



Faith. Freedom. For All.

Testimony of Amanda Tyler,
On behalf of BJC (Baptist Joint Committee for Religious Liberty)

Before the U.S. House Oversight Committee's
Subcommittee on National Security, the Border, and Foreign Affairs

Hearing on "Faith Under Fire: An Examination of Global Religious Persecution"
October 25, 2023

1. Introduction

Good morning. I am Amanda Tyler, executive director of Baptist Joint Committee for Religious Liberty (BJC) and lead organizer of the Christians Against Christian Nationalism campaign.

I am honored to be here this morning to offer testimony about religious persecution around the world and how we as Americans can best advocate for religious freedom as a fundamental human right.

I am grateful for the leadership of Chair Grothman and Ranking Member Garcia in drawing attention to international religious freedom, which is laid out in Article 18 of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights.¹ On December 10 of this year, we will celebrate 75 years since the Universal Declaration of Human Rights was adopted by the United Nations, yet we know we have much work ahead of us in ensuring freedom of religion and belief for all of humanity.

Faith is indeed "under fire" around the world. The best way we can make a difference is by not adding more fuel to the fire of religious extremism and nationalism. Instead, we should focus on being a role model to the world by ensuring the institutional separation of church and state, which protects all of us. As we examine religious persecution globally, I hope we will also examine how well we are living up to this value at home.

For 87 years, BJC has worked to defend and extend God-given religious liberty for all, bringing a uniquely Baptist witness to the principle that religion must be freely exercised, neither advanced nor inhibited by government. Our commitment stems from the historical experiences of early Baptists, who suffered the pain of persecution from religious fervor coupled with the coercive power of the state.

¹ "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."

2. Baptists around the world

BJC and our partners at the Baptist World Alliance are concerned about the infringement of religious freedom against people belonging to any religious group and nonreligious people, too.

The Rev. Dr. Elijah M. Brown, General Secretary and CEO of the Baptist World Alliance, shared this overview of Baptists worldwide with me for the purpose of including it with my testimony:

The worldwide Baptist family is now 51 million baptized believers in 130 countries and territories. Thirty percent of that family lives in a context of war, persecution or extreme hunger.²

In Ukraine, there are 2,000 Baptist churches. Since the start of the war in Ukraine, the Baptist movement has helped more than 1 million people displaced from their homes. We are also concerned about Baptists in Russia. 100 years ago, Baptists in Russia noted a theological conviction that they should not participate in active conflict. They are willing to serve in the military and accept non-combat positions or to participate in other national service projects. In recent days this conviction has been tested and renewed since the start of the war, but there are reports that some have faced retaliation for their convictions of conscience.³

We continue to track a number of developments around the world that are often under-reported or do not seem to receive as much attention as they once did, including in Myanmar and the ongoing brutal war where Rohingya Muslims have faced genocide, where entire communities are still being burned to the ground, and where Baptist pastor and leader Samson Hkalam remains imprisoned.

We ask for heightened concern for all civilians in Gaza, including the small Christian community in Gaza. My understanding is that there are a number of ministries across Gaza but only three church buildings: an Orthodox Church, a Catholic Church, and a Baptist Church. We understand that the Baptist church has received some minor damage over the last 2 weeks. We continue to mourn with the Al-Ahli Hospital. For approximately 30 years it was administered by Baptists and provided such rich and vibrant care with the compassion of Christ for everyone in the community that even today it is still often called, as has been widely reported in media, the Gaza Baptist Hospital.

3. International religious freedom is a bipartisan issue

International religious freedom has long been a bipartisan priority in Congress, and this hearing is another great example of congressional commitment to this crucial element of our nation's work. In 1998, a unanimous Congress passed the International Religious Freedom Act, and President Bill Clinton signed it into law. In 2016, Congress again unanimously passed the Frank R. Wolf International Religious Freedom Act, which President Barack Obama signed into law.

² "Baptist Vulnerability Index," Baptist World Alliance. <https://baptistworld.org/vulnerability-index/>

³ Ken Camp, "Russian forces occupy seventh Baptist church in Ukraine," Baptist Standard, October 17, 2023, <https://www.baptiststandard.com/news/world/russian-forces-occupy-seventh-baptist-church-in-ukraine/>.

The State Departments of both Republican and Democratic administrations have implemented the law through the Office of International Religious Freedom.

