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PANDEMIC OF PERSECUTION: COVID-19 AND THE PERSECUTION OF RELIGIOUS MINORITIES

Abstract

The ongoing COVID-19 pandemic has laid bare some of the structural weaknesses of states and societies and the systemic inequalities within them. In this paper we discuss the effects of large scale disasters such as pandemics on marginalized religious minorities. Our aim is to see how pandemics have been used through history as a cover for persecuting religious minorities. In order to better understand the correlation between pandemics and scapegoating, in the first half of the paper we will look into ancient and medieval experiences, while in the second part we will focus on the Covid-19 pandemic and its impact on current religious persecution. We argue that the effects of the pandemic are twofold. On one hand, it diverts the attention of governments in the global north from addressing persecution against marginalized religious minorities in the global south and in some cases it is even a cover for their unwillingness to resolve these issues. On the other hand, it enables some state and non-state actors in the global south to reinforce discrimination against undesirable minorities in their midst.

Keywords: pandemics, Covid-19, persecution, scapegoating, freedom of religion or belief.

1. INTRODUCTION

In this paper we examine the correlation between pandemics and scapegoating of religious minorities through history. We first lay down the theoretical background by looking into the interpretation and instrumentalization of pandemics. Using the scapegoat theory of intergroup conflict, we will see how pandemics can build upon social vulnerabilities and pre-existing anti-minority prejudices and trigger stigmatization, scapegoating and persecution of undesirables. Through the paper we focus on the case of Christianity for two reasons: First, although Christianity is the most numerous religion worldwide, large segments of Christians live in predominantly non-Christian countries. Second, through history Christians have been on both sides of the religious persecution spectrum.

We will begin our journey in antiquity, when plagues and other natural disasters were used as a pretext for several waves of severe persecution against the Christian minority. In Late Antiquity and the Middle Ages, however, when Christianity became legal and then official religion, the pendulum of persecution shifted. Selective approach to the writings of Augustine of Hippo gave way to persecutions of religious minorities, such as the Jews, in periods of severe crisis like the Bubonic Plague.

In the next section we will provide a bird's-eye view of the modern attitudes to religion, starting from the Reformation, the Counter-Reformation, the Wars of religion and the subsequent challenges to Christianity from Rationalism, the Enlightenment movement, Romanticism, but also Marxism, the First World War and Postmodernism. We will briefly outline how these challenges converged in the late 20 century concepts of privatized faith in a neutral or even secularized state. In parallel, we will see how the Reformation re-discovered the concept of freedom of conscience as a foundation upon which the corpus of human rights and freedoms would later be built.

Shifting our focus from the past to the present, we will look into religious persecution in the age of human rights, especially during the COVID-19 pandemic. We argue that the effects of the ongoing pandemic on vulnerable religious minorities are twofold. On one hand, it enabled some state and non-state actors in the Global South to reinforce existing discrimination against undesirable minorities in their midst. On the other hand, it diverted the attention of governments in the Global North from addressing persecution against marginalized religious minorities in the Global South and in some cases it is even a cover for their unwillingness to resolve these issues. One of the enablers of this global persecution of religious minorities is the so-called 'need not creed' mantra adopted that by many Western governments, the end-result of the converging challenges against Christianity in the modern era. We examine how this 'religion-blind' policy approach hinders national and international efforts for protection of human rights. In the final section we will see the initiatives and efforts to prevent scapegoating and persecution of marginalized religious communities by protecting the freedom of religion or belief.

