

Persecution of Christians

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🕒 9.30am

Ruth Jones >
(Newport West and Islwyn) (Lab)

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I beg to move,

That this House has considered the matter of the persecution of Christians.

I thank the Backbench Business Committee for selecting this important motion for debate. I declare an interest as an officer of the all-party parliamentary group for international freedom of religion or belief. Around the world many obscene, difficult and heartbreaking things are happening to people because of their beliefs. Our APPG aims to speak for those of all faiths and none, and to act as a constructive voice in this place to address religious persecution globally, both now and in future.

This subject is close to my heart. In 2023, I was pleased to represent the APPG at the International Religious Freedom summit in Taiwan, where we heard harrowing reports of persecution, torture and killings on account of people’s religious beliefs. I pay tribute to the unwavering strength of those killed, removed from their homes, refused jobs, and imprisoned without recourse, solely for their faith.


Amid the increasing instances of persecution, hate crimes and stereotyping, numerous organisations work tirelessly to expose and combat those injustices. I am grateful for their collective efforts, and particularly the hours of research that go into producing reports so that we in this House can be made aware of the suffering caused by anti-religious movements, religious extremism, political oppression and Government overreach. By gathering data, providing legal support and amplifying the voices of the persecuted, those organisations expose violations of the universal declaration of human rights and offer hope to those who have been silenced. Their work is instrumental in ensuring that freedom of religion or belief becomes a better recognised and protected human right. Without their vigilance, many cases of abuse would remain hidden and individuals who have been aided by their efforts would continue to suffer without recourse.

Despite the very real threat of persecution, hundreds of millions of Christians—effectively entire populations—remain steadfast in their faith, at great personal cost. They willingly risk their livelihoods, their families and even their lives to uphold their beliefs. Their resilience in the face of oppression is testament to their unwavering conviction, and their strength should not go unnoticed. It is imperative that we advocate on their behalf, ensuring that they receive the fundamental freedoms that so many of us in democratic societies take for granted. To ignore their plight is to turn our backs on the very principles of justice and human dignity that underpin free nations.

Despite being the world’s largest religion, Christianity is the most persecuted minority faith in many regions. That persecution stems from a range of sources, including Islamist extremism, Marxist regimes and dictatorial Governments. In some countries, public celebrations of Christmas are not only discouraged but life-threatening. Open Doors, an organisation that monitors Christian

persecution worldwide, reported alarming global figures for 2024.

Dr Rupa Huq >
(Ealing Central and Acton) (Lab)

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My hon. Friend is making an excellent speech. Was it not one of the most heartbreaking things that all of us in the House have seen when Christmas was cancelled in Jesus’s birthplace last year? We have seen the persecution in Palestine, and in Gaza what has happened to some of the most sacred sites in Christianity, with the third-oldest church reduced to rubble. At times it is heartbreaking. My hon. Friend listed things such as Marxism and Islamism; does she agree that the situation in Palestine should draw our attention to Christians persecuted there, too?

Ruth Jones >

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My hon. Friend is absolutely right. People cannot worship in rubble. It is important that we acknowledge all the areas affected. I will say more on that shortly.

Open Doors’ alarming global figures for 2024 were presented to us in Parliament in January. The world watchlist and accompanying report paint a deeply concerning picture. Last year, almost 5,000 believers worldwide were killed for their faith. Most were from Nigeria. However, there have been rising numbers of Christian deaths in other countries in sub-Saharan Africa, including Burkina Faso, where 201 believers lost their lives—that is a more than fivefold increase on 2023. The last year has seen almost 210,000 Christians forced from their homes into hiding or exile because of their faith. Almost half of them are from Nigeria, despite around half of all Nigerians being Christians.

Since the first world watchlist in 1983, North Korea has been at the top 23 times, which is almost 70% of the time. The persecution of North Korean Christians has worsened in the last year following a rise in reported incidents of violence, which coincides with stricter regulations announced by the North Korean authorities early in 2024.

More and more Christians are having to worship undercover. In Afghanistan, it is effectively impossible for a Christian to publicly express their faith. In Algeria, all Protestant churches have been forced to close, and the number of Christians awaiting trial and sentencing is at an all-time high. In China, the era of relative tolerance is over. Unregistered churches are now illegal. Church teaching is informed by ideological pressure and official indoctrination. Religious education for children is banned. Many congregations are taking their fellowships underground into isolated home groups. Meanwhile, the small Christian community in Libya is extremely careful to avoid a repeat of the March 2023 crackdown, which swept up numerous Christians for arrest. Believers have to be increasingly creative and courageous in how they gather, if at all.


Open Doors states that the persecuted church is increasingly a displaced church, with believers exiled to refugee camps or camps for internally displaced people. Sudan is facing the largest displacement crisis in the world: in a country of 49 million people, the number of IDPs had surpassed 7.7 million by mid-2024. In Nigeria, radicalised Islamic Fulani militants continue to drive Christian communities from their lands. Conflict in the Manipur region in India has forced tens of thousands of Christians to flee for their lives, often with little more than the clothes on their backs. The loss of home and community makes already vulnerable Christians even more of an easy target.

Mr Gregory Campbell >
(East Londonderry) (DUP)

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I congratulate the hon. Member on securing the debate and on her excellent speech, in which she is outlining the outstanding work of Open Doors and other organisations. Does she agree that as well as co-ordinating a UK-wide attempt to address the ongoing problem, we need to internationalise it to try to make people from a range of nations aware and resolve it?

Ruth Jones >

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Absolutely. Open Doors is a great organisation for highlighting what is going on around the world. The hon. Gentleman is right that we need a concerted effort around the world to stamp out the persecution of all faiths, but we are talking about Christians in particular today.

In Pakistan, young Christian men are increasingly being targeted for forced conversion, with recent violent attacks including one against a Christian youth whose throat was slit after a blasphemy accusation. In Iran, 139 Christians were arrested in 2024, with many sentenced to lengthy prison terms under national security laws, simply for attending house churches.

In Nicaragua and Colombia, church leaders face arbitrary imprisonment and assassination for standing up to authoritarianism and criminal groups. Mexico is 31st on the 2025 world watchlist—its highest place since 2005. It is also the only country in Latin America to rise in the rankings. Organised crime is rampant in many areas, and churches and believers who seek to counter it make themselves targets. There has been an increase in the number of believers killed and abducted there.


From violent attacks to house arrests and forced marriages, Christian women and girls around the world are shamed and persecuted twice—once for their faith and the second time for their gender.

The universal declaration of human rights is the most translated document in the world. It has been signed by all 193 UN member states. Crucially, it covers provisions for the freedom to change one’s religion or belief, to adopt a religion or belief of choice, or to retain one’s current beliefs. Despite the numerous protections outlined in the declaration, there is a universal lack of accountability for those who do not uphold its principles, leaving religious minorities vulnerable to continued persecution.

Over the past 24 months, the Foreign, Commonwealth and Development Office has answered 200 written parliamentary questions that mention the protection and aid of persecuted Christians. The steps the UK is taking to protect this fundamental right include advocating for political transition that leads to an inclusive, non-sectarian and representative Government; reminding all parties of their obligations under international humanitarian law; and ensuring that official development assistance is allocated to those who are most vulnerable and most in need, irrespective of race, religion or ethnicity. It is vital to consider what measurements will be used to assess the impact of such aid, projects and policy.


The Government must continue their work on this issue. Areas in which they can go further include ensuring that UK diplomats raise cases of Christian persecution at bilateral and multilateral levels, including by urging Governments of concern to cease the repression of religious minorities and comply with international human rights standards; advocating for the establishment or strengthening of UN mechanisms to investigate FORB violations; and expanding UK aid and development funding to support local peacebuilding efforts, trauma-recovery programmes and economic rehabilitation for survivors of religious violence in Nicaragua and Colombia.

Dr Scott Arthur >
(Edinburgh South West) (Lab)

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My hon. Friend mentioned ever-decreasing ODA funding; does she believe that the complete intolerance of religious persecution should be a prerequisite for such funding?

