

OBSERVATORY ON
INTOLERANCE AND DISCRIMINATION
AGAINST CHRISTIANS IN EUROPE

Under pressure: Human Rights of Christians in Europe

TOP FIVE REPORT
2019 – 2020



SHORT VERSION ENGLISH



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ABSTRACT

While fundamental freedoms are a key element of Western European democratic societies, recent developments have shown that these freedoms are in constant discussion and are sometimes even being limited. There is a rising concern about a decline in religious freedom in Europe, including freedom of expression, freedom of conscience, and parental rights, among other human rights. In this report, OIDAC investigates this issue in five countries in the context of its effect on Christians: France, Germany, Spain, Sweden, and the United Kingdom (UK) between 2019 and 2020. These countries were selected because, according to our observations, Christians face the most difficulties in them. The findings of the report are based on a variety of data we collected. The majority of our data is based on descriptive cases we collected, an extensive questionnaire and in-depth interviews with experts and afflicted Christians. Through our research we identified an increasing intolerance and discrimination from mainly two sides. First, from the governmental side through legislation, or political discourse that undermines the freedoms of Christians and, secondly, from an individual side, through social exclusion and criminal acts against Christians. It was also uncovered that the main dynamic that causes the erosion and limitation of the freedoms of Christians is what was termed secular intolerance. The report presents an interconnected view of the studied cases, highlights current trends, and formulates recommendations.



FOREWORD

Something is in the air; something has changed and a new phenomenon is arising on the horizon. It has been simmering under the surface for some time, but now it is becoming more visible. Most Christians in Europe who really walk in their faith on a daily basis have come across some form of discrimination or intolerance in either an obvious way or an unrecognized subtle one. Being a firm Christian believer in the Europe of today is not just very fashionable but can also lead to serious infringements on one's personal freedom in some essential areas of life, like the workplace or education.

The phenomenon that we are talking about is the increase of intolerance and discrimination against Christians in Europe. This phenomenon can occur in various forms, such as vandalism – antireligious motivated attacks against churches and Christian buildings – or even anti-Christian hate crimes against individuals. But also, through the progressively restricting or contestation of fundamental rights, such as freedom of expression, freedom of religion, freedom of conscience, contractual freedom or parental rights, by society or the state.

The underlying dynamic that brings the phenomenon continuously to the surface, because of its increasing strength, is what we term **Secular Intolerance**. It is an ideologically infused secularization dynamic that has caused a cultural shift on all levels of society, as it tries to relegate religion to the private sphere and ignores the fact that faith plays a vital role in a healthy society. The negation of a public voice is mainly based on strong and sometimes even extreme opposition to Christian morals derived from core beliefs. In some cases, it does not stop at negation but goes even further towards a criminalisation of public or even private opinions.

The picture drawn seems quite drastic and most would say that it is not so acute, but the cases we collected and the interviews and research we conducted speak of a different reality. The aim of this report and the presentation of our findings is in no way to lead to fear, division, or resentment, but rather to openly address a new and worrisome phenomenon. The reason for our inquiry is very simple: no one else really does it, except for a few other organisations. The facts clearly indicate that there is an unaddressed and concerning problem at hand and in order to

raise awareness for it, it needs to be analysed in all its depth. The scarcity of research and data on this issue also means that we manoeuvre through a field that is largely unknown, resulting in the fact that we are still in an explorative stage. Therefore, it is important to state that our research is preliminary, but this holds true for everyone who is taking the first steps into an unknown field. In the end, the goal is not only to contribute to the better protection of the freedoms of Christians, but to raise awareness about the possible effects that such a steady and subtle erosion of liberal principles has for a democratic society. Cornerstones can become uncomfortable stumbling blocks, but they are essential for stability and balance. The same holds true for our society. Cornerstones of our liberal democracies, individual freedom and collective responsibility can be a challenge but should never be diminished or dismissed. Only eye-to-eye encounters and a sober exchange of ideas are true solutions.

“When we avoid difficult conversations, we trade short term discomfort for long term dysfunction.”

