

Persecution Talk:

I had an unusual start to my Christmas last year 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 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 it's a really important issue too, 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 Savile, Leveson and Chilcot - 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 while I wouldn't go to the stake over every jot and tittle of the report I am nonetheless confident in the broad thrust of our conclusion and our recommendations.

But why was it needed?

Over five years ago '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 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 be a stalking horse for 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 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. 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 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 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 stooges of the West. We must seek FoRB for all, without fear or favour.

So I'm concerned with rights for all so 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 how did we go about it all?

It's important to be clear what this Review was not. To repeat, it wasn't Leveson, or Saville or Chilcot, or anything like that: we had a thumb and a thermometer: we have taken the temperature, we have felt the pulse. But just as I wouldn't want to oversell what we did, I wouldn't want to undersell it either. Another criticism we have faced – bizarrely in my view – is that we simply rehashed material already in the public domain, which is simply untrue. Actually we did a significant amount of primary research, travelling globally and taking a significant number of witness statements, from survivors of persecution included, and much of that evidence is freely available on the website (christianpersecutionreview.org.uk).

So what did we do? First we established 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 or other forced coercion'. It's important to say that, as we've been criticised for not providing a definition when we clearly do (I do wonder whether some of our critics actually bothered to read the report!).

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 as the interim report. Alongside that as I mentioned just now the team took extensive evidence from a large number of people in private witness sessions in this country and in many countries overseas. We also conducted a survey of those who might have been expected to interact with the FCO overseas, as well as conducting a survey of every UK Embassy and High Commission, and talking to various diplomats around the world.

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 at some key documents from the FCO itself.

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 importance 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? You find gang warfare 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 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. The time for inaction and indifference is over. And therefore, as the Report argues, if the FCO takes this issue with the seriousness it undoubtedly deserves, then it will simply enable them to do their job better, by helping them to address some very serious current global phenomena.

So how is the FCO doing?

To be honest it's all a bit 'curate's egg' – good in parts, but really not very good in others.

One problem is that many diplomats don't stay very long in post so don't really get to know the country in the way they should. And much depends too on the attitude and 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 don't and some 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 many don't. Many people said the FCO used to be better at this than it is now. Some diplomats, sadly, aren't really bothered by it all, are blind to issues of faith and simply don't understand it. On the other hand, as the Report argues, abuse of FoRB almost certainly intersects with other key issues which the FCO certainly does take seriously: issues such as gender equality, modern slavery, forced marriage, people trafficking and poverty reduction. So for example if you are a Christian woman in the global south you're much more likely to be the victim of those things. So if the FCO cares about those issues, as it says it does, then it should certainly be concerned about Christian persecution.

And being blind to faith sometimes leads to persecution continuing even in refugee camps where Christians still remain a minority. So the overall verdict has to be: could do much better.

So what do we recommend?

As I said earlier: if you lift the stone of persecution and look underneath, you find some very unpleasant things: you find gang welfare on an industrial scale driven by drug crime; you find authoritarian, totalitarian regimes that are intolerant 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. So if we care about those issues we should certainly care about the persecution of Christians and about Freedom of Religion or Belief more generally.

And that is why the Recommendations of the Review are as bold and far reaching as I believe them to be. 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 warn against unintentional 'othering': indeed my conviction is that the single best way to protect Christians from persecution is 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.

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. 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.

Specifically we made 22 recommendations. I'm not going to go through them each individually (because you'll want to get home and I have a train to catch) but rather I want to highlight the three headings they sit under, because I think they're important, and perhaps overlooked.

The first heading is **Strategy and Structures**. This looks at the FCO in the round, at the centre, and argues that FoRB should be central to the FCO's culture, policies and international operations. Clearly that is a step change but in the light of what I've said I think it's essential, for reasons of national self-interest and security, leaving aside the moral imperative that we should do so.

The second heading is **Education and Engagement** in which we encourage the FCO both to up its game in terms of developing religious literacy and to use that understanding to develop

religiously literate local operational approaches that take context seriously, and endeavour to understand that context not just through western eyes: because if you only see that context in your own terms you will never be able effectively to engage in it.

And the third heading is **Consistency and Co-ordination**. This has been in some ways the most controversial area and we faced criticism for focussing only on the FCO and not on government more widely. But to focus on government more widely was simply not in the Foreign Secretary's gift and it was not therefore in our ToRs. But we do signpost some effective ways in which we believe the FCO and the Foreign Secretary can lead across government and frankly this does need a cross-governmental approach that touches for instance on the work of the Home Office and DfID to name just two departments.

And I'm delighted to say that's just what's happening. One of the last things that Alan Duncan MP did before leaving office was to announce that not just the FCO but the Government as whole accepted the recommendations of the report in full. That was certainly more than I hoped for or expected. And I was delighted too that the new Government confirmed that commitment and indeed that the Prime Minister appointed Rehman Chishti MP as his Special Envoy for FoRB, who we're honoured to have here with us tonight. And I've been delighted with the way he has taken on the challenge of implementing the recommendations with such energy and élan.

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.

In one of his first speeches to the 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 God give us strength not to look away, but as a country to do what needs to be done, as Wilberforce and others in his time did. Thank you.