



# Reports

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*Christof Sauer*

## Alarm Bells Against Discrimination

What global surveys and country comparisons on persecution are helpful for

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International Institute  
for Religious Freedom



International Institute  
for Religious Freedom

**Internationales Institut für Religionsfreiheit  
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Instituto Internacional para la Libertad Religiosa**

The International Institute for Religious Freedom (IIRF) was founded in 2007 with the mission to promote religious freedom for all faiths from an academic perspective. The IIRF aspires to be an authoritative voice on religious freedom. We provide reliable and unbiased data on religious freedom – beyond anecdotal evidence – to strengthen academic research on the topic and to inform public policy at all levels. Our research results are disseminated through the International Journal for Religious Freedom and other publications. A particular emphasis of the IIRF is to encourage the study of religious freedom in university institutions through its inclusion in educational curricula and by supporting postgraduate students with research projects.

The IIRF has a global presence with academic and advocacy partners on all continents. We perform original research and in collaboration with our partners. The IIRF is also a “meeting place” for all scholars that take an interest in religious freedom.

We understand Freedom of Religion and Belief (FoRB) as a fundamental and interdependent human right as described in Article 18 of the Universal Declaration on Human Rights. In line with CCPR General Comment No. 22, we view FoRB as a broad and multidimensional concept that needs to be protected for all faiths in all spheres of society.



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## **Alarm Bells Against Discrimination**

What global surveys and country comparisons on persecution are helpful for

### **ABOUT THE AUTHOR**

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**Prof. Dr. Christof Sauer** serves as Senior Consultant of the IIRF in a part time position, being retired early for health reasons. He is one of the two founding directors of the IIRF and served in that capacity until 2021. He is also Director of the Cape Town Bureau of IIRF, where he lived from 2000–2020, and the International Journal for Religious Freedom (IJRF) is his brainchild.

Within the framework of the IIRF International Professorships Programme, Prof. Dr. Sauer has held various academic positions. He is currently Guest Professor at Evangelische Theologische Faculteit Leuven, Belgium (since 2014) and a Senior Researcher of its Institute for the Study of Freedom of Religion or Belief (initiated 2020). For 2023–2024, he has been appointed part time Professor and Consultant on FORB at Fjellhaug International University College, Oslo, Norway. Since 2011, he continues to be Professor Extraordinary at the Discipline Group Practical Theology and Missiology of Stellenbosch University in South Africa.

His previous appointment on behalf of the IIRF was that of Professor of Religious Freedom and Research on Persecution of Christians at Giessen School of Theology in Germany (2017–2022). Since 2003, he has also been supervising numerous doctorates in missiology at the University of South Africa.

He is a theologian and missiologist by education and developed expertise in the field of FORB. He obtained his doctorate in missiology in 2002 at the University of South Africa in Pretoria. In 2013 he received the postdoctoral degree of “habilitation” at Protestant University Wuppertal/Bethel in Germany for his research on the interrelation of martyrdom and mission in worldwide Christianity.

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## Alarm Bells Against Discrimination

### What global surveys and country comparisons on persecution are helpful for

A commentary by Christof Sauer, Professor for Religious Freedom and Research on the Persecution of Christians, Giessen School of Theology, Germany, on the occasion of the publication of the World Watch List 2019 by Open Doors

Fortunately the media are increasingly reporting about persecution of people on account of their religion. This no longer happens only on particularly news-worthy occasions.

For example, if a dozen Christians die in Egypt in an attack on a bus on its way to a desert monastery, or if a symbolic person, like Asia Bibi in Pakistan, is sentenced to death for alleged blasphemy, or if hundreds of thousands of Muslim Rohingya are driven out of Myanmar. In the past it often required a statement by public figures. First, politicians or bishops had to comment to give enough weight to the matter.

Nevertheless, until today most incidents do not make it into the mass media. There are just so many of them. And in many of them in remote corners of the earth hardly anyone is really interested. Therefore the publication of documentation on persecution and discrimination against Christians are important as they inform in a systematic way. At the same time they raise attention and additional media events on the matter. One example is the bi-annual report of Aid to the Church in Need,<sup>1</sup> which highlights improvements and deteriorations. Another, that appears only in German are the yearbooks on religious freedom and on discrimination and persecution of Christians,<sup>2</sup> which amalgamate some of the most important information and articles of each year.

