



# Reports

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*Thomas Paul Schirrmacher and Dennis P. Petri*

## A word to the critics of the World Watch List – and a way forward

**2026 / 3**

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.

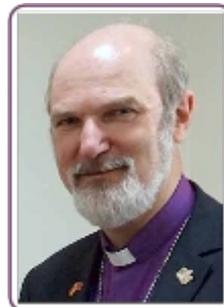
We understand Freedom of Religion and Belief (FoRB) as a fundamental and interdependent human right as described in Article 18 of the Universal Declaration on Human Rights. In line with CCPR General Comment No. 22, we view FoRB as a broad and multi-dimensional concept that needs to be protected for all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



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



**Dr. Kyle Wisdom**  
*Deputy Director*



**Prof. Dr. mult.  
Thomas Paul  
Schirmacher**  
*President of the  
Academic/Editorial  
Board*



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

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## **A word to the critics of the World Watch List— and a way forward**

### **ABOUT THE AUTHORS**

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**Archbishop Prof. Dr. theol. Dr. phil. Thomas Paul Schirmmacher**, PhD, ThD, DD, DHL is President of the International Council of the International Society for Human Rights (Frankfurt), President of the International Institute for Religious Freedom (Costa Rica, Vancouver, Bonn), Co-President of Religions for Peace (New York) and President of the Bonn Abrahamic Center for Global Peace, Justice and Sustainability (BAC). He was Secretary General of the World Evangelical Alliance 2021–2024, which connects Protestant churches belonging to 143 National Evangelical Alliances with a total of 600 million members.

Schirmmacher earned three doctorates in ecumenical theology (Kampen, Netherlands), in cultural anthropology (Los Angeles), and in the political science and sociology of religions (Bonn, Germany) and received several honorary doctorates and honours from the USA and India. He has given guest lectures in more than 100 countries. He has authored and edited 102 books, which have been translated into 18 languages.

**Dr. Dennis P. Petri**, PhD, is International Director of the IIRF, 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) and Adjunct Professor of International Negotiation and Research Methods at the Latin American Faculty of Social Sciences (UNESCO).

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*Thomas Schirmmacher advocating for freedom of religion or belief at the Interparliamentary Union's 2023 Assembly plenary session in Marrakesh, Morocco. © Schirmmacher*

I have been following comments by critics of the World Watch List (WWL) in the global media for many years. I am interested in the global media reaction because the yearly WWL is the most quoted tool regarding freedom of religion or belief (FoRB—the official term used by the United Nations), even though it only re-searches the situation of Christians. I am sympathetic towards any serious effort to record restrictions on religious freedom worldwide and advocate on behalf of churches. However, I do not consider the issues discussed below as being in any way part of WWL or its partners, but as an outsider professor of the sociology of religions. I also would like to state from the outset that I would like to see this expanded to include a global study and ranking of all religions and worldviews.<sup>1</sup>

I have categorized the six criticisms of the WWL that I found in the media.

### **Criticism: The definition of ‘persecution’ is too broad.**

We have to distinguish between two questions here. Firstly, as there are no final definitions agreed upon in this area,<sup>2</sup> the issue is whether the WWL publishes

<sup>1</sup> I would like to thank Prof. Dr. Dennis Petri and Prof. Dr. Ron Boyd-MacMillan for their valuable input on my first draft, and in particular Prof. Dr. Christof Sauer for his thorough review of the final English version and then the German translation.

<sup>2</sup> Sauer, C., & Nel, W. N. (2025). Religious persecution: Definitions, scales, spectrums reflected for the context of theology and missiology. In R. Lilleaasen & C. Sauer (eds.), *Religious Persecution: Theological and Missiological Perspectives*. (Christians under Pressure: Studies in Discrimination and Persecution, 3). VKW: Bonn (pp. 33–73). <https://iirf.global/?p=6233>

its own definitions and whether the results are in line with them. Both is the case. Disagreeing with the definition and questioning the validity of the results are two different matters.

But how do we define or describe persecution in relation to religious convictions, independent of Christianity? I asked AI to summarize all available definitions and received the following response: 'Religious persecution is the systematic mistreatment and oppression of individuals or groups due to their religious beliefs or practices. It involves oppression, discrimination, violence or harassment aimed at suppressing religious affiliation or the lack thereof. Common forms include arrests, property destruction, forced assimilation, or denial of rights.' I would largely agree. Many researchers use similar definitions and descriptions, as does the Wikipedia. For example, David T. Smith defines religious persecution as 'violence or discrimination against members of a religious minority because of their religious affiliation' in his book 'Religious Persecution and Political Order in the United States'.

