

Religious Freedom in the World

Reviewed by Brian O'Connell

Religious Freedom in the World. By Paul A. Marshall. Rowan and Littlefield Publishers, Lanham, MD; Paperback, 499 pages; US\$ 95.00.

“There is no [religious] group in the world that does not suffer to some degree because of its beliefs.” So begins *Religious Freedom in the World*, a major compendium of profiles which evaluates the level of religious freedom in 101 countries. Published by the Hudson Institute’s Center for Religious Freedom, and edited by its Senior Fellow Paul Marshall—formerly of Freedom House—, it is a significant work that covers each continent and major religion.

I must confess to not being a big fan of these kinds of profile books. Normally, they are looked at fairly briefly with perhaps a few countries explored for confirmation of what many already know, and the shelf life is short because of quickly changing global circumstances. However, as true as that is, there are a few good reasons why this book might be an exception and worth a deeper look.

First, there is an attempt by the seven authors who set the context for the profiles to explore trends in religious liberty—both positive and negative (although much of this book is focused on the latter). For example, Lebanese scholar Habib Malik does an outstanding, albeit somewhat contentious, job of examining the state of Christianity in the Middle East and the erosion of their numbers and influence over the past several years. “Among the region’s Christians,” he asserts, “there is a pervading—and justified—sense of abandonment by fellow Christians throughout the world, and they have grown to harbor deep disappointment tinged with resentment at their coreligionists in the West who they accuse of deliberately neglecting them, especially in moments of grave danger” (emphasis mine). Though many, both in the region and outside, might take issue with this statement, there is no doubt that it reflects serious voices.

Secondly, *Religious Freedom in the World* attempts to illustrate the variations of the problems within each of the regions and among different faith communities. Felix Corley, long time reporter and analyst on religious liberty, looks in depth at the challenges within the countries of the former Soviet Union. He points to the overriding imperative of control in the authoritarian regimes of Uzbekistan, Turkmenistan, Kazakhstan Azerbaijan and Belarus. Evangelicals would not be surprised to see examples such as police video footage of raids on Baptists in Kazakhstan, or of textbooks in Belarus stating that Adventists operate “on the same principle as any fraudster.” But, Corley also points to the ways in which religious liberty is constrained among Muslims in the region, where the Islamic hierarchy is deliberately kept under total governmental control with the chief mufti and leading imams appointed only with state approval.

Finally, there is a considerable effort to show the ways in which religious freedom is connected to and foundational to other rights. Dr. Ted Malloch, noted author and scholar and founder of the Spiritual Enterprise Institute (a major funder of this book project), addressed the ways in which religious freedom and economic freedom tend to go together. Using

Wall Street Journal indices, he observes that the countries with the worst records of religious freedom have, for the most part, terrible economic records. This linkage, even if relatively new, is illustrated masterfully by Malloch in suggesting that religiously free societies encourage more entrepreneurial attitudes and leaders because religious freedom creates the conditions for people to make their own choices on ultimate concerns. “Religiously free societies,” he postulates, “usually display the highest concentration of companies that generate prosperity. . . . Closed religious systems foul economic development and stunt growth.” Brian Grim, a senior researcher for the Pew Forum on Religion and Public Life, makes a similar statistical case in his essay on broader socio-economic issues.

Without these overviews and analyses (including ones by Thomas Farr on national security, and Willy Fautre on the situation in Europe) *Religious Freedom in the World* would probably not be worth the hefty \$95 price tag. Even with them it will be a stretch for most. The profiles themselves are well-written and fairly comprehensive with the usual statistics for population, percentage of the different faith communities along with ratings for religious freedom and government regulation and favor of religion. The rationale behind the selection of the country profiles themselves, which according to Marshall, contain more than 95% of the world’s population, is not described. Apart from the usual expected cast: Burma, China, Eritrea, Iran, Iraq, North Korea, Saudi Arabia, Sudan, Pakistan, Cuba, Vietnam, etc, there is no mention of why some were chosen and others not.

Examples of European difficulties are covered by the inclusion of Germany, France, Spain, Greece, Denmark and other, but why no exploration of the important issues in places like Holland and the UK, where growing religious minorities are placing increasing pressure on governments and institutions? The challenging situations in Guatemala and Nicaragua are outlined, but why were other important trendsetting countries in Central America (Costa Rica, Panama) not included? There may be good reasons for these things—even beyond the obvious, we can’t cover everything—, but those questions are left unanswered.

Marshall helpfully explains some of the statistical problems inherent in identifying religious adherents, and sketches some of the ways in which the country profiles look at what a religious freedom violation might be. However, it seems an oversight not to delve into the natural complexity of the range of religious liberty violations. There is an obvious and profound difference, for example, between laws that might discriminate against or harass certain faith communities and systemic persecution that includes imprisonment, torture and death.

Even though the current global situation on religious freedom is without question problematic and this book confirms that, there are reasons for hope. One, the world has become smaller and religious liberty violations are increasingly more difficult to conceal. Second, global religious bodies like WEA are giving more sophisticated attention to religious human rights—and are viewed as more respectable than in the past. Finally, we are seeing a growing attention to an emerging theology of persecution within evangelical circles that is assisting our broader understanding and places these issues more under God’s control. That, of course, is where they belong.