

World
Watch
Research

WWL

Discussion of key themes

Update: October 2025

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WWL – Discussion of key themes

October 2025 update

This document provides discussion on a series of wider issues touching on research into the persecution of Christians. It complements the main World Watch List (WWL) Methodology and WWL-Frequently Asked Questions¹, and highlights matters which need to be taken into consideration, for instance, when comparing the annual Open Doors World Watch List with other indices.

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¹ The “Short version of WWL methodology” and “Complete WWL methodology” are available at: <https://www.opendoors.org/en-US/research-reports/wwl-documentation/> and <https://opendoorsanalytical.org/world-watch-list-documentation/> (password: freedom).

1. Is Christianity the most persecuted religion in the world?

No one is claiming that ONLY Christians are suffering severe persecution. However, there is little data comparable to the WWL available. The likelihood is very great that more Christians are suffering severe persecution than adherents of any other religion. There is, however, no academic research on the persecution of Muslims currently available to confirm this. A [report by Pew Research Center](#) published on 18 December 2024 comes nearest, basing its [methodology](#) on official religious restrictions and the term “harassment”.

Religious groups were harassed by governments or social groups in 192 countries and territories in 2022

Number of countries and territories where religious groups were harassed, by year

	2007	'13	'14	'15	'16	'17	'18	'19	'20	'21	'22
Christians	107	102	108	128	144	143	145	153	155	160	166
Muslims	96	99	100	125	142	140	139	147	145	141	148
Jews	51	77	81	74	87	87	88	89	94	91	90
Other religions	33	38	43	50	57	50	56	68	62	64	68
Folk religions**	24	34	21	32	41	38	37	32	33	40	49
Hindus	21	9	14	18	23	23	19	21	21	24	26
Buddhists	10	12	10	7	17	19	24	25	21	28	25
Religiously unaffiliated	-	5	4	14	14	23	18	22	27	27	32
Any of above	152	164	160	169	187	187	185	190	189	190	192

* Includes Sikhs, members of ancient faiths such as Zoroastrianism, members of newer faiths such as Baha'i, and other religious groups.

** Includes, for example, followers of African traditional religions, Chinese folk religions, Native American religions and Australian Aboriginal religions.

Note: This measure looks at the number of countries in which groups were harassed, either by the government or by individuals/social groups. It does not assess the severity of the harassment. Numbers do not add to totals shown because multiple religious groups can be harassed in a country.

Source: Pew Research Center analysis of external data. Refer to the Methodology for details.

“Government Restrictions on Religion Stayed at Peak Levels Globally in 2022”

PEW RESEARCH CENTER

WWL methodology includes various types of “harassment” in its broad definition of persecution. However, the WWL is also an assessment of the severity of persecution. The question is, for instance, whether the “harassment” of Muslims in Western European countries can be compared to the “harassment” of Christians in Muslim majority countries. Also, if intra-religious “harassment” (or persecution) were excluded from Pew’s data (viz. the Sunni-Shia conflict), Christians would - in WWR’s opinion - turn out to be much more persecuted by people from other religions or ideologies than Muslims, and at a higher level of intensity.

2. Do Christians face most persecution simply because there are more Christians in the world?

It is not possible simply to state that Christians face most persecution because they belong to the largest religious group in the world. To avoid oversimplification it is necessary to consider the following four points.

First: WWR research is not about proving which is the most persecuted or discriminated religion in the world. If one believes that no person whatsoever should be persecuted or discriminated against for their religion or belief, there can be no room for competition about who is most persecuted.

Secondly: Which religious group could be more persecuted than Christians? According to WCD statistics (accessed April 2025),² there are currently 2,631,182,000 (32.1%) Christians and 2,067,234,000 (25.2%) Muslims worldwide. If Christians are more persecuted than Muslims, this cannot solely be due to “over-representation”, given that the difference in numbers is not so great.

UN estimate of 2025 World population	Christians	Christian %	Muslim	Muslim %	Hindu	Hindu %
8,191,988,000	2,631,182,000	32.1	2,067,234,000	25.2	1,130,188,000	13.8

Thirdly: If we say Christians are the “most persecuted”, the term “most persecuted” can be quantitative (i.e. more Christians are persecuted than adherents of other religions), or qualitative (i.e. Christians are more severely persecuted than adherents of other religions), or both.

Finally: WWR does think, for instance, that Christians are more persecuted for their faith than Muslims, but no definitive statement concerning this can be made unless a corresponding WWL methodology were to be applied to the daily life experiences of Muslims. One reason for WWR’s view is the fact that Sharia law applied in specific territories of a country (or in a country as a whole) quickly leads to persecution or discrimination of Christians; among other factors, conversion becomes highly problematic. There are many nations (and areas within nations) with different degrees of Sharia implementation. Countries with Christian majorities simply do not have those sort of comprehensive and religiously colored law-systems which might lead to similar levels of persecution and discrimination of Muslims.

