



Human Rights Violations Targeting Christians

Addressing the Intensifying Anti-Christian Sentiment in a Global Frame

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Abstract

Aim: This article examines the scope and intensity of human rights violations experienced by Christians and suggests some possible strategies to address the problem. The United Nations has expressed concern at the global increase in acts of intolerance and violence directed towards Christians and other people of faith. Yet despite calls by the United Nations to address this growing human rights crisis, little attention has been devoted to the human rights violations experienced by Christians who encounter discrimination in more nations than any other religious group.

Methodology: To conduct this study, a domain-based review of the pertinent literature was conducted. Content from a diverse array of disciplines was reviewed and synthesized to extend knowledge in a specific domain, in this case human rights violations targeting Christians.

Findings: Both the prevalence and intensity of human rights violations experienced by Christians has reached record levels. Over the past 14 years, the number of nations in which Christians encounter harassment increased from 107 to 155. Currently, Christians experience harassment in 78 percent of 198 nations and territories across the globe. Similarly, the number of nations where Christians experience high levels of persecution has increased from 53 nations in 2014 to 78 nations in 2024.

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Value: Christians represent some of the most vulnerable and oppressed people in the world. The data and strategies presented in this article position state and private sector actors with the information they need to address the intensifying anti-Christian sentiment across the globe.

Keywords: Christians, Christianophobia, human rights, religious discrimination

Human Rights Violations Targeting Christians: Addressing the Escalating Anti-Christian Sentiment in a Global Frame

Anti-Christian sentiment—commonly referred to as Christianophobia or Christophobia—refers to animosity directed toward Christianity which manifests in discrimination, prejudice, and human rights violations aimed at Christians or Christian practices (Febriani, 2022; Yancey & Williamson, 2014). The United Nations' (2019) General Assembly expressed concern at the global increase in acts of intolerance and violence directed towards Christians and other people of faith. Yet despite calls by the United Nations for diverse actors to address this growing human rights crisis, little attention has been devoted to the violations experienced by Christians. The lack of scholarship on this topic is particularly concerning given that Christians are subject to discrimination in more nations than any other religious population in the world (Pew Research Center, 2023).

In response to calls from the United Nations (2019) to address this issue, the present article describes the scope and intensity of human rights violations experienced by Christians and suggests some strategies to address the problem. Without understanding the nature and parameters of the violations, it is difficult to execute the appropriate political and social strategies. Put differently, this understanding provides the foundation for actions that can be implemented by various state and private sector actors to alleviate Christianophobia.

The following content is based upon a domain-based review of the pertinent literature (Palmatier et al., 2018). Domain-based papers review, synthesize, and extend a body of literature in a particular domain or area. In the present case, content was reviewed and synthesized to extend knowledge about human rights violations targeting Christians. Toward this end, the content discussed below is based upon a diverse array of sources, including empirical studies, law, news reports, social sciences, and the United Nations. The resulting synthesis begins by defining the right to religious freedom, followed by a discussion of global trends in human rights violations experienced by Christians, and concludes by offering strategies to foster more inclusive, human rights-friendly societies.

Defining the Fundamental Human Right of Religious Freedom

Addressing human rights violations is contingent upon understanding the underlying rights involved. To fully comprehend the escalating anti-Christian sentiment, one must be cognizant of the right to religious freedom. It is this right that provides the basis for the United Nations' (2019) assessment concerning the global increase in prejudice aimed at people of faith.

The right to religious freedom appears in many international human rights protocols; but the perhaps the most pertinent is Article 18 of the United Nations' (1948/2021) Universal Declaration of Human Rights (Fazaeli et al., 2020). Developed in the aftermath of Second World War, the Declaration was adapted by the General Assembly in 1948 without dissent (Gil, 1998). It represents the international community of nations' articulation of the basic human rights that provide a durable foundation for freedom, justice, and peace across all human societies.

Article 18 goes beyond simply prohibiting religious discrimination to present a positive account of religious freedom. In other words, this Article outlines the parameters of this fundamental human right in an affirmative manner. In paraphrased form, Article 18 states that everyone has the right to freedom of thought, conscience and religion; this right includes freedom to change one's religion or belief; and freedom—either alone or in community with others, and in public or private—to manifest one's religion or belief in teaching, practice, worship and observance (United Nations, 1948/2021).

