

Lesson Plan: Religious Persecution

Ayman Nabil Labib was a seventeen-year-old high school student in the Upper Egyptian town of Mallawi. Ayman was a Coptic Christian. On October 16, 2011, his Arabic-Language teacher began insulting and harassing the teenager during class. He told Ayman to wipe off the Coptic cross from his wrist. He told his teacher that it was a tattoo, and added that he was also wearing a necklace with a cross. When the teacher heard this, he became very angry and asked the rest of the class, “What are we going to do with him?” Seventeen of his fellow classmates chased Ayman as he struggled to escape. Ayman was forced into a teacher’s room where the group beat him to death.ⁱ

Persecution in Our World Today

There are countless stories like Ayman’s. Religious persecution happens every day in our world, but these stories rarely make it into the daily news. Although we all know that persecution happens, many of us don’t know very much about it. Christians are the most persecuted group of believers in the world, suffering about 75% of all religious intolerance.ⁱⁱ Pope Francis has reiterated the call to stop persecution against Christians.ⁱⁱⁱ However, many other religious minorities, like Ahmadi Muslims in Pakistan, also suffer religious persecution. These acts are unjust, and countries must be held accountable. The United Nations Universal Declaration of Human Rights. Article 18 of this declaration states that,

“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.”

Countries like Iran and Pakistan have voted in support of this declaration, yet religious persecution is rampant in both these nations.

Religious Opposition

Persecution can come from religious opposition. For example, in South Asia, Christianity is often seen as an invading and foreign philosophy.^{iv} For this reason there is ongoing violence. Christian churches in Nepal receive many bomb threats from extreme Hindu groups.^v Radical Buddhists in Sri-Lanka are pushing for anti-conversion laws.^{vi} This restricts religious freedom, putting the lives of people who convert at risk. This is often directed against converts to Christianity.

The most widespread persecution today takes place in the Muslim world.^{vii} Persecution can be done by the government, through laws about property rights, conversion, and blasphemy, through angry mobs, or through extremist groups, like Al-Queda and the Taliban. It is illegal for Muslims to convert to another religion in Malaysia.^{viii} In Yemen, conversion from Islam is punishable by death.^{ix} Some countries like Algeria go further, making evangelism illegal.^x Morocco has similar laws, aimed at stopping “religious terrorism.”^{xi} In Turkey, Christians are being deprived of their churches and are not given permission to build new ones.^{xii}

One of the worst offenders is Saudi Arabia. This Islamic state allows no non-Muslim place of worship, state schools teach children to “hate Christians”, and the state is governed by the principles of Sharia law.^{xiii} Influenced by the hard-line Wahhabi version of Islam, the religion police ensures that these laws are being strictly followed.^{xiv} Iran is another terrible place for religious minorities, with a growing number of stonings, dismemberments, executions of minors, and other forms of religious persecution.^{xv} Conversion in Iran is punished by death. In Pakistan, Ahmadi Muslims and other religious minorities are persecuted.^{xvi} Pakistan also has vague anti-blaspheming laws. Those who insult Islam, the prophet Mohammed, or Allah either directly or indirectly can be punished by hefty fines, lifelong imprisonment, and death.^{xvii} The vagueness of these laws can lead to punishment of non-Muslims who even touch a Qur’an.^{xviii} On top of all these atrocities there are many kidnappings and forced conversions in many of these Muslim-majority countries.

Besides the actions of governments, extremists groups also wield a lot of influence. Whether it is the Taliban in Afghanistan,^{xix} or Al-Shabab systematically killing Christians in Somalia,^{xx} these groups are fighting a self-confessed religious war against Jews, Christians, and all other infidels.^{xxi} Although many world leaders praised the so-called “Arab spring”, it has only created more opportunity for influence by these extremist groups. One example of this is the growing power of Salafists and the Muslim Brotherhood in Egypt.^{xxii} The influence of these kinds of groups can clearly be seen in Nigeria, where there has been a growing number of mob-lynching and church bombings incidents.^{xxiii}

State Opposition

Religious persecution also originates from the desire for total state control. This can mostly clearly be seen in Communist and Post-Communist countries like Russia, China, and North Korea. Russia, although not Communist anymore, still has a lot of power centralized in government. The “Council of Experts for Conducting Religious Studies Expert Analysis” includes Christian groups among “extremist groups” and monitors them.^{xxiv} Many other post-Soviet countries also require official church registration, while forbidding churches that are “too small” or “too large.”^{xxv}

Communist countries, like China, require complete-commitment to the state, and therefore see Christianity as a threat. In Vietnam, all churches must be officially approved and registered by the state. House churches are illegal.^{xxvi} China, although opening economically still has a lot of restrictions politically and spiritually. Only State-approved and State-run churches are allowed, and must submit to the authority of the state.^{xxvii} Despite restrictions on house churches, there are many all over China, and Christianity is growing rapidly.^{xxviii} One method of control is through labour camps. Forced labour is the means, thought reform is the aim.^{xxix}

North Korea is perhaps the worst of the religious persecutors. Since the 1960s, churches have been closed, religious literature has been destroyed, and religious leaders have been executed or sent to prison camps.^{xxx} Worship of any other person or object besides the Emperor is strictly prohibited.