'Persecution' is also used as a legal term in various treaties and laws, most importantly in the 1951 UN Refugee Convention, and in asylum laws in the US, the EU and many other countries. While definitions vary, they all agree that violations of human rights must be severe and real to apply to asylum cases or refugee status. With the term discrimination increasingly shaping global thinking, the term persecution is increasingly including discrimination, thus aligning with how WWL uses it.

However, things can be tricky. For example, imagine that your children are forbidden from studying at university or that you cannot become a police officer in your country because of your religious affiliation. Is this discrimination in itself already persecution, even if you do not apply for a place at university or for a police job because you are aware of the situation? Or does it only become persecution when you actually apply and encounter all kinds of problems? Take ten such cases to ten German courts and you will get ten different answers.

Please be aware that most human rights terms and related words have broader general and narrower legal usages. For example, the terms 'sexual abuse', 'sexual violence' and 'rape' are often used very generally in the media, which is not necessarily in line with what the law and courts of a given nation might rule.

## **Criticism: By claiming that 'Islamic oppression' is one of the 'persecution engines', WWL reveals its Christian bias.**

- Here are the 'persecution engines', which WWL has extracted from the data. They ask what the most common motives behind persecution are.
- Islamic oppression
- Religious nationalism
- Clan oppression
- Ethno-religious enmity

- (Christian) denominational protectionism
- Communist and post-Communist oppression
- Dictatorial paranoia
- Organized corruption
- Organized crime

This includes ‘Christian denominational protectionism’. Is this anti-Christian bias? What about ‘religious nationalism’? This is observed in countries in which nationalism is built around Christianity, such as Russia. Islamic oppression does not mean that all Muslims are oppressive, just as ‘Christian ... protectionism’ does not mean that this is typical of churches. One thing is for sure: One cannot leave out ‘Islamic oppression’ when talking about the global violation of the human right to freedom of religion or belief.

I am aware that these persecution engines are proven by the WWL only in relation to Christians. However, if I look at the data that our International Institute for Religious Freedom is gathering on all religions and look at other reports like the bi-annual one from ‘PEW Research Center’ or the bi-annual from or Catholic friends ‘Aid to the Church in Need’, I am sure that no major persecution engine is missing when studying the persecution of Muslims (considering a world religion), or the Bahá’í Faith or Jehovah’s Witnesses (considering two smaller religions).

This is not to say that classification into the eight persecution engines is the best approach or the final word. I am simply responding to criticism that it is biased, speaking only against one religion.

## **Criticism: Is Christianity really the most persecuted religion in the world? Or is the number simply high because Christianity is the largest religion in the world?**

Here is what WWL says: ‘Christians are by far the largest religious group persecuted in absolute numbers’. Given that many Westerners are unaware of the persecution of Christians at all and assume that the situation of Christians elsewhere in the world is similar to that on their own continent, this is an important statement to raise awareness.<sup>3</sup> And please do not forget: stating that women are the majority of victims of domestic violence does not downplay or excuse female violence against men. The same is true here.

The Pew Research Center produces a global report on ‘Restrictions on Religions’ approximately every two years; the most recent one was in 2024, the next is expected this year. In its 12th report in 2021, it stated that Christianity is the most persecuted religion, followed by Islam. They did not consider absolute

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<sup>3</sup> Sauer, C. (2019). How many Christians are under threat of persecution? An initial assessment of approaches. *International Journal for Religious Freedom* 12(1/2), 55–69. <https://ijrf.org/index.php/home/article/view/87>

numbers, but rather the number of countries where restrictions were reported: 153 for Christianity and 147 for Islam. As with the WWL, one might have an opinion on how much sense this makes. Nevertheless, the statement is accurate as long as everyone clearly defines their terms.

Neither the WWL statement nor the PEW statement claim that Christianity is the religion with the highest percentage of affiliates being persecuted. In order to make such a statement, one would first need to study all religions in detail. The 380 million WWL Christians in 50 countries, on which the WWL reports that they suffer at least a high degree of persecution, would account for around 15% of Christians worldwide. It would be difficult to think of many religions with a much higher percentage of followers under pressure, but there would be many candidates with a similar or slightly higher percentage.

