Foreign & Commonwealth Office (UK)

An international response to a global crisis

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Our world has, at various points, been divided into empires, carved into countries, and separated by ethnicities. Conflict has taken many forms. Today I want to focus on a dangerous and rising phenomenon. One where we see religion turning on religion, sect upon sect. In other words, where faith is forming the fault lines. According to this worldview - and it's the view of many - my ally and my enemy are determined not by geography or politics or colour, but more and more so by religion.

The fundamental tenets of the major faiths don't lend themselves to this. They are not intrinsically on some collision course. However, religion is being used by some as a means of division, segregation, discrimination and persecution. And that persecution, I believe, is the biggest challenge we face in this young century. It has become a global crisis.

The situation

Across the world, people are being singled out and hounded out simply for the faith they follow or the beliefs they hold. Baha'is, Shias, Sunnis, and Alawites, Hindus, Sikhs, atheists - I could go on. All are falling victim to the new sectarianism that is breaking out across continents.

But today I want to focus on a religion which is suffering particularly in the wake of changes to the Middle East: Christianity. Catholics, Protestants, Orthodox Christians and others are the victims of this type of militant sectarianism.

These communities have lived in these regions for centuries, in places where their faith was born. Yet some are portrayed as newcomers. Many are rooted in their societies, adopting and even shaping

local customs. Yet they are increasingly treated as outsiders. These minority populations have co-existed with the majority for generations. Yet a mass exodus is taking place, on a Biblical scale. In some places, there is real danger that Christianity will become extinct. And one of the most disheartening visits for me was to churches in the Holy Land and see a deserted Bethlehem.

Of course, this sectarianism can take different forms. From ostracism, discrimination and abuse to forced conversion, torture and even murder. The perpetrators range from states to

militant groups, and even to a person's own family. And there are countless causes: Turf wars, social unrest and corruption. Political transition, authoritarianism and terrorism. And, very often, faith is used as a proxy for other divisions.

Collective punishment

But what links many of these cases is that they are examples of collective punishment. A person being held responsible for the alleged crimes, connections or connotations of

their coreligionists. Now of course, this isn't to say the persecution of religious minorities is new. Sadly, this fact is woven into the history of most of our faiths. But these religious fault lines are being ever more exploited by those who wish to cause division.

In an increasingly connected world, people lash out against minorities in response to events happening many miles away. And sometimes, a person of another faith is just a

convenient 'other'– a scapegoat.

Examples

First, let's look at Syria, home to one of the oldest Christian communities in the world, and one of the largest in the Middle East. A country where too many have suffered for too long and continue to do so. The ongoing widespread bloodshed there masks another huge change: The rapid haemorrhaging of the Christian population. Many have already fled the country.

Now, Christians fear that a country which is the setting for many Biblical stories may lose its Christian character. The fate of the Christian - majority town Maaloula gives an insight into this tragedy. Just months ago the Lord's Prayer could be heard recited in Jesus' language, Aramaic. But savage fighting there in September threatened to destroy that treasured culture. And it gave rise to wider questions about the targeting of minorities, such as Christians. Collective punishment for being associated with the regime and the West. And masking the fact that, the vast majority of Syrians – whatever their faith – want a peaceful, democratic future.

Second, look at Pakistan, where the worshippers at Peshawar's All Saints Church were recently targeted by militants who vowed to kill all non - Muslims. Two suicide bombers carried out an appalling attack outside the church after a Sunday service. Scores of people died. The attackers' illogical logic being that because America is a Christian nation, to attack local Christians is somehow retaliation. Again, an example of collective punishment being meted out by extremist groups. And again, not reflecting the fact that the vast majority of Pakistanis want to get on with their lives, and live alongside their neighbours, as they have done for generations.

Third look at Iran. In the last three years, hundreds of Christians have been arrested there. At this moment, many languish in jail, including Pastor Abedini, who was imprisoned for setting up house churches. But in each of these countries it's not just Christians who are suffering. In Syria, all communities, of all faiths, are suffering from the cycle of violence that we have seen occur over the last two years. In Pakistan, the violence suffered by Christians is well known by the country's Shia communities, who have been subjected to attacks for many years. And in Iran, Baha'is have been enduring discrimination and persecution for years.

The world's response

When it comes to persecution, the world is beginning to take note. As the faithful come together at Friday prayers, at the Synagogue on Saturday, at Church on Sunday, sermons ring out about the plight of the persecuted. Politicians, policymakers, academics, journalists all agonise over the problem. And there are countless charities and groups bravely, painstakingly monitoring the fragile situations.

