



The
Anglosphere
Society



Center for Religious Freedom



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of
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Opening Keynote by

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“It was the best of times, it was the worst of times, it was the age of wisdom, it was the age of foolishness, it was the epoch of belief, it was the epoch of incredulity, it was the season of Light, it was the season of Darkness, it was the spring of hope, it was the winter of despair, we had everything before us, we had nothing before us, we were all going direct to Heaven, we were all going direct the other way.”

It was said in 1859 when Charles Dickens wrote those words in *A Tale of Two Cities* that “God ruled and sin pervaded.”

This is true today as we look to the issue of international religious freedom. There is not enough time to tell of all the good things taking place in the world – we see the Church growing in places like China and Africa – but we see rising hostility to religious freedom internationally as well as in Western nations.

I will keep my comments focused internationally for the most part, except to say that I read in a recent report that church attendance in America has been on a steep decline for the past decade, with especially eyebrow raising numbers among the young. The article went on to say that a full 33% of twenty-one to twenty-nine year-olds report that they are non-religious.

Since we are seeing a growing rise of people unaffiliated with church, I am concerned that if there is less concern about religion in America, there will be less concern about religious freedom issues internationally. I have seen no research on this impact on religious freedom – only time will tell.

The Bible has much to say about persecution, oppression and ultimately freedom. Ecclesiastes 4:1 says:

“Again I looked and saw all the oppression that was taking place under sun: I saw the tears of the oppressed — and they have no comforter; power was on the side of their oppressors — and they have no comforter.”

All over the world, people of faith are denied the fundamental and unalienable human right to confess and express their faith according to the dictates of their conscience.

Founding Father James Madison once opined, “Conscience is the most sacred of all property,” and I would maintain that conscience is most assuredly God’s.

I am reminded of a scene in Robert Bolt’s play *A Man for All Seasons*, when Sir Thomas More was asked by the Duke of Norfolk to go along with others out of fellowship and publicly agree with the King. More says,

“And when we stand before God, and you are sent to Paradise for doing according to your conscience, and I am damned for not doing according to mine, will you come with me, for friendship”

According to Pew polling data, more than 80% of the world’s population — 6.6 billion people at this very moment — live in a religiously repressive country. This number continues to grow.

Religious freedom has never been more under assault both at home and abroad than it is today. The task is urgent. The stakes are high. What remains to be seen is whether the people of God will rise to the occasion for such a time as this.

From China, to Iran, to Egypt, to Pakistan, to Nigeria, to Iraq – the face of repression varies, but the outcome is the same: harassment, fear, imprisonment, and even death simply because of what a person believes.

As we look around the world we see, in Iraq, Christians and Yazidis are the victims of genocide. It is worth noting the rich Biblical heritage contained in these lands. With the exception of Israel, the Bible contains more references to the cities, regions and nations of ancient Iraq than any other country in the world.

The Patriarch Abraham came from Ur in Southern Iraq. The account of Daniel in the lion’s den took place in Iraq. Both Daniel and Ezekiel are buried in Iraq. A

remarkable spiritual revival, as told in the book of Jonah, occurred in Nineveh, present day Mosul (ISIS blew up Jonah's tomb 3.5 years ago).

In 2003 Iraq's Christian population numbered 1.5 million. Today, roughly 200,000 Christians remain, maybe less. The Jewish community in Iraq in 1948 numbered 150,000; now there are fewer than 10 elderly Jewish individuals living there. We also have seen thousands of Yazidis killed and over one thousand Yazidi girls are missing. In Syria, the Christian population is dropping as the conflict continues. Today the Apostle Paul could not safely travel the road to Damascus.

In Egypt, we see continued persecution of Coptic Christians. Today Joseph would be advised not to take Mary and Baby Jesus to Egypt for safety as He did in the days of Herod. In Pakistan, Christians are being persecuted and the Catholic Pakistani woman, Asia Bibi, is in prison on death row for eight years on the charge of blasphemy.

In Nigeria, 21,000 Christians have been killed by Boko Haram and Fulani militants. Nine hundred churches have been burned and over half of the Christian Chibok girls captured by Boko Haram are still being held captive after four years. So much for #BringBackOurGirls.