As this content implies, religious freedom is a multidimensional right. Implicitly embedded in religious freedom are the rights to freedom of: assembly, association, thought, and speech (United Nations, 2019). Accordingly, religious expression cannot be relegated solely to the personal or private sphere. Christians and other people of faith are free to express their religious beliefs as individuals or in institutional settings with like-minded others (Marshall, 2021). Attempts to dichotomize religious expression into private and public domains and then prohibit public manifestations of religion represent a violation of this fundamental human right (Fazaeli et al., 2020).

The following sections discuss global trends in violations of religious freedom rights in two inter-related areas noted by the United Nations (2019). Specifically, the United Nations has expressed concern about the increasing number of acts of intolerance and violence targeting Christians and other people of faith and the growing intensity of the acts. In keeping with this framework, the next two sections describe, respectively, the increasing prevalence and intensity of human rights violations experienced by Christians.

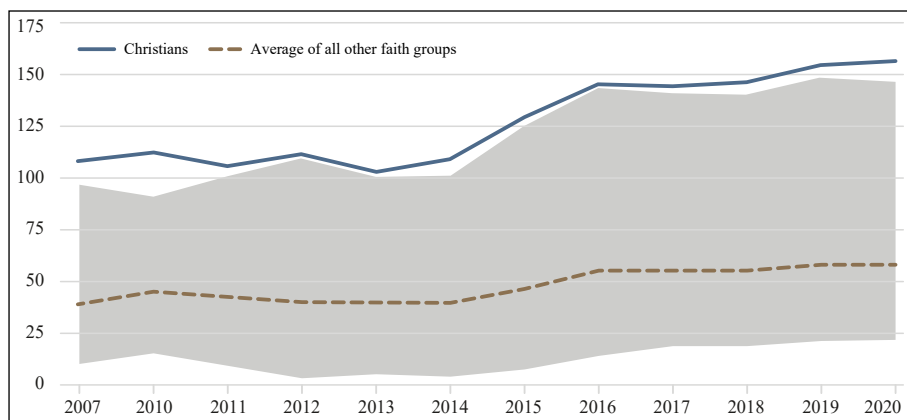
The Prevalence of Human Rights Violations Targeting Christians

Among the best data on the prevalence of religious freedom violations experienced by Christians comes from the Pew Research Center (2023). The Pew reports are widely used by diverse actors, including governments, non-governmental organizations, and think tanks (Birdsall & Beaman, 2020). Further supporting the credibility of Pew’s analysis is the fact that their data is largely consistent with the findings obtained by other researchers conducting similar investigations (Fox & Finke, 2021; Müller et al., 2019). Triangulation of the results from multiple studies in this manner enhances the credibility of the data.

Pew produces data on religious harassment, which serves as a reasonable proxy for religious freedom violations. The measure of harassment is comprised of two 10-point indexes that assess government restrictions and social hostilities. The former refers to state policies that restrict religious expression by, for example, fining or incarcerating Christians for their beliefs and practices (Allen, 2016; Ford, 2016). The latter refers to acts of aggression committed by private individuals and groups, such as mob violence targeting church attendees (Adelaja & Sanni, 2022; Gettleman & Raj, 2021). Data are compiled on 198 nations and self-governing entities, such as Macao and Taiwan. As such, the Pew reports cover more than 99.50 percent of the world’s population and all 193 member states of the United Nations, with the sole exception of North Korea.

Figure 1

Number of Countries in which Christians Experience Harassment by Year



Note. Data obtained from the Pew Research Center (2023).

Comment: the table features the number of nations in which Christians and other religious groups encountered either government or social harassment. It does not depict the severity of harassment.

The solid line in Figure 1 portrays the number of countries in which Christians encounter harassment by year. In 2007, Christians were harassed in 107 nations. By 2020, the number of nations had risen in a relatively linear trend to 155. Thus, the number of nations where Christians were harassed increased by roughly 45 percent over the 14 years covered by the Pew reports. In absolute terms, Christians experienced harassment in 78 percent of the 198 nations and territories examined in 2020, according to the most recent data available at the time this article was written in 2024.

The dotted line in the middle of the shaded grey area represents the mean level of harassment for all other religious groups. As is the case for Christians, the pervasiveness of harassment is also increasing for the average religious adherent. However, the increase is more pronounced for Christians as illustrated in Figure 1.

