



## **Tom Lantos Human Rights Commission Hearing**

### **Freedom of Belief: Countering Religious Violence**

May 25, 2017

1:30 – 3:00 PM

2255 Rayburn House Office Building

#### **Opening Remarks as prepared for delivery**

Good afternoon. I join my esteemed colleague and Commission Co-Chair Randy Hultgren in welcoming you and our distinguished witnesses to the Tom Lantos Human Rights Commission hearing on “Freedom of Belief: Countering Religious Violence.”

Article 18 of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights states that “Everyone has the right to freedom of thought, conscience and religion; this right includes freedom to change his religion or belief, and freedom, either alone or in community with others and in public or private, to manifest his religion or belief in teaching, practice, worship and observance.” Article 18 of the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights, to which 169 of the 197 countries in the world subscribe, includes the same language.

Here in the United States, the very fundamental right to believe in God – or not – has been recognized since the early years of the republic. Article VI of the Constitution prohibits a religious test for those holding public office. The first clause of the first amendment of the Bill of Rights says that “Congress shall make no law respecting an establishment of religion, or prohibiting the free exercise thereof ...” The 14<sup>th</sup> amendment to the Constitution prohibits discrimination,

including on the basis of religion, by securing "the equal protection of the laws" for every person.

But we Americans do not have a perfect record of protecting this fundamental right. As a practicing Catholic, I recognize that there is a long history of anti-Catholic bias in the United States. Here in the House we have colleagues who are Mormons; members of their faith were victims of terrible religious violence in the 1800s. Native Americans were subjected to forced conversion. And today, those who practice Islam are often met with intolerance and worse. We have seen hate crimes against Muslims increase dramatically in recent years.

In the end, the way we fight back against religious discrimination is by recalling universal principles: my right to practice my religion is only as safe as my Muslim brother's. In order for me to enjoy freedom of religion, everyone else must enjoy it as well. That's the only way it works. The alternative is the risk of sectarian violence, the focus of this hearing today.

With that in mind, I'd like to draw your attention to one place where we have not yet seen sectarian violence, but there's a risk we could: Tibet.

I had the privilege of traveling to Tibet in November 2015 on a congressional delegation led by Leader Pelosi. Less than two weeks ago I returned from another CODEL that visited Tibetan communities in Nepal and India, and met for several hours with His Holiness the Dalai Lama. I can personally attest to the deeply held religious beliefs of Tibetan Buddhists, in spite of the decades of repression they have suffered at the hands of the Chinese government – repression that has worsened during the rule of Xi Jinping.

Hundreds of Tibetan religious leaders have been or still are prisoners of conscience in China. Two years ago, the revered monk Tenzin Delek Rinpoche died while in Chinese custody.

The 11<sup>th</sup> Panchen Lama was abducted by the Chinese government at age 6; today he is 28, wherever he is.

Since last July, the Chinese government has evicted thousands of monks and nuns, lay people and students from the famous Larung Gar Buddhist Institute in Sichuan province. According to USCIRF's most recent report, some were locked out of their homes before they could collect their belongings, or were forced to sign pledges promising never to return. Others were forced to undergo "patriotic reeducation programs."

Beijing is seeking to eviscerate the teachings and study of Tibetan Buddhism that are integral to the life of Tibetans. But people are desperate to continue their traditions – so much so that some families in China entrust their children to smugglers to take them to India, so they can study in Dharamsala. That is an incredible testimony to religious belief, but it is also deeply concerning.

I worry that this level of repression will only be tolerated for so long. His Holiness the Dalai Lama is a man of peace, but he is about to turn 82 years old. He will not be with us forever. I worry about what will happen when he passes on.

Tibet is a place where I have no doubt that true freedom of religion could help prevent future violence. As members of Congress concerned with preventing violent extremism, we should be working to advance freedom of religion in Tibet with every tool at our disposal.

Thank you, Mr. Chairman, and I yield back.