Religious Freedom and the Common Good:
A Symposium of the Religious Freedom Project
November 15, 2016

In partnership with the Institute for Studies of Religion at Baylor University
About the Berkley Center for Religion, Peace & World Affairs

The Berkley Center for Religion, Peace, and World Affairs at Georgetown University, created within the Office of the President in 2006, is dedicated to the interdisciplinary study of religion, ethics, and public life. Through research, teaching, and service, the center explores global challenges of democracy and human rights; economic and social development; international diplomacy; and interreligious understanding. Two premises guide the center’s work: that a deep examination of faith and values is critical to address these challenges, and that the open engagement of religious and cultural traditions with one another can promote peace.

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About the Religious Freedom Project

The Religious Freedom Project (RFP) at Georgetown University’s Berkley Center for Religion, Peace, and World Affairs is the nation’s only university-based program devoted exclusively to the analysis of religious freedom, a basic human right restricted in many parts of the world.

Under the leadership of Director Thomas Farr and Associate Director Timothy Shah, the RFP engages a team of international scholars to examine and debate the meaning and value of religious liberty; its importance for democracy; and its role in social and economic development, international diplomacy, and the struggle against violent religious extremism.

The RFP began in 2011 with the generous support of the John Templeton Foundation. In 2014 that support continued, while the project also began a three-year partnership with Baylor University and its Institute for Studies of Religion under Director Byron Johnson.

For more information about the RFP’s research, teaching, publications, conferences, and workshops, visit our website at http://berkleycenter.georgetown.edu/rfp.
INTRODUCTION

To mark our six-year partnership with the John Templeton Foundation, the Religious Freedom Project hosted this capstone conference to explore the wide-ranging political, economic, and social dimensions of religious freedom and their enduring impact on the global common good. The RFP’s 13 associate scholars and other experts from across the academy addressed a range of crucial issues about the broader implications of religious freedom.

Participants brought different perspectives to bear on the following key questions: To what extent is religious liberty critical for human flourishing? When and how does it contribute to economic prosperity, democratization, and peace? What challenges face religious communities living under repressive governments or hostile social forces? How is the persecution of religion related to other infringements of basic human rights? What is the relationship between religious freedom and violent religious extremism, and is there a role for religious freedom in efforts to undermine radicalization and counter violent religious extremism and terrorism over the long term?

We were honored to host Senator Ben Sasse (R-NE), who delivered a major address, his first at Georgetown University, on the promotion of international religious freedom as an urgent global imperative.
## Program

**Welcome**
- Thomas Farr, *Religious Freedom Project*

### Religious Freedom and Human Flourishing

**Moderator:**
- Byron Johnson, *Baylor University*

**Panelists:**
- Thomas Berg, *University of St. Thomas*
- Rebecca Shah, *Religious Freedom Project*
- Brad Wilcox, *University of Virginia*
- Robert Woodberry, *Baylor University*

### Faith and Finance: A Productive Partnership?

**Moderator:**
- Brian Grim, *Religious Freedom & Business Foundation*

**Panelists:**
- Ilan Alon, *University of Agder, Norway*
- Anthony Gill, *University of Washington*
- Timur Kuran, *Duke University*
- Rachel McCleary, *Harvard University*

### Keynote Address: International Religious Freedom Promotion as a Moral, Economic, and Geopolitical Imperative

- The Honorable Ben Sasse, *United States Senator, Nebraska*

### Authoritarianism, Majoritarianism, and Religious Repression

**Moderator:**
- Timothy Shah, *Religious Freedom Project*

**Panelists:**
- Peter Danchin, *University of Maryland School of Law*
- Karrie Koesel, *University of Notre Dame*
- John Owen, *University of Virginia*
- Ani Sarkissian, *Michigan State University*

### Religious Freedom as an Antidote to Violent Religious Extremism

**Moderator:**
- Thomas Farr, *Religious Freedom Project*

**Panelists:**
- Sahar Aziz, *Texas A&M University School of Law*
- Allen Hertzke, *University of Oklahoma*
- William Inboden, *University of Texas*
- Daniel Philpott, *University of Notre Dame*
THOMAS FARR: Good morning, ladies and gentlemen. Welcome to Georgetown University for this special event. Today’s conference represents a milestone: the sixth year in operation of the Religious Freedom Project. Today we are going to showcase the work of our outstanding team of scholars. They are a highly accomplished group of men and women from many academic disciplines and universities, and we’re extremely proud of the work they’ve done.

Our subject today is one that might seem unremarkable in the context of American history. That’s no longer the case. In this conference, we’re going to explore the subject of “Religious Freedom and the Common Good.” Today, unfortunately, many of our fellow citizens have concluded that religious freedom is antithetical to the common good. Are they right? Or is religious freedom more usefully understood as it has been for the past 200 years in our country—the “first freedom” of our constitutional settlement, a fundamental right necessary for every person in every society? The answers to those questions are important not only to our own nation, but to the survival of religious freedom around the world and to our capacity to advance it in our foreign policy.

We’re going to explore these questions in a series of discussions and debates which will include both our scholars and outside experts. These conversations will examine the relationships between religious freedom and other social, economic, intellectual, and political goods. For example, to what extent is religious freedom really necessary for individual and social flourishing? When and how does religious freedom contribute to economic prosperity, democratization, and peace? How is the persecution of people because of their religious beliefs and practices related to the infringements of other basic human rights? What is the relationship, if any, between religious freedom and violent religious persecution and extremism? Is there a role for religious freedom in efforts to undermine radicalization and counter violent religious extremism and terrorism over the long term?

Let’s get to it. I’m going to ask our first panel to come forward and now I’ll turn it over to its moderator, Byron Johnson. Byron is the director of Baylor’s Institute for Studies of Religion, which is a strategic partner of the Religious Freedom Project. Byron is also a distinguished professor of social sciences at Baylor.

BYRON JOHNSON: Good morning. Before we begin our panel, let me quickly introduce our all-star panelists. First, we have Thomas Berg, a professor of law and public policy at the University of St. Thomas. He is a scholar in the area of religion and law. Next, we have Bob Woodberry, a professor at Baylor University. He previously taught at the University of...
Byron Johnson introduces the panelists

Texas and the National University of Singapore. He researches missions, religion, and social change in countries around the world. Next to Bob is Brad Wilcox from the University of Virginia, a professor of sociology and director of the National Marriage Project. Brad also works at the American Enterprise Institute and the Institute for Family Studies. Then we have Rebecca Shah, who was trained as an economist at the London School of Economics. She has done spectacular work in the area of religious freedom. She has studied the role of Pentecostalism among the Dalits and poor women in India. She studied domestic violence and the role of religion and entrepreneurship in reducing it. Becky and Bob are leading a very exciting Religion and Economic Empowerment Project based in India. Becky also works with us at the Institute for Studies of Religion at Baylor. Of course, she also works here at Georgetown with the Religious Freedom Project. She's everywhere; everyone claims her, but we are glad to be able to call her one of Baylor’s own as well.