² WCD: Gina A. Zurlo, ed., World Christian Database (Brill, accessed April 2025)

3. How many Christians are killed for their faith annually?

There is an ongoing debate about the number of Christians killed for faith-related reasons. While some organizations published numbers often as high as 100,000 Christians killed for their faith per year, or ‘one Christian killed every 5 minutes’, research by WWR reveals much lower numbers. (The numbers in the table below are **global totals** recorded within the WWL reporting period.)

WWL	Christians killed for faith-related reasons (GLOBAL FIGURE)	Churches (and other public Christian properties) attacked (GLOBAL FIGURE)
WWL 2013	1,201	774
WWL 2014	2,123	1,111
WWL 2015	4,344	1,062
WWL 2016	7,106	2,425
WWL 2017	1,207	1,329
WWL 2018	3,066	793
WWL 2019	4,305	1,847
WWL 2020	2,983	9,488 ³
WWL 2021	4,761	4,488
WWL 2022	5,898	5,110
WWL 2023	5,621	2,110
WWL 2024	4,998	14,766
WWL 2025	4,476	7,679

The numbers reported and listed above are likely to be much lower than in reality. Here are some reasons why:

- The death of some Christians killed for their faith never reaches the public consciousness:
 - No one really knows about it;
 - Their death is simply not considered worth reporting;
 - Media coverage is deliberately blocked or distorted;
 - Media coverage is not deliberately blocked, but the information somehow gets lost;
 - The deaths are consciously not reported widely for security reasons (e.g. for the protection of local church leaders).
- In situations where Christians have been discriminated against for many years, conflict can make them additionally vulnerable. Christians killed in conflict areas are unlikely to be reported separately. Examples are Sudan and the Nuba people.

³ The number of churches attacked in different forms rose sharply from 1,847 in WWL 2019 to 9,488 in WWL 2020. This rise was particularly related to the action of the Chinese regime against the Church in China, where the number of churches violated one way or another in the WWL 2020 reporting period was at least 5,576. This is a very conservative estimate. There was another sharp rise – a 7-fold increase – from 2,110 in WWL 2023 to 14,766 in WWL 2024: Figures show that churches in China (estimated 10,000 closed) and India (2,228 attacked) were the most vulnerable to being closed down or destroyed. These two countries made up nearly 83% of attack/closure incidents on churches in all countries on the 2024 list. Church attacks in Angola, Burkina Faso, Ethiopia, Nicaragua, Nigeria, Niger, Rwanda and Sudan were also particularly high.

Christians who die through the deprivation of basic necessities such as clean water and medical care (due to long-term discrimination) are unlikely to be reported separately: Christians are not always killed directly; they can be so squeezed by regulations and other vulnerabilities that they die – not at once, but in the course of years. This often includes the deprivation of basic necessities such as clean water and medical care, or exclusion from government assisted socio-economic development projects. If we would include them in the counting, it would be an enormous number of people. The precise number of Christians who die due to these factors is also very difficult to quantify.

4. How does Open Doors' definition of persecution compare with other definitions?

In its classical understanding, persecution is carried out by the state or is sponsored by the state. In reality that is usually not the case. Nowadays, the role of non-state actors has increased in many ways, as can be seen in the activities of militant groups such as the Islamic State group, Boko Haram and al-Shabaab. But also a variety of other social actors could be mentioned: Actors from civil society, such as ethnic group leaders, non-Christian religious leaders, church leaders, ideological pressure groups, ordinary citizens forming mobs, extended family, political parties, revolutionaries, paramilitary groups, organized crime cartels or networks or multilateral organizations or embassies (bilateral).

There is no universally accepted definition of persecution. Courts, lawmakers and scholars have approached the concept from different angles. Neither the preamble, the articles nor the *Travaux Préparatoires* of the 1951 Refugee Convention define persecution. This lack of a universal definition is widely acknowledged; this is the case, for instance, in Section 51 of the handbook published by the UNHCR (in its latest 2011 revision) where it states: "There is no generally accepted definition of 'persecution' and several attempts to come up with such a definition were not successful." The fact is, it might well have been difficult to get many states to sign the convention had a definition of persecution been adopted.

The fact that there is no international definition has led individual countries to come up with their own definitions of persecution. In doing so, some have tried to put the bar high for a situation to be termed persecution. For example:

- i. The [United States Court of Appeals, Third Circuit \(1961\)](#) noted that the mere "repugnance of ... a governmental policy to our own concepts of religious freedom cannot ... justify our labelling such actions as 'persecution'. [Persecution] should be taken to mean confinement, torture or death inflicted on account of race, religion, or political viewpoint."
- ii. The UN Preparatory Commission for the International Criminal Court also suggested that the bar has to be very high. It states: "The perpetrator severely deprived, contrary to international law, one or more persons of fundamental rights."⁴

⁴ Triffterer O and Ambos K. (eds.), 2016: *The legislative history of the International Criminal Court* (2nd ed., Vols. 1–2, p. 242).

- iii. In [EU Directive 2011/95/EU](#), the act of persecution has to be “sufficiently serious by its nature or repetition as to constitute a severe violation of basic human rights, in particular the rights from which derogation cannot be made under Article 15(2) of the European Convention for the Protection of Human Rights and Fundamental Freedoms” (Section III Article 9 para 1a). Persecution is then described more closely as the „application of physical or psychological violence, including sexual violence, legal, administrative, executive or judicial measures (including police) which are discriminating directly or by the way they are applied” as well as “unproportionate or discriminating prosecution or punishment”(Section III Article 9 para 1b).

