


THE STATE OF

RELIGIOUS

FREEDOM

IN THE WORLD



Dr. Katrina Lantos Swett

THANK YOU FOR THAT KIND INTRODUCTION. || IT TRULY IS
AN HONOR AND A PLEASURE TO ADDRESS YOU THIS EVENING
ON AN EXTRAORDINARILY IMPORTANT AND TIMELY TOPIC—
NAMELY THE STATE OF RELIGIOUS FREEDOM IN THE WORLD.

ILLUSTRATION BY DAVID ELIASON



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This is an issue that is near and dear to my heart. As a daughter of Holocaust survivors, as a human rights activist, and now as chair of the United States Commission on International Religious Freedom (USCIRF), the fight to secure this bedrock freedom is one I am engaged in on almost a daily basis.

And let me acknowledge with gratitude and appreciation that the J. Reuben Clark Law Society, the International Center for Law and Religion Studies, and, above all, the Church itself have been in the forefront of fighting both to defend and expand religious liberty at home and abroad. Indeed, the central importance of freedom of conscience or belief is at the very heart of Mormon doctrine, so I feel very at home addressing this issue with this audience.

THE IMPORTANCE OF PERSPECTIVE

Before I get into the substance of my remarks today, I would like to say a word about the importance of perspective as we prepare ourselves for battle each day on behalf of this noble cause. In many ways it feels like the cherished value of religious freedom is under unprecedented assault around the globe, and that is not an unreasonable perception. One need only utter the words *ISIS*, *Paris*, and other Rorschach-like phrases to summon up truly terrifying images of assaults on the freedom of conscience and belief and its related rights of freedom of speech, expression, press, and assembly.

But whenever I find myself daunted by the challenges of our day, I am reminded of the words of my remarkable late father, Tom Lantos. As I mentioned earlier, he and my mother were both Holocaust survivors, and my father went on to become the only Holocaust survivor ever elected to the U.S. Congress and one of its most forceful advocates for human rights. Their incredible lives read like a script out of Hollywood, but that is a story for another day.

Because my dad had lived through the very worst that man could inflict on his fellow human beings, he had a strong sense of perspective and even optimism about our world. And whenever I would feel overwhelmed by the challenges around me, in his marvelous Hungarian accent he would reassure me, “Don’t worry, darling. We are just bending a windy corner of history, and just around it there are bright blue skies and wonderful opportunities.”

I was reminded of my father’s important gift of perspective when I recently traveled to Berlin to participate in the OSCE’s (Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe) very sobering 10-year conference on anti-Semitism in the EU—which, if you were not aware, has seen an alarming rise in recent years. But as discouraging as the conference was, I was also reassured by the knowledge that history is not kind to nor does it ultimately reward those who trample on the religious rights and freedoms of others.

While on a quick bus tour of Berlin, I was struck by a comment from the tour guide that when the Edict of Nantes was revoked in 1685, thousands of persecuted Huguenots fled from France to the city of Berlin, where they started many of the industries and trades that became the backbone of that region’s economy.

You will recall that the Edict of Nantes, signed in 1598 by Henry IV of France, granted the Calvinist Huguenots substantial rights in a nation that was overwhelmingly Catholic. This was a break from the longstanding doctrine that required subjects to follow the religion of their ruler, expressed in the Latin phrase *cuius regio, eius religio*—“whose realm, his religion.”

One might view the Edict of Nantes as an early advancement of the right to freedom of religion and its revocation as a huge step backward, but by driving the Huguenots out of



Representative Tom Lantos

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their land, it was the French who suffered economically and in other ways from their departure, and it was the land that gave them refuge that benefited.

In other words, protecting religious liberty is not just the right thing to do, it is almost always the smart thing to do as well—a lesson we need to be reminded of again and again. As the French say, “*Plus ça change, plus c’est la même chose.*”

So with that brief background and short historical digression, I would like to turn my attention to tonight’s topic. I would like to begin by painting a picture of what religious freedom abuses look like—this is not an abstract right we are seeking to protect, and I would like to share examples of people who have suffered real losses from having this indispensable right denied. I will go on to highlight the magnitude of humanity’s loss when religious freedom is denied by describing the majesty and scope of this fundamental human right. Religious freedom remains a deeply misunderstood right, and part of what I hope to do tonight is to clear away misconceptions that many people have. And finally, we will try to take a look around the “windy corner” we find ourselves at right now to think about what the future might hold.