2. THEORETICAL BACKGROUND: INTERPRETATION AND INSTRUMENTALIZATION OF PANDEMICS

In his latest book "Epidemics and Society: From the Black Death to the Present" (2019) Yale Professor of History and History of Medicine Frank M. Snowden argues that "every society produces its own specific vulnerabilities" to epidemic diseases. Understanding these vulnerabilities helps us understand a "society's structure, its standard of living, and its political priorities" (Snowden 2019, 7). Under certain circumstances epidemic disease can trigger "stigmatization and scapegoating, flight and mass hysteria, riots, and upsurges in religiosity" (Snowden 2019, 5). These circumstances can depend on a number of factors. One of these factors is the interpretation of the origin of the disease that can be classified as supernatural and natural. While naturalistic interpretations view disease as a result of purely physical factors, supernatural interpretations see non-physical forces at work. The supernatural view can be further divided into a divine and demonic interpretation. The divine theory presupposes that the illness is a "punishment sent by an angry god as chastisement for disobedience or sin". The demonic theory sees disease as a diabolical plot by evil spirits or people (Snowden 2019, 9-14). Under certain circumstances, both supernatural interpretations can lead to scapegoating of undesirables and, in particular, marginalized religious minorities. Furthermore, both supernatural and natural interpretations of a disease can be further instrumentalized for the purpose of persecuting religious minorities.

The scapegoat theory of intergroup conflict is helpful in understanding these circumstances. According to this theory, a pandemic can cause a number of prolonged negative experiences, including increasing stress and insecurity over economic decline and income decrease, fear from infection and grief over deceased relatives and friends. In order to deal with the emotional stress caused by this vortex of collective and individual crisis, members of a majority group can seek someone to blame for the calamity. According to Remi Jedwab et al (2020) "by blaming a minority group, members of a majority group may experience emotional relief, because there is now an "explanation" for the shock. They feel that their lack of control over the situation is not their fault, but the fault of the minority" (Jedwab et al. 2020, 3-4). Pre-existing anti-minority prejudices and concentration of power within a majority group can further magnify this effect. In other words, high virulence and mortality rates, distressing symptoms, insufficient understanding of the disease, pre-existing societal tensions and prejudices against minorities as well as active or passive support of authorities can lead to scapegoating and persecution of minorities.

As mentioned, we will examine how natural disasters such as pandemics can kindle scapegoating and persecution of religious minorities using the case of Christianity. We will begin with a brief overview the first three centuries when Christians, then a novel and small monotheistic minority within the polytheistic Roman Empire, were often persecuted under the pretext of pandemics and other natural hazards and disasters.

3. RELIGIOUS PERSECUTION IN ANTIQUITY

The Roman Empire was not tolerant in its essence. However, in terms of religion, the Romans were flexible. They did not hesitate to include the deities of conquered peoples in their pantheon. However, the claim of the Christians that there is only one true God as well as their unwavering rejection to take part in Roman religious rituals, including offering incense to the Emperor, made them victims of persecution. The Great Fire of Rome (64 AD) sparked a wildfire of persecution of Christians in the second and third centuries.[1] Namely, pandemics and other natural hazards and disasters were often used as pretext for blaming and persecuting the Christian minority. In the second and third century there was a general perception that natural hazards and disasters were a divine punishment for Christians' disrespect for the Roman pantheon (Lukashenko and Biletska 2021, 49). Christians were blamed for the 152 AD earthquake, the 165 AD plague, as well as the earthquakes in the 230s. According to Craig de Vos, even the infamous Decian persecutions of Christians in 250 were instigated by popular wrath due to a series of natural disasters (de Vos 2000, 878). Finally, the Plague of Cyprian that afflicted the Empire from 249 until 262 led to a new wave of anti-Christian persecution. Tertullian (115-220), who is regarded as the founder of western Christian theology, protested against Roman authorities' tendency to scapegoat Christians. In his Apology (written in 197 AD), he writes that:

> *"... they consider that the Christians are the cause of every public calamity and every misfortune of the people. If the Tiber rises as high as the city walls, if the Nile does not rise to the fields, if the weather will not change, if there is an earthquake, a famine, a plague—straightway the cry is heard: "Toss the Christians to the lion!"" (Tertullian 40.1,2)*