Nevertheless, I would certainly advise WWL to issue a longer statement on this matter. They could mention that it is easier to ask for percentages when focusing on a specific question. For example, in which countries can Christians and affiliates of other religions not be employed by the state, e.g. as police officers, or where are they not allowed to build official places of worship?

## **Amnesty International, Human Rights Watch and others criticize the fact that this research focuses only on Christians. They argue that this is merely a tactic to pit religions against each other.**

1. We must distinguish between critics such as Amnesty International and Human Rights Watch, who have never shown evidence that freedom of religion or belief is a high priority for them and have always played down the persecution of Christians e.g. in Nigeria, and critics from the global community of freedom of religion or belief advocates and researchers, who definitely want to include persecuted Christians in the overall picture, but would also like to see WWL expand its approach to include all religions and faiths. Such criticism should be carefully studied, even if the focus remains on researching the situation of Christians.
2. Even if it were wrong to research only the situation of Christians, this would not automatically call into question the validity of the data that WWL provides. The solution would not be to stop publishing WWL, but to expand it to cover all religions.
3. In its country reports, but not in the statistics, WWL mentions the persecution of other religions and speaks up for the freedom of all. In addition, they never make all Muslims or all clans etc. responsible for the persecution, nor do they use racist language against any group. Once again, I am not discussing whether this could be improved. I am simply stating that, from my point of view, there is no evidence of the bias for which they are being criticised.
4. It is common for religious and worldview groups to fight for themselves and their own people. If one wants to criticize this, one should criticize all, not just

WWL. At the United Nations, the Bahá'ís, Jews, Humanists and others have offices defending their own people, from which they publish reports on the situation of their followers. Many religious groups publish reports on their own situation worldwide or in specific regions or countries. Of course, it is much easier to gather information about your own group than about others. I rarely hear criticism of any such religions; it is usually only Christians who are criticized. Researchers studying all religions are usually independent researchers or political bodies, rather than the religions themselves or organizations identifying with them. Even the Office for Democratic Institutions and Human Rights (ODIHR) of the Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe (OSCE), which represents 57 states including some from the Americas and is world-class in its work against hate speech and discrimination, organists large databases for people to report incidents of hate speech and discrimination, yet actually gathers those data specifically and separately for Jews, Muslims, Christians and followers of other religions.

5. Open Doors receives its funds from Christian donors who want to support churches facing discrimination and persecution. For example, they provide support for families whose sole breadwinner has been imprisoned. They help rebuild churches that were destroyed. Only a very small percentage of donations is used for research, as any such organization must be very cautious in order to fulfill the donors' wishes. It would be unrealistic to ask them to pay for yearly research into all religions, which would cost many times more and would have to involve a set of institutional partners. Having served on the boards of many NGOs, I can say this. What I won't talk about is how I would make decisions and plan if I were on the board of Open Doors financing WWL —that's a different matter entirely.

6. In Germany, the Catholic Church and the larger Protestant churches published a report in which they heavily criticized WWL for focusing solely on Christians. Ultimately, however, all they can do is advise on what one should do, they themselves do not finance any research. The former German state churches, now independent, Catholic and Protestant, together have an annual budget of around 12 billion euros (at least, not counting the budgets of local churches). It would be very easy for them to fund the best possible religious freedom research. Incidentally: Vatican News obviously thinks otherwise and uses the WWL's numbers and summarizes its results each year.

As the International Institute for Religious Freedom, we conduct an annual audit of each World Watch List (WWL) before it is published. As with a financial audit, we have the right to see anything we want, and we choose the sample countries and then follow through, looking at the sources and how they are documented, and so on. As with a financial audit, the IIRF's scientific audit usually comes with an assessment on whether or not all protocols have been followed correctly, as well as with critics and proposals for improvements - please read the 2026 audit statement. The WWL researchers have often used our proposals for improvements.

This is why I believe it would not be too difficult to create a WWL for all religions. All that is needed is funding. I have approached critics on more than one

occasion and told them, ‘Give us the funds and the IIRF will produce a similar report for all religions.’

