MAY I HAVE A WORD WITH YOU? GLOBAL PATTERNS OF RESTRICTIONS ON PROSELYTIZING

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The right to proselytize is a central aspect of religious freedom. The right to teach and propagate one’s religion is protected in multiple international documents and treaties (Grim and Finke, 2007, pp. 26–27; Mardsen, 2020, pp. 2–4) as well as national constitutions (Fox, 2011; Fox and Flores, 2009) which cover religious freedom. For many religions, preaching to non-believers and seeking converts is a central religious practice (Mardsen, 2014, p. 486). Given this, many argue that religious liberty is not possible under circumstances where preaching, proselytizing and missionary activity are banned (Gill, 2008, pp. 10–17) and freedom to proselytize is included in major academic indexes of religious freedom (Grim and Finke, 2011; Fox, 2020).

Yet, restrictions on proselytizing are among the most common types of restrictions placed on religious minorities around the world. While the vast majority of countries restrict the religious practices and institutions of at least some religious minorities in some manner, few specific types of discrimination against religious minorities are present in a majority of countries. (Fox, 2015, 2016, 2020) As discussed in detail in this chapter, restrictions on proselytizing is an exception in that it is present in over 60% of countries, and this includes numerous democracies and even Western liberal democracies.

Why is this the case? As discussed in detail in this chapter, there are many causes and motivations for restricting religious minorities. These include religious ideologies which are intolerant of other religions, religious institutions seeking religious demographic domination, secular ideologies which are intolerant of certain religious practices, a country’s desire to protect its national culture from foreign influences, the perception of missionaries and political or security threats, and fear of dangerous cults. As discussed in this chapter, all of these general motivations for religious discrimination apply specifically, and arguably especially, to proselytizing.

This chapter proceeds as follows, the motivations for restricting proselytizing are discussed. Then the extent and nature of restrictions on proselytizing around the world are presented.

Why restrict proselytizing?

While there are many reasons to discriminate against religious minorities in general and restrict proselytizing and missionary activity specifically, the focus here is on six of the most common but interrelated motivations. The first is religious ideology. Religions, particularly monotheistic
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Global patterns of restrictions on proselytizing are by nature intolerant of other religions. This is because their beliefs focus on an exclusive truth that leaves no room for other truths (Jelen and Wilcox, 1990; Wald, 1987). As Stark (2003, p. 32) puts it, “those who believe there is only One True God are offended by worship directed toward other Gods”.

This motivation applies in particular to proselytizers. “To proselytize is to work on others in an attempt to influence their thought, conscience, and choices [and] in practice depicts one religion as more valid than another” (Thomas, 2001, p. 527). That is, proselytizers from non-majority religions actively and aggressively challenge the religious ideology of all other religions. Thus, if anything is likely to trigger religion’s ideological tendency toward defending its exclusive truth, it is missionaries from another religion working to convince its members to convert to their religion.

The second motivation is the desire for a religious monopoly – a condition where the state designates and supports an official religion. This perspective on the desire for religious dominance takes a rational choice approach and focuses on how religious leaders and institutions seek dominance within politics and society. Gill (2005, 2008) argues that majority religious institutions and their leaders seek a political relationship where the government supports their religious monopoly in return for the religion supporting the legitimacy of the government. Political leaders benefit because as Robert Dahl (1971) notes, legitimacy not only makes ruling easier, some measure of legitimacy is essential for all governments.

While this desire for a religious monopoly is ultimately motivated by ideology, this perspective focuses on the mechanics of how religious institutions and leaders seek to maintain political and social dominance. Perhaps one of the greatest threats to this dominance is losing members to another religion. Demographic dominance often contributes to political dominance. That is, the beneficial religion-state relationship of a religious monopoly is predicated in its ability to deliver the loyalty of its members to the government. Losing members to other religions undermines this base of power. Thus, for a monopolistic religious institution, losing members undermines the social, political and financial base of support for these institutions. Given this, from a rational choice perspective, religious leaders and institutions would be unlikely to tolerate proselytizers from other religions seeking to poach members from its congregation and would seek to influence the government to restrict these proselytizers.

Third, many countries seek to protect their national culture from outside non-indigenous influences (Goff, 2000). Minority religions which are seen as native to the country are not subject to this motivation, only religions seen as coming from outside (Nelsen and Guth, 2015, pp. 225–226). Religion is considered an important basis for identity (Breakwell, 1986; Little, 1995) and is often linked to nationalist ideologies (Smith, 1999, 2000). Many countries have official policies which recognize those religions which are native. This type of policy, in practice, excludes non-native religions. Hungary, for example, officially designates four “historical” religions. Other countries including Russia, Austria, Latvia, and Lithuania, among others, have similar laws which give benefits to recognized native religions and in some cases effectively restrict those that are excluded from these lists.