The upper boundary of the grey area depicts Muslims, who are the second most widely harassed group. In 2020, they experienced harassment in 145 nations. The lower boundary depicts the least widely harassed group, the religiously unaffiliated (e.g., agnostics, atheists, and secular humanists). It is important to note that Article 18 protects the right of people to affirm atheism and other secular metaphysical belief systems. In 2020, this secular population was harassed in 27 countries for their metaphysical beliefs.

As these data suggest, people from essentially every faith group experience the infringement of their rights in some national context across the globe. In some settings, the harassment is particularly pronounced (Finley, 2020). Diaphobia—animus toward a divine worldview in which a transcendent God serves as a person's central point of reference—and other forms of religious discrimination are pervasive (Hodge, 2003). It is essential that everyone's right to religious freedom be respected. In keeping with the United Nations' (2019) assessment, efforts are needed to promote the rights of all people of faith wherever they are violated. The widespread harassment of Christians across the globe, however, underscores the importance of the present paper.

The Pew (2023) data indicate the harassment of Christians is widespread and increasing rapidly in a global frame. These data, however, do not necessarily capture the severity of the harassment (Birdsall & Beaman, 2020). It is important to note that variations in severity typically exist between, and even within, nations (Petri, 2022). This reality underscores the need for data investigating the intensity of religious freedom violations.

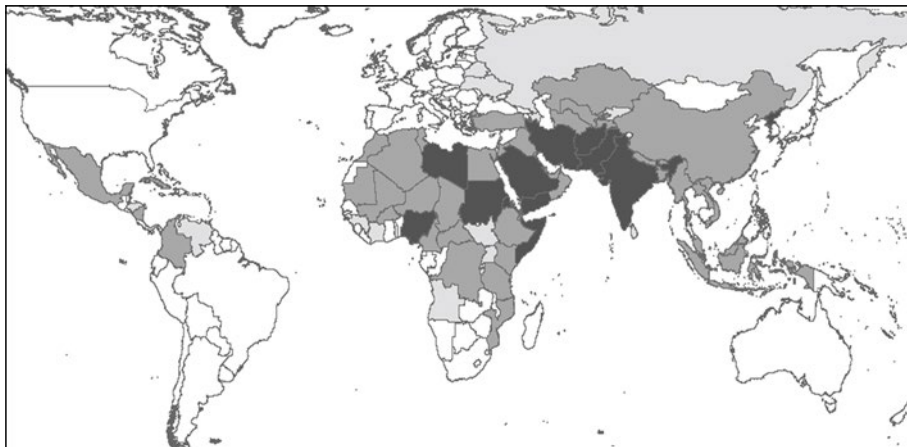
The Intensity of Human Rights Violations Targeting Christians

The most accurate data on the intensity of Christian human rights violations may be produced by Open Doors Analytical (2024). This organization investigates the nations in which it is most difficult to live as a Christian and then compiles the results in an annual report called the World Watch List (WWL). A Christian is defined as anyone who self-identifies as a Christian or belongs to a Christian community based upon a church's historic creeds (Open Doors International, 2023). The data collected by Open Doors Analytical is unique in that it may be the only organization to conduct field research (Sauer, 2019). To help ensure the accuracy of the data, an independent audit of each edition of WWL is performed by the International Institute for Religious Freedom (International Institute for Religious Freedom, 2024).

For each nation, Open Doors (2023) calculates a persecution score based upon six spheres or areas. Persecution is defined as hostility stemming from one's identification as a Christian. Expressions of persecution are assessed in five spheres related to: private, family, community, national, and church life. The sixth sphere cuts across the previous five spheres and measures the levels of violence Christians experience due to their faith. Based upon scores in these six spheres, nations are ranked and classified as featuring high (41-60 points), very high (61-80 points) or extremely high (81-100 points) levels of persecution.

Figure 2

Nations with High, Very High, or Extremely High Levels of Persecution of Christians



Note. Data obtained from 2024 World Watch List by Open Doors Analytical.

Comment: Light grey shading denotes high levels of Christian persecution, medium grey is very high levels of persecution, while dark grey denotes extremely high levels of persecution.

