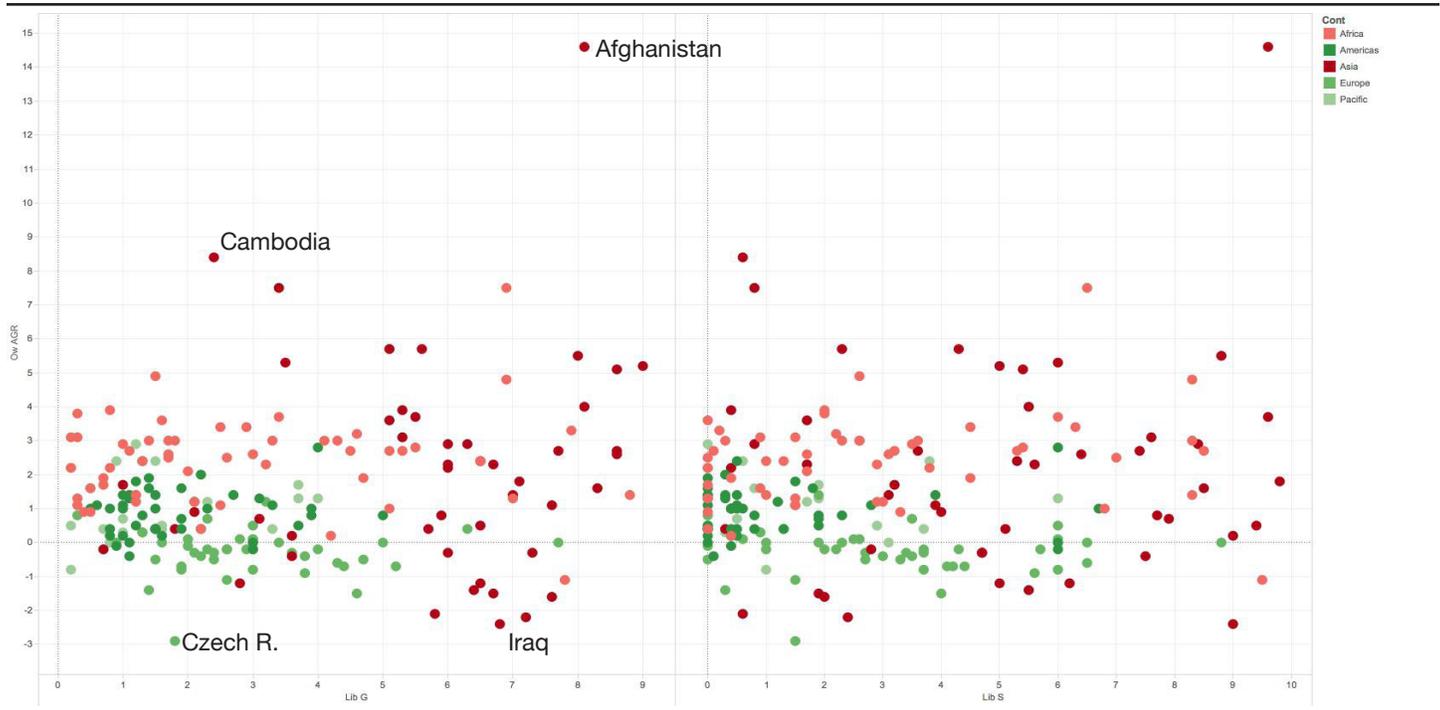


## Global Diagram 6: Persecution does not strongly correlate to rapid church growth

Vertical axis (X): religious regulation and persecution from organized, governmental sources.

Horizontal axis (Y): social pressure, regulation and pressure from families, friends, neighbors, colleagues, teachers, etc.

Colors: Continental areas.  
Green: America (Dark), Europe (Light)  
Red: Asia (Dark), Africa (Light)



### 1. High Restrictions, High Growth

Country	LibG/S	AGR
1. Afghanistan	8/9	14.6
2. Syria	8/9	5.5
3. Iran	8/9	5.1
4. North Korea	9/5	5.2
5. Maldives	8/5	4.0

### 2. Low Restrictions, High Growth

Country	LibG/S	AGR
1. Cambodia	2/0	8.4
2. Mongolia	3/0	7.5
3. Nepal	4/2	5.3
4. Liberia	1/3	5.0
5. Burkina Faso	1/2	3.9

### 3. High Restrictions, Low Growth

Country	LibG/S	AGR
1. Iraq	7/9	-2.5
2. Tajikistan	7/2	-2.2
3. Turkmenistan	6/1	-2.1
4. Uzbekistan	8/2	-1.6
5. Kazakhstan	8/2	-1.6

### 4. Low Restrictions, Low Growth

Country	LibG/S	AGR
1. Czech Repub.	2/2	-3.0
2. Estonia	1/0	-1.4
3. Georgia	3/6	-1.2
4. Lithuania	3/2	-1.1
5. Netherlands	2/4	-0.8

LibG/S, rating of restrictions and/or persecution by the government (G) and society (S), from Pew Research.  
AGR, Annual Growth Rate for 2000-2010, Operation World, 2010.

Is there a correlation between levels of persecution and church growth? We compare the annual growth rate with two different measures of persecution: governmental and societal. We can see from the diagram that the correlation between persecution and church growth is not "tight," but it is tighter around governmental than around societal pressures. On the governmental pressure side, it appears that lower levels of persecution *tends loosely* to correlate to smaller variances in church growth (either weak grow or weak decline); whereas higher levels of persecution *tends loosely* to larger variances (either very rapid growth or very sharp declines).

