



Reports

Dennis P. Petri

Religious Freedom in
Western and Northern Europe

2024/12

International Institute
for Religious Freedom



International Institute
for Religious Freedom

**Internationales Institut für Religionsfreiheit
Institut International pour la Liberté Religieuse
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.



Dr. Dennis P. Petri
(V.i.S.d.P.)
International Director



Dr. Kyle Wisdom
Deputy Director



**Prof. Dr. Janet
Epp Buckingham**
*Executive Editor of the
International Journal for
Religious Freedom (IJRF)*

This report is a reprint from: Petri D.P. (2024). Religious Freedom in Western and Northern Europe. In K.R. Ross, Annemarie Mayer & Todd M. Johnson (eds.). Edinburgh Companions to Global Christianity Volume 8: Christianity in Western and Northern Europe. Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press.

Dennis P. Petri

Religious Freedom in Western and Northern Europe



ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Dr. Dennis P. Petri, political scientist, international consultant and researcher. International Director of the International Institute for Religious Freedom. Founder and scholar-at-large of the Observatory of Religious Freedom in Latin America. Executive Director of the Foundation Platform for Social Transformation. Associate Professor of International Relations and Head of the Chair of Humanities at the Latin American University of Science and Technology (Costa Rica). Adjunct Professor of International Negotiation and Research Methods at the Latin American Faculty of Social Sciences (UNESCO). PhD in Political Philosophy from VU University Amsterdam. Master in Political Science from the Institute of Political Studies in Paris (Sciences Po) and Research Master in Comparative Politics specializing in Latin America from the same institution.

CONTENTS

Introduction	5
De-Christianisation and Religious Illiteracy	6
Secularism and Anti-religious Policy	7
Critical Theory and Cultural Relativism	8
Limitations on Freedom of Expression.....	9
The Self-censorship Phenomenon	9
Violations of Church Autonomy	10
Christian Converts in Muslim Migrant Communities	12
Vandalism against Christian Buildings	13
Increasing Government Restrictions of Religion	14
Future Outlook.....	15
Bibliography	16

Introduction

Historically, the notion of religious freedom emerged in Western and Northern Europe (WNE). Drawing on earlier philosophical writings, religious freedom became an essential building block of the modern state through the Peace of Westphalia (1648) and successive agreements, which effectively put an end to the Wars of Religion, which were wars between Catholics and Protestants during the sixteenth, seventeenth, and early eighteenth centuries. From this historical perspective, the gains that have been made in the struggle for religious freedom are immense. European citizens today enjoy a high level of religious freedom, which stands in stark contrast to the Wars of Religion and the more recent National Socialist regime in Germany. Today, Europeans are free to practise their religion or belief, and discrimination based on religion is prohibited. Overall, there is a much greater degree of religious diversity and tolerance in European societies than ever before.

Considering the historic prominence of the notion of religious freedom in the development of the states of WNE, and the fact that this remains a majority Christian continent, it seems counterintuitive to even consider restrictions to religious freedom in general, and of Christians in particular. Many will therefore undoubtedly rush to the conclusion that this is not an issue worth considering. Others, mostly on the conservative end of the political spectrum, will likely consider that the religious freedom of Christians is under threat as a result of two political phenomena: secularism, which is the drive to push religious expression out of the public sphere, and the intolerant dimension of the gender, sexual and racial diversity agenda, corresponding to the imposition of liberal views, in particular on matters related to life and the family, that make conservative Christian views increasingly less acceptable. As a result, many conservative Christians view Europe as a hostile environment for public expressions of Christianity.

