

OBSERVATORY ON  
INTOLERANCE AND DISCRIMINATION  
AGAINST CHRISTIANS IN EUROPE

# Under pressure: Human Rights of Christians in Europe

TOP FIVE REPORT  
2019 - 2020



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## ABBREVIATIONS

ANEP: National Agency for Evaluation and Prospective Studies  
APPG: All-Party Parliamentary Group  
APS: Alliance of Pro-Life Students  
BAMF: Federal Office for Migration and Refugees  
DGSi: General Directorate for Internal Security  
ECHR: European Court of Human Rights  
ESG: Protestant Student Community  
EU: European Union  
LGBTQ+: Lesbian Gay Bisexual Transexual, Queer +  
ODIHR: Office for Democratic Institutions and Human Rights  
OIDAC: Observatory on Intolerance and Discrimination Against Christians  
OLRC: Spanish Observatory for Religious Freedom and Conscience  
OSCE: Organization for Security and Co-operation in Europe  
PSOE: Partido Socialista Obrero Español  
PSOP: Public Space Protection Order  
RSE: Relationships and Sex Education  
SAP: Swedish Social Democratic Party  
SMD: Student Mission in Germany  
SPUC: Society for the Protection of the Unborn Children  
UN: United Nations  
WCD: World Christian Database



# ABSTRACT

While fundamental freedoms are a key element of Western European democratic societies, recent developments have shown that these freedoms are in constant discussion and are sometimes even being limited. There is a rising concern about a decline in religious freedom in Europe, including freedom of expression, freedom of conscience, and parental rights, among other human rights. In this report, OIDAC investigates this issue in five countries in the context of its effect on Christians: France, Germany, Spain, Sweden, and the United Kingdom (UK) between 2019 and 2020. These countries were selected because, according to our observations, Christians face the most difficulties in them. The findings of the report are based on a variety of data we collected. The majority of our data is based on descriptive cases, an extensive questionnaire and in-depth interviews with experts and afflicted Christians. Through our research, we identified an increasing intolerance and discrimination from mainly two sides. First, from the governmental side through legislation, or political discourse that undermines the freedoms of Christians and, secondly, from an individual side, through social exclusion and criminal acts against Christians. It was also uncovered that the main dynamic that causes the erosion and limitation of the freedoms of Christians is what was termed secular intolerance. The report presents an interconnected view of the studied cases, highlights current trends, and formulates recommendations.

# FOREWORD

Something is in the air; something has changed and a new phenomenon is emerging on the horizon. It has been simmering under the surface for some time, but now it is becoming more visible. Most Christians in Europe who walk in their faith on a daily basis have come across some form of discrimination or intolerance in either an obvious way or an unrecognizable subtle one. Being a firm Christian believer in Europe today is not only no very fashionable but can also lead to serious infringements on one's freedom in some essential areas of life, like the workplace or education.

The phenomenon that we are talking about is the increase of intolerance and discrimination against Christians in Europe. This phenomenon can occur in various forms, such as vandalism – antireligious motivated attacks against churches and Christian buildings - or even anti-Christian hate crimes against individuals. But also, through the progressively restriction or contestation of fundamental rights, such as freedom of expression, freedom of religion, freedom of conscience, contractual freedom or parental rights, by society or the state.

The underlying dynamic that brings the phenomenon repeatedly to the surface, because of its increasing strength, is what we term Secular Intolerance. It is an ideologically infused secularisation dynamic that has caused a cultural shift on all levels of society, as it tries to relegate religion to the private sphere and ignores the fact that faith plays a vital role in a healthy society. The negation of a public voice is mainly based on strong and sometimes even extreme opposition to Christian morals derived from core beliefs. In some cases, it does not stop at negation but goes even further towards the criminalisation of public or even private opinions.

The picture drawn seems quite drastic and most would say that it is not so acute, but the cases we collected and the interviews and research we conducted speak of a different reality. The aim of this report and the presentation of our findings is not intended to lead to fear, division, or resentment, but rather to openly address a new and worrisome phenomenon. The reason for our inquiry is very simple: no one else does it, except for a few other organisations. The facts indicate that there is an unaddressed and concerning problem at hand and to raise awareness, it needs to be analysed in all its depth. The scarcity of research and data on this issue also means that we manoeuvre through a field that is largely unknown, resulting in the fact that we are still in an explorative stage. Therefore, it is important to state that our research is preliminary, but this holds true for everyone who is taking the first steps into an unknown field.

In the end, the goal is not only to contribute to the better protection of the freedoms of Christians but to raise awareness about the possible effects that such a steady and subtle erosion of liberal principles has on a democratic society. Cornerstones can become uncomfortable stumbling blocks, but they are essential for stability and balance. The same holds true for our society. Cornerstones of our liberal democracies, individual freedom and collective responsibility can be a challenge but should never be diminished or dismissed. Only eye-to-eye encounters and a sober exchange of ideas are true solutions.

**“When we avoid difficult conversations, we trade short term discomfort for long term dysfunction.”**

– Peter Bromberg



# KEY FINDINGS

- 1. We have identified five European countries in which the freedoms of Christians have been most infringed during 2019/2020:** France, Germany, Spain, Sweden and the UK.
- 2. Anti-Christian hate crimes in Europe increased by 70% between 2019 and 2020.** These have a higher frequency in France and Germany, although they tend to be more severe in Spain and France, due to a reactionary form of secularism.
- 3. The research indicated two main threatening dynamics that affect the lives of Christians: Secular Intolerance and Islamic Oppression.** While secular intolerance is the driving dynamic in most of the cases and areas of life we observed, Islamic oppression mainly occurs in concentrated hotspot areas, in which Christian converts are the group that is mostly affected along with other residential Christians.
- 4. We identified four areas of life where Christians are most affected.** These are church life, education, politics and the workplace. We found that the area of church life is the most visibly affected due to an increasing number of hate crimes in most countries, but education, the workplace and politics are following shortly after.
- 5. Another finding is that all of the five observed countries have problems concerning the protection of Freedom of Speech.** The UK is the country with the most cases of legal prosecution for alleged "Hate Speech". The other countries only present a few public cases, but according to interviewees, have high rates of self-censorship.
- 6. The right to conscientious objection has been threatened mainly in three countries.** The absence of the conscience clause in Sweden is already affecting Christian professionals, and intentions to alter this clause in France and Spain could lead to a complete exclusion of Christians in certain professions.
- 7. We have identified two trends in the educational sector that are cause for concern.** First, Christian university students perceive that they cannot debate certain topics freely or express their opinions without judgement or negative consequences, which leads to the crippling effects of self-censorship. Secondly, various new regulations on sex and relationship education are violating Parental Rights.



8. Secular intolerance and discrimination against Christianity seem to be based on the **opposition against more traditional and conservative moral views of Christians**. This polarisation also appears to be promoted by sensationalist and religious-illiterate media that stigmatises and marginalises religious voices in the public debate.
9. **Christian converts with a Muslim background are a very vulnerable group in European societies**, and there is very little research about their situation. Our data indicates that many of them face intolerance and violence from their social environment, and the danger they face is often ignored by state authorities.
10. During the state of health emergency due to the Covid-19 Pandemic, **churches were repeatedly discriminated against and religious freedom denied in various countries**. This happened either by the unjustified and disproportionate use of power by public officials (Spain) or through disproportionate blanket bans on public worship, downgrading it to a non-essential service.
11. It was also uncovered that **there is a high rate of religious illiteracy among state authorities**, public officials and journalists. The improvement of religious literacy will be a crucial element to improve the dialogue and to tackle discrimination and intolerance against Christians.
12. **There is an urgent need for more research** in the field of intolerance and discrimination against Christians in Europe on various levels, as the findings outlined.
13. **Religion is a social reality** that cannot be ignored by academia, media or politics. Religion plays a vital role in a stable and healthy society.




# INTRODUCTION

In November this year, the Office for Democratic Institutions and Human Rights (ODIHR) from the Organisation for Security and Cooperation in Europe (OSCE) published their annual Hate Crime Report on the “International Day for Tolerance”. The report, to which OIADC contributes cases of anti-Christian hate crimes every year, gathered 981 anti-Christian hate crimes in Europe for the year 2020, compared to 578 in 2019. This meant an increase of 70% in anti-Christian hate crime since last year.<sup>1</sup>

As we publicly shared these findings, many people were surprised and the story reached international media outlets. We received comments like “I never expected to see Christians in that list, among other religious and ethnic minorities.” But we also experienced rejection by local mainstream media, as they argued that “Christians are not facing real danger” compared to other groups. Nevertheless, our numbers speak louder than our words. This is one of the reasons OIADC was founded over ten years ago, because there was no other organisation reporting and raising awareness on this phenomenon in Europe.

Vandalism might seem harmless, but it is an indicator of a dangerous development against a specific group. Otherwise, it would not be classified as a hate crime by the OSCE. “Harmless” scribbling can incite and normalise concrete and massive violent crimes. Hate crimes in general and their legitimations on a political and social level are also part of genocide research for a good reason. This is of course the last extreme, but we should not ignore the “small” signs that can lead to violent crimes and even homicide. Hate crimes are usually a sign of an underlying problem, a barometer for the social climate in a country. They are more frequent in times of social and political change. The political discourse can – purposely or not – devalue members of a certain group, creating an intolerance led by fear, anger, or ignorance<sup>2</sup>.

The tragic fire of the Notre-Dame Cathedral in Paris in 2019, although not an arson, worked as a fire beacon, indicating that French society, and maybe



Europe was changing. Ten days before the fire, The Times UK had released an article called “Vandalism at hundreds of French Churches”, recalling disturbing cases of human excrements being smeared on church walls and other churches being vandalised by a variety of perpetrators, many motivated by a “militant secularism”. At the end of the year, there had been over 20 arson attacks to churches in France among the over a thousand cases of vandalism against churches and Christian buildings recorded by the French police<sup>3</sup>.

In 2020, priests in Spain, France and Germany were victims of physical assault or violent threats. The Spanish priest, Javier Contreras Beorlegui, was stabbed in the upper body and arms while he prepared to open his church.<sup>4</sup> Sadly, these stories have not alarmed the public about the erosion of Religious Freedom of Christians in Europe, until a tragedy happens that resonates internationally, like the terror attack in Nice that ended in the death of three believers<sup>5</sup>.

The West allegedly reached a high level of tolerance in the last century, but the facts provided by international organisations indicate that there is still much work to be done and that in some respects, due to an overreaching form of secularism, we might be going back to intolerance towards dissenting beliefs. It seems like the efforts to expand and promote tolerance for all has led to an intolerant blindness against a few. Legal developments, like “hate speech” legislation, and changes in conscience clauses for certain controversial medical procedures are limiting the fundamental freedoms of conscience and expression. Like the two Swedish midwives, who were denied employment for objecting to performing abortions. Or the midwife student, Julia Rynkiewicz, who endured a 4-months suspension and investigation for advocating pro-life views, in accordance with her faith. Her case inspired a poll initiated by the legal advocacy organization ADF International, revealing that 25% of students in the United Kingdom (UK) would self-censor their opinions to avoid conflict.<sup>6</sup>

Our data is still very limited, but the growing number of incidents is becoming harder to ignore, and this is why we decided to go further and explore European countries in more depth. Our research shows that in some countries the infringement on the safety and freedoms of Christians is greater than in others, so we chose to concentrate on five of them.

This report visualizes the areas where the freedoms of Christians are “eroding” in Europe. Our findings indicate that this can happen from the governmental side, when legislation and restrictions have been reinforced that conflict with fundamental freedoms, but also from the broader society, through signs of intolerance and discrimination, leading to anti-Christian Hate Crimes. There is a need for a far greater understanding of how these developments are shaping our Western society. If the human rights of a certain group of society – in this case, Christians – are under attack, this affects the democratic structure of our society at large.<sup>7</sup>



## OUTLINE AND SCOPE

The report is divided into 5 sections according to the 5 countries explored: France, Germany, Spain, Sweden, and the UK. Each country has an introduction that embeds our findings into important historical, political, and sociocultural contexts. This is followed by 4 to 5 sections exploring the main affected areas of life or freedoms of Christians with illustrative examples from individual cases and citations from our data. The sections vary in every country, due to the different dynamics in each country. After an illustration of the situation in each country, the report analyses the most concerning dynamics for Christians in Europe, by conducting a comparative analysis of the country findings. Finally, the report closes with a set of recommendations and a conclusion.

## METHODOLOGY

Since the phenomenon at hand is a rather new one and no substantial research has been conducted so far in this field, we can only present preliminary results. Due to this lack of empirical inquiry and academic literature, we opted for an explorative research design, to get a first picture of the problems at hand. We gathered our data through various methods and sources to ensure at least some degree of comprehensiveness. Therefore, we used official statistics from governments and international organisations, conducted personal interviews and processed extensive questionnaires with experts and lay people in each country. We also used data from OIDAC's archive and academic literature. The main sources of information are in-depth individual interviews, 144-questions questionnaires, government reports, official statistics, and media outlets. The reporting period ranges from January 2019 to December 2020.

At the same time, it is important to keep in mind the limitations of this report. Given the explorative character of this report and the limited time and resources, the data is to be considered as preliminary research. The collected data from interviews and questionnaires provide a subjective view of the situation, and while some countries provided enough data to objectively prove these arguments, in other countries or spheres, this was not possible.

# OBJECTIONS

When talking about Intolerance and Discrimination against Christians, there are four main objections or “myths” that are used to downplay the importance and emergence of this phenomenon. We want to briefly address these objections:

1. ***“Discrimination and Intolerance against Christians is merely an intra-Christian conflict”***: While historically there have been intra-Christian conflicts, Christian denominations have, to a large extent, learned to co-exist, and even to work together and have respectful discussions. This is therefore not a source of discrimination or intolerance in European societies. If there is still “intra-Christian conflicts”, the reasons or motivations are of ethical origin.
2. ***“Christians are not facing intolerance or discrimination, but they are losing their historical privileges.”***: Historical privileges are not discriminative towards other religious communities, nor are they negative, and they usually carry a strong feeling of identity and tradition for the population. Therefore, the removal of Christian symbols or withdrawal of privileges related to the Christian tradition constitutes an unnatural break with history and identity, which can be weaponized and lead to hostility and marginalisation.
3. ***“Christianity cannot be discriminated against in Europe, because it holds a majority.”***: While minorities can be more vulnerable to discrimination, it is a wrong and unsubstantiated belief, that majority groups cannot be discriminated against, as history shows. Rather than numbers, it depends on which groups have more power to shape the political discourse, to discriminate, insult or attack a certain group without facing consequences. At the same time, it is important to differentiate between cultural Christianity, which is still a majority in Europe, from those who are active Christians.
4. ***“Intolerance and Discrimination in Europe are minor issues compared to the violent persecution of Christians in other countries.”***: Over 80% of persecuted people worldwide are Christians, and many of them face imprisonment and death in other countries.<sup>8</sup> This does not mean that more subtle forms of intolerance, such as social exclusion, censorship, discrimination in education or employment are less important or can be ignored.