The Department of State issues an annual report to Congress in accordance with the International Religious Freedom Act. This annual report “describes the status of religious freedom, government policies violating religious belief and practices of groups, religious denominations and individuals, and U.S. policies promoting religious freedom in nearly every country and territory throughout the world.”⁴ The report details the religious demography of each country, alongside the status of respect by the government in legal protections and action, as well as the status of societal respect for religious freedom. The report also discusses U.S. government policy and engagement with religious freedom in each country.

The United States Commission on International Religious Freedom (USCIRF), established by the International Religious Freedom Act of 1998, operates as an independent, bipartisan U.S. federal agency and continues to be lauded for its work that represents a continuing commitment of Congress and our country to the importance of religious freedom.

We would ask for the U.S. government to continue to provide full and robust funding for the USCIRF. We celebrate the appointment of the current Ambassador at Large for International Religious Freedom, Rashad Hussain, as the first Muslim to hold this position and ask for continued full funding of the State Department Office of International Religious Freedom.

Among its important assignments, USCIRF advises Congress, engages the Executive Branch, and monitors religious freedom conditions abroad through research and raising public awareness of the need to end religious persecution. USCIRF’s contributions to advancing international freedom of religion or belief includes issuing fact sheets and reports on blasphemy laws, providing critical information about the many places around the world where such laws are used to harm religious dissenters and silence political dissent.

4. Blasphemy and apostasy laws

In 2020, BJC submitted testimony to the “Ending Global Religious Persecution” joint hearing of the U.S. House Committee on Foreign Affairs’ Subcommittee on Africa, Global Health, Global Human Rights, and International Organizations and the U.S. House Committee on Oversight and Reform’s Subcommittee on Civil Rights and Civil Liberties, held on January 28, 2020, which included this explanation of why we oppose blasphemy laws⁵:

As Baptist Christians in the United States, it is safe to presume that we have not suffered under blasphemy laws in our context. That is not true of early Baptists in America nor of our Baptist brothers and sisters abroad. The founding mothers and fathers of our Christian

⁴ “International Religious Freedom Reports” U.S. Department of State.
<https://www.state.gov/international-religious-freedom-reports/>.

⁵ Testimony from BJC submitted to “Ending Global Religious Persecution” hearing, January 28, 2020, held by the Subcommittee on Africa, Global Health, Global Human Rights, and International Organizations of the Committee on Foreign Affairs and the Subcommittee on Civil Rights and Civil Liberties of the Committee on Oversight and Reform. Available online at https://bjconline.org/wp-content/uploads/2020/01/BJC-Testimony-Supporting-H.Res._512-on-Jan-28-2020.pdf.

denomination suffered under laws similar to modern blasphemy laws. Under those laws, they were fined, whipped and imprisoned by their Christian neighbors for daring to follow God as they interpreted Scripture to demand. From these earliest days as a persecuted religious minority group, fighting for religious liberty for all people became part of the Baptist DNA. Marginalized Baptist pastors fought not only for their own religious freedom but consistently spoke of the need for Jewish, Muslim, atheist and all of our neighbors to be free to worship God, or not, as they feel led. It is this advocacy tradition that BJC continues today.

At their core, blasphemy and apostasy laws are a dangerous blending of the institutions of religion and state. Laws penalizing blasphemy stifle religious expression and undermine human rights. Most societies have had religious dissenters and other nonconformists, and history teaches us that state enforced theological conformity simply does not work. Blasphemy laws are often used to silence religious minorities or political opponents and to foster religious intolerance, discrimination and violence within society.

Apostasy and blasphemy laws harm all of us — religious and nonreligious alike. They are used to justify vigilante violence against both religious and nontheistic dissenters. They harm practitioners of the protected religion by squelching dialogue and debate about their faith. Such engagement about faith keeps religion vital and vibrant. Christians, Hindus, Jews, Muslims and others have been fined, imprisoned, tortured and executed for blasphemy offenses.

Currently, more than one-third of all countries has at least one blasphemy law on the books. Some countries vigorously enforce blasphemy laws against religious dissenters or political opponents while others mostly ignore them. Technology and the rise of social media make violations and perceived violations of blasphemy laws easier than ever.