The empirical reality is far more nuanced than these competing narratives. On the surface, Christians face no restrictions on the free expression of their faith. Indeed, religious freedom is a fundamental human right that has been enshrined in international law and protected by many countries. In WNE, religious freedom is generally well respected and protected by law. For example, in Sweden and Finland, the state church is Lutheran but individuals are free to practise any religion they choose. Similarly, the Netherlands, Belgium and Luxemburg have no state religion, and people are free to practise their religion without fear of persecution or discrimination. Moreover, these countries have taken steps to promote religious tolerance and social cohesion. In the Netherlands, for instance, the government has implemented policies that aim to prevent discrimination on religious grounds and promote interfaith dialogue and understanding. Additionally, many of these countries have laws that protect religious minorities and their rights to practise their religion freely. The Baltic states – Estonia, Latvia, and Lithuania – generally have good records on religious freedom, save some occasional discrimination against minority Christian groups (Russian Orthodox in Estonia, Protestants in Latvia and Lithuania).

However, the main religious freedom datasets, such as the Pew Research Center Global Restrictions on Religion dataset and the Religion and State Project of Bar-Ilan University, suggest the overall religious freedom situation in WNE is deteriorating and highlight increasing restrictions of religious freedom caused by both state and non-state actors. While on a global comparative scale these trends do not amount to any form of severe persecution, they are meaningful enough to be taken seriously. In addition to the conclusions reached by the religious freedom datasets, nuances and trends that religious freedom datasets fail to detect also deserve a separate mention.

This chapter starts by discussing three long-term phenomena that have direct and indirect consequences on the religious freedom of Christians. These phenomena are the de-Christianisation process of Europe, secularism and the popularity of critical theory. A second section highlights three trends whereby the consequences of these phenomena on the religious freedom of Christians are most visible: limitations on the freedom of expression of Christian voices, the very subtle self-censorship phenomenon, and violations of Church autonomy. Third, three more emerging trends in which religious freedom violations can be observed are discussed: the threats to Christian converts in Muslim-migrant communities, vandalism against Christian buildings and increasing government restrictions under the guise of combating Islamic terrorism. The chapter closes with some comments on the future of religious freedom for Christians in WNE.

Because of space limitations, WNE will be considered in its totality. Even though it is a very heterogeneous region in terms of its religious history and policies, it is possible to highlight some general features that apply to the whole region. When a particular country or groups of countries stand out from the rest of the region, a separate mention will be made.

De-Christianisation and Religious Illiteracy

As the statistics presented in this volume clearly show, the number of people who self-identify as Christians in WNE has decreased considerably during the twentieth and beginning of the twenty-first centuries. This trend is commonly referred to as secularization, which is not to be confused with secularism, a term that will be discussed below. Because it is examined in a dedicated chapter of this volume, this chapter will refer to one dimension of secularization: 'de-Christianisation.' The latter refers to the decreasing presence of Christianity in social, cultural and political life, resulting from declining adherence to Christian teachings and church attendance, even by people who continue to consider themselves Christians. Of course, important nuances are to be made as de-Christianisation is not a linear nor a terminated phenomenon. It would also be precipitate to conclude that WNE has completely ceased to be grounded in Christianity, which is certainly not the case.

Setting these nuances aside, it is undeniable that the de-Christianisation phenomenon has led to growing religious illiteracy, that is, an increasingly misinformed understanding of what religion entails, with the corollary that public pol-

icies and legislation reckon less fully with religious sensitivities. Although this is not necessarily intentional, policies that are not religiously literate risk inadvertently restricting the religious freedom of Christians.

Although it does not affect Christians, the attempts made in several countries of WNE, including Finland and the Netherlands, to ban ritual slaughtering are illustrative. These bans are promoted by activists and politicians concerned with animal wellbeing but seem insensitive to their implications for the religious life of Jews and Muslims. The same applies to measures that were taken to combat the Covid-19 pandemic, which compelled places of worship to temporarily shut their doors but disregarded the central role of congregations for Christian and non-Christian religious communities. Finally, there are reports about immigration officers in countries of WNE who are insufficiently capable of assessing the religious concerns of applicants for asylum, particularly those who are fleeing religious persecution. The common thread in these examples is an overall lack of religious literacy, with obvious policy consequences for religious freedom.