# TERMINOLOGY

## INTOLERANCE AND DISCRIMINATION

The phrase “Intolerance and Discrimination against Christians” is used to describe the hostilities, social marginalisation, or the denial of equal rights to Christians and Christian institutions in Europe. The term “intolerance” refers to the social dimension of anti-Christian sentiments.

While “intolerance” can remain as an invisible sentiment towards a certain group, the term “discrimination” refers to the legal dimension, which becomes visible through discriminatory treatment. According to the United Nations (UN), discrimination happens among members of society, but also through discriminatory laws, policies, or judgments that directly and indirectly jeopardize the free exercise of rights and freedoms.<sup>9</sup>

For example, discriminatory and intolerant behaviour can lead to opposition to the traits or moral positions that are part of the Christian faith, or to a negative stereotyping of Christianity as a whole. This can lead to attacks on the social level, such as intimidation and marginalisation, on the legal level, through laws that interfere with the human rights of Christians, negatively impacting their lives, or giving them unequal access to justice, and on the political level, such as an exclusion from the public sphere or negative stereotyping that leads to unjust political decisions, etc.

## FUNDAMENTAL FREEDOMS

When discriminatory laws are passed, these can directly or indirectly affect the equal exercise of freedoms for certain members of society. This usually happens as a side-effect of overly broad anti-discrimination legislation or hate speech legislation, that could criminalise core elements of Christian teachings by considering them offensive. We will outline the most important freedoms, which are often the most affected in Western countries.

## FREEDOM OF CONSCIENCE & RELIGION

### Art 9 ECHR

*1. 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, and to manifest his religion or belief, in worship, teaching, practice and observance.*

Freedom of Conscience enables a believer to live according to the demand of his faith, which gives meaning to his own life. Limiting or denying an individual right to freedom of conscience, even based on the rights of another person, takes away its significance and in turn violates personal autonomy as a main requirement of human dignity.

## FREEDOM OF EXPRESSION

### Art 10 ECHR

*1. Everyone has the right to freedom of expression. This right shall include freedom to hold opinions and to receive and impart information and ideas without interference by public authority and regardless of frontiers.*

Freedom of Expression is one of the fundamental rights of a democratic society. This includes the right to publicly make declarations, even if they are unpopular or unpleasant. This right also applies to the public acknowledgement of one's faith and enables people to express the truth according to their faith, as long as these statements are not direct instigations to violence. The European Court of Human Rights (ECHR) even speaks of a "right to shock".<sup>10</sup> The recent emergence of "Hate-Speech" legislation is often contradictory to the fundamental right of Freedom of Expression.

## PARENTAL RIGHTS AND EDUCATION

### Art 14 ECHR

*...The right of parents to ensure the education and teaching of their children in conformity with their religious, philosophical and pedagogical convictions...*

### Art 8 ECHR

*1. Everyone has the right to respect his private and family life, his home and his correspondence.*

Christians are indirect targets of discrimination in religious education when they are denied the liberty to educate their children according to their philosophical and religious views. This takes place on one hand through direct or indirect interferences of public authorities with denominational schools, as well as religious education in non-denominational schools. On the other hand, interference with Parental Rights occurs when they are refused the possibility of opting out of classes that contravene their conscience, religious, or moral convictions.

## EMPLOYMENT AND CONTRACTUAL FREEDOM

A person's religious affiliation should not be a cause of discrimination in employment. Certain legislation, however, has direct or indirect effects on the employment of Christians, for example, the narrow interpretation of the right to conscientious objection might cause discrimination against Christians. Equally, an overly strict separation of work and personal faith might force Christians to have to hide their faith in the workplace.

### HATE CRIME/ HATE INCIDENT

The Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe's Office for Democratic Institutions and Human Rights (ODIHR) defines a "hate crime" as an incident that encompasses: **1) a criminal offence**, and **2) bias-motivation towards a particular group of people**. Therefore in our context, Hate Crimes are bias-motivated crimes against Christians, such as vandalism of Christian sites, including churches, cemeteries, schools, and other public symbols of Christianity, physical assault, among others.

## AREAS OF LIFE

Several areas of life of Christians can be affected by discrimination and intolerance. Among them, we identified four specific areas through our research, in which the daily life of Christians is most affected. These are **(1) Church:** Churches can be affected through interference with their Religious Freedom, their Freedom of Assembly and Association, among other issues; **(2) Education:** Parental rights can be breached by discriminatory laws; and there can be interference with Freedom of Expression and Academic Freedom that affects university students and academics, when wishing to engage in a debate on certain controversial topics, like bioethical issues and identity politics; **(3) Media:** It was also found that media outlets, either private or public, can directly or indirectly marginalise, or exclude Christians and their public opinions or even hurt religious sentiments; **(4) Politics/Government:** State authorities can discriminate against Christians directly or indirectly through discriminatory laws, unjust treatment, or marginalisation, in many cases because of the state's religious illiteracy.

## THREATENING DYNAMICS

During the research process of this report, we have identified two main dynamics that can be considered as threatening to the exercise of the various legitimate Freedoms of Christians in Europe, which encompasses the concepts discussed before: The strongest dynamic in Europe is "Secular Intolerance", a term that is used by scholars to describe intolerance based on a secularist idea of society<sup>11</sup>. A second dynamic, which has less visibility and impact, but is still important to explore is the rise of "Islamic oppression" in certain "hotspot areas" in European countries.

## SECULAR INTOLERANCE

We define "secular intolerance" as marginalisation or discriminatory exclusion of religion and belief from the public and private domain, in the name of secularism. While secularity refers to the neutrality of the state towards religion in any area of society,<sup>12</sup> Secularism is a political ideology that aims at a total separation of state and religion by relegating religion to the private sphere, banishing its influence from all other spheres of life.<sup>13</sup> In contrast to secularity, secularism is not neutral towards religion, but rather negative. A secular state can be achieved through a process of secularisation. Given that most Western liberal democracies were founded under the Christian tradition, secularisation is the process of removing the influence and power that the church had. While secularisation is not a negative as such, when it is ideologically driven, it can lead to discrimination of religious groups.

"Secular intolerance" can be understood as a dynamic coming from the ideological agenda of secularism to marginalise and banish religion from the public sphere. Some of the ideologies that infuse the secular intolerance that is at play in politics and universities today are specifically anti-Christian, like neo-Marxist undercurrents. Secular intolerance leads to the problems described under "Intolerance and Discrimination", like using non-discrimination legislation to marginalise or censor Christian teaching; excluding Christian symbols from the public square; using hate-speech



legislation to limit Freedom of Expression and disregarding Parental Rights when it comes to Christian teaching. This exclusion is based on “equality laws” or “hate speech” legislation that conflict with Freedom of Religion and Freedom of Expression, censoring conservative Christian beliefs. Lastly, radical secularism can lead to anti-Christian hate crimes, which are criminal offences against churches, Christian groups, and Christian individuals, because of their beliefs. Secularism has been criticised by scholars, for creating contradictory or exclusive dynamics.<sup>14</sup>

These dynamics also causes religious illiteracy, which we define as a lack of understanding about the basic tenets of a religious tradition, the ignorance about the diversity of these traditions and the ignorance of the profound role that religion plays in the social, cultural, and political life of individuals.<sup>15</sup>

### **ISLAMIC OPPRESSION**

“Islamic Oppression” is described as a specific radical and political dynamic within the Muslim community that perceives other religions or cultural forms as a threat to their own culture. Therefore, members of this group will oppose and if possible, oppress any other ideology, religion, culture, or politics that does not align with what they consider the “true and only” Islamic teachings. Islamic oppression can threaten Christians through intimidation or in rare cases violent attacks.

Islamic Oppression can mostly be seen in what we call “hotspot areas” of European cities and suburbs, where they impose unique legal and moral codes, which are often in contradiction to democratic principles and human rights. In many cases, they use coercion and threats against Christian converts on all levels of life (private, family, communal and political). Other threats are incitement to violence and discrimination against other religions, the Western secular state, and the use of violence against converts, churches, Christian groups, and/or Christian individuals. In addition, due to a demographic change in these growing areas, Christians become a cultural minority that is then marginalised and displaced from the area.



Observatory on Intolerance and Discrimination against Christians in Europe

## ENDNOTES

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# FRANCE

As most Western liberal democracies have adopted a secular state form during their history, the secular system in France might not stand out at first sight. But historically, France has a long tradition, based on the concept of *laïcité*, which originated after the French Revolution and was coined later with the 1905 law. *Laïcité* or French secularism can be understood as a reactionary movement, given that the French Left had developed a strong anticlerical and anti-Catholic sentiment in a time where the Monarchy had close links with the Catholic church.<sup>1</sup>

While *laïcité* is often translated into English as “secularism”, the term is more complex, and it does not possess a firm definition.<sup>2</sup> Both secularism and *laïcité* are based on the separation of the state and religion. In the case of *laïcité*, this separation has a stricter stance, but in both cases, the political order is solely based on the sovereignty of the people and state neutrality.

Although France has a long secular tradition, the majority of the French population is Christian and particularly Catholic. According to the World Christian Database (WCD) in 2020, 63.1% of people in France are Christians, of which 90.5% are Catholics.<sup>3</sup> Due to migration, Muslims make up the third-largest religious group in France with 9.4%, after Christians and “unaffiliated”. However, a Pew Research study predicts a strong decline of Christianity in France, while Muslims will most likely remain the third-largest religious group of the French population.<sup>4</sup>

Immigration has caused enormous political and societal shifts over the past few years. Besides regular migration, the crisis in the Middle East led to high numbers of applications of asylum seekers in the period 2015–2018. Most of these migrants and asylum seekers follow the Muslim religion. Sadly, the terrible Islamist terrorist attacks in France in the last years have created a high degree of animosity against Muslims or religion at large, which has led to legislation that is further restricting religion in the public sphere<sup>5</sup>, as well as social hostilities from different groups. This has intensified the societal and governmental tension between the strict form of French secularism and the Muslim community. A Pew Research Report shows that government restrictions against religious groups in France are high<sup>6</sup>. On the other side, there has also been a significant increase in social hostilities, which includes both secular radical groups and radical Islamists, who have committed anti-Semitic and anti-Christian attacks.<sup>7</sup>

## FREEDOM OF CONSCIENCE

While the French law recognises the right of medical professionals to conscientious objection, pharmacists, nurses, and public officials are not provided with that right.<sup>8</sup>

In 2018, some politicians applied pressure to remove the conscience clause, given that over 70% of doctors refuse to perform abortions on moral grounds,<sup>9</sup> but that bill was not passed<sup>10</sup>. Our data indicates that gynaecologists and medical students sometimes are pressured or feel obliged to perform abortion out of fear of negative consequences for their professional career, despite the legal protection of conscientious objection.

## FREEDOM OF EXPRESSION

The limitation of Freedom of Expression comes mostly from a feeling of social intimidation that causes self-censorship, rather than from public authorities. A case study in France, which implemented qualitative interviews, revealed that most Christians confirmed that they self-censor their opinions on certain issues, such as conservative Christian views on marriage, bioethical topics, family, and identity politics. Many people recognized not being aware that they self-censor. At the same time, interviewees also stated that a lack of knowledge on these issues or a desire to avoid conflict can contribute to feelings of insecurity. It was also found that Christians are often ashamed of their faith or have experienced rejection (including when applying for jobs) when their faith was known.

Censorship or intimidation in France happens mostly in the social sphere and rarely involves physical violence. But a high number of Christians self-censor to avoid defamation, exclusion, discrimination, mockery, and other similar consequences. One interviewee stated:

*"I remember that my son, one day, had put his catechism notebook in his school bag. At school, his classmates discovered it, and my son was mocked. And so, he never again put his catechism things in with his school things. He separated the two worlds."*

## EDUCATION AND PARENTAL RIGHTS

Incidents of discrimination and intolerance in the French education system have affected the freedom of Expression of teachers and students by preventing any public display of religious sentiments or manifestations in schools and universities, as well as the Parental Rights of Christian parents. Matthieu Faucher, a teacher, was punished in 2017 after being anonymously denounced for using Bible passages during his teaching on history and culture. Despite the Court considering the sanction disproportionate, the National Education institution challenged the decision, until in 2020 the administrative court decided in favour of Faucher.<sup>11</sup>

This reflects the steady transformation of French culture into a Post-Christian society, where symbols, such as crosses have already been banned since 2004<sup>12</sup> (the first act banning religious symbols in Europe), and other Christian traditions have been cancelled, like the visit of Saint Nicolas to a public school.<sup>13</sup> In 2020, the new law aimed to fight "Islamist separatism", is aiming at limiting home-schooling,



which would also affect the Parental Rights of Christians. Bullying has also affected Christian children at schools. A 12-year-old boy was brutally attacked at school in Paris by five other 11-year-old pupils for not removing his necklace with a Cross.<sup>14</sup>

## REPRESENTATION OF CHRISTIANS ON THE MEDIA

We found that there are mainly two forms in which the media discriminates against Christians in France. Firstly, Christians are misrepresented or even stigmatised by French media, this is especially the case when it comes to morally controversial topics. Secondly, Christians are either marginalised or simply ignored.

The latter form of discrimination by the media especially manifests itself in the overall silence regarding the high numbers of crimes committed against Christians, even though almost three churches or Christian buildings are being vandalised every day, according to police statistics in 2019. Nicolas Dupont-Aignan, a Member of Parliament and President of *Debout la France* commented in an interview: „if there is an anti-Christian attack, the press is silent.”<sup>15</sup> Even after a terrorist attack inside and around the Notre Dame Basilica in Nice, many media outlets failed to mention that the killing of three Catholics – one parishioner, and two women – happened inside the church, or that it was directed against Christians.<sup>16</sup> The case was mostly framed as a terrorist attack that happened in Nice.

The most frequently mentioned form of discrimination is the prevalent stigmatisation and negative stereotyping of Christians by using hurtful or disrespectful expressions in national broadcast media. This conclusion was drawn following qualitative interviews and exemplary cases indicating that Christians have frequently been referred to as “ultra-conservative” and “radical”, usually highlighting controversial topics.<sup>17</sup> There are many examples, such as the illustration of a poll in favour of banning street prayers with a photo showing a Christian gathering<sup>18</sup>. TV or radio shows<sup>19</sup> and artists<sup>20</sup> have mocked Christianity and Christian symbols publicly, fomenting this negative trend. An activist organisation, *Sleeping Giants*, also pressured brands to withdraw their advertisements from media outlets they consider too conservative, usually holding Christian values (e.g., *CNEWS*, *Boulevard Voltaire*).<sup>21</sup>

The stigmatisation of Christians was also seen in the context of the Covid-19 Pandemic, as the “Open Doors” Church in Mulhouse was targeted by the news for holding an event before the lockdown started, blaming them for the spread of the virus.<sup>22</sup> The biased media coverage led to the general stigmatisation of evangelicals.<sup>23 24</sup>

Thierry Le Gall, a member of the evangelical Council in France, mentioned that violent and instigating hateful comments like “*Christians should be erased*” or “*Christians should leave the country*” circulated on social media. Some pastors even received phone calls and letters with threats.

