

[Hansard - British House of Commons]

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Persecution of Christians

4.12 pm

Jim Shannon (Strangford) (DUP): I beg to move

That this House is concerned that the persecution of Christians is increasing in the 21st Century; notes that there are reports that one Christian is killed every 11 minutes somewhere on earth for their faith; further notes that Christianity is the most persecuted religion globally; bears in mind that the right to freedom of thought, conscience and religion is a human right stated in the Universal Declaration of Human Rights; and calls on the Government to do more both in its foreign policy and through its aid work to defend and support people of Christian faith.

It is a pleasure to bring this matter forward for consideration. The number of Members in the Chamber is an indication of the level of interest, and I look forward to outlining some of the issues.

I believe that the persecution of Christians is the biggest story in the world that has never been told, and its importance cannot be underlined enough. The subject burdens me, and many other Members, judging by the number here. Each day we pray for Christians who are suffering persecution. It is important that we use the powerful tool of prayer to help them.

I am reminded of the story told about Charles Wesley addressing his congregation in church. He was calling out a hymn and said to the congregation, "I want you to sing lustily. I want you to sing moderately. Most of all, I want you to sing in tune." I believe that this House will be in tune today, because we are all united on the importance of this issue. Today's debate will make that clear.

Mark Field (Cities of London and Westminster) (Con): It is greatly to the credit of the Democratic Unionist party that it has secured this debate. Let us be honest: if this were happening to almost any other religious group it would be something of a national scandal. That makes it all the more important to put the ongoing persecution of Christians in many parts of the world on the political map. This debate will do that in the next two and three quarter hours.

Jim Shannon: I thank the hon. Gentleman for that intervention. I think the rest of the debate will reflect that tone.

One hundred thousand Christians will be massacred this year because of their beliefs. Two hundred million Christians will be persecuted due to their faith. One and a half billion Christians live in what can be termed as dangerous neighbourhoods. That shows the magnitude of the problem of persecuted Christians.

There are Christians in the world today who cannot attend church as we do on Sunday and they cannot pray to God as we do—indeed, as we did before we started our business in this

House today. There is an example of the importance of the Bible and our prayer time. These Christians cannot tell their friends that the Lord Jesus gave his life for them, and they cannot read their Bible as we read our Bible. They cannot carry out their own businesses; they cannot be involved in civic life; they face discrimination in education.

Let us go right across the world from North Korea, where it is estimated that some 100,000 Christians suffer in horrific prison camps, to Eritrea where 2,000 Christians are in jail for their beliefs and 31 died in custody last year. Then there are countries in which Christians are in

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a minority—Sudan and Somalia, for example, where they are pursued relentlessly. Christians are also persecuted in countries where they are of equal numbers, while in countries where Christians are in larger numbers or in a majority, they are subject to radical Muslim teaching and abuse, as exemplified in Kenya, Uganda and Tanzania. In Algeria, it is impossible to register church buildings or to legalise meetings.

In Africa, due to Islamic extremism, the persecution of Christians has increased significantly in 2012 and 2013, most notably in Mali, Tanzania, Ethiopia and Niger. Sharia family courts have been introduced, which ignore Christians and their beliefs. The north of Mali is similar to Saudi Arabia in that Christians are simply no longer allowed to be there or to practise their beliefs. In the Maldives, one cannot read one's Bible; indeed, people are not allowed to have one. If people are caught reading their Bibles on holiday in that beautiful country, they will be arrested, jailed and deported. I hope you will think about that, Madam Deputy Speaker, the next time you decide to book a holiday to the Maldives.

In Sri Lanka, Christians are subject to persecution. In Burma, Christians and ethnic minorities are bombed by Government aircraft and attacked. It would be helpful to hear in the Minister's response some indication of how those issues were presented at the Commonwealth summit and what response the Prime Minister got. I understand that he brought the issues to the attention of the people attending.

Mark Lazarowicz (Edinburgh North and Leith) (Lab/Co-op): I congratulate the hon. Gentleman and his colleagues on raising this issue, which I know is a matter of concern to many of our constituents. I am sure that the hon. Gentleman will, like myself, be opposed to the persecution or harassment of any faith group of whatever denomination. The fact is that Christians face persecution and harassment in more countries than any other faith group. The hon. Gentleman mentioned the Commonwealth meeting. What we need, of course, is action internationally as well. What kind of action does he envisage would strengthen the international regime, international conventions and international agencies to try to stop such persecution and harassment happening?

Jim Shannon: I thank the hon. Gentleman for his intervention. We will discuss those aspects as the debate develops. There is clearly a role not just for this House, but for the Commonwealth, for the United Nations and for all the countries where persecution has taken place. They all have a clear role to play to help ease the pain of persecuted Christians. We should all try to achieve that.

David Simpson (Upper Bann) (DUP): My hon. Friend will know that I have an interest in India, where my adopted daughter comes from. In recent times, we have seen kidnappings, forced marriages, 18,000 people injured, 6,000 houses and 296 churches and small places of Christian worship burned and pastors murdered. It is a horrendous situation; something needs to be done about it.

Jim Shannon: I thank my hon. Friend for his comments, which are harrowing ones. I have them written down here, so I shall not repeat them. My hon. Friend, like many of us here, used to work in the Northern Ireland Assembly, and I can remember him speaking on this issue back then. The story was horrific then; it is equally horrific today. The figures and the statistics are overwhelming.

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Simon Hughes (Bermondsey and Old Southwark) (LD): I thank the hon. Gentleman and his colleagues for choosing this theme for debate. Does he accept that not just members of the Christian Church—him, me, many other Members and our constituents—but people of other faiths now believe that the Government and the Commonwealth in particular should be much more proactive about this issue? In reflecting further on the question asked by the hon. Member for Edinburgh North and Leith (Mark Lazarowicz), does he agree that one thing the Government could do would be to urge the Foreign and Commonwealth Office to argue for the Commonwealth to set up a specific group of people—of politicians and faith groups—to make sure that the human rights of faith minorities in the world, particularly in the Commonwealth, are much better protected than they are now?

Jim Shannon: I thank the right hon. Gentleman for that very valuable contribution. I will mention Baroness Warsi later in my speech. She has outlined the issue from the Government's point of view and explained some of the ideas she is thinking of. I will return to them shortly as I believe they show the direction we should be going in, and hopefully that will address some of the points Members have raised.

In Indonesia and the Philippines Christians have had their churches burned to the ground and church members attacked and killed because they dared to tell others about the love of God, and that God is a God of love who loves them and wants them to be saved and in heaven. Now, in the 21st century, nearly 65 years since the universal declaration of human rights was adopted by the UN—we can now think about the UN's role and the role it can play—and with great improvements in technology and medicine, we might also expect to see an improvement in how humans treat each other. However, sadly, we still see severe violations of human rights around the world. Indeed one human right that is particularly violated is that outlined in article 18: the right to freedom of religion or belief. It is enshrined in the motion before us today, too; that is the thrust of where we are coming from. This right is one of the only rights defined as non-derogable in the international covenant on civil and political rights. That means that it must be protected at all times and cannot be suspended or reduced in times of emergency.

Dr Eilidh Whiteford (Banff and Buchan) (SNP): I congratulate the hon. Gentleman on bringing this subject before the House. What role does he think human rights legislation and constitutional protections might play in helping prevent the kinds of human rights abuses we are seeing at the moment?

Jim Shannon: As this debate develops, the Minister or his civil servants will frantically write down the answers to these questions. I have a number of questions as well. I am sure the scribes in the corner will be writing furiously throughout the debate; I hope I was not insulting them by calling them scribes.

Those who drafted our international human rights clearly saw the right to freedom of thought, conscience, religion or belief as key to the inherent dignity of the human person and that it was important to protect it at all times. We should afford it the same weight; that is where we are coming from. To this end, I am pleased

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that the United Kingdom Government have designated the right to freedom of religion or belief as one of the top human right priorities for their foreign policy. We understand that to be the case and hope to hear it confirmed at the end of our debate. Will the UK Government agree that this right should be protected and promoted by all Governments worldwide? That is another question.

Tim Loughton (East Worthing and Shoreham) (Con): The hon. Gentleman is being very generous in giving way, and what he is saying and some of the cases he is highlighting are deeply alarming. What I am particularly alarmed about is some of the instances he has mentioned within the Commonwealth. The Commonwealth is a huge broad church of different faiths, beliefs and religions and we are a family. Does the hon. Gentleman agree that we should be using the Commonwealth more to promote freedom of worship, as we do poverty alleviation and education, so that Commonwealth countries can promote that among non-Commonwealth countries in the particular parts of the world where they are located?

Jim Shannon: I thank the hon. Gentleman for those very honest and true words, which every one of us can take on board and believe in. I hope we can exert pressure, including through our membership of the Commonwealth, to try to exact change.

This Government are keen to pursue closer financial relations with China and there is nothing wrong with that. The benefits were outlined in the papers today, as were the pictures of the Prime Minister, but there are 100 Christian Church pastors in prison today because they are Christians—because they have a belief.

Mark Pritchard (The Wrekin) (Con): The hon. Gentleman is right to point out that the Christian Church worldwide is suffering from unprecedented persecution, and I welcome this debate. Given that my right hon. Friend the Prime Minister is in China as we speak—unless he is on an aircraft—does the hon. Gentleman agree that the Chinese authorities need to understand that the Christian religion is not a western plot, but has its origins as a religion in the middle east, in a town called Bethlehem?

Jim Shannon: I thank the hon. Gentleman for his comments and that is clearly an issue and China needs to understand that as well. As many Members wish to speak, if I may I will not take any more interventions.

Foreign Office Minister Baroness Warsi has an important role to play. She recently drew attention to the persecution of Christians. I commend her for speaking out so boldly and clearly. In her speech she noted that,

“the parts of the world where Christianity first spread, is now seeing large sections of the Christian community leaving, and those that are remaining feeling persecuted.”

She has set the focus and attention where it should be: on the mass exodus of Christians from the middle east, which is very evident in Egypt and in Syria. In Iraq, Christians fled the cities of Baghdad and Mosul in 2005 after persecution intensified. These are the facts, but the increasing use of violence against Christians in the previously safe north has largely gone unnoticed in the outside world. On 22 September, a suicide bomb went off in the Kirkuk province, injuring 19 people,

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including the Christian politician Emad Youhanna. Al-Qaeda claimed responsibility. How are the UK Government working with Iraq to address this worrying development in northern Iraq?

In Syria, Christians are caught between opposing sides in the conflict. There are an increasing number of missile and mortar attacks in Christian neighbourhoods in cities such as Damascus and Aleppo. Jihadists are now widely understood to have infiltrated the rebel movement in Syria. They specifically targeted Christian villages such as Maaloula, in September, and more recently Sadad, where 45 people were killed. Such incidents demonstrate what is happening.

Now that the United Nations has set the date for Geneva II—22 January 2014—what are the British Government doing to ensure that the Christian community in Syria has a voice at the negotiations? Will the Government do everything possible through Geneva II to protect all the people of Syria, to safeguard the Christian community, to guarantee access for humanitarian assistance, and to establish a new Syria that respects the right to freedom of religion for all?

Mark Field: Will the hon. Gentleman give way on that point?

Jim Shannon: I am sorry but I cannot; I want to give Members a chance to speak.

I turn to Pakistan and the killing of 85 people and the wounding of 150 others in a suicide bombing attack. The Tehrik-i-Taliban Pakistan—the TTP terrorist organisation—is specifically targeting Christians in Pakistan. What will the British Government be able to do about that in their discussions with Pakistan? In Libya, Christians have been murdered for failing to agree to convert to Islam. The fall in the number of Christians across the region is very evident in Iraq.

In Iraq, the violence is increasing. It is the Sunnis against the Shi'ites; the Kurds against the Turks, against the Arabs; the federalists against the separatists; the nationalists against the international jihadists; anti-Government versus pro-Government. Underneath all those levels of disagreement, the region's indigenous, long-suffering, besieged remnant Christians will be the victims of every contact targeted by all forces. They are the target of every one of those groups. That is happening in Yemen, as well, and Christians are being attacked and murdered across the whole of Mexico, Lebanon, Colombia, Guatemala and Sudan.

I turn to Nigeria, a country very close to my heart. We have had debates on it in this House, and we have raised the important questions and issues that we must try to address. The

persecution of Christians in Nigeria takes multiple forms. We are all familiar with the horrifying fatalities resulting from the Boko Haram attacks. First, I would like to highlight the all-pervading pressure placed on Christians in the 12 northern sharia states, where they are effectively second-class citizens and converting to Christianity is a dangerous act not only for the convert, but for anyone who tries to help them. In the northern states, great pressure is exerted on the Christian community. They cannot bury their dead in public cemeteries. In public primary schools, Christian children are forced to attend Islamic studies and are beaten and/or expelled if they refuse. Teenage Christians

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struggle to gain access to secondary schools or higher education institutions. Christian girls were under serious threat of abduction, forced conversion and marriage. Access for Christians to development projects in these states is also severely restricted. What are the British Government doing to address this all-pervading social pressure on Christians in the 12 northern sharia states in Nigeria?

Boko Haram is the militant group that targets Government and Church activities. Church leaders are often specifically targeted by this group. Many have been killed in Nigeria, and attacks against Christians in Nigeria have also reportedly been perpetrated by militants crossing the border from Chad and Niger. There are further examples of attacks upon Christians. A Catholic minister and his two sons were murdered in the northern state of Yobe. Their home and church were then set ablaze. The town of Gamboru was attacked twice. Six people were killed in the first attack, and a further 21 in the second. Militant cross-border terrorist groups are also fomenting religious strife in other African countries. Christians in Somalia and Kenya are being targeted by the group al-Shabaab. In the Central African Republic, the Seleka forces—involving members from the CAR, Chad and Niger—have been involved in the killing of at least eight Church leaders. It has also been noted by observers that the conflict in the CAR is developing a worrying sectarian element.