Secularism and Anti-religious Policy

The Enlightenment promoted the institutionalization of the principle of separation between church and state, implying that the church should not interfere in government and that the state should not meddle in the internal affairs of religious institutions. This correction of the unhealthy symbiotic relation between church and state that had developed ever since Constantine's embrace of Christianity has generally been very positive, and an important dimension of the right to religious freedom. But some Enlightenment actors went further. For example, in 1905 France adopted an extreme form of separation between church and state known as *laïcité*, which has some antireligious expressions as it restricts various forms of religious expression in the public sphere.

Beyond the legal restrictions on religious expression, the anticlerical policies and the marked secular education system have inserted the notion in the minds of the population of France that religion should only be ascribed to the private sphere, without the option of manifesting itself in the public sphere. In this case, not talking about religion or one's own convictions is part of a normalized cultural pattern that few recognise as a violation of religious freedom. This situation is applicable not only to France but also to the formerly communist East Germany, which was subject to an atheistic and antireligious regime until German reunification in 1990.

Though other European nations have milder models of separation, a growing discomfort with public expressions of religion can be observed throughout the twentieth and at the beginning of the twenty-first centuries. More and more often, the principle of separation between church and state is mistakenly understood to require a separation between faith and politics, with the result that basing one's political positions on religious convictions is becoming less and less acceptable. Together with the existing prejudices against religion, some of which are informed by the abuse scandals in the Catholic Church, the advanced degree of religious illiteracy indirectly fosters intolerance of religious views. As

a result, in recent decades, secularism and anti-religious policy have become increasingly prevalent in countries such as the Netherlands, Belgium, France, Germany and Austria. These policies have manifested in various forms, including the banning of religious symbols in public spaces, restrictions on religious education, and the removal of religious holidays from official calendars.

Critical Theory and Cultural Relativism

In addition to secularism, the popularity of critical theory can also be considered as a source of discrimination against the public expression of Christian voices. Critical theory is a set of ideas, originating in the fields of sociology and philosophy, that has become increasingly popular in WNE during this century. This philosophical current argues that all social relations and institutions are shaped by power dynamics and that those who hold power use it to oppress marginalized groups. While this theory has its merits in certain contexts (including to explain the oppressive nature of some religious manifestations!), its popularity in WNE can be interpreted as a restriction of the religious freedom of Christians.

One of the main ways in which critical theory restricts religious freedom is by promoting a secular worldview that sees all expressions of religion as tools of oppression. Critical theorists argue that religion has been used historically to justify oppressive patriarchal power structures and that it continues to do so today. This argument is particularly prevalent in the context of Christianity, which has been associated with colonization and imperialism in the past. As a result, Christian beliefs and practices are increasingly marginalized in public discourse. For example, Christian organisations that hold traditional views on issues such as marriage and sexuality are often labelled as intolerant and discriminatory. In some cases, Christian individuals who express these views publicly have been subject to legal action or public backlash.

This philosophical current leads to a hermeneutic of suspicion with an over-emphasis on the dynamics of power. The movement views political structures, law and language as oppressive and therefore calls for their deconstruction. When Christians publicly argue in favour of a right to life for the unborn or in favour of traditional marriage, they are characterised as intolerant and oppressive. An example of this kind of dynamic was the campaign against the nomination of Rocco Buttiglione in 2004 as Italy's designate to the European Commission because of his conservative Catholic views on the family. The strong opposition eventually led to the withdrawal of his nomination, even though he had publicly affirmed he would not let his personal faith convictions prevent him from moving against discrimination directed toward homosexuals. More recently, the candidacy of Kate Forbes for the leadership of the Scottish National Party caused comparable upheaval because of her outspoken faith stance.

Another way in which critical theory restricts religious freedom is by promoting a relativistic view of truth that undermines the absolute claims of Christianity. Critical theorists argue that all knowledge is socially constructed and that no objective truth can be known. This perspective makes it difficult for Christians to make truth claims about their faith without being accused of imposing their

beliefs on others. A high-profile example of this in recent times has been the coalition of gender lobbies and even Islamic organisations that have joined forces to advocate against speakers perceived as discriminatory, such as the coalition that has prevented so-called ‘hate speech preacher’ Franklin Graham from gaining entry to the UK because of his comments on homosexuals and Muslims.

