



HELSINKI COMMISSION BRIEFING

UNITED STATES COMMISSION ON
SECURITY AND COOPERATION IN EUROPE

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The Crisis of Religious Liberty in Europe

Remarks to the U.S. Commission on Security and Cooperation in Europe (December 10, 2012)

Thomas F. Farr

Let me begin by expressing my thanks to the Helsinki Commission, and especially to Chairman Smith, for holding this briefing. My own involvement in the issue of religious freedom, which has extended over some 15 years, was triggered in no small part by the life and work of Chris Smith, whose commitment to the persecuted has extended over many decades. Mr. Smith, thank you for your life of service to our nation, and to all those – Christian and otherwise – who wish to live their lives in service to God.

Before I give my views on the status of Christians in Europe, I want to acknowledge the terrible state of Christian minorities outside the West. Three quarters of the world's 2.2 billion Christians live in non-Western countries. Millions of these people, along with other believers, are subject to violent persecution and death, either because of their religious beliefs or those of their tormentors. When we speak -- as we must -- of the growing travail of religious liberty in Europe and the United States, we must never forget those Christians and non-Christians whose very lives and well being are under constant threat because of their faith.

Having said this, I want to make it clear that I believe we are witnessing a *worldwide* crisis of religious liberty - one that increasingly includes Europe and even the United States. While Christians and other believers in the West are not subject to violent persecution, we have growing reason for concern -- not only for the well being of religious freedom, but for the health of democracy. I will return to this theme shortly but let me first place Europe's problem into its global context.

Evidence of a Global Crisis in Religious Liberty

The Pew Research Center has in recent years conducted three massive studies that measure *government restrictions* on religion and *social hostilities* toward religion in every country of the world. What these studies have discovered is staggering: *75 percent of the world's population* lives in countries where religious freedom is either highly restricted or very highly restricted. Those affected are Christians, Muslims, Jews, Buddhists, Hindus, and others. Most are minorities, but some are reformers within majority communities who cannot speak out without being attacked under anti-blasphemy and anti-defamation laws and practices.

These people live in about 73 countries of the world. Most are Muslim-majority countries, and many of them are in the broader Middle East. Others are communist countries, such as China and North Korea, or large non-Muslim nations such as India and Russia. It is an unfortunate sign of the times that Europe has now entered this mix. The list of 73 countries includes France, Germany, and the United Kingdom.

Of all the religious groups that are subject to harassment and persecution, Christians fare the worst. They are harassed in some 139 nations of the world. Muslims are the second most vulnerable, suffering harassment in 121 countries.

Perhaps the most alarming result of the Pew studies, however, is that the twin problems of restrictions on religion and religious persecution are getting worse, not better. Virtually all the indicators have shown a deterioration in every region of the world. Both the data and the trends constitute, in my view, a global crisis.

The Travail of Religious Liberty in Europe

Let's turn now to the question of the fate of Christians in Europe. Recall that Europe is the continent where the intellectual origins of religious liberty lie. In our Religious Freedom Project at Georgetown's Berkley Center, we are conducting a program on Christianity and Freedom to take a fresh look at the contributions of Christians and Christian ideas to the spread of freedom, both historically and in the contemporary world. Among other things, our research is confirming that the wellsprings of religious freedom are to be found in the first centuries of Christianity, and that the concept grew to maturity in what later became European civilization, including the American colonies and the United States.

It is all the more alarming, then, to discover how the roots of religious freedom have atrophied in the Europe of the 21st century. One of the Pew studies reported that of all the regions of the world, social hostilities toward religion are rising most rapidly, not in the Middle East, Africa, or Asia, but in Europe.

Here are a few indicators of that trend. As of 2010, the United Kingdom was ranked 17th in the world in *social hostilities* toward religion. That's out of approximately 200 countries worldwide. Germany was ranked 23rd and France 25th. Between 2007 and 2010 there were significant increases in social hostilities in all three countries. By 2010 each of these major Western European nations graded worse in the category of social hostilities than the likes of Burma, Iran, and Sudan.