Have the Government identified the increase in the activity of, and the persecution of Christians by, cross-border militants in Nigeria as a problem? If so, what are they doing to help the Governments in that region to address the issue effectively? I urge the Minister to respond to those and the many other questions that will emerge from the debate today. I thank hon. Members for their patience; I hope that I have been able to set the scene and to explain what this issue means to me personally and what it should mean to the House and everyone in this country. The persecution of Christians is an important matter. Let us pray for them and let us do our best for them as elected representatives in this House.

4.30 pm

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs (Mark Simmonds): I should like to set out the Government's position on this important matter. A little later, I will sum up the debate and answer the questions from the hon. Member for Strangford (Jim Shannon) and those that other hon. Members will no doubt ask. I congratulate the Democratic Unionist party on securing this important debate, and I echo the comment from my hon. Friend the Member for Cities of London and Westminster (Mark Field) that the party deserves enormous credit for choosing this topic, which is of significant importance to many people in our constituencies.

I also congratulate the hon. Member for Strangford on his measured, detailed and thorough analysis of the many areas around the world in which Christians are suffering persecution. I am sure that he would be the first to admit, however, that in the Central African Republic, Nigeria, Syria and elsewhere, it is not just Christians but people of other religions who are suffering such persecution. That should be a matter of deep concern to all of us, whether we have a religious faith or

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not, because freedom of religion and belief is a gateway to other human rights and a litmus test of other fundamental freedoms. When people are persecuted because of the faith that they profess, the freedoms of expression and assembly and other human rights will often also suffer.

Mark Field: I accept that view, but would the Minister acknowledge the depressing paradox that some of the worst persecution is taking place in notional democracies? In some cases, the Christian population would be better looked after under a dictatorship—such as in Syria under President Assad—than in a country that is notionally democratic. This is not simply a matter of saying that a whole load of democratic rights will follow on from religious freedoms. We must ensure that religious and individual freedoms go hand in hand and that they do not find themselves in conflict with each other.

Mark Simmonds: My hon. Friend makes an important point, although he will be aware that we believe that President Assad's regime in Syria has engaged in a deliberate attempt to stir up tensions between religious groups in order to hold on to power. My hon. Friend is right to suggest that these issues are extremely complex, but there is a direct correlation between the rule of law, human rights, transparency and freedom of expression as it relates to religion, whether it be Christianity, any other religion or no religion at all.

Mark Pritchard: The Minister has just read out a list that, perhaps surprisingly, sounds very similar to the Chinese constitution. Given the fact that my right hon. Friend the Prime Minister is in China at the moment, would the Minister like to put on record that the Chinese regime needs to abide by the terms of its own constitution and allow freedom of assembly for Christians, whether they are members of the official Church or part of the underground church?

Mark Simmonds: I understand the point that my hon. Friend is making, but I re-emphasise the fact that we strongly support freedom of religion for all, including in China—the example he gave—in accordance with international frameworks to which the United Kingdom and China are both party. We regularly raise the issue of religious freedom with the Chinese Government, and we have a UK-China human rights dialogue for detailed expert engagement, which will engage with this particular area, too.

Let me make a little progress, because I want to put on the record what the Government are doing about the persecution of those trying to practise their religion. We strongly believe that the freedom to practise, change or share one's faith or belief without discrimination or violent opposition is a fundamental human right that all people should enjoy. We believe that societies that aim to guarantee freedom of religion or belief are stronger, fairer and more confident. The situation facing Christians in the 21st century is alarming. Research by the Pew Research Centre acknowledges that Christians are the most persecuted religious group in

the world—a point made powerfully by the hon. Member for Strangford. The Government recognise that, and the persecution of Christians worldwide was the central focus of Baroness Warsi's keynote speech at Georgetown university on 15 November. In that speech, we called for unity in

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confronting the intolerance and sectarianism that leads to minority communities being persecuted around the world and to a mass exodus of Christians from places where they have co-existed with the majority faith for generations. In the speech, she presented her vision for a cross-faith, cross-continent response to the problem, with a positive, practical focus on promoting the benefits of religious plurality to societies.

A key element of that speech was that our response to the persecution of Christians should not be sectarian. We should not be standing up for our co-religionists or Christians in particular; we should be supporting the right to freedom of religion or belief for all, as set out in article 18 of the universal declaration of human rights. History points out that intolerance is defeated only when we come together. People of all faiths and none should be appalled when a bomb goes off outside a church. Indeed, both Muslims and Christians have come together to protect each other's place of worship, and, as in the case of the terrible suicide bomb attacks on All Saints' church in Peshawar, to donate blood for the victims. That needs to be the response that we all take to the global crisis affecting Christians.

We should speak out on behalf of Christians. That is what we have done, for example, when we condemned the recent attacks that took place in Pakistan, which killed and injured so many innocent people. We should lobby for changes in discriminatory laws and practices that affect religious minorities, including Christians. We will continue to do that when, for example, an Iranian pastor is arrested for setting up a church in a house or for sharing his faith. We meet Christian leaders from around the world to gain a better understanding of their concerns and the issues affecting them. Foreign and Commonwealth Office Ministers met Patriarch Gregorios III on 16 October to discuss the plight of Christians in Syria—the hon. Member for Strangford made a powerful point about that.

We are active in supporting local Christian communities. That is why for a number of years we have supported the work of Canon Andrew White in Iraq, bringing together religious leaders across sectarian divides to denounce violence that occurs in the name of religion. Similarly, when I went to Kaduna in northern Nigeria—another example cited by the hon. Gentleman—I met religious leaders across the religious divide to see the valuable inter-faith work that was taking place there. I wish to discuss Nigeria in my closing remarks, if the House will allow me.

However, I do not believe that making it our policy to defend Christians in particular is going to help them in the longer term. There is a risk of isolating them from the wider populations, identifying them as something of a fifth column and even exacerbating the persecution that they may be suffering. Instead, we should be supporting the building of societies that respect human rights, the rule of law and the equality and opportunity of all citizens, and spelling out that all freedoms of religion or belief are a universal concern.

We are also making the case that countries that protect minority rights are stronger, fairer and more confident. If people are free to believe and to worship, they can make a bigger

contribution to society, boost the economy and guard against violence, extremism and social strife. Other countries should protect Christians not just because it is the right thing to do, which it is, but because it is in their interests to do so. The freedom

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of religion is a fundamental human rights priority for this Government, which means that we pursue it as a major element of our bilateral work, our lobbying of other Governments and our human rights programme funding.

We have equipped our staff with a toolkit to monitor and address concerns about freedom of religion or belief around the world. Our toolkit has provided the inspiration for the European Union's own guidelines on freedom of religion or belief, and we have played a central role in securing both their adoption and implementation. We continue to play a leading role within the EU in making this a priority across member states in terms of focusing on particular countries of concern, programme funding or staff training. It is also a focus of our multilateral work at the UN and the Organisation for Security and Co-operation in Europe. Multilaterally, we are working through the UN to ensure that states implement the Human Rights Council resolution that focuses on combating religious intolerance, protecting the human rights of minorities and promoting pluralism in society.

During the UN General Assembly ministerial week at the end of September, we convened a second meeting of international leaders to discuss what more politicians can do to promote freedom of religion or belief and to fight religious intolerance wherever it occurs within our society.

Sir Edward Leigh (Gainsborough) (Con): The Minister says that we should not focus too much on Christians—I understand that—but if we accept that argument we should not have complained about the persecution of Jews in Nazi Germany because that would have made them a target. I do not necessarily accept all his arguments. He must accept that the overwhelming number of persecutions in the world today are against Christians. That is a fact, and so we have to focus on Christians for better or worse.

Mark Simmonds: I understand my hon. Friend's point. He says that the majority of those who are persecuted for their religious belief are Christians, but there are others who are suffering as well—people of different religions and of no religious faith. Another example that the hon. Member for Strangford gave was the appalling atrocities that are taking place in the Central African Republic, where Muslims are persecuting Christians and Christians are persecuting and murdering Muslims. The actions of both groups are completely and utterly unacceptable, and the United Kingdom Government need to do everything they can to ensure that a person can pursue their religion, whatever it is, without fear of persecution or intimidation.

Mark Pritchard: I am grateful to the Minister for being so generous in taking interventions. In order for there to be some balance vis-à-vis my remarks on China and following on from a debate a week or so ago in Westminster Hall, does he agree that Uighurs in the Xinjiang province of China also need protection, as do the Buddhists in another part of China?

Mark Simmonds: I think my hon. Friend is referring to the Buddhists in Tibet, which I have visited. Certainly, wherever people of religious belief exist, they should be

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allowed to practise free of persecution, intimidation and violence. As I have said before in relation to China or anywhere else, this is a main priority of our bilateral relations. We have raised this important issue in the past, and we will continue to do so in the future.

Sir Tony Baldry (Banbury) (Con): This debate is entitled persecution of Christians. With all due respect to my hon. Friend, there is a risk of the Foreign Office not appreciating the real growing concern about the global persecution of Christians. It is not sufficient to say that because some other people are being persecuted, we should not be concerned about the persecution of Christians. There is a global issue about the persecution of Christians in a number of defined countries. If he looks around, he will discover that what the House wants to hear is what the Foreign Office will be doing differently to address that persecution.

Mark Simmonds: I am grateful for that intervention, and if my hon. Friend will allow me to make some progress I shall set out the changes that will emanate from the work done by my noble Friend Baroness Warsi.

Mr Jim Cunningham (Coventry South) (Lab): Will the Minister give way?

Mark Simmonds: Perhaps I could make little progress, so that I can set out some of the changes that we are making.

We are focusing on the multilateral work at the UN and the OSCE. During the United Nations General Assembly ministerial week at the end of September, we convened a meeting to focus on promoting freedom of religion or belief and fighting religious intolerance in our societies. At the OSCE for the past three years, we have showcased our work on freedom of religion or belief and combating hate crime against religious communities. Moreover, our work to promote the freedom of religion or belief continues to grow, as demonstrated by the creation of a new sub-group of the Foreign Secretary's advisory group to focus on freedom of religion or belief.

Jeremy Lefroy (Stafford) (Con) *rose—*

Mark Simmonds: Let me set this out, then I will happily give way.

We have also introduced new training courses to equip our diplomats to understand the crucial role religion plays in the world today. I should stress that the promotion of the freedom of religion or belief, of which the Christian religion is an important part, of course, remains a priority for all FCO Ministers. Collectively, we have a greater reach and more access to key interlocutors than a stand-alone ambassador on the subject matter would have.

Jeremy Lefroy: I congratulate the DUP on securing the debate. May I tease out from the Minister what he understands by the phrase “freedom of religion or belief”? Is it merely a matter of being able to worship, a matter of being able to worship publicly, or a matter of being able to worship in a public place, to tell others about one's faith and to encourage them to join it? What is the exact definition? There seems to be some variance around the world—I am not saying that it is coming from Her Majesty's Government—in what freedom of religion is.

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Madam Deputy Speaker (Dawn Primarolo): Order. May I gently remind the Minister and Members who continue to intervene that the debate must finish at 7 o'clock? I have 15 speakers on my written list and I would appreciate it, Minister, given that you will seek leave to speak at the end of the debate, if you could make more rapid progress through your speech to allow other Members to speak.

Mark Simmonds: I am grateful for that guidance, Madam Deputy Speaker. Let me give a brief response to my hon. Friend the Member for Stafford (Jeremy Lefroy): I would argue that it is all of the above, as well as the right to change one's religion or belief.

In summary, the UK Government are committed to protecting freedom of religion or belief internationally and to standing up for the rights of Christians and others who are persecuted around the world, regardless of the country or faith concerned. We welcome the increased focus on that fundamental right that has been brought about by parliamentarians, particularly the all-party group on international religious freedom or belief. Our activity to further this fundamental right will continue to grow and develop.

4.47 pm

Kerry McCarthy (Bristol East) (Lab): It is a pleasure to speak in the debate and I know from past experience of speaking in Westminster Hall debates on human rights issues that the hon. Member for Strangford (Jim Shannon) is passionate about the issue. He has made a number of speeches and interventions on the subject in previous debates and I congratulate him on persuading his party to table the motion today.

As we have heard, freedom of religion or belief is included under article 18 of the universal declaration on human rights, which states:

“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.”

As we have heard from those who have spoken so far, in too many countries those freedoms, particularly the right to dissent from the majority religion and to change religion, are not respected.

I commend the all-party group on international religious freedom. I attended its meeting with Baroness Warsi a few weeks ago and I am sure that we will hear from some of the group's members this afternoon. In particular, I congratulate the group on its report “Article 18: An Orphaned Right”. Although all human rights are interdependent and interrelated, it highlights the fact that religious freedom often remains on the margins. As we heard from the Minister, the abuse of someone's right to freedom of religion often acts as a gateway to other human rights abuses, such as those of the right to freedom of assembly or expression.

We have to consider religious freedom as an intrinsic part of human rights and indicative of the level of civil and political freedom in a country. According to the Pew research foundation, almost 75% of the global population live in countries with Government

restrictions or where harassment related to religion is common. We have discussed the fact that Christians are the religious group most subject to persecution. In 2011, a report stated that the harassment of Christians was most

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prevalent in 105 countries, followed by the harassment of Muslims in 101 countries. We need to flag up the fact that persecution is not restricted to Christians, but we are here today to discuss the persecution of Christians.

Before moving on to the more commonly cited countries in the debate about religious freedom, I want to comment on the Central African Republic, which has been mentioned. According to the US ambassador to the United Nations, the Central African Republic has been described as

“the worst crisis most people have never heard of”.

There have been harrowing reports of violence, beheadings and villages being razed to the ground. France has warned that the country is on the verge of genocide, as violence between Muslims and Christians escalates. A third of the population is in need of humanitarian assistance, and I hope that the Foreign Office and the Department for International Development will do all they can to try to prevent that situation from escalating even further and to bring relief to people on the ground.