In comparison, WWL Methodology defines persecution as: “Any hostility experienced as a result of one’s identification with Christ. This can include hostile attitudes, words and actions towards Christians.” This brief definition is supplemented by the following statement: “This broad definition includes (but is not limited to) restrictions, pressure, discrimination, opposition, disinformation, injustice, intimidation, mistreatment, marginalization, oppression, intolerance, infringement, violation, ostracism, hostilities, harassment, abuse, violence, ethnic cleansing and genocide.”

The difference in approach can be explained when the distinct goals for understanding persecution are taken into consideration. The reason for national jurisdiction setting the bar very high is clear: If the standard was not set high, it might lead to a situation where the international community has to face the serious challenge of affording protection to large numbers of people claiming ‘persecuted’ status. This fear has the flipside of underestimating or ignoring the various dimensions of persecution, especially the continuous pressure Christians (and other minorities) might be facing in their different spheres of life. WWL Methodology, on the other hand, treats the concept of ‘persecution’ more inclusively. It gives a solid basis for researchers to track, document, analyze and report about these specific challenges that Christians face in their daily lives.

5. Does ethnic cleansing apply to countries in the WWL Top 50?

The concept of *ethnic cleansing* based on religious affiliation might well apply to (part of) what is happening in a number of the WWL Top 50 countries. Sub-Saharan Africa is an example.

In a growing number of Sub-Saharan African countries *ethnic cleansing*, one of the most recent concepts under international criminal law, would seem to apply for the dynamics created by (political) Islam opposing the presence of Christians in what Muslims consider their territory within countries. *Ethnic cleansing* is when a competitor or those who differ in race, ethnicity or religion are forced to leave a given area by various unlawful means. These can be murder, destruction of property, torture, arbitrary arrest and detention, confinement of civilian population in ghetto areas, forcible removal, displacement and deportation of civilian population, extra-judicial executions, rape and deliberate military or other organized attacks, or threats of attacks on civilians or even *genocide*. The situations in northeastern Kenya, Nigeria, Somalia and Sudan can be said to be typical examples, which in some cases are verging on

genocide. WWR has published studies on *ethnic cleansing* based on religious affiliation in the countries: [Nigeria \(Middle Belt Region\)](#), [Kenya](#), and [Sudan](#).⁵

It should be noted that even in contexts not defined as conflict, *ethnic cleansing* can be in process. Saudi Arabia is an example of this, notwithstanding the massive presence of Christian migrants in the country. The enormous pressure on converts from Islam to Christianity and isolation of Christian migrants from local Saudis, could be characterized as a form of *ethnic cleansing* based on religious affiliation.

Further research will reveal if *ethnic cleansing* based on religious affiliation could be considered a universal characteristic of the WWL top 50 or if it only applies to a limited number of specific countries.

Finally, it was said above that *ethnic cleansing* can even use acts of *genocide* as a means to force others to leave a given area. Some of the acts of persecution in some countries could be characterized as a genocide. An example is what happens in Sudan. Although WWR characterized the process going on in Sudan against Christians as ethnic cleansing based on religious affiliation, what the government of Sudan is doing against the Nuba-Christians is an example of what could be labelled *genocide*. Further research will further develop this element too.

The scope of ethnic cleansing

There is a popular misunderstanding about *ethnic cleansing*: Some think that *ethnic cleansing* can only be committed by the killing or forceful displacement (deportation) of a certain group. However, there are other means of committing the crime of *ethnic cleansing*.

- **Administrative measures:** Administrative measures such as imposing discriminatory and oppressive legal rules, dismissal of members of targeted groups from public service positions, providing no protection or ignorance when rights of such groups are violated, amount to systematic measures to cleanse certain groups off an area.⁶
- **Intimidation (terrorizing) methods:** These acts usually, but not necessarily, are committed by armed civilians, soldiers or government agents and in most instances are committed against the law. Terrorizing methods towards the ethnic cleansing process include intimidation in the street, arbitrary detention of selected target groups and destruction of cultural as well as religious monuments.⁷
- **Other non-violent methods:** The behavior of some perpetrators may not be inherently violent but sows fear and hatred among people. The dissemination of information that

⁵ Nigeria report (2015) available at: <https://opendoorsanalytical.org/wp-content/uploads/2014/10/Ethnic-cleansing-in-the-Middle-Belt-Region-of-Nigeria-2015.pdf>. Kenya report (2016) available at: <https://opendoorsanalytical.org/wp-content/uploads/2014/10/Kenya-Ethnic-cleansing.pdf>. Sudan report (2016) available at: <https://theanalytical.org/wp-content/uploads/2014/10/Sudan-Ethnic-cleansing-WWR.pdf>.

⁶ Pegorier, C: *Ethnic Cleansing: a Legal Qualification*, 135 (2013), available at

<https://search.worldcat.org/title/ethnic-cleansing-a-legal-qualification/oclc/841914938>.

