

Taiwan Keynote: Luke de Pulford

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Understating the scale of global religious persecution; the central importance of religious freedom and its impact on human trafficking and other violations of human rights.

I asked Lord Alton to set the scene by giving you an overview of the global phenomenon of religious persecution. This grossly under-stated issue leads to the persecution of hundreds of millions of people worldwide, including an estimated **250 million Christians**, who are far and away the most persecuted group of all. **11 of them are killed each, and every, single day.**

This is a fact. But it surprises most people. When people think “persecution of Christians” and they tend to think of being **fed to the lions in the Coliseum**. But, as you have heard, they need to think again. Christians may no longer be fed to the lions in the Coliseum: It’s 250 million times worse than that. Beyond that 250 million, over **80 percent of the world’s population don’t have freedom of religion**. For too long we have been almost silent. For too long this preeminent human rights crisis has been left languishing at the bottom of the political agenda.

I asked David to spell out the legal status of religious freedom as a foundational right. Be clear, **this is** foundational right which, as I will explain later, when you honour it, other rights tend to grow from it but when you dishonour it, other rights also diminish. It’s a harbinger of worse to come: a defining right; a bellwether right; an orphaned right.

For many years freedom of religion or belief has been left out of main stream debate, and languishing at the bottom of human rights and political priorities.

But that is changing. Sadly that is not because we have come to a sudden appreciation of the foundational nature of religious freedom. Yes, there has been more political activity in recent years. But the real reason we are seeing more political movement around religious freedom has more to do with the fact that violations of article 18 are at crisis level.

I am dividing my comments into three parts.

1. What’s making this a defining issue.

2. Why China Matters.

2. Religious Freedom as an unrecognised asset.

1. What’s making this a defining issue.

Well firstly, it’s the scale and severity of the violations.

We are living in a new dark age for human conscience - where vast swathes of the global population suffer under the primitive belief that rulers can control thought and subvert conviction.

But it is not just the scale of the problem. It is the severity which has given rise to visibility.

In 2014 the group known as the Islamic State of Iraq and the Levant (ISIL) unleashed a campaign of atrocities against **religious and ethnic minorities** in Syria and Northern Iraq. Before then, Iraq and Syria had become a very uncomfortable place for Christians. Syria's Christian population has declined from 1.7 million in 2011 to below 450,000 ; in Iraq ethnic cleansing and genocide has reduced the ancient Christian population from 1.5 million in 2003 to below 120,000 – and, as the **Archbishop of Irbil recently said**, it is facing extinction.

This isn't just a case of anti-Christian persecution. Far from it.

Before 2015, few had heard of the **Yazidis**, a small monotheistic religion rooted in Kurdistan . In late 2014 and 2015 reports of atrocities from that region started to emerge. We heard that, because of their religion, this group were being targeted by ISIS. Very young girls were being literally sold as sex slaves like cattle in markets. Parents executed in front of their children. Then reports like **the following one started to emerge**.

The person speaking was Vian Dakil, Member of Iraqi Parliament. Since ISIS has been moved from this land, reports have emerged of 200 **mass graves** in the region filled with the bodies of men women and children from these minorities.

Faced with such indiluted barbarism, almost unprecedented evil, proudly displayed on social media. Faced with public crucifixions and the feeding of people's own children to their parents, the world began to ask: "what is their motive".

This was their motive. The destruction of those who represent anything other than their narrow hateful way of life.

To be clear: they wanted to kill and mame Yazidis, Christians and others because of who they are and what they believe.

But why am I telling you all this. Because the world was being brought face to face with Article 18 violations. To a secular West the notion that people might kill one another for the God they worship seems very alien. Perhaps this is one of the reasons that news of religious persecution has struggled to find reception among western institutions, especially in the media and among politicians. But here they were, faced with atrocities they could not ignore, night after night. Atrocities that shocked them deeply, and atrocities perpetrated solely because of background or belief of that person.

Add to this the huge scale of the crimes against **Rohingya, Uighurs**, together with the emerging atrocities in **Nigeria** at the hands of Fulani extremists and Boko Haram; add to this the atrocities of the militia in Sudan - and you why the issue has gained notoriety in recent years.

So the scale and severity have made the problem more visible.

But this is not just a defining issue because the breadth of violation. It is defining because of our impotence to address it.

