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## Five Promising Steps Forward for Religious Freedom: Reflections on Recommendations Offered at the 2022 IRF Summit

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*This article was adapted from closing remarks delivered by Eric Patterson at the 2022 IRF Summit in Washington, D.C.*

The 2022 [International Religious Freedom \(IRF\) Summit](#) in Washington DC resulted in nearly 60 formal recommendations by civil society groups. I was asked to review some of the most promising in the final plenary session of the Summit. Before I do so, I would first like to focus attention on the appropriate motivation for religious freedom advocacy, consider the lessons that need to be learned from the COVID-19 disaster, and then consider five promising recommendations for immediate investment and action.

At the beginning of the Summit, Religious Freedom Institute President Thomas Farr [argued](#) that persecuted believers and their supporters are most often *lovers*, but branded as haters. He is speaking of the false claim that religious people are routinely exclusivist and chauvinistic. This is just not true. Consider the nuns caring for the poor, faith-based humanitarians serving the most vulnerable in insecure places, morally orthodox religious leaders attacked by sexual orientation and gender ideologues, and faithful parents who lovingly raise their children in their faith. These people are motivated by love, love of God and love of their fellow human beings. A subsequent speaker, a bishop, made a similar case: religious freedom for all is a loving approach to protecting and advancing human dignity. This is a good test for all of us. Are we motivated by love to defend the religious freedom of all people?

Sadly missing, however, from both the IRF Summit and the London-based Ministerial on Freedom of Religion or Belief, were careful evaluations of the gross religious freedom violations that occurred during [COVID-19](#). We too soon forget the draconian assaults on religious freedom perpetrated from Pyongyang to San Francisco. Even in democracies, there were jurisdictions that restricted families from meeting to worship, banned outdoor religious meetings, and jailed clerics. Authoritarian governments scapegoated religious minorities as carriers of disease and used the pandemic as an excuse to shut down minority houses of worship. Algeria is a case in point: its mosques re-opened but many of its churches remain closed to this day. COVID-19 saw a rise in attacks on houses of worship and anti-Semitism, not just in Eastern Europe and the Middle East, but also in the United States.

The many other egregious examples of overreaching government power, including in democracies, are well-documented and should be addressed by legislation so that citizens never face this Orwellian

farce again. We need to protect access to religious services for inmates and protect patients from being denied the sacraments, last rites, and services from hospital chaplains. We cannot tolerate burials that exclude families and religious ministrations. We must never again allow public officials to target religious people, as happened in New York, California, and Canada. It is noteworthy that the state of California was taken to the U.S. Supreme Court and lost on three separate occasions. In sum, we are at a point where we need to slow down and go through the process to provide legislative remedies so that we do not go through another round of government discrimination against religion in Western democracies.

With that caution in mind, I'd like to turn to some of the most promising, constructive recommendations that came from the IRF Summit.

**First, governments and civil society agencies should systematically implement best practices that integrate religious freedom into human rights, humanitarian, and diplomatic protocols.** For instance, the Religious Freedom Institute and Open Doors International recently released a formal [protocol](#) for documenting and addressing religious freedom violations. This is particularly helpful for those organizations that work with refugees, immigrants, migrants, and asylum-seekers.

**Second, the [International Ministerial Conference on Freedom of Religion or Belief](#) should publish a formal outcome document signed by the governments participating.** That document should commit governments to upholding the commitments on religious freedom found in the *Universal Declaration of Human Rights* and the legally binding *International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights*. Governments should make a formal commitment to greater cooperation and activity to advance religious freedom for everyone, everywhere. A good place to start would be to use the [IRF Summit Charter](#), written primarily by RFI President Tom Farr, as the blueprint for an aspirational statement.

**Third, efforts should be made to replicate this Religious Freedom Summit in cities across the United States and elsewhere.** [Brigham Young University](#) already runs an excellent summer symposium and other events on international religious freedom, and I've learned that a university in Texas plans to replicate a one-day version of the Summit. These are great ideas and extremely useful in connecting local citizens and local diaspora communities, many of which have fled to the United States for political, religious, and economic freedom. Imagine one-day summits in Los Angeles, Dallas, Atlanta, Chicago, and elsewhere and, similarly, International Religious Freedom Summits in European and other cities going forward. This is a great way to activate new networks of concerned citizens, government officials, academics, and religious people who are standing up for concrete action. This is also a way to get to know the religious communities – including those who fled to the United States to avoid persecution – who live in our own neighborhood.

**Fourth, we must take vigilant action with regards to de-programming, de-platforming, and other restrictions in the sphere of electronic communications** Unfortunately, we have seen a variety of speech and financial restrictions directed at religious freedom advocates and religious people. It is morally wrong to muzzle faithful religious people. Nevertheless, the only way that we are going to resolve this is to take a two-prong approach. First, religious freedom defenders must make every effort to engage governments to stop such egregious violations of freedom of religious

expression, speech, and the press (what we publish) by communications and social media giants. At the same time, the religious freedom community must invest in and investigate alternative platforms for finance, records, distribution of materials, and communication.

**Finally, the hedonistic, anti-faith, revolutionary, and nihilistic messages that reverberate across the media and social media are not just anti-religious, but anti-freedom.** It is simply not the case that democracy means anything goes or that the majority gets to tyrannize religious minorities. What is needed is an investment in media and social media on a wide range of pro-religious freedom themes. From time to time, we see excellent small-scale messaging, but what we need is a billion-dollar investment that brings all the religious freedom research on human flourishing and all the avenues of visual, oral, and digital arts together. It will take that level of investment for there to be enough messages in the global communications ecosystem for us to penetrate and shape the attitudes of the next generation of citizens.

In conclusion, we continue to see nearly three-fourths of the Earth's population restricted from vibrant and public expressions of their faith. Yet, I am hopeful that religious freedom will win in the end because it is rooted in the truth of human existence. That truth is that human beings are religious by their nature, and the natural impulse toward more freedom is rooted, at least in part, in humanity's search for what is true and what is good.

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