Figure 2 depicts the 2024 list of nations exhibiting high, very high, and extremely high levels of persecution ([Open Doors Analytical, 2024](#)). Some 78 nations fell into these three categories. In contrast, 53 nations were classified in these three groups in 2014, the first year the WWL reports were independently audited ([Open Doors Analytical, 2014](#)). In 2014, just two nations exhibited extremely high levels of persecution, a number that had increased to 13 by 2024. In short, the persecution of Christians has continued to intensify globally and has now reached the highest level recorded since Open Doors began collecting data approximately three decades ago.

As mentioned above, it is important to reiterate that variation often exists within nations ([Petri, 2022](#)). In other words, not all Christians living in the nations featured in Figure 1 necessarily experience high degrees of oppression. Rather, the key issue is that the depicted nations represent areas of concern in which Christians are disproportionately subjected to discriminatory dynamics. In terms of areas of concern, Figure 2 highlights the regions of the Middle East, North Africa, and the Asia-Pacific. This is consistent with data from the Pew Research Center ([2023](#)) as well as other studies that have singled out these areas as featuring especially egregious violations of religious freedom (Fox, 2019).

It is difficult to overstate the oppression that Christians living in these areas commonly experience. Christians have been forcibly eradicated from whole cities and territories due to systemic oppression perpetrated by governments and social mobs ([LeMasters, 2018](#)). Believers have been physically assaulted, abducted and held for ransom, imprisoned and tortured, forced to participate in suicide bombings, and even crucified (Müller et al., 2019). Women are often disproportionately persecuted and have been jailed by family members, placed under house arrest, and denied custody of their children. Females have been coerced into marriage (and divorced against their will) and sold into sex slavery ([Fisher et al., 2021](#)). Christian churches and schools have been bombed, leaders executed, and property confiscated. In areas of conflict, Christians have been forced from their homes and communities to prevent them from accessing humanitarian aid and to depopulate the area of Christians ([LeMasters, 2018](#)). Observers have referred to this human rights crisis as crimes against humanity ([Brown, 2016](#)), a genocide (MacGuire, 2019), a global assault on Christians (Marshall et al., 2013) and a global war on Christians (Allen, 2016).

The escalating breadth and intensity of anti-Christian sentiment across the world underscores the need for strategies to address the human rights violations.

In recognizing of this growing crisis, the United Nations (2019) has issued calls to promote the universal right to religious freedom and to actively seek to mitigate act of intolerance and violence aimed at Christians and other people of faith. Several strategies can be implemented to address the intensifying Christianophobia by both state and private sector actors.

State Options to Address Anti-Christian Sentiment

At the state level, some western democracies have incorporated advocacy for religious freedom into their foreign policy initiatives (Philpott & Shah, 2016). At least two complementary models have been adopted by states to address nations that either implicitly or explicitly sanction pronounced discrimination of Christians and other people of faith (Müller et al., 2019). The first model seeks to highlight egregious violators of religious freedom rights while the second adopts a humanitarian approach to assist persecuted religious communities. These might be summarized, respectively, as the visibility and humanitarian models.

The visibility model may be best represented by the United States which adopted the International Religious Freedom Act (IRFA) in 1998 (Philpott & Shah, 2016). IRFA was an innovative initiative which helped inform subsequent religious freedom advocacy by some other western democracies (Petri & Buijs, 2019). IRFA created two key entities: 1) the United States Commission on International Religious Freedom (USCIRF), and 2) the Office of International Religious Freedom within the State Department.

USCIRF and the State Department both publish information yearly on the status of religious freedom outside the United States. USCIRF highlights nations in which particularly egregious violations of religious freedom occur. The State Department compiles data on religious freedom violations occurring in nations across the globe. The annual reports, in tandem with the associated policy recommendations, seek to promote religious freedom as an important aspect of American foreign policy. USCIRF, for example, may recommend the imposition of sanctions on nations engaged in systematic, egregious violations of religious freedom rights.

In practice, such policy recommendations are rarely implemented (Blitt, 2019). Concerns about religious freedom violations are often superseded by those related to commercial relations, fighting terrorism, and maintaining alliances. Nevertheless, the reports issued by USCIRF and the State Department function to shine a light on nations engaged in significant religious freedom violations. This visibility can be effective in encouraging countries to support the religious freedom rights in the Declaration that they—at least in theory—affirm.

To be clear, the IRFA does not focus on human rights violations targeting Christians. Rather, the emphasis is on religious freedom more broadly. Accordingly, Christians are included along with other groups experiencing violations of their religious freedom rights around the world. The second model, discussed next, adopts a different emphasis to alleviate suffering.