The plight of Coptic Christians in Egypt is more commonly known. As documented in Amnesty International’s report, “How long are we going to live in this injustice?”, there was an unprecedented wave of sectarian attacks on 14 August, when the security forces dispersed people in camps, and churches and Church-affiliated buildings as well as businesses owned by Coptic Christians were destroyed. The excellent report by Amnesty—I recommend it to people who have not read it—reported that 43 Orthodox churches were completely destroyed, and 207 churches were attacked. Not only were the symbols of Christianity attacked but Christians themselves, and four people were killed that day. That is part of a rise in sectarian tension in Egypt, following decades of discrimination suffered by Coptic Christians and impunity for the perpetrators. Egyptian law also means that it is difficult for Christians to rebuild their churches.

Mr Jim Cunningham: My hon. Friend has mentioned the Coptic Church, which is probably one of the oldest Churches in the world. Does she agree that when we talk about aid two of the issues that could be raised are human rights—there is a price to pay for aid—and religious freedom, regardless of whether someone is a Christian or belongs to any other denomination? The two have to work hand in hand to attain what we would call human rights.

Kerry McCarthy: My hon. Friend makes a really important point that has been brought to my attention on a number of occasions. For example, we might look at aid to countries such as Uganda, which has introduced a Bill that has been discussed for the past few years. It is a private Member’s Bill, but it has support from senior figures, and it would introduce the death penalty for homosexuality. People have asked me whether we should give aid to a country that is considering such a measure. Should we give aid to other countries where, for example, abortion is denied to rape victims? It is a tricky situation, because if we deny aid to countries where people are persecuted, we run the risk of penalising the most vulnerable

people we are trying to help. We need to send a strong message not about the conditions that we impose on aid but about our expectations of human rights in the countries to which we give aid. I shall come to that when I discuss the Prime Minister's visit to China.

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Mr Simon Burns (Chelmsford) (Con): The hon. Lady has raised a difficult issue, but it did not stop the west imposing sanctions on Iran for other reasons. Should we not look more at whether conditions should be attached to aid where there are particularly horrendous or general abuses of individuals' freedom of religion?

Kerry McCarthy: I would not want to separate it out and just talk about it in the context of freedom of religion. We should discuss it generally in the context of human rights abuses. We have taken steps in countries where we think that there is corruption—

Robert Neill (Bromley and Chislehurst) (Con): Will the hon. Lady give way?

Kerry McCarthy: May I just finish answering the question?

In several countries we would give aid directly to agencies working in the field, rather than putting it into the Government's coffers, because of concerns about corruption and a lack of democracy. That might be a way forward when we have concerns about a country's human rights record, particularly if there are recognised and well-established agencies, such as UN agencies, working in those countries that we can trust to deliver aid without discrimination and without supporting any measures that persecute people. As I have said, I think that we should look at a country's record in the round. It comes down to whether we trust its Government to spend aid money in the way we expect them to.

Robert Neill: I do not think that we disagree with anything the hon. Lady has said, but why does she seem so reluctant to phrase her contribution in terms of religion and the particular persecution suffered by Christians? We are all in favour of human rights for everybody, but there is a particular and pressing concern about Christian communities around the world. Will she not be more specific in her response to my right hon. Friend the Member for Chelmsford (Mr Burns) on ensuring that aid reflects discrimination against Christian and other religious bodies?

Kerry McCarthy: I am sorry, but I have to disagree with the hon. Gentleman. I do not think that we should start carving up human rights by saying that some abuses are worse than others. That would be entirely wrong, because there are countries in which people of other faiths are being persecuted and killed, and we see persecution when we look at violence against women and attacks on LGBT communities. I accept that the persecution of Christians is a growing problem and that it is horrific in many countries, but I just do not think that we should divide it up. I think that we should look at whether a country respects human rights.

This year saw the launch of the Commonwealth charter, which was trumpeted as the first time that all Commonwealth countries had signed up to a statement of shared values. I attended the Commonwealth parliamentary conference in Johannesburg this year. There was a lot of controversy, because it became apparent that not all the countries represented shared the same values, particularly when it came to LGBT rights.

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I will return to the issue of religious freedom. The Maldives has signed up to the Commonwealth charter and so is deemed to share the Commonwealth values of respect for human rights, but its constitution states that a person is not allowed to be anything other than Muslim, as we have heard, and no Christian gatherings or buildings are allowed. Citizens have to be Muslim, and that is enforced by pressure from families, society and the state.

Bangladesh is another Commonwealth country. The Bangladesh Minority Council has lobbied and met me to highlight the treatment of Christians, Buddhists and, in particular, Hindus, who now comprise just 7% of the population. In Pakistan, as we have heard, Hindus, Christians, Sikhs and Ahmadis are at serious risk of violence and intimidation. Members will know the case of the Christian girl arrested last year for allegedly burning pages of the Koran, which brought to public attention the impact of the blasphemy laws in that country. We have also heard about another Commonwealth country, Nigeria, where horrific acts of violence against Christians are being carried out. We have to question what we can do within the Commonwealth. If we say that the Commonwealth is a club of shared values, what can we do when members of that club do not seem to be putting those principles into practice? It is really important to take that question forward.

The hon. Member for Strangford rightly highlighted the plight of Christians in Syria. Of course, that is not the only country from which Christians are being forced to flee. Open Doors has warned that Christians are on the verge of extinction in Iraq, where their population has fallen from 1.2 million in the early 1990s to just 333,000 today. In Iran, Christians have had to flee their homes or the country, Muslims who have renounced Islam face the death penalty and Christians are being sentenced to 80 lashes for drinking communion wine. The special rapporteur on human rights in Iran reported that more than 300 Christians have been arrested since 2010, including Saeed Abedini, who was sentenced to eight years imprisonment for this work with the house churches. Other faiths, not least the Baha'i, also face persecution in Iran.

On Burma, we know about the religious tensions in Rakhine state, where the Rohingya Muslims' faith is a factor, as well as their ethnicity, but Christians in Burma have suffered persecution too. The Chin Christians have been targeted for their ethnicity and their faith. A report by the Chin Human Rights Organisation documented cases of forced labour, more than 40 separate incidents of torture, and 24 official complaints from Chin Christians of human rights violations, including rape and extra-judicial killing, where no action was taken against the perpetrators.

As we heard earlier, Open Doors ranked Saudi Arabia second on its world watch list, with only North Korea ahead of it. Conversion to a religion other than Islam is punishable by death, and Christian worshippers risk imprisonment, lashing, deportation and torture. It is important to note that last month saw the elections, mostly uncontested, to the Human Rights Council, of which Saudi Arabia and the Maldives, as well as China, are now members. I echo the comments I made about the Commonwealth club. If these countries are to be members of the Human Rights Council, they need to be demonstrating in their own countries that they are putting respect for human rights into practice.

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David Rutley (Macclesfield) (Con): I remember being on a visit to China with the hon. Lady a few years back, when I was intrigued to find out that there are over 60 million Christians there. To help take forward greater tolerance for human rights and freedom of religious worship, does she think it is important to have greater inter-faith dialogue engaging the Chinese authorities with Christian groups and other groups to help people to appreciate just how big the Christian community is in that country?

Kerry McCarthy: I thank the hon. Gentleman for that intervention. I, too, was astounded to hear that figure, because one would not have appreciated that the Christian community was so strong in China. He is entirely right that dialogue is one of the ways forward. It is very important in many other cases where part of the persecution arises from the fact that people do not feel able to speak out and proselytise and publicise their religion and feel it is something they have to keep under wraps.

Of course, the Prime Minister is in China at the moment. Before his trip, I tabled some parliamentary named-day questions, which unfortunately were not answered when they should have been, asking him what efforts he was going to make to raise human rights during his visit. I know that it is primarily a trade delegation, but he has gone to a country where Muslims, Buddhists and Christians, as well as Falun Gong practitioners, suffer torture, harassment and arbitrary detention, and the Tibetans and the Uyghurs are prevented from exercising their freedom of religion too. It is important to use such a high-profile visit to raise those issues.

I was impressed by Baroness Warsi when she came along to the recent meeting of the all-party group on international freedom of religion or belief. She seems to be very committed to pursuing this issue. My concern is that she has been given the human rights brief and it is almost as though it has been put in a box so that she will be travelling around the world talking about human rights, which frees up not only the other Foreign Office Ministers but all the other Ministers who are going on trade delegations abroad—

Madam Deputy Speaker (Dawn Primarolo): Order. I am sorry to interrupt the hon. Lady, but in all fairness, when the Minister got to 16 minutes I said to him that lots of people were waiting to speak.

Kerry McCarthy: I am on my last page.

Madam Deputy Speaker: Good. One minute, thank you.

Kerry McCarthy: I am concerned that it is almost as though one person has been delegated the job of talking about human rights and that means that everybody else is free to just go and talk about trade and does not feel that they ought to use the leverage that a trade mission gives them to raise human rights issues too. It is very important that the Prime Minister does that. I asked him about it when he recently went to Saudi Arabia and did not seem to raise human rights there either.

In conclusion, as you will no doubt be pleased to hear, Madam Deputy Speaker, it is important that Parliament works with faith groups in this country that have connections with groups abroad. Open Doors and,

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in particular, Christian Solidarity Worldwide have been very active in the past few years in encouraging Members to bring forward parliamentary debates. There is also a central role for the Foreign Office and the Department for International Development, as we have discussed. The role of Government should be to push for greater compliance with the universal declaration on the human genome and human rights and the international covenant on civil and political rights, to support the work of the UN special rapporteur on freedom of religion or belief, and to press countries with outstanding requests to agree to inspection visits, and indeed other special procedures mandate-holders covering other human rights. Given its membership of the human rights council, the UK has the opportunity to work with our international partners to strengthen protections for basic fundamental freedoms. Support for the freedom of belief must be part of that. No Government can be selective in the human rights they endorse, just as the Foreign Office and the Prime Minister cannot be selective in which countries they challenge on their human rights record.

Several hon. Members *rose*—

Madam Deputy Speaker (Dawn Primarolo): Order. There is going to be a six-minute time limit on Back-Bench speeches from now on. It may be necessary to take it even lower, depending on the frequency of interventions.

5.5 pm

Sir Tony Baldry (Banbury) (Con): First, I am grateful to my friends from the Democratic Unionist party for introducing this debate. I think the whole House will feel that it is particularly apposite, given that this is the season of Advent, when we think about our belief in God becoming incarnate in the vulnerability of a baby and the peace that should bring to earth.

May I say, on behalf of the Back Benchers, that it would have been helpful if both Front Benchers had listened to the debate and then responded to it, rather than taken up the majority of their time in setting out the line they want to take? That very act says to the House that neither they nor their Front-Bench colleagues have really got the point that what we are trying to tell them is that there is a serious issue with the global persecution of Christians, which is being seriously under-reported and not being properly understood or effectively answered.

It is no good the hon. Member for Bristol East (Kerry McCarthy) talking about the equivalence of human rights. Everyone in the House supports the equivalence of human rights, but that is not what this debate is about. It is about the persecution of Christians and the fact that there is now practically no country—from Morocco to Pakistan—in which Christians can freely practise their religion. That must be a matter of real concern to this House.

There is a severe danger, as we start to celebrate the feast of Christmas in this country, that Christianity will be almost completely erased from the traditional middle east Holy Land of the Bible. Joseph would not now be advised to take Mary to Egypt to avoid the dangers of Herod, because Jesus would just not have been safe there today.

What I think we are collectively trying to say to the Under-Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs, my hon. Friend the Member for Boston and

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Skegness (Mark Simmonds), and the Foreign Office is that this issue needs a much higher profile. I would be interested to know when my hon. Friend, the Secretary of State or any other ministerial colleague last raised with the ambassador of Saudi Arabia the comments of the mufti who said that he wished to see every Christian church in the Arabian peninsula destroyed. Such comments cause us all great concern.

Fiona Bruce (Congleton) (Con): Does my hon. Friend share my concern that despite our great presence in Afghanistan over many years, there is now no Christian church left there?

Sir Tony Baldry: My hon. Friend introduced an excellent Westminster Hall debate on this issue and she makes her points very well.

Every week, because of my responsibilities in this House, I read the excellent newspaper the *Church Times*, and every week it has heart-rending stories of Christians being persecuted in Pakistan, Syria, Egypt and a whole host of other countries. Those stories never get reported in the mainstream newspapers. There is serious under-reporting of what is happening to Christians, many of whom—this is true of generations of Christians throughout the centuries—are being evicted, persecuted and driven from their homelands.

I would really like both Front Benchers to understand that what the House is trying to say today is that it is not prepared to continue to stand by while there is global persecution of Christians. They should not think that the line they want to take is sufficient. A step change and something different is required in response to the fact that 200 million Christians are now threatened with persecution, the loss of the right to practise their faith and the loss of their livelihoods, homes and even lives. That is not acceptable; it has to change.

5.10 pm

Mr Nigel Dodds (Belfast North) (DUP): It is a real pleasure to follow the hon. Member for Banbury (Sir Tony Baldry). I agree with everything that he said about the Front Benchers' approach to this debate, as well as about the equivalence of human rights.

Of course all hon. Members from both sides agree that everybody's human rights should be protected, but it does no good to sit back and pretend that there is no particular problem about the persecution of Christians in the world today. We need to highlight that, and not feel guilty or feel that we must be politically correct all the time. We should say it as it is, and be very clear that there is a real issue, as hon. Members have already highlighted.

I was interviewed about this debate on BBC Radio Ulster this morning. The thrust of the four questions put to me was, "Why on earth are you calling this debate? What's it about?" The subtext was that the debate is not really that important. I have come to expect that from the BBC, but I have found in my constituency and across Northern Ireland—I am sure that the same goes for many right hon. and hon. Members—that people are concerned when there is suffering.

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People are of course concerned about all forms of suffering. We only have to look at the fantastic responses to natural catastrophes, such as the contributions made in relation to the recent typhoon in the Philippines, for which people in my constituency have set out to raise money. The idea that people should not be concerned about what happens in other parts of the world is typical of the liberal media in this country. The fact is that people are concerned, and we are right to raise such issues by highlighting the persecution that Christians face and providing a voice to those oppressed because of their faith.

