



Written by [Rebecca Terrell](#) on May 9, 2023

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Worldwide Persecution of Christians

In the middle of the night, with their rectory under terrorist attack, Catholic priests Isaac Achi and Collins Omeh heard each other's confessions. The two had been awakened at 3:00 a.m. by sounds of assailants trying to break in to their parish residence at Saints Peter and Paul Catholic Church in northern Nigeria. After the absolutions, Father Achi urged his associate pastor to flee.

When the criminals' break-in attempts failed, they set the building ablaze. Father Omeh managed to escape and survived being shot from behind. Unfortunately, Father Achi succumbed to the flames. Emergency crews found his remains among the charred rubble of the building.

A fellow cleric, Father Ugochukwu Ugwoke, recounted the tragedy on Twitter in January. *Business Day* identified Father Achi as the same priest who escaped a bomb blast on Christmas Day in 2011 at Saint Theresa Catholic Church in Madalla. The explosion killed 44 of his parishioners and left seven others blind.

Father Achi's family told the *Daily Trust* that he had previously survived two other attacks. Kidnappers abducted him during his time in Madalla, and he survived being shot in the jaw when gunmen invaded a house he was visiting "to bless a child during a naming ceremony." The tall priest stood up to the assailants and bore a scar from the bullet for the rest of his life.

The Daily Post quoted the governor of the Nigerian state of Niger, who called January's deadly attack on Father Achi "ungodly and inhumane" and insisted that "drastic action is needed to end this ongoing carnage."

Diabolic Trends

His reference to "ongoing carnage" is no exaggeration. According to research firm SB Morgan Intelligence, gunmen killed 39 Catholic priests in Nigeria last year, while 30 were abducted and held for exorbitant ransoms. Several dozen other clerics survived injuries sustained in attacks.

Yet 2022 was hardly an anomaly. Examples of earlier murders include that of Father Luke Mewhenu Adeleke, gunned down by unknown assailants after he had celebrated Christmas Eve Mass in 2021. Earlier that year, gunmen shot Father Ferdinand Fanen Ngugban in the head as he was preparing for the Easter vigil service. And exactly two years before Father Achi's slaying, killers ambushed Father John Gbakaan near the village of Tufa. He "was executed with a machete in such a brutal and horrific manner that identification was hardly possible," reported Vatican News.

Who is targeting these priests? Local news reports call them "bandits" and "herdsmen" and bemoan



[facebook.com/nigeriacatholics](https://www.facebook.com/nigeriacatholics)

Martyr priest: Father Isaac Achi was burned to death in January in his rectory in Nigeria, where the militant group Boko Haram has vowed to rid the country of Christians.



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failed efforts to apprehend the murderers, though the problem has been worsening.

Western media have been more explicit. Nigeria has been targeted “since 2009 when a Boko Haram insurgency began with the aim of turning the country into an Islamic state,” reports the Catholic News Agency (CNA). “Since then, the organization, which is one of the largest Islamic groups in Africa, has orchestrated terrorist attacks on various targets, including religious and political groups as well as civilians.”

The U.S. State Department’s National Counterterrorism Center (NCC) has designated Boko Haram a Foreign Terrorist Organization since 2013, and it is ranked seventh among the “20 Deadliest Terror Groups of 2022” in the Global Terrorism Index published by the think tank Institute for Economics and Peace.

NCC’s website identifies the group as claiming solidarity with al-Qaeda and enmity against the United States. The group’s name means “Western education is forbidden,” and Boko Haram took credit for the 2011 Christmas bombing of Father Achi’s church in Madalla.

All Christians — not just Catholic priests — are in the crosshairs of militant jihadist groups such as this. Last year a Muslim mob beat, stoned, and burned alive a young Christian woman outside the security office of her college in Sokoto State for the alleged crime of blasphemy. They posted videos of their brutality on Twitter, and the Nigerian *People’s Gazette* confirmed the circumstances of the murder.

Blasphemy was also the excuse for the brutal public lynching of 74-year-old Bridget Agbahime, the wife of a Bible church pastor in Kano City. The state attorney general released the five suspects in the case on grounds of lack of evidence. Nigerian news outlet The Cable complained, “Too often such religious murders occur without diligent prosecution or willingness to tackle them by governments at all levels.”

The bad news is that Nigeria is not the worst in terms of persecution of those who follow Christ. It ranks sixth on the World Watch List 2023, a catalog of the “top 50 countries where Christians experience the most persecution.” It is published by the nongovernmental organization Open Doors, which dedicates itself to smuggling Bibles into these areas and providing other support for what is reputedly the most oppressed religious group in the contemporary world.

