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Towards a biblical mind

# Pitfalls in combatting persecution

By Judd Birdsall

## Summary

A great number of Western Christians have laudably invested their time, money, and energy to confront the massive global challenge of religious persecution. Sadly, their effectiveness has too often been limited or undermined by several common mistakes. This paper explores seven of these pitfalls and points to Christian principles that enable us to more effectively advance religious freedom for all. My goal in pointing out these dangers is not to condemn any particular organisation or tactical approach, but rather to commend a more considered, capacious, and constructive promotion of religious freedom.

## Introduction

While out for a walk on a recent visit to Basel, Switzerland I happened across a memorial plaque to the sixteenth-century French Protestant theologian Sebastian Castellio. Etched on the plaque I saw Castellio's famously succinct denunciation of religious persecution: 'to kill a man is not to protect a doctrine, but is to kill a man.'<sup>1</sup>

I sat down on a bench next to the memorial to reflect on Castellio's life and legacy. In many ways he had a tragic existence. He had a falling out with John Calvin and lost his position as Rector of the College of Geneva. Despite being one of Europe's most promising intellectuals, Castellio was at times reduced to dire poverty, even resorting to begging to feed his family. For his defence of toleration he was slandered by his critics and censored by municipal authorities. After he died in Basel, his enemies exhumed and burned his body and scattered his ashes so as to leave no trace of him. Even in death he was persecuted!

His body may have been destroyed but Castellio's ideas – principally his plea for toleration and limited government – lived on and have largely won the day. His once controversial claim that civil authorities should not punish persons with dissenting theological beliefs is now more or less taken for granted throughout the West. As if to underscore the long-term victory of Castellio's commitment to religious tolerance and freedom in Europe, his memorial plaque faces an old Protestant church which today is leased to the Serbian Orthodox community in Basel.

While it's easy to advocate for the rights of one's own community, it's much harder to promote toleration for groups that are widely feared or reviled and viewed as political enemies or religious rivals.

But when we consider ongoing religious persecution outside the community of liberal democracies – and the rise, within the West, of both right-wing populism that stigmatises ethno-religious minorities and of left-wing ideologies that 'phobiasse' traditional beliefs – we are reminded that we still have much progress to make before we live in a world in which Castellio's vision is fully actualised.

We can see Castellio as a Christian model of how to continue the fight for religious freedom. Castellio lived and wrote in a socio-political context far removed from ours. Our contemporary challenge is not the treatment of Christian heretics but rather how to live peaceably amid a great diversity of ethnicities, nationalities, ideologies, and moralities. And yet, in Castellio we find many timeless arguments and principles we can apply to Christian efforts to advance pluralism and respect.

<sup>1</sup> The quote is taken from Castellio's *Contra Libellum Calvini*, fol. E1v.

We see these manifest in Castellio's best known work, *Concerning Heretics, Whether They Are to Be Persecuted*, published in response to the execution of antitrinitarian Michael Servetus in Geneva. Appealing to Scripture, Christian tradition, reason, and experience, Castellio demonstrates that protecting conscience from coercion is a moral duty and practical good. He engages with scores of biblical passages and theological texts to build a case that persecuting heretics is incompatible with the example and teaching of Christ, who is the fulfilment of Old Testament law. He notes wryly that Jesus himself was unjustly killed as a heretic.

And it's not just Christian heretics who deserve freedom. Castellio argues that respect for the freedom of Jews and Muslims is a logical extension of New Testament ethics, particularly Paul's admonition in Romans 14 to 'not treat with contempt' those whose consciences lead them to divergent beliefs and practices. Castellio's magnanimity is worthy of emulation in our day. While it's easy to advocate for the rights of one's own community, it's much harder to promote toleration for groups that are widely feared or reviled and viewed as political enemies or religious rivals.



Sebastian Castellio commemorative plaque in Basel

Castellio was convinced that coercing religious conformity does not engender social harmony. 'A careful investigation will,' he argued, 'reveal that persecutors have always been the cause of great troubles.'<sup>2</sup> Castellio cites the example of religiously diverse Constantinople, where the three Abrahamic faiths 'live in peace, which certainly they could not do if there were persecution.'<sup>3</sup>

Fortunately, there are many twenty-first-century

champions of religious freedom and other human rights who carry on Castellio's legacy of learned, magnanimous, biblically and theologically grounded advocacy. Unfortunately, there are far too many examples of Christians falling far short of Castellio's model. They agitate for freedom in ineffective or even counterproductive ways. In my years of working on belief rights, first as a diplomat in the US State Department's Office of International Religious Freedom and now as the director of a research centre on religion and international studies at the University of Cambridge, I have seen numerous examples of how not to combat persecution.

