



Reports

Dennis P. Petri

Stop Looking Only for a Religious Motive

2025 / 28

International Institute
for Religious Freedom



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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.

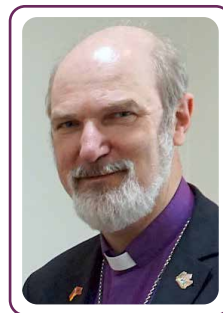
We understand Freedom of Religion and Belief (FoRB) as a fundamental and interdependent human right as described in Article 18 of the Universal Declaration on Human Rights. In line with CCPR General Comment No. 22, we view FoRB as a broad and multidimensional concept that needs to be protected for all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



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Stop Looking Only for a Religious Motive

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

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In the religious freedom field, when a violent incident happens, we frequently hear the same question: “Is this really religious persecution?” What they usually mean is: “Was this person or group deliberately targeted with an explicit religious motive?”

I believe the religious freedom movement needs to ask broader questions than just whether there was an explicitly anti-religious intent. Instead of treating motive as the defining criterion, we should examine how religious identity or behavior shapes a community’s vulnerability to harm. Once we understand that vulnerability, we can focus on taking steps to reduce it.

This is not an argument for ignoring motive altogether. Rather, it is a call to avoid allowing motive to function as a gatekeeping device that narrows our field of vision and delays protective action.

Making explicit religious motives a criterion for recognizing or responding to a particular case can lead to harmful conclusions, for several reasons. First, it is not always possible to determine a perpetrator’s true motive. We can speculate based on public statements, but these rarely reveal the full truth, and extremist actors frequently mask or blend motives. Although scholars can and should analyze intent, decisions about incident documentation should not depend on deciphering the internal reasoning of perpetrators.

Second, conflicts are almost always multidimensional, shaped by economic, social, ethnic, and political factors alongside religion. Even among the people who crucified Jesus, some had religious motives while others acted primarily out of political interests. If we insist on identifying a purely or primarily religious motive before we intervene, we will end up discarding most of the complex cases that characterize real-world violence because they will be labeled as “not religious persecution.”

Third, focusing on motives alone will cause us to overlook situations where victims’ religious inspiration makes them vulnerable even if the attackers are not concerned about religion. For example, in Latin America, organized crime frequently targets religious leaders not because of their faith itself, but because their faith drives them to oppose criminal groups. In other cases, religious believers may be mistreated because their work in drug rehabilitation, migrant assistance, or human rights advocacy collides with the self-interest of government actors, insurgents, criminal networks, or ethnic factions. This targeting restricts freedom of religious expression, even if the perpetrators offer no religious justification.

Similarly, we often hear claims that religious groups in certain regions are attacked or killed only for their money, land, or influence, not because of their faith. But many of those affected belong to minorities in areas dominated by an unfriendly majority, and it is their minority status that exposes them to threats. Here, religion may not explain the attacker’s stated motive, but it clearly helps explain the victim’s vulnerability.

Focusing on motive alone is not just unhelpful; it can become an excuse for inaction. “We can’t tell if there is a clear religious motive” leads to “So we won’t

do anything about the problem.” Discussions quickly devolve into debates over whether specific cases qualify for attention, whether numbers are accurate, or whether certain categories should be included. Granted, getting accurate data is important to sustain the credibility of our advocacy. At the International Institute for Religious Freedom, we work very hard to ensure that our recommendations are based on reliable information. But the central priority should be protecting vulnerable communities—not defending a classification system that filters out too much real harm.

A shift in perspective is therefore necessary. Instead of defining religious persecution exclusively as a motive-based phenomenon, we should also understand it as a vulnerability-based condition, where a community’s religious identity or behavior increases its exposure to harm. This can be done objectively by identifying whether a particular religious group is experiencing victimization in some form, such as physical attacks, denial of employment opportunities, or lack of access to land as a consequence of their religious identity or behavior. Once we have done that, we can then consider what actions could bring relief to the victims.

This shift in perspective also requires greater precision in our language. If we broaden our analytical aperture to include harms arising from religious vulnerability, then not all such harms should be labeled “religious persecution.” Instead, explicitly anti-religious attacks—those demonstrably motivated by theological hostility or religious ideology—should be understood as a distinct subset within a larger analytical category of religion-related victimization. This broader category captures situations in which religious identity or behavior increases exposure to harm, even when religion is not the attacker’s primary stated motive. Maintaining this distinction allows us to preserve analytical clarity while avoiding the exclusion of vulnerable communities whose suffering does not fit narrow motive-based definitions.

The tragic situation in northern Nigeria offers a good example. There has been extensive debate over whether Christians are targeted for attack because of their religion or because of a long-running land conflict between farmers and herders. My approach would instead start by identifying their vulnerability and asking what can be done. Regardless of the perpetrators’ motives, increased protection, whether in the form of government security details or fencing, might help. Peacemaking efforts might help to sort out solutions; if we sit and listen to Fulani herders patiently, we might understand their frustrations better. But they are unlikely to admit an anti-Christian religious motive even if they have one. In this case, bypassing the debate over motive altogether opens the door to more practical, collaborative problem-solving.

Some will disagree with this vulnerability-centered approach. The most common objection is that abandoning motive as a definitional requirement risks “overcounting” cases of religion-related victimization. If we no longer look for explicit intent, critics argue, nearly any harm affecting a religious community might qualify as religious violence. This perspective reflects longstanding academic and legal traditions that define persecution as violence or discrimination because of religion, requiring evidence of the perpetrator’s motivation.

Others contend that motive is essential for analytical and moral clarity. Distinguishing religious persecution from political, ethnic, or economic violence, they argue, helps preserve conceptual precision and supports legal accountability.

These concerns highlight real tensions in the field, but they assume that motive is both knowable and conceptually central. In practice, motives are rarely clear, and violence against religious communities almost always arises from multiple, overlapping factors. A strict motive requirement therefore narrows our field of vision rather than sharpening it. My argument does not deny that motives can matter for legal processes or academic classification or for developing strategies of response in cases where there is a very clear theology motivating attacks; instead, it asserts that for the purpose of protection and prevention—especially in policy and advocacy—vulnerability is the more reliable and actionable lens.

My approach does not suggest that any harm affecting a religious community should automatically be interpreted as religious violence. The crucial task is to identify whether—and how—elements of an individual or community’s religious identity or behavior inspired by religious convictions increase their vulnerability to harm.

This way, we can focus on what truly matters: understanding the complex reasons why certain religious individuals or communities are vulnerable and taking practical steps to reduce that vulnerability. It redirects attention from debates about intent to concrete questions of risk and protection. I share the commonly expressed concerns about avoiding inflated or unfounded numbers, but I am even more concerned about ignoring significant forms of vulnerability simply because a religious motive is not clearly articulated or immediately apparent. Making intervention dependent on vague assessments of intent blinds us to the realities that place believers at risk. A focus on vulnerability, rather than motive, enables responses that are more responsible, inclusive, and effective.

Imprint

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