Ruth Jones >

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Yes, I do, and I am glad the Minister is here to listen to the debate and interested in what he will say in response.

It is important to target sanctions under the UK’s global human rights sanctions regime against individuals and entities complicit in Christian persecution. Will the Government ensure that they publicly name and support at-risk and imprisoned Christian leaders, and use diplomatic channels and public platforms to press for their immediate and unconditional release? FORB should be integrated into broader UK human rights and foreign policy frameworks to ensure that the new integrated human rights and sanctions regime prioritises religious freedom alongside other human rights. Gender and religion-specific vulnerabilities should be recognised in the design of strategies to tackle issues including protection, displacement, conflict prevention, peacebuilding, development and human rights generally.

In recent years the UK has shown great leadership in promoting FORB, and it is vital that it continues to do so. When freedom of religion or belief is under attack, other basic human rights are often under threat as well. FORB serves as the ultimate litmus test for the health of other freedoms in a country. We are blessed to live in a society in which the Government do not take these threats lightly. However, the growing issue of rising authoritarianism in North Korea, central Asia and Iran, and the extreme displacement in west and sub-Saharan Africa, remain deeply concerning and under-represented. I look forward to hearing from colleagues and hope the Minister will address our concerns, so that freedom of religion or belief remains a leading priority in foreign policy and diplomatic engagement.


Dawn Butler >
(in the Chair)

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I remind Members that they should bob if they wish to be called in the debate. We estimate that Members should keep to a limit of around four or five minutes per speech.

 9.42am

Sir Desmond Swayne >
(New Forest West) (Con)

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Nigeria is No. 7 on the world watchlist published by Open Doors. Some of the most egregious examples of persecution, with whole communities being laid waste, come from Plateau state. Many commentators, including the EU Parliament, have put that down to the pressures brought about by climate change. Well, climate change does not rape people. Climate change does not bomb church services. Climate change does not abduct women and children and force them into marriage. Those things are done because of an extremist ideology entirely unrestrained by proper state power, because of the state’s incompetence, indifference or even complicity.

What assistance is the United Kingdom affording to Nigeria in the implementation of the Human Rights Council’s recommendation, from its universal periodic review, on the protection of freedom of religion and belief? Has the Minister shared the experience that I had as a Minister of visiting some of the countries where these things take place and having his ear bent by members of both the Opposition and the Government on what we should do about it, as if we were still a colonial power able to do such things? What leverage do the Government actually have, beyond the important role of providing a platform to share views and reassure sufferers that we are alive to their concerns—that we are praying for them, at least?

Finally, I have a word of caution for the hon. Member for Edinburgh South West (Dr Arthur), who spoke about official development assistance. Properly spent, it is directed to projects that relieve suffering communities. If it is used as a political weapon—as leverage that is put on Governments and withdrawn—it only makes the sufferers suffer even more.

 9.45am

Juliet Campbell >
(Broxtowe) (Lab)

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It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Ms Butler. I thank my hon. Friend the Member for Newport West and Islwyn (Ruth Jones) for bringing this issue to the House. I appreciate her advocacy for those who are going through persecution because of their Christian belief.

Nobody deserves to be persecuted because of their faith. The freedom to practise religion, to experience communion with family and friends and to worship without fear of violence is fundamental to human rights conventions. Christians around the world are being denied those protections and are experiencing unimaginable heartache and suffering. It is estimated that 380 million Christians around the world are subjected to high levels of persecution and discrimination. The data is clear and is incredibly troubling. There has been a rise in violence towards Christians across the globe over many, many years.

Persecution often involves a broad scope of behaviour. It is usually the bloody and violent extremes that get media attention, which is often short-lived, but disinformation, marginalisation and intimidation come under the informal definition of persecution and they deserve our attention. We have an obligation to talk about the issue and speak up for those who are suffering and those who endure torture and killings. The numbers are rising.

I am keen to understand the steps that are being taken to better support persecuted Christians across the world and promote religious freedom and belief. Are there plans to implement the calls to action from organisations such as Open Doors? I congratulate my hon. Friend again on bringing this very important issue to the House.

🕒 9.48am

Jim Shannon >

(Strangford) (DUP)

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It is a pleasure to serve under your chairship, Ms Butler, for what I am sure will be the first time of many. I commend the hon. Member for Newport West and Islwyn (Ruth Jones), who is a dear friend. Like me, she is an officer of the all-party parliamentary group for international freedom of religion or belief; I declare that interest.

I thank all hon. Members who have persistently championed the cause of religious freedom, particularly in relation to persecuted Christians globally. Their unwavering commitment ensures that this critical issue remains at the forefront of our parliamentary discourse. It is imperative that we recognise the alarming escalation in the persecution of Christians worldwide. I have taken the following statistics from a 2023 report by Aid to the Church in Need, which has thoughtfully considered the status of fundamental human rights for all religious traditions.

Some 1.5 million Christians called Syria home before the war started in 2011. Today, that number has plummeted to 300,000, an 80% decline in little over a decade. In Aleppo, the Christian population has dropped from 250,000 to just 30,000—from 12% of the city’s population to a mere 1.4%. In Raqqa, where once there were 11,000 Christians, barely 100 remain today. Deir ez-Zor was once home to 5,000 Christians, but that number has fallen to nearly zero. That tells us all about the decline of Christian faith in Syria. Sadly, we see religious persecution once more being ignored, and Syria is not alone; Nigeria has approximately 3.3 million internally displaced people as a result of religiously motivated violence. Communities have been uprooted and entire cultures have been erased.

I am heartened to support a Government and a Minister who have made significant strides in delivering on the recommendations in the Bishop of Truro’s report. We have seen particular progress on recommendation 2, which calls for the UK to be

“the global leader in championing freedom of religion or belief, ensuring it is given due priority in the UK’s engagement in multilateral institutions”.

The UK Government have answered nearly 80 written questions on behalf of religious minorities this year. I extend my sincere thanks to all those who have used their voices to highlight this freedom. It serves as a litmus test for human rights. The liberty to believe in a higher power, to worship and to stand in awe is intrinsic to our humanity. The values imparted by Christianity make the humanitarian efforts of Christian organisations indispensable to the world. For example, one global Christian Church operating in 193 countries and territories has clocked up 6.6 million hours of volunteer work.

Not only are Christian teachings globally relevant, but they hold profound significance here in the United Kingdom. The Bible warns that turning away from God leads to moral decay, manifesting in behaviours such as wickedness, greed and a lack of compassion. Conversely, embracing Christian teachings offers a pathway to healing and restoration within our communities.

In 1 Peter 4:8-10, the apostle Peter says:

“Above all, love each other deeply, because love covers over a multitude of sins. Offer hospitality to one another without grumbling. Each of you should use whatever gift you have received to serve others, as faithful stewards of God’s grace in its various forms.”

This is a mindset that builds strong, stable and peaceful societies. Countries that have championed freedom of religion or belief lay the foundation for lasting peace. To those steadfast souls who, in the face of relentless persecution, continue their journey with unwavering faith, I echo the words of Christ in John 16:33:

“In this world you will have trouble. But take heart! I have overcome the world.”

I recognise the significance of 2025. Let it be a jubilee year not just in name but in action—a year in which captives and the persecuted find justice, in which those in fear find protection, and in which nations find peace through the promotion of tolerance and interfaith dialogue. That is the sort of country that I want. That is the world that I want. I am sure that everybody here has the same notion.

🕒 9.52am

David Smith >
(North Northumberland) (Lab)

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It is an honour to serve under your chairmanship, Ms Butler. I thank my hon. Friend the Member for Newport West and Islwyn (Ruth Jones) for securing this debate.

I declare an interest as the recently appointed UK special envoy for freedom of religion or belief. In the three months for which I have been in the role, it has become evident to me that the sad truth is that the scale of religious persecution is growing in the world. In 2019, the Truro report, which gave rise to the role that I am now honoured to hold, commented:

“Christianity now faces the possibility of being wiped-out in parts of the Middle East.”