The humanitarian model is exemplified by the Hungary Helps initiative created by the Hungarian government in 2017 (Ochab, 2019). This initiative focuses on persecuted Christians—in keeping with the fact that they are the most widely discriminated population—but also assists Jews, Muslims, Yazidis, and other populations experiencing oppression (Azbej, 2022). Hungary Helps seeks to identify humanitarian crises across the globe, provide direct, locally based assistance, and to develop and reconstruct areas so individuals can remain in their native lands. Thus, the aim is to move beyond the mere provision of emergency assistance to create projects that restore and support communities so people can live in sustainable local societies.

Projects are typically developed by partnering with local communities and faith-based organizations (FBOs). Collaborating with local communities helps ensure the projects are socially valid, or congruent with a community's beliefs, practices, and values (Snodgrass et al., 2022). Social validity is a crucial factor in ensuring interventions are useful and sustainable. Humanitarian projects frequently fall into disuse after the expiration of funding and, in some cases, may even exacerbate local problems (Moyo, 2009). Incorporating local actors in the decision-making process increases the likelihood projects will provide long-term benefits.

Another key aspect of Hungary Helps is collaborating with FBOs (Chowdhury et al., 2019). These organizations tend to be well positioned to deliver services, and facilitate development and reconstruction due to their social location and their high degree of social validity (Austin et al., 2022). FBOs frequently have robust social networks, are embedded in local communities, and possess substantial credibility with people who are poor or vulnerable. These characteristics are often particularly important in regions without good governance (Moyo, 2009). Significantly, it is these regions where the needs are most acute. In short, FBOs tend to be flexible, nimble, and provide aid that is prompt, direct, and local.

These two frameworks—the visibility and humanitarian models—offer different approaches for states interested in addressing the persecution of Christians and other people of faith. As the United Nations (2019) observes, private sector actors also have an important role to play including, for instance, media outlets, human rights organizations, religious bodies, and researchers. In the next

section, some strategies are presented that non-state actors might implement to address anti-Christian bias.

Private Sector Options to Address Anti-Christian Sentiment

Private sector actors can play instrumental roles in countering Christianophobia both internationally and nationally. Authoritarian governments oppressing Christians may only respond to international pressure (Baloch & Ellis-Petersen, 2021). This reality underscores the importance of advocacy by a diverse array of private sector actors. Different actors bring different perspectives to bear on the problem which, in turn, can help address the oppression.

Local, regional, and national media can help sensitize people regarding a human rights crisis about which many are unaware. To cite one example of how media can raise awareness, Gettleman and Raj (2021) profiled the increasing attacks on Christians in India in the *New York Times*. These authors chronicled how perpetrators used social media apps to incite and coordinate attacks against vulnerable Christians. Scouts identified Sunday services and then used social media to immediately organize assaults on Christians while the services were occurring. After being publicly beaten, the Christians proceeded to report the assaults to the police. Rather than arresting the perpetrators, the police arrested and jailed the Christians. The propagation of such accounts draws attention to knowledge that is often subjugated in the interests of those with power, providing a valuable service to readers interested in creating more inclusive, human rights-friendly states (Foucault, 1980).

The United Nations (2019) has appointed August 22 as the International Day Commemorating the Victims of Acts of Violence Based on Religion or Belief. The UN resolution provides a natural opportunity for news organizations to highlight egregious examples of Christianophobia such as that reviewed above. In addition to newspapers, television programming, academic journals, and other venues might also feature pieces on violations of religious freedom in various settings to help raise consciousness about this issue.

Human rights organizations are well suited to operationalize advocacy for oppressed Christians. These organizations have extensive experience in addressing violations of people's rights. Yet, as has long been case with many other private sector actors, relatively few human rights organizations have devoted sufficient attention to the violations experienced by Christians and other people of faith (Rosenthal, 1997). To be clear some organizations—such as the Alliance Defending Freedom International and Forum 18—do focus on religious freedom

violations. As such, they perform a valuable service. These efforts should be supplemented by other prominent human rights organizations. Such organizations can make an important contribution to alleviating suffering among some of the world's most vulnerable and oppressed people by ensuring their work encompasses advocacy for all the rights enumerated in the Universal Declaration (Marshall et al., 2013).

