



FPRI The State of International Religious Freedom and Why It Matters

By Robert P. George

Robert P. George is McCormick Professor of Jurisprudence at Princeton University and is the founding director of the James Madison Program in American Ideals and Institutions. His books include *Making Men Moral: Civil Liberties and Public Morality* and *Conscience and Its Enemies: Confronting the Dogmas of Liberal Secularism*. This article is a slightly revised version of the Annual Templeton Lecture on Religion and World Affairs, underwritten by Drs. John and Josephine Templeton, that he delivered in Philadelphia in October 2014.

One of America's—more precisely, one of Philadelphia's—greatest contributions to the world is freedom of conscience, the idea that people should be free to practice their religion—or not to practice at all. Today, as ISIS gives people the choice to die or convert, while others in various parts of the world flee for their lives because of different varieties of religious intolerance, one of the leading advocates of international religious freedom reports on the state of religious freedom in the world.

Annual Templeton Lecture on Religion and World Affairs

It is great to be here in a city and state where the words “religion” and “freedom” came together so remarkably—even before the founding of our republic. The story began in colonial times, and it is fitting that this month marks the 370th anniversary of the birth of a remarkable man—William Penn—who played so critical a role in laying the foundation for full freedom of religion in our nation.



William Penn

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The story continued through the Revolutionary War era, highlighted by our great Declaration here in Philadelphia that our basic rights come from our Creator, and that these include the right to liberty—which includes in the very first place the freedom to seek the truth in religious matters and to worship the Almighty and honor Him in every facet of life in accordance with the dictates of conscience. And the story culminated with the drafting of our Constitution—once again right here in Philadelphia—which came to include the First Amendment guarantee of religious freedom as America’s First Freedom, a treasured human right constitutionally protected for the people of the nation.

I will focus on this fundamental freedom abroad. I do not on this occasion speak on behalf of the U.S. Commission on Religious Freedom (USCIRF), where I have served as Chairman and currently serve as Vice Chair. Yet my remarks will certainly reflect my experience working on the Commission. Let me begin by asking and answering as fully as possible in the space allows the question of why religious freedom matters. I will then focus on the tragically dire situation for religious liberty in so many places across the globe today. And finally, I will emphasize that our nation can—and must—do a better job of defending religious freedom.

Why Religious Freedom Matters

So why *does* religious freedom matter? Why should promoting and defending it abroad, no less than honoring it at home, be a high priority? The way some people see it, the reason for respecting religious freedom is purely instrumental and self-interested. If you and I disagree in matters of religion, I should tolerate your beliefs and religious practices so that you will tolerate mine. Religious freedom, in this view, is not so much a moral or human right as it is a kind of mutual nonaggression pact. It is easy to see the attraction of this view or to explain why some people hold it. A world in which each community lives in fear that another will seize power and oppress its members is hardly an ideal state of affairs for any of them. But that is exactly what happens where there is little or no protection for religious freedom. Everyone fears what will happen to his own group. And so each group agrees to tolerate the other groups so that it, too, will be tolerated.

But there is a problem with this view: it simply does not go far enough. It ignores the fact that at its core, religious freedom means something far deeper and more profound than people grudgingly tolerating each other in a kind of *modus vivendi*. Simply stated, religious freedom means nothing less than the right to be who we truly are as human beings. The fact is that as human beings, we are drawn to ponder life’s deepest questions and seek meaningful, truthful answers. Where do we come from? What is our destiny? Is there a transcendent source of meaning and value? Is there a “higher law” that pulls us above personal interest in order to “do unto others as we would have them do unto us”? No matter how these questions are answered, one thing is indisputable: human beings can’t stop asking them, and would be diminished precisely as human beings if they were to try to do so. This suggests that the religious quest is a constitutive part of our humanity—an

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