⁷ Petrovic, D: *Ethnic Cleansing- An Attempt at Methodology*, 5 *Eur. J. Int'l L.* 1 (1994). p 5.

inflames hatred against certain group and threatening speeches against a targeted group by powerful group representatives are instances of non-violent methods.⁸ Another non-violent method, which is of relatively recent origin, is to release war prisoners on the condition that their families agree to leave a specified territory.⁹

An example of *ethnic cleansing* evolving out of a process of Islamization can be seen in Sub-Saharan African countries, where many Muslims live clustered together in majority-Muslim areas, or at least areas with tangible Muslim minorities. (This corresponds with advice given to Muslims by the Muslim Brotherhood writer Yusuf al-Qaradawi to live in ghettos. See his visionary document published in April 1990: '[Priorities of The Islamic Movement in The Coming Phase](#)').¹⁰ Such ghettos facilitate the fight for the 'soul of Islam', which is a struggle to get Muslims to progress from being merely 'cultural' to 'devout' or from being 'moderate' to 'radical'. The ghettos provide (very) limited possibilities for Christians to live there, even less as converts to Christianity from a Muslim background. The ghettos also offer a suitable base for a gradual Islamization of surrounding areas.

Nigeria mirrors this situation. Currently, infringements on the religious freedom of Christians occur in a variety of ways. Firstly, the rule of Sharia was unconstitutionally declared in 12 northern states. Local governments and social groups leave hardly any space for Christians to freely live their lives. This is exacerbated by Boko Haram atrocities in northern Nigeria, especially the six north-eastern states, carrying out an anti-Christian agenda that could qualify as ethnic cleansing, if not genocide. In addition, Hausa-Fulani Muslim herdsmen, often assisted by like-minded settlers, try to cleanse the Middle Belt of their original majority-Christian or African traditionalist inhabitants. This situation is a clear example of ethnic cleansing. Furthermore, mob violence all over northern Nigeria makes Christians vulnerable at any place and any time. Finally, a gradual expansion of political Islam over majority-Christian southern Nigeria with the intention to Islamize the South can be observed. Muslim leaders and their constituents pressure adherents of other religions via banking, businesses, symbolism, mosque-building, schools and NGOs to the extent that the Christians (and adherents of other religions) must either leave or gradually adopt Islamic mores and, in some cases, convert to Islam or resist this attempt to impose an Islamic identity on their land. Nigeria could be seen as a test case concerning the persecution dynamics of Islamic oppression in Sub-Saharan Africa and beyond. Similar dynamics can be observed elsewhere at various levels and with different intensities.

⁸ Ibid.

⁹ Bell-Fialkoff, A: A Brief History of Ethnic Cleansing, Foreign Affairs, 1999.
<https://www.foreignaffairs.com/articles/1993-06-01/brief-history-ethnic-cleansing>.

¹⁰ Al-Qaradawi, Y: Priorities of The Islamic Movement in The Coming Phase, April 1990, available at <https://islambasics.com/book/priorities-of-the-islamic-movement-in-the-coming-phase/>.

6. What is religious freedom?

Freedom of religion is a multi-dimensional concept and cannot stand alone. The modern legal concept of the multi-dimensionality of religious freedom can be derived directly from Article 18 of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, which was later incorporated under Article 18 of the International Convention on Civil and Political Rights (ICCPR) be it slightly modified:

“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.”

It is important to bear in mind that the presentation of freedom of religion in Article 18 is much broader than how it is commonly understood. To remind the world about the rich tenor of the article, the UN Human Rights Committee published a [CCPR General Comment on Article 18](#), adopted by the Committee on 30 July 1993. The Swedish Mission Council (2010) produced a booklet entitled [“What freedom of religion involves and when it can be limited”](#), which enumerates seven specific dimensions of religious freedom:

1. Freedom to have, choose, change or leave a religion or belief;
2. Freedom to manifest a religion or belief;
3. Freedom from coercion;
4. Freedom from discrimination;
5. Right of parents to give their children religious and moral education in accordance with their own beliefs;
6. Right to conscientious objection;
7. Freedom to practice one’s religious belief in the workplace.

The second point in this list includes a set of dimensions, which are in fact different types of religious behavior. This set of dimensions can encompass other fundamental human rights principles protected under international law. As there are:

- To worship or assemble in connection with a religion or belief, and to establish and maintain premises for these purposes.
- To establish religious, humanitarian and charitable institutions.
- To make, acquire and use articles and materials related to the rites or customs of a religion or belief, including to follow a particular diet.
- To write, issue and disseminate relevant publications.
- To teach a religion or belief in places suitable for the purposes and to establish theological seminaries or schools.
- To solicit and receive voluntary financial and other contributions.
- To train, appoint or elect leaders, priests and teachers.
- To celebrate religious festivals and observe days of rest.
- To communicate with individuals and communities on faith issues at national and international level.
- To display religious symbols including the wearing of religious clothing.

All points in this list refer to different forms of hostilities to which Christians can become vulnerable, whether directly in the form of violence (*smash*), or indirectly through restrictions of specific rights and freedoms (*squeeze*). Hostilities can be experienced in different *spheres of life*: *Private sphere (forum internum)*; and *Family, Community, National and Church spheres (forum externum)*.