Christians are suffering from external threats almost everywhere.

Here is a story of persecution that is familiar to many in this room. An effigy of a religious leader was paraded through the streets, hysterical graffiti was chalked on the walls, and books were written criticising people as fifth columnists and traitors. They were suspected, mistreated and had only recently been given the freedom to run for public office. That is not Pakistan or Nigeria; it was London in the 1850s, in a frenzy about newly emancipated Catholics. It is a crucial part of this debate to acknowledge that our country’s credibility on freedom of religion or belief is not because we are holier than thou, but because we got it wrong in the past.

Our country’s mistakes on religious toleration and the learning we take from them are the basis on which we can condemn the horror being inflicted on Christians around the world. I am proud to be the MP for North Northumberland. My constituency is home to Holy Island, which witnessed some of the earliest and most sustained attacks on British Christians in the Viking raids. Over the centuries, Northumberland has come to believe deeply in freedom, tolerance and the right for everybody to believe and confess how they wish.

Today, parts of the world such as parts of Nigeria are becoming playgrounds for jihadists, who are freewheeling through the region. I am reminded of the story of Bishop Wilfred, who I met last month. On Christmas Day last year, 47 Christians in Wilfred’s diocese were killed in militant attacks, with another 6,800 believers displaced. We have already heard accounts from around the middle east. In the middle east, the ancient home of three of the world’s global religions, Christian communities are in freefall. In 2014, there were almost 1 million Christians in Iraq; today there are only 200,000. The point is clear: despite the global growth of the Church, Christians remain vulnerable to persecution and conflict.

Dave Doogan >
(Angus and Perthshire Glens) (SNP)

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I congratulate the hon. Gentleman on his appointment as the special envoy for freedom of religion and belief. I wish it had not taken the Government six months to appoint him, but I am sure that he will approach the role with the alacrity that it demands.

The hon. Gentleman talks about the attrition of global Christianity and the oppression of Christian faiths around the world. Does he agree that in the discourse in which we engage in Parliaments in the west and in societies where religion is tolerated, we need to accept that there is no league table of religious persecution? I am concerned that sometimes Christianity is seen as being at the bottom of that league table—that there is a view that religious persecution is wrong, but that some forms of it are more wrong than others. The persecution of Christians often comes out at the wrong end of that equation. Does the hon. Gentleman agree that we need to be crystal clear with the regimes that are persecuting Christians that we believe that it is anathema to what any Government should be doing?

David Smith >

I thank the hon. Gentleman for his warm welcome. I agree that any human rights violation should be treated the same, no matter what religion or belief someone has. I will come on to the broader connection between rights.

There is no country in the world that is a perfectly free society on the one hand, but just happens to persecute Christians on the other. That makes the persecution of Christians, and of freedom of religion or belief more generally, an acid test that reveals the true colours of many regimes that would rather portray themselves as orderly and harmless. Not being allowed to gather for worship means that there is no freedom of peaceful assembly. Not being allowed to evangelise or convert means that there is no freedom of conscience, speech or expression. Being imprisoned for faith means that there is no right to liberty. Without those freedoms, there is no democracy.

When Christians are thrown in prison, they are likely to share cells with Alawites, Uyghurs, Ahmadiyya and other individuals who are not tolerated because of what they do or do not believe. As our hearts break for Christians who are imprisoned, so they break for the many others who are abandoned because of what they believe. FORB is often seen as a canary in the coalmine for freedoms, but the analogy is imperfect because it suggests that the canary does not matter. FORB is better described as the lone nightwatchman who is found bleeding and unconscious outside as the night grows darker and freedom slips away.

The suffering can overwhelm us, but my hope is that the United Kingdom is uniquely well placed to act. Our country has been on a long journey from persecution to pluralism. That gives us a legitimacy with which to challenge other nations and encourage them to do better. We believe something radical, which is that while religious freedom would certainly be good for those who are being persecuted, it would also bless those who are doing the persecuting, by unlocking new opportunities and freedoms for their nations to flourish. I am encouraged that the Foreign Office is serious about keeping human rights as a cornerstone of our foreign policy. I commit to playing my part as the special envoy, pressing the Government as we seek to navigate this new world.

In my constituency of North Northumberland, we share the common-sense values of freedom of speech, fair play and respect for our fellow man. Those values were hard-won over centuries of debate and sometimes conflict. We now have the opportunity to lead the world in avoiding the mistakes we made, and to end the persecution of Christians wherever we see it. Where we see Christian persecution, we know that those of other faiths and beliefs will be suffering too. It is my expectation that this Government will step bravely into the breach to defend them so that, in the words of Jesus quoting the prophet Isaiah, we can

“proclaim good news to the poor, freedom for the captives and recovery of sight for the blind, and set the oppressed free”.

🕒 9.58am

Danny Kruger >

(East Wiltshire) (Con)

It is a pleasure to serve under you, Ms Butler, and to be in a Chamber with so many of my favourite colleagues. I look around and am genuinely so inspired, pleased and gratified to be among this group of parliamentarians of all parties. I do not know what it is that binds us together. Well, I do—we are mostly believers. I pay tribute to everybody here, particularly to the hon. Member for North Northumberland (David Smith); I welcome him to and congratulate him on his very significant appointment. Congratulations too to the hon. Member for Newport West and Islwyn (Ruth Jones), on her championing of this agenda over many years and on calling this debate.

I think it is necessary to acknowledge at the outset—in slight contradiction to the hon. Member for North Northumberland, although I hope that this will not be taken as too Christo-chauvinist a perspective, nor as a sort of Christian supremacist principle—the reason that we in this country defend the liberties we do on behalf of all religions and belief systems around the world, as the hon. Gentleman mentioned. It is because of the Christian foundation to our politics. All our liberties, and the principle of political liberty that this country has sporadically, with some success and some failures, helped to export around the world, derive fundamentally from the Christian foundations of our political institutions and political philosophy. What we think of as the intrinsic value of every human being comes only from one place: the Bible. All our laws and what we now call human rights have that origin. Indeed, the very concept of the secular space, in which people are free to believe anything or nothing, derives ultimately from the Christian principle that everybody has value, and that it is not right to pry into the souls of other men or women.

I do not agree with the hon. Member for North Northumberland that we derive our legitimacy to speak in this space because of our past sins, as a country or as a civilisation. I recognise those sins, but I think we are speaking on this topic because we are the heirs to a tradition that fundamentally recognises the value of Christianity. His regional patriotism for Northumberland is understandable—think of St Cuthbert and the great saints of those days—but I bring him King Alfred, who defended Wessex, including what is now Wiltshire, against the Vikings, pushed back the tide of paganism, restored Christianity to England and ultimately helped to export it to the world. I think it appropriate to be proud of the Christian basis of our politics in this debate.

Jim Shannon >

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The issues of human rights abuse and persecution cannot be divorced. If there is persecution, there is human rights abuse; and if there is human rights abuse, there is persecution. Does the hon. Member agree that that is the central focus for us, as Christians? We stand up for everybody: those with religious faith, with no faith, and with different faiths.

Danny Kruger >

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I absolutely agree. It is of course not just Christians who think that, but it is right that in our country we proudly stand on that ground, and defend the right of everybody to absolute freedom of belief. As I said, I think we do that, ultimately, because the foundation of our politics is Christian.

I will refer quickly to the Holy Land, as other hon. Members have. I have become chair of the APPG on Christianity in the Holy Land, which was instigated by our former colleague David Linden, who is a sad loss to the House—at least on this topic, not on others. He encouraged me to take up the role, so I have been having a number of very powerful and moving conversations with Palestinian Christians about the state of the Church in the Holy Land. In fact, I visited many years ago, in the early 2000s during the second intifada, with Canon Andrew White, who was the Church of England’s representative to the Holy Land in those days and a very great man. We visited Bethlehem, and I saw how absolutely desperate the plight of the Church was at that time. As the hon. Member for Ealing Central and Acton (Dr Huq) acknowledged, the situation has got worse and the state of the Church in the Holy Land is now very dire. I acknowledge that that is the consequence of Israeli Government activity. I recognise that and, as a strong supporter of Israel, I recognise how hard it is for Christians in the west bank to worship.

