

***"The Extraordinary Power of Religious Freedom to Promote Stability and Social Good:  
A National and International Priority to Secure and Promote"***<sup>1</sup>

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Why should diplomats care about religious freedom? Can it be legitimately considered a national priority? After all, are not economic and security matters the more appropriate focus of governments and their representatives, far more important than matters of religious freedom?

In fact, I would submit that religious freedom is utterly central to what governments and diplomats ought to pursue, and that religious freedom is vitally connected to virtually every aspect of national well-being, including national security. What is the rationale for such an assertion?

***First, religious freedom is important because religion is important.***

***Second, religion is important because human beings by our very nature are "religious"; we are emphatically not animals with only material needs for food and shelter.***

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<sup>1</sup> Presentation for a panel moderated by Victor Ghica. Other panelists include: **Rabbi Menachem Hacohen (Israel)**, Israeli rabbi, writer, thinker, and former politician -- member of the Knesset between 1974 and 1988, between 1997 and 2011 he held the post of chief rabbi of Romanian Jewry; **Mr. Pekka Metso (Finland)**, Ambassador-at-Large for Intercultural and Interreligious Dialogue Processes, Ministry for Foreign Affairs, "*Religion, Foreign Policy and their relationship – from an unholy alliance into a new normal*", and, **Mr. Giorgi Ukleba (Georgia)**, Deputy Chairman of the State Agency for Religious Issues, "*Interreligious Dialogue in Georgia.*"

Human beings invariably ask questions about ultimate reality, about God and transcendence, about what meaning our lives have and whether God has some claim on how we ought to live our lives.

At the dawn of the birth of the American experiment in democracy, early American Founder James Madison defined religion as "the duty which we owe to our Creator and the manner of discharging it."<sup>2</sup> In other words, religion for most of us is not just asking questions about ultimate reality, but discerning our obligation to God to live in a manner consistent with a conscience rooted in the Divine.

According to the great Orthodox theologian Bishop Kallistos Ware, the best of Romanian Orthodoxy, as reflected in the impressive thought of Dumitru Staniloae, was influenced by the views of the seventh-century figure beloved by both the Eastern and the Western Church, St. Maximos the Confessor, who

discerns with each created thing a *logos* or inner principle implanted by the creator Logos. This indwelling *logos*, makes each thing to be uniquely and distinctly that which it is, and at the same time draws that thing to union with God.<sup>3</sup>

The Church Father revered throughout the Christian world, St. Augustine, wrote in *Confessions* in the fifth century: "Thou hast made us for Thyself and our hearts are restless till they rest in Thee."<sup>4</sup> Sociologists confirm that the great majority of the world's people consider themselves adherents to some form of religion.<sup>5</sup> Those Western societies which have become

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<sup>2</sup> James Madison, "Memorial and Remonstrance against Religious Assessments," in Robert A. Rutland and William M.E. Rachal, eds, *The Papers of James Madison*, vol. 8 (University of Chicago Press, 1973), 295.

<sup>3</sup> Kallistos Ware, "Foreword" to Dumitru Staniloae, *Orthodox Dogmatic Theology: The Experience of God*, Vol 1. *Revelation and Knowledge of the Triune God* (Brookline, Massachusetts: Holy Cross Orthodox Press, 1998), translated and edited by Ioan Ionita and Robert Barringer, xxi-xxii.

<sup>4</sup> St. Augustine, *Confessions*, tr. F.J. Sheed (Indianapolis: Hackett Publishing, 2006), 3.

<sup>5</sup> For confirmation of this point and for a brilliant presentation on the importance of religious freedom, see Timothy Samuel Shah, *Religious Freedom. Why Now? Defending an Embattled Human Right*, The Witherspoon Institute Task Force on International Religious Freedom, Princeton, New Jersey 2012. Dr. Thomas F. Farr, the president of the Religious Freedom Institute, was the Chairman of the Task Force.

irreligious, or even hostile to religion, over the last two hundred years, are clearly out of step with the rest of the world, and the confident prediction that religion would naturally die out has proven to be completely false.<sup>6</sup>

Religious freedom is not an esoteric issue, undeserving of the attention from governments and diplomats, for the free exercise of religion is perhaps the most potent antidote to many of the ills of society and the indispensable ingredient for society's healthy maturation. George Washington, America's first president, in his 1796 farewell address, stated: "Of all the dispositions and habits which lead to political prosperity, religion and morality are indispensable supports."<sup>7</sup>

In the final analysis, St. Augustine of Hippo and St. Maximos the Confessor are simply restating the key anthropological truth embraced by Jews, Christians, and Muslims, as found in Genesis 1:27: "God created man in his own image." This is why religious freedom is so profoundly important. Any abridgment of that religious freedom strikes simultaneously at the heart of human flourishing and at that which preserves and ennoble human society, for it is empirically demonstrable that there is a direct and positive correlation between the presence of religious freedom in a society and a vast array of societal benefits.

Romania, like the rest of the Soviet Empire, experienced severe religious oppression.