4. RELIGIOUS PERSECUTION IN LATE ANTIQUITY AND THE MIDDLE AGES

Following the Edict of Milan issued by emperors Constantine and Licinius in 313 AD the tide of persecution slowly started to change. From an illegal and persecuted religion, Christianity became a legally recognized religion. By the end of the same century, Christianity became the dominant religion of Rome, while paganism was formally limited. These events coincided with the Vandal invasion and the beginning of the decline of the western part of the empire, inspiring pagan authors to argue that these calamities were a divine punishment by the old Roman deities. Augustine of Hippo responded to these accusations by claiming that the decline of Rome has nothing to do with the spread of Christianity. According to him, all those who remained loyal to the pagan Roman deities simply followed their immoral example and have renounced the virtues. However, Augustine never tried to "sacralize" political life and did not develop a consistent theory about how a political community should look like. His goal was to show that none of the

1 The claims that Christians started the fire of Rome were of later dates and were made after the events.

temporal forms of government are definitive. The temporal city of man will always be a mixture of good and bad things. Only the City of God has lasting value. However, this City is not here and now in its entirety. The Church is called to bear witness about it, but not to forcefully try to implement it. In his initial correspondence with the bishops of the schismatic Donatist movement in Northern Africa, Augustine opposed any form of pressure in terms of belief. In his letters to the Donatist bishop Maximin (Ep.23.7) and Eusebius (Ep.34.1) Augustin insists that no "one should against his will be coerced into the Catholic communion" (Ep.93.17, v., Ep. 185.25-6). However, few years later he approved coercion in terms of belief. The Donatists were not only a schismatic Christian movement, but the radical members were extremely violent and committed atrocities. Augustine reluctantly approved coercive repression of these and similar movements. However, he did not change his mind in terms of the politics and persisted in his belief that public life must be neutral. He called upon Christians to actively engage with non-Christians in creating social welfare for everyone, since all people share a common desire to live in peace and security. The idea of a Christian state would be totally unacceptable for Augustine. Unfortunately, although medieval Christianity was heavily influenced by Augustine's ideas, it failed to follow his council on this issue.[2]

With the spread of Christianity through Europe, this inconsistency gave way to future persecutions of religious minorities, such as the Jews, in periods of deep crisis. The disaster that overshadowed other crisis was the Bubonic Plague.

Following a period of economic expansion, population growth and rapid urbanization in the 13 century, 14 century Europe was suddenly exposed to major environmental, socio-economic, and health crisis. Extreme weather events affected food production and resulted with a seven-year famine (lasting from 1315 until 1322). An animal disease wiped out 60% of the cattle and reduced meat and milk production. The fatal combination of factors made European populations extremely vulnerable to the forthcoming bubonic plague. The first wave of the pandemic, known as Black Death or Black Plague, ravaged Europe from 1347 until 1352. The impoverished, starved and malnourished populations could not withstand its impact.

With its extraordinary virulence (its capacity to cause harm and pathological symptoms), rapid progression of its deadly symptoms and the high fatality rate, targeting people regardless of their sex, age and social status, the plague decimated entire communities, killing up to 40% of Europe's population in only few years. Transforming European demography and affecting every aspect of society, the bubonic plague produced

> *"mass hysteria, violence, and religious revivals as people sought to assuage an angry god. They also looked anxiously within their midst to find the guilty parties responsible for so terrible a disaster. For people who regarded the disease as divine retribution, those responsible were sinners. Plague thus repeatedly gave rise to scapegoating and witch-hunting. Alternatively, for those inclined to the demonic interpretation of disease, those responsible were the agents of a homicidal human conspiracy. Frequently,*

2 Stroumsa rightly points out, the transformation of Christianity from an illegal and persecuted religion seeking recognition and toleration, to an established state religion denying others that same right "would be rooted in human nature, rather than in some implicit aspects of Christian theology" (Stroumsa 1998, 173).

vigilantes hunted down foreigners and Jews and sought out witches and poisoners." (Snowden 2019, 29)

