

**Religious Freedom: Weapon of Peace**  
**Remarks to the International Military Chiefs of Chaplains Conference**

February 2, 2022

Thomas F. Farr

Good morning. It's an honor to be here with you. It's a special honor for me personally to address this group, both because of my own military service in the US Army,.... and because of my long association with the chaplain corps in the United States.

The Religious Freedom Institute is present in many nations around the world, and, as you'll see, we defend religious freedom for everyone and every religious community. Among other things, we have a chaplain's fellows program that keeps us productively engaged with chaplains and the military services. Our chaplain fellows have included Father Dan Mode, and, currently, Pastor Graham Glover who is on the call with us.

So thank you for inviting me to address this international conference. I hope you will find what I have to say helpful to the way you perform your religious vocation.

I will speak for about 20 minutes and then take your questions and comments.

Let me begin by affirming that your vocations as military chaplains are critically important to your troops, to the religions you represent, and to your respective nations. For all those reasons, we at the Religious Freedom Institute believe that you and your work are vitally important to the defense of religious freedom globally.

The core of my argument today is that religious freedom can act as a "weapon of peace," that is, both as a source of flourishing that can make societies more stable and just... and as a deterrent, and even a preventive, of violence and conflict, whether that violence and conflict is caused by religion, or by secular, anti-religious forces. For that reason and others, I will argue, religious freedom should be part of your spiritual arsenal.

Let me tell you why religious freedom is part of my own spiritual arsenal. Very early in my diplomatic career my family and I were targeted by a religious terrorist group while we were stationed overseas. That was not a pleasant experience but it certainly got my attention. I had the opportunity to reflect on the relationship between religion, justice, and violence while teaching at the US Military Academy and at the US Air Force Academy.

Later in my career, I served as the first director of the US State Department's office of international religious freedom. You'll hear tomorrow from the current head of that office, Ambassador Rashad Hussain. While I was in that position, the United States was attacked by Al Qaeda, and I began to connect the dots in earnest.

As my country began to expend the blood of its young men and women fighting terrorists in the Middle East, I became convinced that religious freedom can help prevent terrorism and also help the societies where terrorism is incubated.

I was also influenced by my own religion. During the 1990s my family and I had converted to the Roman Catholic Church. In its Declaration on Religious Freedom, *Dignitatis Humanae*, the Church declares that every person, because created in the image and likeness of God, is endowed with an inalienable dignity and worth, which must include an immunity from coercion in matters of religion. God wishes all of us to come to Him, but not through force, pressure, or other disreputable means often employed by humans, especially governments. He wishes us to come to Him freely, and we must have the right to do so.

So, against that brief professional and personal background, let me present my argument in three parts.

First, I want to make clear precisely what I mean by religious freedom. As I will define it, religious freedom is more than mere tolerance. It is more than the freedom to worship in private. It is certainly more than the right not to be imprisoned, tortured, or killed because of your religion. I will argue that religious freedom will deliver its benefits of peace and stability only to the extent it is applied equally to all, in public as well as in private. Call my view RF equality.

Second, I will give you evidence that religious freedom equality can increase human flourishing while at the same time combating violent religious extremism and terrorism.

Finally, I will discuss how this weapon of peace might be deployed by chaplains.

### **Part One: What is Religious Freedom?**

Let's begin by discussing the content of religious freedom, including its limits. Think of religious freedom as having two parts. The first is private religious belief that should in effect have no limits. The second is public religious expression, which in some cases can be limited.

For many, unfortunately, the right of religious freedom extends only to its private dimensions, that is, the right to believe and to worship. This is indeed the first step to religious freedom. Everyone requires the freedom of the conscience to discern the truth about ultimate matters, such as creation, being, and life after death.

The freedom to engage in this interior search, and to worship alone and with others, is the gateway, if you will, to full religious freedom. It also includes the right not to believe. In effect, this private right of conscience should be immune from coercion by any human or government. Of course totalitarians and terrorists do try to coerce the consciences of men and women and to change or eliminate their beliefs. This is a characteristic of totalitarian ideology. It usually fails.

As precious as it is, this private right of conscience and the right to worship cannot be the full content of religious freedom in society. That is because, as St John Henry Newman put it, "conscience has rights because it has duties." And those duties extend to others in society.

So, for example, I believe in a God who commands me to tell others about Him. Interior prayer and private worship are vital to my relationship with Him. But I also have the duty and the right, as the international covenants put it, to "manifest" my religious beliefs in public life.

