

CCOW interview on freedom of religion and belief in post-Soviet dictatorships

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Why do you feel it is important for Christians to defend everyone's freedom of religion and belief?

There are many reasons, such as the statement in Genesis 1,27 that humanity is “made in the image and likeness of God.” This sharply contrasts with contemporaneous Mesopotamian creation accounts, in which humanity is made as a kind of slave labour force for gods.¹

One reason Christians should care about everyone's freedom of religion and belief has a personal name: Jesus Christ. The Incarnation has extraordinary implications, for everyone and for all of Creation. God became a human being, living a fully human life. Christ's humanity tells us that everyone has the potential to bear God, and so has an incalculable value which no-one can take from them. Our faith tells us that Jesus' resurrection means that everything that serves death and not life has no future – however great its temporary triumphs may be. So Christians are called to work for the end of the oppression of anyone, whoever they are.

Attacks on freedom of religion and belief - perhaps especially against people in dictatorships who do not share our faith - challenge us about our love of God and neighbour which, Jesus told us, are the greatest commandments. Dietrich Bonhoeffer put that point this way, writing in his prison cell in August 1944 before he was martyred² for his part in the July 1944 bomb plot against Hitler³: “The Church is only the Church when it is there for others.”⁴ If we are to truly live as Christians, those words of Bonhoeffer's must be seen to be a reality in our lives as churches and as individual Christians.

What is the current situation on Freedom of Religion and Belief in the areas where you focus your work?

The formerly Soviet states who live under dictatorships are very different from each other. But there are significant similarities in the restrictions their regime's place on the exercise of human rights including the freedom of religion and belief, FoRB for short. All these regimes are hostile to any independent activity by the people they rule, and their basic approach is to make the exercise of human rights conditional upon state permission. So all exercise of FoRB without state permission and registration is illegal, and the public expression of the majority faith is either under total state control or run by leaderships who gladly collaborate with dictatorship. This state control seeks to be total, in Kazakhstan for example extending to the regime dictating how Muslims should pray aloud.

Similarly common to almost all these states is strict state censorship of all religious texts and objects, including online materials. A common excuse for banning materials is that they are allegedly “extremist” even though such claims are usually entirely arbitrary and evidence-free. And as OSCE Election Observation Missions⁵ have documented, the rulers and their puppet “parliaments” who impose such restrictions have not gained power having faced free and fair elections.

¹ See Sir Malcolm Evans, “Religious Liberty and International Law in Europe” (Cambridge University Press, 1997), p. 6

² See Ferdinand Schlingensiepen, “Dietrich Bonhoeffer 1906-1945: Martyr, Thinker, Man of Resistance” (T & T Clark, 2012)

³ See Danny Orbach, “The Plots against Hitler” (Head of Zeus, 2017) and Peter Hoffmann, “The History of the German Resistance, 1933-1945” (McGill-Queen's University Press, 1996)

⁴ translated from “Widerstand und Ergebung” (Gütersloher Verlagshaus, 1998), p. 560

⁵ <https://www.osce.org/odihr/elections>

One of the other similarities is that the laws imposing FoRB restrictions are drafted in secret, often with significant input from the secret police, with minimal to non-existent public consultation. Kyrgyzstan's latest highly restrictive Religion Law and associated new Amending Law in the Area of Religion are cases in point. The final texts as signed on 21 January 2025 were not made public until after 28 January, and came into force on 1 February.

Such laws have no relationship to justice, but are in reality tools to attack the freedom of all. The Law bans a very long list of activities, and among other things all religious communities must gain state registration every 5 years before they are allowed to exist or exercise FoRB. To do this, 500 founders in any one locality must unanimously vote at a meeting to register and submit an application including their identity documents – which the state can arbitrarily reject.

In July an Adventist pastor in Kyrgyzstan was jailed for three years after being tortured, and his unregistered church was banned as allegedly “extremist.” Muslim and Christian critics of the regime's FoRB violations have been jailed and fined. So the reluctance of people to be identified with registration applications can, I think, be well understood. In all of these former Soviet states, people who have been arrested for exercising their FoRB and other human rights without state permission have been tortured with impunity for the perpetrators.