Snowden points that these grave consequences combined with the supernatural understanding of the origins of the disease resulted with scapegoating and violent cleansing of communities. Regardless whether they believed that the plague was a divine punishment or a demonic plot, the culprits had to be found and punished in order to stop the plague. This resulted with violent cleansing of communities from the undesirables. In medieval Europe the Jews were a marginalized religious minority deprived of legal status and fully depended on the benevolence of the authorities, which made them quite vulnerable. Snowden writes:

"Jews were ... repeatedly targeted amidst waves of anti-Semitic violence. Religious dissenters, foreigners, and witches were also attacked. All of them were guilty of offending God and bringing disaster on the faithful […] Thus towns across Europe closed themselves to outsiders during plague years while within their walls undesirables were hunted down, beaten, and cast out. In many places, people were stoned, lynched, and burned at the stake, and full-scale pogroms were also launched—what one might today call ethnic cleansing." (Snowden 2019, 63-64)

However, there is another side of the persecution coin. In his recent analysis of the Black Death, Cohn (2018) points that in many cases, anti-Jewish persecution was driven not so much by supernatural interpretations but by financial interests. The case of the Strasbourg massacre of 1349 points that the real instigators were not the commoners but the nobility. The Holy Roman Emperor Charles IV of Bohemia "encouraged leading burghers, bishops, and knights at Nuremberg, Regensburg, Augsburg, and Frankfurt to murder Jews, granting them immunity from punishment and afterwards cancelling their debts to Jews." (Cohn 2018, 49). Jedwab *et al*, find that up to 235 Jewish communities across Europe faced ferocious persecution, including with pogroms. There were only few reported calls for protection of the Jews. For example, Pope Clement VI issued a papal bull (*Quamvis Perfidiam*) forbidding the persecution of Jews, in which he argues that the plague was equally deadly for Jews as for Christians. However, many of the city and town authorities not only tolerated the persecution, but organized them themselves, because they feared the reactions of the populations (Habicht *et al* 2020, 13-14; Jedwab *et al* 2020, 11-12, 32).

5. RELIGIOUS PERSECUTION IN THE MODERN ERA

Religious persecution in the modern era was marked by disruptive events and processes, such as the Reformation, the Counter-reformation and the subsequent Thirty Years' War (1618-1648). The Peace of Westphalia (1648) inaugurated a new political order in Europe that substantially limited the influence of organized religion on state policy by separating church and state. On a philosophical level, Cartesian Rationalism and English Deism gave way to the Enlightenment movement that perceived organized religion as a source of conflict. Seeking a way to discard the supernatural dimension of Christianity as

irrational, the Enlightenment philosophers questioned key elements of the Christian faith[3]. The challenge culminated with a suppression of the Church during the French Revolution and the transformation of many church buildings into secular temples of reason. In the 19 century, however, the Romantic movement emerged as a reaction to the Enlightenment. Although rejecting the rigidness of rationalism, many Romantic authors were ambivalent toward traditional Christianity.[4] As a response to this crisis of faith, some Liberal Protestant authors initiated a process of discarding some, and reinterpreting other Christian beliefs in line with modern cultural norms, paving a more optimistic view of human nature.

In the mid 19 century Marxism emerged as an intellectual rival to Christianity, arguing that religion is nothing more than a product of social and economic alienation that serves as an opium to the masses, enabling them to live with their economic alienation. The Russian Revolution of 1917 and the Bolsheviks' attempt to remodel society and silence alternative worldviews, set in motion the most ferocious persecution of Christians in modern times. At the same time, the First World War discredited what remained of the liberal theology's optimism and paved the way for Postmodernism's deconstruction of key concepts such as truth and meaning that resulted with further marginalization of religion in public life. (McGrath 2011, ch.4) Many of these processes of modernity converged in the late 20 century concepts of privatized faith in a neutral or even secularized state. In parallel, the Reformation, especially through the Anabaptist movement, re-discovered the concept of freedom of conscience as a foundation upon which the corpus of human rights and freedoms would later be built. Concluding this bird's-eye view of the modern era attitudes towards religion, we now return to the religious persecution in the age of human rights.