Although these kinds of persecutions are not expressly one religion against another, it is clear that God has been replaced by an idol, the state. Christ teaches us to respect the authority God has placed over us but also warns about coming persecution. In [John 15:18-20](#), Christ speaks about the hatred of the world for Him, and therefore also for His followers.

For Discussion

What do the following texts teach us about persecution?

- [Matthew 5:10-12](#)
- [Matthew 10:16-23](#)
- [Mark 13:9-13](#)
- [Luke 21:10-19](#)
- [Romans 8:31-39](#)
- [1 Peter 4:12-16](#)

1. Will all Christians face persecution?
2. Do Christians in Canada face persecution?
 - a. If no, are we being bold enough as Christians?
 - b. If yes, how?
3. What comfort does God give us in the Bible about facing persecution?
 - a. Besides the texts you already looked at, what texts in Revelation speak about persecution?
4. Must we respect the government when it persecutes Christians?
5. Should we allow other religions the freedom to practice? Should we tolerate idolatry and false religions?

Group Activity

In 1998, the US government set up the United States Commission on International Religious Freedom. This commission publishes an annual report on religious freedom throughout the world. It outlines the degree to which religious freedom can be exercised in that country and makes policy recommendations to the US government. It is a great place to get an overview of the current state of affairs. For this group activity:

1. Split into groups and pick a country
2. Look into the religious freedom and persecution of that country
3. Find stories of individuals, groups, and churches who have been persecuted
4. Present this case study to class

Helpful Resources

- [USCIRF Annual Report](#)^{xxx}
- [Voice of the Martyrs](#)^{xxxii}

- [Open Doors: World Watch List](#)^{xxxiii}
- [Amnesty International](#)^{xxxiv}
- **Book:** *Persecuted: the Global Assault on Christians*, (2013) Paul Marshall, Lela Gilbert, Nina Shea

What can we do?

We have a responsibility to help our fellow Christians who are suffering throughout the world. We must encourage our government officials to act in defense of religious freedoms globally. Our government can pressure other nations to respect religious minorities. This can especially be done through our Prime Minister, the Department of Foreign Affairs, and the Office for Religious Freedom. Contact members of the government and ask them how they are defending religious freedom. Look for examples of particular religious prisoners or ongoing persecution and ask them to do something about it.

Although the Office of Religious Freedom is relatively new, it has great potential to protect religious freedom around the world. The United States equivalent (United States Commission on International Religious Freedom), for example, was instrumental in the establishment of Southern Sudan as an independent country and thereby protecting many Southern Sudanese Christians from Muslim militants in the north.^{xxxv}

God has blessed us as Christians in Canada. We have so many freedoms that we tend to take for granted. The freedom to worship God. The freedom to meet with fellow believers. The freedom to express our beliefs and to evangelize to others. We have a great responsibility because of these great freedoms. What is our responsibility? First and foremost, we must be thankful to God and worship him in these freedoms. We must share the Gospel with our neighbours. We must continually hold our brothers and sisters up in prayer. We must stand up for justice and mercy. We must defend the cause of the oppressed and speak on behalf of the voiceless.

ⁱ Kurt Werthmuller, "Copt's Murder a Test of Egypt's New Anti-Discrimination Law," *National Review Online* (October 31, 2011), http://www.hudson.org/index.cfm?fuseaction=publication_details&id=8452; Interviews by Hudson Institute Center for Religious Freedom, Mallawi, October 2011.

ⁱⁱ Paul Marshal, et. al., *Persecuted: the Global Assault on Christians* (Dallas: Thomas Nelson, 2013), p. 4.

ⁱⁱⁱ <http://www.christianpost.com/news/pope-francis-prays-for-persecuted-christians-93981/>

^{iv} Paul Marshal, et. al., *Persecuted: the Global Assault on Christians* (Dallas: Thomas Nelson, 2013), p. 92.

^v *Ibid.*, p. 111.

^{vi} *Ibid.*, p. 115.

^{vii} *Ibid.*, p. 123.

^{viii} *Ibid.*, p. 127.

^{ix} *Ibid.*, p. 149.

^x *Ibid.*, p. 146.

^{xi} *Ibid.*, p. 144.

^{xii} *Ibid.*, p. 136.

^{xiii} *Ibid.*, p. 154-158.

-
- xiv Ibid., p. 160.
- xv Ibid., p. 170-177
- xvi Ibid., p. 201.
- xvii Ibid., p. 199.
- xviii Ibid., p. 199.
- xix Ibid., p. 208.
- xx Ibid., p. 253.
- xxi Ibid., p. 256.
- xxii Ibid., p. 184-185.
- xxiii Ibid., p. 238-240.
- xxiv Ibid., p. 69.
- xxv Ibid., p. 88.
- xxvi Ibid., p. 47.
- xxvii Ibid., p. 28.
- xxviii Ibid., p. 29.
- xxix Ibid., p. 30.
- xxx Ibid., p. 53.
- xxxi <http://www.uscirf.gov/reports-and-briefs/annual-report.html>
- xxxii <http://www.persecution.net/>
- xxxiii <http://www.worldwatchlist.us/>
- xxxiv <http://www.amnesty.ca/>
- xxxv Paul Marshal, et. al., Persecuted: the Global Assault on Christians (Dallas: Thomas Nelson, 2013), p. 296.