– Peter Bromberg



KEY FINDINGS

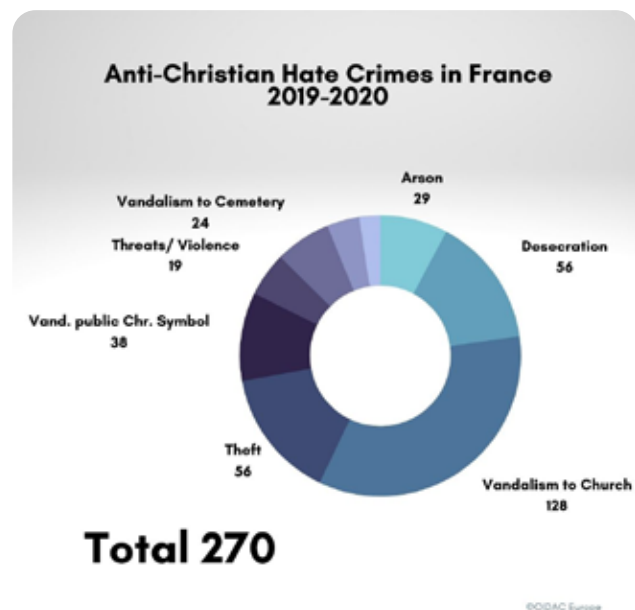
1. We have identified **five European countries** in which the freedoms of Christians have been most infringed during 2019/2020: France, Germany, Spain, Sweden and the UK.
2. **Anti-Christian hate crimes in Europe increased by 70% between** 2019 and 2020. These have a higher frequency in France and Germany, although they tend to be more severe in Spain and France, due to a reactionary form of secularism.
3. The research indicated two main threatening dynamics that affect the lives of Christians: **Secular Intolerance** and **Islamic Oppression**. While secular intolerance is the driving dynamic in most of the cases and areas of life we observed, Islamic oppression mainly occurs in concentrated hotspot areas, in which Christian converts are the group that is mostly affected along with other residential Christians.
4. We identified **four areas of life** where Christians are most affected. These are: **church life, education, politics and the workplace**. We found that the area of church life is the most visibly affected due to an increasing number of hate crimes in most countries, but education, the workplace and politics are following shortly after.
5. Another finding is that all of the five observed countries have problems with regard to the **protection of Freedom of Speech**. The UK is the country with the most cases of legal prosecution for alleged "Hate Speech". The other countries only present a few public cases, but according to interviewees, have high rates of self-censorship.
6. The **right to conscientious objection** has been **threatened** mainly **in three countries**. The alteration of the conscience clause in **Sweden** is already affecting Christian professionals, but similar developments in **France and Spain** could lead to a complete exclusion of Christians in certain professions.

7. We have identified **two trends in the educational sector that are cause for concern**. First, Christian university students perceive that they cannot debate certain topics freely or express their opinions without judgement or negative consequences, which leads to the crippling effects of **self-censorship**. Secondly, various new regulations on sex and relationship education are violating **Parental Rights**.
8. Secular intolerance and discrimination against Christianity seem to be based on the **opposition against more traditional and conservative moral views of Christians**. This polarisation also appears to be promoted by sensationalist and religious-illiterate **media that stigmatises and marginalises religious voices** in the public debate.
9. **Christian converts with a Muslim background are a very vulnerable group** in European societies, and there is very little research about their situation. Our data indicates that many of them face intolerance and violence from their social environment, and the danger they face is often ignored by state authorities.
10. During the state of health emergency due to the **Covid-19 Pandemic, churches were repeatedly discriminated against and religious freedom denied** in various countries. This happened either by the unjustified and disproportionate use of power of public officials (Spain), or through unproportionate blanket bans on public worship, downgrading it to a non-essential service.
11. It was also uncovered that there is a **high rate of religious illiteracy among state authorities, public officials and journalists**. The improvement of religious literacy will be a crucial element to improve the dialogue and to tackle discrimination and intolerance against Christians.

FRANCE

Society in France seems to be increasingly divided between Christians, secular society, and a Muslim society. The secularism of the government has led to strong pressure on Christians, especially when it comes to moral issues in which the secular society and Christianity have different views, such as regards marriage, family, education, bioethics, and gender identity politics. These topics bring up conflicts that negatively affect freedom of expression, freedom of conscience and parental rights of Christians, mainly through fear of social exclusion and discrimination. The media, on the other side, has not helped to create a better culture of dialogue. Instead, it perpetuates certain stereotypes of Christianity and has led to further division.

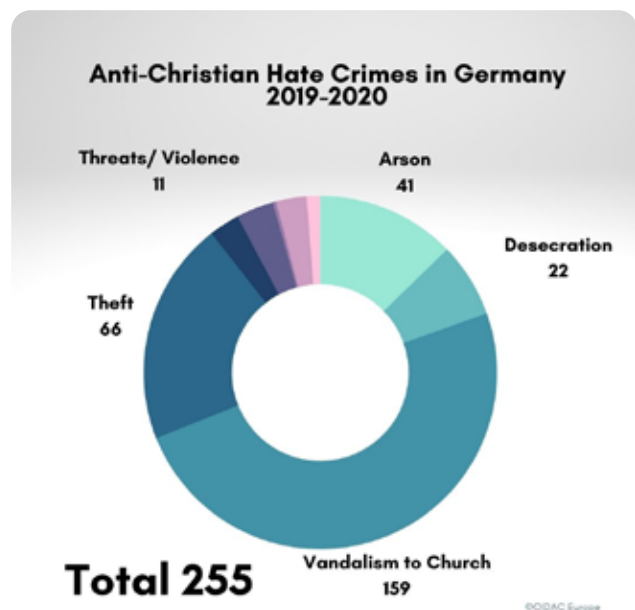
In the context of Covid-19 and responding to the latest terrorist attacks, the government took measures that indirectly restrict religious freedom. The history of French secularism and the tension due to Islamic incidents in France might be a reason for the negative connotation of religion in the country. There is a general lack of respect for Christianity. At the same time, the high number of severe attacks on churches, on other Christian buildings and symbols, and on citizens themselves, is starting to be noticed by the government. This will hopefully increase its attention to this issue. Christians have also reported feeling threatened by Islamic Oppression in certain hotspot areas.