6. RELIGIOUS PERSECUTION IN THE AGE OF HUMAN RIGHTS

Covid-19 (SARS-CoV-2) is just the latest disease in a long pandemic sequence that has given rise to persecution of religious minorities. However, unlike past pandemics, Covid-19 occurs in a world with an international human rights system in place. The Universal Declaration of Human Rights (1948), the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights (1966), the Declaration on the Elimination of All Forms of Intolerance and of Discrimination based on Religion or Belief (1981), have been formally adopted and ratified in most countries in the world in order to guarantee fundamental human rights, including the freedom of thought, conscience and religion (or, briefly, freedom of religion or belief). Article 18 of the UDHR underlines that

> *"Everyone has the right to freedom of thought, conscience and religion; this right includes freedom to change his religion or belief, and freedom, either alone or in community with others and in public or private, to manifest his religion or belief in teaching, practice, worship and observance." (UDHR, Article 18)*

3 These include the notion of divine revelation, the status and interpretation of the Bible, the identity and significance of Jesus Christ, the doctrines of the Trinity and original sin.

4 George Eliot, for example, believed that "the moral aspects of faith can be maintained without the metaphysical basis of Christianity", and that subsequently, "we can be good without God." (McGrath 2011, ch.4).

However, even though we live in what many have hailed as the "age of human rights", the ongoing Covid-19 pandemic shows just how vulnerable religious minorities can be. With is rapid spread, symptoms that puzzled the medical community, authorities and populations, Covid-19 has exposed some of the structural weaknesses of states and societies and the systemic inequalities within them. The economic recession has hit hard on the most vulnerable and marginalized segments of society, especially in the Global South, many of which are Christians.

Having this in mind, we argue that the effects of the ongoing pandemic are twofold. On one hand, it enables some state and non-state actors in the Global South to reinforce existing discrimination against undesirable minorities in their midst. On the other hand, it diverts the attention of governments in the Global North from addressing persecution against marginalized religious minorities in the Global South and in some cases it is even a cover for their unwillingness to resolve these issues.

Prior to the pandemic, in 2018 then UK Foreign Secretary Jeremy Hunt commissioned Philip Mounstephen, Bishop of Truro, to prepare an independent review that would "map levels of persecution of and other discrimination against Christians in key countries around the world" as well as "provide an objective assessment of the impact and levels of FCO support and make recommendations in this regard" (FCO 8 February 2019). The Truro Review was launched on 8 July 2019, confirming the "inconvenient truth... that the overwhelming majority (estimated at 80%) of persecuted religious believers are Christians". (Truro 2019,) The authors of the Review find that "in some regions, the level and nature of persecution is arguably coming close to meeting the international definition of genocide, according to that adopted by the UN." (Truro 2019, 16-17).

This level of pre-pandemic persecution is related to the shifting religious and socio-economic demographics of Christianity. In 1900, only 18% of Christians lived in the regions of the Global South, compared to 82% living in the Global North. Since then, the numbers have dramatically shifted. By 2020, over two thirds of Christians live in the countries of the Global South. It is expected that by 2050 "77 percent of all Christians will live in the Global South." (Zurlo, Johnson and Crossing 2019, 10).[5] However, Christians are still a minority in the Global South and represent 23% of the population in that region (PewResearchCenter 2011). As a phenomenon of the Global South, Christianity is also a phenomenon of the global poor. Their socioeconomic position is marked by "poverty and low or no technology, political instability, low life expectancy, and scarcity of educational opportunity. Their economy is largely based on export of raw material, manufactured goods, and manual labor" (Wan 2018, 733). For example, Christians represent between 1.59-2.5% of the total population of Pakistan and yet occupy 75-80% of low-paid, sanitation jobs. (Tadros, Kanwer and Mirza 2021, 141). In Egypt, over 60.000 Coptic Christians are members of the so-called Zaballeen community (Arabic term for 'garbage people') who survive by recycling Cairo's waste. Along with the decline of religious liberty, these socioeconomic