The persecution of Christians is not new—we know from historical records that there have been persecutions since biblical times—but the staggering fact is that Christianity is the most persecuted faith in the world today, with more than 100,000 Christians killed because of their faith each year, which is one every 11 minutes. According to the World Evangelical Alliance, more than 200 million Christians are denied fundamental human rights because of their faith. Over the past three years, the situation has deteriorated globally.

The Government's responsibility should be to highlight to other Governments what is going on and to uphold the human rights of everyone suffering persecution for their faith, but particularly Christians, given the severity of the purge now happening in many regions of the world.

To follow on from what the hon. Member for Congleton (Fiona Bruce) said, it is particularly painful that in Afghanistan, where there has been so much suffering and sacrifice by our troops and where so much aid and assistance has been given, no churches at all are left, and Christians are unable to meet in public because they have been subject to numerous cases of kidnapping, assassinations and abductions.

The same applies in Iraq. Canon Andrew White, who has been mentioned, has said that Christians in Iraq

“are frightened even to walk to church because they might come under attack. All the churches are targets... We used to have 1.5 million Christians, now we have probably only 200,000 left... There are more Iraqi Christians in Chicago than there are here.”

The debate on the persecution of Christians that the hon. Lady initiated in Westminster Hall focused on that area.

The Arab spring, which has been welcomed by so many, has turned out to be a chilling experience for Christians in that region. They are being disproportionately affected by the violence. In Egypt and Syria, Christianity is effectively and systematically being wiped out altogether. In Saudi Arabia—the shadow Minister, the hon. Member for Bristol East (Kerry McCarthy), mentioned that it is second country on the Open Doors watch list—there is no provision whatever for religious freedom among its people.

The Senior Minister of State in another place, who has responsibility for faith and communities, recently said that Christians are often targeted for “collective punishment”, as some groups believe that they are responsible for what are perceived as injustices committed by the west. That is particularly striking in communist countries, such as North Korea, which is the first country on the Open Doors watch list, and China.

David Simpson: Is it not ironic that we have got to the point in the world, and indeed in Europe, where other religions are admitting that Christianity is under severe pressure and faces severe persecution?

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Mr Dodds: I agree with my hon. Friend.

I pay tribute to the organisations that are doing their level best to highlight what is going on. Open Doors, Christian Solidarity Worldwide, the Barnabas Fund and Aid to the Church in Need are just some of the organisations that highlight the persecution of Christians.

I will not go through a list of all the countries where Christians are being persecuted. I have mentioned a few and other hon. Members have raised the issues in countries such as North Korea and China. However, I want to mention Nigeria in particular. There is a growing problem in Africa, where Islamist extremism has penetrated much of what is happening in many countries in terms of uprisings and destabilisation, for example. In Nigeria, there is a serious attempt by Boko Haram to create an Islamic state and to annihilate Christians and Christianity. I could also mention Kenya, Eritrea, where the situation is particularly bad, and the Central African Republic, among others.

This debate provides an opportunity for the representatives of this United Kingdom to speak out and highlight the problems that are faced by Christians worldwide, and to ask that our Government do even more through their bilateral relations, their aid programme and their foreign relations to make it clear that there must be consequences for countries that continue to violate human rights on such a massive scale, even if our country has close links with them in other ways. Article 18 of the universal declaration of human rights needs to be upheld and defended, and never more so than in this day and age, when the persecution of Christians is so rife.

5.17 pm

Robert Neill (Bromley and Chislehurst) (Con): May I, too, warmly congratulate the hon. Member for Strangford (Jim Shannon) and his party on securing this debate? I could not agree more with the sentiments that have been expressed by my hon. Friend the Member for Banbury (Sir Tony Baldry) and the right hon. Member for Belfast North (Mr Dodds).

I say gently to the Front Benchers on both sides of the Chamber that, however good their intentions, we should not be afraid, in the Parliament of a country that still has an established Christian Church, to phrase a debate in terms of religion or Christianity. Christianity can benefit everyone in any society. It gives us in this country a shared moral compass that binds us together. It offers the same to believer and non-believer, Christian and non-Christian alike, not just in this country but elsewhere. We should therefore not be at all afraid to speak up about the persecution that Christians face.

May I join other hon. Members in paying tribute to the work of organisations such as Open Doors, which provided me with valuable material for a recent debate on this subject in the Parliamentary Assembly of the Council of Europe, and Christian Solidarity Worldwide, which came to my constituency surgery recently to highlight these matters? Canon Andrew White has rightly been mentioned. I also commend to the Government the work of the former

Bishop of Rochester, Dr Michael Nazir-Ali, in whose former diocese my constituency lies. If Ministers have not met or spoken to Dr Nazir-Ali, I hope that they will do so, because he has shed light on the persecution in his native country of Pakistan and elsewhere.

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It is worth restating that while any persecution of any faith is wrong, the pressure on Christians is particular and acute. We must face the fact that in some parts of the world, that persecution comes from a religious/political ideology. I regret to say that some, although not all, elements of the Islamic world demonstrate that problem. In some cases, the persecution comes from states—China and other states have been mentioned—that are aggressively secular. It is right for us to say that it is not good enough for a nation's constitution to say that people have freedom of religion as long as it is through a state-approved Church. It is not acceptable for one part of a constitution to say that freedom of religion is guaranteed but another part to undermine that by saying that a particular form of Islamic jurisprudence trumps all others, as in Egypt.

Bob Stewart (Beckenham) (Con): Will my hon. Friend give way?

Robert Neill: I hope my hon. Friend will forgive me for not giving way; time is short, and I want to make progress so that others can get in.

I hope that the Government will use the leverage that they have. That is why I do not have any problem at all with our developing trade links with China—I hope that we can use the leverage that comes with that developing relationship to remind people that, as other Members have said, membership of the club of modern economies should bring with it respect for religious freedom, and for Christians in particular.

One particular concern is the situation of Christians in the Arab world. They face discrimination in almost every country of the Arab world, with perhaps the only notable exception being Lebanon. The latest Open Doors list of the 50 worst countries in which to be a Christian includes every Arab world country. It is legitimate, as a matter of policy, for us to seek to use our leverage to change that situation.

I have friends and contacts in Egypt, and Members have referred to the situation of the Coptic Church there, which has been established for centuries, almost millennia. That situation has got worse because of political and religious persecution over the past few months. Again, I hope that the Government will use the leverage that we can have with Egypt to ensure that the new draft constitution not only reflects a genuine right to religious freedom for all, particularly the Coptic community, but entrenches it in practice. For example, it should remove discriminatory provisions regarding the building of Christian churches, which evoke laws that go back to the Ottoman era and have been a problem in Egypt. We have a chance to work with the interim Government in Egypt to achieve a genuinely better constitution for all religious minorities, but the reality is that the largest and most pressured religious minority in Egypt is the Christian minority. We should not be afraid to say that.

Like other Members, I hope that we can consider what more support we can give beleaguered Christian communities in Iraq and Syria, which are some of the oldest in the Christian world, through the Geneva II process. It would be a tragedy if the Arab spring, which we all

welcomed, turned into a winter of oppression and discontent for Christians. That is not in the interests of the Muslim majority in those countries any more than it is of Christians.

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We should not be afraid of doing religion in this House occasionally. I hope that if we can have this debate, it means that we have got to a happier place, and I hope that the Government will reflect on that when they take on board what has been said today. Governments are entitled to do religion sometimes, because religion can be for the good of all of society.

5.22 pm

Tom Greatrex (Rutherglen and Hamilton West) (Lab/Co-op): I am pleased to have the chance to make a short contribution to this timely and important debate. I, too, congratulate DUP Members on choosing this subject.

Many Members who are in the Chamber today were also present for the Westminster Hall debate that the hon. Member for Congleton (Fiona Bruce) secured on the persecution of Christians in the middle east. During that debate I made a short intervention to highlight the real concerns of the Christian community in Malaysia. The Minister of State, Foreign and Commonwealth Office, the right hon. Member for East Devon (Mr Swire), who was responding to the debate, rightly said from a sedentary position that Malaysia was not in the middle east. I understand that, but it highlights the importance of this debate in enabling us to discuss places outside the middle east in which there is significant concern about how members of the Christian faith are treated.

Lady Hermon (North Down) (Ind): Can the hon. Gentleman explain to the House why so few of his Labour colleagues are in the Chamber this afternoon for a very important debate about the persecution of Christians? I am absolutely baffled by their absence.

Tom Greatrex: I was going to say that I thanked the hon. Lady for her intervention. I am not sure why others are not here. I specifically want to make a case in relation to Malaysia, which I hope will help to illuminate the debate and add another aspect to it.

Stephen Pound (Ealing North) (Lab): Does my hon. Friend agree that it is entirely appropriate that he mentions Malaysia? The persecution of Christians is a worldwide problem and is not specific to one small part of the world, and the subject of today's debate is the persecution of Christians in the 21st century.

Tom Greatrex: I thank my hon. Friend for his intervention and he is absolutely right. The case I wish to make is about a country that is often portrayed in a very different way, and I hope that this debate will bring more attention to a situation that I have been made aware of in recent months by a constituent.

I am contributing to this debate not so much from the perspective of a practising Christian as from the perspective of somebody who is deeply and fundamentally committed to ensuring that human rights are properly protected. The religious activity and practices of people in any country, as long as they do not harm anybody else, is of little interest or direct concern to me,

but their ability to observe their faith is absolutely of concern. That is why I want to raise some points about Malaysia this afternoon.

Many Members present will have seen the “Malaysia Truly Asia” tourist advertising campaign, which has been stunningly successful over a long period. I am sure

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that many will also have visited Malaysia as tourists—as I did many years ago—and appreciated a tolerant, respectful, gentle and hospitable people, and a society with the reputation for being a Muslim state, but one steadfastly multicultural with Malay, Chinese, Indian and other significant minority communities that include, according to the 2010 census, 9.2% of the population who are practising Christians.

Malaysia is an important Commonwealth partner for the UK, and has had a significant trading and strategic relationship with this country over many years. Because of that background, it is right to be concerned about recent worrying signs in Malaysia, and to draw them to the attention of the Government through this debate. Some Christian communities in Malaysia are now very much in fear of being able to practise their faith without interference, or with limits on their ability to observe their faith in peace.

Christians in Malaysia fear persecution because they have been banned from using the word “Allah”, which has been used as terminology for God in Malay for centuries. That has effectively meant that in some parts of Malaysia the Bible has been outlawed. When a concern was raised—or an attempt was made to raise it—in the state legislative assembly in Sarawak, it was ruled out of order and sub judice, so the legitimate concerns of Sarawak Christians about the Malaysia agreement that governs the relationship stretching back 50 years between the peninsula and other parts of Malaysia, have effectively been censured.

Although freedom of religion is supposedly guaranteed by article 11 of the Malaysian constitution, the reality for many is quite different. In his introduction to the debate, the hon. Member for Strangford (Jim Shannon) referred—I think in the context of Nigeria—to Christian children being whipped. It has come to my attention that there are significant reports of Christian children being whipped for eating pork, and of Christian children who have to board in state schools because of where they live being forced to convert to Islam. Last month the Malaysian Government’s religious affairs department, which is part of the Prime Minister’s office, reportedly issued a sermon to be read in every mosque in Malaysia, condemning supposedly liberal forces undermining Islam. The implication taken by many people in Malaysia was that it was aimed at those who practise the Christian faith.

With Portuguese, Spanish and indeed British colonial influences, it is not surprising that there is a significant Christian community in Malaysia. They have co-existed with others, perfectly happily, for many years since independence more than 50 years ago, but Christians in Malaysia now fear that the country may be embarking on a dangerous path. The Minister for Islamic Affairs in Sarawak, Daud Abdul Rahman, has called for members of the Sarawak Islamic religious department to be upgraded to become a sharia prosecution department, and to be supplied with firearms. According to “Free Malaysia Today”, he said:

“With this departmentalization, it can enhance the ability of the prosecution and thereby strengthening Islamic Sharia law in Sarawak.”

There is real concern that such behaviour has relatively little to do with religion or the tolerance and understanding that religion can often promote, but that it is about seeking to create supporters who identify with one

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political party as pro-Islam, and brand their political opponents as anti-Islam. That is a dangerous road to take, because it unleashes mindless aggression, prejudice and fear. The non-Muslims of east Malaysia are right to be fearful of where that might lead next. Shocking situations can arise when countries of mixed religions and races allow and encourage the development of extremism and prejudice, even in our modern world.

Everyone has the right to freedom of thought, conscience and religion. That right includes freedom to change religion or belief, and freedom, either alone or in community, in public or in private, to manifest religion or belief in teaching, practice, worship and observance.

Father Lawrence, the editor of *The Catholic Herald* in Malaysia, refutes claims that there is a concerted movement to convert Muslims to Christianity, and highlights what I think is my principal aim: to express the need for tolerance and acceptance. He stated recently:

“Ask these people making these claims how many Muslim persons have converted to Christianity. Ask the Attorney General what is the meaning of ‘Our Father’ and ‘Hail Mary’. He will say that he studied in a Catholic school. Did he convert? No, he is still a Muslim. Ask Prime Minister Razak if he knows the ‘Our Father’, because he also studied at St John’s Institution, a Catholic school.”

These men were schooled in a Christian environment, but were free to practise their own faith. The problem in Malaysia now is that it seems that the Government’s policies are effectively making that impossible for people in the other direction. I implore the Minister and his colleagues, when they represent the Government abroad—taking into account the important, specific and specialist relationship between the UK and other countries around the world, such as Malaysia—to use that opportunity to highlight the fact that human rights are also about the right to practise religion without fear of prosecution.

Several hon. Members *rose*—

Mr Speaker: Order. I am grateful to the hon. Gentleman. Perhaps I can just advise the House that, when the time limit on Back-Bench speeches was set at six minutes, there were an intended 15 contributors, since which time two hon. Members have withdrawn. I am therefore in the happy position of being able to raise the limit. My apologies to those who had to adhere to the shorter limit, but I am now raising the limit to eight minutes with immediate effect. The first beneficiary is Angie Bray.