Sermons a regime dislikes can also lead to prosecutions. For example, in Russia many religious believers who have opposed the war have been Russian Orthodox, both of the Moscow Patriarchate and other branches. One of the first to be prosecuted was Russian Orthodox priest Fr Ioann Burdin, who the day after the 24 February 2022 renewed invasion preached a sermon condemning the invasion and stressing the importance of the commandment, “Thou shalt not kill.” On 10 March he was fined one month's average local wages; his bishop backed the prosecution and by 8 April he was no longer priest of his parish. Fr Ioann is now in exile.

When we first spoke, you mentioned that we are coming up to the anniversary of last year's disputed elections in Georgia. What is happening there generally, and how is it impacting Freedom of Religion and Belief?

Georgia borders Russia (which invaded and seized some of Georgia in 2008), and Georgians face rapidly increasing oppression from the Georgian Dream ruling party and their collaborators.⁶ The illegitimate “government,” which many Georgians including the last democratically-elected President Salomé Zourabichvili refuse to recognise, gained power following widespread electoral fraud. Although the ruling party's police (who Georgians call “robocops”) have tortured many demonstrators, large-scale protests have continued almost every day since October 2024's “election.”⁷ Many protestors display Georgian, European Union, NATO, and Ukrainian flags to reflect the widespread desire to live as a free democracy as part of the EU and NATO. The ruling party, which is closely allied with Russia, is now moving to ban all opposition political parties.

⁶ See Tolerance and Diversity Institute, “Freedom of Religion or Belief, Equality, and Secularity, August 2025” https://web.archive.org/web/20251001094352/https://tdi.ge/sites/default/files/tdi_monitoring_report_forb_equality_and_secularity_august_2025.pdf

⁷ See Organization for Security and Co-operation in Europe (OSCE), “Georgia, Parliamentary elections, 26 October 2024: Final Report.” https://www.osce.org/files/f/documents/1/6/584029_0.pdf

The freedom of religion and belief and other freedoms have been increasingly systematically reduced by the Georgian Dream ruling party and the powerful Georgian Orthodox Church. Problems include but are not limited to⁸ repeatedly blocking non-Georgian Orthodox communities from building or regaining places of worship, confiscation and demolition of Christian and Muslim non-Georgian Orthodox places of worship (with police violently attacking worshippers who peacefully protest against this⁹), and discriminatory laws enabling the Georgian Orthodox Church alone to acquire state property and gain tax exemption. There are also very large and hidden state subsidies to the Georgian Orthodox Church.

Since 2013, Georgia's Tolerance and Diversity Institute (TDI) <https://tdi.ge/en> has worked with religious communities of all faiths to help them be able to meet for worship and do the kind of things we in our churches do every Sunday and week of the year.

One leader of a religious community told me in 2024 that “our government is trying to do in weeks what Russia did in years.” At that time the regime introduced for the second time a so-called Law on Transparency of Foreign Influence, called by many Georgians the “Russian Law,” sparking massive protests. The Russian Law requires civil society organisations (including all non-Georgian Orthodox religious organisations) receiving more than 20 per cent of income from abroad to register as an “organisation serving the interests of a foreign power.” The organisations targeted also include dog and cat rescue organisations which receive foreign funding. The Justice Ministry is given the authority to demand from individuals information on – among other things - their political views, ethnicity, and religious beliefs. This information must be provided immediately, on pain of being fined about three months' average wage with no limit to the number of times fines can be imposed.

Parliament speaker Shalva Papuashvili, who signed the Law, claimed without evidence that “certain non-profit organisations ... covertly influence political, economic and security processes.” Many Georgians would agree with Professor Archil Metreveli, Head of the Institute for Religious Freedom at the University of Georgia, that the impact of the Law on human rights including freedom of religion or belief “will be both direct and indirect, and it will be devastating.” As he and other have insisted, “the government's real purpose is not to ensure public 'transparency' of the finances of private organisations, including religious organisations, but to exert control.”