7. How does persecution originate and develop?

The evolution of persecution was well described by the *Religious Economies Model* of Finke and Grim. In this model one can see that social groups and government are continuously reinforcing each other against religious minorities.¹¹ It normally starts with a specific social group in a country representing a specific religion or ideology trying to manipulate the government. From this beginning persecution begins to take root and develop.

The WWR team adapted the *Religious Economies Model*. Schematically, these would be the six stages of gradual development of most of the persecution engines:

1. A small, highly 'charged' social group representing a specific religion or ideology starts to spread their ideas at the expense of (an)other group(s). Often a social or political vacuum presents an excellent breeding ground for such ideas.
2. Fanatical movements grow out of this 'starter group' or assemble around them, and exert pressure on society and government through media strategies and/or physical mob attacks on elements of the other group(s). (These are not usually violent terrorist attacks without involvement of the general public, since these might otherwise alienate the general public from the 'sacred cause'.)
3. The violence disturbs society but governments and the security apparatus (police, military) leave the fanatical movements unpunished while blaming the other group(s) for being the cause of the social unrest by their mere existence. By doing this the government creates a climate of impunity for human rights abuses by those movements and their allies from the general public.
4. This reinforces the actions of the fanatical movements, and draws in more and more regular citizens. This leads to more pressure on the government to collaborate with their agenda, and also to more pressure and/or violence against the other group(s). Sometimes citizens will join out of fear instead of conviction.
5. In the end society and government (including the security apparatus and the judicial system) squeeze the members of the other group(s), to the point of (nearly) suffocating them. This extends to all spheres of life (private, family, community, national and church spheres) and all spheres of society (family, church, school, marketplace, media, arts & entertainment, health system and government).

¹¹ These stages are an adaptation of the *Religious Economies Model* in: Grim, B.J. and Finke R., *The Price of Freedom Denied*, 2010, page 68ff, available as PDF at: https://www.researchgate.net/publication/289095030_The_price_of_freedom_denied_Religious_persecution_and_conflict_in_the_twenty-first_century.

6. Culture as a whole is taken over by the agenda of the highly ‘charged’ social group representing a specific religion or ideology (point 1), and the worldview that is intrinsically linked to this agenda becomes a main cultural source.

In the second point it said violent attacks, often instigated by fanatical movements, are done through mob mobilization. That is the case when persecution gradually develops in society, co-opting the government. In cases in which the aim is to overthrow governments, violent attacks occur more often in the context of a religious or ideological revolutionary movement. (Consequently steps 2 to 6 will then be different.)

The length of time that persecution engines take to develop from stages 1 to 6 can differ greatly depending on the specific context in the country, and on the type of persecution engine. It can also be a continuous or a discontinuous process and/or a clearly visible or more invisible process.

8. Are only Christians who evangelize persecuted?

Not at all. In the context of persecution it makes sense to distinguish three Christian profiles:

A. Convert to Christianity	B. Missionary active Christian	C. Christian by identity
<p>Someone who left his or her former religion or ideological background to become a Christian (can also concern change from one type of Christianity, often the majority type, to another)</p> <p>‘Defectors’, who leave the ranks of a criminal organization after conversion to Christianity, are also part of this profile.</p>	<p>Christian who is active in the public domain in carrying out evangelism, or social or political activities as a Christian</p>	<p>Someone with Christian identity (or considered a Christian by antagonistic groups such as radical Islamic groups)</p> <p>This can be people who live as Christians within the boundaries of regular church life (‘passive’ Christian lifestyle). It can also be people who are considered Christians but who hardly know what the Christian faith entails.</p>

The first Christian profile is the ‘convert to Christianity’

Conversion to Christianity often causes the dominating religious or ideological groups to become hostile towards Christians. Conversion is normally unacceptable for these groups, especially when that religion or ideology has radicalized i.e. has developed a radical momentum within its ranks. WWR understands the concept of conversion broadly so as not to limit it to a merely religious act. Conversion is about someone leaving his or her religious or ideological group setting (or even an ‘anti-ideological’ or anarchistic group setting linked for instance to organized crime) to become a Christian.

The second Christian profile is the ‘missionary active Christian’

These Christians are often active in different forms of evangelization. Christians can also be active in other forms of Christian witness in the public domain. This can concern different aspects of social or political work and include socio-economic development workers, leaders of public opinion, political leaders, journalists, lawyers, human rights advocates, indigenous rights advocates etc. Activity in the public domain, be it evangelization or socio-political work, can cause irritation or a feeling of being threatened, while at the same time Christians expose themselves clearly in the local community as potential targets.