5 Similarly, in its 2011 report on Global Christianity, the Pew Research Center estimates that the Global North-South distribution of Christianity has significantly shifted from 1910 until 2010. In 1910, 82.2% of Christians lived in the Global North while 17.8% lived in the Global South, while a century later, in 2010, 39.2% of Christians lived in the Global North, while 60.8% in the Global South. (PewResearchCenter 2011).

settings of Christian communities in the Global South made them particularly vulnerable to effects of the Covid-19 pandemic.

Having in mind the already high level of persecution, what difference did the pandemic made? Luke Kelly (2020) finds that the Covid-19 pandemic has not only intensified the already existing discriminatory practices by both state and non-state actors against marginalized religious minorities, but can potentially "undermine their position in the longer-term." Kelly concludes that policies and measures against Covid-19 have "disproportionately affected structurally disadvantaged religious and belief minorities, and have been used to justify illiberal control measures." (Kelly 2020, 2). Similarly, in its 2021 Annual Report, the United States Commission on International Religious Freedom (USCIRF) find that "in some countries, already marginalized religious minorities faced official and/or societal stigmatization, harassment, and discrimination for allegedly causing or spreading the virus." (USCIRF Annual Report 2021, 1). These findings correspond to the conclusions of the UN Special Rapporteur on Freedom of Religion or Belief, Ahmed Shaheed. In his interim report "Elimination of all forms of religious intolerance", he points that the exclusion of persons belonging to religious or belief minorities:

> *"is often beset by systemic and systematic denial of both their existence and their identities. Their marginalization is reinforced by the resulting challenges in accessing essential services, resources and opportunities that they face at the hands of majorities, official State structures and even from members in their own communities. Increasingly, evidence suggests that if left unchecked, such discrimination and inequality can precipitate poverty, conflict, violence and displacement. In the most egregious cases, the very survival of some minority religious or belief groups can be placed at risk. The consequences of leaving such populations behind are stark." (OHCHR A/75/385, para. 4)*

In the same report Shaheed warns that religious and ethnic minorities are "particularly vulnerable to higher rates of COVID-19 infection and mortality, to harsh treatment by law enforcement in the context of emergency measures and to unequal access to adequate medical care." (OHCHR A/75/385 para. 47). It is no wonder that in countries with embedded structural weaknesses and social injustices "religious marginalization increases the vulnerability to Covid-19 much like gender, ethnicity and class marginalization", and, as such, is a important vulnerability qualifier (Tadros, Kanwer and Mirza 2021, 133).[6]

Despite worldwide lockdowns, reports show that the persecution of religious minorities has not become victim of the coronavirus. On the contrary, evidence point that extremist groups take advantage of the pandemic to intensify scapegoating and persecution of undesirable religious minorities. For instance, Kruglanski et al (2020) find that by "exploiting gaps in security, and the general burdens on societies that the pandemic imposes" terror groups and violent extremists (such as Boko Haram in Nigeria and ISIS in Iraq) "are using

6 By 'religious marginalization' we do not imply marginalization of a given religion and its doctrines, but the marginalization of the people who are vulnerable precisely because of their religious affiliation. Freedom of religion or belief and its free expression and practice is a fundamental human right of believers, not beliefs, and implies protection of people, not their ideas.

the pandemic as an opportunity to grow stronger." (Kruglanski *et al* 2020, 121). They instrumentalize the pandemic by using

> *"diverse, and, often internally inconsistent, blend of communications including conspiracy theories, claims of the God's vengeance against its enemies, exhortation to weaponise the virus, and taking advantage of society's weakness by launching widespread attacks wherever and whenever possible." (Kruglanski et al 2020, 122).*

