

‘Persecution: Ancient Scourge; Modern Crisis’: Athens

εἰς τὸ ὄνομα τοῦ Πατρὸς καὶ τοῦ Υἱοῦ καὶ τοῦ Ἁγίου Πνεύματος
eis to ónoma tou Patros kai tou Huiou kai tou Hagíou Pneúmatos. Amen

I dedicate this lecture today to the memory of Chris Parry. Chris was a young man from Cornwall who died while rescuing civilians from Russian aggression in Ukraine. His funeral is taking place while I’m here in Athens so today I honour his memory and his sacrificial service of others. And the issues in the conflict in Ukraine are very relevant to this subject I’m want to address today: ‘Persecution: Ancient Scourge; Modern Crisis’

I had an unusual start to my Christmas in 2018 when I was rung up by the Archbishop of Canterbury, Justin Welby, who asked me if I’d be willing to lead a review of the way the Foreign Office, the FCO, had addressed - or otherwise - the persecution of Christians. It became clear that this was a request from the then Foreign Secretary, Jeremy Hunt, himself, who was very moved by the issue and clearly concerned both about the human stories of those caught up in persecution, and worried too that the FCO, frankly, just wasn’t doing enough about it. To be honest it was terrible timing for me, not having even started in Truro, but I knew already what an important issue it is, so I said yes.

And so we set up the Review, with a punishing 6 month window in which to report. In the UK in recent years we’ve had some huge judicially led Public Inquiries, such as the Savile, Leveson and Chilcot enquiries - but this was definitely not one of those. If they were full MRI and CAT scans we had a thumb and a thermometer: we have taken the temperature, we have felt the pulse. But actually, as doctors know, you can tell a lot just by doing that and I am confident in the broad thrust of our conclusions and our recommendations, because, as I will demonstrate, they are underpinned by some very significant primary research.

But why was it needed?

It’s now several years since ‘The Times’ published an editorial entitled ‘Spectators at the Carnage’. It began like this:

Across the globe, in the Middle East, Asia and Africa, Christians are being bullied, arrested, jailed, expelled and executed. Christianity is by most calculations the most persecuted religion of modern times. Yet Western politicians until now have been reluctant to speak out in support of Christians in peril.

Well happily Jeremy Hunt *was* willing to speak out, and so we set the Review up. In some ways it seems as if the persecution of Christians has come out of clear blue sky. It was a real issue in the days of the Cold War when Christians and Churches in some contexts in the Soviet bloc experienced

significant pressure. Post-1989, however, it seemed to recede - only to creep up on us by degrees in the intervening period.

There are two striking factors behind its re-emergence. First, where once it seemed only to be located behind the Iron Curtain, it has re-emerged now as a truly global phenomenon. But it is not a *single* global phenomenon: it has multiple triggers and drivers.

The second striking factor is that because the re-emergence of Christian persecution has been gradual, and has lacked a single driver, it has to some significant extent been overlooked in the West. And the Western response (or otherwise) has been tinged by a certain post-Christian bewilderment, if not embarrassment, about matters of faith, and a consequent failure to grasp how for the vast majority of the world's inhabitants faith is crucial to how they see themselves and to how they behave. Faith and belief are simply not a leisure pursuit as we see it in this country, but fundamental markers of identity, both individual and communal.

At the launch of Review in January 2019 I outlined six reasons why I felt that the Review, focussing specifically on the plight of Christians, was needed, and they bear repeating now.

First, we have to appreciate that today the Christian faith is primarily a phenomenon of the global south - and it is therefore primarily a phenomenon of the global poor. It's not primarily an expression of white Western privilege. And unless we understand that it is primarily a phenomenon of the global poor we will never give this issue the attention it – and they - deserve.

Secondly, this particular focus, on Christian persecution, is justified because Christian persecution, like no other form of persecution, is a global phenomenon. And it is so because the Christian faith is a truly global phenomenon. Christian persecution is not limited to one context or challenge. It is a *single* global phenomenon but with *multiple* drivers and as such it deserves special attention. More specifically it is certainly not limited to Islamic-majority contexts. So the Review was not and was never going to give ammunition to the Islamophobic far-right. To focus on one cause alone is to be wilfully blind to many others.

Thirdly, Christian persecution is a human rights issue and should be seen as such. Freedom of Religion or Belief is, arguably, the most fundamental human right because so many others depend upon it. In the West we tend to set one right against another. But in much of the world this right is not in opposition to others but rather is the linchpin upon which others depend. And we in the West need to be awake to such dependencies and not dismiss FoRB as irrelevant to other rights. If freedom of religion or belief is removed so many other rights are put in jeopardy too.