This motivation for discrimination and exclusion also often applies particularly to missionary religions. There are many missionary groups, particularly those based in North America, which send missionaries globally to convert people to their religion. In societies which seek to preserve indigenous culture, these missionaries are almost inevitably seen as foreign and a threat to national culture (Turner, 2013, p. 119). Under such circumstances, restricting these foreign missionaries is a predictable response.

Fourth, religions seen as cults tend to be subject to considerable discrimination. While there is no agreed upon definition of cults, they are generally small religions considered new to a country. They, in practice, are considered cults by governments precisely because they are new

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to a country, seen to engage in strange or dangerous practices, and to be outside the legitimate universe of accepted spiritualities (Thomas, 2001, p. 529; Barkun, 2003, p. 55). While few of those religions that are so perceived are actually dangerous, they are seen to engage in dangerous practices such as violence, brainwashing and other controlling or manipulative behavior. Because of this perception, cults are particularly likely to attract negative government attention (Peretz and Fox, 2021).

Many religions seen as cults actively proselytize. As many of them are new religions, or at least new to a particular locale, seeking to expand their flock, this is natural. Thus, any religion new to a country which engages in missionary activity is likely to be seen as a cult, no matter whether the same religion is seen as mainstream elsewhere and regardless of whether its activities and practices are actually dangerous (Peretz and Fox, 2021). This makes them more likely to attract discrimination.

Fifth, governments often restrict religious minorities perceived as a political or security threat. It is important to emphasize that the perception rather than the reality is the key factor for this motivation. Securitization theory posits that when leaders use speech acts to portray a group as a security threat, the group can become “securitized”. This removes the normal limitations on what types of limits are acceptable for governments to place on religious minorities (Buzan and Segal, 1998; Mabee, 2007; Wæver, 1995; Laustesen and Wæver, 2000; Fox and Akbaba, 2015).

Missionary groups, especially if they are also seen as cults, can be seen as a security threat. As noted, they are often portrayed as engaging in manipulative and perhaps coercive behavior. They are also in effect seeking to change the religious demography of a country. This can be perceived as a political threat in cases where politics is tied to religious identity.

Finally, anti-religious secular ideologies can be a source of religious discrimination. Fox (2020) argues that while in theory secular ideologies should dislike all religion equally, in practice some religious practices are considered particularly odious to secular beliefs and can attract discrimination from ideologically secular quarters. To the extent that missionary religions are seen as cults, beliefs that cults engage in brainwashing and coercion would certainly trigger the perception that these groups are engaging in objectionable practices. Also as many missionary religions are patriarchal, this would trigger secular beliefs in women’s rights.

Global patterns of restrictions on proselytizing

This analysis is based on the Religion and State (RAS) dataset which currently covers government religion policy between 1990 and 2014 (Fox, 2008, 2011, 2015, 2019). However, some countries, including many former Soviet bloc states, were not independent states until after 1990. Accordingly, statistics labeled 1990 are for 1990 or the earliest post-1990 date for which data are available.

Overall restrictions on proselytizing are common worldwide. Unlike many other forms of restrictions on religion which are increasing worldwide (Fox, 2015, 2020), these restrictions are holding mostly steady. In 1990 (or the earliest date available) 111 of the 183 (60.7%) countries included in this study restricted proselytizing in some manner. In 2014 this number was 110 countries (60.1%).

As shown in Table 19.1, these restrictions are well distributed across world regions and major world religions. Other than sub-Saharan Africa, a majority of countries in all world regions engage in some form of restriction on proselytizing. Similarly, other than Christian majority counties which are neither Catholic nor Orthodox, a majority of countries across major world religions restrict proselytizing in some manner.
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Types of restrictions on proselytizing

In this study, seven categories of restrictions on proselytizing are discussed. This categorization looks less at exactly what is restricted, which in all cases is either the act or proselytizing or proselytizers themselves, and more on the manner in which the government goes about enforcing these restrictions. This includes four different factors. First, are the restrictions formal or informal? That is, do governments make proselytizing outright illegal or do they use other means such as the arrest and harassment of proselytizers on other pretexts in order to limit proselytizing? Second, which governments are enacting the restrictions? Is it the national government or is it some or all local or regional governments within a country? Third, which proselytizers are being restricted? For instance are proselytizers from the majority religion restricted or are only those from minority religions restricted? Similarly, are only foreign missionaries restricted or are legal residents and citizens also restricted? Finally, also explored are some specific tactics such as denial of visas to religious workers.

