

The Importance of Religious Freedom

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Excellencies, Ladies and Gentlemen, Why does religious freedom matter? Religion or belief is part of our conviction, lifestyle, and identity, it is the source of our values and culture.

Peace is the fruit of justice, justice for all. The Modern understanding of justice is based on the respect of fundamental human rights. Religious freedom is defined as freedom of thought, conscience and religion.

Article 18 of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights is at the center of the long list of rights. Indeed, it is a very central right, important for believers and non-believers, for people from A to Z (from Atheists to Zoroastrians). Freedom of Religion or Belief is a litmus test of all other Human rights! Because when religious freedom is missing then other civil freedoms are missing as well.

The situation today around Freedom of Religion or Belief is quite negative. Four out of five people, most of the global population, live in countries with high or very high obstacles for their Freedom of Religion or Belief.

Beside genocidal persecution there are many other forms of religious oppression – anti-blasphemy laws, anti-conversion laws, sectarian violence, totalitarian regimes which try to eliminate religious manifestations and freedom of conscience and conviction for the sake of their ideology and uniformity. By the way, Marx and Lenin hated religion as "opium of mankind". And they have created their own "religion" – new coercive and militant ideology. Major dictators – Hitler, Stalin, Mao Zedong, Pol Pot – fiercely suppressed Freedom of Religion or Belief.

So, what to do?

We must stop these trends and revert them into more humane conditions. Like in environmental protection, we need a "Religious freedom Climate Change". Despite worrying tendencies, we see hopeful moves. After a Century of Genocides, it is time to start Century of Hope.

We must share creative and constructive effort to build a Global religious freedom Movement. It is important to put together 3 "C"s: communication, coordination and cooperation among likeminded governments, parliamentarians, Civil Society Organizations and Faith Based Organizations. This Global Religious Freedom Movement is gradually emerging with the international Religious Freedom of Belief Alliance, Ministerial Conferences on Freedom of Religion or Belief, International Religious Freedom Summits, International Parliamentarians' Platforms on Freedom of Religion or Belief, growing number of Freedom of Religion or Belief Special Envoys and Ambassadors and the International Contact Group of Freedom of Religion or Belief diplomats.

In a more comprehensive way, there is a nexus between Freedom of Religion or Belief and Human Dignity. Human Dignity is a "foundational" principle of all Human Rights and duties.

Ladies and Gentlemen, Dear Friends, Why is evil so influential in today's world? Because it has many allies. Three siblings that spread efficiently evil are: indifference, ignorance, and fear (when we don't care, when we do not know, or when we are scared to say or do something). In order to overcome these siblings, we must invest more into active engagement, lifelong education and civil courage. Then a Century of Hope may come, and a Culture of Human Dignity may prevail over extreme violence, aggressive wars, and a Century of Genocides.

A culture of human dignity is inconceivable without Freedom of Religion or Belief for all. Therefore, I wholeheartedly invite you all to promote a culture of Human Dignity as a common ground for a more humane and peaceful Century. Let's build a Century of Hope!

Thank you all.