Among Christians, wilful inaction may stem from a millenarian view that persecution is a harbinger of the eschaton and thus cannot be stopped, or the belief that because persecution can be spiritually enriching it should not be stopped.

In this paper I will explore seven of the most common and problematic pitfalls in combatting persecution. My goal in pointing out these dangers is not to condemn any particular organisation or tactical approach, but rather to commend a more considered, capacious, and constructive promotion of religious freedom. I want to see Christians working more effectively towards a world in which no one is killed – or in any way mistreated or deprived – on account of their beliefs.

### Pitfall 1: Ignoring the problem of persecution

Even as I highlight several pitfalls that I've seen Christians stumble into when attempting to combat persecution, it needs to be acknowledged at the outset that ignoring – or being ignorant of – the problem is still a major issue. Among Christians, wilful inaction may stem from a millenarian view that persecution is a harbinger of the eschaton and thus cannot be stopped, or the belief that because persecution can be spiritually enriching it should not be stopped. Whatever the reason, the single greatest pitfall to avoid is doing nothing at all.<sup>4</sup>

In their recent co-edited volume *Under Caesar's Sword*, Dan Philpott and Tim Shah observe,

The vast majority of the world's Christians... have little direct experience of the intense religious repression that increasingly engulfs their fellow Christians.... This experiential gap helps to explain the West's attention deficit vis-à-vis the massive global challenge of religious persecution in general and Christian persecution in particular.

To counteract this attention deficit, we must take seriously the New Testament teaching on the local and global church as one spiritual body. As Paul writes in 1 Corinthians 12:26 'If one part suffers, every part suffers with it.' Several of my friends in Washington, DC have recently started a charity simply called OneBody to 'organise prayer gatherings for the persecuted church,'<sup>5</sup> and many other Christian efforts around the world emphasise our membership in one body. These saints are to be commended.

However, I do want to offer two words of caution here. First, Western Christians must avoid thinking of themselves as noble liberators of their benighted brethren. Combatting persecution is not some latter-day white man's burden. Every nation struggles to some degree to accommodate its religious diversity, and principled accommodations only become possible and sustainable when they are embraced from within each nation. That said, those of us who are Western Christians should recognise that we have opportunities to humbly and carefully steward our relative wealth and power to resource and reinforce indigenous reform efforts.

<sup>2</sup> Roland H Bainton, trans. *Concerning Heretics*, Columbia University Press, 1935, p.225.

<sup>3</sup> Ibid.

<sup>4</sup> It's important to note here that the Bible contains no generalised affirmation of religious freedom nor any explicit call to combat religious persecution. As Timothy Shah observes, 'Even a cursory examination of the major New Testament [authors] demonstrates that not only did these apostles possess little

inclination to argue against persecution, but they showed a strong tendency to accept and embrace it as integral to God's redemptive purposes.' However, as the two volumes of *Christianity and Freedom*, co-edited by Shah, attest, further reflection on Scripture by subsequent generations of Christian led to the development of a robust account of religious freedom grounded in a biblical understanding of man, the church, and the government.

<sup>5</sup> See prayforonebody.org.



Second, Christians should be careful not to give the impression that every congregation or individual Christian must make combatting persecution (or any other worthwhile cause) their top priority – and they are spiritually deficient if they don't. Again, we must consider the 'body' metaphor. In Romans 12:4 Paul says, 'For as in one body we have many members, and the members do not all have the same function.' (ESV)

### Pitfall 2: Exaggerating the problem

In a well-intentioned effort to alleviate this deficit of attention and to compel action, some religious freedom advocates exaggerate the problem or offer highly imprecise accounts that misrepresent the scale and severity of Christian persecution in a given context. One frequently hears descriptions such as 'Christians in Country X are being beaten, imprisoned, and killed for their faith.' Such statements are most often literally true at a certain level but they can give the impression that perhaps all Christians in that country are suffering that fate or are in imminent danger of suffering it. This sort of language does a better job of raising funds than relieving persecution.