GERMANY

Germany faces problems of discrimination against Christians from different sources, including a high amount of vandalism. This affects increasingly more Christians, since churches remain closed in order to avoid incidents. While the government restrictions are not very high, in some areas of Germany, social hostility is severe, and the religious illiteracy of the authorities allows this issue to continue. This is confirmed by a recent Pew Research study on Government restrictions and social hostility. Germany must react more effectively to protect Christians from attacks brought about by radicalized groups. Governmental discrimination occurs mainly through interference with Freedom of Speech and Parental Rights regarding the education of their children.

At the same time, the religious illiteracy of authorities has led to the unjust treatment of Christian converts who face persecution and severe violence. According to our experts, there are problems with social segregation, Islamic extremism, and, therefore, harassment of Christians or other religious minorities in Muslim-dominated areas. Given that social hostilities are more severe than government restrictions, it is important to raise awareness, so that the government reacts more effectively.

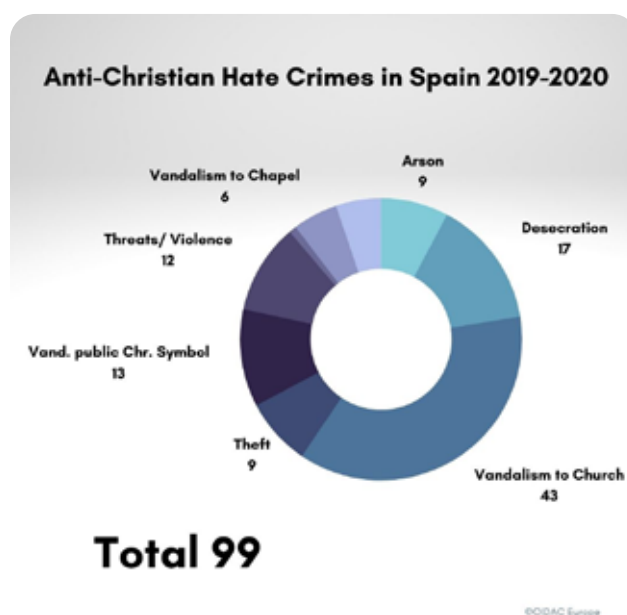


SPAIN

Spain is the only country that shows clear tendencies of a radical secularism that goes hand in hand both with government authorities and with the social environment. The country's recent history of a dictatorship and an authoritarian political system that in some ways favoured the Catholic Church explains why the new secularist ideology has been so easily accepted by society. There is a negative connotation of religion, mainly of Catholicism, that led to the weaponization of the "Historical Memory Law" and other initiatives to exclude Catholicism from the public sphere. This general hostility has led not only to an increase in anti-Christian hate crimes, but also to an increase in blasphemies portrayed by public figures publishing deeply disturbed religious sentiments. This social and political dynamic has led to extremism and polarization from both sides of the political spectrum.

Given the economic crisis, Spain has not been an immigration hotspot, but it still has had some issues with hotspot areas of Islamic oppression, where Christians and Christian converts do not feel safe.

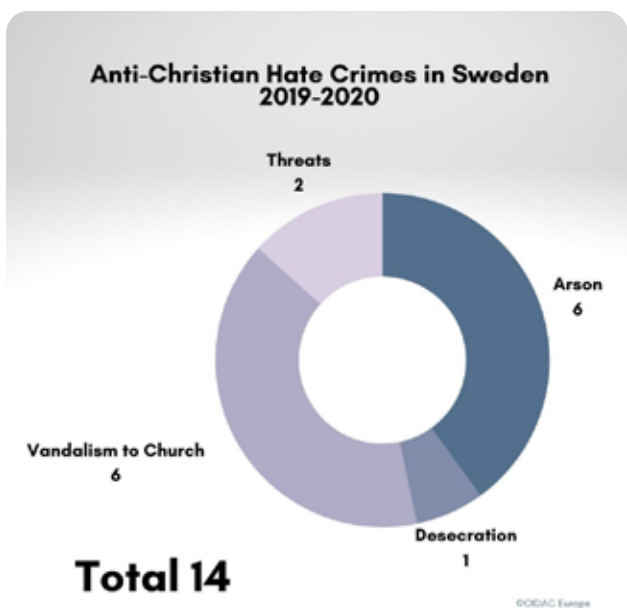
Given the high degree of secularism, religious literacy is not visible in the decision-making of the ruling authorities. The situation in Spain is mainly affecting Freedom of Speech, Parental Rights, Freedom of Religion, Freedom of Assembly, and in some cases Christians are exposed to physical and psychological violence. The main actors are radical individuals or groups, politics, and part of the media.