However, some people do not put much value to country comparisons, and frown even more on any rankings. Some overlook the fact that comparisons and rankings usually only represent the tip of the iceberg of a much richer information offer. Therefore, this contribution aims to present the different types of global surveys and comparisons of the level of religious freedom or persecution of Christians in different countries and to argue for their usefulness.

## Databases

Databases arranged by country, including newscasts on individual incidents, analyses, comments and events, provide a preliminary stage to systematizing world surveys. News casts are generated by several specialized news services, such as WorldWatch Monitor and Morning Star News, and by Christian news

<sup>1</sup> <https://religious-freedom-report.org>

<sup>2</sup> <https://www.iirf.eu/journal-books/german-yearbooks/jahrbuch-verfolgung-und-diskriminierung-von-christen-2018/>

services and magazines. Additionally, countless individual reports are produced by relevant Christian organizations and networks focusing on the topic, some of which are displayed on portals such as One We Stand.

Large databases of such news are provided by several research institutions. The *International Institute for Religious Freedom* archives the collection of media reports on religious freedom collated daily as a digest by the *US Commission on International Religious Freedom*. This is searchable by countries, religions, victims and perpetrators.<sup>3</sup> *Human Rights without Frontiers* provides a database of static annual country-by-country compilations on freedom for religion and belief, derived from a variety of sources.<sup>4</sup> The *International Center for Law and Religion Studies* of the Brigham Young University Law School offers law and religion headlines on an international, European and US level.<sup>5</sup>

However, with all these offerings it is up to the user to combine the random news items, reports and analyses into an overall picture of the situation of any given country, provided that the information is sufficient and the necessary background knowledge available. Therefore, beyond all this, systematic, analytical and interpretative approaches are necessary to facilitate a comparison of countries or global overviews.

## Global Surveys

Some of these global surveys inform about the persecution and discrimination of Christians country by country or region by region. Others concentrate on different particular topics like the fate of prisoners of conscience,<sup>6</sup> or add such additional topics to their country surveys. A few of the surveys also attempt to compare between the different countries and to score them. One such example is the report of the *Pew Research Center* (Washington, DC) on restrictions of religious freedom by governments and social hostilities based on religion.<sup>7</sup> The result is displayed on a matrix, dividing the countries into different groups.

Only few institutions or groups have sufficient staff and resources to cover the majority of the world's countries in their reports and to do so annually and in detail. The *State Department of the United States of America* is currently taking the lead with its annual "International Religious Freedom Report".<sup>8</sup> However, a rudimentary rating of countries only occurs after publication, and is a political exercise. The US government then declares a few countries to be "countries of particular concern". However, the procedure is mitigated by foreign policy considerations and usually has more of a symbolic effect.

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3 <https://www.iirf.eu/news/>

4 <https://hrwf.eu/newsletters/forb/>

5 <https://www.iclrs.org/common/headline.php?contentId=1673>

6 <https://hrwf.eu/forb/forb-and-blasphemy-prisoners-list/>

7 <http://www.pewresearch.org/topics/restrictions-on-religion/>

8 <https://www.state.gov/j/drl/irf/rpt/index.htm>

Other reports focus only on a selection of countries of particular concern, such as the annual report of the *US Commission on International Religious Freedom*,<sup>9</sup> which applies a rudimentary classification.

## Country Rankings

Then there are country rankings such as the *Freedom of Thought Report*<sup>10</sup> of the International Humanist and Ethical Union or the *World Watch List* on persecution of Christians issued by the charity *Open Doors*.<sup>11</sup> The latter excels in being up to date, as it appears already 10 weeks after the completion of the time frame under examination. It has an exceptional proximity to the Christian grassroots in the countries most intensely affected, particularly among evangelical and Pentecostal churches. In addition it demonstrates a special sensitivity for the fate of converts, who – as might be known – are more frequently intensely persecuted than most other Christians.

Such global indexes are available on about 50 different topics, such as freedom of the press, corruption, war casualties, human development, etc. In these rankings all the countries examined are individually evaluated according to the same standards and then scored and ranked.

What are the benefits? With regard to persecution and discrimination against Christians, this helps not to lose sight of situations that are catching less attention, i.e. situations of prolonged pressure rather than horrific violence. I mean countries in which the legal situation gradually deteriorates over the years and religious freedom is increasingly restricted, such as China. An index, if produced at regular intervals, such as annually or bi-annually, may draw attention to improvements or deteriorations of situations, such as the mass closure of churches in Angola towards the end of 2018, or an increase of arrests as in Iran. In such instances an index can act like an alarm bell. It draws attention to a situation that would otherwise be overlooked.