Several organisations do try to measure the scale of persecution with quantitative precision, but these efforts can, if not handled with care, exacerbate the problem of exaggeration. For instance, the Pew Research Center in Washington, DC produces a highly-regarded study of global religious freedom conditions that finds, in its most recent report, that 83 per cent of the world's population lives in countries with high or very high religious restrictions. But if one doesn't carefully examine Pew's definitions, methodology, and narrative caveats, one can come away with the impression that the vast majority of the globe faces active persecution.<sup>6</sup>

In 2018 I had the privilege of working with an international team of researchers on the European Parliament's annual report on freedom of religion or belief.<sup>7</sup> My key takeaway from that exercise is just how difficult it is to measure the enormously complex and contested phenomenon of religious

persecution and intolerance. Numbers can obfuscate as much as they clarify. Given this difficulty, I argue for erring on the side of modesty and caution. It's better to risk understating the extent and severity of persecution than to risk overstating the problem. What's at stake is credible religious freedom advocacy. Abusive regimes fear public scrutiny and look for any opportunity to undermine an advocate's credibility. In a world awash with fake news and misinformation, Christians must be people of truth and integrity. As we are reminded in Proverbs 16:11, 'Honest scales and balances belong to the Lord.'

### Pitfall 3: Uncritical partiality

Related to pitfall 2, too much of the activist literature on persecution not only exaggerates the problem but also shows uncritical partiality and credulity towards certain favoured groups, namely Christian organisations and persecuted Christians.

During my time of service in the Office of International Religious Freedom I learned to be very circumspect about inviting my State Department colleagues to meetings I had arranged with faith-based activist organisations. Far too often the activists presented a picture that was partial, anecdotal, unverified, dated, sensationalised, or politically biased. One of my departmental colleagues flat-out told me she would not follow up on reports of persecution unless they came from one of the mainstream secular human rights organisations because she did not trust the religious freedom groups. This particular colleague had a bias against faith-based groups – as do some of the major human rights organisations who give short shrift to religious freedom abuses – but her concern for credibility was well founded.

A related and delicate issue is the credence we give to accounts from the persecuted themselves. It's critically important that we listen to their stories. It's also important that we listen critically. They bring vivid, unfiltered, first-hand reports of personal experience of suffering for their faith. But their accounts can also be unnuanced, over-spiritualised, and highly coloured by the antagonism they have faced. This is particularly the case with diaspora groups in the West who are prone to use human rights advocacy as a way to continue fighting battles that ended decades ago. Rarely do Western Christians grapple with how persecuted Christians can contribute to social tensions and to hostility with authorities. The Under Caesar's Sword project, a three-year global study of Christian responses to persecution, found that evangelicals and Pentecostals are more likely to suffer persecution than other Christian communities, at least in part because of their style of evangelisation and their oppositional

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<sup>6</sup> For instance, Pew considers government funding for faith-based schools, mandatory religious education in public schools, and state support for the maintenance of religious property to be 'restrictions' on freedom of religion. Pew does helpfully nuance the '83%' finding in its report narrative, but I fear what sticks in people's minds is the alarming statistic and not the descriptive caveat.

<sup>7</sup> To read a full account of our research methodology and results, read the 'Annual Report 2017 Annex' at [www.religiousfreedom.eu/wp-content/uploads/2018/09/RS\\_Annex\\_v1\\_forprint\\_withbleed.pdf](http://www.religiousfreedom.eu/wp-content/uploads/2018/09/RS_Annex_v1_forprint_withbleed.pdf)  
<sup>8</sup> Daniel Philpott, Thomas Farr, and Timothy Shah, *In Response to Persecution: Findings of the Under Caesar's Sword Project on Global Christian Communities*, 41.

posture towards their societies and governments.<sup>8</sup> It is of course perfectly within their right to evangelise and to be peacefully oppositional. But the policy report produced by the Under Caesar's Sword research team recommends that 'Persecuted churches should avoid giving unnecessary offence and bringing on "avoidable" persecution.'<sup>9</sup>