These questions are important for at least three reasons. First, the breadth within states of restrictions on proselytizing and the manner in which they are applied are essential to understanding the extent to which this phenomena is present globally. Second, the tactics a government uses to restrict proselytizers often reveals something about the motives for these restrictions. Third, efforts to combat these restrictions, which are a basic violation of religious freedom according to most interpretations of the term, require accurate information on the nature and locus of these restrictions.

It is important to emphasize that the categorizations that follow take into account both official policy and actual policy. As demonstrated, some governments often do not fully enforce laws restricting proselytizing and many governments in practice restrict proselytizing in the absence of laws restricting them. In some cases, governments place legal restrictions on proselytizing and, in fact, restrict proselytizing but not in the manner prescribed in the laws. Also, it is possible for countries to fall into multiple categories. For example, it is possible for the national government to restrict proselytizing while at least some local governments engage in restrictions above and beyond those national-level restrictions.

Table 19.1 Percentage of countries which restrict proselytizing in 2014

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>World Region</th>
<th>#</th>
<th>%</th>
<th>Majority Religion</th>
<th>#</th>
<th>%</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Western democracies</td>
<td>15</td>
<td>51.9</td>
<td>Catholic</td>
<td>24</td>
<td>54.5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Former Soviet</td>
<td>19</td>
<td>65.5</td>
<td>Orthodox</td>
<td>11</td>
<td>84.6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Christian</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Asia</td>
<td>22</td>
<td>75.9</td>
<td>Other Christian</td>
<td>13</td>
<td>28.3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Middle East and North Africa</td>
<td>23</td>
<td>95.7</td>
<td>Muslim</td>
<td>43</td>
<td>84.3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sub-Saharan Africa</td>
<td>16</td>
<td>33.3</td>
<td>Other</td>
<td>19</td>
<td>65.5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Latin America</td>
<td>17</td>
<td>63.0</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>All cases</td>
<td>110</td>
<td>60.1</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Category 1: proselytizing by all religions is illegal or banned

Only five countries officially ban all proselytizing by all religions – Greece, Nepal, Kyrgyzstan, North Korea and Uzbekistan. All of them enforce this prohibition, though in some countries like Greece and Nepal there have been some gaps in enforcement.

Unless one considers North Korea’s national ideology a form of leader worship, North Korea is arguably the most anti-religion country in the world today (Fox, 2020). While there seems to be no explicit law prohibiting proselytism, this is likely because it is encompassed in a more general ban on religion. The Democratic People’s Republic of Korea in practice harshly restricts proselytism in its continuing effort to sever foreign influence from its people. Reports from non-governmental organizations, refugees and defectors indicate that proselytizers and missionaries who have ties or contact with foreigners, including Christian missionaries, are especially likely to be arrested and subjected to harsh punishment including execution. The government allows some overseas faith-based aid organizations to operate inside the country to provide humanitarian assistance; however, such organizations are not allowed to proselytize or have contact with the locals.¹

Uzbekistan’s 1998 Law on Freedom of Conscience and Religious Organizations provides for freedom of worship, freedom from religious persecution, separation of church and state and the right to establish schools and train clergy, but only to registered groups. It also bans all proselytizing, as do several other laws. The law prohibits “actions aimed at converting believers of one religion into another (proselytizing), as well as any other missionary activity. The criminal code punishes proselytism with up to three years in prison. These laws are enforced. For example in 2009 a court found 13 Baptists guilty of proselytism and fined them each 50 times the monthly minimum wage (approximately $1,000). Foreigners caught proselytizing are usually deported”.²

Both Uzbekistan and North Korea are states with secular anti-religious ideologies. Their general government religion policy is to strongly regulate, control and restrict religion (Fox, 2008, 2015). For this reason, those who seek to spread religion are considered subversive. In addition, North Korea considers religion something foreign to the country’s culture and therefore especially restricts foreign missionaries.