On a different trip at around the same time, I visited Iraq with Andrew White, just after the invasion. At that point, we could wander around quite freely. There was a sense that there would be a new flourishing of religious freedom in Iraq. We visited St George’s church, for a service to mark its reopening after the war. It was a wonderful moment, with Iraqi Christians, as well as lots of American and British soldiers, present. It felt like the dawning of something wonderful in Iraq. Of course, within months that church was closed, and many of the Christians we had met were dead. The tragedy of the American-led invasion was that Christianity in Iraq has been severely repressed ever since, and we know about the similar phenomena in Syria and elsewhere since. The tragedy of nation-building in the middle east, often led by Christians, has not been good for the Church.

The principal enemy of Christianity globally is not misapplied western liberalism; it is alternative religions and ideologies, in particular Marxism in China, radical Hinduism in India and, of course, radical Islam all over the world. My right hon. Friend the Member for New Forest West (Sir Desmond Swayne) mentioned Nigeria. The situation there is absolutely appalling: 3,000 people a year killed in recent years, and getting on for a quarter of a million people displaced. That is, I think, around half the total global number of those killed and displaced. In Algeria, as the hon. Member for Newport West and Islwyn mentioned, I want to draw particular attention to the Kabyle people, a Berber community in the north of the country who have been resisting the Islamist ideology of the Algerian Government for many years and who have suffered severe persecution. They are attempting self-determination and their slogan is, “In the name of all beliefs”. I want to acknowledge that—going back to my original point—when we defend Christianity, we are defending everybody, and I pay tribute to that campaign.

I want to finish by asserting this point. Christianity is established in the west and therefore we think of it as the dominant philosophy, even though in many ways in our country I do not feel it is anymore. It is the shield of minorities everywhere, and I think we need a stronger promotion of the value of Christianity in every society. We should not simply be defensive in debates like this about defending the status quo and defending Christians; we should be supporting those who promote Christianity, sympathetically of course and always peacefully. The promotion of Christianity is a moral good, because wherever Christianity is, life is better. I pay tribute to the hon. Member for Strangford (Jim Shannon). I could not put it better than he did: in an absolute sense, Christianity is good for people.

I pay tribute to Fiona Bruce, the hon. Member for North Northumberland’s predecessor as special envoy—a great friend to many of us and a pioneer in this space in the previous Parliament and over many years for her work promoting religious freedom and belief in this country and around the world. It is a great shame that the Bill she was championing fell before the general election. I do not know whether the hon. Member for North Northumberland would have welcomed it, or if the Government have any intention of reviving the measures proposed in it, which were to establish the position of the envoy on a statutory footing, properly resourced, rather than being something that, as it were, exists at the whim of the Government. I regret that the Bill fell, but I pay tribute to her. I pay tribute particularly to the hon. Member for North Northumberland. It is a tremendous thing that he is now in post; he has a great and important role to do.

Lastly, to end on a note of hope, there are great things happening in the world. Christianity is not oppressed, downtrodden or downcast. We are seeing very positive signs of growth and revival. In China, the house church movement has won many millions of converts. Here in the UK, I am encouraged. There was a report from the Bible Society and Theos recently called, “The Quiet Revival” which demonstrates that, quietly, we are seeing new growth in our faith in the UK. On that basis, I have confidence in the future.

Dawn Butler >

(in the Chair)

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I would like to get everybody in for this important debate. We are looking to get to the Minister at around 10.28 am, so you have about four minutes per speech, please.

 10.08am

Rachael Maskell >

(York Central) (Lab/Co-op)

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It is a pleasure to see you in the Chair, Ms Butler.

As we prepare ourselves for Easter, it is right that we turn our eyes to those persecuted around the world for following Christ, so I pay tribute to my hon. Friend the Member for Newport West and Islwyn (Ruth Jones).

It has been poignant and humbling to listen to the speeches by Members today, as it is sobering and challenging to read the reports of those who share the same faith as me but whose experiences are so different. Today, around a third of the population, and growing, share the Christian faith in the far reaches of the world, but for many their experiences are so different. As we ruminate over the census of decline here in the UK, we see the persecution of Christians around the world, and the sharp intolerance and violence that their faith often draws.

The Open Doors world watchlist, Aid to the Church in Need, overseas organisations and charities, among many, expose the deep scale of persecution on the basis of faith. Most conflicts and war crimes are also associated with faith, and we know that about 380 million Christians across our planet are killed or experience high levels of persecution because of their faith. We see suppression and imprisonment of people, and the destruction of churches. If there is not such sexual or physical violence against Christians in the west, persecution can often show itself as psychological or spiritual suppression of the all too few who dare to speak the name of Jesus freely—even in a place like the UK, where there are no bounds but people still dare not speak his name.

There are three policy areas that I will touch on briefly. One is covered by the Home Office—ensuring that we have safe and legal routes for people who experience persecution to come to the UK. We talk about such routes, but the reality is so different, and because I represent a human rights city, that is a vital point.

The second area is covered by the Foreign Office. ODA has an incredible impact, ensuring more security and greater resilience, and it is so important that we return to 0.7%. Even in a world where our global economy is so disrupted, we must find space to restore ODA to 0.7%.

Thirdly, on trade, I think about China, as I always do. It is 15th on the Open Doors world watchlist, yet we have just signed a trade agreement with it. How much emphasis was put on the need for freedom of religion and belief in China alongside the ink that marked that agreement? We think, of course, of the suppression of the Church and its leaders in China, and of the public denial of the

sacraments to Jimmy Lai. It is so important that we review our policy. We said when we left the EU that we would put human rights at the heart of our trade agreements, but we have work to do to achieve that.

This week, I was listening to a sermon ahead of Easter, which reminded me of persecuted Christians around the world. It talked about coming to the end of the road, where there is no hope, as the Israelites came to the Red sea and the disciples came to the cross. It marked so much as the end. In a nation and world in chaos and crisis, it is hard to find hope. For many persecuted Christians, who are imprisoned and tortured or living in fear, it is hard to find hope. There is such little hope in politics, on our streets or across the world. Yet the sermon went on to say:

“and then there was Jesus”.

That spins logic, and everything else, on its head. The Red sea opened. There was resurrection Sunday. For all of us who put our trust in Christ, we know that there is eternal hope.

It is with that hope that we see the most incredible witness of those who are persecuted. Their hope and their unfathomable joy reminds us all that no regime can suppress the cast-iron security that the Easter message brings. Such hope could not hold Jesus in a grave. It enables persecuted Christians, and all of us, to know that no matter what we face, Jesus is always with us and always will be. As we invest in Him, we invest in ourselves, and have such certainty that the hope in this broken world, including for those who are persecuted, will never be destroyed and can only be found in Him.

🕒 10.12am

Tim Farron >

(Westmorland and Lonsdale) (LD)

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It is an absolute honour, Ms Butler, to serve under your guidance this morning. I pay particular tribute to the hon. Member for Newport West and Islwyn (Ruth Jones) for starting the debate so very well.

I think that to be a Liberal is to stand up for the rights of people that we do not like and do not agree with. It is easy to stand up for the minorities that we agree with. But on this occasion, I speak as somebody who I guess belongs to the minority on planet Earth and indeed, if we believe the last United Kingdom census, in this country: I am a Christian.

As other people have said, I will try to race through my remarks, so that others can get their fair share of the time available. I pay tribute to Open Doors for its world watchlist and for the work it has done in exposing persecution around the world. I will just focus on one or two instances, in particular the state of Libya.

