

Testimony of Robert P. George for Tom Lantos Human Rights Commission

Freedom of Belief: Countering Religious Violence

Thank you very much, Chairman Hultgren. Thank you, Chairman McGovern. I am honored to be appearing again before the Tom Lantos Human Rights Commission. My terms as a member and as Chairman of the United States Commission on International Religious Freedom ended about a year ago, and I handed on the baton to my friend and very capable colleague, Father Thomas Reese.

After my rather ferocious criticisms of both major party candidates in the last election, I did not expect to be invited back to Washington very often. But it is good to be here on this occasion.

I am not a person who flatters idly or offers false praise, but I do want to take this opportunity to congratulate and thank both of you, Chairman Hultgren and Chairman McGovern, for the work and witness that you do for religious freedom and other human rights. It is heartwarming to me, especially in light of what I know from my work on the Commission and what has been reiterated by Mr. Cooperman, it is especially heartwarming for me to know that we still have a strong, bipartisan, Democrat and Republican alliance working, cooperating, for religious freedom. The two of you are very much in the tradition of Tom Lantos and Frank Wolf, working arm-in-arm in this period of intense polarization across so many other issues. But it is just wonderful that you are working together the way you are, and may the Tom Lantos Commission continue to flourish.

In the time I have, I want to begin by pointing to the growing threat that extremism poses, both to religious freedom and to the security of the world. I will, then, highlight the deeply disturbing and wrongheaded ways that some nations have responded to this extremism. I want to suggest that embracing and strengthening religious freedom is the way for nations to respond to the challenges of radicalism and violence. And finally, I will argue that, if we believe religious freedom is important and valuable in this cause, we need to renew our commitment to the two main vehicles that the Congress and the President brought into being in 1998 to promote religious liberty in our foreign and diplomatic policy. And, of course, I mean the U.S. Commission on International Religious Freedom and the Ambassador-at-Large position in the State Department for religious freedom.

Now, like everyone else who is participating in this hearing, I have watched the horrific rise in recent years of violent extremism in the form of entities such as ISIL in Iraq and Syria. I have been sickened by the same events that have sickened everyone in this room today and to all men and women of goodwill, the kidnappings, the sexual enslavement, the beheadings, the crucifixions, the refugee crises, the genocide. The Yazidis and Christians continue to be targets of a campaign of genocide. Muslims who reject extremist ideology, and especially those who assist in the fight against it, have also been targeted. Those Muslims are victims of retaliation from violent radicals. No one, irrespective of faith, who resists in any way is spared the rampages of extremism in the areas that it has conquered or where it is able to operate.

I have also seen how the plague of violent religious and ideological extremism is not limited to Syria and Iraq, but continues to spread across oceans and continents. In Afghanistan, assaults by

the Taliban and like-minded groups against anyone daring to contradict their extremist interpretation of the Quran continues unabated. And the U.S. Commission on International Religious Freedom was right to mark them as an entity of particular concern.

In Burma, as Father Reese pointed out, Rohingya Muslims and Christians continue to suffer assaults from extremists claiming to act in Buddhism's name.

In the Central African Republic, militias reporting to act in Christianity's name, have driven hundreds of thousands of Muslim civilians out of the country, and nearly all of the nation's mosques have been destroyed.

In Egypt, Coptic Christians and other minorities continue to fear for their lives and safety at the hands of extremists proclaiming to act in Islam's name.

In Nigeria, Boko Haram, although it no longer controls territory, continues to attack both Christians and those Muslims who dare to counter its radical interpretations of Islam.

In Pakistan, a country that I continue to be extremely worried about, extremists continue to launch horrific attacks against religious minorities ranging from Christians to Ahmadiyyas, to Shia.

In Iran and elsewhere, Baha'is are among the persecuted.

No one is immune from this. There is perhaps no more visible testament to the scope of these atrocities than the millions of people who have been forced to feel their homes. In Iraq, millions are now internally displaced as a result of ISIL's offensive. Millions among Syria's pre-civil war population have suffered a similar fate, and millions more are, as we know, refugees in neighboring states and in Europe.

In Burma, 140,000 Rohingya Muslims and at least 100,000 Christians remain internally displaced.

In the Central African Republic, more than a million people, mostly Muslims, have been driven out of their homes.

And in Nigeria, Boko Haram's rampages are responsible for the displacement, again, of more than a million people.

Clearly, the unchecked rise of such extremism has unleashed humanitarian crises that are nothing short of horrifying.

Now how have nations responded to these challenges to this religious extremism? In some countries, governments themselves embody the extremism. It is part of their governing ideology, and it has got to be faced up to.

In Saudi Arabia, for example, the Kingdom bans churches and any public expression that contradicts its own interpretations of Sunni Islam while inflicting barbaric punishments on transgressors, as we have seen with the brutal flogging and imprisonment of Raif Badawi and the

mistreatment of Ahmadiyya Muslims and others. For decades, Saudi Arabia has exported its extremist religious interpretations, largely through poisonous, often grotesquely anti-Semitic literature, including curricular material for school children sent across much of the world.

And in Iran, another exporter of extremism, from Christians to other religious minorities such as Baha'is and Sunni Muslims and to dissident Shia, the regime subjects those who contradict its brand of Shia Islam to arrests, imprisonment, torture, and even death.

Now, while Saudi Arabia and Iran embody religious extremism, in other countries governments enable it, or at the very least tolerate it.