SWEDEN

Our interviews, literature, and archives of cases, confirm that there is a growing cultural gap and a rise in social hostilities in Sweden. This is due to extremism within certain ideological groups, including Islamic extremism. Secularism can lead to restrictions for Christians in the sharing of their faith or in the freedom to teach it to their children. Christian schools face bureaucratic barriers and there are efforts to limit their area of operation or even their existence. Christians working in the health care system can face dismissal for exercising their freedom of conscience. Additionally, the authority to perform marriages can be withdrawn from Christian churches if they do not offer to marry same-sex couples, as was the case in the Falun municipality, which withdrew their financial support from the parish.

Although there are minor improvements regarding the Migration Board's assessment of applications of Christian converts, there are still many Christians facing deportation to countries where they face severe or life-threatening danger. At the same time, Christian converts have faced severe violence in certain areas of Sweden.



UNITED KINGDOM

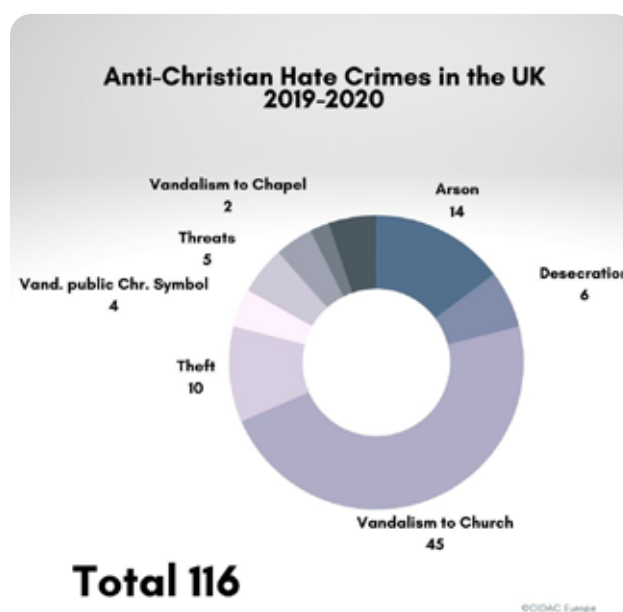
The UK is clearly undergoing a cultural process in which Christian values are being replaced by secularist values in society as well as in the legal landscape. This shift leads to a decrease in Freedom of Expression and breaches in Parental Rights.

The social intolerance within society has also affected the rights of Christian institutions and churches, causing discrimination and leading to vandalism. The media seems to contribute to this issue, by misrepresenting or neglecting Christians in society. Furthermore, the public discourse about sex and gender is leading to social exclusion of people who have dissenting opinions, even if they do not belong to a religious group. If opinions and beliefs can cause this degree of social exclusion, discrimination, and negative consequences in daily life, then these developments are cause for legitimate concern.

Violence against Christians has risen in the UK, in the form of vandalism and severe arson attacks on Christian buildings and even physical assaults on persons. There is therefore a strong social hostility and at the same time indifference or even a bias from public authorities.

Christians and Christian converts are also facing pressure by some extremist Islamic groups in certain areas, such as in residential hotspots and prisons.

One positive development is that several politicians are reacting and conducting studies and research in order to aid actual implementations on a number of the problematic issues, which will hopefully contribute to beneficial change.



CONCLUSION

This report seeks to contribute to a better understanding between religious groups and secular groups. Therefore, we provide some recommendations for improvement. We consider that by improving dialogue and religious literacy, state authorities can achieve better legislation that creates bridges between groups in society by avoiding laws that indirectly discriminate against religious groups. We also want to encourage the Christian population to initiate and seek respectful and open dialogue, by consciously avoiding prejudices toward people with different moral values and by showing more interest in engaging in public debates. Finally, we believe international and civil-society organizations can contribute towards improving this situation by reporting and raising awareness about this phenomenon. Hopefully, this will be a fruitful step to stimulate a wider constructive and open debate for the benefit of many: Christians, other religious groups, minorities, and the broader society in general.