Libya is very important for so many reasons. It is the fourth most persecuted place on planet Earth for Christians. Only 0.5%—35,000—of the people in Libya are Christians. If a woman in Libya is even suspected of being interested in Christianity, they will face horrific abuse, sexual violence, house arrest, forced marriage and even, so to speak, “honour killing”. Neither men nor women are spared. They are subjected to losing their jobs, their homes and their livelihoods. Such incidents are not isolated in Libya; there are widespread attacks upon Christians and suspected Christians right across the country, and the total instability there makes things even worse.

I highlight Libya because it is the country through which so many refugees who may end up in this country go through. When we talk about the channel crossings, let us put things in perspective. Whatever dangers people put themselves through to cross the channel—and they are huge dangers—they are absolutely nothing compared to the hideous dangers that people go through to cross Libya, in order to get themselves to the Mediterranean in the first place. Eritrea is a country where 44% of the population is Christian, and where young men and women find themselves forcibly conscripted indefinitely, very often to kill their own people. We need to be aware of that when we are talking about the refugee crisis.

It is not just failing states where there is a threat to Christians. We see Christian nationalism around the world, where Christianity is appropriated for political purposes—either to shore up the regime, country or state, or one’s own political party. I counsel all Christians to be deeply suspicious of those who seek to appropriate the gospel for political purposes. China has been mentioned as well—a country where, on the face of it, Christianity is tolerated. However, branches of the Church, house churches and those faithful to Christ alone who will not bow the knee to the state, find themselves increasingly under serious threat.

It is worth touching on for a moment why Christians are the most persecuted group on planet Earth, though they are not the only persecuted group—we should stand with all others as well, as I said in my opening remarks. Christians believe we have ultimate allegiance somewhere else. Famously in Matthew 22:20, Jesus is approached by someone who is trying to catch him out by asking, “Are you going to pay taxes to the temple? Are you going to pay taxes to Caesar?” Jesus picks up a coin and says, “Whose image is on this coin?” The image is of Caesar’s. Jesus famously says, “Give to Caesar what is Caesar’s, and to God what is God’s.” That may or may not be an instruction to pay taxes, but it is definitely about giving the image-bearer—or the image-provider—all of what the image entails. That coin had Caesar’s image on it, but God’s image is on us—so yes, give the coin to Caesar, but give all of oneself to God. One can see why that is deeply counter-cultural and offensive.

I heard Justin Welby being interviewed by Laura Kuenssberg the other weekend, as many hon. Members will have. The most irritating part of the interview, from my perspective, is when Justin Welby did not push back when Laura Kuenssberg said, “Why isn’t the Church more in tune with the culture?” That is because we are not meant to be. We are counter-cultural in every place and generation, which will wind up dictators and so-called democrats. That is why I pay tribute to the Prime Minister for appointing the hon. Member for North Northumberland (David Smith), and for recognising that freedom of religion and belief is something we must always fight for because especially for Christians, as we live our counter-cultural lives, we will always be offensive following one who caused the greatest of all offences and died on a cross for all of our sins.

Dawn Butler >

(in the Chair)


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In order to fit everybody in, I will put a two-minute time limit on speeches.

 10.18am

Lizzi Collinge >

(Morecambe and Lunesdale) (Lab)

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It is a pleasure to serve under your chairship for the first time today, Ms Butler. As I have two minutes, I will be very brief.

The persecution of Christians was brought to my attention by one of my constituents, a member of the Heysham Free Methodist Church. I was appalled to learn of the threat of violence from so-called social media influencers and Hindu nationalist leaders; people have been displaced, with their homes and businesses destroyed, and that is absolutely abhorrent. I wish us to speak with one voice on this matter, and to speak against the state enforcement of religion and state tolerance of religious persecution; that is absolutely unacceptable.


I want to call particular attention to the persecution of those who hold no faith, a reality that too often goes unrecognised. In 2022, the president of the Humanist Association of Nigeria, Mubarak Bala, was sentenced to 24 years in prison for a supposedly blasphemous Facebook post. As of January this year, we have blasphemy laws in 91 countries in the world, including in Northern Ireland. Blasphemy laws lead to the harassment and persecution that Mr Bala suffered, as well as that faced by people of all faiths and none. That must end. Mr Bala will be coming to the all-party parliamentary group Humanist Group on 14 May, and I invite hon. Members to join us and hear more of his story.

This debate shows us that people of faith and no faith can have a powerful connection and can find common cause. No one should be persecuted for their faith or lack thereof. Religious freedom, freedom of thought and freedom of belief must be actively protected and are worth fighting for.

 10.20am

Sir John Hayes >

(South Holland and The Deepings) (Con)

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That we live in a strange age is beyond doubt. The guilt-fuelled self-loathing that poisons so many tiny bourgeois minds extends beyond the disowning of where we have come from—our shared history—to being insecure about who we are. To deny the Judeo-Christian roots of western civilisation is to ignore the essence of the values, which by underpinning what we share make us capable of the judgments necessary to know what is right. Widespread insecurity about our Christian heritage neuters the response, by people who should know better, to the persecution of Christians.

The hon. Member for Newport West and Islwyn (Ruth Jones) spoke about parliamentary questions; I asked one when 70 Christians were found beheaded in the Congo. The response I got was full of broadly drawn liberal platitudes about universality and multilateralism, and it said that the Government were saddened—not outraged, disgusted or determined to do something, but saddened. Well, that quiet sadness is an acquiescence of people who, in G. K. Chesterton’s words, exercise unquestioning tolerance. He said, “Tolerance is the virtue of the man without convictions.”

The truth is that throughout the world Christians face discrimination, largely in the name of the Islamisation of parts of the world that used to be Christian. The middle east is a classic example, where the number of Christians has fallen sharply over my lifetime and where Christians continue to be persecuted—in the birthplace of the son of God, bear in mind. In an age that falsely divides people into victims and victors, too often people in the west see Christians as victors even where they are being persecuted.

I simply ask the Minister: will he prioritise this issue? Will he put on a statutory footing the role of the person designated to defend minority religions? Will he make sure that the Government’s policy in respect of aid and foreign affairs addresses the persecution of Christians worldwide?

🕒 10.22am

Carla Lockhart >
(Upper Bann) (DUP)

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I thank the hon. Member for Newport West and Islwyn (Ruth Jones) for securing this debate.


Freedom of religion or belief is not a western ideal. It is a universal human right, enshrined in article 18 of the universal declaration of human rights. Yet millions of our Christian brothers and sisters, especially women and girls, are denied that right every single day. For many of us in the UK, faith is a core part of our lives and identity. However, too often Government policy has treated faith as an optional extra. This debate is not about abstract policy, it is about people—men, women and children—who suffer for nothing more than professing faith in Jesus Christ. I am thankful every day for my ability to profess my Christian faith, and to live in a society where we have civil and religious liberties, and I am thankful for those who have fought for those liberties.

Today, I focus my comments on how persecution disproportionately affects women and girls. These women face a double vulnerability; persecuted for their faith and gender, and often suffering in silence and invisibility. I want to commend Open Doors for its fantastic work in Parliament and across the globe. If we think of gender-specific persecution, we only have to think of forced marriages, domestic and sexual violence, psychological abuse and isolation, and abduction and disappearance. Many voices go unheard, and unfortunately, because of time, we are unable to hear those voices today. In Nigeria, in 2024 alone, more than 4,100 Christians were killed for their faith; over 80% of all reported Christian deaths worldwide. Church leaders, worshippers and entire villages were kidnapped and killed for no reason other than their faith.

Given the huge changes in international relations in the last few months, can the Minister assure me that the freedom of religious belief remains a foreign policy priority for this Government?

🕒 10.24am

Jim Allister >
(North Antrim) (TUV)

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It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Ms Butler.