There is one point I would like to make that really can’t be stressed enough. It is this: when anyone’s religious freedom is violated, other human rights invariably are abused as well. That is because in the end, human rights are indivisible. All of them are tied together. All of them are based on the premise that every human being has dignity and worth that must be honored and respected. So with that in mind, let me begin.

WIDESPREAD RELIGIOUS PERSECUTION

More than three years ago, in March 2011, Shahbaz Bhatti, a Christian who was Pakistan’s Minister for Minority Affairs, was murdered by the Pakistani Taliban for speaking out against his country’s blasphemy law and the death sentence for blasphemy given to Asia Bibi, a Christian woman.

But Minister Bhatti wasn’t the only Pakistani who forfeited his life that year for those reasons. Two months earlier Salmaan Taseer, the Muslim governor of the Punjab



Salmaan Taseer, right, governor of the Pakistani Punjab province, talks to reporters after meeting with Pakistani Christian woman Asia Bibi, left, at a prison in Sheikhpura, Pakistan, Saturday, November 20, 2010.

province, met the same fate for his own courageous opposition to the same law and the Bibi verdict. As I stand before you this evening, I know of at least 18 other Pakistanis who are on death row for blasphemy and 20 who are serving life sentences.

But religious persecution is hardly limited to one country or one type of violation. In August 2007, a week before the first visit of my predecessors to Turkmenistan, the government of that nation released from jail a national Muslim leader, former grand mufti Nasrullah Ibn Ibadullah. Our commission had repeatedly called for his release ever since he had been sentenced to a 22-year prison term on trumped-up treason charges three years earlier. What was his crime? He courageously refused to display a book of sayings by the country’s dictator next to the Qur’an in mosques across the nation. Again, the mufti thankfully was released from prison on the eve of USCIRF’s visit.

But another noble soul, Gao Zhisheng, one of China’s most respected human rights attorneys, has not been so fortunate. Gao’s brave defense of people of various faiths continues to cost him dearly. After disbaring Gao, China’s government imprisoned him, tortured him, and concealed his whereabouts for more than two years. When they finally released him in August 2014, he had lost nearly 50 pounds and half his teeth were missing or rotting away. As I speak, Gao is confined to a remote village while security agents harass his relatives, monitor his reading material, and prevent him from receiving vitally needed medical treatment.

And who can forget the disturbing story of Iranian pastor Saeed Abedini, a U.S. citizen who has been serving an eight-year sentence since 2012 on the bogus charge of threatening Iran’s national security? His real so-called crime was his involvement in Iran’s persecuted house-church movement.

Many others remain imprisoned in Iran for their religious beliefs or for actions that reflect these beliefs, including the “Baha’i seven,” leaders of Iran’s Baha’i community who have been incarcerated since 2008 for heading a religious movement that Iran’s theocratic leaders seek to crush.

Over the past months we all have seen the horrifying news coming out of Iraq and Syria, where ISIS has seized wide sections of both countries and has launched a reign of terror against non-Muslim religious minorities, from Yazidis to Christians, while also persecuting Shi’a and Sunni Muslims who dare to dissent from its perverse interpretations of Islam.

In recent days we have watched in horror as home-grown Islamist terrorists in France gunned down the journalists and satirists of *Charlie Hebdo* and shoppers at the Hyper Cacher kosher market, seeking to terrorize a great city in the heart of Europe into submission to their perverted vision of Islam.

And, finally, in Saudi Arabia the liberal blogger and human rights activist Raif Badawi has been sentenced to 1,000 lashes and 10 years in prison for daring to criticize the nation’s

clerics. This man is due to be lashed each week for 20 weeks until this brutal and barbaric sentence is complete or he is dead.