## RELIGIOUS FREEDOM AND COVID-19

During the pandemic, the French Government significantly infringed the Religious Freedom of believers by installing strict restrictions on religious ceremonies and other religious activities, such as weddings and funerals. Other practices like baptisms, confirmations, and ordinations were not allowed. The churches could remain open only for private prayer.<sup>25</sup> During this time, i.e. Police burst into a church, where the priest was broadcasting a mass online and stopped it.<sup>26</sup>

Although the churches cooperated and accepted the primary decisions, the restrictions started to appear arbitrary and disproportionate, as restaurants and shops were allowed to reopen, while public church services were not.<sup>27</sup> The complete and prolonged ban on public worship was finally challenged by the Catholic Bishop's Conference, and the Council of State invalidated the ban. France was among one of the few European countries in which a public worship ban had to be lifted via a court ruling. Later, in November 2020, health measures were reinstalled, as well as the suspension of public worship including outdoor worship and prayer. This ban was also challenged by several Christian groups until the Council of State invalidated the ban again<sup>28</sup>. In both cases, the ban that infringed Religious Freedom was introduced by the Government, while it was defended by the Courts, and only after Christian groups raised their voices against it.

## THE SITUATION OF CHRISTIAN CONVERTS

Our preliminary research identified that there are two areas in which Christian converts face intolerance and discrimination. Firstly, there is strong pressure, including violent incidents against Christian converts, mainly by family members and their community, and secondly, they receive a lack of support from the government. This topic still requires more insight, but there are exemplary cases of Christian converts facing challenges from the state for receiving asylum, due to the religious illiteracy of authorities or even an anti-Christian bias of the authorities. Alexandre del Valle<sup>29</sup> in an article criticised that French authorities do not believe Christian converts would face threats, persecution, or even death in their countries of origin with Muslim-majority if deported. He analyses the case of the couple Ata Fathimharloei and Somayeh Hajifoghaha to denounce the bias of the authorities and the indifference of the media towards persecuted Christians.

**Ata Fathimharloei and Somayeh Hajifoghaha**<sup>30</sup> are an Irani couple. They and their two children converted to Christianity from Islam and had to flee Iran, as the conversion of the couple would be punishable with death according to Sharia Law.<sup>31</sup> They sought asylum in France, which refused to grant asylum to the family under the argument that they would not be in danger in their country of origin and that the authenticity of their request was unclear. The family was threatened with deportation back to Iran. There have been no further updates.



Regarding the discrimination and violence towards converts faced by their families and community, the organisation ECLJ published a report in March 2021, which is based on fourteen open interviews with converts as well as six interviews with Christian leaders of different denominations<sup>32</sup>. According to their data, around 300 people convert to Catholicism from Islam in France every year. The report finds that violence happens inside the family, in the form of rejection, threats, verbal aggression, physical violence, etc, as well as rejection, isolation, and physical assault from other members of their community.<sup>33</sup> This happens, according to witnesses, mostly in hotspot areas. The report of the ECLJ also reported interviews with Christian leaders that recognized that they would not dare to go into those areas out of fear of being physically attacked and harassed.

There are some examples of testimonies from our research. One convert from Islam to Christianity said:

*"I left Islam out of conviction and therefore I did not suffer from physical persecution, but mental and psychological pressure...It is often rather in mental confinement. One is ostracized, put aside, excluded. There is mental and psychological pressure."*

Another convert recounted: *"In the middle of the Summer, I had a cross, and, on the subway, I was verbally assaulted by a Muslim man who called me names because he saw that I (wear a) cross around my neck. In the working-class districts where there is a strong Muslim community, you do not go out with your cross"*.

#### HOTSPOTS OF ISLAMIC OPPRESSION

According to the General Directorate for Internal Security (DGSI), there are 150 neighbourhoods under the influence of radical Islam in France.<sup>34</sup> Among them are the suburbs of Paris, Lyon, and Marseille. Some polls indicate that the situation is becoming "alarming" and taking "worrying proportions". Some micro-territories are considered "salafised". In these areas, being a Christian or a Christian convert can lead to intimidation, discrimination, or violence.

A devastating example was the case of a 17-year-old girl, who was a victim of abuse by her Muslim family from Bosnia for announcing her intention to marry her 20-year-old Christian boyfriend. The parents told her daughter: "We are Muslims, you are not going to marry a Christian". Her head was then shaved, and she was brutally punched by her family members and had to be hospitalized. She was diagnosed with a broken rib, several haematomas, and trauma to the ear. Her family members were prosecuted and placed under judicial supervision with a prohibition to contact her<sup>35</sup> (17 August 2020).

Intimidation has happened against priests and has happened in churches. In December 2020, seven priests of African descent received personal letters to their home address with the words "Allah Akbar". Two young men disrupted a Sunday evening Catholic mass in Nancy in October 2019 by shouting "Allah Akbar".<sup>36</sup> Some young men draped their North African flags on the roof of Saint-Jean-Baptiste church in Albi. The priest of the church expressed his concern at such an act of "disrespect for a place of worship and Christians", as well as a "provocation." Other similar attacks have been stopped by the police and by citizens, as was the case of a man who stopped a man

shouting “Allahu Akbar” and was heading towards a church with a loaded machine gun.<sup>37</sup>



*St. Paul Church in Corbeil-Essonnes, July 2020*

### ANTI-CHRISTIAN HATE CRIMES


Government statistics in France provide a clear picture of the rising trend of anti-Christian hate crimes<sup>38</sup>, which mostly encompass vandalism against churches and Christian buildings but also physical assault against priests<sup>39</sup> and parishioners. There is also a big variation in the form of vandalism, and it ranges from severe vandalism<sup>40</sup> to desecration<sup>41</sup> and arson attacks against churches, which have become a prominent trend, among others.

Although the French government owns and is responsible for the protection of all churches that were built before the 1905 law came into effect, it has not offered protection of the churches or public Christian symbols. The high number of incidents prompted French politicians, like Valerie Boyer<sup>42</sup> and Marie-France Lorho<sup>43</sup>, to submit inquiries to the Ministry of the Interior requesting more specific data and urging the Government to take measures to protect Christians, given the steady rise of incidents since 2008 (which was when the French Government started collecting this data). The recurrent vandalism has led to the closures of many churches and feelings of intimidation.<sup>44</sup>

In 2019, French police documented 1.052 incidents with anti-Christian bias (on average almost 3 incidents per day), published by the Ministry of the Interior at the beginning of 2020.<sup>45</sup> But these figures do not include incidents

[www.intoleranceagainstchristians.com](http://www.intoleranceagainstchristians.com)





where the perpetrators have not been apprehended. Both in 2019 and 2020 there were tragic attacks, resulting in the death of three Christians<sup>46</sup>, while many others have been injured<sup>47</sup>. Violent incidents with an anti-Christian bias are perpetrated by a variety of groups. Some of the groups behind the crimes have been identified as Satanists, Anarchists, and radical left groups, such as radical Feminists and LGBTQ+ groups, or Islamists<sup>48</sup>, but many remain unknown.

The cases of vandalism usually stigmatize or insult Christians, using anti-Christian slogans<sup>49</sup> or even incite to more violence. In the aftermath of the Nantes fire, one "Anarchist" celebrated the damage on Twitter with the familiar phrase: *'The only church that illuminates is the one that burns'*. The lack of official government response to the vast amount of hate crimes against Christians also reveals a potential political bias against Christians or at least a certain level of governmental religious illiteracy and ignorance.

## CONCLUSION

The society in France seems to become increasingly divided between Christian, secular and Muslim society. The secularism of the Government has led to strong pressure on Christians, especially when it comes to moral issues in which the secular society and Christianity have different views, such as marriage, family, education, bioethics, and identity politics. These topics bring up conflicts affecting Freedom of expression, Freedom of Conscience and Parental Rights of Christians, mainly through fear of social exclusion and discrimination. The media, on the other side, has not helped to create better dialogue, instead, it perpetuates certain stereotypes of Christianity and has led to further division.

In the context of Covid-19 and responding to the latest terrorist attacks, the government took measures that indirectly restricted Religious Freedom. The history of French secularism and the tension with the Islamic incidents in France might be a reason for the overall negative connotation of religion in the country. There is a general lack of respect for Christianity. At the same time, the high number of severe attacks on Churches, Christian Buildings and Symbols and on citizens, is starting to be noticed by the Government, which will hopefully increase their attention on this issue. Many Christians have also reported feeling threatened by Islamic Oppression, mainly in certain hotspots.

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# GERMANY

Germany has a particular geographical separation of cultural aspects, given the coexistence of two completely different states after WWII from 1949 to 1990. The Federal Republic of Germany was a democratic social federal state that protected Religious Freedom and promulgated the “Grundgesetz”, while the German Democratic Republic, occupied by the Soviet Union, applied an anti-religious policy under its communist ideology.<sup>1</sup> After the Reunification in 1990, only 30% of the people living under the socialist regime were Christians, which gave way to rapid secularisation. Therefore, while East Germany appears to be one of the most secularised regions in Europe, West Germany is still less secular.<sup>2</sup> Overall, the figures of non-believers have increased since the 1990s, and Christians have decreased. For 2020, The WCD estimated that Christians in Germany make up 65.9% of the population, showing a strong decline, as Christians made up 96% of the population until the first half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century.

The secularisation process in Germany comes through the dominant liberal ideology in academia and politics and the pluralisation of religion. A strong reason for the pluralisation of religion was the spread of Islam, given that Muslim groups have a long history of immigration: following WWII, during the economic crisis (2008-2012) and, more recently after the Syrian War (2012-2017). In response to this religious pluralisation and the changing demographic development, the Federal Constitutional Court suggested the state must follow “constructive neutrality” and neutrality-policies, and a Muslim-oriented framework.

During this process of secularisation, the rights of Christians regarding Freedom of Speech and Parental Rights have diminished in certain areas, such as in the area of education and the workplace. Germany also presents a high degree of violence that targets religious symbols and buildings. State authorities have been criticised for their treatment of converts from Islam to Christianity due to widespread religious illiteracy.

## FREEDOM OF EXPRESSION

In September 2020, the journalist and writer Birgit Kelle was censored on Spotify, as one podcast on “Indubio” was deleted, where she was invited to talk about her critical book about gender theory.<sup>3</sup> Spotify stated that the deletion was for “content policy violations”. Birgit Kelle accused the streaming service of censorship, also under the name of “cancel culture”, and the owners of the podcast filed a complaint to Spotify for the deletion. As of today, the streaming service has not responded to the complaint.<sup>4</sup>

Freedom of Expression has been limited in Germany when it comes to discussions about gender, marriage, bioethics, and sexuality. Christians, such as the Korean restaurant owner Park Young-Ai, faced criminal investigations in September 2020. The 71-year-old had displayed Bible verses in her restaurant critical towards homosexual acts. She was subjected to a house search and to a hearing, where she explained that she loved homosexuals, but felt compelled to share her belief about homosexuality.<sup>5</sup> This case highlights the increasing criminalisation of speech and the disproportionate way in which these cases are investigated.

A study conducted by the Allensbach Institute for Public Opinion in 2019 confirmed this trend, showing that two-thirds of the respondents consider one has to be careful when talking about certain topics, as there are acceptable opinions and others that are not.<sup>6</sup> The study also showed that, depending on the topic, people have to be more careful about how they express themselves, like in the case of immigration, homosexuality, and patriotism.

## EDUCATION AND PARENTAL RIGHTS

From the findings of our research it can be said that committed Christian students face disadvantages in their education because of their faith, as the climate in some universities has become increasingly anti-religious, and in some cases particularly anti-Christian. The Student Mission in Germany (SMD) has collected and documented dozens of cases of discrimination against Christian student groups, such as Campus for Christ, SMD, or the Protestant Student Community (ESG), among others, including universities across the whole country. Some forms of discrimination are that the groups are denied use of campus facilities and renting rooms, they are prohibited to share flyers, and they do not receive accreditation by student councils. Some students have also received threats.

*In 2019, a representative of SMD explained that between 2016 and 2019 more than 30 of the 80 SMD groups in Germany experienced difficulties using university facilities. The reason for this treatment is that **“religion has no place on campus”**.*

Also, because of their views on moral issues and controversial social topics, they are accused of “homophobia” or “anti-feminism” and are pushed out of the university using the argument of “ideological neutrality” of the university.<sup>7</sup>

A study conducted by Matthias Revers and Richard Traunmüller at the Goethe University Frankfurt found out that:

*“Depending on the topic of discussion, between one-third and half of the students would not allow a controversial speaker on campus*



*and even higher numbers think that such individuals should not be allowed to teach at the university. Roughly one-third of students are also in favour of banning controversial books from their university library. Furthermore, we find evidence for conformity pressures on campus. One-quarter of all students report personal attacks for voicing an unpopular opinion and one-third feel reluctant to openly give their view on controversial political topics in class discussions.”<sup>8</sup>*

One example took place at the University of Göttingen, where a Christian event, “Reformatio 21” was blocked by a group called “Alternative Linke Liste Göttingen. A gynaecologist from the organization “Doctors for Life”, Michael Kiworr, was supposed to speak about abortion at the event, but the university declined the use of a room.<sup>9</sup> This has been criticised by “The Professors Forum”, an association of over 800 lecturers in Germany, who consider that the debate culture at German universities is narrowing. **“There are frequent incidents in which aggressively appearing political groups sabotage the right to freedom of expression”**,<sup>10</sup> wrote Hans-Joachim Hahn, the head of the association, in a press release.

*“There are frequent incidents in which aggressively appearing political groups sabotage the right to freedom of expression”,*

## THE SITUATION OF CHRISTIAN CONVERTS

There are two issues of discrimination towards Christian converts in Germany, one is the religious illiteracy and bias among state authorities who decide on potential asylum status and the second one is the discrimination converts face from their Muslim community and family.

