

Freedom of Belief: Countering Religious Violence

**Tom Lantos Human Rights Commission
U.S. House of Representatives**

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Honorable Co-Chairmen James McGovern and Randy Hultgreen, distinguished representatives of the commission and staff members thank you for inviting me to share my thoughts on how promoting freedom of belief can help the efforts to confront religious violence. I am honored to be speaking with you on the issue of countering violent extremism, which is perhaps the biggest challenge of our age. We are gathered at a time when our enemies have carried out yet another horrific attack – this time deliberately targeting teenage children. Our thoughts and prayers are with our British friends as they move to neutralize this latest attempt to destroy innocent and precious lives.

The United States, in conjunction with its allies around the world, continues to battle the scourge of terrorism. In keeping with the paradigm of countering violent extremism (CVE) we have been focusing our energies on thwarting those who have moved beyond the realm of extremist ideas and have taken to violence. While the priority should be to stop those perpetrating acts of violence it is essential that we concentrate on the wider environment in which they take shape. I am referring to the broader landscape of extremism where a far larger number of people serve as enablers of religiously inspired violence even though they themselves are not the ones carrying out these horrendous acts of violence.

Here is where the line between political extremism and religious intolerance becomes blurry. While extremists do not necessarily go on to become terrorists, terrorism is the violent manifestation of extremism. We cannot succeed in stopping terrorists if we ignore the wider pool of extremists. However, extremism itself emerges out of intolerance for religious differences, which unfortunately has increased greatly in recent decades.

Rolling back this trend through the promotion of religious tolerance, however, is an extremely delicate matter. More often than not our sincere efforts at cultivating diversity of ideas and practices is seen around the world as an attempt at imposing our values on other peoples. Such perceptions end up exacerbating the problems we seek to rectify. This is why I think that in his speech last Sunday at the Arab-Islamic-American Summit in Saudi Arabia, President Trump made an extremely important point when he said: “We are not here to lecture—we are not here to tell other people how to live, what to do, who to be, or how to worship.”

Ladies and gentlemen: it is vital that we not be seen as tampering with the beliefs of other people. This is exactly the misperception that groups like ISIS, al-Qaeda and others are working to exploit. We cannot afford to even inadvertently engage in actions, which end up strengthening the narratives of our enemies. We lose hearts and minds to these vile actors when the idea that the United States and its allies are waging a war against Islam and Muslims gains traction.

Therefore, the conundrum we face is how do we advance the cause of human rights, especially the promotion of religious freedom without making matters worse. We firmly believe that our most cherished ideals are universal in nature. What we think, however, in the larger scheme of things, is of little consequence. Instead, what really matters is whether or not our target audience embraces the plurality of views as an ethic.

So, how do we go about advancing freedom of belief and not have it seen as a call to blasphemy? It is obvious that we need partners on the ground who are seen as credible. But we must be careful that our proximity to them does not undermine their religious legitimacy and authenticity. We should steer clear of religious discourse, especially on a controversial topic such as shariah (Islamic law); instead, we should emphasize the rule of law, which very few people would disagree with.

A key aspect of strengthening the rule of law entails protecting free speech, which is where we should expend the bulk of energies. Radical and extremist ideas continue to percolate in societies because they are not being effectively challenged with opposing perspectives. A key obstacle preventing the emergence of counter-narratives is that they are deemed blasphemous. Not only does it undermine debate but also endangers the lives of those seeking to intellectually deconstruct religious bigotry.

In such an environment there is very little incentive for open discussion. In fact, it is in the interest of people to avoid candid public debates. As a result, the situation allows religious extremists a monopoly over the discourse. The way around this is to foster safe spaces for public dialogue on contentious issues.

Ultimately the free flow of ideas is the only effective weapon against extremism. Extremist ideas tend to be very simplistic and cannot compete in an arena where rigorous and nuanced discussions are taking place. It is only because of the dearth of such public debates that the extremists have the upper hand in terms of the narrative. By promoting free speech we can put the extremists on the defensive - a process, which when it matures, can eventually render their ideas inert.

Such safe spaces enabling free speech, however, can only exist if governments commit to their protection. Now this may seem extremely difficult to realize. States around the world usually employ coercive instruments of power to suppress dissent. However, those same instruments can be utilized to protect free speech, if they can be convinced that it is in their interest to do so.

Considering the growing menace of religious extremism that they are plagued with these governments can be encouraged to actively protect the right of people to debate religious ideas. On their own, however, they are unlikely to embark upon this process. The United States, through skillful diplomacy, will need to steer them towards creating the atmosphere in which debating religious ideas can become a norm. There are any number of means through which we can incentivize them.

Financial assistance can be made contingent upon the efforts of foreign governments towards promoting free speech. For too long such initiatives have been stymied because of the threat of being perceived as an attempt at imposing western values. Certainly this effort like everything else entails challenges but they are not insurmountable. Free speech can be promoted by framing it in the local traditions and culture of dialogue and consultation.

In closing, I would like to recommend that the U.S. government should:

- **Place emphasis** on addressing extremism in general and not simply restrict itself to countering its violent forms.
- **Promote** religious tolerance while steering clear of actions that strengthen the narratives of the extremists.
- **Avoid** getting entangled in religious debates and instead frame the discourse towards 'rule of law' as a human right and a much-needed value.
- **Prioritize** the protection of free speech as a critical path towards tackling the menace of religious violence.
- **Support** efforts towards greater public discussion on religious issues in foreign countries.
- **Allocate** funding towards in-depth research on how advancing the cause of human rights can help us counteract religious extremism.
- **Craft** policies that can help encourage foreign governments to create and protect a safe environment conducive to the free exchange of ideas on religion.

Thank you.