That has been the consensus for years. “The persecution of Christians throughout much of the Middle East, sub-Saharan Africa, and Asia [and] elsewhere is one of the crimes against humanity of our time, and I am appalled at the lack of protest it has evoked,” said Lord Jonathan Sacks, a member of the U.K. Parliament and former chief rabbi of the United Hebrew Congregations of the Commonwealth, during 2014 debate in the House of Lords. “What is happening to Christians in these places is the religious equivalent of ethnic cleansing.”

Indeed, a 2015 study by the Catholic campaign group Aid to the Church in Need noted that “Christians are fast disappearing from entire regions — most notably a huge chunk of the Middle East but also whole dioceses in Africa.” The research blamed “ethnic cleansing motivated by religious hatred” for changing Christianity from a “global faith to a regional one, with the faithful increasingly absent from ever-widening areas.” Likewise, a 2015 Pew Research Center report found that “Christians have been harassed in more countries than any other religious group.”

It has only gotten worse since then. In a 2019 address announcing results of a U.K. investigation into the issue, British Foreign Secretary Jeremy Hunt noted the ever-growing problem, citing evidence that



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Christians “endure the heaviest burden of persecution” globally, “believed to be targets of about 80 percent of all acts of religious discrimination or persecution.” The report warned about “decimation of some of the faith group’s oldest and most enduring communities.”

The U.S. Commission on International Religious Freedom (USCIRF) agrees, calling it a “deeply disturbing” situation. In a *USA Today* op-ed, USCIRF commissioners Jim Carr and Fred Davie quoted statistics from last year’s Open Doors World Watch List: “In 2021, over 360 million Christians lived in places where they experienced ‘high levels of persecution and discrimination’ while 5,898 Christians died for their faith; 6,175 were detained, arrested, sentenced or imprisoned; and 3,829 were abducted.”

A decade earlier, in 2011, Pope Benedict XVI had decried similar statistics in his World Peace Day address: “At present, Christians are the religious group which suffers most from persecution on account of its faith.” He called the circumstances an “intolerable” threat to world security, but the only individual country he cited was Iraq, which he called a “theater of violence and strife.”

Today, that country comes in at number 18 on Open Doors’ tally. Surprisingly, despite China’s oppressive surveillance and ever-tightening restrictions on religious freedom, it ranks only 16th on the list. That status even considers watchdog reports that China has been demanding “worship and allegiance” of Xi Jinping and cracking down on Christian websites and apps, as Fox News reported in February.

Occupying Open Doors’ top spot is North Korea, where Christians face brutal hostility not from Islamic militants, but from their own government. “If discovered by the authorities, believers are either sent to labour camps as political prisoners where the conditions are atrocious,” explains the Open Doors website, “or [they] are killed on the spot — and their families will share their fate as well.” The group reports that the situation has gotten worse since passage in 2020 of the country’s “anti-reactionary thought law,” which outlaws the “importing and distributing of ‘impure’ foreign” materials, including the Bible and religious literature, according to *Daily NK*.

There are 11 countries that Open Doors classifies as areas of “extreme persecution” for Christians. Along with North Korea and Nigeria, those that earn this shameful designation are Somalia, Yemen, Eritrea, Libya, Pakistan, Iran, Afghanistan, Sudan, and India.



Unholy persecution: During the summer of 2008, anti-Christian riots in India left nearly 400 churches



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vandalized or destroyed, and hundreds of people maimed or murdered. (All India Christian Council)

Prohibiting Proselytes

Many more discriminate against Christians in other ways. The U.S. State Department's 2016 International Religious Freedom Report — provided in part to ensure that travelers know what they're walking into — lists 39 countries that completely ban proselytizing, and 28 others that only allow it under strict limitations. That amounts to roughly one-third of the globe wherein talking to others about your religious convictions is banned or restricted and can get you thrown into prison or deported.

"The Pew Research Centre has noted that conversion is now a dangerously contentious issue in India," writes leftist news outlet CounterCurrents.org. "Nine states have enacted laws against proselytism as of early 2021."

It points out that Christianity is one of the only proselytizing religions in the nation. Vigilantes use unproven allegations of conversion activities as an excuse to commit crimes such as arson of churches and schools, physical violence and murder, sexual assaults, and destruction of cemeteries. "Mob crimes are carried out with impunity as the police turn a blind eye," the article protests.

Of course, India ranks high on the World Watch List. Other names on the State Department's Religious Freedom Report are more surprising. Case in point: Israel, where "religious groups may proselytize on the condition that the individual is at least 18 years of age, and no material benefits are offered," explains Open Doors.