In China, we see the Catholic Church being coerced and Catholic bishops disappeared, Protestant pastors and house church leaders jailed. Over a million Uyghur Muslims, including children, are being taken from their homes and placed in detention camps. This is reminiscent of the times of Stalin, Mao and Nazis, and yet the world is silent.

And we see growing anti-Semitism in many places around the world, even in the United States. I believe the current Boycott, Divestment and Sanctions effort against Israel (so-called BDS) is a soft form of anti-Semitism. Over much of the world's history, Jews have suffered betrayal, scorn and persecution. They have been the favored scapegoat of tyrants, who thought that the successful persecution of Jews served to intimidate all others they sought to rule.

Over much of modern history, no survey was needed to determine whether countries were free – simple visits to synagogues did the job. As history has shown us, if the Jews of a country were free to practice their faith, one could be reasonably confident that tolerance and freedom were possible for others.

The Jewish people were the canaries in the coalmine – they have been the first and most exposed to the poisonous airs of tyranny. We saw that hatred, that bigotry, culminated — metastasized — in the Holocaust. That ultimate descent into evil taught the world that hate, bigotry and persecution never comes cheap. It taught the world that once permitted to rear its ugly head, evil can grow more quickly and horribly than imagined possible.

One of the lessons of the Holocaust for a practicing Christian in a post-Holocaust world is to speak out wherever and whenever anti-Semitism rears its ugly head. And to be a Christian in a post-Holocaust world, one must also speak out against what is taking place against Christians and other faiths around the world.

As Dietrich Bonhoeffer said:

“We are not to simply bandage the wounds of victims beneath the wheels of injustice, we are to drive a spoke into the wheel itself.”

To be a decent human being in a post-Holocaust world is to hear the cries of the persecuted.

In the pulpits and pews of many Western churches, we have heard the sound of silence. Given the severity of the challenges facing Christians and other religious minorities around the world, it is increasingly implausible to assert that people in the West are unaware of these human rights abuses. Do these issues receive the attention that they ought to in the mainstream media? No.

But more and more of these stories are breaking through the news cycle, if not always above the fold. Which begs the question: If awareness of the problem is no longer a palpable explanation, why do we not see pulpits and pews consumed by these horrors?

My friend Robert George, Princeton University's McCormick Professor of Jurisprudence, has speculated that perhaps Americans and other Western Christians in particular are afraid of being accused of "self-pleading" if they demand justice on behalf of the co-religionists. Perhaps they are concerned with how the cultural elite and the so-called "beautiful people" — many of whom are antagonistic towards Christianity and for that matter, most of the commonly held social teachings of the world's major religions — would perceive them.

Perhaps of greater consequence, they have on some level bought into what is a key premise of liberal secularism: namely that religion in general, and Christianity in particular, is inherently oppressive. This belief figured into a narrative that is central to the liberal secularist polemic against Christians.

The essence of the narrative is that Christians are always the oppressor, never the oppressed, always the persecutors and never the persecuted. There are manifold ways in which that narrative is untrue. Any student of history knows that it was Christians' pursuit of justice that animated the movements against slavery in the 18th century and for civil rights in the 20th century. And it has been men and women of faith, confronted with the plight of the prisoner and burdened by the struggles of the poor, who still today seek the dignity of every man, woman and child.

Moreover, it is increasingly the case that it is Christians who find themselves marginalized, oppressed, and persecuted in the truest sense of the word. In fact, author Allen Hertzke notes that the suffering church constitutes nearly a third of the total Christian population globally.

Christians have started respected universities and hospitals around the world. Christians run major feeding programs for the poor. The Salvation Army, which responds to every major humanitarian crisis in the world, does so in the name of Jesus. Mother Teresa, who helped the poorest of the poor in India, did so because of a deep and abiding faith in Jesus. Chuck Colson, who led the way on prison reform, did so because of his faith in Jesus.

Dr. Brantly with Samaritan's Purse fought Ebola in Africa even before our government acknowledged it as a problem. Brantly got the disease himself, almost losing his life, as all true disciples are called to do, because of his faith in Jesus.