This is the second, public level of religious freedom. All of us, and all our religious communities, have the right to convey peacefully, as equal citizens, our religious beliefs and values to the societies in which we live, such as our concept of God, of justice, and freedom ordered to truth. This right of public expression is no less important than the private right, but it may on occasion properly be limited. Limits will inevitably vary somewhat between societies, but two in particular must apply to all if religious freedom is to yield its benefits. First, no religion may claim “religious freedom” as a warrant for violence against anyone, or as a rationale for using the state to maintain a religious monopoly. Second, state restrictions on this fundamental human right must be rare, but when they exist they must apply equally to all religious groups.

This second point is important because governments increasingly seek to marginalize particular public religious expressions, including in the West, and the United States, where morally orthodox religious expression is under assault. This has not, and please God will not, lead to violent persecution, but it does threaten the positive impact of religious freedom on Western societies.

The violent aspects of this threat can be seen both in theocratic and atheist regimes, neither of which can abide public expressions of religion that threaten the regime. Saudi Arabia, for example, generally permits non-Muslims, such as Christians who work in the kingdom, to pray and worship privately in their bedrooms.

But the Saudi government will not permit public manifestations of non-Islamic religions, and severely restrict manifestations of non-Wahhabi versions of Islam. Saudi Arabia’s oppression of other religions may appear to have created a kind of stability in the kingdom, but in reality it has provided the theological oxygen for religious terrorism in the forms of Al Qaeda and ISIS.

China’s officially atheist government provides another particularly virulent example. Because some religions pose an alternative source of authority to the totalitarian state, China’s government under Xi Jinping is employing violence to control both the private and public aspects of certain religions in the People’s Republic. The Chinese are, for example, attempting to rewrite the Bible.

The Islam practiced by the Chinese Uighurs, Tibetan Buddhism, and Christianity in general, are being forcibly incorporated into the Chinese Communist state. Again, this severe repression of religion may appear to keep order, but in reality the opposite is true. The brutal internment camps for Uighur Muslims are breeding grounds for terrorism.

In summary, full religious freedom begins with the private rights of belief and worship, which should be inviolable. But it must also include the public rights of all religious communities to manifest religious beliefs peacefully in public life. Where religions are unequally restricted, societies are less just and violence is more likely. To the extent that societies protect religious freedom for all, in private *and* in public, justice, violence and persecution are far less likely.

## **Part Two: How Does Religious Freedom Combat Religion-related Violence and Terrorism?**

Let's now turn to the question of why this is true, and how religious freedom can help reduce religion-related violence, violent extremism, and terrorism.

Let me acknowledge two important caveats. First, virtually every religion has in its sacred traditions elements that can be and have been read as inducements to violence. Second, in many cases of violent extremism there are contributing factors that may be separate from religion, such as nationalism or ethnicity. For this reason, I have over the years adopted the view that violence can properly be labeled as religious in nature if a primary motive of the persecutor or the terrorist is his own religion, or the religion of his victims.

The prevalence of religious persecution today produces terrible human suffering. It also produces cycles of violence and instability that often lead to international insecurity. In the 21st century most religious extremism emerges from the Middle East, Asia and Africa. However, religious extremism, including some home-grown violence, is also increasing in the West.

Over recent decades, most Western nations, including the United States, sought to prevent the incubation of religion-related violence and instability by backing repressive regimes, especially in the Middle East. During the past decade or so, many Western nations – led by the US -- have adopted the advancement of religious freedom in their foreign policies. This is a positive development. Success could contribute to justice, human rights, *and* international security. But success has been very difficult to achieve.

It is not easy to achieve these goals at all, including in diplomacy, but let me give you four examples, that suggest the effort is well worth the trouble. Again, the evidence suggests that religious freedom can reduce the likelihood of religion-related violence, persecution, and terrorism. These examples are taken from my own work, and that of Professor Nilay Saiya, a senior fellow at the Religious Freedom Institute.

First, in a nation with some substantial measure of religious freedom, religious communities must contend with each other in a peaceful competition for adherents. Extremist religious groups must also engage in this competition in order to gain adherents, which means that their claims of authority and credibility do not go unchallenged. Imagine a Saudi Arabia with religious freedom, in which Wahhabism was challenged by other forms of Islam and other religions. Imagine a young Osama bin Laden growing up in that Saudi Arabia. Would Al Qaeda have existed, or had the power and authority it retains to this day?

