



By Elder
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Religion's Vital

For more than 30 years, I have been one of the Twelve Apostles of Jesus Christ. As directed by our First Presidency, we govern our worldwide Church of almost 16 million members in just over 30,000 congregations. We teach and testify of the divinity of Jesus Christ and of His priesthood and the fulness of His doctrine. Unique to our doctrine is our knowledge that God continues to call prophets and apostles to receive revelation and teach how to apply His commandments in the circumstances of our day.

1. The Importance of Religion Globally

Religious freedom is a lifelong interest of mine. My first publication as a young law professor at the University of Chicago 54 years ago was a book I edited on the relationship between church and state in the United States.¹

Today, much more than then, none of us can ignore the importance of religion globally—in politics, conflict resolution, economic development, humanitarian relief, and more. Eighty-four percent of the world's population identifies with a particular religion,² yet 77 percent of the world's inhabitants live in countries with high or very high restrictions on religious freedom.³ Understanding religion and its relationship to global concerns and to governments is essential to seeking to improve the world in which we live.

Although religious freedom is unknown in most of the world and threatened from

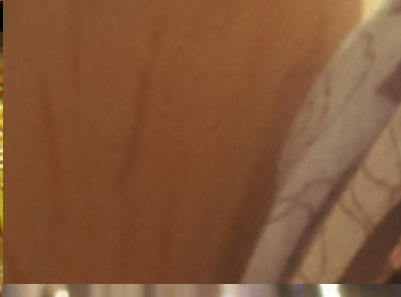
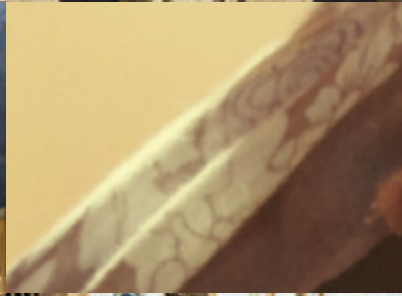
secularism and extremism in the rest, I speak for the ideal in which the freedoms that religion seeks to protect are God-given and inherent but are implemented through mutually complementary relationships with governments that seek the well-being of all their citizens.

Consequently, a government should secure religious freedom for its citizens. As stated in article 18 of the United Nation's influential Universal Declaration of Human Rights, "Everyone has the right to freedom of thought, conscience and religion; this right includes freedom to change his religion or belief, and freedom, either alone or in community with others and in public or private, to manifest his religion or belief in teaching, practice, worship and observance."⁴

The complementary responsibilities of religion, through its adherents, are to observe the laws and respect the culture of the country that secures its freedoms. When religious

Elder Oaks gave this address on June 9, 2016, at Oxford University in England during a symposium on religious freedom.

Global Role



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freedoms are secured, such a response is a debt of gratitude gladly paid.

If there were uniform acceptance and application of these general principles, there would be no need for these discussions on freedom of religion. But as we all know, our

exercise of religious beliefs in the public square. Such attempts of course violate the Universal Declaration's assurance of the right to manifest religion or beliefs "in public or private." The free exercise of religion must also apply when believers act as a community, such as by their efforts in education, medicine, and culture.

2. Social Values of Religion

Religious beliefs and practices are also criticized as irrational and contrary to important government and social goals. I, of course, maintain that religion is uniquely valuable to society. As one atheist admitted in a recent book,



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Clockwise from top left: Mother Teresa, Dr. Martin Luther King Jr., U.S. president Abraham Lincoln, Bishop Desmond Tutu, William Wilberforce.

world is bedeviled with conflicts on these general principles. For example, prominent voices are now challenging the whole idea of unique protections for religion. One such book bears the title *Freedom from Religion* and another, *Why Tolerate Religion?*⁵

Other voices seek to marginalize religion and believers, such as by limiting religious freedom to teaching in churches, synagogues, and mosques, while denying the

"One does not have to be a religious believer to grasp that the core values of Western civilization are grounded in religion, and to be concerned that the erosion of religious observance therefore undermines those values."⁶ One of those "core values" is the concept of inherent human dignity and worth.

Here are seven other examples of the social values of religion:

1. Many of the most significant moral advances in Western civilization have been motivated by religious principles and persuaded to official adoption by pulpit preaching. So it was with the abolition of the slave trade in the British Empire, the Emancipation Proclamation in the United States, and the Civil Rights movement of the last half-century. These advances were not motivated and moved by secular ethics but were driven primarily by persons who had a clear religious vision of what was morally right.