The three also showed significant increases in the levels of *government restrictions* on religion. Between 2007 and 2010 government restrictions in the UK increased by 63%, in France by 20%, and in Germany by 23%. It is symptomatic of this problem that there are currently four cases of British citizens before the European Court of Human Rights, each alleging that the state has simply ignored their fundamental rights of conscience. Both the British courts and the current British government have taken the position that *they* will define what constitutes orthodox Christianity -- not the individuals concerned or the churches themselves. This, I would submit, is a position that endangers not only religious freedom but democracy itself.

By way of comparison, as of 2010 the United States was ranked 49th in the world, ahead of Syria, Laos, and the Congo, in social hostilities toward religion. This phenomenon is, or ought to be, shocking to all of us. Like the three European countries, US scores show significant worsening between 2007 and 2010 in both social hostilities and government restrictions.

What's Going On, and So What?

How do we explain these findings? Why should we be alarmed? The Pew reports suggest that we are witnessing a significant downgrading of religious liberty in the West at precisely the same moment that religious persecution is spiking elsewhere in the world. Allowing for the fundamental differences in the symptoms -- violent persecution outside the West and growing discrimination inside the West -- are there any similarities? I would argue that there are.

To put the matter succinctly, the belief that religious freedom is necessary for human flourishing and the success of democracy is either being rejected or it is being lost. Outside the West, a commitment to religious liberty has never taken hold. This deficit helps account for the failures of Arab and other struggling democracies to take root. There is ample evidence in history and contemporary scholarship that democracy in highly religious societies cannot consolidate without religious freedom in full. That evidence also suggests that religious freedom is important for the defeat of religion-based terrorism. The critical role of religious freedom in the consolidation of democracy and the defeat of terrorism are two reasons why the U.S. policy of advancing international religious freedom is so important to American national interests.

But the Pew reports also suggest that Western nations, including Europe and the United States, are themselves abandoning the belief that religious liberty is necessary to the flourishing of individuals and the success of democracy. This helps to explain why we have proven so ineffective in advancing international religious freedom.

There are many reasons for the decline of religious freedom in Europe and the West. I will cite four. First is the decline of religion itself and the emergence of what Pope Benedict XVI has called the "dictatorship of relativism," i.e., the belief that there are no objective truths, and that all rights claims have equal validity. This helps explain why in Europe, and increasingly in the United States, religion is considered a personal preference with no more claim to state protection than any other preference.

The second reason is the triumph in Europe of the French model of religious liberty, in which the freedom to practice religion is confined to the private sphere. Third is the belief that religion is essentially emotive and irrational, and therefore inappropriate as a means of influencing public policy. Fourth is the contraction of faith-based organizations in civil society. Private religious hospitals, colleges, and charitable organizations have either been historically weak, as in France, or are losing their religious motivations and identities, as in the United Kingdom.

I would note that each of these four trends, while less advanced than in Europe, is present in the United States as well.

Why does all of this matter? Because religion is more than a mere personal preference, and more than a private matter unrelated to the health of democracy. Religion is the enterprise of discovering whether there is a more-than-human reality to which or to whom I owe my existence, whether there is a transcendent reality that accounts for my being, to which or to whom I should attune my behavior, and who determines my fate in an afterlife. These are powerful questions that every human being naturally seeks to answer. In the 21st century, the data show, the vast majority of the world's peoples believes they have found at least some of the answers to those questions.

Religious freedom is the right to pursue the answers to the religious questions. It is the right to join with others of like mind and spirit in worship and in civil society associations. It is the right to influence the laws and policies of the nation with religion-based arguments on the same basis as non-religious persons and non-religious arguments. It is the right not to be coerced by the state to act against one's religious conscience. To deny religious freedom in any of these senses is to mount an attack on human dignity, and to undermine civil and political society.

In short, to insist that a person or a religious community must live as the state mandates -- without the right to live privately and publicly in accord with religious truth as one has apprehended that truth -- constitutes a firm step in the direction of tyranny. Unfortunately, that is the trend we are witnessing in Europe today.

Again, thank you for the opportunity to give you my views.