European and American countries are colored green; while the Americas tend to be more free and growth seems on average higher, while European countries tend to be somewhat less free (though by no means very restrictive) and growth is lower; but these results could also be explained by cultural and other phenomena. African countries (orange) tend to be as free as European and Asian countries, on the whole, and exhibit a high growth which is certainly affected by their higher demographic patterns. Asian countries are more interesting: the handful that are 'open' also show depressed growth. But of those that are highly restrictive, while most exhibit significant growth, a certainly large minority face depressed growth as well.

Overall, the idea that restrictions feeds growth is not strongly demonstrated. **Diagram Editor:** Justin D. Long.  
**Data source:** Pew Research and Operation World. All data at 2010-14. **More global diagrams:** <http://www.justinlong.org>. This diagram and an additional page of analysis can be downloaded from <https://gumroad.com/1/hguX>. Justin Long serves with **ActBeyond**, <http://www.beyond.org>.

# Does persecution feed church growth?

by Justin D. Long

There is an oft-quoted romantic saying attributed to Tertullian: “The blood of martyrs is the seed of the church.” Many often seem to think persecution is a good thing for church growth—that somehow, jail time and martyrdoms are fertilizer that bring about a spectacular harvest. Is this true?

First, let’s briefly consider how we measure levels of persecution. One way is the number of martyrs. Here is another commonly quoted saying: “There were more martyrs in the 20th century than in all other centuries combined.” The implication is, persecution was far worse in the 20th century because there were more martyrs.

However, martyrs as a percentage of all Christians was actually quite low. The percentage of believers martyred was far higher under the Roman Empire, for example. While numbers were high in the 20th century, the *intensity* was low. In 1800, the martyrdom rate was about 0.001% of all believers per year. This rose to 0.006% in 1900, then peaked at 0.03% per year in 1970 (at the height of the Soviet era), and began falling again. By 2000, it had fallen to 0.008%.

The Center for the Study of Global Christianity has some estimates on the total number of martyrs for the period of 2000-10: about 1 million (see [www.globalchristianity.org](http://www.globalchristianity.org)). But it’s worth bearing in mind that 800,000 of those million or so martyrs were people killed in situations of witness in the midst of the DR Congo conflict. In other words, to be a “martyr” does not necessarily require being killed for one’s faith; being killed in a situation of witness counts. This is, to me, a perfectly correct definition, but does not necessarily get very well to the question of persecution.

Another problem with measuring persecution by the number of martyrs is that not all countries kill believers. Some only arrest them, imprison them, regulate them harshly, impose economic sanctions on them, and so on.

Persecution is broader than martyrs, and in this age of increasing globalization, dictators are finding it better and just as effective to observe and regulate than to imprison or kill.

Pew Research has a method for looking at the question of persecution, which is quite useful. They have done a country-by-country survey with multiple questions looking at a range of issues related to both governmental and societal persecution. This is important, because in some countries people have little freedom to convert but face little societal pressure if they do; in others, the governments care very little but there are significant challenges from family and friends.

In this global diagram, we correlate annual growth of the church (from Operation World) to these two measures, and present them in two scatter plots. We’ve colored the more Westernized countries of the Americas, Europe and the Pacific in shades of green, and the African/Asian countries in shades of red.

Does higher levels of persecution correlate to higher levels of church growth? **The answer is: not strongly.** The correlation of Governmental Liberty to Church Growth is 0.185. The correlation of Societal Liberty to Church Growth is 0.142.

You can see it on the attached graph. Green countries are split fairly evenly between ‘growing’ and ‘not growing,’ although it’s true there’s a minor trend toward the more-free being higher-growth, and the less-free being less-growth. African nations are, by and large, growing and more-free, but there are a fair number on both the less-free and more-free sides of the chart that have depressed growth. Asian countries are mostly less-free, but about equally high-growth and low-growth.

When you think about it, it makes sense persecution wouldn’t necessarily lead to intense church growth. While it does tend to *purify the church*

by weeding out the less committed, the weeding itself reduces numbers.

Moreover, persecution tends to break ‘word of mouth networks.’ Viral scaling depends on “hub” people—the socially connected, through whom messages pass, who serve as gateways as well as “infectors.” More significant persecution levels will often focus on imprisoning or otherwise removing these “hubs,” which diminishes the virality of the church.

Further, excessive persecution and regulation can reduce demographic growth: one of the early efforts of persecutors is to prevent children from being evangelized, converted or disciplined.

Finally, really high levels of oppression can cause people to flee. Young believers might be able to hide for a time; but as they mature and begin evangelizing others they can become known. When persecution focuses on them, many consider leaving the country.

How can persecution help? One key way is by preparing the ground. As we’ve mentioned, in times of persecution, people choose what they believe and refine their faith. They have their faith tested. When the persecution passes, those who endured persecution often become significant and influential witnesses.

This is largely what has happened in China. If the governments of Iran or North Korea were to fall and be replaced by a more moderate form of government, we would likely see an explosion of Christianity there.

In fact, it appears from the data that the most potent form of persecution is a moderate level of freedom, a general idea that any church plant must be highly organized, well-funded and public, and significant regulations on churches. This preserves freedom while raising the bar for would-be church planters to something most won’t jump over.