

# Types of Persecution

*"For you have been given not only the privilege of trusting in Christ but also the privilege of suffering for him."  
Phil. 1:28-29*

Christians living as minority groups within other faith communities often live out the truth of this verse, as they face discrimination and persecution. The types of persecution can vary a great deal. At the extreme end Christians can face violence to the point of death. In comparison to this the discrimination which denies them jobs or equality with their non-Christian neighbour can seem 'less' distressing – but as anyone who has lived with prejudice and bias can testify to, daily discrimination and injustice, sustained over many years, is no easy burden to bear.

Persecution is a wide concept, and difficult to define in detail. The following is a summary of the main difficulties which Christians living as a minority can face. As with many classification attempts, this is a loose system and many incidents of persecution may overlap several categories. However, it may be useful to give some idea of the breadth of persecution which exists for today's Christian Church. Not all of the different types of persecution we have identified occur in every Christian minority situation, but vary from country to country.

## **Societal discrimination**

In traditional Islamic teaching Christians and Jews were known as *dhimmi*. This word carried a connotation of inferiority, of the conquered. Though the *dhimmi* system is not practised officially in modern times, it has left a legacy of prejudice against Christians and other non-Muslims. Christians are thought of as lowly, of lesser status than Muslims, and society frowns on interaction with Christians. This perception of inferiority is reinforced when the media give prejudiced, biased or untrue information about Christians and the Christian faith. This can include circulating false reports of Christian activity, and scaremongering about Christian evangelists. Media campaigns against Christians are often precursors for attacks, as they whip up anti-Christian feeling amongst the population. For example, following

the murder of a church leader in Turkey in February 2006 there were allegations in the Turkish media that he had been engaging in unacceptable "missionary activity"; justifying his death.

## **Institutional discrimination**

In recent years the subject of institutional racism, which is said to exist in British police forces, has been frequently in the Western media. This is rightly seen as a problem which needs to be addressed. However, in many Muslim-majority countries there is a much greater problem of institutional prejudice against non-Muslims. In these situations, the police and authorities refuse to treat Christians and other non-Muslims with the same respect as Muslims. In effect the faith of the victim determines whether or not they have a chance of receiving justice. This institutional discrimination within the security forces and authorities may take the form of police in Pakistan refusing to register a case where a Christian has been attacked by Muslims; in Egypt the police have been seen to stand watching Christians being attacked instead of intervening to stop and there have even been reports of Indonesian security forces joining in the anti-Christian violence.

In other incidents the police are intimidated by Islamic extremists and so do not act to bring justice for the Christian victims due to fear of reprisals. In early 2006 twenty Pakistani Christian boys were rescued from a group of Muslim men who had abducted them, intending to sell them into slavery or the sex trade. Though there was plenty of evidence against one of the leaders of this group of abductors, the police admitted that they were too afraid to take action as the man was known to be a leading member of an extreme Islamic organisation.

Institutional discrimination is not limited to Islamic contexts. Reports from certain Indian states describe Indian police responding to anti-Christian violence from Hindu extremists by arresting the

*This perception of inferiority is reinforced by the media*

Christian victims of the attack. While they hold the Christians in custody, trying to find some crime to charge them with, they may ill-treat and hit them. In Burma (Myanmar), a Buddhist-majority country, the Christians frequently suffer attack from the army.

### **Employment discrimination**

For several decades Western laws have been passed and refined in order to eliminate discrimination on the basis of race or gender in employment practices. However in Islamic countries Christians are regularly passed over for promotion, or prevented from getting jobs at all, because of their Christian faith. This is partly due to regulations in *shari`a* [Islamic law] which stipulate that Christians should not have authority over Muslims, and partly due to the *dhimmi* legacy of societal prejudice. In 2006 a Muslim professor resigned from his post at El Minya university, Egypt in protest at the university's discriminatory stance against Christian faculty and job applicants. His resignation letter expressed his sadness that a Christian colleague had been denied a teaching post solely on the basis of her Christian faith. In certain countries, such as Pakistan, many Christians are only able to get the dirty and despised jobs, such as sweeping the streets or cleaning sewers. Converts from Islam to Christianity are often unable to get work at all.

### **Legal discrimination**

Some countries have in place laws which specifically discriminate against either Christians or non-majority faiths in general. This of course includes every country whose legal system or constitution is based on *shari`a* [Islamic law]. In recent years twelve states in Northern Nigeria have adopted full *shari`a*, making life increasingly difficult for Christians there. Algeria introduced regulations in 2006 which severely discriminate against non-Muslims.

Another form of legal discrimination occurs where laws which are not specifically anti-Christian are nevertheless used against them. For example, Pakistan's notorious "blasphemy law" is not anti-Christian, but a disproportionate number of Christians have been charged under it. Because a Muslim's testimony is considered as worth more than a Christian's, and a single Muslim witness's

testimony without any further evidence may be taken as enough proof to arrest and detain Christians, this law has been falsely used many times by Muslims to get personal revenge on Christians. In May 2006 a Christian headmaster was finally released from prison after five years following an accusation of blasphemy. If he had been found guilty of "defiling the name of Muhammad" he would have faced a mandatory death penalty.

