

# Editorial

## RELIGIOUS FREEDOM: GROWTH AND CHALLENGE

Almost complete religious freedom in Eastern Europe. Amazing expansion of religious freedom (and the spectre of regression) in the Soviet Union. Tens of thousands of Christian soldiers praying in Saudi Arabia, the home of Islam's holiest shrines. Christian minorities in Arab nations experiencing pressure and decline because of Western ignorance and neglect of legitimate Arab (especially Palestinian) concerns. Few of these astounding developments were imagined when the editors started working on this issue on religious freedom several years ago. Today, as we look back on a couple of years of breathtaking change in religious freedom (including tremendous improvement in many areas), is a good time to reflect carefully on its importance and prospects.

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Both historically and theologically, religious freedom has a primacy in the interrelated cluster of political, social, and economic freedoms.

Historically, Christianity has played a key role in the emergence of freedom in the modern world. We dare never forget (or refuse to confess), of course, the long history of religious oppression waged by Christian governments against Jews, Muslims, and heretics. The sixteenth-century Anabaptists who dared to challenge more than a millenium of Constantinianism which united church and state died by the thousands for their radically unpopular views. But their minority witness has prevailed and almost all Christians and a growing number of other people now accept religious freedom and the "separation of church and state" as basic elements of a good society.

Even during the Constantinian phase, Christianity contributed to this development. One of the most basic elements of free societies is that government is limited and recognizes the independence and freedom of other institutions in society (e.g., family, media,

schools, religious institutions, economic structures, etc). In European history, one of the roots of this limitation on government flowed from the Christian confession that Jesus is Lord and therefore allegiance to Christ and his church represents a higher loyalty than the citizen's commitment to the state. State totalitarianism is impossible and religious freedom is inevitable when large numbers of Christians implement this basic belief.

Theologically, religious freedom is a crucial element of biblical faith. God calls each person to respond freely to the divine invitation. Government should not coerce conscience. If anything is clear from the long history of Israel's constant rebellion against Yahweh, it is that God was willing to give his chosen people the freedom and space to reject his will and still enjoy the created gifts of food and health. Jesus' parable of the wheat and tares speaks not to church discipline within the church but to religious freedom in the larger society (Mt. 13: 24-30). The field where the tares are allowed to grow is the world. It is God's will for persons to have the freedom to choose unbelief or wrong belief and still live in God's good field until the end of history.

Because religious freedom is so important, we dare not allow the successes of the past couple of years to blind us to continuing problems. It is not yet certain that the great changes in the Soviet Union will be permanent. Muslim societies continue to infringe on religious freedom in sweeping ways. It is often illegal for Muslims to convert to another religion and death is, with some frequency, the ghastly penalty. Christians should undertake a new sustained challenge to Islam to abandon its religious repression. (At the same time, Christians should be careful to offer Muslims the same religious freedom in so-called "Christian" nations that we seek in other societies).

In human history, religious freedom has been the exception, not the norm. Only persistent vigilance will guarantee its survival and growth.

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