Based on these and so many other cases, two points are abundantly clear. First, when religious freedom and other human rights are violated, real people suffer. Whether their names are etched on gravestones or their faces stare at us from behind prison bars, we must never forget them. Second, the right of religious freedom is far broader, far more inclusive, and far more sweeping in scope than most people realize. It embraces a full range of thought, belief, and behavior.

THE RIGHT TO BELIEVE

Religious freedom is equally as deep as it is broad, honoring and upholding the claims of conscience. How broad and inclusive is religious freedom as a human right? Support for it means opposing every form of coercion or restraint on people's ability to choose and practice their beliefs peacefully.

Contrary to prevailing notions in some circles, promoting religious freedom does not mean imposing beliefs on other people. Quite the contrary. It is about protecting everyone's right to believe and remain true to their deepest convictions. Religious freedom applies to the holders of all religious beliefs, bar none.

Thus the commission on which I serve fights diligently for the right of members of every religious group—from Muslims to Christians, Jews to Buddhists, Hindus to Baha'is, Yazidis to Falun Gong—to practice their faith nonviolently.

But this critical human right is even broader than that. Not only does it apply to those who hold religious beliefs, it also extends to those who reject religious beliefs altogether. When atheists or agnostics are targeted for expressing their convictions, they too are victims of religious persecution. They too merit our steadfast support and protection.

Besides protecting every belief—religious or otherwise—freedom of religion or belief is itself a conviction that is unbounded by geography or nation. It is not the exclusive preserve of any one country. It is a universal value endorsed by a *majority* of countries in Article 18 of the 1948 Universal Declaration of Human Rights as well as in subsequent agreements. Like every other human right, religious freedom is the birthright of humanity.

Religious freedom is broad and deep enough to merit a seat at the table with economic or security concerns in any nation as it conducts its affairs with the world.

In short, religious freedom is a pivotal human right that is relevant to literally every person in the world. It means nothing less than the right of every one of us to think as we please, believe or not believe as our conscience leads, and live out our beliefs openly, peacefully, and without fear.

Understanding all of this is essential to spurring our country to do more to advance this freedom around the world. Such advocacy in support of religious freedom is especially crucial today, when religious freedom is under serious pressure in so many places. According to a recent study, 76 percent of the world's population—five billion people—live in countries in which this freedom is restricted in serious ways, either by the government or by societal actors.

Clearly, abuses of religious freedom must never go unchallenged. This is not just the opinion of the United States; it is a fundamental principle of international human rights law. As I mentioned, in 1948 the world community created and adopted the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, including Article 18, which deals specifically with freedom of religion or belief. Since 1966 the governments of 167 countries have signed the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights, a binding treaty that includes protections similar to those of Article 18. The United States' commitment to this foundational human right reflects our own history of people fleeing persecution in Europe and coming to these shores so they could live out their convictions. Later, the First Amendment to our Constitution included firm protection for religious freedom.



Lisa Peng, left, holding a photo of her father, Peng Ming, and Grace Ge Geng, right, holding a photo of her father, Gao Zhisheng, are introduced prior to testifying on Capitol Hill in Washington, DC, Thursday, December 5, 2013, before the House Foreign Affairs Committee hearing entitled "Their Daughters Appeal to Beijing: 'Let Our Fathers Go!'"

RELIGIOUS
FREEDOM
IS THE
BIRTHRIGHT
OF HUMANITY

But Americans always have been concerned about other people's freedom as well, and so in 1998 the International Religious Freedom Act (IRFA) was signed into law. The IRFA created a special office in the State Department to defend this right abroad. It also created USCIRF—the commission on which I serve. USCIRF is an independent, bipartisan, federal government body charged with using the same international standards I have just mentioned to measure how governments abroad handle religious freedom. USCIRF also issues reports that highlight abuses and make recommendations about how our country can best respond to these violations.