I’d like to start off by asking this question: How has your own research demonstrated a connection between religious freedom and human flourishing? Becky, I know that’s a good question for you. Why don’t you kick us off?

REBECCA SHAH: Thank you, Byron. In terms of religious freedom, my research indicates that religious freedom gives the poor, especially poor women, the freedom to pursue a religion that enables them to demand equity and reciprocity in relationships. What do I mean by that? Our research in India showed quite unexpectedly that women who self-reported as converts to indigenous and independent forms of Pentecostalism were more likely to report domestic violence. The non-reporting of domestic violence is a very serious issue everywhere. In 2004, the Pan American Health Organization as well as the Center for Disease Control conducted a 12-country study of Latin American and Caribbean countries, which showed that there was a serious under-reporting of domestic violence in those countries. When asked why they didn’t report domestic violence, the number one reason given by women was that they thought it was normal at first; when they realized it wasn’t, they felt shame.

What I take away from this is that religious freedom enables women to not be passive recipients of abuse from their husbands. A woman can point to her husband as being guilty of a crime when she reports the violence. Her reporting of domestic abuse demonstrates that she expects to be treated differently. She expects to be treated like someone who has dignity, someone who has worth. She expects not to be abused, not to be a passive recipient of a treatment that sees her as having little worth.

The most recent National Family Health Study from India—which unfortunately was done in 2006, since the 2016 data has not yet come out—corresponds with our data and shows that people who report as Christian are more likely to report their violence as well. Married women who had experienced domestic violence and who self-reported as Christians were more likely to report their abuse. This seems to indicate to me that women who are able to convert to another religion see themselves as people who have dignity and worth that demands that they be treated as people who have dignity and worth.

BYRON JOHNSON: Thank you. Bob has done work on missions all around the world. His work has won awards and has been published in the best journals. He's the only person I know who submits an article to a journal and gets asked to lengthen the article instead of shrink it. The article actually grows, which is what happened for his American Political Science Review piece. Bob, go ahead.

ROBERT WOODBERRY: When I studied the social impact of missions around the world, I discovered that not only did missions have a direct, mostly beneficial effect on the societies where they served, but those missions also changed how the
dominant religion acted, often in ways that also benefitted society. When you have religious freedom, you get religious competition. New groups start to do different things to help people, like education or medical work. Partially, these social services help the new group get a hearing. Moreover, generally it’s the marginalized—the people who are abused in a particular context—who are most likely to convert. The threat of losing adherents starts to change the behavior of the dominant religion, which often starts providing similar social services.

When there is a religious monopoly that controls the texts, the interpretation of the texts, and the institutions, then that religion doesn’t have to do much to maintain its status. But when poor and marginalized people begin to convert, all of a sudden the dominant religion has to do something in order to avoid losing them. So not only is there a direct benefit that comes from what the mission groups bring with them, but missions also changes the behavior of the dominant religious group.

If you look at Latin American countries like Mexico, research by Guillermo Trejo shows that when Protestant missions came in, the Catholic Church devoted more resources to working among the poor, providing them with education and political support. Because they had far more resources than the Protestant missions, they were able to do a better job of helping the poor people. But the larger point is that the Protestant missions changed the behavior of the Catholic Church. Similarly, in India or East Asia, Buddhist and Hindus began to create organizations to work with the poor after Protestant missions entered the region and began promoting mass education, mass printing, and so on.

When you measure the average cumulative effect of what missionaries have done, you quickly discover the benefits. Where Protestant missions are active, we see greater literacy, more educational enrollment, more book publishing, more newspaper circulation, more voluntary association memberships, longer life expectancy, lower infant mortality, greater economic development, and greater political democracy. Areas that had less religious liberty in the past have less of these things.

Now, the missions may not be causing all of these things directly. Often, they are causing them indirectly by how they shape societies. I’m enough of a scholar to realize that the correlations don’t imply a causal relationship. There’s a complex interaction and the connection may be stronger or weaker depending on the context. But I and others have done a lot of work to try to determine whether they’re causal or not, and the results indicate a pretty robust relationship.

BYRON JOHNSON: Fantastic. Tom? You’re a legal scholar. What do you think when you hear this? How do you react to that?

THOMAS BERG: Yes, I’m in the different position here. I’m almost entirely a consumer of empirical research rather than a producer. I come at this issue as a legal scholar and as an advocate in the appellate courts and sometimes in the legislature. I view my role as posing questions about existing and future research in order to bring it in touch with the questions being asked in the legislative arena and in the courts on religious freedom issues.

The first thing that I’ve done in my work that’s relevant to the discussion here is to reemphasize the way in which the discussion about religion and the common good is not simply a matter of social policy, but also a part of our constitutional tradition of religious freedom. The founders nearly all thought that morality was crucial to a free society. They nearly all thought that religion was crucial to inculcating that morality and virtue.

George Washington gave a particularly pointed example of that in his farewell address, where he said that national morality is crucial to society and that we should indulge only with caution the supposition that morality can be maintained in exclusion of religious principles. At the same time, many of the founders did not believe that government could directly inculcate virtue. Madison and others emphasized that if government tried to advance religious organizations directly, it would tend to undercut and corrupt those institutions. The solution was indirection—leaving religious organizations free to promote the common good in their own way.
I obviously focus on the American context. There are particular questions that arise here. The research on religion and the common good is important and I expect to learn a tremendous amount today. I do worry a bit that, at least in the American context, the research tends to present conclusions at a fairly high level of generality regarding the contributions of religion to the common good. I worry that some research is not directly responsive to the kinds of criticisms of religious freedom in the American context that Tom Farr briefly alluded to at the beginning of this panel.

The critics of religious freedom in America admit that religious freedom may be fine in general. But religious freedom is being used today to claim exemptions from the law, which are being sought by organizations that themselves violate important social norms like equality for women and LGBT citizens. How, the critics say, do those organizations possibly promote the common good?

A second part of my work has been to frame and analyze those questions and think about various responses to them. I’ve tried to demonstrate that even in cases of religious exemption, religious freedom promotes the common good. Let me offer just one example. Among the most common religious freedom questions today in America, as we know, are those in which primarily Roman Catholic and evangelical Protestant organizations are challenged over same-sex discrimination and other conflicts with nondiscrimination laws.

