

**Remarks by David Mulroney for the 6th Annual Parliamentary
Forum on Religious Freedom**

Ottawa, April 3, 2017

Thank you for this opportunity to talk about the topic at hand, namely “China and Religious Freedom: Stories and Perspectives.”

I am happy to share my stories and perspectives relating to China and the struggle for religious freedom. But I would like to approach the topic from a particular vantage point, one that I think is appropriate to this parliamentary forum and to the only claim on expertise that I have. I served in China as Canada’s ambassador, so I would like to talk about what Canada and, specifically, the Canadian government can do to promote religious freedom in China.

Let’s be clear, there is no debate about the lack of religious freedom in China. Its government is tightly controlled by an avowedly atheist party. Humanity is viewed through the prisms of science, economics and a blood-stained and discredited ideology, perspectives that exclude the transcendent and that reduce the individual to near invisibility.

Of course, China’s technocratic leadership suffers from similarly limited vision in other domains, specifically, any that insist on seeing our human experience on a canvas broader than the cramped and circumscribed vision of the Communist Party can comprehend.

This feeds a deep anxiety in a Party that is perpetually insecure about its hold on power. And it goes some way to explaining the Party’s inclination to repress, punish and silence those who aspire to a deeper and richer vision of human possibilities. It shouldn’t surprise us, for example, that just as China’s leaders are deeply fearful of any manifestation of religious

belief, so, too, are they intimidated by thinkers and painters and poets. The artist Ai Weiwei is considered dangerous in large part because he reaches his fellow citizens in ways the Party can't. The same is true of the Dalai Lama, or of a preacher in a house church in the suburb of some bleak, modern and entirely soulless Chinese city.

I once listened in amazement as China's foreign minister spat out the syllables "Fan Di Gang." This man, a senior official in a powerful, nuclear-armed state, was expressing his distaste for and fear of a tiny enclave near the centre of Rome—the Vatican.

But if even if we acknowledge that the Chinese State fails to accord religious freedom to its subjects, what can and should Canada do about it. On what basis might we introduce this troubling state of affairs into our official bilateral agenda?

Well, for one thing, religious freedom is promised under Article 18 of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, a document that technically binds all UN members, China included. Here's what the article actually says:

Everyone has the right to freedom of thought, conscience and religion; this right includes freedom to change his religion or belief, and freedom, either alone or in community with others and in public or private, to manifest his religion or belief in teaching, practice, worship and observance.

Given that Canada is also bound by the declaration—indeed Canadian John Peters Humphrey helped to draft it—what can we do to build religious freedom into our larger discussion of human rights with China?

As Dr. Bennett's presence on the panel this evening reminds us, we took a very important step forward by creating an Office of Religious Freedom operating under the leadership of an ambassador.

I would like to give you my own perspective from the coal face, working as a Canadian diplomat in China, and specifically, as Canada's lead diplomat in China in the months leading up to the creation of the office.

Let me begin by noting that I was, from my first days as ambassador, keenly interested in religious belief in China. I should be clear that this was of more than theoretical or even professional interest. I am a Catholic, and therefore tend to see faith and belief as natural and necessary shapers of human behavior.

I made sure that on my travels, I got to spend time with faith groups. And I did have an agenda. I quickly became aware that something as simple as showing up with a message of Canadian concern and support can become, as my colleague the German ambassador eloquently put it, like a candle in the dark for people who are otherwise alone and abandoned.

I visited many mosques, and shared my keen interest in Islamic art, culture and history with our Chinese followers on social media. I looked and listened carefully as I travelled. I was saddened, on my visits to China's far west, home to Muslim Uighurs, by a clumsy, insensitive and highly militarized Chinese administration that is almost certain to radicalize the region.

After much difficulty, I got to Tibet. There, only after daily battles with my government handlers, whose objective was to make it as difficult for me as possible to see and learn anything, I managed to witness unforgettable and highly moving scenes of faith and belief. Miraculously, these survive despite persistent efforts by the state to constrain belief and believers.

On a trip to China's southwest, I slipped quietly into a Protestant house church for a worship service operating outside the control and approval of

the Party. I sat in a sunny courtyard with men and women from one of China's many minority groups, listening to them sing their hymns and read their bibles. We were all complicit in an illegal act, daring to worship in something other than a space designated by the state. But we were also enjoying the freedom granted us by the Universal Declaration, which speaks of worship as having a private as well as a public dimension.