State decree (#410) in November 1959

ordered that only elderly people living in Romania could pledge the monastic vows of poverty, chastity, and obedience to God. About five thousand monks and nuns ... [were] forcefully removed from the very ancient monasteries. Religious services were tolerated only as part of liturgical ghettos. For at least two decades, the Church was deprived of any means for organizing social work, missionary activities or cultural events. The space

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<sup>6</sup> See the works of the respected sociologist Peter Berger for confirmation of this point.

<sup>7</sup> George Washington, "Farewell Address," September 19, 1796, available at <http://www.presidency.ucsb.edu/ws/?pid=65539>

for personal belief shrunk dramatically. Pilgrimages were restricted. Priests performed infant baptisms only in secret. Old books were taken out of circulation.<sup>8</sup>

One of the great myths of our time is that governments which are hostile to the very presence of religion in society are guided by a desire for the State to be "neutral" in matters of religion. In fact, whether we are talking about communists or the rising tide in our day of aggressive, fundamentalist secularism, "neutrality" is certainly not the agenda. Abolishing religion is the agenda and it is pursued with a ferocity which can only be compared with the fanaticism of "religious" extremism. The great Russian thinkers Father Sergei Bulgakov and Nikolai Berdyaev last century both drove home this point in their analyses of the violent character of Bolshevism.

How else can we explain the Romanian communists' obsession with stamping out all religious thought and expression? And yet, even today, long after communism has disappeared from Europe, there are forms of secularism which are aggressive, intolerant, and committed to the position that traditional religious views and practice are out-of-date and have no place in the modern "progressive" public square.

***But to restrict the human desire to ask ultimate questions and to live in ways consistent with the answers to those question, is to deprive human beings of the opportunity to fully flourish and be fully human.*** The atheist and agnostic ought to have the freedom to ask and respond to those questions in ways consistent with their intelligence and conscience, even if that means rejecting religious faith, but the same freedom must be accorded to those who answer ultimate questions in ways which "progressives" today find to be out-of-date.

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<sup>8</sup> Mihail Neamtu, "The Ideological War on Religion. How did Communism try to Destroy Christianity in Eastern Europe (and Failed)? March 8, 2019, manuscript to be published later in 2019 by the Acton Institute, 2.

According to the careful work of the Pew Research Center in Washington, D.C., for the last several years throughout the world, even in Western democracies, religious freedom has been in decline, is even under siege. Indeed, *83% of the world's population* lives in countries where the practice of religion is either significantly limited or prohibited altogether.<sup>9</sup>

Why is this the case?

***First, we must frankly acknowledge that there are aberrant forms of religion which are violently and murderously hostile to religious freedom.*** To be sure, most religious people totally reject these violent manifestations of religion as bogus and counterfeit -- as gross betrayals of their deepest ideals. Violent Islamist extremism as manifested by ISIS or Boko Haram, or seen in the Burmese military's genocidal attacks on Rohingya Muslims fueled by Buddhist extremism, are two contemporary examples of this tragic phenomenon.

Contrary to what some secular intellectuals argue in the West, however, such violent extremism is not the natural or inevitable bi-product of believing some things are objectively true and others false. In fact, it is quite consistent to believe in the reality of truth (that all is not relative) and the obligation to pursue, and yet simultaneously bear witness to one's sense of truth with humility and a theologically-rooted that every human being, even ones with whom we most profoundly disagree, should be free to hold their views and in no case should they be compelled to affirm that which they do not believe. The only limit on the freedom of "heretics" or "apostates" -- those who are out of step with religious majorities -- is that they may not abridge the rights of others to religious freedom in the pursuit or advancement of their own religious ideas.

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<sup>9</sup> "Global Uptick in Government Restrictions," Pew Research Center, June 21, 2018, 15, <https://www.pewforum.org/wp-content/uploads/sites/7/2018/06/Restrictions-IX-FULL-REPORT-WITH-APPENDIXES.pdf>

Perhaps the most sophisticated and balanced defense of religious freedom yet to be written is *Dignitatis Humanae* ("Of the Dignity of the Human Person"), a declaration produced by the Second Vatican Council and released in late 1965.<sup>10</sup> It demonstrates that a religious tradition can grow in its understanding of what religious freedom means in terms of dealing with those with whom it deeply disagrees, and yet still remain a witness to what it considers to be true.

*A second enemy of religious freedom today is the all-powerful secular State which is tempted to view all people to be a threat who do not acknowledge the State as the ultimate authority.* Such a perspective invariably puts religious believers in harm's way, since no believer in God can place the temporal State above transcendent God.

*A third enemy of religious freedom is a fundamentalist secular ideology which insists that all religious ideas are simply wrong and not to be tolerated.* This threat is particularly insidious when married to an authoritarian or totalitarian state.