Fourth, this is not about special pleading for Christians, but making up a significant deficit. In the UK we have been blind to this issue – partly because of post-colonial guilt: a sense that we have interfered uninvited in certain contexts in the past so we should not do so again. But this is not about special pleading for Christians: rather it's about ensuring that Christians in the global south have a fair deal, and a fair share of the UK's attention and concern. So it's an equality issue. If one minority is on the receiving end of 80% of religiously motivated discrimination it's simply not just that they should receive so little attention.

[We did, incidentally, face criticism for using that 80% figure. It was cited by the International Society for Human Rights, a respected Geneva-based organisation 10 or so years ago, but no longer appears on their website, simply because the research on which it's based is not current. However in private conversation with senior figures in the organisation they certainly stand by it and suggest if anything the figure is now higher. And I note that our critics have not been able to put up an alternative figure.]

Fifthly, however, this is also about being sensitive to discrimination and persecution of *all* minorities. Because the Christian faith is perhaps the one truly global faith it has become a bellwether for repression more generally. If Christians are being discriminated against in one context or another you can bet your bottom dollar other minorities are too. So renewing a focus on Christian persecution is actually a way of expressing our concern for *all* minorities who find themselves under pressure. And ignoring Christian persecution might well mean we're ignoring other forms of repression as well.

[And I also want to say very clearly that I want to distance the approach we took in framing the Review and its recommendations from any kind of approach that is simply an expression of a narrow identity politics, which I fear could be said of the approach taken by the Hungarians.]

And finally to look at this from a specifically Christian perspective the Christian faith has always been subversive: 'Jesus is Lord' is the earliest Christian Creed. Those words were not empty, and explain why from the earliest days the Christian faith attracted persecution. To say that Jesus is Lord was to say that Caesar was not Lord, as he claimed to be. So from its earliest days the Christian faith presented a radical challenge to any power that made absolute claims for itself. Christian faith should make no absolutist political claims for itself - but it will always challenge those who do, which is precisely why the persecution of Christians is a global phenomenon and not a local or regional one.

The Christian faith will always present a radical challenge to any power that makes absolute claims for itself, and there are plenty of those in the world today. And I suggest that confronting absolute power is certainly a legitimate concern and policy objective of any democratic government. Indeed

the Christian faith's inherent challenge to absolutist claims explains why it has been such a key foundation stone of Western democratic government – and explains too why we should continue to support it vigorously wherever it is under threat.

Nonetheless the focus of the Review's recommendations is clearly on guaranteeing freedom of religion or belief for all, not just for some. To argue for special pleading for one group over another would be deeply un-Christian. It would also, ironically, expose that group to greater risk, by isolating them and unintentionally portraying them as agents of the West. We must seek FoRB for all, without fear or favour.

So I'm concerned with rights for all – thus I do want to acknowledge the significant persecution other communities have suffered. The Rohingya community in Myanmar have suffered grievously, as have the Yazidis in Iraq. The Ahmadis have been persecuted since their inception. It's right to recognise the suffering of Christians in India and China, but it would be very wrong to ignore the persecution of Muslim communities in those countries, including the Uighur Muslims, who have suffered appallingly. In many places in the world it is certainly not safe to admit that you are an atheist. Jehovah's Witnesses have experienced severe persecution historically, and are certainly not free of it today.

And of course Christians have also, historically, been the persecutors of others. I think with shame of the Crusades, the Inquisition and the Pogroms. But this isn't just a historical phenomenon. Some of the violence in the Central African Republic has very likely been initiated by Christian militia. And responsibility for the dreadful massacre of 8,373 Bosniaks in Srebrenica in July 1995 must be laid squarely at the feet of those who called themselves Christians.

So in sum I wanted to be able to justify the work of the Review – and indeed to found the work of the Review – both on values that were acceptable in terms of Western liberal democracy, so its recommendations would have traction (and frankly because I believe in those values), and in ways that were commensurate with - and indeed drawn from - the Christian faith, because clearly there was an issue of my own integrity in this as well. And nor, indeed, do I want to set the values of western liberal democracy and the Christian faith too much in opposition one to another, especially as the one owes so much to the other.

So how did we go about it all?

The first thing we did was to establish a working definition of persecution: to quote p. 15 of the report: *'In the absence of an agreed and much needed academic definition of persecution the review has*

proceeded on the understanding that persecution is discriminatory treatment where that treatment is accompanied by actual or perceived threats of violence of other forced coercion’.

