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Religious Freedom: Cornerstone of Peace

*May we pursue peace by working together to
preserve and protect the freedom of all people to hold and
manifest a religion or belief of their choice.*

Elder Christofferson delivered these remarks during an interfaith conference held in São Paulo, Brazil, on April 29, 2015.

I greatly appreciate the invitation to be with you this evening in this interfaith gathering, where Muslims, Sikhs, Catholics, Adventists, Jews, Evangelicals, Mormons, native spiritualists, people of no faith, and many others all stand shoulder to shoulder with leaders of government and business, joined to discuss and celebrate religious freedom. Indeed, the very act of our meeting together in this unique setting is a powerful symbol in its own right.

I am particularly pleased to be here in Brazil, a nation rich with diverse culture and people. By embracing its diversity, including its religious diversity, Brazil has prospered and will continue to prosper. Brazil was recently recognized as the country with the lowest government restrictions on religion.¹ I congratulate Brazil for this significant distinction. Brazil now has a responsibility to lead the global movement to promote this freedom. As Jesus Christ stated in the New Testament:

“Ye are the light of the world. A city [or in this case, a nation] that is set on an hill cannot be hid. . . .

“Let your light so shine before men, that they may see your good works, and glorify your Father which is in heaven” (Matthew 5:14, 16).

Esteemed colleagues, the world needs Brazil's light to shine long and bright. Tonight we celebrate what can become of that vision.

Background and Basic Principles

Religious freedom is the cornerstone of peace in a world with many competing philosophies. It gives us all space to determine for ourselves what we think and believe—to follow the truth that God speaks to our hearts. It allows diverse beliefs to coexist, protects the vulnerable, and helps us negotiate our conflicts. Thus, as the European Court of Human Rights has wisely concluded in multiple cases, religious freedom is vital to people of faith and “is also a precious asset for atheists, agnostics, sceptics and the unconcerned.” This is because “the pluralism indissociable from a democratic society, which has been dearly won over the centuries, depends on it.”²

A robust freedom is not merely what political philosophers have referred to as the “negative” freedom to be left alone, however important that may be. Rather, it is a much richer “positive” freedom—the freedom to live one’s religion or belief in a legal, political, and social environment that is tolerant, respectful, and accommodating of diverse beliefs.

We use our freedom of religion and belief to establish our core convictions, without which all other human rights would be meaningless. How can we claim the freedom of speech without being able to say what we truly believe? How can we claim the freedom of assembly unless we can gather with others who share our ideals? How can we enjoy freedom of the press unless we can publicly print or post who we really are?

The good news is that there has been remarkable progress in the spread of religious freedom. I have seen this progress in my own lifetime. As one example, in 1948, when I was just three years old, the United Nations General Assembly adopted the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, which called for “everyone [to have] the right to freedom of thought, conscience and religion.”³

When I was 21, a treaty was negotiated to make the

United Nations declaration binding. That treaty—known as the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights—reinforced the idea that each person should have “freedom to have or to adopt a religion or belief of his choice, and freedom, either individually or in community with others and in public or private, to manifest his religion or belief in worship, observance, practice and teaching.”⁴ The treaty entered into force 10 years later, in 1976.

As of 2017, 169 countries were parties to the treaty—virtually every developed country in the world.⁵ The American Convention on Human Rights (the Pact of San José, Costa Rica), which was adopted in 1969 and has been in force since 1978, protects religious freedom in almost identical language.⁶

Strong reasons undergird the progress made and should motivate us to do even more. Religious freedom strongly correlates with a host of positive economic, public health, and civic benefits.⁷ In general, religious individuals have better family lives, stronger marriages, less substance abuse and crime, higher educational levels, a greater willingness to volunteer and donate to charities, better work habits, longer lives, better health, greater income, and higher levels of well-being and happiness.⁸ Clearly, religious freedom and the practice of religion strengthen society.

The Need for Vigilance and Cooperation

Unfortunately, protections afforded to freedom of religion and belief are often weak, unheeded, and attacked. Powerful pressures attempt to restrain religious freedom even as it grows—including in countries that historically protected it most vigorously. These pressures have the upper hand or are gaining ground in many countries. Vast swaths of the world would find unthinkable the kind of celebration we enjoy here in Brazil.

