

## AID TO CHURCH REPORT

# Two-thirds of world's population live in countries where religious freedom is restricted

RELIGIOUS FREEDOM

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**Anna Bono**



On 21 October, the foundation Aid to the Church in Need (ACN) presented its new report on religious freedom worldwide, the eighth, which covers the two-year period from 2023 to 2024, at the Augustinian Patristic Pontifical Institute in Rome. For the past

25 years, ACN has been monitoring violations of this fundamental right, and as Pope Francis said on 10 October when he received the foundation's staff and collaborators, it 'bears witness, gives voice to the voiceless, and reveals the hidden suffering of so many'.

**ACN does this by examining the situation in 196 countries.** Its reports are unique because they document abuses, violations and restrictions on freedom of religion and worship against all religious communities, not just Christian ones. 'If religious freedom is denied to just one group,' explains ACN, 'there is no real religious freedom for anyone.'

**The 2023–24 report notes an overall increase in pressures and restrictions on freedom of religion and worship** during this period. Currently, nearly two-thirds of the world's population, totalling over 5.4 billion people, reside in 62 countries where systematic violations of religious freedom are prevalent. In 24 of these countries, a total of 4.1 billion people are subject to outright persecution, including violence, abuse, imprisonment, and other forms of repression. This category includes the two most populous countries in the world, India and China, both of which have over 1.4 billion inhabitants. The nature of the persecution varies according to the context: a combination of authoritarianism and religious extremism in eight countries; repression by authoritarian regimes in seven countries; religious extremism in seven countries; and a convergence of authoritarianism and ethno-religious nationalism in two countries. Islam is the determining factor in 17 countries, including seven in Asia and 10 in Africa. In 18 of the 24 countries (75%), persecution has increased compared to the previous two years.

**In a further 38 countries, totalling 1.3 billion people, religious freedom is violated** by systemic discrimination against religious minorities. These restrictions are of a legal, political or social nature and limit their freedom of belief and worship. Authoritarianism is the prevailing factor in 24 countries. The remaining 14 countries have a variety of causes, primarily ethno-religious nationalism and religious extremism.

**According to ACN, a further 750 million people are at risk of religious discrimination** in 24 countries where there are growing signs of concern regarding freedom of religion and worship, and which have therefore been classified as 'under observation'.

**The report highlights the most alarming factors, phenomena and trends.** At the forefront is the intensification and spread of jihadist violence, which, in many cases, is the primary cause of persecution. Of particular concern is the penetration, entrenchment, and spread of jihadist groups affiliated with al-Qaeda or ISIS in Africa.

These groups have long been present not only in the Sahel, but also in several sub-Saharan African states. They target Christians and Muslims who do not adhere to their radical interpretation of Islam.

**Religious nationalism is also on the rise, fuelling persecution and structural discrimination against minority communities.** According to ACN, India is the most emblematic example of ethno-religious nationalism, where 'hybrid persecution' is carried out through the convergence of legal instruments and mass violence against minorities. Religious freedom is increasingly becoming a victim of armed conflicts, whether civil, interstate or regional. These conflicts are responsible for mass displacement that disperses religious communities, targeted attacks against specific religious communities, and extensive, often irreparable, damage to religious structures and places of worship. Organised crime also restricts religious freedom when it targets religious communities and their leaders, albeit not for religious reasons. In Latin America and sub-Saharan Africa in particular, there have been an increasing number of cases of churches and religious institutes being looted, religious people being kidnapped or killed, and faith communities being forced into silence.

**Violations of religious freedom are the cause of increasingly large-scale forced exoduses in Asia and even more so in Africa.** The report explains that religious persecution is now one of the main causes of the increase in refugees and displaced persons, millions of whom are not protected by governments and are fleeing to save their freedom and their lives. Entire religious communities have been uprooted, their places of worship destroyed, and their heritage wiped out.

**Finally, ACN highlights two growing phenomena.** The first is the drastic increase in anti-Semitic and anti-Islamic hate crimes, which are concentrated in Europe, North America, and Latin America. In France, anti-Semitic acts increased by 1,000%, while those targeting Muslims increased by 29%. In Germany, 4,369 anti-Semitic and anti-Islamic crimes were recorded over a two-year period, compared to just 61 in 2022. Synagogues and mosques were targeted, individuals were attacked or threatened, and hate messages were spread online. The report stresses that, in many contexts, government responses appeared inadequate, fuelling fears and insecurity in religious communities.

**The other phenomenon highlighted by ACN is the growing number of anti-Christian incidents,** including attacks on places of worship and worshippers, which have been documented in Europe and North America. The report cites approximately 1,000 anti-Christian incidents in France, over 600 acts of vandalism against churches in

Greece and 24 churches burned in Canada between 2021 and 2024. There have been increases in anti-Christian acts in Spain, Italy, the United States and Croatia, involving desecrations of places of worship, attacks on clergy and interruptions to religious celebrations. These are often motivated by ideological hostility, militant activism or anti-religious extremism.

**'Religious freedom is a human right, not a privilege'**. ACN has been working on this basis since 1947. Speaking at the report's presentation, Cardinal Pietro Parolin recalled that 60 years have passed since the publication of *Dignitatis Humanae*, the 1965 Second Vatican Council declaration on religious freedom — the 'cornerstone' of this universal right.