The authors appropriately put the word 'avoidable' in quotes because one must be careful to avoid falling into the trap of blaming the victim. That's precisely what repressive governments and monopolistic religious communities would want us to do. Persecution is always the persecutor's fault. But unbiased evaluation of first-hand stories is an essential part of an overall careful study and presentation of the facts on the ground. Both the persecuted and their advocates would do well to heed 1 Peter 2:12 which instructs us, 'Keep your conduct among the Gentiles honourable, so that when they speak against you as evildoers, they may see your good deeds and glorify God on the day of visitation.' (ESV)<sup>10</sup>

#### **Pitfall 4: Neglecting the persecution of non-Christians**

Worse than showing undue partiality to persecuted Christians is the pitfall of ignoring the plight of persecuted non-Christians. As we saw in pitfall 1, it is entirely appropriate that Christians should have a special – though not uncritical (pitfall 3) – concern for mistreated members of the body of Christ. This special concern, however, should not result in a lack of concern for non-Christians.

I have seen an overemphasis on Christian persecution and a concomitant neglect of non-Christian suffering play out in two primary ways. First, too often Christians try to prove that they are the world's most persecuted religious community.



That is probably true, given that Christianity is the largest and most international religion. So what? Any assault on any person's freedom of conscience is an affront to a Christian view of human dignity. This emphasis can lead us to miss, for instance, the fact that Muslims are the primary victims of Islamic terrorism and of repression in Muslim-majority countries.

This leads to a second and related problem: viewing the integration of Islam and government in so many Muslim-majority countries as only a concern for Christians and other

minorities. An American diplomat once told me that religious freedom is 'not a major issue' in Afghanistan because the country is over 99 per cent Muslim. But because apostasy and blasphemy are capital offences in Afghanistan, over 99 per cent of the population is not free to change or critique their religion. That is a *major* issue. Afghanistan will never become a thriving liberal democracy – and will continue to fuel violent radicalism – if it restricts human freedom in such a fundamental(ist) way.

There are principled and pragmatic reasons for Christians to defend the rights of non-Christians. At the level of principle, most foundationally, Christians believe every human person is created in the image of God. In the words of Pope Benedict XVI,

The right to religious freedom is rooted in the very dignity of the human person, whose transcendent nature must not be ignored or overlooked. God created man and woman in his own image and likeness (cf. Genesis 1:27). For this reason each person is endowed with the sacred right to a full life, also from a spiritual standpoint.<sup>11</sup>

At a pragmatic level, Benedict observed that 'Religious freedom is an authentic weapon of peace,' and indeed a growing body of scholarship has shown that religious freedom contributes to social stability and harmony.<sup>12</sup> As Castelli noted five centuries ago, 'where there are no persecutions, everything is tranquil despite diversity of religion.'<sup>13</sup> Christian religious freedom advocacy that neglects non-Christians is therefore sub-Christian and short-sighted.

#### **Pitfall 5: Mimicking the persecutors of Christians**

Another way we undermine the credibility of our advocacy for religious freedom is by mimicking the rhetoric of authoritarian government officials and monopolistic non-state actors. They often claim that Christians, or at least certain types of Christians, are agents of foreign influence or rival civilisations and cannot be loyal citizens, and thus cannot be granted the same level of social privilege and legal protection. Sadly, this same sort of argument is often employed against Muslims by Christian politicians and civil society leaders in the West.

In 2009, US congressman Trent Franks provided a poignant example. Franks, then co-chair of the International Religious Freedom Taskforce in Congress, called for an investigation into an utterly spurious claim of a Muslim conspiracy to infiltrate the US government. This problem has only grown more acute in the US in the Trump era, with many Christian pastors and political leaders openly casting aspersions on Muslims and their faith. The hypocrisy does not go unnoticed. Following the US Department of Justice's creation of a Religious Liberty Taskforce to counter 'persecution' in America, comedian Stephen Colbert joked 'Wow, that could put a real kink in their Muslim Ban.'

We have seen similar dynamics in Europe. In Hungary, for

9 Ibid. 48.

10 Scripture quotations are from the Holy Bible, New International Version, unless noted otherwise.

11 'Religious Freedom, The Path to Peace.' Available at [http://w2.vatican.va/content/benedict-xvi/en/messages/peace/documents/hf\\_ben-xvi\\_mes\\_20101208\\_xliv-world-day-peace.html](http://w2.vatican.va/content/benedict-xvi/en/messages/peace/documents/hf_ben-xvi_mes_20101208_xliv-world-day-peace.html)

12 See, for instance, Brim Grim and Roger Finke, *The Price of Freedom Denied: Religious Persecution and Conflict in the Twenty-First Century*, Cambridge University Press, 2011.