Having established that working definition I put together a team made up of independent members and people from key NGOs, supported by staff from the FCO. Then we drew up a map of the global situation which was published at Easter 2019 as the interim report.

Additionally we selected a few ‘focus countries’ so as to analyse the general situation there, and then undertook some in-depth case studies of particular cases of persecution in those places and examined how the FCO had responded – if indeed it had. We also compared the FCO response with what other countries and international bodies were doing globally to address the situation, as well as examining some key documents from the FCO itself.

All of that was underpinned by a very significant body of research. We undertook much more than an armchair, paper-based exercise. Members of the Review team undertook in-person visits to a number of countries – places such as Hong Kong, Nigeria, Indonesia, Malaysia, Pakistan, Sri Lanka, Egypt, Israel and the UAE – and that is not an exhaustive list. In country, members of the team met both with FCO officials and, crucially, with members of local Christian communities to take evidence from them.

Additionally we surveyed every single British Embassy or High Commission around the world with a searching questionnaire and, of course, processed all the evidence returned to produce a fuller picture of the FCO response to the issue.

We received a steady stream of written submissions both solicited and unsolicited, including some first-hand and deeply harrowing accounts of persecution covering all six global regions that we focussed on in the report.

In April 2019 the team undertook two weeks of closed oral evidence sessions in Westminster Abbey where we heard from 75 people, survivors of persecution amongst them, sharing often harrowing accounts of their suffering. In all we heard evidence about 23 specific countries.

As a consequence we were able to produce an evidence based report which focussed in forensic detail on a number of countries and on an number of specific incidents in those countries, analysing the FCO response to them at the same time. So the Review constitutes a substantial body of evidence weighing in at 176 pages with no fewer than 718 footnotes. And the website christianpersecutionreview.org.uk contains yet more evidence deliberately archived there for future research purposes.

So what did we find?

At one point in the Independent Review I say that there are two existential threats to human flourishing and harmonious communities in the world today. One is climate change and the other one is the systematic denial of Freedom of Religion or Belief, in different places and in many different ways, globally. That wasn't a conviction I had when the Review's work began, but it grew on me as the work progressed - indeed I was shocked by the scale, scope and severity of the phenomenon. I think we've begun to realise the importance of addressing the first of that pairing, climate change. It's high time now that we recognise the important of addressing the second. But how do I justify that general assertion?

The most chilling aspect, I think, of George Orwell's 1984, is the existence of the 'Thought Police' and the concept of 'thought crime'. Why the most chilling? Because to be denied the liberty to believe what you want to believe - and I include in that the right to not to believe - is the most fundamental denial of human rights. And therefore I believe that Freedom of Religion or Belief is not simply one right against many, but actually the one on which so many others depend: because if you are not free to think or believe how can you order your life in any other way you choose? That's certainly what Eleanor Roosevelt, the prime framer of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, believed.

And yet what we found is that in so places around the world today we see this right questioned, compromised and threatened. So, secondly, we do need to ask *why* the violation of Freedom of Religion or Belief is so widespread, and affecting Christians on pretty much every continent. This is as I said before a global phenomenon with multiple drivers – even though there are many who would like to attribute it to one cause alone.

If you lift the stone of persecution and look underneath, what is it that you find? In contexts where governments are weak you find gang welfare on an industrial scale driven by drug crime; you find authoritarian, totalitarian regimes that are intolerant both of dissent and of minorities; you find aggressive militant nationalism that insists on uniformity; you find religious zealotry and fundamentalism in many different forms that often manifests itself in violence. And you often find those phenomena combined too. In other words, we find massive threats to human flourishing and harmonious communities and ultimately we find in those things significant threats to our own security as well. So if we care about those grave issues we should certainly care about the persecution of Christians and about Freedom of Religion or Belief more generally. We can no longer say that this is a sidebar issue of a special interest group. These are huge issues that we face in the world today.

And sadly the COVID-19 crisis has only exacerbated this situation. Weak governments have to give all their attention to managing the pandemic; authoritarian regimes use the situation to accrue more power to themselves; militant nationalists tend to blame minorities for the ills that are visited upon them and religious fundamentalism uses the current crisis as a cloak for increased persecution.

These are many sinister forces at work in our world today, with many suffering as a consequence. And as I say the situation is getting worse not better. India and China were hardly on the radar a decade ago, but look at the genocidal fate of the Uyghurs in China. Pew Research now considers India the worst place globally for societal violence against minorities. Russia has become increasingly intolerant of faith minorities. The situation for religious minorities in Crimea is significantly worse now than it was before Russia's illegal annexation of it. So the time for inaction and indifference is over. And therefore, as the Report argues, if the FCDO took this issue with the seriousness it undoubtedly deserves, then it would simply enable them to do their job better, by helping them better to address some very serious current global phenomena.

