

Remarks by USCIRF Commissioner  
Sandra Jolley  
Religious Rights in a Pluralistic World  
23rd Annual International Law and Religion Symposium  
International Center for Law and Religion Studies  
Brigham Young University  
Provo, Utah  
October 2-4, 2016

Thank you for that kind introduction.

I want to thank Cole Durham for graciously inviting me to speak to you today as we mark Brigham Young's 23rd Annual International Law and Religion Symposium.

And I also want to thank ICLARS, the International Center for Law and Religion Studies, not only for hosting this symposium, but for maintaining its steadfast commitment to religious freedom.

I am honored to be addressing such an illustrious group of people who embrace religious freedom.

You have come from across the globe, from many walks of life, to learn and share and discuss this pivotal liberty.

I also am honored to be serving in my first year on the U.S. Commission on International Religious Freedom or USCIRF which supports this fundamental right across the globe, wherever it is imperiled.

Today I would like to talk about religious freedom by asking and answering the following questions:

What is religious freedom?

What is USCIRF and how did the need for it arise?

What are some of the key issues that USCIRF advances today?

And finally, as a woman, how do I see the relationship between religious freedom and the rights of women?

So let us begin.

What is religious freedom?

Religious freedom is the right of all human beings to think as they please, believe or not believe

as their conscience leads, and live out their beliefs openly, peacefully, and without fear.

In 1948, dozens of nations embraced religious freedom by embracing a historic document, the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, which included in Article 18 a religious freedom guarantee.

But in the ensuing decades, two problems arose. First, too many of these countries became religious freedom abusers. Second, America's foreign policy establishment was failing to incorporate religious freedom concerns in its dealings with such nations.

Responding to these problems, the U.S. Congress passed, and the President signed into law, the International Religious Freedom Act, or IRFA, in 1998.

In the heart of the State Department, Congress planted an Office of International Religious Freedom, led by an Ambassador-at-Large. Rabbi David Saperstein currently holds that position and remains an outstanding advocate for this pivotal right.

And partly to ensure that the State Department was taking this new office and its mandate seriously, the law created our bipartisan independent Commission as a new federal advisory body.

So who and what is USCIRF and what do we do?

USCIRF is composed of nine volunteer commissioners appointed by leaders of both parties from both houses of Congress and by the president, as well as the religious freedom ambassador – currently Rabbi Saperstein -- who serves as a non-voting ex-officio member.

Ours is a religiously and ethnically diverse group of professionals from a number of fields, from journalism to academia and government to the nonprofit world.

Serving under our commissioners are 13 full-time professional non-partisan staff members, including an executive director, a policy and research unit, government and media relations directorate, and executive writing function.

USCIRF has two main mandates – monitor religious freedom violations and provide key policy recommendations to the President, the Secretary of State, and Congress.

In the course of its work, USCIRF meets at home and abroad with leaders, both governmental and NGO, and with people from every walk of life.

It issues written analyses, including its Annual Report, as well as special reports, factsheets, press statements and op-eds.

USCIRF's Annual Report, issued before May 1 of each year, identifies severe religious freedom violations and includes recommendations of nations for designation as "Countries of Particular Concern" (Tier 1 CPC countries) for perpetrating or tolerating systematic, ongoing, and

egregious violations.

The Annual Report also creates a Tier 2 list of countries within which such violations, while serious, don't meet the CPC standard.

So what are some of USCIRF's pivotal issues and how have we advanced them in recent years?

One such issue is the plight of prisoners of conscience. From secular tyrannies like China to religious tyrannies like Iran, and even an electoral democracy like Pakistan, people are jailed and abused for their religious beliefs and actions.

In response, the Tom Lantos Commission in the U.S. House of Representatives, in conjunction with USCIRF and Amnesty International, launched the Defending Freedoms Project to draw attention to these prisoners and get Members of Congress to commit to advocating for individual prisoners while highlighting conditions which led to their imprisonment.

Another one of our issues is governments producing educational literature which foments bigotry, intolerance, and violent religious extremism. USCIRF has released two reports, in 2011 and earlier this year, spotlighting how Pakistan's school textbooks breed bigotry against religious minorities, from Christians to Ahmadi Muslims to Hindus, fueling a climate conducive to violence against these minorities by religious extremist groups and other non-state actors.

We also have highlighted the nexus between religious freedom abuses and two of the worst calamities of our time – the global refugee crisis and genocide.

These abuses clearly led to conditions which drove from their homes Yazidis, Christians, and other religious minorities in Iraq and Syria, Christians and Muslims in Nigeria and the Central African Republic, and the Rohingya Muslims in Burma. In 2015, nearly 60 million people were forcibly displaced, the highest level ever recorded.

The barbaric attempts of ISIL to cleanse Syria and Iraq of religious minorities led the State Department, after USCIRF's prodding, to deem this terrorist group guilty of genocide earlier this year.

Clearly, religious freedom abuses are a global problem calling for a global solution. That is why we encouraged the historic launch in 2014 in Oslo, Norway of the IPPFoRB – the International Panel of Parliamentarians for Freedom of Religion or Belief. As its name suggests, this is a global coalition of parliamentarians to promote freedom of religion or belief. I was in Berlin recently for one of their meetings and it was remarkable. Chancellor Merkel addressed the gathering and we met brave, committed religious freedom advocates from a wide array of cultures and religions.

Before I conclude, let me say a few words as a woman about the relation between religious freedom and women's rights.

In many of the world's most religiously repressive countries, women's rights are also violated.

To cite two examples, for decades, the one-child-only policy of China, a serious religious freedom abuser, interfered with a deeply personal choice, while Saudi Arabia, another severe religious freedom violator, continues to enforce restrictions on the most basic freedom of movement of women.

Moreover, when governments perpetrate or tolerate religious freedom abuses, women are most often the victims.

In a lecture delivered in Burma in 2013, Christy Vines of the Institute for Global Engagement, citing Maryann Cusimano Love of the Catholic University of America (and former USCIRF fellow), noted that studies consistently show that since women are more religious than men, religious persecution and violence affect women most.

According to Vines, women comprise, and I quote, “the overwhelming majority of victims of religiously motivated attacks on churches and mosques around the world.”

Clearly, women’s rights and religious freedom are bound together.

Now some people stress how they conflict. One example given is female genital mutilation, but there’s a problem with this example. Aside from the question of whether any religion actually demands this barbaric practice, the central issue is whether religious freedom protects beliefs from challenge or believers from coercion or repression. Clearly, it’s the latter. We must not forget that religious freedom includes not only the right to embrace a tradition, but the right to challenge and even reject that tradition in some or all of its aspects.

Let me conclude with a quote from Karen Armstrong:

“Religion isn’t just about believing things. It is a moral aesthetic, an ethereal alchemy. It is about behaving in a way that changes your intimations of holiness and sacredness.”

Clearly, religion matters, and matters deeply.

And because religion matters, so must religious freedom.

And so, let us continue to engage in this noble struggle together for this indispensable and universal right of humanity.

Thank you.