Remarkably, in 2013, roughly 5.5 billion people—77 percent of the world’s population—lived in countries with high or very high restrictions on religious liberty, up from 68 percent just six years earlier.⁹

Virtually all Western democracies claim to believe in



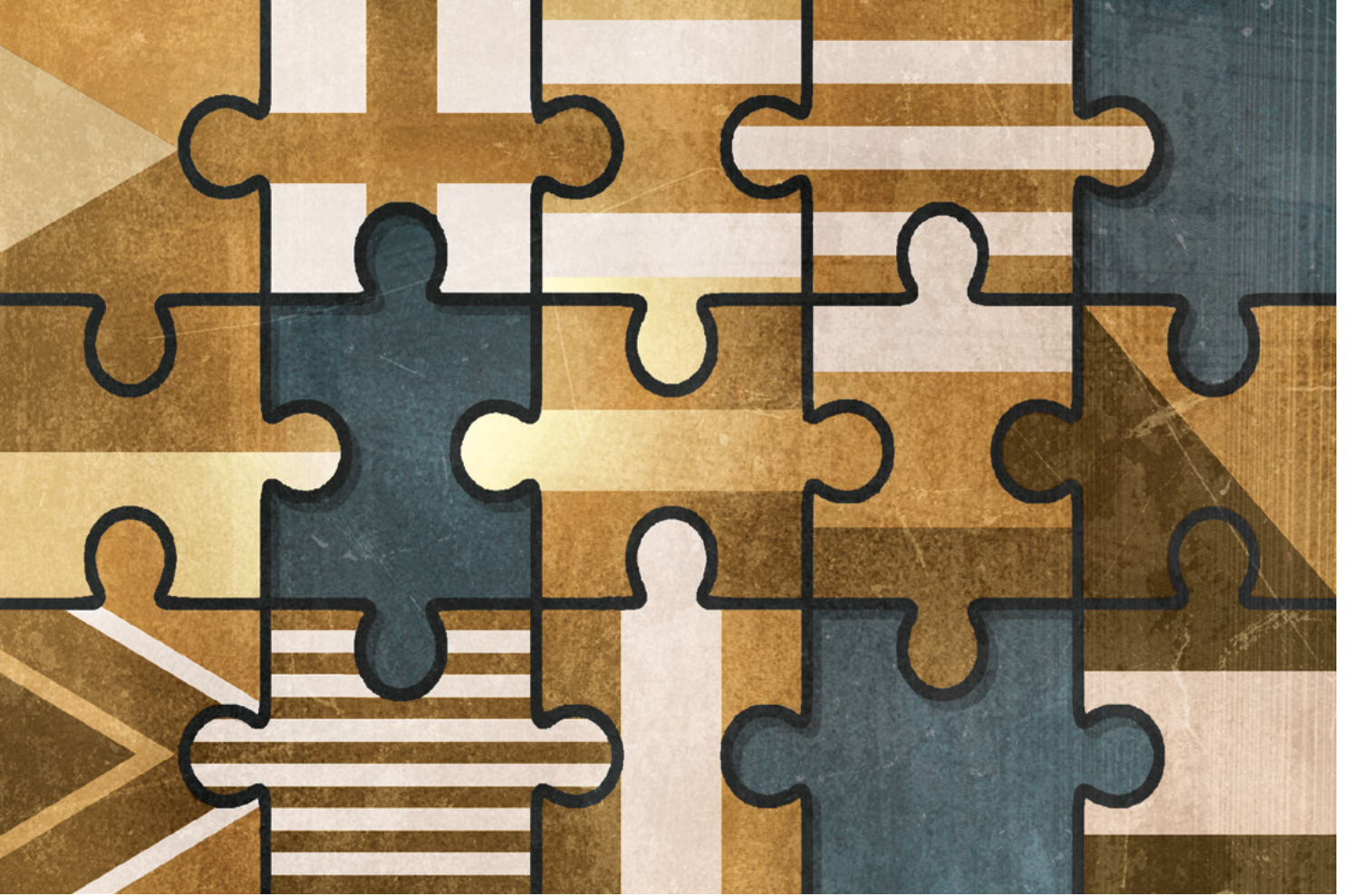
the principle of religious freedom. It is the application of the principle that can create controversy. Threats to religious freedom typically arise when religious people and institutions seek to say or do something (or refuse to say or do something) that runs counter to the philosophy or goals of those in power, including political majorities. Religion is often countercultural and thus unpopular. For this reason, religious freedom, even where it is generally supported in principle, is often vigorously opposed in practice.

In Europe and North America, controversies have arisen over issues such as whether churches can decide whom to hire (or not hire) as their ministers, whether individuals can wear religious clothes or symbols on the job or at school, whether employers must pay for employees' contraceptives and abortions, whether individuals can be compelled

to provide services that offend their beliefs, whether professional or university accreditation can be denied or revoked because of moral standards or beliefs, and whether religious student organizations can be required to accept students with contrary beliefs.

Brazil, with its religious diversity, also grapples with similar issues, such as businesses closing on Sunday, the wearing of religious clothing, and the protections afforded to Afro-Brazilian traditions. We are grateful that many of these matters have been resolved in favor of religious freedom. The prompt and proper resolution of issues involving the free exercise of religious beliefs will be invaluable to Brazil's ongoing respect of its diversity. By allowing religious people and organizations to live their faith publicly and without recrimination, Brazil will continue to be a bright and hopeful example of religious freedom to the world.

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The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints is pleased to stand with you and others in this vital effort. Although we are optimistic that our efforts will make a difference, we must make these efforts collectively, since none of us can win this fight alone.