7. RELIGION-BLIND APPROACH

Apart from enabling authoritarian governments and extremist groups to scale up persecution against religious minorities, the Covid-19 pandemic also diverts the attention of governments in the Global North from addressing persecution against marginalized religious minorities in the Global South and in some cases it is even a cover for their unwillingness to resolve these issues. One of the major findings of the previously mentioned Truro Review is that the lack of western response to persecution

> *"has no doubt too been tinged by a certain post-Christian bewilderment, if not embarrassment, about matters of faith, and a consequent failure to grasp how for the vast majority of the world's inhabitants faith is not only a primary marker of identity, but also a primary motivation for action (both for good or ill)." (Truro 2019, 12)*

Both in the Review and in successive statements, the Bishop of Truro points out that one of the enablers of this global persecution of religious minorities is the so-called 'need not creed' mantra adopted by many Western governments. This mantra "simply fails to recognize how creed, or indeed, not having a creed, creates very significant need. Being faith-blind means we can simply be blind to injustice, and that is not good enough." (Bishop of Truro, 8 July 2021). Lord David Alton of Liverpool[7] illustrates the negative effects of this approach commenting the situation of religious minorities in post-Daesh Iraq:

> *"A policy of "religion-blind" aid has meant that the UK is unwilling to rebuild a Christian town, or a Yazidi village, unable to grasp that the Nineveh Plains were always a patchwork of settlements belonging to different religious groups – who lived in harmony with their near neighbours of another creed." (Truro 2019, 58)*

Where does this mantra originate from? Authors such as Sandel (2009), Maclure and Taylor (2011) and Wolterstorff (2018) provide a clue that can help us trace this mantra back to the Rawlsian concept of privatized faith that individuals are to keep for themselves and circulate strictly within the their religious and moral associations, thus practically silencing religious and moral convictions in the public square (Milkov and Gjorgon 2020). Put in practice, this concept of privatized faith in a neutral state gives way to the 'religion-blind' approach and the 'need no creed' mantra that prevents liberal democracies to consider creed as a vulnerability qualifier and treat the global phenomenon of persecution of religious

7 Lord Alton is Co-Chair of the UK All Party Parliamentary Group on religious minorities.

minorities as a human rights issue. As a result, "western politicians until now have been reluctant to speak out in support of Christians in peril." The authors of the Review call the UK government "to recognize religious affiliation as a key vulnerability marker for members of religious minorities" and reject the privatized faith mantra in foreign policy contexts entirely (Truro 2019, 129).

The 'religion-blind' policy approach is not limited to national level. The Truro Review finds that UN and other agencies also "fail to ensure that those whose need has been specifically generated by their creed, through the suffering of persecution, receive their fair share of aid" and recommends the Government to review the channeling of its international aid through UN and other agencies (Truro 2019, 59). In this context Marshall (2021) finds that

> "religious measures are strikingly missing in methodologies and indices that assess human development progress. The most widely used approaches to assess and compare development and humanitarian programmes and performance rarely devote more than marginal attention to religious dimensions, including FoRB. This includes the indicators for the 17 SDGs and 167 targets and human rights reviews." (Marshall 2021, 29)

It should come to no surprise that the UN Special Rapporteur on freedom of religion or belief, Ahmed Shaheed calls upon states, civil society and UN entities to extend the scope of sustainable development by promoting "freedom of religion or belief, in particular in the context of religious or belief minorities who may experience unequal access to essential services such as health care, quality education and housing, inter alia." (OHCHR A/75/385, para. 3). Taking religious marginalization seriously is indispensable for implementing the core, transformative promise of the UN Agenda 2030 to "leave no one behind".

