

Introducing The Lindisfarne Centre for the Study of Christian Persecution

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Lindisfarne, Northumberland

Defining persecution

Last November we formally launched the Lindisfarne Centre for the Study of Christian Persecution.

Why Lindisfarne?

It's a new research organisation which aims not just to tell governments, international organisations and media where persecution of Christians is happening, but also why – the ideology behind the persecution. Only when you understand that can you see where it is likely spread in the future.

The name Lindisfarne is used to highlight the crisis of church life precipitated by the 793 AD attack on the monastery at Lindisfarne and subsequent Viking attacks on churches and Christian institutions across Britain which lasted until 1018. According to the early 12th century church historian Symeon of Durham, these almost eradicated Christianity in parts of Britain. The name highlights the broadly similar situations of violence, persecution and attempted eradication that in recent years Christians have faced in countries such as Iraq and Syria, and currently face in the North and Middle Belt of Nigeria.

But that raises a question:

What is 'persecution'?

In the Parable of the Sower Jesus spoke about those who fall away from their faith when "trouble" or "persecution" comes ([Matt 13:21](#)). The first word (θλίψις - thlipsis) has the idea of pressure – squeezing someone with various afflictions until they give up their faith, while the second (διωγμός - diōgmos) – is the idea of actually pursuing someone, forcing them to run away.

In other words, as far as the Bible is concerned, persecution is various forms of pressure and harassment to give up our biblical faith. That's something which is very easy to lose sight of as the whole concept of "persecution" has become secularised.

Freedom of religion largely and almost exclusively developed in Protestant countries as the translation of the Bible led to real debate about what were the God given limits on the extent to which government could interfere in matters of conscience. It was the persecution of those such as John Bunyan – who spent 12 years in Bedford prison (1660-72) for the terrible crime of preaching without the permission of the Church of England(!) that finally led to the 1689 Toleration Act and other subsequent freedoms by which Britain led the world in establishing full freedom of religion.

Defining freedom of religion

Today that history is largely forgotten by politicians, media and even judges. I've lost count of the number of times I've heard such people insist that article 18 of the 1948 Universal Declaration of Human Rights is a full and adequate definition of freedom of religion. Its history tells a somewhat different story.

It was drawn up by a committee drawn from countries such as the UK and USA with a long heritage of freedom of religion, as well as those such as China, Saudi Arabia and the USSR which did not. In essence it was a compromise agreement arrived at after nearly two years of debate, which simply said that *"Everyone has the right to freedom of thought, conscience and religion"* and then gave two examples, *"this includes the freedom to change his religion or belief"* and the somewhat vaguer right to *"manifest"* religion.

The first example was included against strong opposition from predominantly Islamic countries – as apostasy i.e. conversion from Islam carries the death penalty in shari'a. While Saudi Arabia successfully vetoed a draft proposed by the UK government which included the freedom *"to persuade other persons of the truth of one's beliefs"* i.e. the freedom to preach – as again this conflicted with shari'a.

Since then, the question of what actually are *"human rights"*, including the right to freedom of religion, has become an incredibly contested area. Islamic countries have repeatedly sought to introduce motions to the UN Human Rights Committee claiming that *"defamation of religion"* is an abuse of human rights i.e. seeking to introduce what is in effect, a global Islamic blasphemy law, under the cover of *"human rights"*.

Identifying religious freedom

So, when we set up the Lindisfarne Centre for the Study of Christian Persecution, we consciously went back to those aspects of freedom of religion which historically developed in the countries of the English-speaking world. We identified 10 such aspects of freedom of religion:

1. Freedom of the Church from state interference, including freedom to interpret scripture without government interference.
2. Freedom to translate and own scripture in the vernacular and read it publicly.
3. Freedom of worship.
4. Freedom from being required to act against one's beliefs.
5. Freedom to establish places of worship.
6. Freedom to preach and try to convince others of the truth of one's beliefs.
7. Freedom to choose or change one's faith.
8. Freedom from being required to affirm a particular worldview, i.e. religious or philosophical beliefs, in order to hold public office, enter various professions or study at university (repeal of 'Test Acts').
9. Freedom of parents to educate children according to their own beliefs.

Freedom to criticise the religious or philosophical beliefs of others (absence of blasphemy law).

Renewal and reaffirmation

On our website we have developed country profiles which assess the treatment of Christians in specific Islamic countries against these 10 aspects of freedom of religion. We do so because we don't want to just say a particular country is persecuting Christians – we also want to tell them what aspects they specifically need to improve.

However, we also fundamentally believe that it is important to remind politicians and media in the West of what freedom of religion has historically meant. Because if we do not safeguard it here – then the ability of western governments to advocate for persecuted Christians overseas becomes somewhat like a wounded soldier fighting with one arm behind his back.

We also believe that the renewal and reaffirmation of these values which originally emerged in response to Christian reflection on the God-given limits to government may have some hope of countering the challenge of radical Islam. Since the collapse of totalitarian Communism 35 years ago, this has now become the predominant ideology behind the increasing spread of Christian persecution in the world.

Dr Martin Parsons is CEO of the Lindisfarne Centre for the Study of Christian Persecution (christianpersecution.co.uk)

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