5.32 pm

Angie Bray (Ealing Central and Acton) (Con): Thank you, Mr Speaker, but I intend to be brief as I am looking forward to hearing what other Members have to say. I join others in commending Democratic Unionist Members for securing this important and timely debate, just a matter of weeks before Christmas.

As I have mentioned in the House before, I am proud to be an officer and active member of the all-party group on international religious freedom or belief, which has been up and running for nearly a year and a half. In that time, we have built up a strong membership, including the Archbishop of Canterbury and a list of key supporters from many different religions and representatives of those who choose not to have any religion. At the heart of the group is the passionate message that protecting

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the concept of freedom of religion or belief is of paramount importance. While this debate rightly focuses on the unacceptable persecution of Christians in countless places around the world, we must also condemn any instances of persecution against any religion.

That was the position we took as our starting point for our first report, on article 18 of the universal declaration of human rights. We made a series of recommendations to the Government on measures that we think different Departments should take to help to improve the situation around the world, including an ambassador-level position with responsibility for promoting freedom of religion or belief; putting pressure on the UN to find sufficient funding to support a full-time special rapporteur on freedom of religion or belief; and calling on the Department for International Development to identify freedom of religion or belief as a new priority in its work.

It is also right for us to mention, in the context of this debate, the superb work already being done by Christian stakeholders on behalf of both their own community and the numerous other different communities experiencing persecution, including humanists. Most recently, Gregorios III, Patriarch of the Church of Antioch, came to talk to us about the dreadful plight of Syria's substantial Christian community, which since 2011 has been ripped apart by the bloody conflict there. His response to the outrageous events was to say:

“We call for dialogue, reconciliation and mutual respect for and among parties and for the crisis to be resolved by peaceful means.”

Among the Christians there are many Iraqi Christians who sought refuge in Syria after experiencing persecution in Iraq, and have now found themselves driven out of the country that had become their new home and safe haven.

Mr Angus Brendan MacNeil (Na h-Eileanan an Iar) (SNP): Is not one of the concerns that we had when Parliament was recalled a few months ago and we were asked to vote on intervening in Syria what effect that might have on the Christians within Syria, particularly given the experience in Iraq?

Angie Bray: It was certainly made very clear to us when we heard from the Patriarch that he felt that a peaceful means was the only way to help the Christians and many others caught up between the two sides who found themselves in such a difficult situation.

Syria, and the middle east in general, is perhaps the most shocking, recent and obvious example of the fact that violence against Christians and other religious communities is on the rise, yet as a recent report from Aid to the Church in Need set out, this is a truly worldwide problem. While it is concerning that a region such as the middle east, once so widely populated by Christian communities living in peace and harmony with their non-Christian

neighbours, is now seeing a huge decline in the number of Christians living there, this problem is growing in many parts of the world.

Only by looking at religious persecution globally can we stand a chance of protecting people and their faith. Understanding the complex reasons for sectarianism on a local level is clearly essential because of the different forms it takes in all manner of far-flung places. Again, as part of our group's work, we recently heard from the Indonesian ambassador, who briefed us on the situation

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facing Christians who experience persecution on some of the islands that make up Indonesia. He described how organised outside influences can stir up local feelings in a deliberate manner, sowing the seeds of persecution. The Government, he told us, do not always find it easy to tackle the problem because of the geographical nature of Indonesia.

Bob Stewart: On that point, I have met mujaheddin groups who have told me, cold-bloodedly, that their job was to come and kill Christians. That was in Bosnia in 1993.

Angie Bray: I thank my hon. Friend for that important intervention. In fact, I was just going on to make similar points myself.

One of the concerns I raised when the Pew Research Centre recently briefed our group on its latest figures on religious persecution across the world, either by Government or by local populations, was that sometimes it is surely neither Government nor local populations that start the problem, but insidious third-party forces that operate across national boundaries in a global fashion in pursuit of their own, often extreme, religious ideologies. We have to think about how we deal with this growing phenomenon—fed, in this modern age, by the internet, as well as by determined preachers on the ground.

Today's debate asks us to focus on the plight of Christian communities across the world, but I think this leads us to considering a much wider picture of persecution of all kinds of faith and, indeed, of those who wish to live without faith. Homing in on one kind of persecution might help us to consider what could be done for other faiths, too. As the Archbishop of Canterbury said recently after the tragic bombings of Christian churches in Peshawar:

“We need to condemn the persecution of anyone on behalf of their faith.”

As we are discovering as the all-party group continues its work, almost every faith is persecuted somewhere in the world, and we must all stand together to resist this and to work to uphold article 18 of the universal declaration of human rights, which asserts the right of everyone to choose their faith or none—and, indeed, to change their mind if they wish.

5.39 pm

Sammy Wilson (East Antrim) (DUP): It is a great joy to have the opportunity to speak in this debate, which is important because of the scale of the problem, because of the individual suffering that people experience across the world, and because this issue is actually sanctioned by the Governments of many countries, demanding a response from the UK Government.

The scale of the problem has been outlined very well by previous speakers. Some 200 million Christians are under severe risk of persecution, with many thousands killed every year and ethnically cleansed from their towns and homeland. Some 50,000 Christians have been cleared from the city of Homs in Syria during the civil war. In Eritrea people are being imprisoned on a regular basis. In Sudan before it was partitioned, over a 30-year period 2 million Christians were killed by the regime. That is the scale of the problem.

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It goes on even today. Within the last month, hundreds of people, from Nigeria to Eritrea to Kazakhstan to China, have been arrested and put in prison simply because of their faith, and when they go into prison they are denied due process. They are denied access to lawyers. They are sometimes even denied knowledge of the charges facing them. They can languish in prison for a long time and in horrible conditions.

Any other overseas problem on that scale would have been a priority for the Foreign Office, yet the Minister and the Opposition Front-Bench spokesman attempted to widen this topic, rather than to zone in on the real issue, which is this is a particular group of people who are being persecuted.

As has been pointed out, this is not only happening in Muslim countries. From Morocco to Pakistan, Christians in Muslim countries are under threat, but it happens elsewhere too.

Mr MacNeil: The hon. Gentleman will know, as I do from my parliamentary postbag, of the persecution of Baha'is, particularly in Iran. Does he agree that regardless of whether those persecuted are Baha'is, Christians or whatever, a message must come out from a plurality of voices that the persecution of people on the basis of their faith is a very un-Islamic thing to do?

Sammy Wilson: Absolutely, and I think that is the point we need to be making in the House. Persecution of people of whatever faith by people of whatever faith is wrong.

We can go beyond the Islamic countries to Korea, where 70,000 Christians languish in prison, some of them in the most horrible conditions. I do not want to start telling lots of individual stories, but one struck me in particular. We found in Northern Ireland during the troubles that people can get numbed by numbers—they come to be seen as just statistics, rather than as highlighting the real suffering behind them—but 6,000 Christians are languishing in prison No. 15 in North Korea. They are regularly brought out on a Sunday, and two people are selected and paraded in front of the rest of their fellow Christians, stabbed with pointed bamboos and called on to renounce their faith because then the torture will then stop. Many of them, of course, finish up being murdered because they will not renounce their faith. Leaving aside the huge numbers, that is the kind of horror and individual human suffering we are talking about.

As the hon. Member for Gainsborough (Sir Edward Leigh) said, when the Nazis carried out such acts in concentration camps we pursued the prison guards and those responsible to the ends of the earth, to prosecute them and to make sure they were brought to justice, yet it seems there is not the same response when it comes to the persecution of Christians. That is not just to do with the Government, of course. It is to do with the media, too. I thought it was striking that when 80 Christians were blown up at the beginning of November as they

worshiped in Pakistan, the BBC found it so important that it came below the Emmy awards in the news agenda. That seems to be the level of seriousness that is attached to such issues.

One of the reasons for that sort of response is that, in many instances, such persecution is actually sponsored, sanctioned and encouraged by the Governments of the

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countries concerned. We have already heard the Grand Mufti of Saudi Arabia calling for the destruction of all Christian churches on the peninsula. Human Rights Watch has said that the most dangerous place for a person to be a Christian today is Pakistan, and that much of that persecution is sanctioned by the Government there. A lot of the persecution of Christians in Nigeria is fomented by official sources—and so it goes on around the world. When we point to and specify the persecution of Christians, perhaps we are actually pointing the finger at Governments who, possibly for political reasons, we sometimes need as allies, and at Governments who, for commercial reasons, we need as trade partners. If that is the reason we are not prepared to be specific about this persecution, it is a great shame on the Government of our country.

Mr MacNeil: Although we have our concerns about persecution, perhaps we should be highlighting good practice where it occurs. There are indeed Islamic countries that are tolerant, and perhaps we should hold up the examples of Senegal, Bangladesh and Turkey, where there is a lot more tolerance compared with the societies we are concentrating on. We should make it clear that there are examples of Islamic states in which we would all be quite happy to live.

Sammy Wilson: I am not so sure about the human rights situation in the countries that the hon. Gentleman mentions.

What can and should be done? I know this is a debate about what the Government should do, but the media have a responsibility. Where such unpleasant things are happening, they should be given proper coverage that is communicated to the wider world. Baroness Warsi said in Georgetown last month that it is important that we get an international coalition against such abuses, and that includes not just Governments but journalists, judges and all the people who can bring to the notice of the world the abuses taking place, do something about them, and deal with those engaged in them.

As has been mentioned, we give aid to many of these countries. I do not accept the argument that, by denying aid to them, we in some way disadvantage the people who live there. If that were the case, we would not impose sanctions anywhere, because there will always be people who are disadvantaged by sanctions. If the aid is going to a Government who are engaged in and supporting these practices, it is particularly easy to make it clear that no further aid will be given. As has been said, sometimes this is not a question of physical persecution but of economic or educational discrimination. When we think about how we spend our aid money, perhaps it should be targeted at persecuted groups.

We have talked about the ability of the Commonwealth to put pressure on the Governments of countries across the world over which we have some influence, where these abuses take place. This requires a concerted effort. It requires us not to be politically correct, but to have

the courage to say, “This is happening to a particular group of people. It will not be tolerated, and there will be things which this Government will do.”

I have asked many questions about this. I have been told that the Government are aware of the situation and that they are monitoring it, looking into it and pressing the matter. We need more than that when people’s lives are being put at risk in this way.

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5.49 pm

Rehman Chishti (Gillingham and Rainham) (Con): It is a real pleasure and a privilege to follow the hon. Member for East Antrim (Sammy Wilson). I pay tribute to the Democratic Unionist party for choosing this important topic for debate. I come from a Muslim background, and my father was an imam. When I saw that the topic was “Persecution of Christians in the 21st century”, I knew that it was absolutely right and proper to have a debate on that subject. It is important for the world to realise that persecution goes on. I was speaking to a good friend of mine, the former Bishop of Rochester, Michael Nazir-Ali, about this, and he told me that the persecution of Christians was taking place in more than 130 of the 190 countries in the world at the moment. That is completely and utterly unacceptable; it is a very sad state of affairs.

When I was thinking about which area to focus on in the debate, it was difficult for me to decide because the persecution is so widespread. When it is taking place in more than 130 countries, which country should I pick? I narrowed it down and chose a country that I know well. I was born in Pakistan and had the great privilege, pleasure and honour of serving as an adviser to the former Prime Minister, Benazir Bhutto. She wanted reform, but she lost her life. She wanted a progressive Pakistan, but the radicalisation elements and certain others did not agree.

That is why, when I saw the topic for the debate, I had to choose Pakistan as the subject of my speech. The persecution of Christians is a major problem there, and I want to focus on the blasphemy laws. I recently read an article published by the Centre for Legal Aid, Assistance and Settlement, an organisation that covers the persecution of Christians in Pakistan and abroad, which stated:

“The Blasphemy law is at the root of much suffering and persecution of Christians in Pakistan. The use and abuse of this law is the fundamental issue underpinning discrimination and open violence against Christians and local churches”.

Sammy Wilson: The hon. Gentleman can obviously speak from experience in his own country. Does he accept that when Muslims stand up for Christians in Pakistan, they too put themselves at risk? When the governor of Punjab stood up for and visited a Christian girl in jail, he ended up being murdered by his own bodyguard.

Rehman Chishti: I know more than many others about that issue. I lost my good friend Benazir Bhutto to radicalisation. She was two weeks away from winning an election, after which things could have changed. We had discussed reforming the blasphemy laws, but she was never able to do that. That is the problem in Pakistan, and the hon. Gentleman has highlighted it very well. The governor of Punjab, Salman Taseer, had raised the case of Asia

Bibi, a Christian. She is a 46-year-old mother of six children, and she is still in prison in Pakistan. She was supposed to be pardoned by the President in 2010, but owing to pressure from the radical right, she was never freed. That was totally unacceptable. Pope Benedict said that what was happening to her was unacceptable and called for her release. However, she is still in prison in Pakistan and facing the death penalty. People in Pakistan stand up for her, but they know what the dangers are.

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However, this does not mean that the Government of Pakistan cannot stand up and do the right thing by repealing a bad law. That bad law is the blasphemy law, and the abuse of that law must be dealt with. It is used to settle disputes between one neighbour and another, under sections that were brought in between 1980 and 1986 by General Zia, who was himself a radical. He was an extremist, and he introduced a section that stated that anyone who defamed the Prophet had to be killed. That is totally unacceptable. Those sections of the blasphemy law that were brought in during the Zia era are bad law and they have to go. The Pakistan Government could and should do that, but, as has been mentioned, Governments themselves face certain pressures. They can stand up, as the Minister with responsibility for minorities, Shahbaz Bhatti, a Christian, did. He said that this law was wrong, but what happened to him? He was killed. What happened to Salman Taseer, the Governor of Punjab? He said it was wrong and he was killed. So we have to understand the difficulties for Governments in changing these laws, but they have to change them.