13 *Concerning Heretics*, p.225.



example, in 2016 the government created an office to aid persecuted Christians in the Middle East even while barring and disparaging Muslim refugees fleeing the same instability and repression. Hungarian president Viktor Orban has called Muslim migrants ‘invaders’ and pledged to protect Europe from the ‘rust’ of immigration. To be sure, immigration – especially at the scale experienced in Europe in recent years – raises difficult questions about state resources, social cohesion, national identity, and a host of other interwoven issues. The questions are all the more difficult when it comes to immigration from countries and religious communities with no experience of genuine religious freedom. Formulating immigration policies that are both compassionate and strategic requires a great deal of prudential judgement. But stoking fear and fuelling tension is imprudent and extremely dangerous.

It might be politically advantageous to scapegoat some minority group in the West, but we must recall that Christians are the minority in 71 countries. We make life more difficult for those Christian minorities when we mistreat minorities in the West. If we want religious freedom for ourselves and our fellow believers we should reciprocate the same courtesy to others. Echoing Castelli’s line about how a man can be orthodox in one city and a heretic in the next, religious freedom expert Chris Seiple argues, ‘We should all believe in some form of the Golden Rule, if only because we are all minorities somewhere.’<sup>14</sup>

#### Pitfall 6: ‘Persecution complex’ in the West

There is a tendency among Christians in the West to present their own experience of minor legal discrimination or social marginalisation – or, frankly, loss of relative social privilege – as

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akin to the brutal repression Christians face in other parts of the world. I think there are at least three contributing factors. First, the demographic and political strength of Christianity is undeniably decreasing in many Western countries. Second, we have seen the emergence of what some scholars label a victimhood culture in the West wherein status is gained not through achievement and honour but through perceived marginalisation and oppression. Third, there is a temptation for Western Christians to want to share in the esteem accorded to persecuted Christians from other parts of the world.

To be sure, Western Christians are facing issues of concern. There are increasing social and legal pressures, particularly surrounding the freedom to maintain and manifest historic Christian convictions on issues of life, sexuality, gender, and marriage. A 2015 survey found that 70 per cent of white evangelicals in America believe Christians face as much discrimination as other groups in the United States.<sup>15</sup> As University of Bristol professor of jurisprudence Julian Rivers has observed, in the West a ‘growing administrative regulation and a general feeling of cultural dissonance can feed off each other to create a sense of growing persecution.’<sup>16</sup>

And yet, is having a sense of persecution the same as actually being persecuted? The New Testament does use the word commonly translated ‘persecution’ (*diógmōs* in

the Greek) to cover a range of forms of hostility. However, in contemporary usage ‘persecution’ is a highly charged term – not unlike ‘genocide’ – typically for the most severe cases. Knox Thames, the US State Department’s senior advisor on religious minorities, argued in his 2009 book that a casual use of ‘persecution’ to refer to any abuse of religious freedom ‘only cheapens the term and lessens the impact when describing an actual situation of persecution, hindering the advocate’s effectiveness.’<sup>17</sup> The word, Thames cautions, should be reserved for ‘the most violent, egregious, and extreme repression of religion’. By that measure, Christians do not suffer persecution in the West. As long-time religious freedom

activist Rabbi David Saperstein is fond of saying, it would be great if every country’s greatest religious freedom challenge was whether a conservative Christian baker has to make a cake for a gay wedding.<sup>18</sup>

#### Pitfall 7: Employing language that alienates

This final pitfall is perhaps less serious than the others presented here, but it’s important to remember to use

14 Chris Seiple, ‘The lesson of Lebanon: Can this war-torn nation provide an example for getting along?’ *Washington Post*, 15 January 2015, [www.washingtonpost.com/national/religion/the-lesson-of-lebanon-can-this-war-torn-nation-provide-an-example-for-getting-along-commentary/2015/01/15/03b86568-9d02-11e4-86a3-1b56f64925f6\\_story.html?utm\\_term=.7c90b0a5c98e](http://www.washingtonpost.com/national/religion/the-lesson-of-lebanon-can-this-war-torn-nation-provide-an-example-for-getting-along-commentary/2015/01/15/03b86568-9d02-11e4-86a3-1b56f64925f6_story.html?utm_term=.7c90b0a5c98e)