Now, how crucial are these organizations in particular to the contribution of religion to the common good? John DiIulio has written that three religious communities—Roman Catholics, white evangelical Protestants, and black evangelical Protestants—figure most prominently in volunteering to help both members and nonmembers of their individual communities. Religious organizations from these three groups create a tremendous amount of social capital. I have suggested that they may be particularly vigorous in doing so precisely because they have a strong religious identity that inspires commitment to improving the common good. But that distinctive identity may also sometimes cause them to depart from societal norms. In my work I’ve described them as “partly acculturated” organizations and activities. They serve the broader society, and yet at the same time they are in some ways countercultural, running counter to dominant norms.

Relying on some other social science work—again, I rely on existing findings rather than develop new ones—we see that organizations that make countercultural demands tend to produce greater commitment in their members by reducing
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Thanks, Byron. I would say, first of all, that
BRAD WILCOX: fatherhood, and marriage. Brad, how would you respond to that?
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That’s a broad question. I’m going to throw it out there to Brad, because Brad hasn’t had a chance to comment. And Brad is somewhat at a disadvantage, because his work isn’t on religious freedom per se. He studies the influence of religion on families, fatherhood, and marriage. Brad, how would you respond to that?

BYRON JOHNSON: Well, that may be a good segue for us. About a month ago, we had an event here at Georgetown University where John DiIulio and I responded to Brian Grim’s new research, in which he tries to quantify the economic contributions of religion to American society. It’s a fabulous new article that’s received a lot of attention and publicity. John DiIulio loved the article, and so did I. But John was thinking that Brian overestimated the contribution. For those of you that haven’t read the piece, he estimates that religion has an economic impact of about $1.2 trillion a year to the U.S. economy. John thinks that’s high.

I think it’s low, because the paper, as good as the research is, overlooks a number of areas where you could assess religion’s contribution. Brian also bases the research on an estimated 344,000 houses of worship in the United States. There’s now some preliminary research being done on the halo effect of these organizations and what they actually do in their communities. In fact, we have new research that estimates the number of congregations to be as many as 500,000 religious houses of worship in America. If you take all of those extra congregations into consideration, then maybe $1.2 trillion is a low estimate. Well, if that’s the case and we have all these organizations that are doing good work—like after-school programs for kids or faith-based drug treatment programs—what does that mean when some of the positions that they take run counter to the culture? What lies ahead if we restrict these organizations from the work that they’re doing?

That’s a broad question. I’m going to throw it out there to Brad, because Brad hasn’t had a chance to comment. And Brad is somewhat at a disadvantage, because his work isn’t on religious freedom per se. He studies the influence of religion on families, fatherhood, and marriage. Brad, how would you respond to that?

BRAD WILCOX: Thanks, Byron. I would say, first of all, that there is some evidence, in part from your own research, that the least privileged Americans in some ways benefit the most from religious institutions. In the concluding section of Robert Putnam’s new book, Our Kids, Putnam talks about the ways in which religious institutions shape important educational outcomes for children in poverty. For instance, poor African-American kids benefit the most from religious attendance and religious engagement. It’s important as we’re thinking about these calls to regulate or otherwise alter religious institutions to realize that the people who may pay a price for those changes oftentimes are in the least privileged communities.

I would say more generally with respect to my own work that religion is an important source of stability and quality of life for white, black, Latino, Asian, and other American families. I find that couples, be they black, Hispanic, or white, who attend religious services together—that’s an important caveat, that they must be attending as a couple—are much more likely to report high relationship quality than African Americans, whites, and Latinos who do not attend together. We also find that there is remarkably less divorce for couples who attend services together.

In terms of looking at the impact of religion on family life, there’s some important connection between religion and entry into marriage, marital childbearing, marital quality, and marital stability here in the United States. That’s another example of the way in which religion as an institution tends to strengthen this particular dimension of our common life together. Again, if we try to impede religious liberty, we may be unintentionally undercutting other goods that religious institutions promote here in the American context.

BYRON JOHNSON: Becky, in India you’ve also done work on the connection between religious freedom and entrepreneurship. I think that’s related to this question. Can you share with us some of your findings in your previous work on the connection between religious freedom and entrepreneurship?

REBECCA SHAH: Well, first I want to clarify that the microfinance organizations that I work with in Africa and India provide loans to people from all faith traditions. They are primarily Christian microfinance organizations, but when women seek loans, they do not discriminate based on religion. In fact, it’s more likely that loan recipients are non-Christians, because Dalit Muslim women are some of the poorest women in India. Being a Dalit makes you poor because you’re an outcast. And if you’re a Dalit woman, you have not had access to education for cultural and other reasons.
Dalit women request loans to do all sorts of things. Embroidery is a great example. They might embroider and sell saris—a kind of Indian female garment—which they can do at home in north and south India. Or they can make jewelry and sell it to support their families. But the point is that they get loans regardless of their own faith.

There may be a time—and we are not there yet—when a law may be passed to prevent people from operating a business because of their particular stance on some issue, be it marriage or whatever. My fear is that such a law would shut down many of these Christian organizations that I work with, and the women will suffer from not having access to loans. This would be an enormous loss because these microfinance companies provide free business training to the men and women all across the country and in Sri Lanka.

In fact, I was just in Sri Lanka to study how we could set up business incubation units in the northern region, where there is a high number of widows because of the war. Most of the widows are Hindu. We are trying to tell the women that raising goats is economically not viable because the goats die frequently. On this trip, I was with a gentleman who was one of the microfinance experts. He was a man of faith, but it didn't matter that most of the women whom we spoke to were from other faiths.

So by limiting organizations based on their religious principles, we actually deprive the poor. Doing so would force the microfinance organizations that I work with to shut down, which would deprive the poorest of the poor—the poor Dalit women—of access to funds and access to a chance of a better life.

BYRON JOHNSON: Well, Tom, I’m going to come to you next to tie this together. I do a lot of research on prisons. I study faith-based organizations like Prison Fellowship and Kairos Prison Ministry. I frequently get asked if I also do studies on Islam and other groups in prison. The reality is that most of the work and almost all the volunteers for these initiatives come from evangelical groups. Going back to Dilulio’s point, the people who are doing the volunteer work and are serving the least fortunate tend to be people who are very devout or orthodox, and who also hold views that put them at odds with the prevailing culture.

Even Bob Putnam—who’s done so much work on social capital in his bestselling book, Bowling Alone—argues that fully one half of all social capital is spiritual capital, and this spiritual capital is found within houses of worship. That’s a big concession, I think, that there is a significant amount of good that’s going on.