Limitations on Freedom of Expression

As a result of the phenomena presented above, Christians experience increasing restrictions on their freedom of expression. Even though freedom of expression is a protected human right in all countries of WNE, in some cases Christian voices have been restricted from expressing their views freely.

One of the most prominent cases of the restriction of Christian voices in WNE is the censorship of Christian social media accounts. In recent years, social media platforms have taken measures to limit the spread of hate speech and misinformation on their platforms. However, some Christian voices have argued that their views on issues such as abortion, same-sex marriage and gender identity are being censored. For example, in 2020 Twitter suspended the account of Dr Taylor Marshall, a prominent Catholic author and commentator. Twitter claimed that Marshall’s account had violated its policies on ‘hateful conduct’, but many of Marshall’s supporters argued that he was being unfairly targeted for expressing traditional Christian views.

Another example of the restriction of Christian voices in WNE is the ‘de-platforming’ of Christian speakers and organisations from universities and other public spaces. In recent years, several universities have cancelled events featuring Christian speakers or organisations due to concerns about their views on issues such as homosexuality and gender dysphoria. In 2019, the University of Oxford cancelled a talk by the Christian Legal Centre, a group that advocates for religious freedom and traditional values. The university claimed that the group’s views were ‘not compatible with the values of a modern university’, but many Christians argued that this was a violation of academic freedom and free speech. Similarly, in 2015 a Christian student at a Belgian university was threatened with disciplinary action for sharing his faith with a Muslim classmate. The university claimed that his comments violated the school’s anti-hate speech policy. Christians have also faced legal action for expressing their views on controversial issues. In some cases, Christians have been fined or even imprisoned for expressing their opposition to same-sex marriage or the rights of transgender persons.

The Self-censorship Phenomenon

A closely related trend is the self-censorship phenomenon. Within the context of the rapidly changing social norms, many Christians in WNE feel that they must be cautious about expressing their beliefs in public, for fear of being accused of hate speech. This can lead to self-censorship, where individuals refrain from

expressing their religious beliefs to avoid controversy or legal trouble. This can be particularly challenging for Christians who sense a call to share their faith with others.

Anecdotal research suggests an increasing amount of pressure on Christians to conform to cultural norms, with socially conservative views being silenced as a result. Christians seem to have become accustomed to being silent about their views when they depart from the mainstream. It is difficult to assess the extent of this phenomenon, precisely because of its subtle nature. It is possible that court cases have had a chilling effect on conservative Christians, who often resort to self-censorship, mainly to avoid going through the trouble and anxiety of a court case that leads in turn to the disruption of careers, advanced stress, bullying at work and other negative experiences.

Germany has seen a growing trend toward political correctness, which has resulted in self-censorship among Christians. For example, many Christians feel that they cannot express their opposition to same-sex marriage or gender ideology without being labelled as bigots or homophobes. They fear that expressing their beliefs could result in social or professional consequences, such as being ostracized by their peers or losing their jobs.

In the United Kingdom, self-censorship among Christians is often related to the fear of being accused of hate speech. The country has strict hate speech laws, which have been used to prosecute individuals who express opinions that are deemed offensive or discriminatory. Many Christians feel that these laws have a chilling effect on free speech, particularly when it comes to expressing religious beliefs. As a result, they often choose to remain silent on controversial issues for fear of legal repercussions.

Finally, in Belgium, self-censorship among Christians is often related to the fear of offending minority groups. Belgium is a multicultural society, with a growing sensitivity to issues of race and ethnicity. As a result, many Christians feel that they must be careful about what they say in public, particularly when it comes to discussing issues related to immigration or Islam. They fear that any criticism of these groups could be perceived as racist or Islamophobic, which could lead to social or professional consequences.

Violations of Church Autonomy

The religious autonomy of Christians in WNE has been a central issue in the contemporary era, as Christians face challenges from secular authorities, non-Christian groups and even other Christians. Religious autonomy refers to the freedom of individuals and communities to practise their religion without interference from external forces. This includes the right to believe, worship and organise religious activities according to one's own beliefs and values, as well as the right to participate in religious institutions without coercion or discrimination.

