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## Today's Fight for Religious Freedom

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### *2022 Cornerstone Series on Translating Diplomatic Engagement to On-the-Ground Improvements in Religious Freedom*

*The 2022 International Religious Freedom Summit, hosted in Washington, D.C., and the 2022 Ministerial to Advance Freedom of Religion or Belief, hosted by the United Kingdom, are among the most significant international events focused on advancing religious freedom globally. They bring together governments, religious leaders, survivors of persecution, advocates, and civil society organizations from around the world to grapple with religious freedom challenges and opportunities.*

*The events illustrate the role of robust diplomatic engagement—inclusive of state or government actors, civil society organizations, and individuals—in advancing religious freedom and associated rights in diverse countries and contexts. But how do we ensure engagement in diplomatic efforts like the Summit and Ministerial lead to practical and sustainable improvements in religious freedom for communities in participating countries?*

*This Cornerstone Forum series invites experts to reflect on their experiences in efforts to advance religious freedom globally, engage key stakeholders in the process, and safeguard against mere symbolic support for religious freedom to ensure this right is secure for everyone, everywhere.*

*To see other pieces in this series visit: [Cornerstone Forum: Translating Diplomatic Engagement to On-the-Ground Improvements in Religious Freedom](#)*

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Why should you and I, regardless of our religious or political beliefs, support religious freedom for everyone, everywhere? Because human beings must have the freedom to be religious.

We are by our nature religious beings. The search for God is natural to each of us. Religious freedom is not a privilege granted by governments. It is a natural, inalienable right, given to every

human being by God. It is the duty and the right of conscience to discern the truth about religion and to exercise religion in private and in public.

Religious freedom by its nature excludes compulsion. No person may be compelled or manipulated by any human agent, especially by government, to seek God or to worship him. God himself neither compels nor manipulates. He loves and he beckons. We should imitate him. This view of religious freedom and human dignity motivates me to fight for religious freedom for everyone.

In fact, this noble idea—religious freedom as human dignity—is so compelling that it has been affirmed many times in the modern world, in international covenants, in national constitutions, and in speeches by politicians. And yet millions of human beings remain subject to violent, sometimes deadly, religious persecution and discrimination. They are paying a profound cost for their religious consciences. We must fight for them.

We must fight, for example, for the Muslims of China. Mihrigul Tursan was recently imprisoned in a Chinese “reeducation camp,” where she was tortured, deprived of sleep, and repeatedly subjected to electric shock. Her six-week-old triplets were taken from her. One died.

Why did Chinese authorities do this to an innocent mother and her babies? Because Mihrigul is a Uighur Muslim. China’s totalitarian, atheist regime targets her version of Islam and any other religion that posits an authority greater than the party or the state. The Chinese communist regime employs violence to transform Tibetan Buddhism into an arm of the state. It destroys churches whose believers resist the state. It attacks Christian public witness by the process of “sinicization.” You and I must fight for Mihrigul, her Muslim community, and all the religious minorities of totalitarian China.

We must also fight for the Christians of Nigeria. On Pentecost Sunday, scores of Nigerian Catholics were slaughtered while worshipping at Mass. Several priests have been murdered since Pentecost. Last month, as her helpless father looked on, Deborah Emmanuel Yakubu was stoned, tortured, and murdered. Her body was then burned to ashes by hundreds of Muslims—her fellow college students. Why did they do this? Because they were taught to hate people like Deborah, people who embrace a faith that they reject.

Unfortunately, we are also seeing a retreat from religious liberty in Western democracies. Many are rejecting particular forms of religion, or religion itself. Anti-Semitism continues to raise its vile and violent head in the West. In democratic Finland, Päivi Räsänen, a Member of Parliament, has been subjected to criminal prosecution because she openly expressed her Christian beliefs about marriage and sexuality

In many Western democracies, including the United States, ancient moral truths on the sacredness of human life, on marriage and sexuality, and on the natural distinctions between men and women are being labeled by those with power as irrational, bigoted, and untrue. The new moral orthodoxy holds that the self, not God, is supreme, and that the body is merely an instrument of the self. If this is true, then complete sexual freedom is rational, as is changing bodily sex to conform with what the self desires. But what if it isn’t true? What if it harms children and causes suffering and unhappiness?

In a democracy, everyone has the right to believe what they wish. But no one has the right to silence those who disagree. Unfortunately, that is the stated goal of those in America who are libeling traditional religious believers as haters, bigots, racists, and even fascists.

Facebook and Twitter routinely “cancel” believers who post their traditional moral views. Public school boards have expropriated the authority to indoctrinate children in the new moral orthodoxy, whether parents agree or not. The current administration has said it will bring “the full force of the federal government” down on those who do not accept government-imposed moral orthodoxy.

Violent attacks on Catholic churches and sacred sites have increased over the past two years. This past Sunday my parish church had an armed guard out front. This should not be happening in America.

The American founders feared a state-enforced morality would be the road to tyranny. They guaranteed the right of religious free exercise for everyone in order to encourage religious citizens to debate public morality. They were wise to do so. Those with traditional moral views have contributed much to our common good.

Parents who hold traditional moral views have the duty, and the right, to raise their children in the faith. Those who oppose state-imposed morality have the duty, and the right, to fight for their understanding of God and man, of human nature and freedom, and what makes for true happiness. The attempt to coerce them, to cancel them, to silence them represents an impulse worthy of totalitarian China, not America.

Unfortunately, this problem has also entered American foreign policy. The State Department is demanding that nations with traditional moral beliefs either accept contemporary Western views of sexual morality, or risk losing life-saving aid and life-changing investment.

This is the opposite of advancing religious freedom for all. Pope Francis has rightly called it “ideological colonization.” It is an assault on human dignity. It disrespects and disregards the religious conscience that lies at the heart of religious freedom. It is unworthy of our nation and any nation that purports to defend justice, human equality, and human freedom.

A society that affords all its citizens full religious freedom generates good things for everyone. So let us stand as one in fighting for religious freedom, especially those of us blessed to live in democratic nations.

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*Thomas F. Farr is president of the Religious Freedom Institute. This essay is adapted from a speech delivered at the 2022 International Religious Freedom Summit.*

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The Religious Freedom Institute (RFI) is committed to achieving broad acceptance of religious liberty as a fundamental human right, a source of individual and social flourishing, the cornerstone of a successful society, and a driver of national and international security

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