In Pakistan, the government enforces the country's blasphemy law vigorously with dozens of Pakistanis, Ahmadiyya, Christian, dissenting Muslims, on death row or serving life sentences for violating this law. The weight of the blasphemy laws falls disproportionately on religious minority communities such as Christians, Hindus, Ahmadiyyas, and, in turn, emboldens religious extremists to assault these minorities. And while the government continues to enforce the blasphemy law zealously, it lacks any corresponding zeal in bringing to justice those private individuals, the mobs and the thugs and the terrorists who are responsible for these assaults.

While some governments embody religious extremism and violence, others enable it; still others seek to manage such extremism by granting or withholding favors from sectarian and religious groups based on whether or not they support the government's policies.

When massive numbers of Christians or massive numbers of Syrians of different faiths took to the streets in 2011 demanding their rights of citizens, the Assad regime fired on them while turning sectarian groups against one another. That is the origins of this civil war. And as we have seen, that civil war has opened the door to unimaginable horrors which ISIL and other violent extremists have perpetrated.

In still other cases, governments respond to the violence and extremism by turning their sights on entire religions, or at least a critical mass of their adherents. For example, both China and Russia apparently have decided that the way to fight extremism of some Muslims is by repressing all or most Muslims. Often, the fight in extremism is merely a transparent pretext for oppression. And Father Tom I was glad mentioned this. China has taken this approach with the Uighur Muslim community while Russia has done it with Muslims in the North Caucasus region. And by the way, this is one of several reasons I commend USCIRF for its most recent recommendations to the State Department designating Russia as a CPC, Country of Particular Concern, as it has long done with China.

Now, unfortunately, we in Western societies have had our own difficulties dealing with religious extremism. For decades, our foreign policy bureaucracies largely accepting the thesis, now fully falsified, that modernization produces secularization, seem to have forgotten the following critical fact: that is, for the vast majority of people around the world, as Father Tom said, faith matters. According to the Pew poll, 84 percent of the world's population identifies with a specific religious group, as Father Tom noted. And for many of these people, religion is not just one among several affiliations; it is central, often the central thing in their lives.

And yet, for generations, this simple fact somehow managed to confound foreign policy experts across the West, including our own. Recall the shock and disbelief which followed the fall of the Shah of Iran in 1978 and his replacement by the radical regime of Ayatollah Ruhollah Khomeini, despite numerous indicators that Khomeini's movement was on the rise.

Recall the astonishment of foreign policy elites a decade later during the stunningly swift succession of events leading to the Soviet Union's demise. They just wouldn't believe that Pope John Paul II's standing up to Soviet tyranny beginning in Poland would propel religion-based freedom movements across the Soviet Empire, helping to destroy its dictatorial reign.

And, of course, the brutal reality behind the 9/11 massacres confounded the experts, as 19 hijackers killed 3,000 Americans and themselves, in the belief that they were somehow pleasing God.

Time and again throughout most of our lifetime, my lifetime, Western elites have missed the boat on religion. We thought, people thought, educated people thought, sophisticated people thought it would fade away. It is like the belief Father Tom mentioned that free market capitalism would necessarily bring with it freedom of speech and other civil liberties, freedom of religion. It didn't happen, and modernization did not produce secularization throughout the world.

You cannot conduct foreign policy with the rest of the world if you are clueless or dismissive about religion's central role in most people's lives. You can't have a successful strategy against your foes if you are clueless or dismissive of their motives.

And as a result, our own people, along with leaders and governments from other parts of the world, have failed to develop over time a coherent or consistent strategy against violent religious extremism. So, how do we counter violent extremism?

Well, we do it through ideas and beliefs that are neither violent nor extremist. What Chairman McGovern said a moment ago I think is absolutely right. How do we combat expressions of faith that dishonor some people? Well, we affirm those while honor all people. There is only one way for this to happen. We have to stand unabashedly for universal, fundamental human rights, including the right to religious freedom. We need to exemplify it in our domestic policy and promote it in our foreign policy. And as Father Tom said in responding to Chairman McGovern, it has got to be everyone. It has got to be everyone's job.

Yes, the politicians. Yes, you have a job to do; no question about that, but, also, religious leaders. Civil society has a crucial role to play here. So, does business. Chairman McGovern is right about that. We all have a role to play. We have to stand firmly for the notion that the way to defeat bad religious ideas is with good religious and philosophical ideas, ideas about justice and human rights and the common good, operating in a free marketplace of ideas.

And again, governments can't do this alone. Religious leaders, especially leaders of majority or dominant faiths, must sign onto the project and follow through with it. The cases that Father Tom has mentioned that he promoted, the case where an imam and a priest would walk together to try to calm a situation of potential violence, those kinds of things have to happen.

Chairman McGovern, when you asked for an example of something like that happening, the one that came to my mind was the series of hunger strikes that Mahatma Gandhi engaged in try to quell the sectarian violence between Hindus and Muslims in the lead up to Partition in India and after Partition.

So, finally, governments that crack down on religious freedom across the board in the name of fighting extremists are unwittingly, I think unwittingly, but they are certainly strengthening the extremists that they are fighting against and weakening moderate, less resilient competitors.

So, we need to counter religious violence with religious freedom. We need to understand religious freedom is valuable not only for its own sake, but as a tool in the fight against religious violence.

And with that, I will conclude, Mr. Chairman, and submit my written testimony to the committee.