I encourage you to hold fast to the freedoms you have forged at home and to lead courageously in promoting religious freedom on the world stage. The need to protect and preserve religious liberty—in a fair and balanced way that also protects others’ fundamental rights—is acute.

The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints is pleased to stand with you and others in this vital effort. Although we are optimistic that our efforts will make a difference, we must make these efforts collectively, since none of us can win this fight alone. I echo what my colleague Elder Dallin H. Oaks of the Quorum of the Twelve Apostles recently stated in a forum similar to this one:

“It is imperative that those of us who believe in God and in the reality of right and wrong unite more effectively to protect our religious freedom to preach and practice our faith in God and the principles of right

and wrong He has established. . . . All that is necessary for unity and a broad coalition along the lines I am suggesting is a common belief that there is a right and wrong in human behavior that has been established by a Supreme Being. All who believe in that fundamental [principle] should unite more effectively to preserve and strengthen the freedom to advocate and practice our religious beliefs, whatever they are. We must walk together for a ways on the same path in order to secure our freedom to pursue our separate ways when that is necessary according to our own beliefs.”¹⁰

Our task will be difficult and require constant vigilance, but it is of utmost importance.

I close with a passage from the Doctrine and Covenants. This passage was revealed in 1835, at a time when, despite constitutional protections, my forefathers were being driven

from their homes for embracing what to others seemed like new and different beliefs. So it is a sobering reminder for our time, especially when many of today's restrictions on religious freedom also come in countries that espouse the principle but sometimes fail to apply it in practice.

Our scripture says, "No government can exist in peace, except such laws are framed and held inviolate as will secure to each individual the free exercise of conscience." Governments may "restrain crime, but never control conscience; [they] should punish guilt, but never suppress the freedom of the soul" (D&C 134:2, 4).

May we pursue peace by working together to preserve and protect the freedom of all people to hold and manifest a religion or belief of their choice, whether individually or in community with others, at home or abroad, in public or private, and in worship, observance, practice, and teaching. ■

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

NOTES

1. See "Brazil Has Lowest Government Restrictions on Religion among 25 Most Populous Countries," July 22, 2013, theweeklynumber.com/weekly-number-blog; "Restrictions and Hostilities in the Most Populous Countries," Feb. 26, 2015, pewforum.org.
2. *Kokkinakis v. Greece*, 3/1992/348/421 (May 25, 1993), para. 31; *Nolan and K. v. Russia*, 2512/04 (Feb. 12, 2009), para. 61; see also *Serif v. Greece*, 38178/97 (Dec. 14, 1999), para. 49; European Convention on Human Rights, Article 9.
3. United Nations, Universal Declaration of Human Rights, Article 18, Dec. 10, 1948, un.org/en/documents/udhr.
4. International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights, Article 18, Dec. 16, 1966, ohchr.org/EN/ProfessionalInterest/Pages/CCPR.aspx.
5. See International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights; see also W. Cole Durham Jr., Matthew K. Richards, and Donlu D. Thayer, "The Status of and Threats to International Law on Freedom of Religion or Belief," in Allen D. Hertzke, ed., *The Future of Religious Freedom: Global Challenges* (2013), 31–66.
6. See American Convention on Human Rights "Pact of San José, Costa Rica," Nov. 22, 1969 (Inter-American Specialized Conference on Human Rights), oas.org; see also Juan G. Navarro Floria and Octavio Lo Prete, "Proselitismo y Libertad Religiosa: Una Visión desde América Latina," in *Anuario de Derecho Eclesiástico del Estado*, no. 27 (2011), 59–96.
7. See Brian J. Grim, Greg Clark, and Robert Edward Snyder, "Is Religious Freedom Good for Business?: A Conceptual and Empirical Analysis," *Interdisciplinary Journal of Research on Religion*, vol. 10 (2014), 4–6; Paul A. Marshall, "The Range of Religious Freedom," in Paul A. Marshall, ed., *Religious Freedom in the World* (2008), 1–11.
8. See Patrick F. Fagan, "Why Religion Matters Even More: The Impact of Religious Practice on Social Stability," *Backgrounders*, no. 1992 (Dec. 18, 2006), 1–19; Robert D. Putnam and David E. Campbell, *American Grace: How Religion Divides and Unites Us* (2010), 443–92.
9. See "Latest Trends in Religious Restrictions and Hostilities," Feb. 26, 2015, pewforum.org.
10. Dallin H. Oaks, "Preserving Religious Freedom" (lecture at Chapman University School of Law, Feb. 4, 2011), mormonnewsroom.org.

FAMILY HOME EVENING IDEA

Discuss the importance of religious freedom with your family, including how the citizens of your country first obtained the freedom to worship. What events led to religious freedom in your country? This may include legislation, protests, even war. You might create trivia questions to ask your family to help them learn about this topic in a more engaging way. In addition, consider discussing the following questions: How is religious freedom a blessing in our lives? How would our lives be different if we were not free to practice our religion? How can we help promote religious freedom for ourselves and others?