2. In the United States, our enormous private sector of charitable works—education, hospitals, care for the poor, and countless other charities of great value—originated with and is still sponsored most significantly by religious organizations and religious impulses.

3. Western societies are not held together primarily by the overall enforcement of laws, which would be impractical, but most important by citizens who voluntarily obey the unenforceable because of their internal norms of correct behavior. For many, it is religious belief in right and wrong and an anticipated accountability to a higher power that produces such voluntary self-regulation. In fact, religious values and political realities are so interlinked in the origin and perpetuation of Western nations that we cannot lose the influence of religion in our public life without seriously jeopardizing all our freedoms.

4. Along with their private counterparts, religious organizations serve as mediating institutions to shape and temper the encroaching power of government on individuals and private organizations.

5. Religion inspires many believers to render service to others, which, in total, confers enormous benefit on communities and countries.

6. Religion strengthens the social fabric of society. As Rabbi Jonathan Sacks has taught: “[Religion] remains the most powerful community builder the world has known. . . . Religion is the best antidote to the individualism of the consumer age. The idea that society can do without it flies in the face of history.”⁷

7. Finally, Clayton M. Christensen, a Latter-day Saint who is hailed as a worldwide “thought leader” on business management and innovation,⁸ has written that “religion is the foundation of democracy and prosperity.”⁹ Much more could be said about the positive role of religion in economic development.

I maintain that religious teachings and the religiously

motivated actions of believers are essential to a free and prosperous society and continue to deserve special legal protections.

3. Complementary Responsibilities of Religion

So far I have spoken only of governments’ responsibilities to religious believers and organizations. I now turn to the complementary responsibilities that religions and believers owe to their governments.

From those who enjoy their protections, governments obviously have a right to expect obedience to laws and respect for culture. Governments have an overriding interest in preserving the security of their national borders and defending the health and safety of their citizens. They obviously have the right to insist that all organizations, including religions, refrain from teaching hate and from actions that could result in violence or other criminal acts toward others. No country need offer sanctuary to organizations that promote terrorism.

Religious freedom is no barrier to government power in any of these circumstances.

Today the complementary functions of religion and government are being severely tested in Europe. The massive inflow of refugees of mostly Muslim religion and culture into countries with a different culture and different religions obviously creates serious political, cultural, social, financial, and religious challenges.

What can religion and religious organizations contribute to help refugees and the countries that have received them—short term and long term? We know that some professionals are skeptical of the role of religious organizations in these matters, some even seeing religion as a disruptive influence. I will try not to contradict opinions based on facts with which I am not familiar. I will only share the policies and experience of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, which I believe will illustrate the positive



Refugees cross the border from Syria into Turkey.

influence that religious organizations can and should have, short term and long term.

We who are known as Latter-day Saints, or Mormons, take literally Christ's teaching that we should give food to the hungry and shelter to the stranger (see Matthew 25:35).



these efforts has averaged about U.S. \$40 million per year.

We avoid one of the objections to faith-based organizations by rigorously separating our humanitarian services from our worldwide missionary efforts. Our humanitarian aid is given without regard to religious affiliation because we want our missionary efforts to be received and considered without influence from force or food or other favors.

4. What Can Churches Do?

What can church organizations do in addition to what the United Nations or individual countries can do? Again, I refer to our own Church's experience. While our



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We are likewise directed by a modern revelation from the same source to “remember in all things the poor and the needy, the sick and the afflicted, for he that doeth not these things, the same is not my disciple” (D&C 52:40).

Care for the poor and the needy is not optional or incidental in our Church. We do this worldwide. For example, in the year 2015 we had 177 emergency response projects in 56 countries. In addition, we had hundreds of projects that benefited more than a million people in seven other categories of assistance, such as clean water, immunization, and vision care. For more than 30 years, the magnitude of

membership—half in the United States and half elsewhere—is small in terms of capacity to help, we have three great advantages that magnify our impact.

First, the service traditions of our membership give us a resource of committed and experienced volunteers. To translate that into numbers, in 2015 our volunteers donated over 25 million hours of labor in our welfare, humanitarian, and other Church-sponsored projects,¹⁰ not counting what our members did privately.