Nepal, while declaring itself a secular state, is less anti-religious than North Korea and Uzbekistan. Nevertheless, proselytizing is forbidden by Nepal’s 1990 constitution as well as its 2007 interim constitution. Nepal always allowed foreign religious organizations to engage in charitable work and education but does not allow them to engage in missionary activities. This ban was enforced strictly for much of the study period, but between around 2010 and 2014 there was a gap in enforcement with few if any proselytizers prosecuted or deported. However, by 2015 prosecutions and deportations resumed.³

Kyrgyzstan’s 2008 Law on Freedom of Religion and Religious Organizations prohibits proselytism, which is defined as “insistent attempts to convert followers of one religion to another”.⁴ Before this law, proselytizing was not illegal but strongly discouraged.⁵

Greece officially bans all proselytizing but in practice this is enforced only on minority religions and not the country’s official church, the Greek Orthodox Church. This indicates the motivations include protecting the country’s majority religion and culture (Article 13 of Greece’s constitution).⁶ In September 2009 the European Commission against Racism and Intolerance expressed concern that proselytizing remained a criminal offense. The government responded that anti-proselytizing laws had “long since fallen into disuse” and that only proselytizing that was coercive or disturbed public order was illegal. Nevertheless, the law is enforced sporadically, particularly against Jehovah’s Witnesses, Mormons and evangelical Christians. Most incidents involve the arrest of proselytizers who are then released by the police after several
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hours. In most cases where charges are pressed, the accused were acquitted. In December 2011 the Bishop of Piraeus Seraphim filed charges against the Catholic Church for proselytism following the blessing of the school year by a Catholic priest in the presence of Greek Orthodox students. There were also reports that police were complicit (did not intervene) in cases of Greek Orthodox clergy verbally and physically harasing Mormons who were proselytizing7 (Anderson, 2003; Pollis, 2002).

Overall this type of policy is rare. Other than Greece all of the countries that follow this policy have secular anti-religion policies. All of them are also arguably interested in protection of their national culture from outside influence. While some of the policies described later in the chapter could be attributed to these five countries, the RAS dataset does not code these five countries in these additional categories because the dominant policy is the overall ban on proselytizing.

**Category 2: proselytizing to members of the majority religion is illegal but proselytizing to members of minority religions is legal**

Other than Laos and Myanmar, all of the 24 countries which followed this policy at some point between 1990 and 2014 were Muslim-majority countries. All of them had this policy for the entire study period other than Iraq which had this policy only during the Saddam Hussein era.

Laos, for example, prohibits proselytizing by foreigners. In addition, Article 12 of the 2001 Decree on Religious Activities states that other religious groups must have permission from the local government to preach or disseminate religious materials outside their house of worship. In effect, this restricts proselytizing to only Buddhists, the country’s majority religion. In addition many local officials seek to force converts to Christianity to recant their conversion. The tactics include evictions from homes, destruction of crops and detention. In some cases these tactics are used in locales where conversion to Christianity occurred several generations in the past.8 The reasons behind this policy are complicated since Laos is officially an anti-religious Communist state. Fox (2020, pp. 179–180) argues that this pattern is likely due to a combination of two factors. First, some local Communist officials pay lip service to Communism but, in fact, support Buddhism. Second, Buddhism is considered an integral element of the national culture, and the government seeks to maintain that culture.

The 22 Muslim-majority countries in this category – Afghanistan, Algeria, Brunei, Comoros, Gaza, Iran, Iraq (Hussein era), Jordan, Kuwait, Libya, Malaysia, the Maldives, Mauritania, Morocco, Pakistan, Qatar, Saudi Arabia, Somalia, Sudan, the UAE, Western Sahara, and Yemen – all follow similar policies where seeking to convert Muslims away from Islam is illegal but seeking to proselytize among the country’s religious minorities is allowed. Other than Sudan, Islam is the official religion in all of these countries, and all of them, including Sudan, strongly support Islam. This indicates a largely religious motive for these policies.

Levels of enforcement in these countries vary. In Morocco, for example, proselytizing to Muslims is forbidden; however, voluntary conversion away from Islam is not. Thus, foreign missionaries focus their efforts on non-Muslims or conduct their work discreetly. Attempts to induce Muslims to convert are illegal, but this restriction is not enforced in practice since there have been few incidents of non-discreet proselytizing.9 In contrast in Kuwait, non-Muslim missionaries are forbidden from entering Kuwait, and religious leaders of unrecognized religious groups must enter the country as “non-religious” workers. Missionary groups in the country may proselytize to non-Muslims, but they strictly are forbidden from proselytizing to Muslims. Violators are arrested but are sometimes released on their first offense with a warning. The government actively supports Sunni Muslim proselytizing to convert non-Muslims.10
Category 3: proselytizing is legal but is restricted in practice by the national government