So how is the UK FCO doing?

I can only say what I found nearly three years ago, not how things are now. But what we found was a mixed picture – good in parts, but not so good in others – though I'm sure it's all handled excellently in the Embassy here in Athens. And I'm genuinely grateful to the many people at the FCDO who allowed this unknown bishop and his team to peer into so many aspects of their work.

One problem we found is that many diplomats didn't stay long in post so didn't really get to know the country in the way they should. And much depended too on the commitment of individual diplomats rather than on the implementation of FCO policy. The FCO has something called the FoRB Toolkit which posts are supposed to be used, but many didn't and some I'm afraid to say didn't even know it existed. It requires posts to engage in advocacy on behalf of individuals and minority communities: and again some do but others didn't. In general we found that much more could be done to help diplomats grasp the significance of faith

Thus we were taken to task by some FCO officials for an unreferenced assertion in the interim report that sub-Saharan Africa was a majority Christian region. It seemed such a blindingly obvious thing to say that we didn't really feel it needed justifying, but they disputed it. So in the final report we did indeed justify it with a simple reference to readily available Pew Research figures. To my mind that did display a significant lack of religious illiteracy.

A further example of this is in the approach that's been taken to the Middle Belt of Nigeria and the phenomenon of the conflict associated with the Fulani herdsmen. The standard FCO line has been that this is an old conflict between contrasting lifestyles exacerbated by climate change. In other words the religious dimension is significantly underplayed. A year or so ago the then relevant government minister claimed in a letter to be "unaware of substantiated evidence that extremist Islamist ideology is a driver of intercommunal attacks". I'm afraid that is so completely at odds with the evidence, including that cited in the Independent Review, as to be literally incredible. And of course while the FCDO continues to claim there is no religious component to the violence they will fail to come up with religiously literate responses to it

And as the Report argues, abuse of FoRB certainly intersects with other key issues which the FCDO does indeed take seriously. Violating a person's religious freedom frequently means a violation of other key human rights such as freedom of assembly, freedom of expression, freedom from torture and the very right to life itself. And yet that is the lot of religious minorities the world over. If the right to FoRB falls, so many other rights fall too. Thus many religious minorities, many Christians amongst them, live in much greater poverty and suffer from greater food insecurity than do members of the majority community. Many religious minorities are also ethnically distinct as well, so there are, frankly, simple issues of racism at work here too.

There is a particular intersection between the denial of FoRB and gender equality. Globally, Christian women are far more likely to be victims of discrimination and persecution, including people trafficking, gender-based violence, kidnapping, forced conversion and forced marriage, than are men or members of the majority community. Thus they suffer double discrimination: they are marginalised and abused simply because they are both women and Christians.

And so my point is this – we just cannot see this as a side-bar or special interest issue. It bears upon some deeply serious issues in today's world: issues with which Western governments should be hugely concerned, issues as trade, poverty, security, racism, women's rights and the very right to life itself. And that is why I argued that FoRB should be 'central to FCO operation and culture' and that a commitment to it should be 'enshrined in strategic and operational guidelines'. So if the FCDO cares about those issues, and it certainly does, then it should certainly be concerned about Christian persecution - because if it takes Christian persecution seriously, and abuse of FoRB more generally, it will also become more adept at addressing those other issues.

So the overall verdict was: could certainly do better.

So what do we recommend?

This as I've said is a serious issue and it needs serious responses, and that is why the recommendations of the Review are as bold and far reaching as I believe them to be, arguing that FoRB should be front and centre in the FCDO's policy and operations . There are two main thrusts to them.

Central to them is an argument that the FCO should promote FoRB indiscriminately and for all, and not just Christians. I argue that for two main reasons:

First, to single out any one community just makes it even more vulnerable, and we have to avoid that. That's why the recommendations of my Review warn against unintentional 'othering' of the Christian community. If we exercise favouritism towards Christians we risk portraying them as stooges of the West and thus increase their vulnerability. And of course Christians in India and Egypt, for example, don't want to be portrayed as a western import, but as authentically and fully Indian and Egyptian. So my clear conviction is that the single best way to protect Christians from persecution is not to single them out for special treatment but to guarantee Freedom of Religion or Belief for everyone.