BJC applauds both the House and Senate for passing the resolution calling for the global repeal of blasphemy, heresy, and apostasy laws in 2020. As we said in prior submitted testimony:

“[The resolution] sends a message to our global neighbors that religious freedom is a fundamental human right. It strengthens our voice at the United Nations (UN) in both opposing the creation of model blasphemy law and supporting UN efforts to combat religious intolerance, discrimination or violence and to avoid restricting religious expression. It ensures that countries which enforce blasphemy laws will be designated as ‘countries of particular concern’ under the International Religious Freedom Act of 1998.”⁶

⁶ Testimony from BJC submitted to “Ending Global Religious Persecution” hearing, January 28, 2020, held by the Subcommittee on Africa, Global Health, Global Human Rights, and International Organizations of the Committee on Foreign Affairs and the Subcommittee on Civil Rights and Civil Liberties of the Committee on Oversight and Reform. Available online at https://bjconline.org/wp-content/uploads/2020/01/BJC-Testimony-Supporting-H.Res._512-on-Jan-28-2020.pdf.

5. Christian nationalism threatens religious freedom in the United States and harms the reputation of the U.S. around the world

We are particularly aware of the relative freedom that we as Americans enjoy compared with so many people around the world. We can too easily take for granted the freedoms that we enjoy – to gather for corporate worship without fear of reprisal from the government, to have equal citizenship status without regard to religion, and to be free to hold or change our religious beliefs without fear of prosecution, violence, or imprisonment. We know that millions of people around the world today do not live in free societies that protect these rights.

Despite our country's strong commitment to religious freedom, as enshrined in our constitutional framework and other laws, we know that its protection requires constant vigilance. In this country, religious tests for office are prohibited by Article VI of the Constitution, and the First Amendment protects the free exercise of religion and against government establishments of religion. Disagreements about the scope of these and other protections for religious freedom are common and certainly not immune to partisan influence, but most Americans continue to treasure the freedom our laws provide for those of all faiths and those who do not claim a faith tradition. Unfortunately, too often some have confused our religious freedom tradition with an ideology of promoting religion itself.

The single greatest threat to religious liberty in the United States today – and thus our reputation as leaders in the fight for religious liberty to the rest of the world – is Christian nationalism. We see religious nationalism in countries around the world, but the specific form of religious nationalism that is most oppressive to religious freedom for all in our country is Christian nationalism.

Christian nationalism is a political ideology and cultural framework that seeks to fuse American and Christian identities. It suggests that “real” Americans are Christians and that “true” Christians hold a particular set of political beliefs. Christian nationalism seeks to privilege Christians and Christianity in law and policy.

We see what happens when religious nationalism in a country is allowed to flourish and use the power of the state to attempt to force a set of religious beliefs or create only one accepted form of religious belief. Hindu nationalism in India has led to extrajudicial violence against Muslims, Christians, and other minorities. We also see Buddhist nationalism in Myanmar and Sri Lanka used to justify the slaughter of Rohingya Muslims and a military coup. In Russia, Patriarch Kirill supplies moral legitimacy to Russian President Vladimir Putin and the invasion of Ukraine.

Christian nationalism is certainly not unique to the United States. We see far-right political movements in Europe and Latin America use Christianity to provide cover for their policy aims. But if we are to champion religious freedom around the world and oppose religious persecution, we have a moral and strategic obligation to respect it at home. What happens abroad has an impact on the daily lives of Americans. We've sadly seen increased religious bigotry in the United States because of the war between Israel and Hamas. It's up to all of us to reject antisemitism and Islamophobia in all of its forms.

BJC launched Christians Against Christian Nationalism, an ecumenical grassroots campaign of Christians across the United States to oppose the rise of Christian nationalism and its threat to our faith and country, in 2019.

To oppose Christian nationalism is not to oppose Christianity. In fact, a growing number of Christians – and I am one of them – feel a religious imperative to stand against Christian nationalism. More than 35,000 Christians have signed their names to a unifying statement of principles at the heart of the Christians Against Christian Nationalism campaign, declaring the danger and providing a united front to show that following the tenets of Christianity is not the same as using the coercive power of the state to force belief.