One example of violations of church autonomy in WNE is the ongoing debate over the role of the Catholic Church in Ireland. In 2018, the Irish government introduced legislation that would require Catholic hospitals to provide abortions, despite the Catholic Church's opposition to the practice. The Catholic Church objected to this legislation, arguing that it would force them to violate their religious beliefs and interfere in their ability to govern their institutions autonomously. This led to tensions between the Catholic Church and the Irish government, with the Church accusing the government of violating the principle of church autonomy. A second example of violations of church autonomy in WNE is the debate over the role of the Church of England in the United Kingdom. In recent years, there have been calls for the Church of England to change its position on various social and political issues, such as same-sex marriage and women's ordination. However, many members of the Church of England have objected to these calls, arguing that, if enforced, they would violate the principle of church autonomy. They argue that the Church of England should be free to govern itself according to its own traditions and beliefs, without interference from external actors. Similarly, the Swedish government has sought to impose new conditions for subsidies and to ban foreign funding in order to exert pressure on faith-based organisations, thus infringing religious autonomy.

An expectation exists that hate-speech legislation might eventually try to reach inside churches, effectively censoring Christian preaching. Some scholars anticipate an extension of the scope of hate speech (and a lowering of its threshold) in the near future, leading to a culture of censorship and the broadening of government monitoring. In other areas, particularly cases involving sexual orientation, it seems nearly impossible to express alternative views on existing policies, as any attempt to do so is immediately met with hostility and accusations of discrimination.

A central aspect to the discussion about church autonomy is hate speech legislation, where WNE has been at the forefront. While the primary objective of such legislation is to create a safer and more tolerant society, it can also endanger religious freedom, including for Christians. One way in which hate speech legislation endangers the religious freedom of Christians is through the criminalization of certain beliefs. In some cases, conservative Christians who hold traditional views on issues such as marriage, gender and sexuality have been prosecuted for expressing their beliefs. For example, in 2010 a Swiss court fined a Christian pastor for preaching a sermon that described homosexuality as a sin. The pastor argued that he was simply expressing his religious beliefs, but the court held that his comments were discriminatory and violated hate speech laws. A high-profile case is that against Päivi Räsänen, a Finnish Member of Parliament and a former Minister of the Interior, who has been charged with three counts of hate speech related to comments she made about homosexuality and same-sex marriage in her blog posts and statements in 2019 and 2020. The case against her is ongoing, and if convicted, she could face fines or imprisonment.

Notwithstanding the preceding description of restrictions of the religious freedom of Christians in WNE, other states in this region provide substantial support for a particular Christian denomination. This is true for many countries in the region, even though only a few have established it as its official religion (this is the case in Iceland, Denmark and Norway). Government support for religion is often not as favourable to these religious denominations as it might seem. On the contrary, in Scandinavia, Belgium and Germany, the clergy depends financially on the state, which implies that the state can meddle in the internal affairs of the church. For example, in many of the Nordic states, governments used this influence to force their state churches to change their doctrines on issues like same-sex marriage and female clergy.

Christian Converts in Muslim Migrant Communities

Religious freedom can be challenged not only by the state, but also by the interactions between various religious communities. The migration of Muslims to WNE has brought about diverse cultural and religious communities. Among these communities are individuals who have converted to Christianity from Islam, and these converts often face threats and persecution. One of the main threats to Christian converts in Muslim migrant communities is social ostracism. Although this is not limited to converts from Islam to Christianity, converts can face hostility and rejection from their families, friends and communities. They might be seen as traitors and accused of betraying their culture and religion. This can lead to isolation, loss of community support and difficulties in finding employment and accommodation. For instance, in the Netherlands, converts have reported being ostracized by their families and communities, which has led to feelings of loneliness and isolation.