In sum, the evidence suggests that where broad religious freedom exists, violent extremists are more likely to be deprived of the theological, ideological and financial support they need to recruit others. We have seen this dynamic work in Indonesia, South Africa, Senegal, and the US.

Second, when religious freedom permits all religious communities to engage in the public and political life of a nation, their access to legitimate political institutions and the influence this affords them makes it less likely that they will turn to violence. This phenomenon has been at work in several nations. Indonesia, for example, is the largest Muslim nation in the world and is

not without its extremists. But the political and cultural influence of the world's largest Muslim NGO, Indonesia's Nahdlatul Ulama, has clearly been positive, including its condemnation of violence.

Third, religious freedom not only permits, but also encourages, religious institutions to contribute to the common good through good works. By its nature, this process is not only good for societies, but it discourages a turn to violence and separation.

For example, the U.S. constitution guarantees the right of religious "free exercise," which has been responsible for the growth of a huge and productive faith-based civil society involving all America's religions. Most have created religious hospitals, schools, homes for the aged poor, and other charities that serve people in need. This has had the double effect of strengthening American democracy and discouraging religion-based violence.

On the other hand, when government or cultural norms deny religious institutions the right to engage in such public works, they are denying religious people and their institutions the opportunity to practice their faith peacefully and to convey their values to the public. They are denying their societies a critical social function that serves the common good and works against religiously-inspired violence. To prohibit this form of public engagement by repressive laws or cultural rejection is to encourage separation and, in some cases, a turn to violence. The US faith-based civil society has long filled this role in America but it is increasingly under pressure.

Fourth and finally, where religious individuals and communities are equally free to practice their religions in society, they act as a check on state power. This works in a variety of ways. For example, by operating schools, hospitals and charities, religious communities are performing services that otherwise governments would perform, thereby increasing their power. In addition, when a nation's religious groups believe in an authority greater than the state, this acts as a check on the power of the state.

This characteristic of religious freedom helps to check the power of authoritarian states, where religious violence is most likely to emerge. But it *also has had a positive impact in democracies*, in particular by preventing religious monopolies that might encourage minority religions to turn to violence. In Western democracies, such religious monopolies as once existed have long since disappeared.

Unfortunately, they have often been replaced by an aggressive anti-religious secularism. This has doubtless fed violent outbreaks of anti-Semitism and anti-Muslim discrimination in Western Europe and the US. But it has also led to invidious discrimination against all religions that retain morally orthodox beliefs. These beliefs are no longer welcome in public life.

In sum, the evidence suggests that where **all** religions are treated equally, and have equal access to public life, individual and social flourishing are more likely, while violence and instability are less likely to occur.

## **Conclusion: How Chaplains Can Employ Religious Freedom as Weapon of Peace**

Let me end by turning to the question of how you as chaplains might employ religious freedom as part of your spiritual arsenal.

First, you must have religious freedom in order to employ your religious teachings in preaching, and in providing spiritual sustenance and counseling, to the troops you serve. I suspect that there are many religious beliefs and practices represented in this conference. I would argue that each of you has the duty, and therefore the right, to convey to those under your spiritual care what you believe to be right and just, and why you believe it.

In this sense alone, chaplains are a special case. Your professional vocations exist because some of your troops share your religious beliefs. You are who you are, and where you are, in substantial part so that you may draw on those beliefs to witness them to those troops who share them, and to witness them to those troops who do not. You are there to teach, to counsel, and to encourage. As far as I am concerned, there is very little more important than that mission.

In order for you to perform that duty you and your troops must have religious freedom, within the reasonable limits set by the military mission you serve. I would add that your troops should witness your defense of the rights of others outside your own religious tradition. And, of course, you must defend the rights of those who do not believe. At the same time, you must in my view be open and inviting, especially to the non-believers.

Finally, many of you during your careers have been or will be asked to advise military commanders or even political leaders on the religious environment in the areas where you are deployed with your troops. In the United States, I have seen increasing numbers of chaplains being assigned to the State Department, including the office of international religious freedom.

The more you know about all the issues addressed in this conference, including the issues of religion in conflict, the better. And, to put it simply, the more you know about religious freedom as a weapon of peace, the better you can serve your commanders, your troops, your country, and your own religious tradition.

Although religion is declining in the West, all the data show that the reverse is true elsewhere in the world. The vast majority of the world's peoples identify with a religion. So long as that is true, your jobs will be vitally important.

And so too will the utter necessity for all of us to defend religious freedom for everyone, everywhere.

Thank you for having me today.