Some laws are used to stop Christian outreach activity. For example, several states in India have anti-conversion laws, which are ostensibly for the purpose of preventing forced conversion, aiming to maintain harmony amongst different faiths. However, experience has shown that these laws are used to falsely accuse innocent Christians of using force or fraud to gain converts; as a by-product they also inhibit charitable work, which might lead to accusations of "allurement". In Indonesia, a child abuse law was used in September 2005 to convict three Bible-class teachers who had allowed Muslim children to attend their Christian club. The judge had said that he knew the three women were innocent, but was pressured into finding them guilty by the crowd of angry Islamic extremists who attended the trial carrying a coffin.

### **Suppression of Christian mission activity**

In many countries, particularly Islamic countries, Christians may have freedom to practise their religion, but it is against the law for them to share their faith with non-Christians around them. The new Algerian regulations mean Christians face the threat of fines and imprisonment for "inciting, constraining or utilizing means of seduction tending to convert a Muslim to another religion". Possession of materials likely to "shake the faith of a Muslim" also become illegal. This could strike at all testimony, witness, outreach or even answering questions about Christianity from Muslim friends. It could also be used to outlaw possession of a Bible or New Testament or any other non-Muslim scriptures. In China printing of the Bible is heavily monitored by the government and numbers are restricted.

...many Christians are only able to get the dirty and despised jobs, such as sweeping the streets...

## **Suppression of conversion to Christianity**

Where Christians do manage to spread the Gospel of Christ, converts to Christianity from Islam know that they face a whole barrage of persecution. Legally they may be prevented from registering their conversion which could prevent them from marrying a Christian, registering their children as Christian or even being buried as a Christian. A Christian from a Muslim background in Malaysia has been battling for years to have her conversion legally recognised.

Even their own family members may pose a threat if the convert reveals his or her new Christian faith. When Gaser Mahommad Mahmoud, an Egyptian convert, finally told his adoptive parents of his faith in Christ, they sent him to be institutionalised. While held in the mental hospital he was tortured and abused while hospital staff tried to get him to return to Islam. There are also many cases where converts have been killed by family members in order to restore the family honour which had been "damaged" by the conversion.

Because of these dangers there are many secret converts who do not dare to meet with other Christians to worship. Though they have the Lord sustaining them, it is a lonely path to travel, unable to worship, pray or study the Bible with fellow believers. We know that it can be a hard step for anyone to take to become a Christian, but the courage needed to do so is multiplied for those who choose to follow Christ where Christians are a minority faith.

## **Forced conversion from Christianity**

Christian minorities can also suffer as a result of members of the majority religion around them attempting to convert them. While it is expected that any missionary religion will try to make converts, it is the tactics used which cause suffering. As many Christians in minority groups live also in enduring poverty, a common tactic is to offer material or financial rewards for converting. This might not sound very harsh – but it means that Christian families may be faced with the knowledge

that their children could get an education or even receive essential medical care if they "just" deny their faith. They need much strength and courage to remain firm in their faith while seeing their family suffer around them, seemingly unnecessarily.

Fear and intimidation are also used to try to convert Christians, sometimes in conjunction with bribery. A Christian family might be "invited" to convert by wealthy or powerful Muslims, with the promise of better jobs and securer life styles if they do – and the underlying or perhaps blatant threat of violence and other forms of repercussions if they don't. Many cases are reported of Christians being kidnapped and held by violent means while their captors try to force them to recant their faith in Christ. Girls and women are often raped.

In India there exist what are termed "re-conversion campaigns", whereby Hindu movements, concerned at the spread of Christianity, pledge to reconvert Christians to Hinduism; however it should be noted that "re-conversion" is a misnomer – many of the Christians who are targeted were never Hindu in the first place, but descended from converts generations earlier. These re-conversion campaigns will often involve a combination of threats and inducements. In Burma (Myanmar) the government is systematically attempting to "re-nationalise" the population of the country, and this includes a conversion campaign to Buddhism. Burmese soldiers are promised a financial bonus for marrying from the ethnic minority group of Chin people, who are majority Christian.

## **Suppression of corporate worship**

In many countries Christians find that the normal desire to meet together for corporate worship brings many difficulties. Perhaps the severest form of this persecution is seen in Saudi Arabia, where public worship is completely prohibited. Church buildings are also forbidden. However the law is in practice applied also to private meetings such as homegroups. Christians simply gathering together, whether with the intention of worshipping or not, are vulnerable to being accused under laws such as these. In March 2006 nine Christians in Uzbekistan were arrested in a café in Tashkent, and were or-

dered to give written statements that they had gathered for a religious meeting.