The WWL and the IIRF are the only entities I know of that actually document killings because of religious affiliation: the WWL for Christians and the IIRF’s Violent Incidents Database (VID) for all religions. The VID could be much more complete and useful if those criticizing the lack of numbers for non-Christians helped to finance this kind of research. Yet most of the funds for the VID still come from Christian organisations.

## **Criticism: One should not create a ranking at all.**

WWL is just one of many such rankings worldwide.<sup>4</sup> Billions of dollars are based on these kinds of rankings. Organizations like the World Bank produce them because otherwise they would have no idea what is going on. Much of our knowledge about the world today comes from such rankings.

Everyone from consumer protection organizations is familiar with the procedure. What is the best car for a family of four? You single out five areas in which you can get a certain number of points: price, duration, interior space, fuel usage, etc. In the end, you have a ranking. But now you are only interested in how much petrol or electricity a car needs. You turn to the relevant column and easily see the ranking for fuel usage. Several global corruption indices from Transparency International, the Freedom Index from Freedom House and many UN indices on poverty or equal rights for women follow the same basic structure, as does the WWL. If you are only interested in the killings of Christians and actual violence, check column 5 of the WWL. A country might have a high ranking here, but a lower one in the other four columns. Conversely, a country may have a high ranking in columns 1–4, even though few people are killed.<sup>5</sup>

## **Criticism: Is this really academic research?**

I have seen WWL evolve from a source of support for praying Christians into the evangelical document most frequently referenced in the global secular media year on year. The IIRF collaborated with WWL academics from various disciplines to develop the five-column questionnaire,<sup>6</sup> which is refined from time to time to enhance reporting, despite the inherent limitations of this type of research in our imperfect world—perfect numbers will always be elusive.

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<sup>4</sup> Sauer, C. (2022). Alarm Bells Against Discrimination: What Global Surveys and Country Comparisons on Persecution are Helpful for. *IIRF Reports 2022(1)*. <https://iirf.global/?p=2577>

<sup>5</sup> Sauer, C. (2022). Suggestions for an appropriate use of World Watch List data (2021). *IIRF Reports 2022(2)*. <https://iirf.global/?p=2330>

<sup>6</sup> Sauer, C. (2012). Measuring persecution: The new questionnaire design of the World Watch List. *International Journal for Religious Freedom* 5(2), 21–36. <https://ijrf.org/index.php/home/article/view/80>

As IIRF we worked and work with the research team academics at WWL to ensure that the results are presented in a way that makes it clear how they are achieved, enabling researchers to study the methodology. If you read our latest audit report, you will see that we are not doing WWL a favor or simply giving them a clean bill. Instead, we are digging into what they do and providing a scientific evaluation, which may differ from year to year, as with a financial audit.

As is often the case, the published methodology of WWL has many more pages than all the other material published around the WWL. It provides definitions for all the terms used and explains how the final score for each country is calculated. Researchers can find much more information here than for most well-known global yearly indices, such as Transparency International's various corruption scores. Just to add: The Pew Research Center also has a very extensive document on the methodology of its FoRB research. If you read it, you will easily understand why this kind of research is so expensive.

Another advantage of the IIRF's Violent Incidents Database is that the raw data is available to researchers.<sup>7</sup> This means that researchers can use the data for their own research and ask and answer questions that are not on IIRF's agenda. If we receive the necessary funding, IIRF will expand the Violent Incidents Database and its other tools, producing many further reports related to freedom of religion or belief and reporting on human rights violations against any given faith group.

## **Appendix: The Persecution Narrative: Are Christians Really the Most Persecuted?<sup>8</sup>**

Last week, Open Doors released its 2026 World Watch List<sup>9</sup> with a familiar headline: Christian persecution has reached “an all-time high.” The figures are striking—388 million Christians now face high levels of persecution and discrimination, up 8 million from last year. Fifteen countries hit record-high violence scores. In Nigeria alone it is claimed 3,490 Christians were killed for their faith.

These numbers are real, and the suffering is genuine. But do statistics like this really support the broader claim—that Christians are the most persecuted religious group in the world? This claim is so often repeated it does not even warrant qualification by some. Figures like Douglas Murray and Eric Metaxas have amplified this narrative loudly. Metaxas declared that: “The greatest untold story of the 21st century is the persecution of Christians.” Murray echoes this sentiment, arguing that Western leaders are silent: “There is a real and terrible

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<sup>7</sup> While our vision for the VID is to be open access, we have had to evolve to a subscription model, in which we charge for data access.