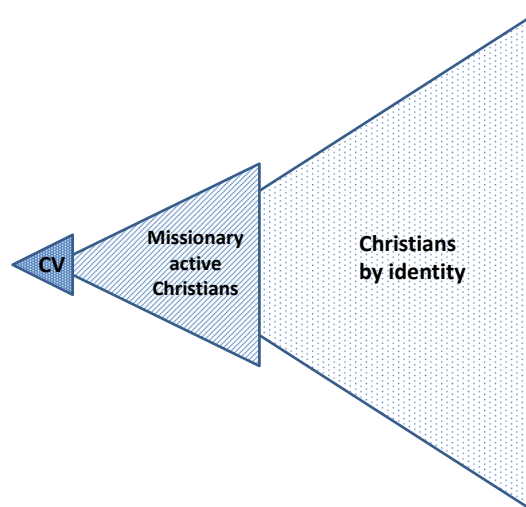
The third Christian profile is the ‘Christian by identity’

What a person says, does, or does not do, is not important at this stage; it is sufficient that a person is considered to be a Christian as a reason for being targeted by persecutors. It can happen that people, who hardly know what the Christian faith entails, are pressurized and even killed for being (considered) Christians.

Which Christian profiles are affected depends on the persecution situation

Which Christian profile is affected by persecution depends more on how the persecution situation has developed than on the type of persecution engine involved. Converts are normally the first victims of persecution – e.g. converts to Christianity from a Muslim background. Even when society is not yet Islamized and the government has not yet adopted Sharia law, converts are very vulnerable in their private, family and community spheres of life. The same applies for ‘defectors’, where life in the community sphere is often more problematic than in their private and family spheres of life. After converts come the Christians who are active in the public domain. When the persecution situation develops further, Christians by identity become affected too. In the end the visibility of Christianity in the public domain (i.e. churches and other Christian buildings) is reduced by the closure (and sometimes demolition) of such buildings.

The diagram below shows how persecution often starts with converts (CV) and then increases when Christians become evangelistically active. Finally persecution grows to affect citizens purely due to their identity as Christians.

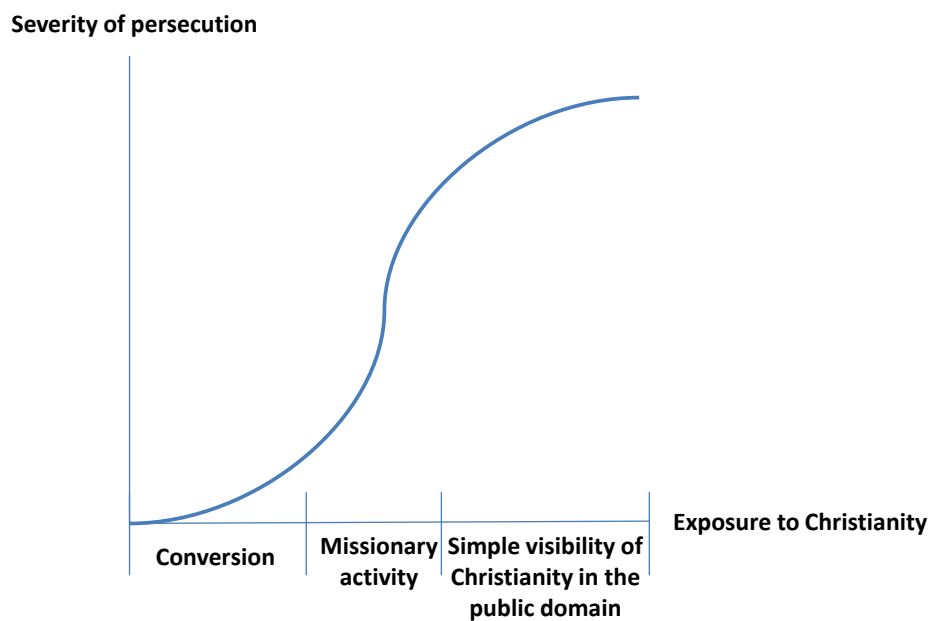


Stated in a different way: Converts often put persecution in motion. Once people start converting to Christianity, missionary activity is felt more and more as a threat and will consequently be suppressed. If the Christian movement continues, attempts will be made to eradicate all signs of Christianity in society, whether Christian dress codes, church buildings or other.

Missionary activity as an accelerator of persecution

Missionary active Christians bring persecution to the public domain. While the persecution of converts often starts in the private life of converts, persecution of missionary active Christians normally happens in direct relation to public activity. That gives missionary activity a special meaning in the framework of persecution. Missionary activity is a paradoxical reality of the Christian faith. It is the undeniable vocation of Christians and is a fruit of obedience, but it also crystallizes social and governmental tendencies to safeguard vested interests through bitter persecution of these same Christians and others not directly involved in missionary activity.

Missionary activity not only brings persecution into the public domain, it also accelerates the dynamics of persecution. The following figure describes this persecution development curve:



The progress of persecution and the ‘role’ of missionary activity could be compared to the turning point of a titration curve in chemistry. Gradually increasing numbers of converts might cause a gradually increasing awareness that something is going wrong from the point of view of (religious) social leaders, including the government. However, there is a buffer capacity in society for (religious) dissent. Only when things become obvious – converts get a higher profile while missionary activity is visibly present in the public domain – alarm bells might start ringing, and there could be a turning point in persecution in the sense that it suddenly seems to increase disproportionately. The sheer visibility in the public domain of Christians, churches and other Christian buildings gives the final push to the development of persecution.