Many observers, legal experts and even government ministers have argued that the crimes of ISIL amounted to genocide and crimes against humanity. At the time I was privileged to draw up a motion on the issue around which I was privileged to build a parliamentary campaign. Our motion declaring that Parliament believed ISIS to have perpetrated genocide won a **unanimous vote in the House of Commons**. The campaign involved bringing Yazidi survivors and witnesses to parliament and the drafting of a PMB.

Unfortunately efforts to make the international community act upon the genocide in the Middle East have failed. Suspected ISIL genocidaires have not seen justice for their crimes, and continue to perpetrate atrocities, making a mockery of States' obligations under the UN Convention on the Prevention and Punishment of the Crime of Genocide (the Genocide Convention) – and the Universal Declaration of Human Rights.

In a more hopeful era, when those Declarations were promulgated, **Dag Hammarskjöld**, a one-time Secretary General of the United Nations once remarked:

"It has been said that the United Nations was not created in order to bring us to heaven, but in order to save us from hell."

But in our own times the UN, and its constituent nations, have failed abysmally to save religious minorities – Christians, Yazidis, Jews and Muslims – from the living hell of beheadings, rape, mass displacement and lives of abject misery.

Genocide has been happening. But we did not invoke Genocide Convention. The Convention was created to bind States to acting to prevent and protect against crimes like these ever happening again. For political reasons, we have quietly allowed this commitment to die, like so many of the people it was intended to protect.

And this is my point. **Our clear and demonstrated inability of unwillingness to respond appropriately to the worst kinds of crimes imaginable has pushed religious freedom closer to the top of the political agenda.** But still, States are slow to act.

So far, so negative. But there are some positive signs.

At last week's meeting of the UN General Assembly (UNGA), the United States took defining steps to put religious freedom and persecution right at the top of the agenda.

For the very first time, a country hosted an event at the General Assembly on religious freedom. President Donald Trump and the US Ambassador on Religious Freedom, Sam Brownback, spoke powerfully. Among those present was Meriam Ibrahim, a pregnant Sudanese woman put in jail in Sudan for being a Christian and sentence to death. Many of us campaigned for her release. Also speaking was a Uighur Muslim woman whose father, a Uighur intellectual, has been incarcerated by the Chinese – along with an estimated 1 million others. She has no idea what has happened to him or his condition.

Here is what the President said:

"Today with one clear voice, the United States calls not he world to end religious persecution"

He went on to assert that "America stands with believers in every country who ask only for the freedom to live according to the faith that is within their own hearts" should be welcomes by all - and will be welcomes especially by the millions whose lives have been blighted by genocide, crimes against humanity, persecution and discrimination.

So, the genocides of the 21st Century, together with our failure to address them forced a silent world to find its voice. Which brings me to the role of China.

2. Why China Matters.

China has a human rights problem. And it has a particular problem with Article 18. Any who has any doubt of the scale of what is underway should read last week's New York Times and Washington Post which carried excoriating exposés about China's treatment of the Uighurs.

Just ask the **Tibetan Buddhists** who cannot practice their faith. The Dalai Lama is prohibited from even visiting his ancestral home – while despairing Buddhist monks have burnt themselves to death in protest at their persecution. The Chinese now say they will appoint the next Dalai Lama - a right that belongs to Tibetan Buddhists, not them.

Ask the Falun Gong practitioners Last Tuesday while President Trump was in New York speaking to the UN General Assembly, Hamid Sabi was at the UN Human Rights Council in Geneva. He was presenting the findings of the China Tribunal, an independent tribunal on allegations of forced organ harvesting and the selling of organs from persecuted religious and ethnic minorities on an industrial scale

Mr Sabi told the Council that UN member states have a “legal obligation” to act after the Tribunal found China has commissioned “crimes against humanity against the Falun Gong and Uighur minorities. **Here is what he said.**

Ask Chinese Protestant leaders who have seen their churches destroyed and house churches shut down. The famous Golden Lampstand Church in Shanxi Province was destroyed by paramilitary police officers. Approximately 1500 churches in **Zhejiang** province have had their crosses removed – some demolished. Since the beginning of 2016, according to China Aid, 49 of their churches have been defaced or destroyed, crosses removed, and a pastor's wife crushed to death in the rubble as she pleaded with the authorities to desist. 280 rights lawyers, like Zhang Kai, trying to defend basic freedoms, have been arrested or disappeared. We now here that posters displaying the Ten Commandments have been removed and replaced with ten quotes from President Xi - something which has been personally verified to me.