We hosted Jackie Rivers, the wife of Gene Rivers and the executive director of the Seymour Institute for Black Church and Policy Studies, here at Georgetown last summer. She spoke about how her organization exists on fumes, and about how she was fearful that the good work that they’ve been doing in Dorchester, Massachusetts—an area within Boston that’s disadvantaged—could all be threatened. If they were to lose tax exempt status, which is something that they really fear, it would put them out of work. They’re one of the only groups left that’s working with gang members and the homeless in Dorchester. Tom, the question is, how do you see these challenges to religious freedom playing out?

THOMAS BERG: It’s a huge issue that is as old as our republic. Let me go back to Washington again. He wrote a well-known letter to the Quakers in the Mid-Atlantic states after they congratulated him on his inauguration. Of course, Washington had a somewhat fraught relationship with the Quakers because during the revolution they were unwilling to fight. They also chose to help British soldiers and to provide them relief, which sometimes led to the Quakers being accused of treason. But Washington wrote back to the Quakers and said, “It is doing the people called Quakers no more than justice to say, that except their declining to share with others the burthen of the common defense, there is no denomination among us who are more exemplary and
useful citizens.” Common defense wasn’t a minor issue for Washington, by the way. The second sentence of the letter then says that the laws should extensively accommodate religious conscience as much as is consistent with the essential interests of the nation.

It’s a very strong statement of religious accommodation. I view the two parts of that letter as connected to each other. A group may depart from social norms in one respect, and yet contribute to the common good in many other respects. When you take action against a group based on one area of conflict, you run the risk of undercutting the contributions that it makes in other areas because of its distinctive identity. I think that is a recurring point in our constitutional tradition, and we need to remember it now. I think it’s true with evangelicals and Catholics, too, not just Quakers. Again, I would be interested in research that might explore that connection. Is there something about the distinctive identities of organizations that make them particular contributors to the poor?

One more thing: You brought up Putnam and Campbell, and as I understand their findings, they found a robust connection between a person’s religious identity and their level of contribution to social capital, including the amount they volunteer. Religious folks are higher than nonreligious folks on scores of social capital and volunteering, but they are lower than nonreligious folks on the score of tolerance. That may vary from finding to finding, but it is part of Putnam and Campbell’s research.

That’s another thing we have to consider, particularly at this moment when the safety and the equal status of Muslim citizens in our country is in question. We don’t know exactly how this is all going to play out. It’s very early, but we should be extremely vigilant. Speaking as an evangelically-oriented Christian myself, evangelicals should be particularly vigilant because our moral credibility as defenders of religious freedom is crucial to having the moral credibility to say that we contribute to the common good. We must recognize that others deserve that freedom, too, and that they need to be protected.

BYRON JOHNSON: We’ve done a lot of research, and we certainly need to do more. I think Brian Grim’s study helps us think in a new way about quantifying religion’s contributions and about what it means to affect the common good. I’d like to ask Bob another question, and after he responds others can weigh in. What kind of research do we need to do in the future that would help us be more vigilant about documenting the impact that these faith groups are having? It’s not enough just to say that, if you go to church every week, you’re more likely to live longer—though that’s an important finding. What does that mean economically? Can we structure future studies in ways that we haven’t thought about?

ROBERT WOODBERRY: Good question. First, however, I’d like to make a minor comment related to what was just said. We can’t make our argument for religious liberty entirely on pragmatic grounds. It shouldn’t only be that, if you provide enough “good,” you can have religious freedom. Because how we define “good” is actually based on religious or religious-like belief. Moreover, definitions of good and bad have changed over time. Dominant groups have repeatedly tried to impose what they consider “good” on society. Over the course of history, dominant groups have tried to impose their notions of “good” on other groups, but now we regard many of these notions of the “good” as fundamentally bad. For instance, when Quakers, Mennonites, and other religious people first tried to avoid being forced to kill people in a war, there were punished because members of the dominant community thought they were wrong. But now we have the ability to be conscientious objectors.

Juries were given independence from judges due to a similar situation. Quakers were evangelizing publicly and were accused of disturbing the peace. When they were put on trial, the jury found them innocent on the grounds that the Quakers weren’t
disturbing the peace; they were just spreading their faith. The judge said that the jurors had made a decision that was against the law and put the jurors in prison without food or a chamber pot until they would change their mind and find “according to the law.” A higher court ruled the punishment of the jurors was illegal, which led to the independence of the jury in British common law. The higher court decision ensured that judges could not punish jurors for arriving at conclusions the judge disagreed with.

There are plenty of other instances of religious groups standing against the dominant morality of their society in ways that we now admire. Southern plantation owners and legislators banned northern missionaries from working with blacks in the South or in the Caribbean. Forced sterilization was regarded as a good thing in the early twentieth century; the Catholic Church was the main group to stand against it. We can’t just assume that good and bad are neutral, objective things. Religious freedom allows us to have different opinions about what is good and bad. People can argue from different positions, which hopefully helps us create a better society. Suppressing groups that think differently than us is actually a bad thing. So we can’t base our claims regarding the importance of religious liberty solely on pragmatic grounds.

There is, of course, research to support the pragmatic value of religion, depending on what factors you are measuring. The impact of religion works both through formalized institutions and informal ways. If you’re talking about something like health in the United States, people who attend church regularly live, on average, about 7.2 years longer than people who do not. If you think of how that affects health insurance, for example, or the cost of the Affordable Care Act, you realize that this is a very large factor that is rarely discussed. Religion promotes behaviors that are not only healthy but also have positive economic effects—if it reduces divorce, if it increases involvement with kids, or if it increases involvement in schools, all of those things have a social benefit.

However, some skeptical scholars critique this work as correlational rather than causal. One difficulty is that a lot of research is based on self-reporting. We need to work on performing research that can demonstrate a causal relationship between religion and other factors with greater plausibility. For example, Becky Shah and I are working to measure the effect of religion through randomized control trials so as to isolate the effect of religion in a very careful way. This can be convincing to a broader group of scholars. I think we have to work harder to undermine the critique that religious people are just saying nice things about themselves and make it harder for those who doubt the value of religious liberty to posit alternative explanations.

We also need to be very concrete regarding the financial and social implications of our research. For example, religious people are living 7.2 years longer and recovering from diseases more quickly than nonreligious people—which they do. Both are quite stable findings in the empirical research, and both have a large economic benefit for society that people don’t even think about. Anyone who cares about healthcare should care about religious because it saves the medical system a lot of money.

BYRON JOHNSON: Becky, do you want to respond to that?

REBECCA SHAH: I just want to piggyback on what Bob has said. In our research we’re asking very hard questions about what people actually believe, which is not an easy thing to do. Sometimes this entails asking questions about the specific content of people’s beliefs. We’ve had to drill down into the beliefs that Muslims actually hold, say, about future-regarding behavior. How do their beliefs shape future actions? What do they indicate about how husbands and wives treat each other and their children? What role does God play in this behavior?