9. How do the duties of the State relate to persecution?

Of all entities, the State has a huge responsibility to make sure that human rights (Freedom of Religion or Belief in this case) are not violated. Generally speaking the State has the following duties:

- To respect – not breach or interfere with the enjoyment of the right
- To protect – stop and prevent violations
- To fulfill – adopt appropriate measures towards the full realization of rights; and the obligation to facilitate, provide and promote human rights.

The State has an active duty in terms of protecting the rights of Christians from different drivers (actors) of persecution. In the case where drivers of persecution are related to the persecution engines *Dictatorial paranoia* and *Secular intolerance* it is apparent that the State itself interferes with the right (duty to respect and protect). In the case where radical groups or militias violate rights of Christians, it means the government fails to protect, or even collaborates with these groups. It is clear that in these cases the State also fails to fulfill the right to Freedom of Religion or Belief.

10. Does WWL analysis sometimes confuse civil conflict with persecution?

Commentators often look at the situation of civilians in civil conflicts and ignore the role of religious identity on the side of the victim and religious motivation on the side of the perpetrator among the complex mix of factors and motives for hostilities against civilians. Detailed research shows that religion often plays an important or even decisive role, without which the situation cannot be fully or correctly understood. This applies even when religion is not the only factor. Hence, according to WWL research, conflicts such as those in Central Africa, Myanmar, Nigeria and Syria are (at least in part) situations involving the persecution of Christians on grounds of faith.

11. What is meant by “persecution eclipse”?

This is a situation whereby persecution and civil conflict overlap to the extent that the former is in a real or imaginative sense overshadowed or rendered almost invisible by the latter. There are two typical contexts for *persecution eclipse*.

First, *persecution eclipse* arises when specific events are wrongly interpreted. Nigeria provides a clear example. Nigeria is a country with an alarming record of religiously-related violence. There is debate whether this is actually persecution, or just civil unrest. Is there an agenda of Islamization or is it about ‘environmental degradation and migration’? A paper, published by

World Watch Research in 2013 discusses this and argues that [persecution eclipse](#) is taking place.¹²

Secondly, *persecution eclipse* arises when conflicts catch international attention after their initial phases. An example is Boko Haram in Nigeria. In the beginning phases after its resurrection in 2010, Boko Haram killed government personnel (including security forces) and Christians. While government personnel (whether Muslims or Christians) were killed because they were linked to the government, Christians were killed because of their faith. When the international community caught attention of the situation, the conflict had already spread to everyone (Muslims too) who was not a Muslim of the type of Boko Haram.

Another example is Central African Republic in 2012/2013. Christians were cruelly persecuted by the Islamic Séléka militants on their way to power in Bangui, the capital of the country. International attention arose when the anti-Balaka (seen by some as a Christian militia) had started to commit revenge attacks on Muslims in Bangui. The origin of the conflict was then quickly forgotten, and (almost) the entire blame was put on the (so-called) Christian militia.

Another example is the situation of the Christian population in Kachin and Northern Shan State in Myanmar. The Kachin have been striving for independence and/or autonomy since the 1950s. The fact that Kachin fighters regularly clash with the Burmese army has overshadowed media awareness that Christian churches and schools etc. have been frequently used as targets for shelling, Christian teachers among the Kachin have been killed, pastors arrested and thousands of Kachin Christians are still displaced in the region and have been deliberately cut off from receiving (international) aid. The fact that Border Guard Forces (BGF) are also drivers of persecution, blurs the picture. These are armed groups operating alongside the Burmese army, recruited from other ethnic minorities. This situation is further complicated by the fact that army, politicians, Kachin fighters and BGF all participate to a varied degree in the trade of precious stones, timber and drugs. As the leader of the Kachin Baptist Convention, Dr. Hkalam Samson, stated in September 2019, all sides of the conflict are simply benefiting too much from the current status quo and do [not really seem interested in peace](#).¹³

12. How do societal power dynamics operate?

World Watch Research uses the term ‘persecution engine’ to describe a distinct situation which is causing Christians to be persecuted either violently or non-violently. This situation of persecution can be considered as the consequence of a societal ‘power dynamic’. WWR has identified a total of eight power dynamics: Communism, Secularism, Political authority, Capitalism, Ethnicity, Christianity, Judaism, Hinduism, Buddhism and Islam.

A power dynamic normally represents a world view that has a claim of superiority over other world views. That is not a problem in itself, as long as it is coupled with a true sense of pluralism.

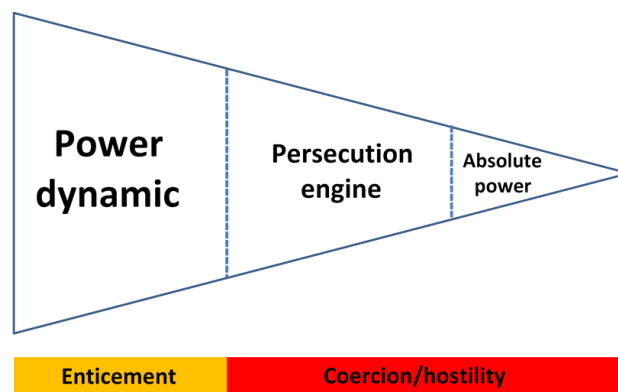
¹² “Nigeria: Persecution or Civil Unrest?”, WWR, 2013, p.11: <https://opendoorsanalytical.org/wp-content/uploads/2020/04/Nigeria-Persecution-or-civil-unrest-2013.pdf>

¹³ Interview in The Irrawaddy, 18 September 2019, available at: <https://www.irrawaddy.com/in-person/interview/no-peace-myanmar-without-sacrifices-kachin-christian-chief.html>.