Experts speculate that so-called foreign religions are seen by the Chinese authorities as vehicles for the infiltration of Western values. The analysis is that Chinese authorities therefore choose either to attempt to Sinicise them, or destroy them altogether.

Judge for yourself and listen to these reports from the last few days: on the 21st of September a Buddhist temple in Hebei – having been praised for paying respect to “revolutionary heroes” – was suppressed; on the same day by refusing permits, blocking roads, and sending hundreds of police officers to control believers, authorities impeded the annual Catholic pilgrimage to Mozi Mountain in Inner Mongolia; on the 19th, it was reported that symbols of traditional Chinese spiritual teachings would not be spared in the campaign to eliminate all religions, with Taoist symbols and temples facing demolition; on the 18th, having been arrested for her faith, Ren Cuifang, aged 30 a member of the Protestant Church of Almighty God died on the 12th day of detention. After seeing her bruised body, the family suspects she has been tortured to death; on the 17th it was reported that the former Uighur president of Xinjiang University Tashpolat Tiyyip faces execution, as Chinese authorities intensified the "study, purge, resist" crusade against dissent; on the 15th we learnt that Police in China had begun to terrorise the religious into becoming agents to collect information about people who escaped religious persecution by travelling to foreign countries while Grid administrators have been given increasing responsibilities to monitor and report on the daily lives of each resident. Believers and dissidents are primary targets.

I repeat. These reports are just from the past few days.

And all this by a Government whose constitution says it will uphold religious freedom.

On top of this, the United Nations has been systematically weakened by China and Russia using vetoes to prevent international action to safeguard fundamental freedoms. Meanwhile China is pursuing a strategy of takeover within an increasing number of UN institutions.

Dag Hammarskjöld would barely recognise the institution: little wonder that the US has grown so sceptical about the UN's efficacy. As it has increasingly disengaged Beijing has been moving in – increasingly trying to move the UN away from the principles on which it was founded.

Those who are tempted to believe that these are “internal matters” which should be left to China as a matter of “internal policy”, should think again.

In addition to recent activity at the United Nations, China has produced more than two dozen memoranda of understanding supporting its commercial activities and its huge plan of foreign investment, the **Belt and Road Initiative**. It has brought together its own alliance of illiberal States to approve of its actions against its Uighur population – unbelievably, including some Islamic nations.

At the UN last week Ambassador Brownback said that “there was direct pressure from the Chinese Government for countries not to participate” in the Ministerial on Religious Freedom.

Developing countries, especially, are subjected to economic blackmail – and, as I have personally experienced, threats are made when you dare to publicly question or criticise.

But as Ambassador Brownback made clear, this is no time for silence.

At the UN meeting he said he was “**very disappointed that a number of** nations have signed a letter saying that what the Chinese are doing with the Uighurs is fine. I'm stunned, because you've got a million people in concentration camps in 2019 and you're not concerned about this? And I'm concerned about a number of Islamic countries in particular that wouldn't stand up and speak out about this.” He urged Islamic countries to withdraw their names from that letter.

A Candlelit Vigil was held this week outside Chinese Embassy in Washington – expressing solidarity with North Korean escapees and with the millions of protestors in Hong Kong - so fearful that the rule of law, democracy, basic freedoms, human rights and especially freedom of religion or belief, will be destroyed as the methods of Tiananmen Square are deployed against the freedom loving courageous people of Hong Kong. We are only too aware that it is Hong Kong today and it will be Taiwan next.

The Times newspaper recently reported that protestors in Causeway Bay held aloft a banner quoting Winston Churchill “**We will ride out the storm of war, and outlive the menace of tyranny, if necessary, for years, if necessary, alone.**” We should neither leave Hong Kong to stand alone nor aid and abet those who seek to crush them – not least through British sales of surveillance and face recognition technologies both to Hong Kong and China.

I have been organising a campaign in the British Parliament calling for international action to provide Hong Kong people with second citizenship and a second place of abode, as an “insurance policy” - if China sets aside “two systems one country”. I am glad to say that over 170 parliamentarians from both Houses and all political parties have now signed a joint letter to our Foreign Secretary demanding that we stand with Hong Kong.

So to summarise.