Religious bodies also have a unique role to play. As cultural insiders, Christians and other people of faith are uniquely positioned to understand the nature and character of violations of religious freedom (Bussey, 2020). They might function as canaries in the coal mine, as early detectors of atmospheric conditions that legitimize and fuel human rights violations. In addition, many religious entities have a substantial number of members. Consequently, in addition to identifying violations, they can mobilize people to advocate for religious freedom, in both international and national contexts.

It is important to reiterate that Christianophobia is not confined to the nations that appear on the WWL. As illustrated by the Pew (2023) data, anti-Christian sentiment is pervasive. Discrimination against Christians is a significant problem in many western democracies (Yancey, 2023). To cite just one example from the United States, state actors repeatedly worked to ban Christian student groups from public university campuses ([InterVarsity Christian Fellowship/U.S. v. University of Iowa](#), 2021). In turn, the toleration of systemic bias in western nations helps legitimize more oppressive acts in other countries.

In any country, it is important to identify, name, and eliminate forms of systemic bias that affect Christians. Human rights violations tend to flow from power imbalances (Foucault, 1980). Disparate power relations—especially in key culture-shaping professions—lead to the creation of social narratives that function to legitimize government restrictions and social hostilities targeting Christians (Müller et al., 2019). Indeed, ultimate power resides in the ability to create, disseminate, and police the social narratives that give people a sense of meaning and purpose (Sue, 2010). These narratives provide heuristic prisms to members of the general population, shaping their understanding and interpretation of the world (Petri, 2018). They implicitly socialize people about the issues that merit their consideration, the populations whose rights should be protected or enhanced, and those whose rights should be disregarded or constricted. To cite some practical examples, they determine who is allowed to bank and who is debanked ([Sattler](#), 2023), who is allowed to participate in society and who is “disappeared” from society (Chow, 2020).

In western settings, the social narratives created by the post-industrial knowledge sector reflect a secular perspective that tends to ignore or disparage the

concerns of Christians (Gouldner, 1979). For example, television programming in the United States—perhaps the most influential form of media in America—rarely features Christians, depicts them in a favourable manner, or accurately represents their perspectives (Lichter et al., 1994; Skill & Robinson, 1994). Similarly, Christians living in developing nations—who comprise the majority of the world’s Christian population—also frequently lack access to cultural power (Marshall et al., 2013).

Accordingly, efforts are needed to deconstruct the power imbalances that legitimize anti-Christian sentiment. In western settings, this entails investigating the under-representation of Christians in positions of cultural power, such as academia, news media, television programming, etc. (Smith, 2003). As part of this process, research is needed to illustrate how the under-representation facilitates discrimination against Christians (Yancey, 2023). As alluded to above, visibility is the first step in creating more inclusive societies that respect religious freedom rights.

In addition to examining the effects of discrimination, exploring the beneficial effects of religious freedom should also be considered. In other words, researchers might investigate how this fundamental human right enhances societal well-being. Highlighting the advantages associated with respecting this fundamental right may foster support for religious freedom among diverse societal stakeholders.

To cite some examples that others might build upon, investigators have documented a relationship between religious freedom and better economic outcomes (Grim et al., 2014; Grim & Grim, 2016). Others have illustrated how inner-city congregations add value to their neighbourhoods by, for instance, creating green spaces and social enterprises that augment liveability in urban areas (Cnaan & An, 2018). Still others have explored how affirmation of religious freedom in international settings is associated with gender empowerment and political and civil freedoms (Grim & Finke, 2010). These are all outcomes that have broad appeal. Documenting the utilitarian value of religious freedom in this manner helps build a positive case for the importance of this human right.

Conclusion

In a global frame, Christians encounter more pervasive violations of their fundamental human rights than any other religious group. In addition, the severity of the violations is also increasing. The prevalence and intensity of the oppression experienced by Christians has reached record levels. In recognition of the

increasing acts of intolerance and violence targeting Christians and other people of faith, the United Nations (2019) has emphasized the importance of multidimensional efforts to promote and protect the universal right to religious freedom.

In keeping with this call, the present paper has presented two conceptually distinct approaches that nation-states might adopt to support vulnerable and oppressed people of faith. In addition, several strategies were offered that private sector actors could implement to address the intensifying anti-Christian sentiment in nations across the world. It is important to stress, however, that the strategies offered in this paper are ineffectual unless acted upon. To build inclusive societies that respect human rights, action is required by both state and private sector actors.

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