In many countries there are no laws restricting proselytizing, but the government uses other means to restrict it in practice. In both 1990 (or the earliest date available) and 2014, 24 countries followed this policy. Between 1990 and 2014 three stopped this practice (Belgium, Djibouti and Israel) and three (Eritrea, Kazakhstan and Turkmenistan) began this practice. In Israel, for example, a 1977 law prohibits any person from offering material benefits as an inducement to conversion. It is also illegal to convert a minor. Otherwise, proselytizing is legal. However, until 2011 in practice, both national and local governments occasionally restricted proselytizing, mostly by foreigners, using other laws such as charging proselytizers who hand out religious literature for “peddling” without a license. In other cases police and soldiers hassled, threatened and sometimes detained proselytizers, telling them proselytizing is illegal. In some cases these proselytizers were deported. After an incident where several proselytizers were arrested in 2011, a district court judge declared these detentions illegal, and the practice mostly stopped subsequently.¹¹

Similarly, in Egypt proselytizing is not explicitly forbidden by law, but the government may impose legal penalties against non-Muslims proselytizing to Muslims, citing issues such as “disrupting social cohesion”. The government tolerates foreign religious workers on the condition they do not proselytize among Muslims. Proselytizers who distribute Christian literature are regularly detained on various charges and, if not residents, deported.¹²

Category 4: proselytizing is legal but is restricted in practice by local or regional governments or government officials

This type of policy is similar to the previous one except the officials restricting proselytizing are primarily local officials in some locations. In most cases this is in the absence of a coherent national policy of restricting proselytizers. In some cases there is such a national policy but some local officials engage in restrictions beyond those found in the national policy. This pattern of restriction was present in 25 countries in 1990 (or the earliest data available). By 2014 this practice stopped in four countries but began in six, bringing the total to 27.

In some cases these restrictions are minor and at least partially opposed by the national government. Bulgaria’s 2002 Religious Denominations Act protects the right to write, publish and disseminate beliefs orally, in print, via electronic media and through various types of educational programs (Article 5.1 and 6.5) and also to preach or teach “in places that the organizations find appropriate for their purposes” (Article 6.6). However, it does prohibit proselytizing to minors without their parents’ permission (Article 7.4).¹³ Nevertheless, there are reports of local officials harassing proselytizers, particularly Mormons and Jehovah’s Witnesses. For example, in 2010 there were several instances of Jehovah’s Witness members being fined for various proselytizing activities conducted without permits, including organizing public religious meetings, proselytizing door-to-door and distributing religious materials.¹⁴ In 2013 the town of Burgas passed an ordinance that prohibited door-to-door proselytizing and the distribution of religious literature. Bulgaria’s Directorate for Religious Affairs protested the restriction and advised affected religious groups to consider legal action.¹⁵

In Romania there is no law against proselytizing, but this type of local harassment is more common than in Bulgaria. There are reports of proselytizers being told not to speak to people on the streets and police demands to pay fees to hand out information. In other cases local officials tacitly supported campaigns by the Orthodox Church to prevent proselytizing.
For example, in 2004, the mayor of Dofteana under influence of the local Orthodox priest obstructed activities of the Jehovah’s Witnesses and warned them to cease their door-to-door ministry. Also in 2004, the Mayor of Mizil, despite repeated complaints filed by the Jehovah’s Witnesses, issued a resolution forbidding any actions of proselytizing. In 2007, two members of Jehovah’s Witnesses were stopped by the mayor of Branisca while they were practicing religious ministry. The mayor asked them to leave the locality and told the Witnesses that their preaching activity was illegal.16

Category 5: countries deny entry to foreign proselytizers or otherwise limit the activities of foreign proselytizers

This category of policy tends to focus on religions not considered native to the country which are considered by at least some government officials to be undesirable. It often takes the form of denial of visas or special requirements for visas for religious workers that are not placed on other visa applicants. Thus, a primary motive, though certainly not the only motive, is protection of national culture. This is the most common category of restriction on proselytizing measured by the RAS dataset. It was present in 65 countries in 1990 (or the earliest date available) which increased to 66 by 2014.