State authorities are accused of rejecting asylum requests of Christian converts because of the state authority’s religious illiteracy or a specific anti-Christian bias they have. This was confirmed by a study performed by Open Doors, an organisation working for persecuted Christians worldwide. They interviewed 133 churches in Germany and documented the cases of 5.207 Christian converts from different nationalities who applied for asylum in Germany. The study found strong irregularities, like some nationalities being more rejected than others or an unexplainable difference between the acceptance rate between North, South, East and West of Germany. Open Doors documented that, even if the converts had a confirmation of their Christian faith or a baptism certificate, 2.045 were rejected by the Federal Office for Migration and Refugees (BAMF), 1400 were rejected by the administrative office, and 99 were deported back to countries where they would face persecution or death.<sup>11</sup> A clear indication of the anti-Christian bias is the finding that baptism certificates or confirmation from a pastor even lowered the chances by 11.4% for a positive asylum decision.<sup>12</sup>

One illustrative example is the case of an Iranian Christian woman known as “Mahsa”, who fled Iran and immigrated to Germany in 2015 after the police attempted to arrest her for her conversion to Christianity (which under

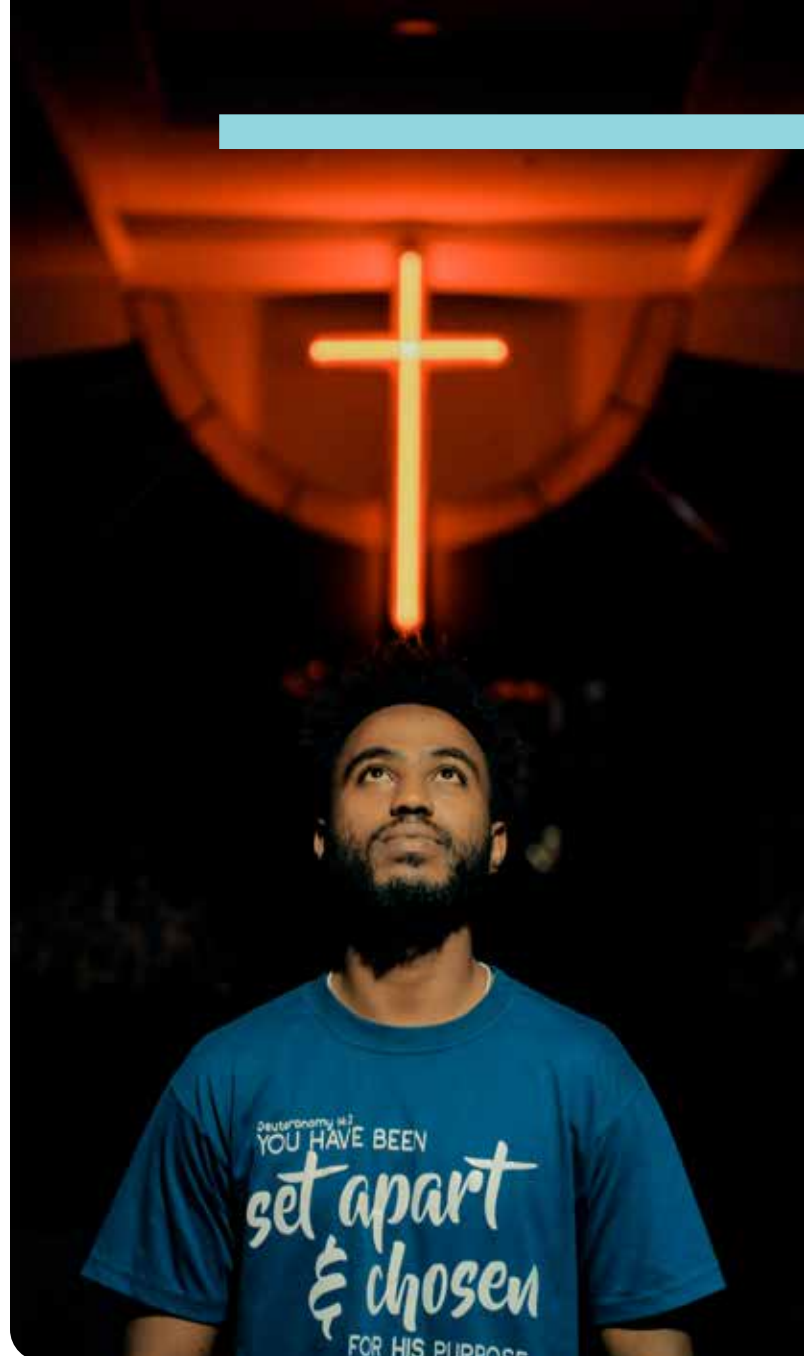
Sharia law is considered blasphemy and treason, punishable with death). She feared for her life if returned to Iran. “Masha” was living in Hesse, but a decision in 2019 by the Federal Office for Migration and Refugees (BAMF) denied her asylum, causing her severe distress and anxiety<sup>13</sup>. After a petition was signed by 7.860 people, asking the authorities to grant her asylum, which was also promoted by her Christian community, “Mahsa” was given a refugee status and was able to stay in Germany.<sup>14</sup> Similar to Mahsa, the Observatory has documented other cases (Ex. Naser R<sup>15</sup>), but not all of them had a positive ending.

Asylum for Muslim refugees who converted to Christianity has diminished significantly in the last years, according to Open Doors. The cases vary depending on the federal state and court. In the province of Bavaria, parishes have increasing problems with state institutions regarding converted Christians, as the Administrative Court denies that their conversion is genuine and rejects their asylum application. These Christians could face severe sentences, including the death sentence in their country of origin for converting to Christianity if deported.<sup>16</sup> After a particular case was reviewed, the Federal Constitutional Court on the 22nd of May 2020, published a press release (Nr. 39/2020), confirming that there should not be a formal or knowledge-based “faith test” by the courts in the case of asylum applications by converts. Until now, Germany has had no coherent assessment process for converts.

The second biggest threat that Christian converts face is violent attacks from fundamentalist Islamists against them. Converts are monitored by the Islamic fundamentalist communities living in certain hotspot areas. Living in these areas puts them at risk, so many would rather hide their faith in public or on social media. They fear that their families at home, in the country of origin, or even in Germany might have to suffer for their conversion.

An External expert who was interviewed explained that:

*“The Pakistani friend uses social media (Instagram, Facebook, and WhatsApp), so pro-Christian comments or profile pictures are immediately registered. Even statements that relativize Islam are registered by relatives and considered a precursor to apostasy. Only continuous affirmation of pro-Islamic slogans ensures integrity for the Pakistani and his family. For example, the friend once criticized an Islamic crime in France and called it “un-Islamic.” In response, he received a message from his relatives saying, “we are watching you”.*”



## ANTI-CHRISTIAN HATE CRIMES

The number of anti-Christian hate crimes in Germany is surprisingly high but not as severe as in other countries in this report. The observed cases of violence in Germany are mainly perpetrated against Protestant and Catholic churches and Christian buildings. These include vandalism, looting, graffiti, and damage of property with a high and slightly increasing frequency in the last years. There have also been more severe cases that show a clear bias like physical assaults on priests,<sup>17</sup> arson attacks<sup>18</sup> and decapitated statues.<sup>19</sup> OIDAC has documented 255 violent attacks against Christians or Christian sites between 2019 and 2020, and there is an unpublished list of small thefts with a high number of incidents in the archive, which hasn't been published due to the uncertainty of whether an anti-Christian bias exists. Still, it provides a clear sign, that churches have become an easy target for robbery and vandalism, which may be due to the decreasing value of religion in current culture.

Unknown pro-choice activists vandalized the St. Pantaleon Church in Cologne with threats after the Church announced a screening of the film "Unplanned", which tells the life story of a pro-choice activist who decided to become pro-life. This happened on the same night when the screening was planned, but which was canceled due to Covid-19. One graffiti said: «Abortion opponents, we will get you all».<sup>20</sup>

It is crucial to put the incidents in the context of the church communities' perceptions. The attacks have prompted church leaders to decide whether they should keep the doors open outside times of worship to avoid damage.<sup>21</sup> The partial closure of churches interferes with the Freedom of Religion for many Christians, especially Catholics, as praying and visiting the church outside worship hours is an essential part of their expression of faith and worship. Many times, the motives behind these acts of vandalism are unknown, but there is a strong secularist movement, also supported by some political groups, that has claimed several of the attacks, such as extreme feminist<sup>22</sup> and Antifa groups, and sometimes also Islamist groups.<sup>23</sup>



The wall of the St. Pantaleon church in Cologne, October 2020



## CONCLUSION

Germany faces problems of discrimination and intolerance against Christians from different sources, including a high amount of vandalism, which is affecting more and more Christians as churches remain closed to avoid incidents. While the government restrictions are not very high, in some areas of Germany social hostility is severe, and the religious illiteracy of the authorities allows this issue to continue, this is confirmed by a recent Pew Research study on Government restrictions and social hostility.<sup>24</sup> Germany must react more effectively to protect Christians from attacks initiated by radical groups. Governmental discrimination occurs mainly through interference with Freedom of Speech, and Parental Rights regarding the education of their children.

At the same time, religious illiteracy of authorities has led to the unjust treatment of Christian converts, who face persecution and severe violence. According to our experts, there are problems of social segregation, Islamic extremism, and, therefore, harassment of Christians or other religious minorities in hotspot areas. Given that social hostilities are more severe than government restrictions, it is important to raise awareness, so that the Government reacts effectively.

*"Respect for religious diversity cannot lead to the paradoxical consequence of ousting the religious element from public discourse".<sup>25</sup>*

*- Cardinal Jean-Claude Hollerich  
to KNA, 01.12.2021*

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# SPAIN

The current political situation in Spain traces back to a period of social and political reforms, culminating with the end of the Franco dictatorship and the proclamation of the 1978 Constitution.<sup>1</sup> During the last decade, the socio-political landscape in Spain changed rapidly. After the 2004 Atocha terrorist attack<sup>2</sup>, the new President Zapatero put an end to a period of mainly conservative political rule. The new socialist Government advanced a progressive liberal agenda by passing extensive legislation in areas that are controversial from the perspective of Christian morals and ethics.

Between 2004 and 2011, religious intolerance in Spain increased alarmingly. Spain's secularism is not a new phenomenon, it reassembles the sentiments that spiked in the years before the Spanish Civil War in the 1930s, motivated to a large extent, by its anti-Catholic postures. Pope Benedict XVI<sup>3</sup> spoke of these anti-Catholic sentiments in the context of the intention to close religious places, such as the Basilica of the Holy Cross in the Valley of the Fallen.<sup>4</sup> The Franco regime ruled over four decades and favoured Catholics while marginalizing dissident voices. Spanish secularism has, therefore, a reactionary manner, particularly against Catholics, based on an erroneous assumption that perceives Catholicism as a symbol of the Regime.<sup>5</sup>

Spain remains a mainly Catholic country, but no religious denomination in Spain has official status. The WCD documented in 2020 that 85.8% of the Spanish population was Christian. Spain's laicism and secularism are highly belligerent, to a degree that they become, in many instances, radicalised against religious groups. The attacks targeting Christians in Spain have been steadily increasing and becoming more violent, according to the Spanish Observatory for Religious Freedom and Conscience (OLRC).<sup>6</sup>

The secularism in Spain also comes from the governmental side. According to Pew's Global Restrictions on Religion Study<sup>7</sup>, Spain scored 2 out of 10 in the Government Restriction Index in 2007, and by December of 2016, it increased to 3.0. As for the Social Hostility Index, Spain scored 1.6 in 2007, and 4.0 in 2016.

The anti-Catholic manifestations of Spanish secularism adopt various forms. Some examples are the legislative measures that discriminate against the Catholic Church, favouring other faiths in the fields of education, religious celebrations, treaties, laws, etc. There are also specific calls to protest, and even to use violence against churches and members of the clergy and, more alarming is the implementation of a violent discourse.

## FREEDOM OF EXPRESSION

According to our research, Christians can face social and legal harassment for expressing Christian positions openly in the private and public spheres. In some cases, Christian leaders of civil society organizations have faced criminal lawsuits for "hate speech" and in other cases, their social media accounts have been suspended on grounds of "intolerance" or they have been subjected to smear campaigns. Expressions of Christian faith and views on life, marriage and sexuality from the Biblical perspective are being discriminated against and accused of being "extreme." Christian opinions are often considered offensive towards other groups, which often leads to self-censorship.

*One expert said: The free expression of Christian ideas on controversial issues (abortion, euthanasia, sexuality, family, etc.) is giving rise to strong responses, sometimes highly aggressive, both in the social networks and in the media of the political left. In some cases, they are even the basis for criminal lawsuits for "hate speech".*

Although the cases are not publicly known, our data indicates that there have been cases of professors who have been refused a position because of their Christian views on certain subjects and doctors who have not been given certain positions for refusing to perform specific operations due to their Christian faith. In Catalonia, religious teachers were prevented from teaching the Catholic faith. And there was a case of an Evangelical police officer, Salvador Martí, who was prevented from giving talks on road safety and child abuse prevention in schools after criticising the content of LGBTQ+ laws.<sup>8</sup>

## EDUCATION AND PARENTAL RIGHTS

Christian pupils and students, as well as Christian academics, have faced discrimination and intolerance. The government introduced new legislation at the end of 2020 to remodel the educational system, which intensified the secularisation process by reducing religious teaching and implementing more restrictions on state funding for private schools, of which 58% are Catholic.<sup>9</sup> The organization Europa Laica,<sup>10</sup> teacher unions and other groups in the field of education have been demanding a complete "secularity of education," and consider it to be necessary "to remove religion from education immediately." This will specifically hinder Parental Rights, recognized in Article 27.3 of the Spanish Constitution, in terms of choosing the education for their children following their religious or moral beliefs.

In reaction, another policy was proposed by a conservative party, to affirm parental authority, called the "parental pin" in the schools of Murcia.<sup>11</sup> The "Parental Pin" would oblige schools to seek the permission of parents for their children to participate in extra-curricular activities, including lessons and workshops on LGBTQ+ topics.<sup>12</sup> The proposal was opposed by the socialist government (PSOE), who see the secularisation of education in Spain as a key area. Parents and their children who have demanded the application

[www.intoleranceagainstchristians.com](http://www.intoleranceagainstchristians.com)



of the “Parental Pin” have been harassed by students and teachers, as reportedly happened in the French school Julio Verne in Tenerife.<sup>13</sup>

In Almería, two students were forced to simulate fellatio in front of their classmates in a workshop on pornography in the school Cura Valera de H. Overa. The Parents’ Association of the school reported that some children came home “crying and humiliated”. This workshop was run in the framework of the “State Plan against Gender Violence”.<sup>14</sup>

Christian academics that presented a research paper on climate change were discriminated against by a state-led agency.<sup>15</sup> The OLRC, presented a research project in October 2019, to the National Agency for Evaluation and Prospective Studies (ANEP) under the Ministry of Science and Innovation on a Climate Change topic. The authors were from the University of Alcalá, the University of Catalonia and researchers of three different universities, from which two have a Christian background. In June 2020 they received a statement that the experience of the authors of the research is doubted, and they are afraid of a biased study, given the religious weight of the institutions involved. The OLRC took the case to the Ministry, but it was rejected.

### COVID-19 AND RELIGIOUS FREEDOM

The Spanish Government never banned public religious celebrations at a national level and the decisions could be made by the Diocese, which followed the mandatory hygiene regulations and reduced the capacity of people up to 50% for gatherings. Although the churches acted within the law according to the Royal Decree issued by the government on 14 March 2020, executive authorities evacuated and interrupted religious services several times.<sup>16</sup> Article 11 of the Decree states that attendance ‘at places of worship and civil and religious ceremonies, including funerals, is conditional on the adoption of organisational measures consisting of avoiding crowds of people, depending on the size and characteristics of the places, in such a way as to ensure that those attending can respect the distance between them of at least one metre’<sup>17</sup>.