The first Christian martyr was Stephen. Stephen was martyred simply because of his loyalty to the head of the Christian Church, Lord Jesus Christ. Stephen has been followed, down the eons of time, by millions of others who have been persecuted and put to death for simple adherence to the basic Christian message of redemption through the sole mediation of Christ. There is nothing offensive in that and yet it offends. The offensiveness has caused many to lose their lives, and that is a shocking indictment of the wider world. We take for granted all of the freedoms and liberties we have, but a debate such as this rightly causes us to reflect on those who exercise the freedoms that jeopardise their own lives. Think about Iran, where there has been an increase in the imprisonment of Christians from 22 in 2023 to 96 in 2024, indicating the trend. Think of Afghanistan, where the Taliban’s return and their extreme sharia law means many people have been executed simply for converting to Christianity. That is a sobering reminder of the values that we have, should hold to, and never take for granted. I finish with words from the beatitudes:

“Blessed are those who are persecuted for righteousness’ sake, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven.”

🕒 10.26am

Sammy Wilson >

(East Antrim) (DUP)

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Jesus of course warned his disciples that in this world they would have tribulation. Many Christians across the world have experienced that tribulation in their own personal lives. Over 340 million Christians are actively persecuted for their faith. That ranges from discrimination, to imprisonment, torture and death. I think many of us find it difficult to contemplate and comprehend that people making the choice to be a Christian know that, in some countries, that is what they will suffer.

One of the most moving experiences I have had in this House was at the Open Doors event, where I met a pastor from Nigeria, who told me that his church of 400 members was down to 22 because most of them had been killed. He was going back to be their pastor and to lead them, regardless of the consequences. I do not know how many of us in this room would have that kind of bravery. In this Parliament, we have a duty to keep highlighting these issues through the questions we ask and the debates that we have. The Government have power to do things through their trade, aid and asylum policies. One of the bishops in Syria told me that the Christian Church had been decimated in Syria, but even when refugees went to refugee camps, they were the first to be persecuted and discriminated against there. I think our asylum policy has to bear in mind those groups fleeing persecution and still being persecuted as they should have priority. There is much we can do and I hope that debates such as this one encourage the Government to do it.

Dawn Butler >

(in the Chair)

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I would like to give the mover of the motion two minutes at the end.

🕒 10.29am

Monica Harding >

(Esher and Walton) (LD)

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It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Ms Butler. I thank the hon. Member for Newport West and Islwyn (Ruth Jones) for securing this debate, which is as important as it is timely—I am pleased to be speaking today as we break for the Easter recess.

The right to practise one’s faith freely, without hindrance or discrimination, is fundamental. The Liberal Democrats have a proud history of liberal universalism. We believe that all people should be able to live their life free from fear, including fear of religious intolerance; that human rights are applicable everywhere; and that the universal declaration of human rights, which enshrines the freedoms of thought, conscience, faith and religious practice, has the same resonance now as it did when it was enshrined almost 80 years ago.

It is distressing, therefore, to see Christians across the world persecuted and, worse still, to know that for many the situation is deteriorating. Today, at least 318 million Christians live lives subject to high levels of persecution and discrimination—an increase of 12% on 2021. Moreover, the number of countries that Open Doors considers to be conducting extreme or very high levels of persecution against Christians tripled in the past decade from 23 nations to 60.

It is no coincidence that those statistics rise in parallel to increasing levels of conflict and instability around the world. Four of the top five nations in which Open Doors judges that the most extreme persecution of Christians takes place—Somalia, Yemen, Libya and Sudan—have suffered particularly acute civil strife and are highly fragile. When nations collapse into violence, it is often minority groups, whether ethnic or religious, who suffer first and most. Sudan, where the world’s largest humanitarian catastrophe is taking place and where more than 25 million people are in need of food support, is home to more than 2 million Christians who have been swept up in the brutal conflict. More than 150 churches have been destroyed—some deliberately targeted—and there are accounts of Christian leaders who have been murdered.

Sir John Hayes >

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Of course that is true, but it is not the whole story because the persecution of Christians predates much of that. For example, in the middle east, the Ottoman empire gave licence for persecution on exactly the grounds I described: aggressive Islamism perpetuated by the Ottomans led to the persecution of Christians, particularly in Palestine, Bethlehem and similar places. Conflict matters, but it is not all that matters.

Monica Harding >

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In conflict, religious and ethnic minorities are persecuted.

British investment, through international development spending, peacebuilding and deconfliction, reduces the risk of religious intolerance. I am deeply concerned that, as with so many vital areas encompassed by official development assistance, British efforts to safeguard freedom of religion or belief will suffer because of the Government’s decision to slash development spending to the lowest level this century. Previous aid cuts fell hard on programmes focused on those issues. When ODA was reduced from 0.7% of GNI to 0.5% in 2021, the Institute of Development Studies found that some programmes protecting freedom of religion in south Asia saw their budgets plunge by 50%.

The burdens are borne most of all by women and girls, who disproportionately face the horrors of religious intolerance whenever it appears. As evidence given by the APPG to the International Development Committee in 2021 attests, religious intolerance often goes hand in hand with the repression of women and girls. We tend to see that most clearly when it results in girls losing access to education. That deprivation is most acute when applied to women from religious minorities, for whom, as the APPG said,

“their gender acts as a further marginalising layer of identity”.

Freedom of belief and gender equality are both cherished objectives of the Government’s development policy, yet cuts to aid spending will result in setbacks on both fronts.

I am also disturbed by the growing trend of authoritarian states using the digital weapons at their disposal to control and repress minority religious populations, including Christians. We see that in China, a country home to almost 70 million Christians—the single largest Christian minority population anywhere in the world—which has taken to deploying surveillance cameras inside and outside houses of worship capable of identifying believers. China also uses biometric data as a tool to monitor and therefore control faith groups. It is particularly concerning that the extent of that repression, and the potential for it to become still greater, has increased in tandem with technological development, and I urge the Government to monitor that closely.

Britain must play a role in safeguarding religious minorities and Christian communities across the world. In the past, the UK has helped to play a convening role, bringing together Governments, non-governmental organisations and civil society organisations—for instance, through the declaration of humanity, which opposes religious interpretations that are used to justify conflict-related sexual violence and other crimes.

As the UK makes the moral and strategic error of cutting development spending, it is critical that we do all we can to preserve our diplomatic capabilities. I am glad that the Prime Minister has appointed a special envoy for freedom of religion or belief, and I welcome the hon. Member for North Northumberland (David Smith) to his role. However, to be maximally effective, that role must have dedicated support from within the FCDO, so can the Minister share what FCDO resources are available to support the work of the envoy? In view of the darkening situation for Christians around the world, is the Minister willing to reassess the Government’s decision not to legislate in this Session to put the envoy on a statutory footing?

Persecution based on faith should have no place in today’s world. The worsening global outlook for tolerance is an indictment of increasing levels of violence, conflict and extremism, and it is an invitation to redouble our efforts, through diplomacy and development, to protect religious minorities—Christians and others. This is the worst time for the Government to make such deep cuts to our international aid budget, which supports projects that protect religious minorities. I urge the Government to row back on those plans; to return to the challenge of carrying the beacon for human rights, including Christian rights, in these most deadly times; and to match today’s rhetoric with action.

 10.36am

Andrew Rosindell >
(Romford) (Con)

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It is, as always, a pleasure to serve with you in the Chair, Ms Butler. I commend the hon. Member for Newport West and Islwyn (Ruth Jones) for raising this vital issue in the House today, as we approach the most holy period in the Christian calendar, to remind us of the appalling persecution of Christians throughout the world. I will not mention every country, as so many have been mentioned today, which highlights that it is dangerous to be a Christian in parts of our planet, and we in this country must stand up against that kind of persecution and oppression.

I commend all Members who have contributed to this wonderful debate, but I draw particular attention to some of the remarks of my right hon. Friend the Member for South Holland and The Deepings (Sir John Hayes), which were replicated by my hon. Friend the Member for East Wiltshire (Danny Kruger). I am looking at the crown above the door to this Chamber. There is a cross on that crown, which tells us that our constitution, our liberties, our freedoms and our British way of life are founded on Christian values. Whichever political party we represent, it is vital that we defend those traditions.