And yes, there are laws in place. But laws mean little when you consider that some of the most oppressive states in the world theoretically guarantee religious freedom in their constitutions. In fact, 83 per cent of countries [with populations over two million] protect freedom of religion by law. But a great many of those do not put this into practice – often doing quite the opposite.

And internationally too, religious freedom is guaranteed. Article 18 is the most translated article in the UN Declaration of Human Rights. But I believe it is one of the least heeded.

So this is a global crisis and it needs an international response. Statutes and sanctions, aid and ambassadors - none of these will make a material difference. What we must do is make religious freedom a priority, change the way we approach this global crisis, and ensure we tackle it together. And today I want to offer some suggestions about how we might do this.

My story

Now you may be wondering why this matters to me. Why a British government minister of the Muslim faith feels the need to stand here and talk about the persecution of Christians and other minorities.

I grew up practising a minority religion, Islam, in a majority - Christian country. My father migrated to England from Pakistan in the 1960s. He had little money but a deep sense of rootedness in his faith, and loyalty to his new country. He brought up his five daughters to follow Islam. Back then, it wasn't my religion which made me different, it was my colour. And, inspired by the heroism of Martin Luther King and Nelson Mandela, I became a lawyer and a campaigner for racial justice.

But after September 11th 2001, more and more it was no longer my colour that defined me, but my religion. I had fought those battles once; I wasn't ready to fight them all over again. So I left Britain. But having spent a year away I realised I had taken the easy option. Because if there now was a sense of unease between my faith and my country then I felt I had to duty to play my part and to try to make things a little better.

When I returned I got involved in national politics. I was appointed to the House of Lords. I became a member of David Cameron's shadow cabinet. And in 2010 I had the privilege of being appointed as the chairman of the Conservative Party and the first Muslim Cabinet Minister. We formed government at a time when faith was being sidelined in politics and public life, the last government having pledged they would not do God. I felt the need to make the case for faith and I said that the new government would 'do God'. That we would support faith groups to worship freely, to act upon their faith for the good of society, and to be protected from intolerance. I saw the worrying rise of anti-Muslim hatred and I felt it needed to be put it on the agenda. Arguing, to much criticism, that Islamophobia had passed the dinner table test – that, unfortunately, it could be found in the most civilised of settings. And that we must learn the lessons from our ongoing fight to defeat scourge of our societies, anti-Semitism.

But there was also another worrying phenomenon developing: societies being told they needed to dilute their faith in order to accommodate others. I believed that my experience of pluralism, of growing up as a Muslim in a country with an Established Church, showed otherwise. I knew that that the presence of other faiths was not a threat to another identity.

So when I led the largest ever delegation of UK ministers to the Vatican, I called on Europe to become stronger and more confident in its Christianity. And in a private audience, Pope Benedict urged me to continue making this case. And today I sit in cabinet as the first Minister for Faith in the UK and Senior Minister at the Foreign and Commonwealth Office, responsible for freedom of religion and belief at home and abroad.

What is freedom of religion or belief

So let me explain what religious freedom means to me.

It means the freedom to have a religion. To believe what one chooses to believe. The freedom to manifest those beliefs. To show them outwardly. To share them with others. It means being free to change your faith. And it means being free to have no faith. And to do all this without fear of discrimination, without fear of attack, without fear of persecution. And that is why we've made freedom of religion and belief a key priority for the British government.

First, through our work with multilateral organisations. Within this we have committed to working with the United Nations Human Rights Council to implement Resolution 16/18. This resolution lays the foundations for combating discrimination against people based on their

religion throughout the world. Political consensus is crucial to achieving this, so in January I brought together ministers and senior officials, from the Foreign Minister of Canada to the Foreign Minister of Indonesia, in London. And in September held a further meeting in New York during UN General Assembly week.

The Organisation of Islamic Cooperation also remains a key partner in our quest to promote religious freedom. And progress was made that OIC Heads of Government summit earlier this year.

Second, through bilateral engagement. I have made freedom of religion and belief a priority within my human rights brief and each and every minister at the Foreign and Commonwealth Office is an ambassador for religious freedom. Every one of us raises and promotes these issues in the countries for which we have responsibility.