Alistair Burt (North East Bedfordshire) (Con): I have listened with great care to the debate because the policy that I supported in the Foreign and Commonwealth Office is the subject of a certain amount of criticism. What my hon. Friend is touching on is important, in that it is about the pressure of culture on governance? That is present in not only Pakistan, but in a number of Arab countries. It makes it difficult for Governments who would like to respond in the manner that we would all wish, but they cannot because they are frightened, sometimes to death, by their populations. What we are talking about today is as much an issue of culture that needs to change, as governance. We all wish that the problem was easier to solve than it appears to be.

Rehman Chishti: I am very grateful to my right hon. Friend for that important comment. Before I address it, may I thank him for all the hard work he did when he was an FCO Minister, especially in the Asia Bibi case? He made representations to the Government of Pakistan, as has the high commissioner in Pakistan, Adam Thomson, to whom I have spoken about this. My right hon. Friend makes a point about how one deals with the culture. A significant part of that is about changing hearts and minds, which is linked to the aid we give certain countries. If it is used properly, we can deal with the issue of changing hearts and minds.

Amnesty International has said that the blasphemy laws in Pakistan are a form of religious persecution and that they should be repealed. I entirely agree with every word that has been said on that point.

Mr MacNeil: The hon. Gentleman is making a fantastic speech, on which I congratulate him. Is the message that is coming strongly from his speech that when persecution takes root, no matter where it is aimed, it ultimately ends in the persecution of a number of people in society to whom one would never have imagined it happening at the beginning? As he well

knows, the persecution extended so far in Pakistan that it led to the death of his friend Benazir Bhutto. In some ways, that was an end point to that very sad persecution—it went everywhere.

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Rehman Chishti: I am grateful to the hon. Gentleman for that point; he is right and I have nothing further to add.

Apart from repealing the blasphemy laws in Pakistan, because that may take time, what can we do now to push the Government of Pakistan to deal with those laws? Pakistan's ambassador to the United States has made comments that are similar to my view, as has Bishop Michael Nazir-Ali. He says, and I say, that, first, these laws should not be dealt with by the lower courts in Pakistan, because they are more susceptible to corruption and intimidation by religious groups in the communities; secondly, that specialised prosecutors should deal with blasphemy laws in that country; and, thirdly, that specific judges have to deal with blasphemy laws. When I was on a flight from Karachi to Islamabad last year, I met 12 high court judges and a supreme court judge there. I asked them whether I could raise certain points with them and they said that I could. I then asked whether I could raise the point about the blasphemy laws in Pakistan and they said of course I could. However, when I asked why the blasphemy laws were abused in Pakistan, the high court judges said to me, "No blasphemy law is abused in Pakistan." If that is the mentality of judges at the high court in Pakistan, what hope does anyone have of justice in that country? That is why I say that specific judges trained to deal with blasphemy issues should deal with these cases.

The other thing that should happen is that there should be a body in the Ministry of Interior and Narcotics Control that authorises prosecutions, because in that way the process would not be subject to intimidation at any local level. If allegations are made, cases would have to go to a specific cell in that Ministry that deals with blasphemy laws and if it gives authorisation, a charge should follow. In that way, we could deal with some abuses that are going on at the moment. That would go some way to dealing with such cases, but other people may have other suggestions for dealing with them.

There is another way of addressing this issue. President Zardari could have done it in 2010. I know that well because I raised it with him, but he was not able to pardon Asia Bibi. We are all entitled to have our own separate faiths and beliefs but let us think about Asia Bibi. She is 46 and has five children and has been languishing in prison for four years. She was condemned to death by a lower court, not knowing whether her appeal would come through. Is that a civilised world? Is that right and proper if it happened to one of us or someone we loved? Absolutely not. The Government of Pakistan under a new President and Prime Minister have a moral obligation to do the right thing and ensure that Asia Bibi is released and pardoned.

Finally, when those who are persecuted for their faith seek asylum in another country, they should be given priority. Someone being persecuted in that way could be taken outside and shot under the blasphemy laws, so giving priority to those who are seeking asylum and who have been persecuted on grounds of their faith is the right way forward.

6 pm

Stephen Pound (Ealing North) (Lab): It speaks a great deal to the credit of this House that the brother of a priest can follow the son of an imam, that I can be seated behind an ordained Presbyterian Minister and

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that, in front of both of us, is the nephew of Sister Assumpta, a Presentation Sister from Dungarvan in County Waterford. All of us present and those not present in the Chamber are united in our respect and admiration for the Democratic Unionist party in raising this debate tonight, particularly for the hon. Member for Strangford (Jim Shannon). He is a man who does not just profess his faith in private and does not just talk the talk, but lives his faith. In the words of Timothy, he is an example, and we all have reason to be grateful to him.

We are here to discuss a situation that is beyond doubt. There is no question that Christians are the most persecuted single group in the world today on grounds of religion. It is one thing to talk about persecution and to list the horrors, but when one thinks of Christians in this century, in this very year, being crucified in Iraq, we realise the depth of sheer horror that we are looking at. Dedolence is not an emotion that usually informs this House. The emotion that most of us feel when we hear such things is of a very deep and genuine sort.

I would like to focus my remarks on one small area, and that is the area of Iraq. My hon. Friend the Member for Dumfries and Galloway (Mr Brown) and I, with our good friend Emmanuel Yacoub from the Assyrian Democratic Movement, visited Iraq quite recently. It was an extraordinary and overwhelming emotion to be standing in the desert that nurtured the Desert Fathers, to be in the plains of Nineveh, to see the tomb of the Prophet Nahum, and to be in the area where Christianity first found its feet and grew. If Armenia was the first ever Christian country in the year 301, the Christian history in the middle east is so deep that it goes back to the birth and the death of our Lord Jesus Christ.

I know that the hon. Member for Gainsborough (Sir Edward Leigh) visited the area immediately before us. He has spoken on the matter far more eloquently and powerfully than ever I could. One does not have to be a genius to areolate the future of Iraq. A country that once had a Christian population the size of Northern Ireland now has a Christian population less than that of the borough of Ealing. Many of the people who have left, particularly those who served the British as the Iraqi levies—I think of the great families in my own constituency of the Khorshabas, the Michaels and the Jasos and the family of my good friends Jenie and Isaac Asia—gave an enormous amount to the British. Talking about targeting assistance and help at Christian communities simply identifies them and makes them a target in the other sense of the word, and many of the Christian communities in Iraq are already targeted.

It was a tradition of the British during imperial times to work with a particular group of people. One might think of the Tamils in Sri Lanka, and particularly of the Christian communities such as the Chaldean Assyrians in Iraq. They worked loyally and faithfully with the British and we promised them at that time that they would be free to practise their religion. Sadly, that is not the case.

Frankly, many of us are overwhelmed by the immensity and the horror and we wonder what best we can do. The hon. Member for Strangford probably said the most important thing, and I make this point extremely seriously. There is one thing we must do. We must assist

wherever we can financially and materially and we must raise the profile, but we must never, ever forget to pray for our

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fellow co-religionists. The power of prayer is immense and it has an incredible force. Let us never forget suffering Christians in our prayers. Let us continue to do that. Advent might be a couple of days old, but this is a powerful season for prayer.

On the question of Iraq, I would like seriously to suggest to the Minister that we consider supporting the idea of an autonomous Christian district in northern Iraq on the Nineveh plains, particularly in the Tel Kaif and Al-Hamdaniya area. That has been suggested for many years—they are ancient Christian Assyrian Chaldean lands—but they would not be exclusively for Christians. It has been said over and over again that this will be for the local community and would allow a breathing space for Christians. It would allow that simple, basic right to worship our shared God in the place of God. Why can we not support that?

The hon. Member for Strangford has already mentioned Emad Youhanna, who was attacked with a suicide bomb outside his house. That did not happen in the last century, or in the last decade—it happened on 22 September 2013 in Kirkuk, in Rafigayn. Emad Youhanna is a member of the Assyrian Democratic Movement and of the Iraqi national Parliament. That bomb injured 19 people, including three of Rab Emad Youhanna's children.

I seriously suggest that we could support the idea of a safe haven. I understand that a strange argument is emerging that Christian communities were safer during what is still called “Saddam time” in Iraq. That is a false argument. There might not have been slaughter on the streets, but when the dictator runs a dictatorship no one is free and the Christians who were tolerated one day could be slaughtered the next, so please let no one make the case that, under Assad or Saddam Hussein, it was somehow a golden period for Christians. It might have been less worse, but in the long term the doom was just as serious.

I suggest that we remember our co-religionists in our prayers and support the idea, particularly in the north of Iraq in the plains of Nineveh, of an autonomous Chaldean Assyrian region. Anyone who has stood as the hon. Member for Gainsborough, my hon. Friend the Member for Dumfries and Galloway and I have and felt the chill fear that abounds in those hot, burning desert sands will know that we cannot stand by and do nothing. We must support these people. This is the land where Christ's message was first promulgated to huge numbers. It is an area and a land that we must respect. It is a holy land; let us make it safe for Christians.

6.8 pm

Sir Edward Leigh (Gainsborough) (Con): I very much agree with all that my good friend the hon. Member for Ealing North (Stephen Pound) has said and support the comments on Assyria. I do not know whether you managed to get some rest on Sunday, Mr Speaker, and watch once again on BBC4 the excellent French film entitled “Of Gods and Men”. It is a very beautiful film about the appalling murder of six Benedictine monks in the Atlas mountains. It is such a moving film because there is one scene in which Father Christian confronts one of the terrorists—the same terrorist who ultimately decapitates him and his fellow monks.

Father Christian starts reading from the Koran in Arabic and quotes directly the passages that exhort all Muslims to be peaceful to other religions. The terrorist completes the

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verse. That makes most powerfully the point that we should make in this debate: in practising our own religion, in no way do we diminish the practice of other religions or people's ability to practise their religion in any way they wish.

Fiona Bruce: Will my hon. Friend give way?

Sir Edward Leigh: I shall give way only once in a moment.

Many of the people we are discussing—the persecuted Christians of the world—are the poorest of the poor. In Pakistan in particular, they are very much at the bottom of the heap, and they are denied human rights. All that they require in their simple lives is an ability to practise their religion, so this debate sends a powerful message about their right to freedom of expression.

Fiona Bruce: My hon. Friend says that in no way do we diminish other people's right to practise their religion if we practise our own. Society has enhanced that right: where we respect the right of one religion and people of one faith to practise their faith, we respect all if we respect that properly.

Sir Edward Leigh: I would like to echo what my hon. Friend the Member for Banbury (Sir Tony Baldry) said in his powerful speech. It is slightly regrettable—I say this gently—that my hon. Friend the Under-Secretary spoke at the beginning of the debate. It is increasingly the practice for Ministers to speak early in debates—I make this point particularly to you, Mr Speaker—but it is important that they listen carefully and respond. *[Interruption.]* The Minister will give a winding-up speech, but it will be much shorter than it would have been.

I have taken part in every one of these debates, and I have heard this Foreign Office speech many times before. Dare I say that I do not detect a sense of burning anger about what is happening to Christians? This is something that has increased, and it is one of the most terrible things happening in the world today. Of course we should regret, attack and be angry about any persecution of any religion. The hon. Member for Bristol East (Kerry McCarthy) mentioned that Christians were persecuted in 105 countries, or their human rights were somehow limited, but she immediately tried to be relative—I think that there is a danger of relativism in this debate—and said that there were 101 countries where Muslims had their rights affected. That may be strictly true, but the fact of the matter is that the overwhelming number of really violent and dangerous persecutions, killings and denials of human rights are directed at Christians, which is why we should congratulate the hon. Member for Strangford (Jim Shannon), who continues, year on year, to raise the issue. It is down to the DUP, not the Conservative Government or the Labour Opposition, that this debate is taking place on the Floor of the House, and the hon. Gentleman is to be congratulated on that.

This debate is not a relative debate about human rights. It is a debate about the persecution of Christians. My hon. Friend the Member for Banbury, speaking with all the authority of his office, and everyone who has taken part in this debate demand that the Government take this more seriously and speak out more powerfully.

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There was an appalling case in All Saints church in Peshawar in which 120 Christians were blown up. How much publicity was there about that case? If a similar outrage were perpetrated by a Christian suicide bomber going into a mosque and blowing up 120 Muslims, it would be considered appalling, and the House can imagine the consequences worldwide for Christians.

I am afraid that, for all the warm words from the Foreign Office, there is still a lack of real determination to speak out. We have been in this space before, with the persecution of the Jews in the 1930s and the persecution of many minorities over time, where we as a Government have drawn back because of trade and other considerations of national policy, and we have not been prepared to speak up for minorities.

I want to follow what my friend the hon. Member for Ealing North, said, because I have been there. Like him, I have been to Iraq, and I can assure you, Mr Speaker, that there is nothing more terrible than what happened to a mother I spoke to. The last time she saw her child was when he went off to church with her husband. The husband was kidnapped and never seen again. The child was murdered just because of his religion—for no other reason. My friend and I will never forget those conversations, because those attacks revealed an appalling level of hate. We invaded Iraq and we have a responsibility, so we cannot pass by on the other side. Maybe we invaded for good reasons, but we do have a responsibility.

Stephen Pound: Does the hon. Gentleman agree that it was extraordinarily humbling and salutary to realise that the language in which that mother addressed us through a translator was Aramaic, the language of our Lord and Saviour Jesus Christ?

Sir Edward Leigh: It was moving. To listen to a mass in Aramaic is an extraordinary experience.

I make no apology for Saddam Hussein, and I quite understand the comments that have been made about Iraq, but things have become much worse since the invasion. The fact of the matter is that Iraq's Christian population has fallen from around 1.2 million to around 600,000, because tens of thousands have fled. When I was in Mosul, in ancient Nineveh, Christians were being murdered and dozens of families were fleeing. Where did they flee to? They fled to Syria. What did we have a debate about at the end of August? We had a debate, once again, on the need to bomb Syria. Thank God some of us refused to support that and the House of Commons said no. Otherwise, what would have been the fate of the Syrians?