New York Times columnist Nicholas Kristof wrote of this reality as he had experienced it in his travels abroad, especially some of the most grim, forgotten places on earth:

“In liberal circles, evangelicals constitute one of the few groups that it's safe to mock openly. Yet the liberal caricature of evangelicals is incomplete and unfair. I have little in common, politically or theologically, with evangelicals or, while I'm at it, conservative Roman Catholics.

But I've been truly awed by those I've seen in so many remote places, combatting illiteracy and warlords, famine and disease, humbly struggling to do the Lord's work as they see it, and it is offensive to see good people derided.

But I must say that a disproportionate share of the aid workers I've met in the wildest places over the years, long after anyone sensible had evacuated, have been evangelicals, nuns or priests.”

One of the most powerful pieces of writing in modern times is the Reverend Martin Luther King's “Letter from a Birmingham Jail.” In it, he said:

“Injustice anywhere is a threat to justice everywhere...Whatever affects one directly, affects all indirectly...We know through painful experience that freedom is never voluntarily given by the oppressor; it must be demanded by the oppressed.”

King went on to say:

“There comes a time when the cup of endurance runs over, and men are no longer willing to be plunged into the abyss of despair...So often the contemporary church is a weak, ineffectual voice with an uncertain

sound...But the judgment of God is upon the church as never before. If today's church does not recapture the sacrificial spirit of the early church, it will lose its authenticity, forfeit the loyalty of millions, and be dismissed as an irrelevant social club with no meaning for the twentieth century."

Waiting for the right time to act is not an option.

As we look at all the persecution taking place of all faiths around the world, are we, who consider ourselves men and women of faith in 2018, more cautious than courageous?

Are we willing to risk imprisonment for what we believe? In the Bible we see it is common for those who follow God to end up in jail. Joseph resisted the advances of another man's wife and was jailed; Daniel and his friends refused to stop worshipping their God and were jailed; John the Baptist publicly decried the sin of the leaders of his land and was jailed and ultimately beheaded; and the Apostle Paul wrote many of his letters from a Roman jail cell.

I was told that when WWI German hero Martin Niemöller was imprisoned by the Nazis, a fellow pastor came to visit him. The pastor asked Niemöller how a man of his stature could be in a place like that. Niemöller reportedly replied:

"The question isn't how could I be here, but why aren't you here too?"

These are profound questions of conscience which every man and woman must answer for themselves. And I believe that we in the West will find ourselves better able to count the cost, as it were, the more intimately acquainted we are with our persecuted brothers and sisters abroad.

And if we know their stories, if we weep at their wounds, if we intercede on their behalf through prayer and advocacy, I am confident that we will find ourselves shaped by the courage of these men and women as they become more than faceless, nameless victims in distant places and hard to pronounce prison cells.

And if we are clear-eyed about the times in which we live, I believe these encounters will make our own faith more robust and strengthen us for the days ahead. We need more Dietrich Bonhoeffers, Martin Luther Kings, Thomas Mores and William Wilberforces.

What remains to be seen is whether men and women of faith, and others of good will, will accept this challenge, regardless of where it leads them.

When asked why he continually spoke out against injustice, Nobel Laureate and Holocaust survivor Elie Wiesel said:

“If I remain silent, I may help my own soul but, because I do not help other people, I poison my soul. Silence never helps the victim. It only helps the victimizer.”

What a powerful statement – silence never helps the victim. It only helps the victimizer. In fact, silence actually encourages the wrongdoers to continue their acts of violence.

In the 18th century, British Parliamentarian William Wilberforce said this to his fellow countrymen about the evils of the slave trade:

“You may choose to look the other way, but you can never say again that you did not know.”

Reverend Martin Luther King said:

“In the end, we will remember not the words of our enemies, but the silence of our friends.”

Are we not the friend of the persecuted?

A quote often attributed to German Lutheran pastor and dissident Dietrich Bonhoeffer says:

“Silence in the face of evil is evil itself. Not to speak is to speak. Not to act is to act.”

So, we can never again say we do not know. When we leave here today, let us commit that we will pray, we will speak and we will act.