Third, through project work, in which we are working with human rights and faith-based organisations across the world, particularly ones which bridge sectarian divides and promote dialogue between religions. And fourth, given the key role faith plays in our global politics today, we are equipping our diplomats with the understanding of the crucial role religion plays in the world today.

Stay true to history

To tackle this global crisis I believe we need to go further. There are four pathways to this approach.

First, making clear the facts of history. My father's teaching was that to be faithful, one must pay heed to history as much as theology. But unfortunately we see people distort history for their own divisive ends.

Like those who try to portray Christianity as a Western import in the Middle East. Like those in some parts of India, where, despite the church having roots there since the Apostles, there have been attacks against Christians. Like in Burma, where the Muslim Rohingha, stripped of their citizenship in 1982, remain in limbo, stateless, despite their community having lived there for over 200 years. Like those in Pakistan, where the founding father Mohammed Ali Jinnah represented minorities in the flag with a strip of white alongside the green.

I was taught his famous words as a child: "You are free to go to your temples. You are free to go to your mosques or to any other places of worship in this State of Pakistan. You may belong to any religion, caste or creed – that has nothing to do with the business of the State." Yet today those words ring hollow.

And then there are those who insist on an unbridgeable divide between Jews and Muslims. But they forget about the Righteous Muslims, from Albania to Tunisia, who risked their lives to

shelter Jews during the Holocaust. And they ignore the fact that Jews helped the Bosnian Muslims to rebuild their lives after the Balkans war and genocide in Srebrenica.

Now in the UK we too have our challenges. Extremists there will tell you that you cannot reconcile being British and being Muslim. You cannot follow Islam and be loyal to the UK. But history doesn't support them. Muslims have contributed to Britain for decades. In fact, hundreds of thousands from the British Indian Army fought and fell for our country in the First World War. And surveys have shown that British Muslims show higher levels of patriotism than the wider population.

In the US, too, you have individuals like Pamela Geller and Robert Spencer denying the place of Muslims in society. Yet these so - called patriots ignore the founding tenets of their nation, of freedom and equality. And that America's founding father, Thomas Jefferson, over 200 years ago hosted an iftar at the White House and had a Quran on his bookshelf.

History is one of our most powerful tools in promoting religious freedom. It proves that there is nothing inevitable about sectarian conflict around the world.

And I reject that there is a Muslim world and a Christian world. There is no unbridgeable divide between Jew and Muslim, Hindu and Sikh, or indeed within religions, between Catholic and Protestant or Sunni and Shia.

Now of course there have been times in history where religious conflict has taken place. But history shows that it is possible for these religions to live together. So we must expose those who seek to twist history, who are neither true to the roots of their faiths or the founding principles of their nations.

No threat to identity

Our second pathway is the fact that the presence of other faiths does not threaten the identity of a religion or a state or a culture.

Time and again we see the motivation for persecution being the desire to preserve national, political or religious identity. Internationally we need to make very clear: that the presence of other faiths doesn't come at the expense of your own. That, in fact, accepting and co-existing with another faith doesn't make you less of a Muslim, a Christian, a Jew, a Hindu – it makes you more of one.

As I mentioned earlier, the fact that I grew up in a majority Christian country actually made me feel stronger in my own faith. Sending my own daughter to a Christian convent school didn't make her less of a Muslim. Indeed she adapted the Lord's prayer and made it her own by ending it ameen, instead of amen.

For me, rejection of another faith just reveals a weakness in your own. For just as the bully bullies because he or she is insecure, so too the state, group or community suppresses because it fears a threat to its identity. As Hillary Clinton put it after the tragic murder of US Ambassador Stevens in Libya last year: Withstanding threats and insults are a ‘sign that one’s faith is unshakeable’.

There are countless examples of the persecution of the ‘other’ in order to protect identity. Why did the Nazis want to exterminate Jews? In part because they feared they polluted their purity, their Aryan identity. Why did the communist regimes crack down on religion? Because they wanted to eliminate all competing loyalties and remove all ideological opposition. And why, today, do we see, in some Muslim - majority countries, extremists turning on their minorities? Because they think it makes them stronger and more powerful in their Islamic identity to reject the other.

So once again, we need to show that acceptance of the ‘other’ proves not that you are weak, but that you are unshakeable in your identity.

Benefits or religious freedom

There is a third case for us to make: the benefits of religious freedom. That quite apart from protecting minorities being the right thing to do morally, it is also the right thing to do socially, economically and politically. Pioneering research by academics, including from here at Georgetown, has proven the link between religious freedom and a society’s ability to flourish.