That law has long been a point of contention for groups such as the Beit Hillel Congregation, Messianic Jews who worship in the immigrant-heavy coastal city of Ashdod. In 2019 Israel National News accused the organization of "deceptive missionary practices" in handing out gift boxes to local children. And *Israel Today* reported that authorities arrested a Christian missionary in February 2021 for giving a religious pamphlet to a six-year-old.

It's odd pushback to encounter in the place where Jesus was born and raised, where He preached and died, and where the 1948 Israeli Declaration of Independence declares: "Israel will ensure complete equality of social and political rights to all its inhabitants irrespective of religion, race or sex; it will guarantee freedom of religion, conscience, language, education and culture."

Yet earlier this year two influential members of the Israeli Parliament proposed legislation that would outlaw evangelism and send violators to prison. In their official explanation of the bill, the sponsors emphasized that they were targeting Christians, and Joe Rosenberg of *All Israel News* wrote that the measure had strong support in Parliament. Aggressive objections from evangelical Christians — who are some of the biggest supporters of Israel worldwide — prompted the sponsors to withdraw their proposal for the time being.

Adding insult to injury, earlier this year when a member of Germany's Parliament proposed establishment of an International Day Against the Persecution of Christians, lawmakers not only voted against it, but some also challenged the veracity of claims to Christian persecution worldwide. Opponents alleged that the measure was intended only to stir up hatred of Muslims, and that claims of discrimination merely stem from a supposed persecution complex of Christians living as minorities in Muslim-dominated countries.



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But their suffering is real, according to the International Society for Human Rights (which, ironically, is headquartered in Germany), and also according to the World Evangelical Alliance's International Institute for Religious Freedom. Both organizations agree with Open Doors' assessment and caution that the problem is growing.

Home Turf

Christians who have lived through persecution warn that even the United States is not immune. "The leader of a watchdog group that monitors Christian persecution in China said he's seeing echoes of the Chinese Communist Party 'playbook' in the U.S., and he's worried it'll get worse," reports Fox News.

That watchdog leader is ChinaAid president Bob Fu, whose 2013 book *God's Double Agent* recounts his imprisonment in Beijing for leading "house churches," which are those not registered with the government. He and his wife escaped in 1996, and dedicate their lives to providing legal and humanitarian aid to persecuted Christians.

Fu told Fox that he is "seeing the same tactics in Western nations that the CCP uses to crack down on churches." He cited censorship, intolerance of dissent, and the forcing of "woke" culture, and particularly pointed to political weaponizing of law enforcement as a "worrisome" trend.

"It is very shocking and horrible to see American society's transformation evolving from its constitutional basis," said Fu. "I feel America is descending into a Chinese communist style of governance."

He is justified. Last November, the U.S. military labeled a New Jersey mother of two as a security threat for her social-media posts objecting to sexually explicit posters displayed in her children's elementary school, according to CBN News.

In March, Arizona's Washington Elementary School District severed ties with Arizona Christian University because it deemed the Christian faith of ACU's student-teachers a threat to its LGBTQ students.

Missouri's College of the Ozarks, a Christian school, is taking its case against President Joe Biden to the Supreme Court this year over his administration's ban on "housing discrimination" based on sexual orientation and gender identity.

Last fall, FBI agents used long guns and ballistic shields to arrest Mark Houck, a pro-life activist and Catholic father, at his home in front of his terrified wife and seven children. Capitol Hill Republicans have noted the agency's disproportionate lack of interest in locating those who fire-bomb pro-life pregnancy centers, and its labeling of "radical-traditionalist Catholic[s]" as "racially or ethnically motivated violent extremists" in a recently leaked internal memo.

Fu also points a finger of blame at Canada, where authorities clamped down so hard on churches during the pandemic that U.S. Senator Josh Hawley (R-Mo.) has urged USCIRF to add that country to its watch list.

It could be a well-deserved designation, considering that authorities arrested 16-year-old Josh Alexander in February for trespassing at his Catholic high school in Ontario, where he had been suspended for protesting the school's transgender policies. Released to his family, he was arrested two days later for quoting Scripture outside a drag-queen story hour for children at the National Arts Centre



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in Ottawa.

“I recognize that our freedom of religion is under attack.... God’s natural order is under attack. The family unit in general is being attacked from every angle, and they’re starting with the youth,” Alexander told CBN News. When asked what the solution is, he responded, “I’m not going to silence myself. We’re told to go into the world and preach the gospel, and that’s what I’m going to continue to do.”



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