Neither Bob nor I are theologians. But we’ve had to study very intently the religious traditions that underpin behavior. Bob primarily studied Sikhism, so he became an expert in studying all of their beliefs. We have had to study all of the beliefs of the different sects of Hinduism. We examined Catholic beliefs, both cultural and non-cultural. We’ve had to ask people specific questions to isolate the influence of those beliefs on their economic and social outcomes. That’s very difficult to do, because we had to do some things that were not politically correct.

BYRON JOHNSON: Brad, do you want to jump in?

BRAD WILCOX: I think one challenge facing us today more generally is the need to think about the ways in which religious freedom may be beneficial on some important outcomes. We’ve heard some of those outcomes, particularly from Bob, and we’ll hear more about them in the next panel. But it’s also important to understand and to realize that there may be some variables where religious freedom doesn’t have a positive effect—or any effect at all.
My own research for the Religious Freedom Project finds that there is no link between religious freedom and the strength of marriage culture around the globe. We looked at this in the West. We looked at this outside the West. We broke it up into different regions. There isn’t any clear association between religious liberty and the health of marriage per se as an institution. Now, perhaps there is an association between religious attendance in the West and the strength of marriages. But that’s a somewhat different kind of relationship than the question of whether or not religious freedom per se tends to strengthen marriage as an institution.

As I’ve been thinking about this particular issue, it seems that religious freedom is perhaps clustered with pluralism and the primacy of individual conscience—it is in essence part of a group of modern progressive and individualistic values. Yet marriage and the extended family are more traditional institutions that tend empirically to flourish in societies that have a more collectivist orientation. For that reason, religious freedom might not actually promote stable marriages.

What I’m saying is that our research might demonstrate that religious freedom and religious liberty are not panaceas that necessarily foster better outcomes across every dimension of our common social life. This is an important caveat to the research that we’re doing. And if we find a lack of a correlation, we have to be clear about that in order to keep our integrity.

We have to state that in certain areas religious freedom seems to be having an impact that’s arguably positive, while in other areas it’s not. In some areas, the impact of religious freedom could actually be negative. We must be clear about the fact that when you actually start looking at any kind of factor, results can get somewhat messy or ambiguous.

BYRON JOHNSON: Right. This is related to the need to think strategically about research that helps us more accurately assess the contribution of religious freedom. We recently did a study in Minnesota where we looked at a faith-based program designed to rehabilitate prisoners. Typically, we just examine if the program actually reduces recidivism. We’ve shown recidivism reduction, but we realized that that’s maybe not enough. So we structured our project in Minnesota like a cost-benefit study to examine the return on investment.

We found that for every participant in this faith-based program, the state of Minnesota is saving $8,300 in expenses. We calculated this number not only by tracking them post-release, but also by tracking how much they paid in taxes and child support. We also studied whether this program helped released convicts repair their marriages. This allowed us to operationalize this study differently than by just looking at recidivism.

There’s another program called the Prison Entrepreneurship Program based in Houston, Texas. In this program, faith-motivated business executives go into prisons and help inmates develop business plans that will eventually help them start their own businesses when they leave prison. As you know, getting employment is a very difficult thing for someone coming out of prison. Just getting a driver’s license or finding a job is difficult. But for convicts who have participated in the Prison Entrepreneurship Program, the employment rate is almost 100 percent. If you live in Houston, you’re more likely to be unemployed if you didn’t go to prison than if you did but participated in this program. These convicts have formed companies. A lot of these companies are flourishing and they now have their own employees, and many of them are now in stable marriages for the first time.

Now we are thinking about calculating the economic benefit of this program even beyond telling the simple story that the program lowered recidivism. There are more important questions that people want to answer. Many people are not returning to jail, but that doesn’t mean they’re living wholesome lives. Perhaps they’ve committed new crimes that have just not been detected.
Tom, I know that you don’t crunch numbers, but you read people who do crunch numbers. When you hear this kind of a discussion, what are you thinking?

THOMAS BERG: I think there’s a lot more I need to learn. I agree completely that our arguments for religious freedom can’t be based solely on pragmatic grounds. They have to be based on human dignity as well. But the definition of a pragmatic argument can actually be quite broad. The promotion of human dignity itself has pragmatic benefits. I need to learn and read more about all of these things, and I look forward to more of these studies.

I would like to reiterate the connection between departing from social norms and maintaining a distinctive religious identity that may also contribute to vigorous community involvement. From a legal advocacy perspective, I find research that frames the relationship in that way to be extremely helpful.

I’m also interested in the research on religious freedom and social stability around the world because that may become an issue in the United States, too. Nothing will deepen American Muslims’ love of their country more than having their freedoms protected. That’s not an empirical statement. I can’t prove that. It’s a bit of a rhetorical statement, but I think it’s important. And nothing would disillusion citizens more than the sense that their government does not protect their freedoms.

Unfortunately, we now see some level of disillusionment. We were already seeing it among conservative Christians before Tuesday’s election. Who knows how the world will change after Tuesday? In the long term, I don’t think the world is really that different. The cultural direction on issues of sexual morality and the negative views toward conservative Christian religion are clear regardless of what happened last Tuesday.

Research about social stability and religious freedom in other countries may turn out to be relevant in the United States as well. Religious freedom as a source of social stability is a deep part of our tradition. Let me quote for you an excerpt from the Supreme Court’s ruling in the Jehovah’s Witness flag salute case of 1943, Board of Education v. Barnette: “[The] assurance that rights are secure tends to diminish fear and jealousy of strong government, and by making us feel safe under it makes for its better support.” Now, that’s written by New Deal justices who wanted a strong government. They also thought it was important, therefore, to protect First Amendment rights in order to give that government greater legitimacy.

We have a strong government now, and we always will. We’re living in a welfare state government, which comes with a set of pros and cons. When government plays such a significant role in people’s lives, it is quite important that people feel that the government is also recognizing their other loyalties that supersede their loyalty to the state.

BYRON JOHNSON: Well, we’re going to open up our panel for questions.

JULIANA TAIMOORAZY: Good morning. I’m Juliana Taimoorazy from the Iraqi Christian Relief Council. This question is for Bob and Rebecca. Do you see cultural Christians invested in the plight of the persecuted Church in Iraq and Syria to the same extent as those who are more devoted and who attend church on a regular basis? My organization travels and speaks in different churches on a weekly basis to raise awareness and to help support these people. We’ve noticed in our experience that those who are more devoted care a little bit more than those who are culturally Christian. Thank you.