<sup>8</sup> Petri, D. P. (2026, January 23). The Persecution Narrative: Are Christians Really the Most Persecuted? *Five4Faith*. <https://five4faith.substack.com/p/the-persecution-narrative-are-christians>

<sup>9</sup> Petri, D.P., & Wisdom, K. (2026, January 14). Audit Statement on the outcomes of the Open Doors World Watch List 2026. *International Institute for Religious Freedom*. <https://iirf.global/?p=6777>

persecution of Christians around the world, and yet the people who talk about human rights so rarely bring it up.”

Their arguments tend to rely more on emotional appeal than on solid data. Instead of engaging with the complexities of religious persecution, they use the suffering of Christians as a vehicle to promote their own ideological battles—against Islam, “woke” culture, and Western secularism.

But does their narrative stand up to scrutiny?

This isn’t just an issue of accuracy. It’s also a question of effectiveness. If advocacy for persecuted Christians is reduced to a culture war talking point, does it actually help those who are suffering?

### **The Numbers Game: Who is the Most Persecuted?**

Are Christians the most persecuted group in the world? It depends on how you define “persecuted” and how you measure it. Christians do indeed face significant persecution, especially in regions where they are a minority. However, the raw number of cases does not necessarily make them the most persecuted proportionally. Since Christianity is the world’s largest religion, it follows that a large number of persecuted individuals will be Christian.

Yet as sociologist Miray Philips demonstrated, neither of the two most-cited data sources—Open Doors and the Pew Research Center—actually substantiate the claim<sup>10</sup> that Christians are the most persecuted religious group worldwide. The problem, as Philips shows, is that Open Doors and Pew data are made to say things by politicians and journalists they were never designed to say. Open Doors collects data exclusively on Christian persecution. Since it provides no comparative data on other religious groups, it simply cannot support claims about a hierarchy of suffering. The 388 million figure represents Christians living in countries designated as having high levels of persecution—not the number of individuals with documented experiences of persecution. Countries with large Christian populations, such as India, China, and Nigeria, account for much of this total.

The Pew Research Center, meanwhile, measures how widespread religious restrictions are—counting the number of countries where each group faces harassment. In 2022, Christians were harassed in 166 countries, Muslims in 148, and Jews in 90. But Pew explicitly warns<sup>11</sup> that these figures “do not reflect the severity of harassment or persecution and thus cannot determine which religious groups face the most persecution.” The data show only that Christians, as the world’s largest and most geographically dispersed group, encounter restrictions in more places—not that they suffer most intensely.

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<sup>10</sup> Philips, M. (2025, August 29). The Social Construction of Christian Persecution Through Quantification in International Religious Freedom Advocacy. *Sociology of Religion: A Quarterly Review* 2025, XX:XX 1–23. <https://doi.org/10.1093/socrel/sraf022>

<sup>11</sup> Majumdar, S. (2024, December 18). Government Restrictions on Religion Stayed at Peak Levels Globally in 2022. *Pew Research Center*. <https://pewresearch.org/?p=195993>

A more precise way to assess persecution is to examine the proportion of a given religious community facing discrimination or violence. Groups like the Rohingya Muslims in Myanmar or the Yazidis in Iraq have faced near-total annihilation in certain areas. Other religious minorities—Bahá'ís in Iran, Ahmadi Muslims in Pakistan, Jehovah's Witnesses in Russia—experience systematic legal discrimination and social hostility at staggering rates.

As Jonathan Fox argued in *Foreign Affairs* a decade ago, “religious discrimination is an equal opportunity endeavor.”<sup>12</sup> Fox's point—echoing Philips's critique—is that media coverage and advocacy create a false impression that religious persecution is primarily about Christians suffering at the hands of Muslims. In reality, religious minorities of all kinds face discrimination across the globe, perpetrated by governments and societies of all religious backgrounds.

This being said, it is actually possible to determine which groups face the most persecution—but only with comparative data across all religious minorities. The Religion and State Project (RAS), which Fox directs, provides exactly this: it scores discrimination against each religious minority separately in every country. Through its partnership with RAS, the International Institute for Religious Freedom now publishes the Global Religious Freedom Index (GRFI),<sup>13</sup> enabling genuine cross-group comparisons.