THE CONSEQUENCES OF VIOLATING
RELIGIOUS FREEDOM

In the course of our efforts, USCIRF has found at least four kinds of violations of which governments are culpable: state *hostility*, state *sponsorship*, state *enforcement*, and state *failure*. State hostility involves the government actively *persecuting* people due to their beliefs. State sponsorship refers to the government actively *promoting*—and sometimes even exporting—ideas and propaganda, often of a violent and extremist nature, that include hostility to the religious freedom of others. State enforcement refers to the government actively *applying* laws and statutes such as antiblasphemy codes to individuals, often members of religious minorities. State failure means that the government is *neglecting* to take action to protect those whom others are targeting due to their beliefs.

When it comes to state hostility toward religions, some of these governments, like North Korea or China, are *secular* tyrannies, which consider all religious beliefs to be potential rivals of state secularist ideology, such as communism. Others like Iran, Saudi Arabia, and Sudan are *religious* tyrannies, which enthrone one religion or religious interpretation over all others, which they see as rivals to the one they favor. Still others, like Russia, are a hybrid of secular and religious tyrannies.

In North Korea the government severely represses religious activity, and individuals who defy that repression are arrested,

imprisoned, tortured, or executed. In China the government continues its persecution of Tibetan Buddhists and Uyghur Muslims. To stem the growth of independent Catholic and Protestant groups, Beijing has arrested leaders and shut down churches. There have even been reports of officials going after registered churches and tearing down crosses and church steeples. Members of Falun Gong, as well as those of other groups deemed “evil cults,” face long jail terms, forced renunciations of faith, and torture in detention.

In Iran the government has executed people for “waging war against God” while relentlessly targeting reformers among the Shi'a Muslim majority as well as religious minorities, including Sunni and Sufi Muslims, Baha'is, and Christians. Pastor Abedini remains in prison, and the regime has stirred up anti-Semitism and promoted Holocaust denial.

Saudi Arabia completely bans the public expression of all religions other than Islam. Not a single church or other non-Muslim house of worship exists in the country. In addition, the Kingdom enthrones its own interpretation of Sunni Islam over all others and has detained individuals for apostasy, blasphemy, and sorcery. Sudan continues its policy of Islamization and Arabization, imposing Shari'ah law on Muslims and non-Muslims alike, using amputations and floggings for acts of so-called indecency and immorality, and arresting Christians for proselytizing.

And, finally, Russia has a secular government but favors the Moscow Patriarchate of the Russian Orthodox Church while persecuting competitors, such as Jehovah's Witnesses or those it deems a threat to the state, such as Muslims.

Regarding state sponsorship of radical ideology, which targets others' religious freedom, Saudi Arabia continues to export its own extremist interpretation of Sunni Islam through textbooks and other literature that teach hatred and even violence toward other religious groups. Regarding state enforcement, Egypt and Pakistan enforce antiblasphemy or anti-defamation codes, with religious minorities bearing the brunt of the enforcement. Finally, regarding state failure to protect religious freedom, the abysmal record of the governments of Myanmar (Burma), Egypt, Iraq, Nigeria, Pakistan, and Syria exemplifies those nations that do *not* protect their citizens against religion-related violence.

In Burma, sectarian violence and severe abuses against Christians and Muslims continue with impunity. The plight of the Rohingya Muslims is especially alarming and heartbreaking, as countless numbers are stateless, homeless, and endangered. In Egypt, Cairo has failed repeatedly over time to protect religious minorities—including Coptic Orthodox and other Christians, Baha'is, Shi'a Muslims, and dissident Sunni Muslims—from violence or to bring perpetrators to justice. In Iraq, the rise of ISIS is a major consequence of the government's continued failure to protect the lives and freedoms of non-Muslim minorities, such as Christians and Yazidis, as well as Shi'a Muslims and dissenting Sunni Muslims. In Nigeria, Boko Haram attacks Christians as well as fellow Muslims. The government has failed to prosecute perpetrators of religious violence, and that violence has killed more than 14,000 Nigerians, both Christian and Muslim, since the turn of the century. In Pakistan, the government's continued failure to protect Christians, Ahmadis, Shi'as, and Hindus has created a climate of impunity resulting in further vigilante violence. And in Syria, a three-year civil war triggered

by the Assad regime's refusal to respect human rights and embrace reform has devolved into a sectarian religious conflict, combining the worst aspects of state tyranny with state failure to protect life and freedom. While the regime continues to target Sunni Muslims, terrorist opponents like ISIS target those on all sides who oppose their dictates, from Sunnis and Alawites to Christians.