15 This response is 21% higher than that for all Americans and, tellingly, 15% higher than the response from non-white Protestants. See the full results from the Public Religion Research Institute at [prii.org/research/survey-americans-believe-protests-make-country-better-support-decreases-dramatically-protesters-](http://prii.org/research/survey-americans-believe-protests-make-country-better-support-decreases-dramatically-protesters-identified-black/#.Vx52APkrJph)

[identified-black/#.Vx52APkrJph](http://prii.org/research/survey-americans-believe-protests-make-country-better-support-decreases-dramatically-protesters-identified-black/#.Vx52APkrJph)

16 As quoted in Paul Marshall, ‘Western Christians’ Responses to Denials of Religious Freedom,’ *Under Caesar’s Sword: How Christians Respond to Persecution*, p.428.

17 Knox Thames, Chris Seiple, and Amy Rowe, *International Religious Freedom Advocacy: A Guide to Organizations, Law, and NGOs*, 2009, p.6.

18 Noted in Jacob Lupfer, ‘The Politics of Religious Freedom Under the Trump Administration,’ *Religion & Politics*, 14 August 2018.

language that encourages rather than encumbers the cause of combatting persecution. Two points merit mention here.

First, the very term we use to express our goal – ‘religious freedom’ – is off-putting to some. I have used it throughout this paper as a convenient shorthand because I am American (the term has deep historical roots in the US) and writing to a largely Christian readership. But to avoid the perception that we are only interested in freedom for the religious it is helpful, particularly in public and legal settings, to use the phrase ‘freedom of religion or belief’ – the phrase found in the Universal Declaration of Human Rights.

Second, as Erin Wilson of the University of Groningen has pointed out, both ‘religious freedom’ and ‘freedom of religion or belief’ can be foreign, even threatening, to non-Western societies that emphasise collective norms above individual rights. In such settings it can be more useful to draw on vernacular concepts like social harmony and equality that can be contextual footholds for religious freedom. Even in the West, the terms are suspect to some, as the very word ‘freedom’ has taken on a partisan tone. As social psychologist Jonathan Haidt observes in *The Righteous Mind*, conservatives sacralise



Article 18 of the Declaration of Human Rights guarantees freedom of religion or belief

‘liberty’ whereas liberals sacralise ‘equality’. I noted with interest that the British government recently announced the creation of a four-year, £12 million initiative with an innovative and culturally sensitive name: the Coalition for Religious Equality and

Inclusive Development (CREID).<sup>19</sup> At a launch event for the programme a participant noted that ‘religious equality’ was selected rather than ‘religious freedom’ because the former phrase resonates in more places.

## Conclusion

In this paper I have examined seven common pitfalls that I have seen in the field of Christian religious freedom advocacy. Drawing on the example of Sebastian Castelleo, contemporary scholarship, my own recent experience, and the timeless teaching of Scripture I have tried to point towards a better way. My hope is that readers will become more actively, thoughtfully, and effectively involved in promoting religious freedom. When we speak about or pray for the persecuted are we exemplifying biblical ethics and the best of the Christian tradition? When we see an article in the Christian press about persecution or receive an email with a funding or advocacy appeal related to the persecuted church, we should ask ourselves: Does this article or appeal exaggerate the problem or show undue partiality to Christians? Does it disparage non-Christians or neglect their suffering? Does it evidence symptoms of a ‘persecution complex’ or employ language that alienates? By recognising and ultimately avoiding these pitfalls we can become constructive and productive champions for all those who suffer on account of belief.



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<sup>19</sup> ‘Government commits £12 million to champion freedom of religion or belief worldwide,’ [gov.uk/government/news/government-commits-12-million-to-champion-freedom-of-religion-or-belief-worldwide?fbclid=IwAR2aMOJmhxLTLICoOgBrVw2yf8tZMe3GcFQN\\_h3mFc4wsYWD5yfCVyauM](http://gov.uk/government/news/government-commits-12-million-to-champion-freedom-of-religion-or-belief-worldwide?fbclid=IwAR2aMOJmhxLTLICoOgBrVw2yf8tZMe3GcFQN_h3mFc4wsYWD5yfCVyauM)

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