In a context where Georgian Orthodox Church hostility – openly supported by regime politicians and the State Agency for Religious Affairs - has led to overt discrimination and even extreme physical violence, Pastor Zaal Tkeshelashvili of the unregistered Evangelical Church of Georgia points out that “disclosure of the personal data of religious community members may cause further stigmatisation in their places of work and beyond.” Professor Giorgi Meladze of Ilia State University states that “the Law was specifically designed as an instrument to target 'others' and religious minorities should consider it a threat to their fundamental rights and liberties.”

Police used violence including torture with impunity against thousands of demonstrators against the Law. Many human rights defenders and protestors received threatening phone calls, and face direct physical intimidation. Bishop Rusudan Gotsiridze of the Evangelical Baptist Church, for example, noted that she and other clergy and people in her church receive anonymous threatening phone calls and “that these 'unknown people from different countries' were calling dozens of people around me and even swearing at them.” Like many human rights defenders, Bishop Rusudan – whose Church has long openly supported LGBTI people and other marginalised groups - knows she is under covert state surveillance. “I know we could easily be targets of the government now this Law is enacted.”

⁸ See Tolerance and Diversity Institute, “Freedom of Religion or Belief in Georgia, 2024” https://web.archive.org/web/20251001092950/https://tdi.ge/sites/default/files/tdis_forb_report_2024_eng.pdf

⁹ See Tolerance and Diversity Institute, “Freedom of Religion or Belief in Georgia, 2010 - 2019” https://web.archive.org/web/20200919081713/https://tdi.ge/sites/default/files/tdi-report-freedom_of_religion_in_georgia_2010-2019.pdf

Bishop Rusudan is also concerned about the impact on human rights defenders, such as the Tolerance and Diversity Institute (TDI). “Now, if anyone infringes on my rights and targets me, I know whom to call. I know whom to call if I need a lawyer's help. If human rights organisations don't exist, it means that everyone will be silenced and those who won't be silenced may eventually end up in prison. It is a very terrifying prospect.” Pastor Tkeshelashvili fears that without the support of human rights organisations, religious communities will not be able to protect their rights. “If, after the adoption of this Law, human rights organisations are not able to function, we will face the rise of extremism, fanaticism and violence, with religious communities left unprotected. We will go back to darkness, which we left behind after a long fight and paying a high price.”

As Professor Metereveli observed, “the only religious association that can be confidently said to be exempt from this Law on Transparency of Foreign Influence is the Georgian Orthodox Church. This is despite the potential concerns about its political connections with the Russian Orthodox Church, which is virtually equivalent to the influence of the Russian State.”

Repression - including direct targeting of the Tolerance and Diversity Institute (TDI) and other human rights defenders by the secret police and regime thugs - has rapidly increased from 2024 onwards. All of TDI's activities are about to become illegal under laws passed by the regime's puppet parliament. This includes the Grants Law, which bans all activity as well as the receipt of foreign grants unless the regime allows this. The personal penalties for non compliance are twice the amount of the grant, with extra fines of roughly the monthly minimum wage if individuals refuse to be interrogated or provide allegedly “false information.” These fines can be imposed immediately, and doubled for repeat “crimes.” Such penalties are in addition to penalties imposed under the “Russian Law.”

Two weeks ago, in mid-September, the so-called Anti-Corruption Bureau hand delivered letters to around 30 civil society organisations including the Tolerance and Diversity Institute demanding that they hand over sensitive financial and other data including personal information about everyone they have been in contact with. The letters gave no legal grounds for the demands, which are illegal even under the regime's laws. Yet appeals have resulted in courts copying and pasting regime reasoning into judgments upholding the regime's illegal actions.