And secondly it is simply not part of the Christian tradition to seek special favours. We must love our neighbours indiscriminately, without picking and choosing and exercising any favouritism or making a special case for ourselves. [As I said before: this is not an expression of any kind of narrow identity politics.]

So the first main thrust is that the FCO should promote FoRB indiscriminately and for all. And the second is that the FCO must address this issue much more proactively and face it head on. Indeed I recommended that FoRB should be central to the FCO's culture, policies and international operations. I say again: this is not a peripheral issue that can be relegated to the side-lines. It touches on key and critical issues in the world today.

And having made those recommendations something remarkable then happened. Not just the FCO but the Government as whole accepted the recommendations of the report in full, and confirmed that commitment after the 2019 election. That was certainly more than I hoped for or expected, and I would certainly say that the issue is now on the political radar in the UK in a way it simply wasn't before. In particular I was delighted by the appointment of Fiona Bruce MP as the Prime Minister's Special Envoy for FoRB. Fiona has a long track record of commitment to this issue and is doing a magnificent job, to ensure the implementation of my recommendations in full and to ensure that the Government's reality matches its rhetoric.

One further, subsequent, development is also worthy of note. In the wake of the publication of the Review we established the UK FoRB Forum. This gathers together around 90 different stakeholder

groups from a wide range of backgrounds – humanist, Jewish, Islamic, Hindu and Jewish and others too. We liaise closely with the APPG on FoRB as well as the Special Envoy and the Forum is deliberately action focussed enabling diverse stakeholders to make common cause on issues of mutual concern. An early example of this was Humanists UK, and CSW, an avowedly Christian organisation committed to FoRB for all, campaigning together in support of Mubarak Bala, President of the Humanist Association of Nigeria, arrested and now imprisoned because of his activities in that role. And I look forward to the UK FoRB Forum continuing to catalyse significant activity to defend and promote FoRB worldwide.

Subsequently too the International Religious Freedom of Belief Alliance has been set up, consisting now of 42 states, and last summer the UK hosted a major international FoRB Ministerial Conference at which I know a number of people from Greece were present. So my Review is part of a growing international movement of great significance. Indeed I think my review has given momentum to that movement.

And we need the voice of Greece, as a key member of the International Alliance for Religious Freedom or Belief, to be heard in that global conversation. We need Greece's voice to be clearly heard, especially in the light of the current crisis in Orthodoxy caused by the situation in Ukraine. Russia's geo-political position has been bolstered by a particular 'Russian World' theology and I'm very glad to hear how that position has been challenged by other Orthodox voices, here in Greece and elsewhere, as it surely should be. Russia's position it seems to me un-Orthodox and deeply disrespectful of the core values of FoRB. Indeed I would go so far as to say that the Russian Orthodox Church's uncritical support of President Putin is not a legitimate expression of the Christian faith, but a betrayal of it.

The fact is that we simply can't afford to be religiously illiterate in today's world. To be religiously illiterate in today's world is simply to fail to understand how and why others act as they do. That is why I argued for the FCO to up its game in terms of religious literacy, simply so it can do its job better. Again, this is not an option or a special interest issue. If you fail to understand the influence of Confucianism as well as Marxism on the Chinese Community Party you will fail to understand the Chinese Community Party. And of course if you fail to understand the role of the Russian Orthodox Church in Russian society you will fail to understand Russia. It's certainly worth asking as we look back on the disaster of Afghanistan whether the key role of religion was critically overlooked there too. And I note with sadness the failure of all western governments to recognise and respond to the extreme vulnerability of religious minorities in that country.

So this is a time for action. I believe, that now more than ever we must defend liberal democracy and the freedoms it guarantees us, including Freedom of Religion or Belief. It's needed now more than ever. We must stand against all those who would betray and undermine it through violence, through crime, through militant nationalism, through authoritarianism, through religious fundamentalism and bigotry. It matters hugely, I believe, to our world today that we should do that. And it matters hugely that we should defend those many whose welfare, liberty, communities, families and very lives are put at risk by those dark forces. So I hope these recommendations make a very significant difference in the days to come. I was proud to present them to the Foreign Secretary and deeply honoured that he commissioned me to do so.

It's vital that we open our eyes to this issue and recognise it as the egregious issue it undoubtedly is. In one of his first speeches to the British House of Commons on the Slave Trade, as he presented Thomas Clarkson's monumental report on the phenomenon, William Wilberforce said this: 'You may choose to look the other way, but you can never again say you did not know'. Well, we now know this is a huge problem too. May we too not look away. May God give us strength instead to face up to this great challenge of our times, just as did Wilberforce and others in their day too. Thank you.