These four types of violations suggest a strong correlation between the lack of religious freedom and the lack of social harmony and stability. Indeed, a number of studies show that while countries that honor and protect religious freedom and related rights are more peaceful, stable, and prosperous than those that do not, nations that trample on this freedom provide fertile ground for poverty and insecurity, war and terror, and violent radical movements and activity.

We see the negative consequences of not promoting freedom of religion or belief when looking at nations USCIRF has recommended that the State Department designate as "countries of particular concern," or CPCs, marking them as the world's top religious-freedom abusers. These countries are Burma, China, Egypt, Eritrea, Iraq, Iran, Nigeria, North Korea, Pakistan, Saudi Arabia, Sudan, Tajikistan, Turkmenistan, Vietnam, and Uzbekistan. A striking number of these nations continue to have serious issues with stability and security.

Thus it is essential that we promote religious freedom not only because it reflects our values and international human rights standards but because it can enhance the security of our own country and that of the world, especially in the struggle against violent religious extremism.

AROUND THE WINDY CORNER

Let me close by asking a fundamental question: What does the future hold for religious freedom and related human rights?

As of today, the landscape around the world looks admittedly bleak. But does the future have to be like the present? I can answer that question with an emphatic *no*. Yes, the struggle for these rights remains an uphill one. But in our time, the calls for protection of religious freedom and related rights are being amplified as never before in



Naghmeh Abedini holds a necklace with a photograph of her husband, Saeed Abedini, while on Capitol Hill in Washington, DC, Tuesday, June 2, 2015, during a House Foreign Affairs Committee hearing with three other people whose family members are being held in Iran.

history. Thanks to an unprecedented information revolution and the enormous power of the Internet and social media, the calls for freedom are being heard across countries and continents, demanding an end to the status quo of repression and extremism.


The message they send is unmistakable: religious freedom matters and must be upheld. It is time for governments around the world to hear and heed this message. For the dictators of China and North Korea and the terrorists of ISIS and the Pakistani Taliban, there is nothing they fear more than the cause of religious freedom. Yes, I know: when Yazidis and Christians, Tibetan Buddhists and Rohingya Muslims, Baha'is and Jews, Hindus and Falun Gong are oppressed, it is hard to see the fear in their oppressors' eyes. But the fear is there. We can see it in their actions—in their repeated use of brute force to silence and intimidate others. Clearly they fear thought and debate. They fear deliberation and discussion. They fear sunlight and scrutiny. They fear transparency and truth. And so, of course, they fear the Internet. They fear Facebook. They fear iPhones. They fear us. They fear their own people. They probably fear each other. And, most of all, they fear the future.

Yes, the enemies of freedom remain formidable and the fight for freedom remains uphill and can be exhausting at times. The struggle against injustice is long and arduous. But let us take comfort in the wise words of the late Robert F. Kennedy:

Each time [we strike] out against injustice, [we send] forth a tiny ripple of hope, and crossing each other . . . , those ripples build a current which can sweep down the mightiest walls of oppression and resistance.

I would like to close with a story that I think beautifully illustrates the profound connection between religious freedom and all the other precious constitutional and human rights that we cherish. John Wycliffe—the English philosopher, theologian, reformer, and preacher—undertook to translate the Bible from the Latin vulgate into the common vernacular in the late 1300s, and he did so in the face of enormous opposition and even persecution from the ecclesiastical authorities of his day. Despite all, he persisted in this mission, and when his work was done he wrote the following words in the flyleaf of that first Bible: "The translation is complete and shall make possible government of the people, by the people, and for the people."

Now, we cannot know precisely what he meant when he wrote those words, but I believe he was illuminating for all of us the profound insight that when men and women are free to pursue and understand truth for themselves, they become empowered to build societies that honor the claims of conscience and the fundamental liberties and rights of all people.

Thank you. 