Second, through our members' financial contributions to humanitarian causes, we come to the table with our own funding. While we have the ability to operate independent of bureaucratic structures and appropriations, we are also eager to coordinate our efforts with individual governments and with United Nations agencies for the greatest impact. We call upon them to look increasingly to the strengths of religious organizations.

Third, we have a global grassroots organization that can

be mobilized immediately. For example, on the worldwide problem of refugees, in March 2016 our First Presidency and our Relief Society, Young Women, and Primary General Presidents sent messages to members worldwide reminding them of the fundamental Christian principle of helping the poor and the “stranger” in our midst (Matthew 25:35). They invited girls and women of all ages to join in helping refugees in their local communities.¹¹

As a representative example of our members’ responses in Europe, one evening in April 2016, more than 200 Mormon congregants and their friends in Germany volunteered and packed 1,061 “welcome bags” for children living in six refugee centers in Germany in the states of Hessen and Rheinland-Pfalz. The bags contained new clothing, hygiene items, blankets, and art supplies. One of the women leading the effort said, “While I cannot change the tragic circumstances which made [refugees] flee from their homes, I can make a difference in [their] environment and be an active player in [their] lives.”

Here are two examples of our formally organized worldwide humanitarian efforts. In 2015, in full partnership with the British-based AMAR Foundation, LDS Charities constructed primary health care

centers for the Yezidi minority in northern Iraq, who were brutally targeted by ISIS. These health care centers—fully equipped with laboratory, urgent care, pharmacy, and ultrasound—bring relief to a population hurting both physically and spiritually. They employ Yezidi medical professionals and volunteers who aid their own people in culturally sensitive ways.

In 2004 the devastating earthquake and resulting tsunami in Southeast Asia on December 26 killed 230,000 people in 14 countries. Our LDS Charities arrived on site one day later and worked actively for five years. In the heavily affected Banda Aceh region alone, our charities built 900 permanent

houses, 24 village water systems, 15 primary schools, 3 medical centers, and 3 community centers that doubled as mosques. Additionally, we supplied copies of the holy Koran and prayer rugs to help those communities in their worship.

These are only some illustrations of the value of religion in a culture for which we in the religious community do not just advocate but also demand religious freedom, which we

consider to be the first freedom. ■

For the full text and video of this address, go to mormonnewsroom.org.



AMAR chair Baroness Emma Nicholson with Elder Jeffrey R. Holland in London, England.

NOTES

1. See *The Wall between Church and State*, ed. Dallin H. Oaks (1963).
2. See Pew Research Center, “The Global Religious Landscape: A Report on the Size and Distribution of the World’s Major Religious Groups as of 2010,” Dec. 2012, 9, 24, pewforum.org.
3. See Pew Research Center, “Latest Trends in Religious Restrictions and Hostilities,” Feb. 26, 2015, 4, pewforum.org.
4. Universal Declaration of Human Rights, adopted by the United Nation’s General Assembly on Dec. 10, 1948, un.org. This array of protections for religious practice is recognized widely in international and regional human rights documents. See, for example, the “International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights,” Dec. 16, 1966, Article 18; “Declaration on the Elimination of All Forms of Intolerance and of Discrimination Based on Religion or Belief,” 1981, Article 1; “European Convention for the Protection of Human Rights and Fundamental Freedoms,” 1950, Article 9; “American Convention on Human Rights” Nov. 22, 1969, Article 12; and “African Charter on Human and People’s Rights,” June 27, 1981, Article 8.
5. Amos N. Guiora, *Freedom from Religion: Rights and National Security* (2009) and Brian Leiter, *Why Tolerate Religion?* (2012).
6. Melanie Phillips, *The World Turned Upside Down: The Global Battle over God, Truth, and Power* (2010), xviii.
7. Jonathan Sacks, “The Moral Animal,” *New York Times*, Dec. 23, 2012, nytimes.com.
8. Jena McGregor, “The World’s Most Influential Management Thinker?” *Washington Post*, Nov. 12, 2013, washingtonpost.com.
9. Clayton Christensen, “Religion Is the Foundation of Democracy and Prosperity,” Feb. 8, 2011, mormonperspectives.com.
10. This is a total of over 14 million Church-service hours by missionaries, nearly 8 million by welfare and humanitarian workers, and over 4 million by welfare work in wards.
11. See First Presidency letter, Mar. 26, 2016, and letter by General Presidents of Relief Society, Young Women, and Primary, Mar. 26, 2016.