounce, the more radical or “jihadist” form of their religious expression such as ISIS. The predominant group persecuted is that of Christians, but ISIS has not failed to seize the opportunity to persecute any person who does not adopt their particular form of fundamentalism and so Shia imams and Yezidi ethnic and religious persons have been mercilessly executed. In many of the countries where radical fundamentalism thrives, Christians are all too often categorized or politically dubbed as “Westerners” and therefore held as enemy to the State, enemy of Islam, to be eradicated.

But outside of these countries where Christians are often at risk, the report clearly shows the phenomenon not to be limited to the extremists ISIS types in Iraq and Syria. Rather, the cases of persecution continue to grow in certain parts of Africa, for example in South Sudan, Eritrea, and Nigeria and also in parts of Asia, particularly in China, Myanmar, Sri Lanka and India⁶. Hence, while there is a predominance of acts of religious persecution at the hands of Muslim extremists, it is certainly not limited to them. In fact, a common thread recurring in the vast majority of these cases is the systematic imposition of an inflexible religious ideology or of extreme forms of nationalism and of a sense of identity that forcefully implement their position, either by forced conversion or by execution, without any due consideration to the fundamental human right of conscience, which is the root of freedom of religion.

Another dimension that comes to the surface in our discussion is the failure, on the part of some States, to protect and to defend these basic rights for their citizens. The ‘culprits’ are in most instances non-State actors, a rather new phenomenon that complicates the task of protection on the part of States often ill-prepared or just unable to control their territory. Such a situation calls for international cooperation in sustaining the cause of human rights. But in several countries where crimes of discrimination and persecution are blatant and the free expression of religion inhibited, a structural problem is at the root of public social organization, the lack of a separation of religious conviction and government, a separation of “Church and State” as we would commonly describe it. In this situation a person that does not profess the religion or convictions of the majority population or of the governing party is relegated by law to the status of a second class citizen. In some cases, different belief is in itself a cause for punishment. Such a selective application of human rights is itself a violation of human rights and is seldom addressed in its institutional dimension. If

⁶ In the case of China, for example, cf. “Cracks I the atheist edifice.” The Economist, Nov. 1, 2014, p. 19-22.



there is no respect for the equal dignity of every human being, as part of the whole human family, and no respect of the person’s inherent freedom of conscience and religion, the status of religious freedom will only continue to spiral out of control and future reports such as this one presented today will unfortunately describe even more cases of violations on even a grander scale.

In conclusion, permit me to make a small “editorial” comment. As you may know, there is a new publication, released just these days, entitled “*The black book of the conditions of Christians in the world*” and it carries an intriguing subtitle: “*A civilization in peril?*”⁷. We rightly focus our attention on gross cases of religious persecution and discrimination, forced exile and alienation. But I think attention should be given, as this Report does, to the rising number of cases of religious intolerance in those developed countries where opposition to the free exercise of conscience and religion continue to take stronger root. In many of these cases, regarding, for example, questions such as the nature of marriage and other moral issues, we see situations in which States, or the court system bypassing parliamentary procedures, are implementing a strong liberalization and acceptance of personal desires based on a rather extreme individualism, and transforming them into rights. In this way persons and groups with different religious convictions and ways of expressing them are no longer tolerated. In these cases, we are seeing a so-called “tolerant ideology” being imposed intolerantly without much respect for religious beliefs.

One is tempted to look at the current situation with a certain pessimism. Two different political and cultural environments converge in limiting the free exercise of Christian convictions. States with a non-Christian majority reject pluralism in their society including coexistence with Christians. Liberal democracies consider Christian values as not sufficiently inclusive and therefore not suitable. In this situation, would civilization be really in peril?

The way out of this peril it seems is to “go back to the basics”. The universalization of religious freedom is the first step; it should be recognized as a fundamental human right for every person, in every country, and respected equally by everybody. The failure to apply and defend this right on a universal level affects the implementation of all other human rights, as experience shows. Such a failure has precisely precipitated the overwhelming situation that we face in our world today. The challenge facing the international community, the Human Rights Council and States is a renewed commitment to what the U.N. Universal Declaration of Human Rights states: “Everyone has the right to freedom of thought, conscience and religion; this right includes freedom to change his religion or belief, and freedom, either alone or in community with others and in public or private, to manifest his religion or belief in teaching, practice, worship and observance.” (art.18)

Closing the gap between the ideal proposed by international instruments and the practice on the ground remain a daunting task, but there is no alternative than to continue working in the direction of a more effective guarantee of religious freedom for all.

⁷ JEAN-MICHEL DI FALCO, TIMOTHY RADCLIFFE, AND ANDREA RICCARDI (Eds). *Le livre noir de la condition des chrétiens dans le monde.* XO Editions, Paris, 2014. P. 811.

