

International Conference on Religious Freedom In Honour of Hon. Shahbaz Bhatti

Notes for Hon. David Kilgour

(Other panel speakers: Ambassador Andrew Bennett, Ambassador Jackie Wolcott, Exec. Director, U.S. Commission on International Religious Freedom, Father Robert McCulloch, the Vatican)
Parliament Buildings, 1 Wellington Street, Ottawa
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A 2011 Pew Forum study estimated that Christians then numbered about 2.1 billion worldwide. According to the International Society for Human Rights, a secular group with members in 38 countries, 80 per cent of all acts of religious discrimination in the world today are directed at Christians. Pew Research adds that hostility to Christianity reached a new high in 2012, when Christians faced some form of discrimination in 139 countries, almost three-quarters of the world's nations.

According to author Paul Marshall, Latin America is now one of the regions where people are most free to practice their faith. The countries of central Europe, except for those of former Yugoslavia, have in recent years also been largely spared religious persecution. There are many religiously free countries in Africa and among Asia-Pacific nations. Marshall adds, "In standardized country surveys produced for the Center for Religious Freedom, South Korea, Taiwan, Japan, South Africa, Botswana, Mali, and Namibia are religiously more free than France and Belgium..."

Open Doors, a Christian organization, publishes an annual listing of countries where people are least free to follow their faith. At the top is North Korea, followed by Iran, Afghanistan, Saudi Arabia, Somalia, the Maldives, Yemen, Iraq, Uzbekistan, Laos and Pakistan. Some very brief comments about three on the list and one that is not follow:

Saudi Arabia

Saudi Arabia, having more than one million Christian foreign workers, bans churches and private acts of Christian prayer. The previous monarch permitted his religious police to raid private Christian religious gatherings and to bring members up on charges of 'blasphemy'. The spread of Saudi Wahhabism is clearly the cause of many international violence problems today. The historian Bernard Lewis for one has documented how the Wahhabis gained influence in the Saudi Kingdom: "... oil money has enabled them (to establish a network of well-endowed schools and colleges) to spread this fanatical, destructive form of Islam all over the Muslim world and among Muslims in the West."

Iran

There is much international concern about approximately 300,000 Baha'is in Iran because they have no legal rights and their entire leadership remains in prison. Sunni Muslims are treated badly. Dozens of Christians have been arrested and jailed for attempting to worship. Struan Stevenson, President of Europe Iraq Freedom Association, has warned that the regime in Tehran has the same goal as (ISIS) in using violence to create a worldwide caliphate and 'enslave the world in a medieval corruption of the Muslim faith'. He also warned that cooperation between the West and Iran in the

war on ISIS would be 'extremely dangerous' and could trigger a sectarian war between the Shiites and Sunnis that could plague the region for decades.

China

The repression of Tibetan Buddhists and Uyghur Muslims by the party-state in Beijing is now well-known. The regime has long sought to bring Christians, now estimated at 80 – 125 million, to heel. The State Administration for Religious Affairs (SARA), which controls all religions in China, manages the Three-Self Patriotic Movement (TSPM) for Protestants and the Catholic Patriotic Association, which does not recognize the Pope. The number of Christians attending Party-approved churches appears to be now in the 20-30 million range; 50-75 million Christians belong to unregistered 'house churches'.

The persecution of Falun Gong, a nation-wide movement numbering 70–100 million in the mid-1990s by the government's own estimate, which uses exercises and meditation derived from Buddhism/Daoism, since mid-1999 seems less well understood. A 2014 book, *The Slaughter*, by Ethan Gutmann puts the persecution of this community in context. The author explains how he arrives at his "best estimate" that vital organs from 65,000 Falun Gong and "two to four thousand" Uyghurs, Tibetans, or House Christians were seized in a vile commerce in the 2000–2008 period alone. Organs are pillaged and trafficked for high prices to wealthy Chinese and 'organ tourists'.