KATRINA LANTOS SWETT: A GUARDIAN OF FREEDOM

Six years ago this week I spoke at a moving memorial service in Washington, DC, honoring the late U.S. congressman Tom Lantos, the only Jewish survivor of the Holocaust ever elected to that distinguished body. The story of Tom's harrowing youthful years in Nazi-invaded Hungary is as riveting and wrenching as it is essentially indescribable. It would be a prelude to his becoming one of the most powerful voices on this planet for human rights, for universal justice, and for meeting the needs of the downtrodden and the forgotten, the bereft and the abused. The sad fact in all of this is that seeing virtually all of his loved ones annihilated by wholesale genocide robbed him of not only his entire family but also much of his religious faith. But the redeeming fact is that Tom later made his unparalleled love for his wife, Annette Tillemann; his two daughters, Annette and Katrina; and his grandchildren, all 18 of them, the divinity of his life—his lost family reborn, if you will. Of almost no other person I know could I say more emphatically that family meant everything.

In that memorial service I said, "Tom Lantos must have vowed somewhere in that strong heart and iron will of his that although he could not change the past, he most assuredly could shape the future. And that meant, among other things, cherishing his family in an absolutely consummate way and preparing them to give significant service to the world." Well, those words about his children's service to the world were prophetic. After her father's passing, and to guarantee that his work and his legacy would not falter, Katrina and her family established a foundation to promote and protect human rights, declare its fundamental privileges, and decry any abuses anywhere they might be found. Katrina currently serves as president of that foundation, the Lantos Foundation for Human Rights and Justice. She also chairs the U.S. Commission on International Religious Freedom. A friend of Katrina's and mine, Professor Robert George, who is the McCormick Professor of Jurisprudence and Moral Philosophy at Princeton and a member and former chair of the commission, told me just a few months ago that Katrina was absolutely perfect in this role—"stunning," he said, "without peer." He wanted her to be the chair for life. Actually, the by-laws do not allow that, but if Robby has his way, she will be the chair every other term for as long as she lives.



But Katrina has pretty much been stunning and without peer all her life. From her early years in the Bay Area, she exceeded every remotely reasonable and virtually all unreasonable expectations in a family where high expectations were the norm. It was the Lantos way; it was the Lantos heritage. Just as though everyone else did so, she blithely skipped high school and entered college at 14. One year later she transferred to Yale, where her sister, Annette, was already enrolled and where I had the blessing to come to know her.

At Yale the Lantos girls broke all the stereotypes: that smart women are arrogant, that smart young women are insufferably arrogant, that if you are beautiful you surely must not have brains, and, above all, if you were an Age-of-Aquarius Ivy Leaguer, you certainly were not going to profess any religious devotion, at least not the institutional kind. After all, Woodstock was only 90 miles away and eight months ago. But because of the goodness of her soul and her intuitive love for truth when she heard it and for the Holy Spirit when she felt it, Katrina joined The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints during her Yale years. From that day to this, and in every conceivable way, she, her husband, Dick, whom she helped convert to the Church, and their mission-going children have been undeviatingly faithful to the Church. Our association with them in their journey of conspicuous devotion and unstinting service has been one of the true joys in the lives of Jeff and Pat Holland and Quentin and Mary Cook.

After graduating from Yale, Katrina attended the University of California, Hastings College of Law. By age 21 she was working with Senator Joe Biden in her role as lawyer for the U.S. Senate Committee on the Judiciary. She went on to manage several political campaigns, including her father's, her husband's, and her own. In 2002 she was the Democratic nominee for Congress in New Hampshire's second district, a seat her husband had held prior to his appointment as ambassador to Denmark. In 2006 Katrina earned a PhD from the University of Southern Denmark in history with an emphasis on human rights and U.S. foreign policy.

When you hear this woman speak about human rights, you realize that this work is not a career for her; it is her passion. Like her father before her, she has become a guardian of freedom, that paper-thin veneer protecting civilization. She protects the rights of the faceless, the nameless, the persecuted, and all others whose God-given rights have been violated. Best of all, she is my warm and wonderful friend and a devoted Latter-day Saint at all times and in all places. I am immensely proud of her. Dr. Katrina Lantos Swett, we are very honored to have you speak to us tonight.