

Launch of review into persecution of Christians: Foreign Secretary's speech

Good morning ladies, gentleman. Welcome to the Foreign Office.

When I was moving house last year, I came across a book called God's Smuggler which I first read when I was about ten.

At the height of the Cold War, Brother Andrew van der Bijl would smuggle Bibles across the Iron Curtain to communist countries where Christianity was ruthlessly suppressed.

When the Berlin Wall fell 30 years ago, the European nations that Brother Andrew had visited undercover won their liberty and achieved one of the greatest advances of human freedom in modern history.

Yet when I became Foreign Secretary, I learned that almost a quarter of a billion Christians were still enduring persecution around the world.

The evidence shows sadly that the situation is becoming worse.

The number of countries where Christians suffer because of their faith rose from 128 in 2015 to 144 a year later. In the Middle East, the very survival of Christianity as a living religion is in doubt.

A century ago, 20 percent of the region's people were Christians; today the figure is below 5 percent. Britain has always championed freedom of religion or belief for everyone.

I would particularly like to thank Lord Ahmad, our Minister for Human Rights – who was appointed the Prime Minister's Special Envoy in 2018 – for his vital work in this field.

And he has made an immense personal contribution, working across Government, visiting 13 countries to reach across religious divides, and securing funding for programmes in Iraq, Malaysia, Burma and Sudan.

And as someone who himself comes from a persecuted minority, I have always valued his wise counsel and his passion for this cause.

In my first weeks as Foreign Secretary, I prioritised the plight of the Rohingya Muslims, who are targets of a brutal campaign of ethnic cleansing mounted by the army of Burma.

But I am not convinced that our efforts on behalf of Christians have always matched the scale of the problem, or indeed have reflected the evidence that it is Christians who frequently endure the heaviest burden of persecution.

Indeed around the world, Christians are believed to be targets of about 80 percent of all acts of religious discrimination or persecution.

Perhaps because of a misguided political correctness – or an instinctive reluctance to talk about religion – British governments have not always grappled with this problem.

So in December I asked the Right Reverend Philip Mounstephen, the Anglican Bishop of Truro, to review the Foreign Office's support for persecuted Christians and recommend improvements.

I am grateful to Bishop Mounstephen for submitting his final report, which describes in harrowing detail the scale of the suffering and the moral obligation that rests on all of us.

So I thank him and all his team for the work they put into this excellent review which I hope will lead to a sea change in our approach at the Foreign Office.

The Bishop writes: "If one minority is on the receiving end of 80 percent of religiously motivated discrimination, it is simply not just that they should receive so little attention."

His report highlights the "decimation" of some of Christianity's "oldest and most enduring communities".

When Islamist terrorists struck Sri Lanka on Easter Sunday, killing over 250 people, this was the third Easter in a row disfigured by a terrorist attack somewhere in the world.

And these attacks stand alongside the equally appalling attacks on worshippers in mosques in Christchurch in New Zealand, reminding us how people across the world, of all faiths are still in this, the 21st century, being murdered for their religion.

So I warmly welcome this report and its recommendations. We are working across Government to agree a formal collective response as soon as possible.

Let me highlight some of those recommendations in particular.

Firstly, the report recommends that we seek a new UN Security Council Resolution urging all governments in the Middle East and North Africa to protect Christians and allow UN observers to monitor the necessary security measures.

Secondly, it says that for too long, governments have preferred the vague language of general condemnation rather than face the specific problem of anti-Christian discrimination and persecution.

The report recommends that I instruct my officials to define this abuse, and I believe we should do that by calling it out clearly with the label Christophobia.

Thirdly, as we establish independent national sanctions regimes after Brexit, the report says we must be prepared to consider imposing such measures on perpetrators of serious, religiously-driven human rights abuses.

Fourthly, it proposes that we establish a John Bunyan stream of the Magna Carta Fund, named in honour of the author of Pilgrim's Progress, dedicated to helping persecuted Christians. This would, for example, be used to fund trauma care for survivors.

Fifthly, all Foreign Office staff – at home and abroad – should in the view of the report, undergo mandatory training on religious literacy, subject to resources.

And finally, I already expect British Embassies and High Commissions in relevant countries to deliver tailored responses to any violations of freedom of religion or belief.

There will be, for example, a new focus on this subject by our High Commission in Nigeria, including greater engagement with Christian leaders and visits to those communities affected by persecution.

Bishop Mounstephen's review was independent and, in some respects, he is critical of our approach. We must accept such criticism in the constructive spirit in which it was intended.

For example, the report highlights different views of the causes of conflict between largely Muslim herders and Christian farmers in the central belt of Nigeria.

But whether or not the bloodshed is driven principally by competition over land and water, it would be a mistake to overlook religious hatred as an important factor.

Indeed it's hard to avoid concluding that the gunmen who raided a church in Benue state last year, murdering two priests and 17 worshippers, just one of the atrocities highlighted in the report, were motivated by anything else.

So in closing, I repeat my thanks to Bishop Mounstephen for calling our attention to a terrible burden of suffering. As the Christian doctrine of Original Sin reminds us, the capacity for wickedness is inherent in the human condition. We will never be able to extirpate anti-Christian bigotry.

But nor must we shrug our shoulders and walk on the other side of the road.

As a country that has always been a beacon for freedom and tolerance, the United Kingdom will not shirk its responsibilities and I am determined we will look up to them.

Thank you.