OIDAC documented several cases, of which many took place in April 2020, where the police evacuated the churches although they were acting according to the law. Two times the police interrupted and evacuated a church service in La Laguna district of Cádiz<sup>18</sup> and on 11. April, the police demanded the evacuation of the Cathedral of Granada during a Good Friday



service.<sup>19</sup> The fourth case happened on April 19th in Sabadell, where there were only two people present during the adoration, which was allowed under the Covid-19 regulations.<sup>20</sup> Other cases include the prohibition of a Catholic Procession.<sup>21</sup> The president of the OLRC, Maria García, sent a letter to the Minister of the Interior, Fernando Grande-Marlaska<sup>22</sup>, concerning the suspension of church services and asked for an explanation. She accused the Spanish government of violating the right to Religious Freedom and wrote to the leader of the Popular Party, Pablo Casado, requesting his party to question the government over this matter.

According to legal and human rights experts, the use of the emergency legislation of the "state of alarm" was incompatible with both the requirements of the Spanish Constitution and with international human rights standards.<sup>23</sup> Apart from the government restrictions, there were also cases of social hostility due to the stigmatization of Christians accused of spreading the Virus.<sup>24</sup>

### REPRESENTATION OF CHRISTIANS IN MEDIA

Mass media frequently offended, mocked, insulted, threatened, or disproportionately criticized Christians and the church. For example, in the newspaper "El Pais" an article was published before Christmas, which intended to refute some Christian beliefs, questioning the feast of Christmas.<sup>25</sup> According to the yearly national report by Aid to a Church in Need, hostility in the media in Spain increases around important Christian festivities like Christmas or Easter. A clear example was the case of a satire of the Nativity<sup>26</sup> scene on a national television channel, which happened in December 2020. This indicates a biased attitude of the media against the church and Christians. The incidents in mass media outlets, like television and news broadcasts, have shown constant hostility towards Christians and Catholicism in particular, through comments or mockery.

For example, during the pandemic, the defamation of evangelical groups by the media, that framed them as a source of Covid-19 infections, led to harassment of Christians in the workplace and schools<sup>27</sup>. Additionally, we have seen blasphemous cartoons<sup>28</sup> or the indifference of social media platforms to trends that are clear incitements to violence, such as the Hashtag "Burn the Clergy" that became popular on Twitter in November 2020 and was not taken down until many people reported it.<sup>29</sup> The organisation Abogados Cristianos (Christian Lawyers) in Spain has been denouncing cases of blasphemous artwork and presentations, as well as many other issues that affect Christians.





## REMOVAL OF RELIGIOUS SYMBOLS

As discussed in the introduction, many Spaniards consider Catholic symbols also as symbols of the Franco regime. In 2007 a “Historical Memory Law” was passed, originally to support victims of the Franco Regime, but in recent years it has been used under the pretext of so-called “democratic memory” by secularist groups to push for the removal of crosses and other Christian religious symbols from the public space<sup>30</sup>. At least 18 cross monuments in public spaces have already been removed or are required to be removed, even if they do not have any plaque referring to the dictatorship and have now only a religious meaning.<sup>31</sup>

In February 2020, also under the “Historical Memory Law”, the municipality intended to start a “re-signification” of the Valley of the Fallen, turning it into a city cemetery<sup>32</sup>. For this, they had to expel an Order of Benedictine Monks, who had run the Valley since 1957<sup>33</sup>. In September the proposal was passed. The Basilica and the cross were allowed to remain in the Valley, but the Benedictine Monks were expelled.<sup>34</sup>

Another cross in Ribalta was planned to be removed in 2017. Politician Begoña Carrasco criticized the ideological sectarianism under which historical streets and symbols are being removed.<sup>35</sup> Also, Abogados Cristianos has denounced several removals of crosses by local municipalities across Spain under this law.<sup>36</sup> This removal of crosses has to taken place in Orense, Alicante, Andalusia, Tortosa, Gijón, Tárrega, Jaén, Valencia, Cáceres,<sup>37</sup> among others.

Apart from the removal of crosses by the Government, there is a general hostility towards religious symbols, leading to the vandalism of nativity scenes and crosses in the public square. Smaller religious symbols, like crosses in hospitals and public schools, have been removed after the Government passed a new Law of Religious Freedom and Conscience, where they proclaim a total laïcism of the State.<sup>38</sup>

## THE SITUATION OF CHRISTIAN CONVERTS

Christian converts in Spain face the same issues as in other countries: hostility from members of their Muslim community and the indifference of state authorities towards this hostility. There are a few small Muslim areas in Spain where Islamic oppression is a concern. For example, the cities of Ceuta and Melilla, Catalonia, and Madrid. According to our internal research, Christian converts living in oppressive Muslim communities face hostility, ostracization, monitoring, rejection and even violence from their family and the local community. Numbers are not publicly known, but many experts from our internal research confirm the risks of ostracization and psychological or physical abuse that Christian converts face.

By seeking asylum in Spain, converts have also faced rejection, regardless of the danger of persecution and even death in their home countries. A 50-year-old Iranian man has dealt with hostility for 16 years since he

converted to Christianity from Islam.<sup>39</sup> He fled from Iran, where he was threatened with death by his family, and ended up in Barcelona, where he received help from an Evangelical church. His asylum application has been rejected three times, and now he lives in an unregulated situation since 2018. Hostility and violence towards his Christian faith have also been continued by other Iranians in Barcelona. He told his story in an interview published in November 2020, where he made the following statements:

*"When I arrived here, I found a job in an Iranian shop that sold Persian carpets. The owner had been Iran's ambassador to Italy. When he found out that I had converted to Christianity he threatened to kill me. (...) In 2011, I started working in an Iranian restaurant, but they did not accept me because they knew I was a Christian. They constantly bullied me, and in the end, I was fired."*

*"When I had my first interview with the Spanish government in 2005, they assigned me an interpreter who told other Iranians that I had converted to Christianity. I don't know why he did that. He also threatened to report me to the embassy."*<sup>40</sup>

### ANTI-CHRISTIAN HATE CRIMES

According to the OLRC, violent incidents in Spain have been on the rise for some years. They recorded 175 incidents directed against religious freedom in 2019, from which 140 (80%) targeted Catholics.<sup>41</sup> The report also compared the numbers to the year before and confirmed that there was a constant increase between 2014, 2018, and 2019. The report also highlighted certain regions, where incidents were higher, like Andalusia, followed by Madrid and Catalonia. The Ministry of Interior documents hate crimes in Spain, but it does not specifically count hate crimes against Christians. It counts attacks based on religion and ideology in general without disaggregating the data. According to the Ministry of Interior, there were 66 hate crimes based on religion in 2019,<sup>42</sup> while OIDAC recorded 30 incidents against Christians that year. The numbers of the Ministry of Interior decreased for 2020,<sup>43</sup> but OIDAC documented 51 violent incidents against Christians in the same year.

Forms of violence range from severe physical assault against priests who have been attacked and even stabbed<sup>44</sup>, arson attacks to churches or religious symbols<sup>45</sup>, vandalism, theft<sup>46</sup>, desecration like smearing faeces on church walls<sup>47</sup>, and aggressive disruption of mass with threats and shouts such as **"I'm going to burn you all"**<sup>48</sup>.





But the issue of violence is not only a phenomenon of social hostility. In many cases, hateful speech and incitement to violence against Christians have also been used without major concern from the Government. For example, after it was reported that 7,000 Catholic women were killed by leftist republicans during the Civil War, David Roig and another member of the far-left party "Unidas Podemos" wrote on Facebook: *"Only 7,000? What a pity. There should have been more."*<sup>49</sup> Similar phrases have been said by celebrities, such as Abel Azcona, who tweeted on 3. October 2019 *"It has been a beautiful night to burn Churches"*<sup>50</sup> and on Graffiti saying *"The only Church that illuminates is the one that burns"*.<sup>51</sup>

### CONCLUSION

Spain is the only country that shows clear tendencies of radical secularism that goes hand in hand with government authorities and the social environment. Their recent history of the dictatorship that favoured Catholics explains why the reactionary secularist ideology has been so easily accepted by society. There is a negative connotation of religion, mainly Catholicism, which leads to a weaponized use of the "Historical Memory Law" and other initiatives to exclude Catholicism from the public sphere. This general hostility has led to an increase of anti-Christian hate crimes, but also blasphemies portrayed by public figures that have deeply disturbed religious sentiments. This social and political dynamic has led to extremism and polarization from both sides of the political spectrum.

Given the economic crisis, Spain has not been an immigration hotspot, but it still has had some issues with hotspot areas of Islamic oppression, where Christians and Christian converts do not feel safe.

Due to the high degree of secularism, decisions of the ruling authorities do not show any religious literacy. The situation in Spain affects Freedom of Speech, Parental Rights, Freedom of Religion and Freedom of Assembly. In some cases, it exposes persons to physical and psychological violence from radical individuals, politicians, or the media.



*"It is not a question of right or left. It is a question of religious freedom and respect for the role of religion in the political sphere."*<sup>52</sup>

- COMECE Secretary General, Manuel Barrios Prieto

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# SWEDEN

Sweden is considered the most secular<sup>1</sup> and individualistic nation worldwide.

<sup>2</sup> Although Sweden had a strong Lutheran State Church, its secularisation has been a long complex process that was mainly led by the Swedish Social Democratic Party (SAP) and many freethinkers – such as Nyström and Wicksell.<sup>3</sup> While the Free Church promoted the separation of church and state and religious pluralism, the freethinkers had an anti-Christian narrative. On the other side, historians consider that the Lutheran state church contributed to this process: “Rather than opposing the secularizing forces, the Church of Sweden in some ways actually enhanced secularization, not least because of the strong pressure from the Social democratic party.”<sup>4</sup> In 2000 the Lutheran Church was disestablished from the state, but it is still the biggest religious denomination.

The SAP introduced secularisation into the political sphere. With the rise of individualistic ideologies that include sexual liberation and left-leaning ideas, the traditional Christian teachings were seen as an opposing view.<sup>5</sup> The strong secularisation through legislation leads to conflicts with the fundamental freedoms of Christians. For example, while abortion is free and available without parental consent, the right to conscientious objection for health care professionals is not recognised.<sup>6</sup>

Immigration has become one of the main topics in Swedish politics. The country is one of the most chosen destinations by immigrants and asylum seekers in the West. Despite Sweden having good integration policies, considerable waves of immigration since the Syrian war have led to areas with a high degree of social segregation where hostility towards Christians can be visible. A Pew Research study shows that social hostilities in Sweden are very high in comparison with other European countries, having 3.5 Index points, while the median of Europe was 2.6.<sup>7</sup> Social hostilities come from different groups, among them radical secularist groups and extremist Islamic groups. Government restrictions on Freedom of Religion are slightly higher in Sweden (2.8) than in most of Europe (2.7), but the situation has improved according to the most recent numbers.<sup>8</sup>

## FREEDOM OF CONSCIENCE

Freedom of Conscience has been breached in Sweden, the clearest sign was a recent ECHR's decision on a case involving two midwives, who lost their job for refusing to perform an abortion.<sup>9</sup> This decision encouraged local politicians to further limit Freedom of Conscience as they proposed the replacement of the concept of "conscientious objection" with "refusal of care".

The denial of this right also affects Christian students in midwifery education, as they cannot receive a scholarship or a contract from an employer if they refuse to perform abortions<sup>10</sup>. Moreover, some midwifery education programs include compulsory practical work in abortion and abortion care<sup>11</sup>. In the future, Christians could be excluded from the entire profession.



Ellinor Grimmark (L) and Linda Steen, the two midwives who lost their job for refusing to perform abortions. (Foto: ADF International)

## FREEDOM OF EXPRESSION

Freedom of Expression is limited at the workplace, especially for journalists from alternative media, teachers, and other professions. Our interviewees have reported that people have been fired for expressing dissenting opinions. An expert said that the Freedom of Speech is mostly "Not directly hindered, but hindered in the sense that there is a risk when expressing certain views in public."

Most workplaces and media outlets, except the Christian-owned outlets, limit Freedom of Expression by restricting, interrupting, or ridiculing Christian views. "Political correctness" is very important in Sweden, and people fear being sanctioned for talking about sensitive subjects, like gender and abortion. According to the Swedish mainstream media, the country has experienced a significant rise in prosecutions for "hate speech" on social media, but we currently have no data on how this affects Christians.

An interviewee commented: *"I would like to press the intolerance of expressing one's Christian religion in working life. In several workplaces, it is not accepted or considered "wrong" to wear a cross, for example. Usually it is not something that comes up explicitly, but in the event of incidents this can be pointed out as a "problem" that should have been taken into account."*

Another one said: *„Some free churches have been discriminated against for their belief that marriage is between a man and a woman. They have not been prevented from expressing it, but they have received very harsh and thorough criticism and discrimination that they do not dare to speak in any way."*

## EDUCATION AND PARENTAL RIGHTS

Education in Sweden is very secular, both in schools and universities, but there is limited data on the situation at universities that can affirm overall direct discrimination against Christians. According to our experts, Freedom of Expression is limited at universities, given that Christian students do not enjoy the possibility of hosting Christian events or speakers, a phenomenon

called “No-Platforming”. An interviewee said. *„I have personally witnessed degrading comments in academic rooms for my Christian faith and they are usually known because I carry crosses.”*<sup>12</sup>

In schools, a survey showed that Christian youth have been subjected to harassment and bullying for their faith<sup>13</sup>. Simply wearing religious symbols can be a reason for harassment, as was the case of an 11-year-old boy who was beaten and called a “fucking pig” by other kids for wearing a cross necklace<sup>14</sup>. In October 2020, a 15-year-old boy was asked to remove his cross necklace for a school photo, because it could be offensive for other pupils, while other students were allowed to wear Muslim attire. The headmaster of the school later distanced himself from the incident and said that the photographer had made a mistake.<sup>15</sup>

Homeschooling has also been banned for many years, and confessional schools are hard to find, given that the authorities are pressuring to prohibit the foundation of new denominational schools, which some politicians call a “theocratic dictatorship”.<sup>16</sup>

### THE SITUATION OF CHRISTIAN CONVERTS

Christian converts experience difficulties practising their faith openly, as they can face threats and risk violence. This usually happens in certain zones that we call hotspot areas of Islamic oppression. These areas are Växjö, Stockholm, Sodertalje, Landskrona, Malmö, and Gothenburg, among other cities. According to our research, the pressure can come from the family, the religious leaders, and the wider social context. Converts from Islam to Christianity – particularly among the refugee population – have suffered violent assaults, death threats, sexual assault, and social exclusion. Harassment can also consist of lock-in, control, forced religious obedience, financial consequences, dismissal, and coercion. Women are particularly vulnerable, given the male-dominated social background and culture. Some women have been harassed for not wearing hijab or are forced to wear it. This primarily affects Christian converts but also to a lesser extent the churches that operate in these areas.