The Christians Against Christian Nationalism statement includes this language: “Conflating religious authority with political authority is idolatrous and often leads to oppression of minority and other marginalized groups as well as the spiritual impoverishment of religion. We must stand up to and speak out against Christian nationalism, especially when it inspires acts of violence and intimidation—including vandalism, bomb threats, arson, hate crimes, and attacks on houses of worship—against religious communities at home and abroad.”

Opposing religious nationalism around the world is an important way to protect people of faith and people of no faith from persecution. We are a faith freedom nation and a global leader in advancing religious freedom around the world. Our work as American Christians, though, starts at home, and we have a special responsibility to confront our fellow Christians about the dangers of Christian nationalism.

It’s deeply alarming that a member of the U.S. House of Representatives, Marjorie Taylor Greene, openly identifies as a Christian nationalist. It’s even more troubling that most Republicans in Congress have not objected to her embrace of this troubling form of religious nationalism.⁷ How can our diplomats around the world ask governments to respect religious minorities around the world – including in the many countries where Christians are a small minority – when a prominent member of Congress openly embraces a theocratic movement?

5. No more Muslim ban policy

I testified about international religious freedom before the U.S. Senate Judiciary Committee’s Subcommittee on the Constitution in 2018.⁸ I spoke about the harm to the religious liberty reputation of the United States because of then-President Donald Trump’s Muslim ban policy. On the first day of the new administration in 2021, President Biden issued a proclamation overturning the Muslim ban policy. It read, in part:

⁷ Jack Jenkins, “Republicans keep mostly mum on calls to make GOP ‘party of Christian nationalism,’” Religion News Service, August 12, 2022, <https://religionnews.com/2022/08/12/amid-calls-to-become-the-party-of-christian-nationalism-little-republican-pushback/>

⁸ Cherilyn Crowe, “Tyler to Congress: We must attend to current religious liberty challenges,” BJC, December 10, 2018, <https://bjconline.org/tyler-to-congress-we-must-attend-to-current-religious-liberty-challenges/>

The United States was built on a foundation of religious freedom and tolerance, a principle enshrined in the United States Constitution. Nevertheless, the previous administration enacted a number of Executive Orders and Presidential Proclamations that prevented certain individuals from entering the United States — first from primarily Muslim countries, and later, from largely African countries. Those actions are a stain on our national conscience and are inconsistent with our long history of welcoming people of all faiths and no faith at all.⁹

BJC praised the Biden administration’s decision to overturn the Muslim ban policy, but we also recognize that there cannot be any future attempt to ban immigrants based on their religion. For this reason, BJC endorsed the National Origin-Based Antidiscrimination for Nonimmigrants (NO BAN) Act, which would amend the Immigration and Nationality Act to prevent future discrimination on the basis of religion in immigration policy. The NO BAN Act was passed by the U.S. House during the 117th Congress on April 21, 2021.

This year, former President Donald Trump has stated on multiple occasions that he will reenact his Muslim ban policy if elected in 2024 to serve as president again.¹⁰ He promised to ban Muslims as a candidate in 2016, and so we should take him at his word for a ban “even bigger than before” again now. The intent of the Trump administration’s policies was rooted in religious animus. We must not do further harm to the U.S. reputation on religious freedom by entertaining the idea of a new Muslim ban policy.

6. Conclusion

Religious freedom is at a crossroads today. Religious persecution around the world, coupled with a resurgence of Christian nationalism at home, means we must redouble our efforts to protect religious minorities and the nonreligious – both domestically and globally.

While we advocate for religious freedom internationally, we must take caution not to isolate religious freedom above and against other human rights, including LGBTQ rights and reproductive rights. Religious freedom is best understood as one human right that is part of a broader set of interdependent human rights.

I believe we can bolster the traditional bipartisan consensus in favor of international religious freedom advocacy. Religious minorities and the nonreligious around the world need an ally in the United States of America, and our allyship starts at modeling what it means to be a pluralistic, diverse, democratic nation.

⁹“Proclamation on Ending Discriminatory Bans on Entry to The United States,” The White House, January 20, 2021, <https://www.whitehouse.gov/briefing-room/presidential-actions/2021/01/20/proclamation-ending-discriminatory-bans-on-entry-to-the-united-states/>

¹⁰ Anjali Huynh, “Trump Uses Support for Israel to Revive Travel Ban Talk,” New York Times, October 9, 2023, <https://www.nytimes.com/2023/10/09/us/politics/trump-israel-travel-ban.html>