Georgians from a variety of faiths have told me that, if the Tolerance and Diversity Institute (TDI) is forced to close, they will lose the chance to gain their freedom of religion or belief. Many human rights defenders are being forced into exile as they and their families (including infant children) are directly targeted by regime thugs. After they received the letters, TDI along with 20 other civil society organisations publicly stated that “we continue our activities and legal efforts to stop the enforcement of repressive laws. We will use all available legal means to protect our rights and the rights of the citizens of Georgia.”¹⁰

That courage is also found amongst the religious communities the Tolerance and Diversity Institute (TDI) works with. At the time of the Russian Law's passage in 2024, I took part in a meeting TDI organised in Georgia for religious communities, state officials, and civil society organisations. During the public discussion, an imam who has long worked for human rights in Georgia, a calm, gentle, and thoughtful man, asked me what others should do if he is arrested – a very possible scenario for him. I asked him what he would like others to do if that happens. He replied, and I quote: “I want them to carry on working for justice, and to be kind. For even the smallest such action builds a better world.”

¹⁰ <https://tdi.ge/en/statement/georgian-dream-has-started-new-stage-repressions-against-civil-society-targeting-30>

Where, as Christians listening to this, do we go from here? Where do we find hope? How do we go deeper? How do we pray and act?

These questions are, I would suggest, different facets of the same question.

The courage and integrity of people of all faiths and none in such dictatorships who reject regime oppression and work for human rights is a powerful source of hope. So is a strong theological understanding of humanity and the Incarnation, as I suggested at the start of this podcast.

Where to go deeper is related to this, as these dictatorships are hostile to documenting reality. They target anyone they see as actually or potentially outside their control, often claiming “security,” “extremism,” or “terrorism” to justify violating the freedom of religion and belief and other freedoms. So it is vital to ask what exactly regime claims mean in concrete reality. For as human rights defender Vaclav Havel commented on dictatorships, “it is a world of appearances trying to pass for reality,” observing that “because the regime is captive to its own lies it must falsify everything.”¹¹

For example, some regimes such as Azerbaijan, Georgia, and Kazakhstan invite foreign religious leaders to alleged “dialogue” meetings at which they praise the relevant regime’s alleged “tolerance” and avoid all discussion of their host’s serious human rights violations.¹² So don’t believe claims coming from such meetings, which flagrantly contradict reliable sources about the reality of such regimes.¹³

So one starts by relying on sources of truthful information, such as for news about these countries Radio Free Europe <https://www.rferl.org/> , on human rights generally Human Rights Watch <https://www.hrw.org/> , and on freedom of religion and belief specifically Forum 18 <https://www.forum18.org/> . These can be supplemented for particular countries, such as Georgia’s Tolerance and Diversity Institute <https://tdi.ge/en> , Civil Georgia <https://civil.ge/> , and the Kazakhstan International Bureau for Human Rights and the Rule of Law <https://bureau.kz/en/> .

This leads into what Christians should pray and do. Two important steps would be:

1. Regularly pray for the people and human rights defenders who live under dictatorships - they very much appreciate the support of people outside their context; and
2. Encourage people to do what they can to help people living under dictatorships struggle for freedom. This can be as simple as just talking about the situation in such countries – you never know the connections of anyone you might talk to! Or taking action for prisoners, such as those listed by Front Line Defenders <https://www.frontlinedefenders.org/> .

As the Georgian imam said, “even the smallest such action builds a better world.”

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¹¹ Vaclav Havel, October 1978 essay on the nature of dictatorships “The Power of the Powerless,” Section IV <https://web.archive.org/web/20190509214727/https://www.nonviolent-conflict.org/wp-content/uploads/1979/01/the-power-of-the-powerless.pdf>

¹² See eg. Forum 18, “KAZAKHSTAN: Religious freedom survey, June 2022” https://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article_id=2753

¹³ Eg. for detailed examples of the reality of Kazakhstan, see “We don’t even cry anymore.” Torture, ill-treatment and impunity in Kazakhstan in connection with the ‘Bloody January’ events (International Partnership for Human Rights, Kazakhstan International Bureau for Human Rights and the Rule of Law, and the NGO Coalition against Torture in Kazakhstan, in partnership with the World Organisation against Torture (OMCT), 2023) <https://bureau.kz/wp-content/uploads/2023/01/kazakhstan-january-report-eng-1.pdf>