As I have argued elsewhere, the field of freedom of religion or belief (FoRB) measurement has grown increasingly sophisticated, yet persistent challenges remain<sup>14</sup>—including conceptual ambiguities, the conflation of “restrictions” with “persecution,” and underreporting of violations against less-organized religious communities. These measurement gaps matter: they shape which communities receive attention, resources, and policy intervention.

The International Institute for Religious Freedom's Violent Incidents Database (VID) documents patterns of targeted violence against religious minorities that complicate any simplistic hierarchy. In Pakistan, for instance, the Ahmadiyya Muslim community faces systemic persecution, including attacks on their places of worship and individuals. In 2023, multiple Ahmadi individuals were killed and their religious sites desecrated—acts perpetrated with impunity, reflecting deep-seated societal and institutional biases. The legal framework explicitly criminalizes Ahmadi religious identity in ways that do not apply to Christians. While Christian communities also suffer from discrimination and violence—such as the 2023 Jaranwala church burnings—this disparity underscores the varying degrees of institutionalized persecution faced by different religious minorities in Pakistan.

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<sup>12</sup> Fox, J. (2015, August 31). Equal Opportunity Oppression: Religious Persecution Is a Global Problem. *Foreign Affairs*. <https://foreignaffairs.com/world/equal-opportunity-oppression>

<sup>13</sup> Global Religious Freedom Index. *International Institute for Religious Freedom*. <https://iirf.global/publications-resources/global-religious-freedom-index/>

<sup>14</sup> Petri, D. P. (2025). Measuring What Matters: Evolving Metrics of Religious Freedom. *The Review of Faith & International Affairs* 23(4), 33–56. <https://doi.org/10.1080/15570274.2025.2545135>

Data from the IIRF's VID and GRFI show that religious persecution is widespread, and no single group has a monopoly on suffering.

## **The “Ignored Persecution” Myth**

Murray and Metaxas also claim that Christian persecution is uniquely ignored. But is that really the case? In recent decades, advocacy for persecuted Christians has gained significant political traction, particularly in the United States. The US made religious freedom a foreign policy priority as far back as 1998 establishing a dedicated Ambassador for International Religious Freedom and pressuring countries like Nigeria and China on their treatment of Christians. Reports from the U.S. Commission on International Religious Freedom (USCIRF) consistently highlight Christian persecution, and many civil society organizations like the IIRF actively campaign on the issue.

Far from being ignored, Christian persecution is one of the few religious freedom issues that enjoys bipartisan political attention in the West. What's debatable is the effectiveness of this attention. Advocacy efforts often focus on Western political pressure rather than addressing the root causes of persecution—authoritarianism, nationalism, and sectarian conflicts within persecuting states.

## **Why Aren't Christian Leaders Louder?**

A common accusation—echoed in Murray's rhetoric—is that Western Christian leaders are complicit in this silence. While some church leaders may hesitate to speak out, the reasons are complex. Fear of political backlash cannot be the only factor.

Many churches are focused on local social issues, theological debates, or the rise of secularism in their own societies.

The influence of prosperity gospel theology, which emphasizes personal success over social justice, may also play a role.

However, there is another possibility: many Christians remain largely ignorant of the data about religious freedom violations, and therefore don't make it a priority.

And some Christian leaders don't see persecution as a simple Christian-versus-the-world narrative. Many recognize that religious persecution is a global, multi-religious problem. They may choose to advocate for all persecuted religious communities rather than exclusively focusing on their own.

## **A More Honest Conversation**

If we truly care about persecuted Christians—and about religious freedom in general—we should reject simplistic narratives. Advocacy should be based on evidence, not outrage. The goal should not be to “win” a debate against secularists, Muslims, or progressives, but to ensure that people of all faiths can worship freely without fear.

Figures like Murray and Metaxas may bring attention to Christian persecution, but their approach risks turning a serious human rights issue into another front in the culture wars. If we want to make a real difference, we need better data, better advocacy, and a commitment to defending religious freedom for everyone

## Imprint

### Addresses

International Institute for Religious Freedom  
P. O. Box 780068  
Orlando, Florida 32878  
United States of America

Friedrichstr. 38  
2nd Floor  
53111 Bonn  
Germany

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

Website: <https://iirf.global>  
Contact: [info@iirf.global](mailto:info@iirf.global)

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