I have also been to Syria and heard numerous appalling examples of what is happening to innocent Christians there. Again, I make no apology for the Assad regime, but under his father there was a degree of protection. Can the Government be so sure that in arming those they call the “good” rebels, or encouraging them—they claim that they have in no way armed them—they are not also leeching support and armaments to the bad rebels? There have been appalling examples of persecution in Syria. Mass graves have been found in the village of Sadad, where 46 Christians were murdered and where a family of six—this is just one family—were blindfolded and shot in the head. A 26-year-old, Ninar Odisho, was shot in the street, murdered for his faith. I could go on

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and on with such appalling examples of violence and hatred shown towards that ancient Christian community in the middle east.

Pakistan has been mentioned. Quite rightly, there was wonderful worldwide publicity about the shooting of Malala Yousafzai and her courage in resisting the Taliban, but how much coverage has there been of Kashmala Munawar, a Christian girl who lost one leg and nearly lost the other when she was blown up because of her religion? As I said earlier, how much worldwide coverage has there really been of the appalling massacre in Peshawar?

This debate is timely. I very much hope that when the Minister responds he will reflect the powerful mood of the House of Commons. This cannot go on. We cannot have tens of thousands of people around the world losing their human rights, or having them endangered, and thousands being murdered. The Government have a role to play in articulating our anger. It must stop.

6.19 pm

Ms Margaret Ritchie (South Down) (SDLP): I commend the hon. Member for Strangford (Jim Shannon) for introducing this motion, along with his party, the DUP, on the persecution of Christians in the 21st century. This afternoon's debate has been reflective and instructive. Many Members have spoken with a great deal of knowledge about the persecution of Christians, and not only in the middle east, but further afield. My hon. Friends the Member for Foyle (Mark Durkan) and for Belfast South (Dr McDonnell) and I receive in our mailbags correspondence from constituents vehemently opposed to the persecution of Christians.

We are opposed to the persecution not only of Christians but of all religious groups; this debate should not reflect sectarian or sectional attitudes or principles. However, we must recognise that Christians have been persecuted in the middle east and in other parts of the world. As the former Foreign and Commonwealth Office Minister, the right hon. Member for North East Bedfordshire (Alistair Burt), said, this has a lot to do with cultures and Governments. There is a need to change the opinions of cultures and Governments to persuade people that it is not right to burn Coptic churches in Egypt, to massacre Christians in Sudan and in Pakistan, or to burn people out of their homes because of their religion.

It is particularly significant and poignant that we are discussing this issue at the time of Advent as we approach Christmas—the birth of the person who founded Christianity. It is interesting that most of the persecution is happening in the countries of the middle east where Christianity was born but where the number of Christians is dwindling as they are being forced out.

Baroness Warsi has said that 83% of countries guarantee freedom of religion but many are not making provision for it. The Catholic Archbishop of England and Wales said of the possible extinction of Christians in the middle east:

“I think in some parts of the Middle East that is probably true... There are real challenges for Christians in this part of the world to support and get alongside them and also for politicians to understand that the presence of Christians is a great mediating factor, often for example between different segments of Islam.”

When the German Chancellor addressed members of the Lutheran Church, she said that Christianity is

“the most persecuted religion in the world.”

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We have these testimonies from people who are respected in their own right and are highlighting the problems faced by Christians in this world. We should appreciate that religious freedom is one of the most important gateways to other forms of human rights and freedoms.

It is regrettable that the comments by Front Benchers did not reflect the rest of the debate. I hope that they will be able to explain, if not today, at a later stage, what we are going to do about the persecution of Christians in Sudan and other parts of north Africa, the burning of Coptic churches in Egypt, the persecution of Christians in Iran, and the fact that Christians no longer exist in Afghanistan. What will be done to honour the principle of the UN declaration on the elimination of all forms of intolerance and of discrimination based on religion or belief?

There is a duty on the Minister to address that issue tonight. The Government also need to actively promote the multinational efforts of the European Union and consider whether it might also be possible to do things through the G8 and the G20. They also need to put pressure on the Governments of nations where Christians are persecuted to take responsibility, protect religious groups and eradicate intolerance.

Some of the greatest vices in the world today are those of religious intolerance and sectarianism, which breed not only hatred and violence and the mutilation of people, but the desecration of homes, families and human life. If we believe in the principles of human rights and religious freedom, we must urge the Government to do all in their power to work with other Governments throughout the EU and the world in order to ensure that all pressure is brought to bear to end and eradicate this iniquitous violence, terror and murder.

Several hon. Members *rose*—

Mr Speaker: Order. The wind-up speeches need to begin at 6.40 pm. Three Government Back Benchers are seeking to contribute, all of whom I want to accommodate, so a degree of self-restraint and consideration would help.

6.26 pm

Mr David Burrowes (Enfield, Southgate) (Con): I welcome this incredibly important debate and congratulate the Democratic Unionist party on securing it. I also welcome the fact that the Under-Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs, my hon. Friend the Member for Boston and Skegness (Mark Simmonds) and the Minister for faith, the noble Baroness Warsi, have noted the importance that the Government place on the issue.

Sadly and regrettably, none of us needs to apologise for focusing on the issue of Christian persecution or to qualify why we are doing so, because the scale and nature of that persecution throughout the world this century is appalling. Some years ago we might have

been able to discuss the discrimination and persecution of Christians in the context of their status as a minority and argued that their human rights needed to be respected and that we needed to do much more to protect them. That is not what we are dealing with now.

Christians throughout the world, particularly in the middle east and Africa, are being persecuted and discriminated against not just because they are in a

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minority—indeed, they are in a majority in some cases and may be equal in number in others—but because they are a target. Those who are being persecuted now see themselves as a target, not simply a group following a particular religion. That is evident from the scale of the persecution.

I welcome the Minister's comment that the issue under discussion should be a litmus test of other human rights. It should not be picked off as simply one among many human rights that we need to debate, as the shadow Minister, the hon. Member for Bristol East (Kerry McCarthy), suggested. We need to hold the Minister and the Government to account every time they attend trade delegations and visit other countries, and ensure that they direct international aid to the right places. This is a litmus test of how often the issue of religious freedom is raised and of how much we can seek improvement in countries of concern.

The Minister is an ambassador for religious freedom, as indeed are all the other Foreign Office Ministers. He will, therefore, want to report back to us on occasions other than dedicated debates on how much the Foreign Office is doing in those countries of concern to ensure that the principle of religious freedom is being upheld.

I welcome the comments made by the noble Baroness Warsi in Washington. Indeed, they have been echoed by Members today. She said:

“Across the world, people are being singled out and hounded out simply for the faith they follow or the beliefs they hold.”

She said that in some countries, as we have heard,

“a mass exodus is taking place, on a Biblical scale”

and that

“there is real danger that Christianity will become extinct.”

I welcome those important words from the Minister for faith. She also said that article 18 on the protection of religious freedom is

“the most translated article in the UN Declaration of Human Rights”,

but “the least heeded” by those we share a table with at UN and EU meetings.

We need to ensure that the Government do God, as they have rightly said they do, and that they do so by protecting article 18. In particular, they need to ensure that this is about the

manifesting of belief and sharing it with others, which is a key issue. We must ensure that United Nations Human Rights Council resolution 16/18 is properly implemented across the board, and I ask the Minister to respond about that.

Baroness Warsi's meetings in January in London and in September in New York are extremely welcome and important, as are the engagement on bilateral agreements, the project work and the diplomatic support that is going on. That has a particular focus in relation to the freedom to change religion, which must be properly recognised, but it is important to accept that there are different understandings and interpretations of article 18. We must ensure that the international covenant on civil and political rights is signed by the Arab countries with which we trade that have not done so: Oman, Qatar, Saudi Arabia and the United Arab Emirates should all sign it, as should Burma.

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We must ensure that we get the language right. Persecution happens in all forms: deliberately, in burning down churches and killing Christians, but as we have heard, also as economic discrimination by the state and others, including against Christians in Iran. I took part in the inquiry by the all-party group on international religious freedom or belief, which has shown that there is discrimination across the board.

There has been a focus on trying to restrict people to the private sphere; a sort of privatisation of religion. President Morsi has said:

“As long as the apostate keeps it to himself...he should not be punished... However, someone who proclaims his apostasy in public, and calls for others to follow suit, is a danger to society...the law and the shari'a intervene.”

Where the rubber hits the road is when someone wants to change religion, particularly from a non-Christian—indeed, a Muslim—background. That is when they really need protection.

It is important that we are clear about the language, because we want to talk not only about freedom of worship, but about freedom to manifest one's faith. Following the massacre at Maspero in Cairo in 2011, the Foreign Secretary said:

“The freedom of religious belief...needs to be protected... The ability to worship in peace is a vital component of any...democratic society.”

It is important to say that, but the Foreign Office must go further on the ability to manifest one's faith.

The Home Office must also act in relation to asylum applications from those who have converted to Christianity and have been told, like some of my constituents, “You aren't a pastor. You don't need to go out in public and share your faith, because that isn't your profession.” Christians are obliged as part of their calling to go out and show their faith, and they need to be protected across the board.

I must finish, but let me say this. We have now entered the Christmas period, which is an important time to make it clear that we want to protect religious freedom in all its forms. I

hope that our speeches will be well heard, and that we practise what we preach in all channels and communications.

6.32 pm

Andrew Selous (South West Bedfordshire) (Con): Things are so bad for Christians across the world that we should have a debate such as this at least annually. When the Archbishop of Canterbury came to the Jubilee Room, he said that speaking out on behalf of persecuted Christians really matters, because the persecutors of course want to get away with what they do without anyone seeing or noticing. That is why our debate is so important.

Religious liberty in this country is so important because it gives us the moral authority to raise with other countries the concerns that we are quite properly expressing today. I want to put on the record the Open Doors world watch list of countries in which persecution is most severe. It states that there is absolute persecution in North Korea; extreme persecution in Saudi Arabia, Afghanistan, Iraq, Somalia, the Maldives, Mali, Iran, Yemen, Eritrea and Syria; and severe persecution in Sudan, Nigeria, Pakistan, Ethiopia, Uzbekistan, Libya, Laos, Turkmenistan, Qatar, Vietnam, Oman and Mauritania. Open Doors is particularly concerned about those 23 countries on its world watch list 2013.

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It is not too much of a parallel to say that the position of Christians in the middle east in the second decade of the 21st century is analogous to that of the Jews in Germany in the 1930s. I am not the first person to say that—I think Lord Alton of Liverpool has said it in another place, and my hon. Friend the Member for Congleton (Fiona Bruce) recently said it in Westminster Hall—and it is not hyperbole to say so.

It is really important that Christians around the world and people of other faiths have the freedom to change faiths. May I press the Minister on what the United Kingdom has done at the United Nations Human Rights Council? It is felt that the Organisation of Islamic Cooperation has blocked the issue of the freedom to convert, about which my hon. Friend the Member for Enfield, Southgate (Mr Burrowes) spoke powerfully by quoting President Morsi.

On occasion, our Government have not been as robust as other Governments in dealing with this issue. In a speech in the other place on 9 December 2011, Lord Patten said that concerns had been raised with him by Anglicans in Turkey that they were not allowed to worship in public. He was told by the Government that nothing much could be done. However, he pointed out, by way of comparison, that the German Government had managed to get the Turkish Government to take action on the position of German Roman Catholics in Turkey. I say gently to the Minister that more could be done on occasion. We should follow Germany's more muscular approach in that instance.

When Ministers and members of the royal family travel overseas, it would be good if they made contact with Anglican priests around the world. At every level—governmental, political, cultural, business and individual—these issues must be raised. That is how we will change the culture, as has rightly been said.

Finally, although this debate is, of course, set in the overall context of human rights, there is a severe and pressing issue as far as Christians are concerned.

6.36 pm

Fiona Bruce (Congleton) (Con): As I am the last Back Bencher to be called to speak, I understand that I am limited to four minutes. I therefore not only thank DUP Members for calling the debate, but wholeheartedly support what has been said by the hon. Members for Ealing North (Stephen Pound), for South Down (Ms Ritchie), for Strangford (Jim Shannon) and for East Antrim (Sammy Wilson), my hon. Friends the Members for Enfield, Southgate (Mr Burrowes), for South West Bedfordshire (Andrew Selous), for Gainsborough (Sir Edward Leigh) and for Bromley and Chislehurst (Robert Neill), the right hon. Member for Belfast North (Mr Dodds) and, most eloquently, my hon. Friend the Member for Banbury (Sir Tony Baldry).

In the short time that I have left, I want to welcome the speech by Baroness Warsi on 16 November in Washington, which has been referred to, in which she said that persecution is the biggest challenge we face in the 21st century. She called it a “global crisis”. If, as we hear, Christianity is the most persecuted religion on earth, 80% of religious persecution is suffered by Christians, Christianity is at risk of eradication in countries across the globe and the situation is worsening, the persecution of Christianity and Christians is a global crisis. That

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crisis needs a co-ordinated international response and the British Government should take a much stronger lead in that. Having sat through the whole debate, I believe that that view is shared by many colleagues.

We need more than words, meetings, resolutions and declarations; people want to see action. As I went about my constituency at the weekend, I was surprised that several constituents came up to me and expressed their pleasure in seeing that this debate was taking place in the House. That is not something that happens often. I believe that the British public are looking for more action on this issue.

I share the concern of other hon. Members over the comments made by the Minister in his opening remarks. However, at least he is here. The motion states that

“the persecution of Christians is increasing in the 21st Century”

and

“calls on the Government to do more both in its foreign policy and through its aid work to defend and support people of Christian faith.”

I am disappointed that no Minister from the Department for International Development has been here throughout the debate. I was also disappointed that no DFID Minister attended the recent Westminster Hall debate on the persecution of Christians in the middle east. If, as this Minister says, we should be providing resources to address this issue, that ought to be something that DFID Ministers are considering. DFID should be prioritising this in its aid provision. It has recognised that girls, women and whole communities can benefit from education, and it needs to wake up to the fact that if we defend and strengthen people’s right to practise their faith and live in a more peaceful society, it will produce a more productive

and flourishing society for all, whatever faith is being defended and supported. I therefore ask DFID to consider seriously how it will respond to the motion.

