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# Did you know?

Religious persecution is not a new phenomenon. A daily review of the headlines highlights the persecution of Christians and other religious communities around the world. The problem is widespread, and effective solutions can be difficult to grasp. However, difficult does not mean impossible. *DID YOU KNOW?* is designed to equip readers with key facts and insights that can help us better understand global religious persecution and respond effectively.

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In the context of global persecution, the mission of the Everett Center for Global Religious Freedom at Dallas Baptist University is to inspire and equip students, churches, and policymakers to advance religious freedom for all. For more information and resources, visit the Everett Center's website at [www.dbu.edu/cgrf](http://www.dbu.edu/cgrf).

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## **Did you know that every faith community is susceptible to persecution every day?**

Billions of people hold a worldview shaped by faith. Approximately 75% of the world's population [identifies](#) with a religion or belief, while [many others](#) hold nonconforming or spiritual beliefs. At the same time, studies have [documented](#) that roughly three-fourths of the global population live in nations that limit the free practice of faith due to government restrictions, social hostilities, or both. It's an astonishing statistic—every day, billions of people from every faith or none are susceptible to religious persecution.

## **Did you know that governments are obligated to uphold the right to religious freedom for everyone?**

By signing the [UN Charter](#), all UN [member states](#) have agreed to promote and encourage “respect for human rights and for fundamental freedoms for all without distinction as to race, sex, language, or religion.” These rights and freedoms are delineated in international documents, beginning with the 1948 [Universal Declaration of Human Rights](#) (UDHR). The UDHR provides “a common standard of achievement for all peoples and all nations” and a “common understanding” of specific human rights.

Religious freedom is one of these fundamental freedoms. A universal human right, it is spelled out in Article 18 of the UDHR, Article 18 of the [International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights](#), as well as other international and regional treaties. In addition, most countries' [constitutions](#) include language providing for religious freedom. Regrettably, however, these international, regional, and domestic guarantees are not honored universally in practice.

## **Did you know that religious freedom is an individual right?**

When most people think of religious freedom, they think of attending a worship service—its communal aspects. Religious freedom certainly includes the freedom to engage in collective activities, but that's only part of the picture. Religious freedom protects every individual's right to hold, or not to hold, any religion or belief, and to peacefully manifest that religion or belief, subject to only very narrow [limitations](#). This includes the freedom to change faith, debate religious issues, to dissent from or refuse to follow prevailing interpretations, to hold and express controversial or unpopular beliefs, to educate one's children, to share faith, or to not be religious. In this way, the international standard protects religious believers as well as atheists and agnostics alike. And indeed, governments cannot choose which beliefs deserve protection. Religious freedom protects Muslims, Jews, Hindus, Buddhists, Baha'is, Sikhs, Yazidis, indigenous religious communities and those with other beliefs in the same way it protects Christians.

But remember: as a human right, religious freedom protects people, not religions. This means that every person is guaranteed the right to hold and to manifest their beliefs—but not to have those beliefs be immune from discussion, challenge, or criticism.

Article 18 – Everyone has the right to freedom of thought, conscience and religion; this right includes freedom to change his religion or belief, and freedom, either alone or in community with others and in public or private, to manifest his religion or belief in teaching, practice, worship and observance.

Universal Declaration  
of Human Rights

## **Did you know that all instances of religious persecution violate religious freedom, but not every violation of religious freedom is persecution?**

Religious persecution is a heavy term. It constitutes violence on account of a person's religion or belief (or lack thereof) combined with the absence of accountability. In other words, religious persecution could be assaults, beatings, torture, disappearances, and murder with no recourse for the victim because the police are either complicit, incompetent, or corrupt. To preserve the meaning of the term and the credibility of advocates, one should reference "religious persecution" only in the most egregious situations. But that doesn't mean other religious freedom violations aren't problematic. The closing of churches, the banning of gatherings, gag rules or prohibitions on certain religious speech (sermons, proselytizing, education) run afoul of international standards and are worthy of advocacy.

## **Did you know that religious freedom is a broad right, encompassing a wide range of activities and expression?**

Religious freedom protects more than just the right to worship or to practice religious rituals. Its [full scope](#) covers worship, observance, practice, teaching, and expression. These include activities such as: wearing religious dress or symbols, using religious objects, celebrating holidays, observing rest days, following dietary restrictions, participating in life rituals, or using a particular language. The right also includes establishing and managing meeting places and other institutions; choosing and training religious leaders; possessing, publishing, and distributing religious materials; and educating children. Additionally, it protects the right to keep or to change one's religion or belief without coercion. Finally, religious freedom encompasses the freedom to publicly or privately express one's beliefs, including through proselytizing or other expressions intended to persuade another person to change his or her religious beliefs or affiliation voluntarily.

Importantly, while aspects of tolerance are often part of respecting fundamental rights, religious freedom aims higher. Tolerance is an attitude while religious freedom is a legal right protected under international law. In this way, religious freedom moves us beyond tolerance.

## **Did you know the U.S. government is required to promote international religious freedom for all worldwide?**

Since 1998, the [International Religious Freedom Act](#) (IRFA) has mandated that the U.S. government oppose religious persecution and promote religious freedom abroad. The law established a special [ambassador](#) and an [office](#) at the State Department to focus on the issue. It requires the State Department to issue an [annual report](#) on conditions in foreign countries and to impose consequences on violators, including annual [designations](#) of the foreign governments and nonstate actors\* that are the worst abusers. Additionally, the Act established a [bipartisan advisory body](#) to monitor conditions, evaluate U.S. policy, and make recommendations. To learn more about the history and status of U.S. international religious freedom efforts, read the Everett Center's [report](#) *International Religious Freedom Advocacy in a Time of Disruption: A Roadmap for Civil Society & Faith Actors*, available on our website.

## **Did you know that religious freedom for everyone, everywhere, matters for global peace and security?**

Considering that the vast majority of the world's population is affiliated with a religious group or holds some spiritual values, most people want the freedom to follow their beliefs—or not to believe—according to the dictates of their own conscience. Yet despite religious freedom's longstanding recognition, this important right is still widely denied or [restricted](#) in practice. From a humanitarian perspective, we should care when our fellow human beings are prevented from, or punished for, seeking to peacefully live out their deeply held beliefs. But there are also broader reasons to be concerned. [Studies](#) have shown that nations that provide religious freedom are more likely to be democratic, stable, prosperous, and peaceful, whereas those that do not experience more poverty, instability, extremism, and violence. This means that whether a country protects or denies religious freedom domestically makes a difference not only for the well-being of that society itself, but also for peace and security for us all.

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\*In the context of persecution, the term “nonstate actors” refers to non-governmental actors such as terrorist or criminal organizations, armed groups, extremist groups, local mobs, or insurgent groups. Examples you may know include the Taliban in Afghanistan, Boko Haram in Nigeria, or the ELN guerrilla group in Colombia.