Pakistan

Christians living in Pakistan comprise about 3.8 million of the more than 170 million population, according to government estimates. Many live in fear of its blasphemy law, which carries the death penalty and has been applied arbitrarily against religious minorities in more recent years. In 2010, for example, Asia Bibi, a Christian mother of five, was sentenced to death for allegedly insulting the Prophet Muhammad. When Punjab Governor Salman Taseer explored ways of freeing her, he was murdered by his bodyguards. On March 2, 2011, Pakistan's federal minorities minister, Shahbaz Bhatti (shown below in Ottawa about a month before his death), who was also concerned about Bibi, was also gunned down. A Christian, he had predicted his own death for months while defending religious freedom for Pakistanis of all faiths. This conference is held in his honour.



What Canada's and other governments should do:

1. Democratic governments should use the billions of dollars in aid we give to some of the offending countries as leverage. Trade/investment could be made conditional at least in part on the protection of the freedom of conscience and worship for all citizens. Why, many ask, should Canadian taxpayers give development assistance to regimes which persecute religious minorities of any faith?
2. While we continue to grapple with the worldwide persecution of religious minorities, democratic governments must continue to protect their own spiritual minorities. We must

ensure that all minorities can worship, live and work freely, without fear. In turn, governments of Muslim-majority countries should do more to incorporate peace and tolerance into the fabric of their own societies. Unless they create and build cultures of religious harmony domestically, fighting jihadist terrorism will be difficult.

3. Canada and other countries should steward our political resources for effective lobbying. We need co-ordinated religious freedom advocacy by our Religious Freedom ambassador, our diplomatic missions in countries of concern, and MPs on issues like changing blasphemy and other anti-religious freedom laws. Revising or repealing Pakistan's blasphemy law, and its current applications, should be well up on the bilateral agenda every time Canadians meet with officials from Islamabad. In multilateral fora, government officials should engage in continuous conversations on behalf of voiceless religious communities and individuals.
4. Islamic radicalization in a country like Canada is difficult to comprehend aside from toxic internet messages from abroad and/or Saudi Wahhabism as the major causative factors. Consumerism/secularism/denigration of faith in general/ issues of youth purpose in the West, including Canada, which can make fundamentalism in all faith forms attractive to those who need certainty in their lives, are no doubt confusing some young people.

Ottawa Imam Dr. Zijad Delic's 2014 book, *Canadian Islam-Belonging and Loyalty*, includes these two points:

- "In so many ways, Canada is a land of immigrants and their children, who together comprise one of the world's leading democratic multicultural societies. In fact, Canada is widely regarded as the model, or the showpiece, of multiculturalism."
- "The Canadian model of citizenship, as contrasted with various models from the European countries, allows a pluralist approach to all its citizens, including citizens of the Muslim faith. They are provided with the space for developing a Canadian Muslim identity."

Mohamad Jebara, another respected Ottawa Imam, reminded Canadians after the Paris events that the best way to overcome those who "hate us is by giving them what they least expect: love." Much effort is still needed for our cultures and faith communities to understand each other better. If we turn away from each other, we diminish ourselves. We must stand together for our national values.

5. The government of Canada might host an international conference on building greater inter-faith understanding in 21st century nations. We must all stand together to embrace diversity and respect it, while working together to prevent violent, narrow, and divisive ideologies from undermining our sense of whom we are and want to be.
- 6.

Conclusion

Let me give the final word to Mrs. Maryam Rajavi, a devout Muslim and president-elect of the National Council of Resistance of Iran (NCRI), speaking at an International Women's Day event in Berlin:

In the past two centuries, our world has time and again reached new heights in large measure due to women's equality movements...Regrettably; however, the advancement of the ideal of equality has today come face-to-face with a formidable barrier, Islamic fundamentalism. While endangering the whole region and world through genocide, terrorism and discrimination, this phenomenon is most hostile to women. For this reason, today, women's plight in the Middle East is entirely entwined with insecurity, oppression, homelessness, murder and servitude...Nevertheless, I want to say that there is a way to defeat and overcome this destructive force and there is a solution: Women's power is the greatest challenger to Islamic fundamentalism.

Thank you.