One example is of Hossein Hosseini, a young convert who was stabbed on 22. July 2020 with a knife at Grindtop Church in Täby, in the Stockholm area. According to the reports, he had been receiving death threats for a long time and he described being “very scared”.<sup>17</sup>

*„I have personally witnessed degrading comments in academic rooms for my Christian faith and they are usually known because I carry crosses.”*



From the research we conducted two interviewees said:

*"A young 27-year-old Irani woman with 2 children converted to Christianity in 2019 but has experienced continual and growing threats, abuse, and harassment from her family, including her husband. She has since been living in "hidden accommodation".*

*"In the asylum camp, some of our converts who were reading the Bible got very big problems. It was in Hotel John in Filipstad. One day when I passed through the camp, I saw policemen and a big crowd of angry people. Some families came to me and were very upset. They told me that they had been threatened when they read the Bible in their rooms. In the night, strong Muslims at the camp entered their rooms without knocking and if they saw people reading the bible, they hit them and told them that later at night they were going to cut their heads."*

It was also recorded that *"women have been harassed because they don't wear hijab"* and in July 2019 a young woman named Amanda was rejected from boarding a public bus in the Southern area because the driver considered her to not be dressed properly."

A great number of Christian converts in Sweden have also been refused Asylum without consistent arguments. The Swedish Migration Board assessment of the applications of converts is considered to be inconsistent and arbitrary, most of the time due to the religious illiteracy of public authorities.<sup>18</sup> A study analysing the asylum claims from 2015-2018 of 619 Afghan converts to Christianity outlined serious shortcomings in the Swedish Migration Board's process.<sup>19</sup> 68% of the converts were denied asylum because their conversions were not deemed to be "genuine," despite all of them being baptized members of 76 churches in 64 locations across Sweden. The report noted that the Migration Board emphasized knowledge-based answers to questions and intellectual ability, rather than evidence of belief, religious practice, and involvement in church life.<sup>20</sup>

### **HOTSPOTS OF ISLAMIC OPPRESSION**

Although there is not enough research about this issue, our interviews indicate a considerable presence of radicalized Islamists among the Muslim population. Certain mosques have held sermons with a hostile message against Swedish society. There have been cases of Islamists seeking to impose Sharia law on Swedish society and some Imams inciting violence against the "unfaithful".

Consequently, Christians can face written or oral threats and physical attacks in cities, such as Västerås and Uppsala, Malmö, Stockholm, and others. Christian converts tend to hide their faith, especially if they live in the same town as their family. Wearing a cross or having a Christian tattoo can be a reason for being attacked and Christians can be monitored by their local community or private groups that infiltrate churches.<sup>21</sup>



Adam was supported by the Salvation Army to request asylum after escaping from Morocco as he faced imprisonment for converting to Christianity.

## CONCLUSION

Our interviews, literature and archives of documented cases, confirm that there is a growing cultural gap and a rise in social hostilities in Sweden. This is due to extremism within certain ideological groups, which includes Islamic extremism. Secularism can lead to restrictions on Christians in the sharing of their faith, or in the freedom to teach it to their children. Christian schools face bureaucratic barriers and there are efforts to limit their area of operation or even their existence. Christians working in the health care system can face dismissal for exercising their Freedom of Conscience. Churches can also face heavy critic and consequences for choosing to marry only heterosexual couples. For example, the Falun municipality stopped its financial relations with the Lugnet Church, after this one was heavily criticized on the media for not marrying same-sex couples.

Although there are minor improvements regarding the Migration Board's assessment of applications of Christian converts, there are still many Christians facing deportation to countries where they face grave or life-threatening danger. At the same time, Christian converts have faced severe violence in certain areas of Sweden.



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# THE UNITED KINGDOM

Christianity in the UK has a long history, and it has been one of the major influences and cultural traits. Even now, there are two state-recognized Christian denominations: the Church of England and the Presbyterian Church of Scotland; the Queen is both Head of State and Supreme Governor of the Church of England and there are 26 unelected bishops that sit in the House of Lords. This strong heritage could be the reason why British secularism seems to be more inclusive than the reactionary secularism in France and Spain.

On the other side, a large sector of the population no longer holds religious beliefs, which contributes to the secularisation process. In the UK there is a particular phenomenon that religious identities are shifting. While Christianity has lost members, the percentage of non-believers and Muslim people has risen. On a political level, broad "equality" and "hate speech" laws have been introduced, which have been used to restrict the Freedom of Expression, Freedom of Conscience and other rights of Christians.

There is a growing influence of Islam in culture and society. Sadly, the series of Islamic-based terrorist attacks that took place since 2015<sup>1</sup> have negatively shaped the attitudes between Britons and Islam, as well as those toward religion in general. By comparing the Index of Government restrictions and social hostility towards religion by the Pew Research Centre, one can see that both forms of pressure have risen (1.6 on Government Restrictions and Social Hostilities 2007 to 2.3 on Government Restrictions and 6.6 on Social Hostilities by 2016).<sup>2</sup> At the same time, some parliamentary groups are responding to these issues positively, and studies have been conducted to explore the issues affecting religious groups, such as the report "Living With Difference"<sup>3</sup> and "Learning to Listen"<sup>4</sup>, which addressed problems of religious illiteracy in the media or of public authorities. A poll<sup>5</sup> conducted with university students showed high levels of self-censorship in universities, which led to new legislation to ensure an atmosphere of tolerance and avoid intimidation of students to talk freely about their opinions.

## FREEDOM OF EXPRESSION

There have been numerous cases of sanctions or dismissal from different professions, or refusals of employment for expressing Christian beliefs and views privately on social media or in public, that have led to several court cases in the UK. Christians and non-Christians have faced intimidation, threats and discrimination for expressing opposing views regarding identity politics and bioethical issues, or for sharing biblical quotes on social media or in public. This issue has affected the careers of many people, including tax expert Maya Forstater<sup>6</sup>, school worker Kristie Higgs<sup>7</sup>, Doctor David Mackereth<sup>8</sup>, school governor Maureen Griffith<sup>9</sup> and the school caretaker Keith Waters.<sup>10</sup> Christian politicians have been deselected from parties for holding different views on abortion and marriage, for example, Rob Ffello<sup>11</sup> and Roger Godsiff.<sup>12</sup> Another MP, Dr. Lisa Cameron, received death threats for voting following her pro-life convictions.<sup>13</sup> Also, a study by the Institute of Economic Affairs, conducted in 2018, criticized the limitation of Freedom of Conscience, which has affected medical staff or students who hold pro-life views.<sup>14</sup>

At universities, students and professors have been censored. University professors have been accused of transphobia<sup>15</sup> for debating controversial topics on female-only spaces and transgenderism, leading to the cancellation of events<sup>16</sup>. Students have faced consequences for sharing personal views, such as Julia Rynkiewicz, who faced a four-month suspension from her studies and an investigation into her "fitness to practice" because of her involvement in a pro-life society.<sup>17</sup> Another student, Felix Ngole, was expelled for supporting Christian sexual ethics and an Iranian student was told he could not ask critical questions about Islam.<sup>18</sup> Many student pro-life groups have been refused affiliation to student unions<sup>19</sup> and Christian groups have faced problems hosting Christian events.

Michael J. Robinson, Director of Communications for The Society for the Protection of the Unborn Children (SPUC), said:

*"Universities should be bastions of free speech, where differing opinions are explored and challenged. To silence any student, particularly on the basis of a deeply held philosophical belief, is to act against the Equalities Act. (...) The universities must work harder and hold student unions to account for not protecting freedom of speech".*

In the public square, by using the Public Space Protection Order (PSPO) there has been pressure to introduce «buffer zones» around abortion clinics<sup>20</sup>. The locally introduced "buffer zones" prohibit Christians to engage in silent prayer outside the clinics. The PSPO has been widely criticised by different people for being too broad, as it criminalises peaceful activities, such as conversations about abortion alternatives; counselling; prayer; offering leaflets about practical help available to women, etc.

"Despite supporting abortion, a number of prominent human rights groups and campaigners have spoken out against the introduction of censorship zones. This includes Peter Tatchell, the Manifesto Club, Big Brother Watch, Index on Censorship and the Freedom Association", writes Fiona Bruce MP.<sup>21</sup>

Justyna Pasek launched legal proceedings in the High Court against



Dr. Lisa Cameron MP received death threats for voting against a pro-abortion bill, according to her pro-life convictions.

Richmond Council to challenge the PSPO.<sup>22</sup> Other Civil rights organisations, including Liberty, have raised major concerns, and submitted that the provisions of the PSPO are “*too widely drawn and likely to inhibit lawful protest*”. In 2018, the Home Office stated that it was inadequate to introduce national “buffer zones”, given that “***the majority of activities are more passive in nature***” and that there is already legislation that restricts “*protests that could cause harm to others.*”<sup>23</sup>

## EDUCATION AND PARENTAL RIGHTS

While at universities most of the problems are related to Freedom of Expression and association, in schools it is Parental Rights that are being infringed, mostly due to the new guidance on “relationships and sex education” (RSE). The RSE guidance requires schools to teach primary and secondary school children about LGBTQ+ relationships and may not permit parents to opt-out. Parents of primary school children can withdraw their children from the sex education component, but the relationships component would be mandatory. A petition requesting for the right to opt-out their children<sup>24</sup> reached more than 112.000 signatures. A petitioner, Dr. Katherine Godfrey-Fausset stated in March 2019: “We have grave concerns about the physical, psychological and spiritual implications of teaching children about certain sexual and relational concepts proposed in RSE and believe that they have no place within a mandatory school curriculum”.

Christian, Muslim, and Orthodox Jewish groups have expressed concern that the RSE undermines their religious beliefs, particularly concerning marriage. In a statement, Colin Hart, chairman of the Coalition for Marriage said: “*There are two problems here. Firstly, the age-appropriateness of the new material and secondly making these lessons compulsory, denying those with strongly-held religious or philosophical objections the right to withdraw their children from these classes; a right that has existed for decades.*”<sup>25</sup>

Christian schools have been pressured to provide “atheist content” for children who do not attend Christian ceremonies for religious reasons<sup>26</sup>. Another case was of a 13-year-old girl, who received mentoring sessions with the head of an LGBTQ+ group.<sup>27</sup> She was encouraged to change her identity, was addressed with male pronouns at school and allowed to use the men’s bathroom without the parents being notified by the school of this important decision in their daughter’s life. According to her parents, she showed no signs of gender dysphoria, and after two months she had cut her hair and said to identify as a boy. The psychologist who later attended the girl also disapproved of the school’s actions.<sup>28</sup>

At Universities, pro-life societies have been denied affiliation to the Student’s Union. This was the case at the University of Edinburgh and the University of Stirling. The SPUC<sup>29</sup> and the Alliance of Pro-Life Students (APS) published a report, “Free2Speak”<sup>30</sup>, which analysed campus censorship in Scotland<sup>31</sup>. Although the universities have accepted the Equality Act, pro-life societies were rejected for violating union policies regarding discrimination and equal opportunity.

At the University of Glasgow and the University of Aberdeen, students were required to pursue legal action before their pro-life student groups



were granted affiliation. The SPUC and APS called the Scottish Government to act against the «censorship epidemic» at Scottish universities. Madeline Page, CEO of the APS said: *"We work with students every day who have to fight their students' unions to affiliate societies or challenge the censorship of their events and materials. (...) Pro-life students and groups deserve to be treated like any other society on a university campus – free from undue burden and discrimination"*.

## THE REPRESENTATION OF CHRISTIANS ON THE MEDIA

There have been signs of an unbalanced portrayal of faith groups in the media, which prompted the All-Party Parliamentary Group (APPG) to conduct a report about religious literacy in media in the UK. The APPG points out that:

*"...too many people continue to view the media as indifferent towards religion and belief at best and actively biased against people of faith at worst. As detailed in this report, there is evidence to support this perception."* The media's indifference can be recognized by its omission of important information that would aid in the understanding of religion in certain programmes. Bias can be observed when media coverage leads to defamation of certain Christian organizations.

One medium that has been highly criticised for a certain bias is the BBC.<sup>32</sup> One example happened in October 2020, when the BBC broadcasted a TV programme on the issue of "Gay Conversion Therapy"<sup>33</sup>. In the programme the BBC informed about this delicate topic, but only featured one side of the discussion, failing to represent other scientific opinions and approaches, as it was criticised by the organization "Core Issues Trust". The CEO of "Core Issues Trust", Mike Davidson, claimed that: *"The programme's participants did not fairly represent the range of opinions that might reasonably be expected on this controversial subject. It was in fact advocacy rather than enquiry journalism. (...) No attempt was made to hear from equivalent (...) individuals who have benefitted from counselling interventions and who do consider themselves to have left the LGBTQ+ lifestyles."*

This one-sided public discourse called for a so-called "conversion therapy ban" by equating voluntarily sought out counsel with abusive and highly unprofessional therapeutic practices that are already illegal. A group called X-Out-Loud<sup>34</sup> formed by ex-LGBTQ+ voices, advocates for nuanced and differentiated legislation that gives people the freedom to choose to seek out counselling, instead of outlawing counselling choice.

The report by the APPG confirms the problem of media indifference and or bias. It highlights four ways in which religious groups have been discriminated against by media practices: **1) Sensationalism**, by only highlighting political discussions and criticism instead of showing how religious people contribute to society; **2) the reinforcement of undifferentiated and misleading stereotypes** **3) the reduction of religion to purely doctrinal forms, using imprecise language** and **4) the ignoring of diversity within faith groups**.<sup>35</sup> Impoverished, biased journalism can heat controversy on certain topics, producing a reductionistic picture of religious groups, in this case, Christians, as if they were all members of a certain political spectrum, for instance. Such journalism can fail to facilitate open discussion and

*"...too many people continue to view the media as indifferent towards religion and belief at best and actively biased against people of faith at worst."*

understanding between the secular and the Christian population.

### **BUSINESSES AND CHRISTIAN ORGANISATIONS**

Christian businesses and organizations that express their support for conservative Christian views on marriage or support people “*who voluntarily seek change in sexual preference and expression*” were forced to close their bank accounts due to extreme interventions by certain pressure groups. For example, the US-based restaurant chain Chick-fill-A was removed from a shopping mall<sup>36</sup> after local activist groups protested over its donations to Christian groups such as the Salvation Army. The activists claimed that both the company and the Christian groups had a reputation of being hostile towards LGBTQ+ rights and called for a boycott of the restaurant chain until the shopping centre confirmed that it would not renew the restaurant’s six-month lease. The outlet finally closed in March 2020.<sup>37</sup>

Other examples are the Core Issues Trust and the International Federation for Therapeutic and Counselling Choice, both were notified by Barclays Bank that their accounts would be closed<sup>38</sup>. These organisations could disappear in the future because of the attempts to ban so-called «conversion therapy», and with it psychological counselling, even where a person seeks this form of assistance.