With respect to the indisputable fact that authoritarian and totalitarian states are particularly hostile to religious freedom, there is an obvious reason why this is the case. An all-encompassing State is very inclined to view religion, particularly Christianity or Judaism, as inherently hostile to unlimited state power. As Dr. Tom Farr, the president of the Religious Freedom Institute, has observed: "both the theory and practice of limited government are supported by the commitment of religious citizens to an authority beyond the state, and by the important role of religious communities in the voluntary institutions of civil society."<sup>11</sup> This

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<sup>10</sup> The full text of *Dignitas Humanae* can be found at [http://www.vatican.va/archive/hist\\_councils/ii\\_vatican\\_council/documents/vat-ii\\_decl\\_19651207\\_dignitatis-humanae\\_en.html](http://www.vatican.va/archive/hist_councils/ii_vatican_council/documents/vat-ii_decl_19651207_dignitatis-humanae_en.html).

<sup>11</sup> Thomas F. Farr, "The 'Ministerial Exception': An Inquiry into the Status of Religious Freedom in the United States and Abroad," in *Religious Freedom and the Law: Emerging Contexts for Freedom for and from Religion*, 1st edition, ed. Brett G. Scharffs, Asher Maoz, Ashley Isaacson Wooley (New York: Routledge, 2018), Part 1, Chapter 2.

amounts to yet another reason the populace should support religious freedom: it provides a much needed check on unlimited state power and the tyranny that invariably follows from such power.

In conclusion, I will very briefly outline four reasons why governments and diplomats ought to consider the defense of religious freedom as a national and foreign policy priority.

First, any *legitimate* government exists solely to enable its citizens to flourish as human beings, and since human beings are by nature "religious," to abridge religious freedom is to undermine any possibility of full human flourishing.

Second, religion ought to be free because it can be a potent source of virtue, generosity, forgiveness, solidarity, stability, and peace. Religion at its best is an antidote to the chaos of unbridled selfishness. Perhaps most importantly, religion which recognizes that we are all created in the Image of God and that we therefore all have innate value understands clearly that our human dignity does not come from the State nor can it be taken away by the State. Revered Church Fathers of both the Western and the Eastern Church, as well as the first American president and other American Founders were absolutely right when they insisted that the virtues necessary for civil society to flourish are ones which good religion nourishes.

Third, religious people are most likely to realize the importance, even necessity, of "limited government," and this will serve as a powerful barrier to that which will produce tyranny -- the unlimited State. Responsible religious believers understand the importance of government and society, but they also know that their ultimate allegiance must be to that which transcends the State. The great French writer Alexis de Tocqueville noted in the nineteenth century, "despotism may govern without religion, but liberty cannot."<sup>12</sup>

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<sup>12</sup> Alexis de Tocqueville, *Democracy in America* (1835), chapter entitled: "Accidental and Providential Causes Which Contribute to Maintain the Democratic Republic in the United States."

Fourth and finally, in recent years, persuasive empirical evidence has emerged that religious freedom is a powerful antidote to terrorism. The scholar who has done the most to document this fact is Dr. Nilay Saiya, a Religious Freedom Institute senior fellow. Saiya's 2018 book, *Weapon of Peace: How Religious Liberty Combats Terrorism*, advances the proposition that religious freedom is an essential element for the national security of any country. Among his most remarkable findings are the following:

- Countries with "low" levels of restrictions on religion experience an *absence of religious terrorism 99 percent of the time*.
- States that *enforce blasphemy laws experience almost six times as many terrorist attacks* as states where such laws do not exist.
- *Religiously-restrictive countries experience more than 13.5 times as many religious terrorist attacks* as their religiously free counterparts.
- Nine of the ten countries hit hardest by *homegrown religious terrorism impose serious restrictions on religious freedom*.
- The vast majority of *international religious terrorist groups originated from religiously oppressive settings: 88% emanated from religiously-restrictive countries, 8% from moderately-restrictive countries, and slightly more than 3% from religiously-free settings*.<sup>13</sup>

According to Dr. Saiya, religious freedom unleashes forces which are profoundly positive for the promotion of societal good. For example, pluralism, a natural product of religious freedom, in turn promotes an ability to live peacefully and subjects all views to debate and civil discussion. Radical and extreme ideas are more easily defeated in such settings. Indeed, radicals multiply where an exchange of ideas is not allowed.

Dr. Saiya has noted that:

Freedom of religion ... unlocks the "spiritual capital" of faith-based actors. In many parts of the world, religious communities have been instrumental in increasing literacy, reducing poverty, promoting development, providing access to potable water,

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<sup>13</sup> This summary of Saiya's conclusions comes from Religious Freedom Institute Chaplain Fellow Fr. Daniel Mode, and can be found in "The Intersection of U.S. National Security Strategy and Religious Freedom," April 25, 2019, <https://www.religiousfreedominstitute.org/cornerstone/the-intersection-of-us-national-security-strategy-and-religious-freedom>.



administering healthcare, running counseling centers, and leading peace and reconciliation processes.<sup>14</sup>

And the reverse is true as well. That is, restricting religion can interfere with social development, which in turn can serve as a spur to violence or terrorism.

In short, if diplomats are looking for that which will advance the agenda of regional peace, make terrorism less likely, and unleash the positive good that religion can do in societies, they will realize that their own national security will be enhanced by the promotion of global religious freedom.

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<sup>14</sup> Nilay Saiya, *Weapon of Peace: How Religious Liberty Combats Terrorism* (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 2018), end of Chapter 1.