We are here today to discuss a deep moral urgency. This is not an abstract issue; it is about the very real suffering of people—men, women and children—who are targeted, attacked, imprisoned and even murdered simply for their faith. Christians have faced oppression for centuries. At home, that persecution has found new ways of expressing itself, but abroad it is still very much the same—murder, state-sanctioned discrimination and violent oppression. Today, around the world, Christians are being oppressed on a staggering scale.

First, in the light of the Government’s efforts to begin removing sanctions against Syria and their stated desire to work with the interim Government of that country, it is imperative that we ask the Minister what assurances the UK Government have received that this new approach to Syria will not come at the expense of religious minorities. How will progress be monitored? What can be done to ensure that a codified constitution in Syria represents everybody equally, especially Christians? What discussions has the United Kingdom had with our partners in Washington and Europe to ensure that any future settlement does not come at the expense of those vulnerable communities in Syria? Crucially, what steps are the Government taking to support displaced Christian families and to ensure accountability for the reported atrocities we have been hearing so much about?

In recent months, we have observed what appears to be a growing alignment between the Government of the United Kingdom and China, a country where religious oppression has become ever more brazen. The Government have announced an audit of UK-China relations. Will Christian persecution be a key part of that audit? Have individual cases—for example, the recent arrest of Bishop Shao Zhumin, who was detained for refusing to pay a fine related to a mass that the Government of China deemed illegal—been raised at the highest levels? How are the UK Government ensuring that their diplomatic efforts with the People’s Republic of China include pressing for greater protections for religious minorities—especially, of course, for Christians?

Having read this year’s Open Doors “World Watch List” report, which many Members rightly highlighted, I am sure that I speak for all Members across the House when I say that, while we welcome its publication, its revelations are no less troubling than those of the previous year. Sadly, there seems to be very little progress. In south Asia, Christian communities continue to endure grave challenges and are under increasing social pressures. In Pakistan, blasphemy laws continue to be disproportionately weaponised against

Christians, with widespread reports of abductions, forced conversions and systematic discrimination in day-to-day life. In Bangladesh, rising hostility and subtle everyday forms of persecution, particularly in rural areas, have created an environment of fear and exclusion.

What representations have the Government made to those Commonwealth countries? How is British aid being used to safeguard religious minorities and promote genuine freedom of belief? What more can the Commonwealth of Nations, as an organisation, do to promote religious freedom, and will the Minister use the Government’s influence to ensure that the Commonwealth acts where it can across Commonwealth nations in this respect?

Nigeria is another Commonwealth nation that many Members highlighted. The situation there grows more dire by the day. Christian villages are being attacked, with churches burned to the ground and priests kidnapped and executed. Boko Haram and Islamic State West Africa undermine the rights of anyone who does not subscribe to their extremist ideologies. Have the Government sought assurances from the Nigerian Government on protecting Christian communities, especially in vulnerable regions of that country, and what support is being given to enhance the security and resilience of these communities against such threats?

Sir John Hayes >

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To be blunt, we have a lot of influence in Nigeria, so I would go as far as to say, “No trade and no aid until their Government act on this.”

Andrew Rosindell >

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My right hon. Friend makes an excellent point. We have to get tough with countries that behave in this way, and we have to uphold the freedoms of these people. That is part of our heritage, and we should ensure that the rest of the world receives our support where minorities are threatened and persecuted. I could go on with examples—from countries ravaged by war to those where legislative oppression cloaks persecution in legality. We could all do so, but the suffering of Christians is global and unrelenting, and our response must be equally tireless and resolute.

The last Government introduced the position of the Prime Minister’s special envoy for freedom of religion or belief: Fiona Bruce, a wonderful person whom we very much miss. I am delighted that the current Government have renewed that commitment by appointing the hon. Member for North Northumberland (David Smith), but will the Minister outline what progress has been made since the new envoy’s appointment? How is the envoy working across all Departments and with international partners to protect Christians at risk, and will the Minister enshrine the appointment as a permanent part of how we do things by making it law, as Fiona Bruce attempted, so that we always have someone who fulfils that very important role? What more can we do to support and amplify the envoy’s position to ensure it delivers meaningful change?

Let me be clear that this is not a partisan issue. It is about standing up for the fundamental right to freedom of religion. It is about defending those who are suffering simply for their faith. We cannot—we must not—remain silent. Britain has a proud history of standing up for the religiously persecuted. We must remember that if we do not defend religious freedom abroad, we weaken it at home. A world in which Christians are persecuted with impunity is a world in which faith is no longer safe. Our message today must be clear: we will not stand idly by. We will not allow the persecution of Christians to be ignored any longer.

I end with a passage from the Gospel of St Matthew that feels all too relevant today:

“Behold, I am sending you out as sheep in the midst of wolves, so be wise as serpents and innocent as doves...you will be hated by all for my name’s sake.”

Let those words remind us of our duty. The question is: what will His Majesty’s Government do to defend the freedom of religion and the rights of Christians, and to prevent, condemn and stop persecution around the world?

 10.46am

The Minister of State, Foreign, Commonwealth and Development Office >

(Stephen Doughty)

It is a pleasure to serve under your chairpersonship, Ms Butler, for your first time in the role. I am particularly grateful to my constituency neighbour, my hon. Friend the Member for Newport West and Islwyn (Ruth Jones), for securing this debate and for highlighting many shocking examples of the persecution of Christians around the world.

I thank all right hon. and hon. Members for their contributions. I especially thank my hon. Friend the Member for North Northumberland (David Smith), our new UK special envoy for freedom of religion and belief. I welcome his appointment and commend his efforts. I look forward to engaging with him over the coming months to discuss his work so far and what the Government can do to support it.

As Proverbs 31:8-9 reminds us, we must

“speak up for those who cannot speak for themselves”.

That has been the tone of many of the contributions today, with Members representing the stories and the lived reality for many persecuted Christians around the world in diverse, difficult and extremely dangerous—often life-threatening—contexts. I am glad that we have heard such passionate contributions, despite the fact that they represent some extremely horrific situations.

I declare an interest as a Christian, who has also worked with Open Doors and other related organisations in the past to highlight these cases. I am conscious of the example of my namesake, Stephen, which the hon. and learned Member for North Antrim (Jim Allister) reflected on. Indeed, the name of this place in Welsh is San Steffan, not Westminster, which is a reminder to me when I walk in through the entrance to this place. I remember asking my mum as a young child why I was called Stephen and what was the story, and reading about the horrific persecution and death that St Stephen endured.

I am also privileged to represent Cardiff South and Penarth, a constituency rich in religious diversity and tolerance. Its Christian communities encompass Catholic, Protestant, Greek Orthodox, Nigerian Pentecostal—every kind of church and chapel—which represents its diversity and wonder. Those churches also sit alongside mosques, temples, gurdwaras and synagogues, and those who have no belief. That makes my community beautiful and rich, but sadly that is not the experience in many parts of the world, as we have heard.

The statistics bear repeating: 380 million Christians face high levels of persecution and discrimination, which is one in seven believers. Nearly 4,500 were murdered for their faith last year, and over 200,000 were forced into hiding or exile, each with their own terrible story to tell. For many in parts of Africa, the middle east and south and east Asia, persecution, harassment and discrimination is part of daily life. Of course, that is the reality for many people of many different beliefs and in minority communities, but we have heard about Christians specifically today.

Through the course of my own duties and my personal life, I have met many courageous Christians who have suffered for their faith. Indeed, I reflect on the visit that I undertook just a few weeks ago to Ukraine, where I met a priest in Bucha who had worn civilian clothes during the Russian invasion after a fellow priest was killed. He showed me some absolutely brutal and shocking atrocities that had been carried out by the Russians. He had to bury members of his congregation. Indeed, he helped to dig their graves.