Christian adoption agencies are suppressed for providing their services according to their Christian values<sup>39</sup> and Christian couples are prevented from becoming adoptive parents because of their faith<sup>40</sup>. Christian associations, such as the Billy Graham Evangelical Association, Destiny Church in Scotland, and pastors, have seen their events venues canceled by companies because of the Christian message that they wanted to transmit on social issues<sup>41</sup>.

### **RELIGIOUS FREEDOM AND COVID-19**

The Religious Freedom of citizens during 2020 had to be reinstalled by the courts in various cases across the UK, challenging the government-imposed worship ban. At the beginning of the pandemic, all nations in the UK responded to the health crisis with a general lockdown, including the suspension of mass and the closing of churches, among most other services and shops. But, as restrictions were eased by the government of Scotland and Ireland, churches were not treated as essential services, while other shops were allowed to open. This led to court challenges in both Scotland



and Ireland.

Before the second general lockdown in November 2020, church leaders across the UK signed a pre-action letter in May of the same year<sup>42</sup>, asking the government to take back the general ban on public worship. This was followed by a legal challenge led by the Christian Legal Center and Pastor Ade Omooba MBE, given that the Government rejected the latter.<sup>43</sup> The aim of the challenge was not to avoid Covid-19 prevention measures but to challenge the criminal sanctions that had been imposed to ban worship services<sup>44</sup>, as a disproportionate treatment to religious groups that also did not have any scientific evidence that could justify the ban.<sup>45</sup>

Fortunately, the judicial Court in Scotland ruled in 2021 that the worship bans had been unlawful<sup>46</sup>. On the other side, the decision in Ireland remains pending. The Christian organisation Christian Concern has created a compound list of the cases of Religious Freedom violations and Covid-19 lockdowns, where the overview and court challenges are visualised.<sup>47</sup>

### THE SITUATION OF CHRISTIAN CONVERTS

Whereas most issues for Christian converts in the UK appear to be difficulties receiving asylum on the grounds of religious persecution, the testimonies collected during our research show that converts also face intolerance and violence in their local community and families for converting to Christianity. There have been several cases of Christian converts in the UK, who have been denied protective asylum status, or who are facing deportation, even if in their countries of origin with a Muslim majority, the conversion from Islam to other religions is punishable with torture, prison and even death, or they can face extreme social hostility. A common problem of these cases is that the UK Home Office rejected the applications on the basis that the conversion was “not genuine”. The problem is that there is no coherent assessment scheme developed with church leaders to prove the credibility of someone’s faith, leading to arbitrary or misguided decisions. A bias can be identified, given that in the past, the UK Home Office also omitted important information about the persecution that Christians face in refugee camps.<sup>48</sup>

The religious illiteracy of the Home Office was condemned by the Church of England, after the case of a Christian convert seeking Asylum in England who was rejected because “Christianity was not a peaceful religion”, backed by violent imagery in the bible passages from the book of Revelations<sup>49</sup>. The Government also rejected the case of Asia Bibi, who had been on death row for many years for alleged blasphemy and sought asylum in the UK. She was rejected out of fear that this might cause civil unrest in certain Muslim communities in the UK or foreign UK embassies.<sup>50</sup>

Another case is the one of Asher Samson<sup>51</sup>, a Pakistani Christian who sought to stay in the UK after being beaten and repeatedly threatened with execution by Islamic extremists in Pakistan. Despite the support he got from thousands of Christians asking the government to grant him asylum, he was deported back to Pakistan on January 9<sup>th</sup>, 2019. Another case is that of Reza Karkah<sup>52</sup>, an Iranian Christian, who faces the prospect of imprisonment, torture, and separation from his wife and child after the UK Home Office rejected his application for asylum on the basis that he was ‘fabricating’ his Christian faith and that he failed a knowledge test with

questions about church history and bible figures.

From the testimonies of Christian converts, there was one man who narrated how a convert was *“beaten up by fellow Pakistani young men and was vacated from his home.”* The interviewed person recalled that the convert was not only *“brutally attacked”* or in his own words *“almost bludgeoned to death”*. He also *“faced daily intimidation and criminal damage to his properties.”*

A female convert said:

*“My daughter and I live with my parents, I was bullied emotionally, mentally, verbally, and in a recent event of physical abuse to which we became homeless. We were mocked for worshipping Jesus Christ; we only sang praises out loud when they were not present at home. I’ve heard other very horrific incidences where in some cases Muslims who converted to Christianity were subjected to terrible physical abuse, even murder.”*

## VIOLENCE IN PRISONS

Radicalization in prisons in the UK does not only affect Christians, but it can particularly target and harm Freedom of Religion for Christians in prisons and Christian Chaplains. According to a report by the Ministry of Justice, Islamic gangs in jails are forcing prisoners to convert to Islam with threats and beatings and organizing prisoner-run Sharia courts.<sup>53</sup>

A prominent case was the experience of the Christian Chaplain Paul Song, who faced strong intimidation during his time working as a prison chaplain in the South London jail HMP Brixton. He recalls being in a state of *“near-constant fear”* and described one incident when an Islamic group stormed his gathering in the chapel and began praising the jihadist who had murdered the soldier Lee Rigby in the street.<sup>54</sup> After he spoke out about these events to *“The Mail”*, Mr Song was punished and banned from working in London jails, which he is challenging.<sup>55</sup> Mr Song talked to *The Mail* about the reason why he is speaking about this issue: *“What has happened to me has set a dangerous precedent for anyone else who dares to tell the public about the growing domination of Islamic extremism in our prisons. I am determined to fight for justice.”*<sup>56</sup>

Apart from the case of Mr Song, academic literature has also started to draw attention to this problem: *„There is increasing evidence that prisons in the West are now starting to play a similar role—particularly in the United Kingdom, which has seen more “homegrown” terrorist plots (and consequently more terrorist convictions) than any other Western country* Research done in prisons around Europe has also concluded that in England terrorist offenders in high-security prisons are overwhelmingly Islamist and that the possibility of inmates being groomed by extremist ideologies *“remains a real and potent danger.”*<sup>57</sup>

## HOTSPOTS OF ISLAMIC OPPRESSION

According to our data, there has been a noticeable increase in social pressure by a rather radical form of Islamic culture. Christians living in hotspot areas are being pressured to abide by certain rules and a way of life shaped by this culture. In places like Birmingham, Leeds, Bradford,



Prison Chaplain Paul Song faced discrimination while working in the South London jail HMP Brixton



Leicester and East London<sup>58</sup>, Christians are being forced to take part in non-Christian religious ceremonies, activities, events, customs and they have to be cautious about how they dress. This also causes Christians to refrain from organizing public Christian celebrations in their communities to avoid "causing offences". Converts to Christianity with a Muslim background are forced to live double lives to guarantee their physical and psychological safety.

Some bookshops are selling books that promote Jihad and polygamy and the Islamic dress code. Sharia law may be used in mediation for disputes concerning marriage and finance. An estimated 30 to 85 Sharia councils operate parallel to the national legal system, mostly in urban centres with a significant Muslim population.<sup>59</sup>

### ANTI-CHRISTIAN HATE CRIMES

There is a high number of vandalism, thefts, arson, and other crimes committed against churches and Christian buildings in the UK, as well as other forms of discrimination like a physical assault<sup>60</sup>. According to a report by the Scottish Government on Hate Crimes between 2018-2020, most hate crimes in Scotland (42%) are perpetrated against Catholics.<sup>61</sup> The Countryside Alliance also published a report in response to the concerns of citizens about thefts and vandalism against churches in rural areas. By retrieving police numbers, the organisation made the high number of incidents visible, which happened across the country between 2019 and 2020. The Countryside Alliance had released a previous report with the alarming number of 20,000 crimes committed against Churches between 2017 and 2019.<sup>62</sup> The organization concluded their latest report by saying:<sup>63</sup>

In Scotland, churches have been damaged to such extent, that they are now granted money from the hate crime fund.<sup>64</sup> There have been severe cases of arson attacks on several churches. Some examples are documented in the OIDAC archive, such as four cases of arson to churches in East London on 19.

*"The latest set of figures, out only a year after the incredibly distressing numbers in 2019, make for horrific reading. We cannot risk being engulfed by a church crime wave and clearly more needs to be done to tackle this problem. Taking into account that during some of this year, the country was in lockdown, it is chilling to learn that criminals either acting alone or in gangs have taken advantage of this awful pandemic and continued to target rural churches."*

June 2019<sup>65</sup>, and arson to a catholic academy, which led to devastating results on 3 October 2020<sup>66</sup>. A terrorist plot by a Muslim convert who planned a suicide bomb attack on St. Paul's Cathedral in London was dismantled in July 2020.<sup>67</sup>



St. Simon Catholic Church in Glasgow, april 2019

## CONCLUSION

The UK is clearly undergoing a cultural process, in which Christian values are being replaced by secular values in society as well as in the legal landscape. This strongly threatens Freedom of Expression and breaches Parental Rights. Social intolerance in society is also affecting the rights of Christian institutions and churches, causing discrimination, and leading to vandalism. The media seems to contribute to this issue, by misrepresenting Christians in society. The public discourse about sex and gender is leading to the social exclusion of people who have dissenting opinions, even if they don't belong to a religious group. If opinions and beliefs can cause this degree of social exclusion, discrimination, and negative consequences in daily life, then these developments are cause for real concern.

Christians are also facing pressure from some extremist Islamic groups in certain areas. Violence against Christians has risen in the UK, in the form of vandalism and severe arson attacks on Christian buildings, and even physical assault. There is therefore strong social hostility and at the same time indifference or even a bias from public authorities. A positive development is that some politicians are reacting and conducting studies and research about these issues, which are being implemented to address this problem, hopefully bringing positive change.

*"I am not convinced that our efforts on behalf of Christians have always matched the scale of the problem, or indeed have reflected the evidence that it is Christians who frequently endure the heaviest burden of persecution. Indeed around the world, Christians are believed to be targets of about 80% of all acts of religious discrimination or persecution.*

*Perhaps because of a misguided political correctness or an instinctive reluctance to talk about religion, British governments haven't always grappled with this problem."*

- Jeremy Hunt

"Persecution of Christians review: Foreign Secretary's speech following the final report" Speech, 8 July 2019

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# COMPARATIVE ANALYSIS

## FREEDOM OF CONSCIENCE

Freedom of Conscience usually comes into question when controversial services are to be provided, like in the health care system, for pharmacists and midwives. In recent years, the topic has also extended to the question of marriage and gender. Christian medical professionals, medical students, but also Christian leaders and wedding officiants can find themselves in a dilemma between their religious beliefs and the required duty. This has even affected some academics when they were required to sign a statement that did not align with their beliefs.

After the decision of the ECHR concerning the limitation of “conscientious objection” for midwives in Sweden, other countries like Spain have been encouraged to seek this limitation to conscientious objection by changing the “conscience clauses”. The “conscience clauses” can vary in each country and they are a recurrent topic in politics. In France, there have been frequent attempts to limit conscientious objection for medical staff.

It is important to remember that Freedom of Conscience does not only apply to religious beliefs, as people and institutions can have moral reasons to object to a certain practice. Freedom of Conscience enables Christians and other members of society to live according to the faith and convictions that give meaning to their lives. Therefore, limiting or denying this right to Freedom of Conscience devoids this right of meaning and violates personal autonomy as the main requirement of human dignity.



## FREEDOM OF EXPRESSION

Although Freedom of Expression is a fundamental right and a precious asset for a democratic society, the reality is that this right is being limited in many spheres of society. European Christians face negative consequences for expressing their views on certain topics, or sometimes for revealing their faith or quoting a bible verse. The consequences can be on a social level, like exclusion, intimidation, or even violence, but also through legal prosecution or dismissal. Legal prosecution has become a greater issue given the hate speech legislation that has been passed in recent years. These new inclusive hate speech legislation primarily pose a problem because of their vague formulations.

This problem affects several areas of life, and it can become harder to track, as people experience a “chilling effect” and start to self-censor their opinions to avoid conflict. In countries like Germany, France and Sweden, where religion is considered a private matter, many people seem to self-censor,

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which can be the reason why there are fewer legal cases regarding Freedom of Expression in these countries. On the other side, the UK presents a high number of cases of Christians facing legal consequences or dismissal for expressing their views on social media, at universities, or in their workplace, etc.

While direct incitement to violence or violent speech should be considered dangerous and criminal, the state should not criminalize controversial debates that can offend some people. There is a need for a proportionate and balanced look into hate speech legislation, otherwise, it can be weaponized to restrict the Freedom of Expression of Christians and many other people who engage in public debate.



## EDUCATION AND PARENTAL RIGHTS

Education has a very important role in the cultural formation of new generations and parents are generally recognized as the prime educators of their children. However, through the secularisation of education, schools are increasingly transmitting values that conflict with traditional Christian values of parents. When these parents express concern regarding the sexual education or gender topic, they are often ignored or even ridiculed, as has happened in Spain. But also, secularisation in universities has led to discrimination or even suspension of Christian students or teachers for sharing unpopular opinions.

Additionally, religious teaching in schools has been reduced strikingly, even though religion is a key element in society. New secular education legislation has led to less religious education and less support for religious schools, like in Spain, France and Sweden.

There have also been cases of discrimination against students and pupils, like the boy who was beaten in Sweden for wearing a cross, or pro-life student associations being excluded in the UK. Studies are showing that students at universities in England and Germany feel intimidated. If there is a problem of social segregation in education, it can transmit into the broader culture. Some state authorities in the UK have already recognized this issue and have made decisions regarding the importance of reversing this negative culture before it translates into society.

## CHRISTIAN BUSINESSES AND INSTITUTIONS

Although Christian institutions, such as schools, associations, and adoption agencies enjoy autonomy in organizing their activities and delivering their services, our research shows that some institutions or businesses have experienced harassment and opposition for holding Christian beliefs. The opposition comes from different sources, like extreme activist groups and government authorities.

Christian institutions and businesses can face difficulties in finding venues to host an event due to their beliefs. For example, due to pressure from activist groups, a bank refused services to Christian institutions and a shopping mall stopped its contract with a Christian restaurant chain. Also, Christian adoption agencies have had to close their doors, as they were not allowed to provide their services according to their ethics. The refusal of services due to religious beliefs is considered a form of discrimination. But

this issue affects many other aspects like Freedom of Expression, Freedom of Assembly of Christians as well as Contractual Freedom.

## REPRESENTATION OF CHRISTIANS IN MEDIA

The situation of the media in the five analysed countries presents two main similar patterns and tendencies. One is that the news about anti-Christian hate crimes has not received the attention that would be considered proportionate by some politicians and faith groups. Christians therefore can feel ignored and excluded. The reason for these omissions is not clear, nor has it been explored in this report, but the APPG Report on religious literacy and the media gives a good explanation, on how the media tends to only focus on sensationalism when it comes to religious groups.