ROBERT WOODBERRY: I haven’t researched that directly, so this is anecdotal. But my sense is that what you said is correct: People who are more devout are more concerned about the issue of persecution of Christians overseas. I would add that when you go to places like Iraq, refugee camps in the Middle East, or rural Afghanistan, many of the people who provide social services, who live in the most difficult places, who stay for the long term, who have learned the language, and who are deeply embedded in the local culture are also religiously devout. They are often from conservative religious groups.

In contrast, the people who come in with the government or with secular NGOs tend to come in with lots of money, and they pop in and pop out. They don’t stay for the long term. They don’t get to know the people. They don’t learn the language. They also don’t tend to be in the very difficult, remote places. Thus, I suspect the missionaries and religious NGO workers are more effective in mitigating local social ills, especially dollar for dollar.

BYRON JOHNSON: Are there other questions? Yes, here in the front.

ANNA SINEVA: Thank you. My name is Anna. I work at the National Affairs Office of the Church of Scientology here in Washington, D.C. My question is also mostly for Rebecca and Bob because you two spoke the most about the empirical
“People often will criticize others for promoting or imposing their set of ethical views on others... But we practice the same ethical imposition now, only with a somewhat different set of ethical values. We impose our ethical values on our society, on other groups, or on other countries by incentivizing and sometimes forcing change on particular issues that we think must be changed—for example, issues of gender, sexuality, equality, and democracy. But imposing “modern” or “civilized” values is something that we criticized in the past. If we’re going to criticize the past, we shouldn’t be hypocrites.”

*Robert Woodberry*

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research that you have done. I was wondering about one particular component of that research that I would imagine was very difficult. It seems like a big variable would always be the personal awareness regarding how one’s own religious background has influenced one’s views. You could have somebody who’s very well-bred, very educated, and morally composed who is completely unaware that he has high values and standards in life as a result of his religious upbringing because he didn’t have any exposure to people of different kinds of beliefs. For example, he doesn’t know that his views on the family or his contribution to society are due to his religious upbringing. Or you could have somebody who converted or became a religious leader in life and is fully aware of that factor. How did you work through that complexity?

**REBECCA SHAH:** The new research we’re doing in India focuses on the very, very poor with very low socioeconomic status from a variety of religious traditions. They wouldn’t be called well-bred. Very few of them, if any at all, have had any education, and virtually none of them have had a college education.

**ROBERT WOODBERRY:** We’re also looking at religious changes over time, so we ask questions about all their different backgrounds to examine each religious background that may have shaped them. Our research in India and Sri Lanka is in an early phase, so it’s hard to differentiate or measure every change of faith, like if you were raised Christian and became Muslim, or you were raised Hindu and became Christian. The research is still in an early phase, so it’s challenging to see how those things interplay. But I think they do always interplay because you’re never coming from nowhere. You’re always building on what was there before.

This relates to what we were discussing earlier. If you are making claims about whether or not religious groups should be restricted based on whether or not they are doing something that is “bad,” you are actually making a moral claim. Any time you get upset or angry at someone else’s actions, you’re making a moral claim. You’re saying that their actions are wrong. You may not know what the foundation for that moral claim is, but you are claiming something. And those claims come from somewhere. They come from traditions that not everyone shares.

People often will criticize others for promoting or imposing their set of ethical views on others. For instance, they’ll criticize people in the nineteenth century for having a “civilizing” mission. But we practice the same ethical imposition now, only with a somewhat different set of ethical values. We impose our ethical values on our society, on other groups, or on other countries by incentivizing and sometimes forcing change on particular issues that we think must be changed—for example, issues of gender, sexuality, equality, and democracy. But imposing “modern” or “civilized” values is something that we criticized in the past.

If we’re going to criticize the past, we shouldn’t be hypocrites about it. If we’re going to make moral and ethical claims and seek to impose them because they are universal, then we should justify those claims in a way that doesn’t undermine other people’s ability to make counterclaims.

**BYRON JOHNSON:** Very good. Are there other questions?

**JENNA MENIK:** Thank you. Tom made a statement that religious people rank lower than nonreligious people with
regard to tolerance in the studies of Putnam and Campbell. What exactly were Putnam and Campbell measuring to produce that finding? Did they measure active persecution of other religious groups, or is it simply a non-willingness to accept or sympathize with other people’s beliefs?

THOMAS BERG: I don’t know the Putnam and Campbell finding that well. I assume it’s the latter rather than the former. I don’t think it’s about active persecution.

ROBERT WOODBERRY: I’ve studied it. It’s actually pretty complex. Normally, when researchers measure intolerance they select a number of target groups, like gays and lesbians, feminists, racists, and various types of marginal groups. Then they create scales to examine who is more opposed to those groups. Now, the people who create those scales tend to be social liberals, and those scales often get weighted toward groups that social liberals are worried about being targeted. In that context, devout religious people and religious conservatives appear more intolerant.

However, if you take a different approach and ask people which group they dislike most, and then ask them about discrimination and intolerance for the groups they dislike, then religious people are not more intolerant than nonreligious people. I think it is more fair to conduct the studies this way. Tolerance should not be defined as liking thing or groups that academics want us to like; in that case, whoever picks the target groups looks more tolerant. Marxists like Marxists, and feminists like feminists. But that doesn’t tell us anything. Instead, tolerance should be measured as how we treat the groups we do not like. People on the left and right, or religious and nonreligious people, all dislike other groups of people. Ask people which groups they dislike, and then ask them about their tolerance for those groups. When that is done, religious people are not more intolerant.

BRAD WILCOX: James Hunter’s work, in his book The Death of Character, has a similar story playing out. Hunter studied religion among teenage populations and found that in some important outcomes—things like honesty, for instance—more religious teenagers scored better. But on his measure of tolerance—and I can’t remember how he measured tolerance—he found that religious teens were less tolerant. Depending on how you define tolerance, it may be the case that religious teens do better on some important moral outcomes, but they don’t do as well on the tolerance outcome. This is the case in America. As you were pointing out, the stock we place on the tolerance outcome has risen dramatically in the last decade and a half. Good question.

BYRON JOHNSON: Yes, in the back.

NATHAN WINEINGER: Thank you. I’m Nathan Wineinger from the 21st Century Wilberforce Initiative. I’m wondering if there is any research regarding the process by which things we used to view as good become seen as bad, like slavery. Is there any research on the role of penitence and repentance within religious traditions on any of these outcomes—social stability, et cetera?

BYRON JOHNSON: Bob, what do you think?