On a personal trip to Jerusalem a few years ago, I visited St George’s cathedral, where I heard of the abuse that Christians face from extremists, even in that holy city, including being spat on and persecuted. Many other examples of suffering have been raised today, and while I will not be able to cover all of them I will attempt to address some of the key points.

First, let me say that the UK remains strongly committed to freedom of religion or belief. No one should live in fear because of what they do or do not believe in. That is why we are championing freedom, tolerance and mutual respect through our work on the international stage, our bilateral work, and our programme funding. Indeed, my hon. Friend the Member for North Northumberland has been busy with international engagements and outreach since his appointment. Alongside his efforts, we are using our extensive diplomatic network across the world, and dedicated FCDO staff, to champion freedom of religion or belief and to challenge the persecution of Christians and other religious minorities.

I pay tribute to the work of organisations like Open Doors; its crucial world watchlist shines a light on Christian suffering around the world. To the many brave human rights defenders drawing Government attention to these vital issues at huge personal risk, I say that we stand with you. Members have referred to many of the recommendations in the Truro report. We welcome the report and its recommendations, which we are considering carefully.

A number of Members have raised the very difficult decision taken by the Prime Minister, with conflicts overseas undermining our security and prosperity at home, to cut our ODA budget from 0.5% to 0.3%. The Prime Minister and myself have been clear on many occasions that this was not an announcement that we were happy to make. We will of course do everything we can to move towards rebuilding our capacity. Our commitment to freedom of religion or belief and to tackling the persecution of Christians and other minorities will not waiver. I have noted the various points that have been made about specific countries and programmes —the envoy, my hon. Friend the Member for North Northumberland, will have heard those too.

I highlight the important work that we do in our programme funding, including through the John Bunyan fund, which enables us to target funding through our posts and centrally to support our objectives on freedom of religion or belief. We also build awareness of relevant issues among our staff and our platforms through seminars and training. We hosted a seminar last summer for religious engagement on foreign policy. We mark and use the important international dates and campaigns, such as Red Wednesday, to reinforce our commitment to promoting and protecting freedom of religion or belief.

We also continue to work at the international and multilateral level. That includes our work through the United Nations, where we regularly engage and participate in interactive dialogues with the special rapporteur. Last month our special envoy, my hon. Friend the Member for North Northumberland, was in Geneva to do that in a session on the intersection between freedom of religion or belief and torture. We have participated in different dialogues in New York, and we also co-sponsor side events at the Human Rights Council.

We regularly raise freedom of religion or belief during the universal periodic review process, which has been mentioned a number of times. In November, we specifically made statements on Bhutan, Nicaragua and Qatar. In the case of Nicaragua, we noted our increasing alarm at the deteriorating human rights situation, including the closure of Church-affiliated organisations, and the harassment and arbitrary detention of members of the Church.

I will give some other examples of the work that we have been doing, because this is very much at the heart of the efforts that the Foreign Secretary and other Ministers have been engaged in. Last December, the Foreign Secretary wrote to Pastor Lorenzo Rosales Fajardo, imprisoned in Cuba, to express his solidarity and calling for his release. We were delighted when he was released in January. Freedom of religion or belief is also crucial to our work in Pakistan. The Under-Secretary of State for Foreign, Commonwealth and Development Affairs, my hon. Friend the Member for Lincoln (Mr Falconer), visited in November to promote that work during meetings with Government Ministers, business and religious leaders.

Members have raised a number of countries. Many right hon. and hon. Members raised the situation in Nigeria. I reassure colleagues that we regularly raise freedom of religion or belief with the Nigerian Government. Of course, the drivers of intercommunal violence are complex, and through our security and defence partnership we engage with our key stakeholders to address that. We regularly raise freedom of religion or belief with the Nigerian Government, including during their periodic review in January 2024. We condemn all instances of intercommunal violence. We raise concerns at the United Nations Security Council. Through our £38 million Strengthening Peace and Resilience in Nigeria programme, we are attempting to address the root causes of conflict in the middle belt of the country and beyond. That partnership builds the capacity of Nigeria's security forces to tackle violence against civilian communities, including those of different religious backgrounds and beliefs.

Many colleagues mentioned Syria. We have made it absolutely clear that the Government who are forming there must ensure the protection of all civilians, set out a clear path to transitional justice and make progress towards an inclusive society, which must include the protection of diverse religious minorities and communities in the country. Let me also be clear that we will judge them by their actions. I am the Minister with responsibility for sanctions and we are closely monitoring the situation there.

China, of course, was mentioned by many. Let me be clear that the United Kingdom Government stand firm on human rights in China, including on the repression of minorities. We raise our concerns at the highest levels. The Prime Minister, the Foreign Secretary, the Chancellor and the Energy Secretary have all raised human rights recently with their counterparts in China.

In Iraq, our specific freedom of religion and belief objectives are absolutely threaded through the programme work of the British embassy in Baghdad and the British consulate-general in Erbil. In Algeria, the British embassy in Algiers has raised freedom of religious belief with the Algerian authorities on a number of occasions, and did so again recently. On 10 February, our ambassador met the Minister of religious affairs and we will continue to raise concerns, including in relation to Kabyle and the operation of the Protestant Church of Algeria.

On Libya, last year we co-sponsored a human rights resolution at the Human Rights Council relating to these issues. Of course, the Holy Land itself was regularly referred to in the debate; I referred to it myself in my own opening remarks. Respect for freedom of religion and belief, and the promotion of inter-religious dialogue, play an absolutely important role in securing a sustainable peace.

Our consulate-general in Jerusalem regularly meets and discusses issues with the Christian community in the Occupied Palestinian Territories, including with the patriarchs and the heads of churches in Jerusalem.

We continue to press for the Democratic People’s Republic of Korea to collaborate with the international community and to take steps towards implementing its human rights obligations. Obviously, the situation there is hugely concerning, not only for Christians but for so many other people. Christians are categorised there as a “hostile” class, according to the special rapporteur on the DPRK.

We continually raise human rights concerns with the Eritrean Government. Indeed, the UK special envoy for the horn of Africa and the Red sea raised human rights during her visit to Eritrea in June last year, and we continue to work on that issue closely.


Obviously, the situation in Sudan is absolutely horrific. That is why it has been so key in the Foreign Secretary’s efforts, and indeed in our commitments on ODA and in our work at the United Nations Security Council.

Of course, Iran was also mentioned, and we are absolutely committed to holding it to account for its restrictions on freedom of religion or belief, including at the UN’s third committee in October.

In conclusion, I reiterate the Government’s absolute commitment on these issues, and the importance of them to me personally as a Minister, and indeed to the Foreign Secretary. I will continue to do important work with our special envoy, my hon. Friend the Member for North Northumberland, and with organisations such as Open Doors. I very much welcome the different examples that have been raised by right hon. and hon. Members today. It is very important that these voices are heard, and that the situations are exposed. Members can be absolutely assured of our commitment to work with them in tackling persecution against Christians, and indeed in tackling persecution against anyone on the basis of their religion or their non-belief around the world. That is the right thing for this country to do and we will continue to do it.

🕒 10.58am

Ruth Jones >

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It has been a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Ms Butler, and I thank all right hon. and hon. Members for attending this debate, and for participating in it in such an informed and knowledgeable way.

Hopefully, we have highlighted the plight of persecuted Christians around the world. I hope that we have amplified their voices, so that people here in the UK will wake up and realise just what is going on across the world today. I especially thank my hon. Friend the Member for North Northumberland (David Smith), the special envoy for freedom of religion or belief, for attending the debate, and I look forward to following his work as he represents the UK on the world stage.

It has also been good to hear from the Minister about what he and his team have been doing, and I look forward to seeing him continue his work to promote religious freedom, especially for Christians across the world. We need to make sure that we are turning laudable words into concrete actions to protect and support our Christian brothers and sisters across the world.

Question put and agreed to.

Resolved,

That this House has considered the matter of the persecution of Christians.