The second issue is the misrepresentation of the Christian population, which was addressed in the APPG report. The findings point towards the religious illiteracy of the media, which can lead to issues of distrust and less dialogue.<sup>1</sup>

*"Inaccurate reporting can lead to whole communities developing fearful or actively antagonistic relationships with the media. This is true at both national and local levels. Community reporter Rachael Nichol noted that bad representation can lead to groups 'feeling like they can't trust the press. (...) They don't feel safe when religious stories are being covered for fear their precious beliefs may be distorted or used to incite hatred."*

Preliminary findings indicate that a certain political discourse dominates most media outlets. In Sweden,<sup>2</sup> there has been official data that confirms this tendency. In Germany, there is also anecdotal evidence of a dominant focus on liberal news, without active discrimination towards Christians. In France, Spain, and the UK, the situation has been more problematic, leading to defamation and discrimination which at the same time can promote hostility and violence against Christians in their daily lives.

## RELIGIOUS ILLITERACY

During the country analysis, religious illiteracy was only explored more deeply in Germany in the context of the alarming problem this causes for Christian converts seeking asylum. At the same time, our research has identified religious illiteracy as an underlying problem that leads to many other issues discussed in this work. For example, the APPG led a study on religious literacy in media in the UK and found out, that religious illiteracy is the main reason why Christians and other religious groups tend to be misrepresented and many times negatively stereotyped by journalists and media outlets.

Religion and belief are a social reality in our world that cannot be ignored, otherwise, they will end up misrepresented, misunderstood or even discriminated against. This is not a good foundation for formulating policies nor for social inquiry in any form. By excluding or misrepresenting religion in the public discourse and legislation, one cannot ensure a true democratic representation of the whole society. Therefore, to better grasp the issues that this report explores, it is





crucial to address religious illiteracy. Religion and belief are more than ideological affiliation or a lifestyle choice, religion is one of the most influential and dominant identity markers of individuals. Religious identity markers usually override other identity markers and therefore influence the behaviour of an individual in all areas of life, not just the private. A positive development has been observed in the UK, as the UK Government committed to implementing the recommendations made by the Bishop of Truro's report for supporting persecuted Christians, in which he stressed that a better religious literacy of public officials was needed<sup>3</sup>.

### REMOVAL OF RELIGIOUS SYMBOLS

The removal of religious symbols across Europe is not a new phenomenon, as many crosses have been removed from hospitals, schools and public offices. In France, Sweden and Eastern Germany, laws have already been implemented to secularise public institutions, such as schools<sup>4</sup>, hospitals and state buildings by removing crosses hanging on the walls. In some isolated cases, Christians have been harassed or discriminated against for wearing a cross necklace<sup>5</sup> or a religious symbol<sup>6</sup>.

This issue is especially visible in Spain where the government authorities are actively targeting Catholic crosses in public spaces with the argument that they were erected under the Franco regime.

The removal of public Christian symbols affects many communities that do not see the cross as a symbol of a regime or a certain political ideology, but as a cultural and religious identity.

### THE SITUATION OF CHRISTIAN CONVERTS

Christian converts face violence and discrimination in all reported countries, they can be identified as the most affected group in terms of severity. By facing deportation, converts could be sent back to countries where they face severe persecution or even death, while they also face hostilities and discrimination in the European countries, they find themselves in.

Given that they are a religious minority inside their community, converts are more exposed to violent attacks than most Christians in European countries. They face violence and intolerance from extremist Islamic groups, but they also often face violence and discrimination from their inner circles and families. Our research shows severe cases in France and Sweden.

On the other side, Christian converts face discrimination from authorities, as is very clear in Germany, Sweden, and the UK. This problem is interconnected to religious illiteracy on the part of state authorities, because they often ignore or do not believe the gravity of their situation, or they try to prove a converts faith with theoretical examinations. In Germany, their certificates of baptism can even worsen their chances for a positive asylum application.

In a report about the situation in Germany by Open Doors one can read the following statement:

*„The situation of converts is very individual. But they all have one thing in common: the enormous psychological burden of having to live with an unresolved situation. These people arrived here traumatised anyway and cope differently with the challenges here in Germany.“*  
- Open Doors 2021, p.34





## HOTSPOTS OF ISLAMIC OPPRESSION

Islamist violence and extremism not only affect Christians, as academic and political discussions show. The increase of violence and social segregation has been observed in many countries, like France and Sweden, but also in Germany and the UK. In the UK, this issue is particularly affecting prison inmates and chaplains, given the high rates of extremism in prisons. Hotspots of Islamic oppression are a sensitive issue, as it encompasses religious conflicts and sometimes racial and cultural problems as well.

One can see that in France, the laws to combat separatism in response to Islamic extremism have led to other discussions regarding Religious Freedom. Therefore, a good step to better grasp this problem would be to improve the religious literacy of state authorities to effectively address this problem but also to openly engage with it.

## RELIGIOUS FREEDOM AND COVID-19

The bans on worship services have been a specific issue due to the Covid-19 Pandemic that caused huge changes in Europe since the beginning of 2020. Every country reacted independently, still, lockdown measures and restrictions were a recurrent form to contain the health crisis.

The problem with Religious Freedom during this time became visible after the first restrictions were lifted, but collective worship remained banned. When fewer essential services were allowed to open, such as shops and restaurants, Christians started to raise questions and request their Freedom of Religion without a response from the government. This led to several court decisions to reinstall the freedom of religion of Christians in the UK and France. In Spain, the problem was not primarily due to the law, which was not as restrictive as in other countries, but it was the disproportionate and unlawful evacuations of church services by the police.

Although this issue seems to be unique and isolated, it raises concern as to how governments perceive religion. It shows a level of indifference or even bias against religion, or it can be a sign of religious illiteracy, as discussed in the previous chapters.

## ANTI-CHRISTIAN HATE CRIMES

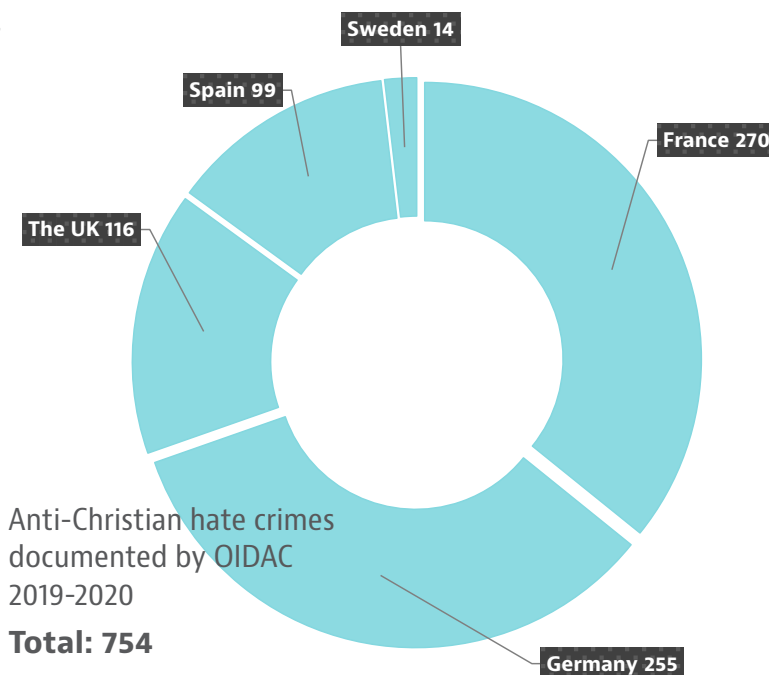
For 2020, a total of 7,181 cases of hate crimes against groups and individuals of different religions and other protected characteristics were reported by the OSCE. 4,008 of them are descriptive cases the rest are police data from individual member states. 24 states report data on hate crimes committed

due to racism or xenophobia, 20 on LGBT groups, 16 states on anti-Semitism, and 14 on incidents against Muslims, but only 11 countries report data on hate crimes against Christians, and this distorts the statistics significantly. Furthermore, of the 136 civil society organisations that provided descriptive data, only 8 organisations consistently reported incidents against Christians. Both of these findings put the reality of the situation into a different perspective, which indicates that the actual number of hate crimes against Christians is probably way higher. When comparing the number of incidents from last year to the number of this year, we can see an increase of almost 70%. What is also striking, is the fact that of the 4,008 descriptive cases, 980 are hate crimes against Christians, almost 25%, more than against any other religious group. This year alone, we were able to report around 600 of the 980 cases to the OSCE.

The increase of violence against churches, Christian buildings, public Christian symbols and even individuals has been a silent, underreported development that is now slowly getting more attention. The ministry of interior of Spain failed to report the cases of anti-Christian violence, but they usually document hate crimes towards "religious groups" or "ideological groups" and cases of anti-Semitism. Sweden and UK do document these crimes, but they have not reported them to the OSCE. Germany and France are documenting the cases of violence against Christians. In England, the organisation "Countryside Alliance" also started reporting on this issue in 2017<sup>7</sup>, because of the number of requests they received from worried citizens. In Spain, the OLRC is publishing reports since 2016.

It is too soon to clearly state the amount of growth in these cases because the increasing number can also be due to underreporting in the past. Still, in France and Spain, one can already see a tendency towards an increase in cases. Some forms of violence are more predominant in some countries. For example, France has a severe problem with arson attacks while Germany faces mostly vandalism and theft. By observing these trends, it is interesting to look at the historical and political landscape to see if they correlate with the developments. In the case of Spain and France, we can recognize that both have the presence of reactionary secularism, which might be a reason for the severity of vandalism that occurs in these countries.

Hate crimes highlight the underlying social dynamics, they are usually an expression of hostility, intolerance and discrimination that was already there. Still, the field can be explored with more depth, as we have very limited data as to which groups commit most crimes against Christians, which Christian denominations these are and what are the exact motives behind the attacks.



# RECOMMENDATIONS

According to the insights provided in this report, OIDAC has formulated the following recommendations for different political levels:

## 1. **We recommend to the governments of the European Countries:**

- To refrain from interferences and to modify legislation that directly or indirectly discriminates against Christians.
- To ensure the Freedom of Religion, Freedom of Expression, Freedom of Assembly, and the Right to Conscientious Objection of Christians.
- To collect disaggregated data with the specific aim of monitoring intolerance and discrimination against Christians and to take appropriate soft measures in response to this phenomenon.
- To ensure religious literacy among public officials, to improve the manner of their interventions in the life of Christians.
- To recognise the systematic targeting and killing of Christians and other religious minorities in Iran, Iraq, Syria, among other countries and to recognise the special status of Christians and other religious minority refugees and asylum seekers.
- To develop a standardized comprehensive assessment for Christian converts who seek asylum on the grounds of religious persecution.

## 2. **We recommend to the international governmental human rights institutions:**

- To report on intolerance and discrimination against Christians and recommend appropriate action to their member states.
- To examine their reports and recommendations regarding indirect discrimination against Christians.
- To raise awareness and to encourage the media and other professionals not to spread prejudices against Christians.

## 3. **We recommend to the European Union:**

- Not to adopt non-discrimination legislation that significantly limits Freedom of Expression, Association and Religion.
- To examine EU legislation regarding direct or indirect discrimination against Christians
- To recognize the special status of Christian and other religious minority refugees and asylum seekers in the EU.

## 4. **We recommend to journalists, opinion leaders, artists, and other members of society:**

- Not to tolerate anti-Christian hate crimes.
- To avoid engaging in marginalisation and negative stereotyping of Christians and to be aware of your responsibility in shaping a tolerant public discourse.
- To employ the same standards with Christians which you would like to see employed with yourself.



# CONCLUSION

Although persecution of Christians worldwide is a known problem, the field of intolerance and discrimination against Christians in Europe is quite new and therefore almost no substantial research has been conducted. In our work, we have identified two threatening dynamics in society for the lives of Christians in Europe, which are 1. Secular Intolerance and 2. Islamic oppression. Secular intolerance, as we have seen, leads to the discrimination of Christians in different areas of life by ignoring or excluding religion from these areas, like in education, at the workplace, in the public square and sometimes in politics. We have also seen that secular legislation or the cultural belief that religion is a purely private matter has also conflicted with several fundamental freedoms, like the Freedom of Religion, Freedom of Expression, the Freedom of Conscience and Parental Rights of Christians.

On the other side, Islamic oppression also affects the fundamental freedoms of Christians, usually with a more direct or violent dynamic, but this happens in a way a smaller fraction of society, mainly affecting Christian converts who are more exposed to potential extremist circles. Still, some cases of vandalism or violent attacks against Christians and Christian buildings with Islamic motives have raised an alarm in countries like France and the UK, and it will be important to start a public debate on these topics. Nevertheless, It is important to note that we highlighted this dynamic not to instigate any frictions between Christianity and Islam or to say that there is a generalised problem between the two. This generalisation is also not substantiated by our data in any way. It was of great importance for us to always use and present our data in the correct context and hope it will not be used by others out of this context.

The wider issues in European societies are usually non-violent, but the negative consequences are still clear and serious, and they show clear discriminatory and intolerant patterns. Christians should not face dismissal, punishment or discrimination in their workplaces or educational institutions for exercising their Freedom of Conscience to withdraw from certain practices, nor should they be limited in their Freedom of Expression. Our research indicates that these dynamics create a hostile environment for Christians, where they feel intimidated by the fear of negative social, legal, or political consequences. This intimidation does not only affect Christians in Europe and their future generations, but it also generates a loss of diversity and openness for the broader society.

We have observed that if these developments are not addressed, the level of secularism – and therefore the exclusion of religion – could reach such levels in society that it will become more difficult to spot discrimination and intolerance, as Christians might hide their faith, self-censor their opinions or even be excluded from the political and social discourse. This affects Christian communities, causing segregation, which can lead to extremism and social problems, but it also denies members of this group their human dignity. Therefore, our conclusion considers the idea of radical secularism as anti-democratic because it can have even corroding effects on the founding blocks of a democratic society.

On the other side, we recognize that this report is very limited due to the novelty of the research field and the scope of the report. Even if our data aims to encompass several expert voices, statistical data, mainstream media outlets and academic literature, it will need further research to confirm these findings. At the same time, this opens many possibilities for in-depth research on very important issues. For example, it would be interesting to explore the reasons behind the indifference or bias in the media in countries like France and Spain or to conduct surveys to retrieve more data on self-censorship tendencies at the workplace and universities.

Our research indicates that mainly through improving dialogue and religious literacy, state authorities can achieve better legislation that creates bridges between groups of society instead of creating animosity through laws that indirectly discriminate against religious groups. But we also believe that among the Christian population there is the possibility for improvement by stimulating respectful and open dialogue, by consciously avoiding prejudices on different moral values and by showing more interest to engage in public debates. This report seeks to contribute to a better understanding between religious groups and mainstream and secular groups of society. Hopefully, this will be a fruitful step to stimulate a wider constructive and open debate for the benefit of Christians, other religious groups and minorities. Ultimately, this will serve the broader society in general.



## ENDNOTES

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