I do not know why there has not yet been adequate involvement on the part of those involved in development work. Perhaps it is due to a misplaced fear of that involvement being confused with proselytising, or being seen as being biased or as promoting western colonialism. That is political correctness of the worst kind, because people's lives and livelihoods are at stake. I challenge DFID to review its policies. In the Westminster Hall debate I asked the Minister of State, Foreign and Commonwealth Office, my right hon. Friend the Member for East Devon (Mr Swire), to do that, and he said that we had the "Faith Partnership Principles" document. But that does not address the issue. Will DFID please do so?

6.40 pm

Dr William McCrea (South Antrim) (DUP): I thank all Members who have contributed to this important debate. In particular, I thank my hon. Friend the Member for Strangford (Jim Shannon) for setting the scene of the many atrocities committed against Christians, and I appreciate all his efforts to raise the matter in Westminster Hall debates and on other occasions.

I thank the Minister and shadow Minister for their understanding, although I was somewhat concerned that they widened the debate beyond the motion. I was delighted that the hon. Member for Banbury (Sir Tony Baldry) brought back the proper focus in his excellent

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contribution. The Minister acknowledged that Christians are the most persecuted people in the world, and I agree with the shadow Minister that if countries want to be part of the human rights club, they ought to play by the rules.

I thank my right hon. Friend the Member for Belfast North (Mr Dodds) for his usual thoughtful contribution, which focused the House's attention on the motion. The tone and content of the contribution that the hon. Member for Bromley and Chislehurst (Robert Neill) made were absolutely right. The hon. Member for Rutherglen and Hamilton West (Tom Greatrex) was asked about his colleagues, but we deeply appreciate his presence and contribution.

We agree with the hon. Member for Ealing Central and Acton (Angie Bray) that we ought to reject the persecution of anyone because of their faith. My hon. Friend the Member for East Antrim (Sammy Wilson) brought a tone of reality, giving chilling accounts of persecution not only by other religious groups but aided by Governments and authorities in various parts of the world. The hon. Member for Gillingham and Rainham (Rehman Chishti) reminded us of a number of countries where persecution is going on, and he was courageous in speaking personally about the situation in Pakistan. We deeply appreciate his interest and his contribution.

I thank the hon. Member for Ealing North (Stephen Pound) for his usual eloquent exposition of the tragedies facing Christians in Iraq. He also reminded us that we need to raise the profile of persecuted Christians across the world and pray for them, and I agree

wholeheartedly. I thank him for his helpful and thoughtful contribution. I also agree wholeheartedly with the hon. Member for Gainsborough (Sir Edward Leigh) that right hon. and hon. Members who have taken part in the debate believe that civil and religious liberties are not for some but for all, and the debate has focused on that. As he explained, the night of persecution grows even darker in some parts of the world, even when we intervened in Iraq and Afghanistan and sent our soldiers to fight for liberty and freedom.

I agree with the hon. Member for South Down (Ms Ritchie) that the debate has been reflective and informative—that is certainly an appropriate description. The hon. Members for Enfield, Southgate (Mr Burrowes) and for South West Bedfordshire (Andrew Selous) made thoughtful contributions. I appreciate that time was unfortunately too limited for them to expand their remarks, but I know they take a keen interest in this issue and have contributed to other debates.

The hon. Member for Congleton (Fiona Bruce) had just a few moments to contribute, but I believe this House owes her a great debt of gratitude because she tirelessly raises this issue again and again. Her encouragement and depth of knowledge is worthy of commendation and recognition, and I am happy to give that on the Floor of the House on behalf of my right hon. and hon. Friends.

Stephen Pound: Briefly, before we move on, may I share with the hon. Gentleman a message I have just received from Stormont from my colleague the hon. Member for Bury South (Mr Lewis), shadow Secretary

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of State for Northern Ireland? He said that of all the debates he has missed, this is the one he regrets the most and he wishes he had been present. Unfortunately, as the hon. Gentleman and the House will understand, he had to be in Stormont today.

Dr McCrea: I thank the hon. Gentleman for that information, and I have no doubt that the shadow Secretary of State would have attended this important debate and been happy to participate in it.

Article 18 of the universal declaration of human rights emphasises the right to have certain freedoms, and I was just thinking what an amazing thing freedom is. It was what our fathers and forefathers fought and died for. Freedom of religion is a fundamental human right, and the fact that my right hon. and hon. Friends tabled this motion for debate acknowledges that for many, that freedom is being denied.

We make no apology whatsoever that the motion focuses directly on a group of people worldwide who are increasingly becoming isolated and are constantly under attack for their simple faith in Jesus Christ. The sad reality is that one Christian is killed for their faith every 11 minutes somewhere on earth, and many Governments remain totally silent about that situation. It is our desire to highlight the persecution of Christians not only in far off regions of the world, but in Europe and our own land. The list from Open Doors was helpful and gives the top 50 countries where the persecution of Christians happens for religious reasons. That certainly helps our understanding and points to the number of places where such persecution is going on.

There is the influence of Islamic extremists, and we are now witnessing an increase in the persecution of Christians, which is shown in many different ways. For some it is a violent attack from Islamic groups, such as the looting and burning to the ground of a Pentecostal church in Algeria. There are kidnappings of Christians for ransom in Egypt, public lashings for those practising Christianity in Saudi Arabia, and crucifixions in Iraq—we could go on, as that is only the tip of the iceberg of what we know. Sadly, the persecution of Christians is not debated often on the Floor of the House.

In several countries where Christians are a minority, persecutions are perpetrated at both state and community level. Indeed, through the intensity of that persecution, the existence of a small Christian community is often threatened, with many feeling they have no choice but to flee to safety somewhere else. For many, however, there is nowhere they can safely go—they cannot afford to go anywhere else.

When the Minister winds up, we must recognise that the persecution of Christians is going on in countries that receive financial aid from many Christian taxpayers in the United Kingdom. When we think of £1.325 billion to Ethiopia between 2010 and 2015, £1.392 billion to Pakistan for that period, £1 billion to Bangladesh, £1 billion to Nigeria, £710 million to Afghanistan, and £643 million to Tanzania, we must realise that that is taxpayers' money, yet there is persecution of Christians.

We should always remember that persecution does not only happen somewhere else, because charity starts at home. Many Christians in the United Kingdom feel isolated at this time, and for many in this House, if they

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openly profess their faith in Jesus Christ as their Lord and Saviour, they witness the rolling of eyes, or disbelief that somehow today we really believe the Bible is the word of God, and we are scorned and ridiculed for that. As a believer, I unashamedly say that I do believe that the Bible is God's precious word. I am guided in my public life, as well as in my private life, by the word of God. In our country, there are many sad instances of persecution of street preachers—even carol singers are under attack because of certain legislation that is, or has been, proposed.

I thank the Secretary of State for Northern Ireland for her attendance. She has been here for a large part of the debate.

In conclusion, what should we do? We have to speak up, because by so doing we also speak for many of the weak, disadvantaged and defenceless people of the world. Thank God our faith will prevail. The Lord Jesus said:

“I will build my church; and the gates of hell shall not prevail against it.”

While we are being persecuted, remember that the blood of the martyr is the seed of the Church.

6.50 pm

Mark Simmonds: With permission and with the leave of the House, I wish to respond to this important and significant debate. I reiterate that it is to the huge credit of the Democratic Unionist party that it has raised these important issues.

Correctly, this has been an impassioned debate outlining many of the horrors and persecutions suffered by Christians around the world. The situations in numerous countries have been raised, and the simple fact is that Christians are persecuted more than any other faith group in the world. The nature of this persecution can take many different forms and the perpetrators vary from Governments to militant groups to even a person's own family. Faith is often used as a proxy for other divisions, as religious fault lines are exploited.

Let me be absolutely clear to the House: the Government are not silent and the Government are not quiet. When Christians are persecuted, we, as Government Ministers, speak out clearly and forcefully. I cannot stress enough how seriously the Foreign and Commonwealth Office takes this issue, as part of our commitment to freedom of religion around the world. Promoting respect for human rights is at the very heart of the Government's foreign policy. Where Christians or any religious believers are victims of persecution, we will condemn the violence and ask the relevant authorities to ensure that justice is served. There can be and should be no impunity for those who persecute individuals on the basis of religion or belief.

A particular spotlight has been shone on the situation for Christians in the Middle East. That point was made powerfully in the wonderful speech by my hon. Friend the Member for Banbury (Sir Tony Baldry). We have heard of the exodus of Christians from the region, and of communities that have co-existed for centuries now turning on minorities and treating Christians as outsiders. That is simply unacceptable.

Persecution is not limited to the middle east, and, where Christians are attacked, it is rarely just Christians who are suffering—whether they be Shi'a Muslims in

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Syria and Pakistan, and Rohingya Muslims in Burma. None of that persecution is acceptable and none of it should be tolerated.

Alistair Burt: Will my hon. Friend give way?

Mark Simmonds: If my right hon. Friend will forgive me, I will not give way as I want to answer the specific points raised in the debate.

The hon. Member for Strangford (Jim Shannon) rightly raised the Commonwealth Heads of Government meeting. I can tell him that freedom of religion and belief was discussed by the Heads of Government, who agreed to strengthen the communiqué's language on this subject, and we warmly welcomed that. The Foreign Secretary announced last week the setting up of an advisory group of experts on freedom of religion and belief. That will help us increasingly to factor in a faith-based perspective to our foreign policy.

The hon. Member for Rutherglen and Hamilton West (Tom Greatrex) rightly raised the challenges faced by Christians in Malaysia. I can inform him that the high commission in Kuala Lumpur raises the issue of respecting religious diversity with their Malaysian counterparts on a regular basis, and last did so on 7 November.

I want to make sure that Members across the House understand the Government's position on the right to freedom of religion or belief. We interpret freedom of religion or belief according to the definition set out in article 18 of the universal declaration of human rights, which includes the right to practise the religion in public or private, and to share it with others. It also includes the right to change one's religion and to have no religion at all.

I fully agree with the hon. Member for Strangford that protection of the right to freedom of religion or belief should be a priority for all countries. We, along with EU partners, sponsor a resolution at the UN twice every year on this subject. We have also agreed guidelines on the promotion of the right to freedom of religion or belief with EU partners. These guidelines are already helping the embassies of all EU member states to promote and protect the freedom of religion or belief in a wide range of target countries.

A number of hon. Members raised the important issue of Syria. We are committed to speaking up on behalf of all those who are targeted, and we have made it clear that those responsible for these violations should be held to account—and the International Criminal Court may have a role to play. I confirm that there are Christians among the members of the Syrian National Coalition who will be invited to the Geneva II talks.

Hon. Members have raised the issue of Nigeria, with particular reference to Boko Haram. By far the highest numbers killed by Boko Haram are Muslims, not Christians, and this includes senior Muslim clerics and anyone who stands up against its extremist ideology. We have consistently encouraged, and will continue to do so, the Government of Nigeria to protect all their citizens and to promote a dialogue between communities at different levels, as indeed I saw and participated in myself in Kaduna, earlier this year. It is important to distinguish between the age-old competition for land and resources between farmers and nomadic herders and the terrorism occurring in the north-east. Nigeria is a traditionally tolerant country.

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The hon. Member for Bristol East (Kerry McCarthy) raised the issue of the worrying events happening in the Central African Republic. Appalling human rights abuses are going on there. The Department for International Development recently announced an increase from £5 million to £15 million for humanitarian assistance. Both French and African troops are going to be deployed, which I hope will be authorised by a United Nations resolution later this week.

A number of hon. Members raised the appalling attacks on Coptic Christians in Egypt. Let me reiterate the point made by my right hon. Friend the Foreign Secretary in his statement to Parliament of 3 September when he spoke about the deplorable burning of churches and the attacks on Coptic Christians. We were outraged by the attack of 20 October, when four Coptic Christians were killed. The Foreign Secretary has publicly condemned all acts of violence. We recently encouraged the committee tasked with drafting Egypt's new constitution to ensure stronger protection in that country.

A number of hon. Members raised the work of the all-party group on international religious freedom and beliefs, which is chaired by Baroness Berridge. We very much welcome its work and encourage all faiths to work together, regardless of the specific religion involved in

incidents. I also pay tribute to the work of the Christian Church over the centuries to fight for religious freedom for all faiths, not just for Christians.

My hon. Friend the Member for Banbury asked what additional work the Foreign and Commonwealth Office will do to raise the issue of the persecution of Christians. Let me reiterate that the persecution of Christians was the precise topic of a speech by my noble Friend Baroness Warsi in Washington last month. This clearly demonstrates that the FCO recognises and prioritises this matter not just as a problem, but as an issue on which we must work to find solutions. Other ministerial colleagues and I raise the issue of the persecution of Christians wherever and whenever it occurs, as do our ambassadors and high commissioners around the world, expressing our deep and heartfelt concern.

A number of other hon. Members raised the important issue of UK taxpayers' money going to countries where the persecution of Christians takes place. It needs to be understood that the majority of UK development assistance does not go via Governments, but where it does go through budgetary support, we make it absolutely clear that the host Government must share the UK's commitment to respecting the full range of human rights, including combating religious intolerance and tackling persecution and discrimination.

My hon. Friend the Member for Gillingham and Rainham (Rehman Chishti) made a very powerful speech. I want to confirm to him that my noble Friend Baroness Warsi regularly raises the issue of the blasphemy laws with Ministers and the Government in Pakistan.

I fully agree that Christian belief is a powerful force motivating millions of people to do good, with Christian institutions occupying a valuable position in society. We recognise the positive role Christians play across the world.

Question put and agreed to.

Resolved,

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That this House is concerned that the persecution of Christians is increasing in the 21st Century; notes that there are reports that one Christian is killed every 11 minutes somewhere on earth for their faith; further notes that Christianity is the most persecuted religion globally; bears in mind that the right to freedom of thought, conscience and religion is a human right stated in the Universal Declaration of Human Rights; and calls on the Government to do more both in its foreign policy and through its aid work to defend and support people of Christian faith.