When this is not the case, the drivers of the power dynamic will strive for absolute submission of society to their world view. The drivers of the power dynamic are often small (radical) groups within the broader group of adherents of that worldview, who are not necessarily representative of that broader group, but who manage to get sufficient space to maneuver towards their goal.

An example is the situation created by Islam in northern Nigeria. It is not that all Muslims want to get rid of Christians in northern Nigeria through conversion or expulsion. Nevertheless, strong drivers of Islamization succeed through violent and non-violent means in making life for Christians in northern Nigeria more and more difficult.

In the following diagram, it can be seen how a power dynamic strives to achieve absolute power in society by first using enticement and then coercion.



Where Christian communities exist, the world view in question is first spread through enticing and encouraging Christians to join its ranks. This may be done in a low-key or high-profile way. For instance, in specific ethnic group areas of Sub-Saharan African countries, the Church is first weakened by Christians who find themselves attracted to the concepts of African Tribal Religion (ATR) and voluntarily join the ranks of ATR adherents. However, in due course even motivated church members might also find themselves being forced by militant groups to comply to ATR concepts. And if ATR adherents convert to Christianity that will cause them even more serious problems.

Where such enticement fails to bring the desired result of obtaining absolute power over the Church (and others not yet subject to the groups exerting pressure), the power dynamic is likely to develop into a distinct persecution engine, creating a situation of coercion and hostility – as illustrated in the diagram above. The drivers of that power dynamic then become drivers of persecution.

In WWL methodology, nine persecution engines are listed as emanating from ten power dynamics.¹⁴ These persecution engines each describe situations which display their own brand of hostility towards Christians and are central both for scoring the WWL questionnaires and for the analysis of the persecution of Christians and their communities. For further information on how each persecution engine is described and operates, see the “Complete WWL Methodology”

¹⁴ Complete WWL Methodology, updated October 2025, Diagram 5, p.13: <https://www.opendoors.org/research-reports/wwl-documentation/Complete-WWL-Methodology-update-October-2025.pdf>.

available at: <https://www.opendoors.org/en-US/research-reports/wwl-documentation/> and <https://opendoorsanalytical.org/world-watch-list-documentation/> (password: freedom).

13. WWL Violence statistics – Why “for faith-related reasons” is so important

Throughout the world, there are many violent incidents of varying severity where people have suffered, among them many Christians. However, not all violence involving Christians can be considered persecution, as defined by WWL methodology. Two examples follow where civilians – including Christians – have suffered immensely, but this is not classified as ‘persecution’.

Example Ukraine: The war in Ukraine has caused killings, physical harassment, imprisonments, internal displacement, fleeing abroad, abduction of Christians, damage and destruction of churches, schools, cemeteries, shops, homes and other properties. Yet the effects of the war on WWL scoring for Ukraine and Russia have been very small. This is due to the fact that in all questions in the Violence block the words ‘for their faith’ has been included. In other words, the question is always: Are believers specifically targeted (or extra vulnerable) in the various categories for faith-related reasons?

Although violence has been ravaging Ukraine since 24 February 2022, it has targeted the general population but not specifically Christians for their faith. Even Ukraine’s [August 2024 law](#) prohibiting the existence on Ukrainian territory of the Ukrainian Orthodox Church of the Moscow Patriarchate is probably best viewed as a war-related (rather than faith-related) political action (Agenzia Fides, 26 August 2024).

Example Afghanistan: Concerning the possibility of Christians being killed by the Taliban because they had worked for the previous government, the large drop in violence score from 15.0 points in WWL 2022 to 4.6 points in WWL 2023 caused much consternation. This reaction was based on the false assumption: “Doesn’t a large drop in the score for violence mean that Christians are in less danger than before?”

Open Doors has a reputation for careful reporting on the situation of Christians, and if there is no concrete evidence for Christians being attacked and killed etc. for their faith, then WWL gives the specific Block 6 question the number zero. The possible threat of attack is taken into consideration under the Pressure scoring. Admittedly, the danger under the Taliban is extreme but with the Afghan church deeper underground than in the previous WWL reporting periods, Christians have been less visible for attack. Added to this is the fact, that the Taliban has had other priorities to deal with and has not explicitly been targeting non-Muslim and Shia citizens. Where Christians experienced violence, it was normally for the same reasons as for other Afghans who had worked with the former government and armed forces and was not a faith-related issue. When the Church is deeper underground, incidents may, of course, occur which are not reported. The WWL 2023 reduction in the score for violence in no way indicated that it was safe (or safer) for Afghan Christians to live in the country. To claim that would be totally untrue.