And what are the limitations of rankings? There is one thing they can do best – to attract attention, and to indicate: “Watch out, you have to check this out more deeply!” For example, when you find Afghanistan close to the top of the *World Watch List*, you should read up the country dossier, in order to get a better understanding of the situation. Rankings in isolation would remain superficial, and overemphasizing rankings could possibly be misleading.

It is characteristic of all rankings that they inevitably remain fuzzy. However conscientious the analysts may be, the results usually depend on numerous different variables. The problem is that nobody can tell with certainty, how exactly all these variables must be weighed among each other.

In the *World Watch List*, for example, the factor of violence against Christians contributes to one sixth of the overall country score. The remainder is reserved for the pressure in different areas of life and on church life as a whole. If,

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<sup>9</sup> <https://www.uscirf.gov/reports-briefs>

<sup>10</sup> <https://freethoughtreport.com/map/>

<sup>11</sup> <http://opendoorsanalytical.org> (Password: freedom)

instead, less emphasis were to be placed on violence, the order of the 73 most problematic countries within the ranking would shift considerably. However, countries that had previously performed very well would not suddenly appear at the opposite end of the country ranking. Due to these limitations of rankings, it is therefore helpful that Open Doors provides numerous additional rankings on various other issues, in addition to the overall ranking of the *World Watch List*, such as rankings of the number of fatalities, persons displaced, churches destroyed, etc.

## Different user groups

The various user groups, such as politicians, journalists, activists and church people, may use global rankings on persecution for different purposes.

For politicians it is important to have information on which countries to prioritize in their efforts to promote freedom of religion or Belief. The European Parliament Intergroup on *Freedom of Religion or Belief and Religious Tolerance* in the European Parliament has made the suitability for setting priorities a crucial criterion in the preparation of its latest report.<sup>12</sup> Additionally, politicians need an overview on the individual countries in order to see the big picture beyond daily newsfeeds, individual incidents or moving individual fates.

The issue is quite similar for human rights organizations and Christian ministries concerned with religious freedom and the persecution of Christians. They need to use their limited funds wisely. They too must set priorities. At the same time, however, they do not want to overlook new developments and want to be able to react promptly and appropriately to deteriorating situations. Regular stocktaking therefore, will be crucial for them, including the availability of comparative metrics.

Journalists are naturally eager to publish numbers. What counts for them are the out-of-the-ordinary and superlatives. That is why indexes and rankings are popular with journalists. In addition journalists, by virtue of their profession, need to communicate in a way that everyone can understand and seek to give vivid or even graphic accounts. When doing so, they might easily succumb to the temptation to simplify inappropriately and to give numbers and rankings a higher value than they actually deserve.

For Christian churches, global surveys should first and foremost guide them to intercession, not only for the top of a list among particularly problematic countries, but irrespective of their ranking. Christians everywhere need courage to confess their faith. After all, the Gospel needs to become known everywhere, even in places where few people personally know any Christian. Where are the congregations and churches that regularly pray by name for countries in which Christians are under particularly severe pressure? If a church were to pray for the people in only two countries every Sunday, eventually all 100 countries for which detailed information is available in the *World Watch List* documentation, will be prayed for in the course of one year. When using the report of the Catholic

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<sup>12</sup> <http://www.religiousfreedom.eu>



mission *Aid to the Church in Need*, one could even pray for four countries per week. And, should this not take place in one's own church, every Christian can pray at home. Many agencies also offer prayer diaries and up to date news which can be subscribed for that purpose.

## **Doing the right thing**

Used wisely, global surveys and country comparisons on persecution will fulfill an important function and be very beneficial. At the same time, the various reports complement one another – those that do not attempt any rankings and attempt to manage without any metrics, and others that do.

It is important that we heed these alarm signals and subsequently take the necessary action for the benefit of oppressed and persecuted Christians, everybody according to their position and capabilities.

*Christof Sauer is coordinating the audit of the outcomes of the World Watch List of Open Doors by the International Institute for Religious Freedom since a number of years. He also researches the various indexes and global surveys on religious freedom or persecution of Christians and has published recommendations for the appropriate use of the World Watch List. [www.religionsfreiheit.global](http://www.religionsfreiheit.global)*

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