ROBERT WOODBERRY: I don’t know of any research on penitence and repentance specifically. I certainly know that within the abolitionist movement, which was a very religious movement for the most part, penitence for national sins like slavery was a very important part of mobilizing opposition to slavery. That was also true in terms of other nineteenth-century movements that were linked to revivalism and the mission movement—for instance, the movement to fight the opium trade. Certainly in the nineteenth century, penitence and repentance were central factors in mobilizing movements against things like slavery and abuses by colonial powers.

BYRON JOHNSON: We have another question in the back.
TONY LAUINGER: Thank you. I'm Tony Lauinger, a board member of the Religious Freedom Institute. I have a question for Professor Berg about speech and about our freedom to express religious beliefs. In how much jeopardy do you believe those freedoms are when some respond to the exercise of religious freedom by calling it hate speech? For instance, I believe that in some parts of Canada, pastors who speak out against certain things like same-sex marriage, abortion, or other moral issues—even in their own church—could be charged with hate speech.

THOMAS BERG: I think it’s always worth noting that a culture, including a legal culture, can shift dramatically over time. There always has to be that caveat with any answer to your question. With that said, I think the free speech culture in the United States is pretty strong and shies away from any government regulation. It's shared on a bipartisan basis even by secular liberals who—at least those on the courts—are quite committed to freedom of speech. The Roberts Court has been the most protective of free speech of any court that we've had.

Things change in two places. Number one, when you move beyond speech to what is described as conduct, even when that conduct has a heavily expressive element, the left side of the political spectrum is less likely to protect it. Many people claim that in those cases, anti-discrimination laws must be enforced because the issue is about conduct, not speech. That's the primary flashpoint.

Sometimes anti-discrimination laws are enforced through claims that the major harm to the victim is speech-related harm—that by refusing service to me, you have attacked my dignity. That is speech-related harm. Yet, because refusing service is conduct, the anti-discrimination side says there's absolutely no legal protection for the refusal of service under free speech rights. Remember also that in the Obergefell case, Justice Kennedy talked about the freedom of religious institutions to teach their beliefs about marriage. He didn't say anything about their ability to practice their beliefs about marriage and to act consistently with their beliefs about marriage. That's a very significant qualifier.

The other significant qualifier is that there exist effective restrictions on speech in the marketplace. It's the Brendan Eich question [the former CEO of Mozilla]: Will anyone who has declared views in favor of the traditional view of marriage be punished socially, say, by the loss of their jobs? Those two are both significant problems. But with regards specifically to government regulation of speech in the United States, I think we’re on safer ground than Canada or Western Europe, where there are less robust traditions of freedom of speech.

BYRON JOHNSON: Next question, please.

TIM SCHEIDERER: I'm Tim Scheiderer of the St. Charles Institute. I have a question about advocating for international religious freedom. Have you or anyone else used your research to advocate for religious freedom to lawmakers domestically or internationally? What has been the reaction?

REBECCA SHAH: This is the purpose of the Religious Freedom Institute. The Religious Freedom Institute was just started to complement the academic nature of the Religious Freedom Project. The institute will bring together the research by scholars at the RFP—like Brad's research, Bob's, and mine—and put it in a format to advocate for religious freedom.

In addition, the work of the Religious Freedom Project has been used in meetings at the State Department. Recently I conducted a review of religious freedom programs within the State Department's Bureau of Democracy, Human Rights, and Labor. I had to review the projects, as well as produce a strategic document on how they can best move forward. I used a lot of work from the Religious Freedom Project, like that of Ani Sarkissian and Karrie Koesel, to inform how the State Department should move forward.

BYRON JOHNSON: I'll just add that we academics do a good job of publishing articles in very sophisticated journals that very few people read. We're beginning to realize that there have to be other ways to communicate these findings so that people actually hear about them. Brad is fantastic at this. Brad has been writing popular pieces for the Washington Post, the New York Times, and USA Today. We are pursuing that path more as a way to put our findings in a format that allows people to easily understand them and ensures that everyday people and policymakers will read about our research. That's the reason for the institute coming into existence, to have that kind of effect that we haven't been able to have just yet.

THOMAS BERG: I think it’s wonderful. I hope the RFI will be directly filing amicus briefs in court, providing legislative testimony, et cetera. It will bridge the gap between the empirical research and what judges, legislators, and administrators are hearing. It’s really important.

BYRON JOHNSON: On that note, we have just run out of time. Please join me in thanking our panel. [Applause]
Faith and Finance: A Productive Partnership?

BRIAN GRIM: The connection between business, the economy, and religious freedom is one that has not been looked at very much. Yet examining the connection certainly makes sense. When people get along and accept one another, they can do business together better. I’ll just give one example, and then I’m going to open the floor to our panel of experts by posing a couple of questions to them.

If you remember, a few years ago there was a big controversy in New York City over plans to build an Islamic center and mosque near Ground Zero, where the attacks of September 11 happened. There was great controversy over this mosque. People were saying all kinds of inflammatory remarks about Muslims, labeling the proposed building the “Ground Zero Mosque” and trying to prevent the construction on the site. The heated debate has died down, as that project didn’t materialize.

Yet, if you tour New York City today, one of the most visible things you’ll see on the streets are halal food trucks. There are lines snaking around the block to get the Muslim “kosher” food. It’s very interesting how the proposal to build a mosque inflamed passions, whereas there are Muslims doing business throughout the city and everybody loves them. I am suggesting a meaningful connection between a climate conducive to business and the acceptance that stems from religious freedom.

I’m going to address my first question to Tony Gill, a distinguished professor from the University of Washington. Tony, what is the connection between religious freedom and the economy?

ANTHONY GILL: The connection between economic growth and religious liberty is something that was explored during the second phase of the Religious Freedom Project about three years ago. I was asked to think about the question: Does religious liberty promote economic growth? The answer is pretty simple. We can go back about 340 years to Adam Smith. He talked about this in his book, The Wealth of Nations.

The recipe for economic growth is very, very simple. You need to specialize. When you specialize, you become better at something. You gain efficiency. However, when you specialize, you need to trade with other people because you’re only doing one thing, and in order to survive you need lots of things. Thus, specialization combined with an expanding market is the recipe for growth.
Now, anything that gets in the way of the expansion of the market is going to limit specialization. It's going to harm, slow down, or possibly even decrease economic growth in that regard. We can think about many different types of barriers to trade here, such as increased tariff rates or increased regulations.

Another important issue is religious liberty. If you make it very difficult for somebody with different beliefs to set up shop in your country—to believe what they want to do, to do things that they want to do on a Friday, Saturday, or Sunday—then they’re not going to want to come to your country. They’re not going to want to visit with you and trade with you, and that is going to restrict economic growth. The restriction of religious liberty is just another barrier to trade. We typically think of religious liberty as something else. I’m thinking of it in a more mundane, economic sense. Restriction on religious liberty cuts down on trade.