In some cases the restrictions are minor and involve some bureaucracy in order to enter a country. For example in Italy missionaries or religious workers must apply for appropriate visas prior to arriving in the country. Those seeking a visa for religious work must provide documentation regarding their religious qualifications, information on the nature of their religious work in the country and proof of economic support.17

In other countries the burdens for gaining a visa can be more substantial. For example, in 2004 Denmark passed the “Imam Law”, which is directed at foreign religious leaders seeking residence visas in Denmark. This law limits the number of religious residence visas issued in proportion to the size of the religious community and requires that the applicant be associated with a recognized religion, possess a proven relevant background for religious work and be self-financing. Most importantly, it states that visas will not be issued if there is reason to believe the applicant may be a threat to public order, public safety, security, decency, health or other people’s rights and duties. Thus, it is generally believed to be targeted at imams who preach ideas considered contrary to Danish cultural norms.18

In a more extreme example, Turkmenistan by law prohibits all foreign missionary activity and all foreign religious organizations. The state denies visas to foreigners suspected of conducting or intending to conduct missionary activity. In fact most visas for anyone suspected of wanting to enter Turkmenistan for any religious purpose are usually refused and visitors who are discovered meeting with religious communities risk deportation. The sole exception is when registered religious communities apply to invite foreign religious leaders. Such requests are occasionally approved.19

Category 6: proselytizing is limited by location

This type of policy limits proselytizing based on the location where the activity is allowed to occur. This can include limiting proselytizing to specific locations, usually recognized places of worship, and bans proselytizing and missionary activity in all other locations. It also includes instances where proselytizing is banned in specific locations within a country but is legal elsewhere. This type of restriction was present in 1990 (or the earliest available date) in five countries which increased to nine by 2014.
Fiji is an example of a more limited manifestation of this type of restriction because the country’s constitution places limits on proselytizing on government premises and at government functions. Similarly in some parts of India it is illegal to engage in missionary activity near places of worship of other religions. This is intended largely to prevent social unrest.

In Vietnam, this type of restriction is part of a larger pattern of restrictions. Only members of registered religious organizations may proselytize their faith, and only in their registered places of worship. The government must approve all foreign missionary groups, and these activities must take place under the sponsorship of a national or local religious organization. This is sporadically enforced as undeclared missionaries from several countries are active in the country. However, foreign religious workers or delegations are occasionally prevented from entering Vietnam.20

Category 7: proselytizing is limited to legally recognized religions

Restricting religions by restricting their ability to legally register is a common tactic, particularly in autocracies (Sarkissian, 2015; Finke et al., 2017). Thus this type of restriction on proselytizing is often part of a larger set of restrictions in unregistered religions. This type of restriction was present in 17 countries in 1990 (or the earliest date available) which increased to 20 by 2014.

Austria is a borderline case where proselytizing is legal for all religions, but religious workers for confessional communities or legal associations must apply for a general immigrant visa that is not employment or family based and is subject to a quota. Unrecognized groups may not be able to secure work/residence permits and therefore may not be able to bring missionaries, teachers or pastors from non-EU countries to Austria. This may diminish their activity.21 Ecuador similarly requires religious groups to be licensed or registered if they engage in proselytizing activity.

Tajikistan applies this type of restriction more strictly. A 2009 law states that only officially registered religions may engage in preaching and teaching religious doctrines. This includes missionary activity. Even before this law was passed, missionaries who openly proselytized were often harassed by authorities. The government bans organizations which illegally proselytize and deports proselytizers if they are not citizens.22

Conclusions

Restrictions on proselytizing and missionaries are common and perhaps most common against foreign missionaries. It is important to emphasize that while restricting proselytizing is often a violation of religious freedom, there is a balancing issue where individuals may not wish the attentions of missionaries and proselytizers. As Witte and Green (2009, p. 595) put it, “in addressing instances of proselytism, states must balance one community’s right to exercise and expand its faith versus another person’s or community’s right to be left alone to its own traditions”.

That being said, I would argue that most of the restrictions discussed in this work are beyond what is necessary to protect the right to be left alone. It can also be contextual. For example, the ban in some parts of India on proselytizing close to the place of worship of another religion could certainly be seen as a reasonable effort to avoid unnecessary friction in a country where inter-religious tensions are high. Nevertheless, even minor intrusions such as a government requirement that proselytizers be licensed are, in effect, a government regulating who may or may not engage in a religious practice. Thus, these contextual-based exceptions ought to be comparatively rare.
On a more general level, restrictions on missionaries and proselytizing are important because they are a microcosm of larger patterns of religious discrimination. Proselytizers and missionaries are among the least popular members of religious minorities among religious majorities who engage in activities seen as cultural and ideological threats and often also as political and security threats. This makes them particularly vulnerable and likely to be among the first to be repressed by a government that is becoming more repressive and intolerant of religious minorities.

Notes


References