Government authorities can make life very difficult for church congregations. One article of the new 2006 Algerian regulations forbids leading an act of worship, organising a religious assembly or "preaching" (undefined) without prior authorisation, giving the Algerian state power to regulate who leads, speaks and teaches in non-Muslim religions. Where churches have to be registered, applications for registration are frequently obstructed by red tape, or outright rejected, so that Christians are forced to either break the law by meeting together or limit themselves to solitary worship. A great increase in this kind of harassment occurred in 2006 in Uzbekistan.

In addition there can be restrictions on the building and repair of churches. Whereas mosques can usually be built and repaired freely, in some countries, such as Egypt, Christians cannot make even the most minor of repairs in their churches without permission from the authorities, which can take years to achieve. In June 2006 Yogyakarta, Indonesia suffered an earthquake, which destroyed much property including over a hundred churches. This was devastating for the Christian community who know how long it may take them to be allowed to rebuild these churches, if they are ever given that permission. Until then they must meet for worship outside. Even meeting publicly like this, where it is an option, can bring with it new difficulties. In October 2005 Christians worshipping together in the streets of one Indonesian town (because their churches had been closed) attracted mocking insults and threats of violence from radical Muslims.

Churches in West Java, Indonesia have recently faced what seems to be a systematic programme of forced closures. At one point in 2005-2006 as many as 30 churches a month were forced to close. The closures were the result of a decree which requires local public leaders to approve the construction of non-Muslim houses of worship.

### **Violence against individuals**

Possibly the worst kind of persecution comes in

the form of violence. Christians may suffer from violent attacks, by individuals, by security forces, or by armed mobs. Frequent reports from Egypt and Pakistan in particular speak of Christian girls abducted, raped, forcibly married to their Muslim captors and forced to convert to Islam. Many Christians in a wide range of countries are martyred for their faith; many evangelists and church leaders have disappeared, their bodies later found showing signs of torture. To be a Christian in an area of Muslim oppression is to live daily with the threat of violence. This can be especially true of those who leave Islam to follow Christ as their Saviour.

### **Community oppression**

It is not only Christian individuals who are victims of discrimination, but whole Christian communities can be targeted. In May 2005 eleven Christian families in India were attacked by Hindu villagers; the men were beaten and the women sexually abused. Following the attack the Hindu villagers met with nine other villages and agreed to socially ostracise the Christian families, who were prevented from using the public well for water or shop in the local food stores. The Christians were declared untouchables.

Sometimes this community oppression is the result of an accusation against an individual. When Pakistani Christian headmaster Parvez Masih was accused of blasphemy, the twenty other Christian families in his village also received threats of violence. In November 2005 when another Pakistani Christian was accused of destroying a Qu'ran the Christian village of Sangla Hill was attacked by an angry mob of around 2,500 Muslims who burned Christian homes and churches, injuring many people.

At its most extreme this form of persecution is outright *jihad* – for example in Indonesia the Islamic group Laskar Jihad advanced across the Maluku islands in 1999-2002, systematically attacking Christian villages, killing, looting, forcing Christians to flee into the jungle. Their aim was to 'cleanse' the islands of Christians completely.

© Barnabas Fund, 2006  
[www.barnabasfund.org](http://www.barnabasfund.org)

**Other titles in this series include:**

- **Islam and Slavery**
- **Islam and Truth**
- **Poverty and Persecution**
- **Shari`a and Muslims in the West**
- **What is Shari`a?**
- **What is Islam?**



## **BARNABAS FUND HOPE AND AID FOR THE PERSECUTED CHURCH**

### **UK**

The Old Rectory, River Street, Pewsey,  
Wiltshire SN9 5DB  
Telephone: 08700 603 900

Fax: 08700 603 901

*Calls to 08700 numbers are charged at normal national rate*

From outside the UK

Telephone: +44 1672 564938

Fax: +44 1672 565030

Email: [info@barnabasfund.org](mailto:info@barnabasfund.org)

Registered Charity number 1092935

Company registered in England number 4029536

### **Australia**

Postal Suite 107  
236 Hyperdome

Loganholme QLD 4129

Telephone: (07) 3806 1076 or **1300 365799**

Fax: (07) 3806 4076

Email: [bfaustralia@barnabasfund.org](mailto:bfaustralia@barnabasfund.org)

### **Jersey**

Le Jardin, La Rue A Don, Grouville,  
Jersey, Channel Islands

JE3 9GB

Telephone 700600

Fax 700601

Email: [bfjersey@barnabasfund.org](mailto:bfjersey@barnabasfund.org)

### **New Zealand**

PO Box 17404,  
Karori, Wellington 6147

Telephone 04-476-2517

Freephone: 0800-008-805

Fax: 04-476-2519

Email: [barnabasfund@xtra.co.nz](mailto:barnabasfund@xtra.co.nz)

### **USA**

6731 Curran St  
McLean, VA 22101

Telephone: (703) 288-1681

or toll-free 1-866-936-2525

Fax: (703) 288-1682

Email: [bfusa@barnabasfund.org](mailto:bfusa@barnabasfund.org)