China matters because:

- It does not respect religious freedom, despite what the government says. Remember the words of Hamid Sabi: “Crimes against humanity **proven beyond a reasonable doubt**”.
- China realises a value conflict. It sees religious freedom as a threat precisely because respecting religious freedom might allow people to think and behave in a way China does not want.
- China has shown that it is willing to pursue an expansionist and aggressive foreign policy, Investing huge amounts in other countries which, while that investment can be cautiously welcomed, has proven a bargaining chip with developing countries, buying their silence around China’s human rights record.
- As such China represents a threat to the international order around human rights and democracy. Not just because they are abusing human rights with impunity, but because this represents an alternative value system which is being spread with evangelistic zeal. As China looks to expand its power internationally, we cannot fail to recognise the emergence of a new clash of civilisations, with religious freedom at its centre.

3. Religious Freedom, an unrecognised asset, and the link to other human rights abuses:

If China wants to be “the other America” it needs to understand that you cannot have a prosperous, stable and harmonious nation while you simultaneously crush the human spirit. That’s America’s “special ingredient.” It’s in its DNA.

There’s ample **empirical evidence** available to justify the assertion that the most prosperous societies are the ones that promote religious freedom and the most impoverished societies are the ones which don’t.

Similarly, where countries allow the freedom of conscience protected by Article 18, you will find fewer human rights abuses. Yes, this is partly because governments which ignore one right tend to ignore others. But it’s also because rights flow from one another. Where free expression of conscience is not respected, you will always find discrimination and associated rights abuses.

And in my work as Director and Cofounder of the Arise Foundation – a charity which works on the frontline with victims of human trafficking and modern-day slavery – I have seen first-hand the place of religious freedom as an unrecognised asset and, conversely, the role of religious persecution as a driver for migration and displacement.

It’s a “no brainer”, well understood by good employers, that when you respect those things innate to an employee’s identity, such as their religious beliefs and practices, your employee will be more contented and better motivated. It also plays in how customers and clients – 4 out of 5 of whom have a religious belief – are treated; often enabling religiously literate companies to out compete those who have no understanding of its importance.

Allow me to give you an example.

40.3 million people are estimated to be living in **slave-like conditions**. What does slavery mean? This means that someone exercises the rights of ownership over them.

Well... much of the work against slavery is done by community based organisations - often faith based. **The charity I run, Arise**, exists to support these groups all over the world.

But in some countries, faith-based organisations are prevented from doing this work. Vietnam. Even India. This is often the soft side of persecution. Where governments kill the work of groups like these

with bureaucracy, not permitting them to register, finding ways of closing down their institutions and initiatives. I think of a remarkable shelter for people who had been raped. The Government found an obscure reason to close it. Who loses out? The people who need our help the most.

Professor Brian Grim estimates that annually, religion contributes about \$1.2 trillion to the U.S. economy, which would make the U.S. religious economy the world's 15th largest national economy, putting it ahead of about 180 other countries. He points out that it's more than the annual revenues of the world's top 10 tech companies, including Apple, Amazon and Google. And it's also more than 50% larger than that of the annual global revenues of America's 6 largest oil and gas companies. One Study, undertaken in 2014, found that religious freedom is one of only three factors significantly associated with global economic growth.

It's an unremarked and insufficiently understood economic marker – and one which China needs to understand. Religious minorities disproportionately contribute to economic innovation and prosperity.

China should recall that during the flowering of religious openness which followed the cruelties and oppression of the Cultural Revolution, China enjoyed vibrant economic growth. Pluralism, diversity, respect and openness have sadly been superseded by a reversion,

In addition to the trade war with the U.S., China's ongoing crackdown on religion adds another weight dragging down what has been remarkable economic growth spurred on by the religious openness following the Cultural Revolution of the 1960s-1970s.

So freedom of religion and belief can contribute to a rich **pluralism** that is itself associated with economic growth. Indeed, the active participation of religious minorities in society often boosts economic innovation. China needs to understand that if it wants harmony and internal stability religious freedom is a prerequisite. It can't have one without the other.

It also needs to appreciate the extraordinary contribution made by members of churches, through voluntary endeavour, working for the common good – which comes at no cost to the **State**. The rest of the international community must have the courage to say “never again” and mean it, by preventing, protecting and punishing these gross abuses when they occur.

Just like to end by thanking our hosts, graciously given so much time and a platform to speak so freely. Not so far away from here, giving a speech like this would not be possible.