9. POSITIVE TRENDS

The Truro Review have given way to some positive trends. The International Religious Freedom or Belief Alliance (IRFBA) was established in February 2020 as a "network of likeminded countries fully committed to advancing freedom of religion or belief around the world." [8] In its "COVID-19 and Religious Minorities Pandemic Statement" IRFBA addresses its concern

> *"about the impact of COVID-19 on religious minorities. As a shared and important principle, we hold that governments should never limit or penalize an individual's right to believe or not believe and any decision to change one's belief. Members of religious minority groups are among the most vulnerable, and they have been subjected at times to verbal abuse, death threats, physical attacks, and discrimination in attempting to*

8 Currently 35 countries have joined the Alliance: Albania, Armenia, Austria, Australia, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Brazil, Bulgaria, Cameroon, Colombia, Costa Rica, Croatia, Czech Republic, The Democratic Republic of Congo, Denmark, Estonia, The Gambia, Georgia, Greece, Hungary, Israel, Kosovo, Latvia, Lithuania, Malta, the Netherlands, Norway, Poland, Senegal, Sierra Leone, Slovakia, Slovenia, Togo, Ukraine, the United Kingdom, and the United States.

access public services, and in all too many cases, vital health services have been denied entirely." (IRFBA August 20 2020).

In November 2020 Poland hosted a Ministerial to advance freedom of religion or belief that supported "religious and faith-based organizations and leaders in tracking and identifying gaps in the COVID-19 response (2020 Ministerial to Advance Freedom of Religion or Belief).

Another important step in addressing this issue was made with the G7. Namely, for the first time the Group of Seven (G7)[9] included freedom of religion or belief in its official documents. In the Corbis Bay G7 Summit Communiqué "Our Shared Agenda for Global Action to Build Back Better", the G7 leaders commit to "support freedom of religion or belief" (Corbis Bay G7 Summit Communiqué, para. 48), while in the "Open Societies Statement" they commit to cooperate together and with partners to "Strengthen open societies globally by protecting civic space and media freedom, promoting freedom of expression, freedom of assembly and association, and freedom of religion or belief, and by tackling all forms of discrimination, including racism" (2021 Open Societies Statement, 2).

CONCLUSION

In this paper we examined the correlation between pandemics and scapegoating of religious minorities through history. Using the scapegoat theory of intergroup conflict, we saw how pandemics can build upon social vulnerabilities and pre-existing anti-minority prejudices and trigger stigmatization, scapegoating and persecution of undesirables. The case of Christianity helped us see the dynamics of scapegoating from both ends. In fact, Christianity made a full circle, from a persecuted minority in the Roman Empire, then a persecuting majority in Late Antiquity and the Middle Ages, and finally facing persecution in the Global South in the late 20th and early 21st century. Despite occurring in the 'era of human rights', the COVID-19 pandemic negatively affected religious minorities worldwide. We argued that the effects of the ongoing pandemic on vulnerable religious minorities are twofold. On one hand, it enabled some state and non-state actors in the Global South to reinforce existing discrimination against undesirable minorities in their midst. On the other hand, it diverted the attention of governments in the Global North from addressing persecution against marginalized religious minorities in the Global South and in some cases it is even a cover for their unwillingness to resolve these issues. One of the enablers of this global persecution of religious minorities is the so-called 'need not creed' mantra adopted by many Western governments that "simply fails to recognize how creed, or indeed, not having a creed, creates very significant need. Being faith-blind means we can simply be blind to injustice, and that is not good enough." (Bishop of Truro, 8 July 2021). Its origins can be traced back to the Rawlsian concept of privatized faith in a neutral state, that, in its turn, is a result of the converging challenges against Christianity in the modern era.

9 The Group of Seven (G7) is an inter-governmental political forum consisting of Canada, France, Germany, Italy, Japan, the United Kingdom and the United States and attended by the EU.

This 'religion-blind' policy approach is present on both national and international level, in organizations such as the UN and other agencies, undermining the very efforts for the implementation of major policies and agendas.

We noted, however, that there are exceptions from this rule, such as the efforts of the International Religious Freedom or Belief Alliance, and the growing awareness among key nations about the need to prevent scapegoating and persecution of marginalized religious communities by protecting the freedom of religion or belief. If applied non-discriminatory and consistently, such efforts could stop the cycle of stigmatization, scapegoating and persecution of marginalized religious groups, even in times of crisis.

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