In short, if people are free to believe and to worship, then they are able to make a bigger contribution to society. A society which is religiously free attracts people who boost the economy. Religious freedom guards against violence, extremism and social strife, all of which hold back the development of a society.

This is nothing new. Back in the 17th century people were actually emigrating to the Netherlands for its religious freedoms and consequent economic opportunities. Spain’s Islamic Golden Age was a period of harmony and progress; a safe haven for persecuted Jews, and therefore a space for everyone to reach their full potential. It has long been argued that greater religious tolerance was the reason some regions of Europe surged ahead of others in terms of economic growth and trade.

And look at America. Would this nation of many races and many religions have been so successful without its founding principles of freedom, fairness and equality? Because, ladies and gentlemen, persecution is bad for business. In the time of the Raj, Britain knew religious tolerance fostered peace and productivity. The Dutch when conquering the New World insisted on religious freedom in their newfound colonies.

There has been a similar realisation recently when it comes to girls' right to an education. Of course, giving girls this right is in itself is the right thing to do.

But there is also a knock - on impact for the rest of society. It's a boost to a country's GDP; curbs child mortality; guards against poverty; ensures better health. That is why the UK is so dedicated to helping girls get an education around the world.

The world has woken up to these facts. It needs to wake up to the benefits of religious freedom too.

Majority defending minority

Fourth and finally, I believe our response to this global crisis must not itself be sectarian. It must not be a case of Christians defending Christians, Muslims defending Muslims, or indeed faith groups defending faith groups. A bomb going off in a Pakistani church shouldn't just reverberate through Christian communities; it should stir the world.

In this I am inspired by the teachings of Islam, which tell us your fellow man is your brother – either your brother in faith, or your brother in humanity. I am guided by the example of the Good Samaritan, who wouldn't have stopped to question the faith of the robbed, beaten man before he helped him. Of course, the notion that you can only care about a person who shares you faith is, in places, deeply entrenched.

Over the summer we all saw the car crash interview on Fox News, where scholar, Reza Aslan, was interviewed about his new book: The Life and Times of Jesus of Nazareth. The presenter could not comprehend why the writer, who was, incidentally, a Muslim, would write a book about Christianity. Our duty is to challenge such bigoted preconceptions, for these feed into the divisions between faiths and create the conditions for intolerance.

This cross-faith stance will be crucial in tackling religious persecution. After all, we have only defeated intolerance in the past when we have all come together, whatever the cause.

Apartheid was defeated when the whole world realised the terrible injustice that was taking place in South Africa. The American Civil Rights movement received the boost it needed when the international community, black, white and brown, got behind the cause. Gay rights in the UK were truly established once the wider community got on board.

For me there is great hope, and that hope stems from the goodwill of ordinary people. We must remember the Arab Spring sprung not from sectarian tension but from a mutual desire for democracy, freedom, and equality. This was summed up in that iconic slogan "Muslim, Christian, one hand". It was embodied in the Christians who joined hands and encircled Muslims in Tahrir Square, protecting them as they prayed.

Around the world we hear of the bomb blasts and the attacks. But we don't hear about the Muslims and Christians defending each other's places of worship, as happens from Nigeria to Indonesia. We don't hear enough about the moderate Syrian opposition's strong commitments to protecting minorities, ahead of a political transition. Nor, when the terrible attack took place in Peshawar did we hear about the hundreds of local Muslims rushing to give blood for the victims. Let's share more of those stories and let's show that freedom of religion or belief is a universal concern.

Conclusion

So these are the four components of my vision for how we can tackle this global crisis:

One. Ensuring that extremists aren't able to twist history for their divisive ends, demonstrating that co-existence has succeeded and sectarianism is not inevitable.

Two. Proving that the presence of other faiths is not a threat to identity, and accommodating others actually provides you are strong and secure in your own beliefs.

Three. Showing that religious freedom isn't just a good thing in itself, but it's a good thing for economies and for societies to progress and flourish.

And four: making sure our response to this global crisis is not sectarian, but united, strong and, ultimately, effective.

We need to start to turn this vision into practical action. For we must act. Religious persecution is blighting lives, ruining lives, ending lives; right now, right across our world. This is not just a problem for the people who are affected. It's not just a faith problem. It's a global crisis. And it can no longer be ignored.

Thank you very much.

Further information

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