Another significant threat to Christian converts in Muslim migrant communities is physical violence. Some converts are subjected to verbal and physical abuse, including beatings and death threats. In some extreme cases, converts are killed for apostasy. For example, in Germany, a convert from Islam to Christianity was stabbed to death by an Afghan asylum seeker in a refugee centre in 2016.

Moreover, converts can face legal consequences for leaving Islam. In some countries, such as Saudi Arabia and Iran, apostasy is a capital offense punishable by death. Although this is not the case in Europe, converts can still face legal issues, particularly in cases of family law, such as marriage and custody of children. For example, in the UK, a Muslim man was granted custody of his children by a Sharia court after his ex-wife converted to Christianity. Generally, custody would be granted to the mother.

Furthermore, converts can also face harassment and surveillance from radical Muslim groups. These groups can view Christian converts as a threat to their religious and cultural identity and try to intimidate or harm them. For instance, in Sweden, converts have reported receiving threatening phone calls and emails from Muslim extremists.

This century has seen a rise in anti-Christian sentiment in some areas, particularly in certain neighbourhoods with high Muslim populations. As a result, many Christians in these areas feel compelled to keep their faith private, for fear of discrimination or even violence. In some cases, Christian symbols and statues have been vandalized, further exacerbating the problem. In the Netherlands, some Christians feel that they must be careful about what they say in public, particularly when it comes to discussing religion or criticising Islam. They fear that any criticism of Islam could be perceived as Islamophobia, which could lead to social or political backlash.

Vandalism against Christian Buildings

A concerning increase in vandalism against religious buildings, including churches, synagogues and mosques, in WNE has taken place in the past decade. From desecration of graves to arson attacks on churches, these incidents have raised questions about the motives behind such actions and their impact on communities.

An example of such vandalism occurred in Sweden, where more than 100 churches have been attacked since 2012. These attacks have taken different forms, ranging from arson to spray-painting satanic symbols on the walls of churches. One notable incident occurred in April 2019, when a nineteenth-century church in the town of Härnösand was set ablaze. The church was severely damaged, and the arsonist left behind a message mocking Christianity. The police investigated the incident as a hate crime, but no arrests were made.

Similarly, in France, a spate of attacks against churches has raised concerns. In February 2019, the Basilica of St Denis, a historic church near Paris that contains the tombs of many French monarchs, was vandalized. The perpetrators damaged stained-glass windows, smashed statues and graffitied the walls with messages denouncing Christianity. This incident came in the wake of several other attacks against churches in France, including arson attacks, thefts of sacred objects and the murder of a French priest.

Germany has also seen a rise in attacks against Christian buildings. More than one thousand attacks against churches in the country occurred in 2019, ranging from thefts to vandalism to arson. In one particularly disturbing incident in April 2019, a Catholic church in Berlin was set ablaze and completely destroyed. The arsonist left behind a message suggesting that the attack was in response to the church's support for refugees. The incident was investigated as a hate crime, but the perpetrator has not been caught.

These incidents are not isolated and can be considered a trend. One possible explanation for this increase in attacks is the rise of extremist ideologies that are hostile to Europe's Christian heritage, when they view Christianity as an oppressive force and might see attacks on churches to resist that oppression. Whatever the cause, the impact of these attacks on Christian communities is significant because it spreads fear and thereby accelerates other trends like

self-censorship and withdrawing behind church walls. Churches are not just places of worship, but also cultural landmarks and symbols of community identity.

Increasing Government Restrictions of Religion

Various scholars have highlighted the sharp rise of anti-religious sentiments in the Western world, especially since the terrorist attacks of 11 September 2001. In essence, the terrorist attacks confirmed many in their belief that religions are inherently violent and that therefore religious practices should be restricted. This view is a caricature, yet it is held to differing degrees in wide portions of the media and academia. Islamic terrorism, and perhaps also other issues such as the extreme punishment of apostates in some Muslim communities, warrant intervention by the state but can also lead to pressures for the state to broaden its regulation of religion, a trend that is referred to as ‘securitization theory’ in social sciences. Even though this trend primarily targets Muslims, it also affects Christians by association.

