



Across the West, Attacks on Religious Freedom Accelerate

As religious freedom continues to come under ruthless attack by governments from Communist China and North Korea to the Middle East, major new threats to religious liberty are increasingly emerging across the West. While early warning signs have been flashing in the United States, across Europe efforts to infringe on the right to freedom of religion are even more advanced. If left unchecked, religious-freedom advocates warn that the controversial plots have the potential to eventually unleash mass abuses and human-rights violations by governments even in formerly free nations.



Transnational European entities, for example, have been seeking to crack down on what are being referred to as “new religious movements.” More than a few national governments in the region have even [criminalized](#) certain forms of religious expression — especially [criticism](#) of [homosexual behavior](#) or Islam, which in some parts of Europe can even be punished with prison sentences. In the United Kingdom, as *The New American* [reported](#) in late 2012, official discrimination against Christianity has also sparked cries of hostility toward religious liberty.

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Most recently, in Europe, a transnational outfit known as the Council of Europe produced warnings from across the continent. Last month at the Parliamentary Assembly of the Council of Europe (PACE), pseudo-legislators from every part of Europe were debating a resolution that vilifies “new religious movements” under the guise of countering “cults” and “sects.” If approved in its original form, the measure would have called on European governments to monitor and counteract smaller religions — especially taking aim at their ability to convert younger members to their views.

“We are simply obliged to halt the dangerous, devastating sect parade in our countries, as they very often lead families and minors to a guaranteed destruction, taking advantage of the extreme social conditions people face,” said Parliamentarian Naira Zohrabyan, an Armenian delegate to PACE who strongly supported the measure. “I definitely agree with the rapporteur on the need to reinforce the provisions of the criminal legislation, which envisage punishment for making people, first of all minors, dependent on sects through different physical and psychological mechanisms of influence.”

The pseudo-legislation, which was introduced and pushed by French Parliamentarian Rudy Salles, sought to extend France’s widely criticized anti-religious-freedom dogma to 47 separate nations across Europe. If it had been approved, the original measure would have also established “information centers” to monitor minority religions, created a “European observatory,” and more. Especially under fire were private schools and homeschoolers. While the resolution and its supporters gave a few tepid and obligatory nods to “religious freedom,” human rights activists warned that the measure was an all-out assault on fundamental liberties.

In the end, critics from across the political spectrum and from a wide array of religious and non-



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religious movements joined together to stop the effort. According to news reports, more than 80 human rights organizations and experts in criminal law and religious freedom from around the world joined forces to kill the plot. A petition with more than 10,000 signatories was also delivered to key Council of Europe policymakers demanding that the proposal be rejected.

“Criminal and civil law provide ample protection from potential abuses of minors and other individuals from cults,” explained the Alliance Defending Freedom, a pro-family and pro-liberty legal organization of thousands of attorneys that urged PACE to reject the measure. “To provide unfettered discretion to the State to extra-judicially monitor religious groups injures the very substance of religious freedom, parental rights and church autonomy.” ADF also cited horror stories of persecution from France to highlight the potential dangers of the resolution.

The original measure was indeed stopped, but critics of the plan are hardly ready to celebrate just yet. “The very fact that such a discriminating proposal is being discussed in Parliamentary Assembly of Council of Europe is a reason to worry,” said Jura Nanuk, president of the Central-European Religious Freedom Institute. “I believe a lot of united effort will be needed by all human rights and religious freedom groups to prevent further deterioration of religious freedom in Europe.”

As has happened before in PACE, the controversial body ended up adopting a very different measure than the one originally proposed. In fact, the two versions were nearly opposite in intent, with the original calling for government action against certain minority religions, and the approved measure demanding that governments protect religious freedom across the continent. The final resolution reads:

The Assembly calls on member States to ensure that no discrimination is allowed on the basis of which movement is considered as a sect or not, that no distinction is made between traditional religions and non-traditional religious movements, new religious movements or “sects” when it comes to the application of civil and criminal law, and that each measure which is taken towards non-traditional religious movements, new religious movements or “sects” is aligned with human rights standards as laid down by the European Convention on Human Rights and other relevant instruments protecting the dignity inherent to all human beings and their equal and inalienable rights.

The accelerating threat against religious freedom is hardly unique to Europe, the Middle East, and communist-ruled nations. Even in the United States, where the First Amendment guarantees the God-given right to freedom of religion, the dangers are growing. Across America, for instance, federal authorities are increasingly infringing on unalienable rights by, among other coercive actions, forcing religious individuals to violate their firmly held convictions by purchasing contraception and abortifacients for employees under ObamaCare.

At the state level, Christian photographers and bakers are [increasingly being forced to serve at homosexual ceremonies](#), too. In one of the most radical manifestations of the ongoing campaign, last year, the Department of Defense was [caught training U.S. troops](#) that Catholics, orthodox Jews, and evangelical Christians should be considered “religious extremists” — even equating the major religions representing more than half of Americans with truly violent groups such as al-Qaeda, the Ku Klux Klan, and Hamas.

At the same time, indications that elements of [Big Psychiatry](#) are quietly working to treat “religious fundamentalism” as a “mental illness” have also sparked alarm. Last year, for example, Oxford University neurologist Kathleen Taylor made headlines worldwide after suggesting that “cult” members



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or adherents of radical ideologies could have their beliefs considered a psychiatric disease that would be somehow “treated.”

“One of the surprises may be to see people with certain beliefs as people who can be treated,” she said last summer at the Hay Literary Festival in Wales in response to a question. “Someone who has for example become radicalized to a cult ideology, we might stop seeing that as a personal choice that they have chosen as a result of pure free will and may start treating it as some kind of mental disturbance.”

“I am not just talking about the obvious candidates like radical Islam or some of the more extreme cults,” the neuroscientist continued. “I am talking about things like the belief that it is OK to beat your children. These beliefs are very harmful but are not normally categorized as mental illness. In many ways that could be a very positive thing because there are no doubt beliefs in our society that do a heck of a lot of damage, that really do a lot of harm.”

Taylor later backed off slightly, saying in an interview with the U.K. *Telegraph* that the comment was aimed only at people whose beliefs triggered “harm-doing” actions. She also said that religious people were not the only ones to hold such harmful views supposedly requiring “treatment.” However, Taylor’s comments are hardly the first time prominent authorities in the field have suggested that psychiatry and mental “treatments” could someday be abused for the purpose of coercively changing people’s views.

“There will be, in the next generation or so, a pharmacological method of making people love their servitude, and producing dictatorship without tears, so to speak, producing a kind of painless concentration camp for entire societies, so that people will in fact have their liberties taken away from them, but will rather enjoy it, because they will be distracted from any desire to rebel by propaganda or brainwashing, or brainwashing enhanced by pharmacological methods,” *Brave New World* author and intellectual Aldous Huxley [said](#) in a 1962 speech at Berkeley. “And this seems to be the final revolution.”

A full-blown campaign against religious freedom, of course, has not hit the West yet, but analysts are warning that the threat is accelerating. While the assaults so far have generally come under the guise of attacking loosely defined “cults” and “sects” — sometimes not even defined at all — religious-freedom advocates warn that even Christians could one day be caught up in the dragnet. In some “progressive” European countries, for instance, Bible-believing Christians now make up a mere fraction of the population and are routinely persecuted already. Without strong protections for religious liberty and freedom of conscience, those threats will continue to grow all across the West.

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