And, not surprisingly, I took a keen interest in Catholic affairs. I followed carefully the case of a seminary whose students had courageously gone on strike, refusing to submit to the imposition of a communist party plant as their rector. It worked. The party hack was replaced.

I asked to visit the seminary, and the new rector graciously agreed. But he asked that I also obtain permission from the authorities, so as to protect the seminary from reprisals.

I did so, and found, on my arrival at the train station in the city where the seminary is located, a finger wagging junior official who harangued me in public for seeking to visit. He also informed me of an urgent meeting with senior local officials, one that would make my seminary visit all but impossible. I insisted on seeing the seminary, and ended up conducting my now abbreviated tour and meeting with the rector and seminarians at jogging pace. I can honestly say that the meeting left me breathless. The urgent official meeting turned out to be a hollow courtesy call, a complete fabrication.

At the heart of my experience with religion in China was the opportunity to join with Catholic volunteers in the Canadian embassy to organize Mass each Sunday for the international community.

I should note that we offered similar support to other faith groups. But by this time, with China bearing down on the Catholic Church once again, it was the Catholic community that felt most under pressure.

Each week we would welcome at least 100 friends, men, women and children from all continents. At the great feast of Easter, we would open the doors and seat people in the embassy gardens, as 200 or more would gather. The parish, Our Lady of China, was very active in providing funds to shelter pregnant women who feared coerced abortions, and in reaching out to the abandoned elderly and patients afflicted with HIV AIDS.

Throughout this period, I encouraged staff to begin thinking of ideas to pitch to the soon-to-be established office of religious freedom. These were not long in coming. Our list included projects involving Buddhist, Protestant and Catholic groups. Towards the end of my tenure, I travelled to Tashkurgan, about as far west as you can go in China, to meet with the Ismaili Muslim community there. One of my last acts as ambassador was to pitch the idea that Canada might be able to play a role in offering higher education to young people from this community, who are otherwise cut off from the wider world, including the wider Ismaili diaspora.

There is rich scope for supporting projects that provide material and educational support to religious organizations and believers in China, projects that enable them to be what they so often are: lonely agents of charity and hope in an otherwise materialistic society.

But as we worked, I also noticed something else. There was considerable skepticism from my colleagues in Ottawa about the need for an office of religious freedom in the first place. I was encountering, and not for the first time, secular discomfort with the very idea that freedom of religion still belongs in the list of fundamental human rights.

On a number of occasions, I heard colleagues wonder out loud whether we would also be creating an "ambassador for atheism." It was as if acting to protect religious freedom was a perk offered to believers, something that could only be justified if it were balanced by a perk offered to someone else.

Since then, this distinctive initiative has disappeared, folded into an office of "Human Rights, Freedoms and Inclusion." Public servants pay careful attention to messages like this.

What should *we* read into it? Can those of us who value religious freedom take heart, accepting the government's explanation that the change is actually an improvement?

I would say "*Yes . . . If,*"

If the government makes it clear through its projects and funding that it truly is open to promoting the broad spectrum of human rights identified in the Universal Declaration;

If the government makes it clear that before determining which specific rights we will emphasize in a particular country, we are prepared to listen and learn about local conditions and needs;

And *if* the government reaches out to capable partners across Canada who are themselves dedicated to advancing religious freedom in countries where it is threatened.

There is of course one more thing: any country seeking to stand up for religious freedom and freedom of conscience abroad must be seen to support these things, clearly and unequivocally, at home.

Getting this right matters.

Managing our future relationship with a country as complex and challenging as China requires us to lift our game. We need to think very carefully about how we advance our interests while deflecting the negative consequences generated by China's reemergence as a global power.

This almost certainly involves reaching out to new non-state partners in China, and empowering new non-state actors here in Canada.

I have referred in my own writings to China's "constituencies of change," communities that are admirably dedicated to reforming the country from within.

Building Canadian bridges to China's inspiring and courageous religious believers is, in my view, smart diplomacy. But it's more than that. It expresses a broad, tolerant and generous conception of human rights.

It is a Canadian value.

It is what we should be doing.

Thank you.