One example of this trend can be seen in France, where the government has implemented a series of laws and policies aimed at combating Islamic extremism. In 2010, the country introduced a ban on the wearing of full-face veils in public spaces, including schools, hospitals and government buildings. The law was widely criticised for targeting Muslim women and for violating religious freedom. In 2021, the French government introduced a bill aimed at promoting ‘Republican values’, which included measures such as increased surveillance of mosques and religious associations, as well as stricter controls on foreign funding of religious organisations. While the government argued that the bill was necessary to combat radicalization and terrorism, critics argued that it unfairly targeted Muslims and violated their right to religious freedom. By extension, Christians are also affected, as all religious associations are now subject to increased state control and must sign a Republican commitment contract to access subsidies or approval.

Another example of securitization is the framing of religion as a security threat after the 2011 attacks in Norway. The Norwegian government responded by increasing security measures and surveillance, as well as passing new laws aimed at combating terrorism, which affect both Muslim and Christian groups. In February 2021 Denmark considered a bill that would require all sermons delivered in foreign languages to be translated into Danish, aimed to combat the potential spread of extremist ideologies and hate speech in religious communities. This bill was ultimately withdrawn in June 2021 due to concerns over its potential impact on religious freedom and freedom of speech, but is illustrative of this trend. More generally, increased registration requirements and taxation of religious organisations are occurring in some countries, all of which place unnecessary restrictions on the church sphere. For example, an organic ordinance of the Brussels-Capital Region reduces the ceiling for deficits of religious organisations to 30%.

Future Outlook

After discussing several pertinent cultural and philosophical phenomena, this essay discussed several trends and emerging trends that affect the religious freedom of Christians in WNE. It would go too far to conclude that these trends constitute severe restrictions of religious freedom or to claim that they are irreversible, but they deserve attention from both Christians themselves and policy makers.

To the extent violations of religious freedom are the result of religious illiteracy, these can be addressed by raising awareness about religious sensitivities through educational campaigns and interreligious dialogue. If they are rooted in an anti-religious sentiment, or a belief that some human rights should trump religious freedom, this is more problematic.

Christians also need to accept they are a minority, perhaps not in numerical terms, but in terms of social, cultural and political influence. Although some Christians have had difficulty accepting the demise of a Christian Europe, it is more compelling to argue in public for robust and flourishing freedom of religion or belief for all, rather than seeking any privileged place for Christianity. Christians might be best advised to argue for true pluralism, including state neutrality toward religion, rather than to advocate for religious freedom only to secure privileges for their own.

Bibliography

- Buckingham, Janet Epp (ed.), *Responding to Secularism* [Special issue of the *International Journal for Religious Freedom*, 13(1/2)] (Bonn: International Institute for Religious Freedom, 2020).
- Fox, Jonathan, *Political Secularism, Religion, and the State: A Time Series Analysis of Worldwide Data* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2015).
- Jenkins, Philip, *God's Continent: Christianity, Islam, and Europe's Religious Crisis* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2007).
- Nussbaum, Martha, *The New Religious Intolerance: Overcoming the Politics of Fear in an Anxious Age* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2013).
- Trigg, Roger, *Equality, Freedom and Religion* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2012).

Imprint

Address

c/o World Evangelical Alliance
Church Street Station
P.O. Box 3402
New York, NY 10008-3402
United States of America

Friedrichstr. 38
2nd Floor
53111 Bonn
Germany

International Director: Dr. Dennis P. Petri (V.i.S.d.P.)
Deputy Director: Dr. Kyle Wisdom
Executive Editor of the IJRF: Prof. Dr. Janet Epp Buckingham
President: Prof. Dr. Dr. Thomas Schirrmacher

Contact: info@iirf.global
Donations: <https://iirf.global/donate/>

Occasional journal with special reports, research projects, reprints and documentation published by VKW Culture and Science Publ.

Follow us:





International Institute
for Religious Freedom

International Institute for Religious Freedom

Bonn | Brussels | Cape Town

Colombo | Brasília | Delhi

Tübingen | Vancouver

iirf.global • info@iirf.global