About 400 years ago, folks in the Netherlands figured this out. The Dutch have been very important in promoting religious toleration and religious freedom. The principle of religious freedom filtered over to England and then to the United States, where it is protected by the First Amendment. One of the things that the Dutch realized is that they are a commercial nation. They need to trade with a lot of individuals. Yet, if you keep arresting the people that want to trade with you because of their religious beliefs, then they won’t want to trade with you anymore. Based on this consideration, the Dutch started to tolerate one another. They said, “You know what, we don’t like your beliefs very much, but you have some really cool goods that we like. Why don’t we live together a little bit and trade on that dimension, even though I might not necessarily be happy about your religious faith?”

Even in Dutch territories there were still some laws on the books that said you couldn’t believe this or that thing. Yet, they started to push them aside. “We’re not going to enforce these legal restrictions on religious liberty,” they said, “because we like having you here.” European immigrants to North America adopted this mindset as well. The famous Pilgrims and the Puritans that came in search of religious freedom were really escaping religious persecution in England.

Ironically, as they settled in America, they started to do their own persecution. If you remember Mary Dyer, she was a Quaker. She didn’t get along with people in Boston too well, and they didn’t get along with her. They eventually hanged her. That’s not religious liberty. Yet over time the folks in the Massachusetts Bay Colony said, “You know, those Quakers in Pennsylvania make really good furniture. We like that stuff. They’ll never want to come here if we keep hanging them from the Boston Common, so let’s stop doing that. We’ll start to tolerate them. Again, we don’t necessarily like their beliefs, but we need to tolerate them.”

Eventually, such toleration gives rise to religious liberty. Toleration is that first step on the path to religious liberty. A question came up earlier in the first panel about toleration and whom one should tolerate. Throughout my studies of this historical time period, the answer is pretty simple: You tolerate whom you need to tolerate. There is no magical formula that says you have to tolerate a certain set of beliefs. In fact, there should be no magic formula that tells people they have to tolerate anybody. Religious toleration should really come from the bottom-up. Personally, I don’t like everybody on every dimension of conduct, but I can definitely appreciate some dimensions. For example, if you have whisky, I really like you. [Laughter] If you have whisky, I will interact with you whatever your faith.

It is important to realize that mundane, commercial interests often link persons of different faiths because the motivation to provide religious liberty, and thus to promote economic growth, comes from the bottom-up. I’m always very concerned when we, as advocates of religious freedom, start talking about how to promote religious liberty through the federal government in order to get people to tolerate and like one another. That always scares me because I think religious liberty really comes from the bottom-up.

Some of the best work that is going on in this project right now is from Rebecca Shah. She works in very impoverished communities in India where there are Muslims, Hindus, and Christians, both evangelicals and Catholics. You know what? They get along with one another. Even though there are rules in India that say certain people are restricted to doing certain things, when people live side by side in local communities and have to tolerate one another, they start to develop a respect for one another and grant each other the liberties that they need. In turn, these liberties allow them to trade with one another, to specialize, and to create lots of economic growth. It would be wonderful if we could implement this kind of respectful toleration on a broader scale.

BRIAN GRIM: You claim that religious toleration works to promote economic growth here in the United States. It works
in the Netherlands, and it seems like it might work in parts of India as well. Let me now seek the input of Timur Kuran, a professor of Islamic studies from Duke University. Does it work in the Muslim world? Is there any evidence in the Muslim world that mundane daily transactions among neighbors can lead to religious toleration that, in turn, inspires economic growth? Data shows there are some challenges in the Muslim world on issues of religious freedom. Does religious freedom lead to religious toleration that, in turn, inspires economic growth? Data shows there are some challenges in the Muslim world on issues of religious freedom. Does religious freedom facilitate innovation, investment, and growth there?

TIMUR KURAN: Economic development is driven by new ideas and risk-taking. A disproportionate share of entrepreneurship and innovation around the world, including the Muslim world, occurs in cities—and for a very good reason. In cities, people feel relatively free to challenge established structures, to experiment, and to share ideas with others. By the same logic, anything that restricts the sharing of ideas, the execution of ideas, or the production of ideas limits economic development.

For decades, secular governments in Turkey restricted entrepreneurship by pious Muslims through policies that restricted the flow of resources to the countryside. Specifically, the government impeded the flow of resources beyond Ankara and Istanbul, cities that are very heavily dominated by secular elites. Restrictions on the entrepreneurship of pious Muslims were also imposed through policies that limited interactions between the secular elites and the pious masses. These restrictions started to get relaxed in the 1990s, and what followed was a long period of rapid economic growth and vigorous industrialization. This growth was the simple consequence of removing the restrictions that reduced contacts and joint enterprises between secular elites and pious people. A tremendous amount of the entrepreneurship that drove this new growth came from the more religious parts of the country.

I don’t want to imply that in the Muslim world, or anywhere else, the restrictions on religious freedom that reduce development come only from secular policymakers. Religious leaders limit religious freedoms in order to protect their own privileges. In doing this, they end up impoverishing public discourse, making people afraid to express new ideas lest they be perceived as blasphemous and insulting religion. We’ve seen many examples in the Islamic world. There are religious leaders who have tried to narrow the definition of what a good Muslim is and to restrict the expression of certain ideas. In the process they’ve actually ended up hurting their own communities.

I’ll cite Pakistan as a very sad example. In Pakistan, since the 1940s, the definition of what makes a good Muslim has been narrowed in stages. The types of ideas that can be brought into public discourse have been narrowed. The big losers have been the Pakistanis themselves. Major entrepreneurs, people with great ideas, generally don’t stay in Pakistan. They go abroad. They execute their ideas abroad. They create wealth abroad. Pakistan is the big loser.

BRIAN GRIM: Yes. Later, I’m going to talk about Pakistan, and I’ll give a great example. The example you gave of Turkey is especially interesting from the U.S. perspective, where we just had an election that signaled a disconnect between the rural population and elites. If you look at the electoral map, the whole center of the country is red (Republican) with blue (Democratic) fringes on the more densely populated coasts.

The example of Turkey allowing discussion between the elites and non-elites, or the grassroots, resulted in economic progress. Perhaps it provides some hope for the economic prospects of the United States if dialogue between elites and the grassroots in America improves.

TIMUR KURAN: In the last few years, what happened in Turkey is the equivalent of the red states achieving power, and for about 10 years they expanded religious freedoms. However, in the last five years they have actually been restricting religious freedom. Now they are putting restrictions on secular persons. They are also putting restrictions on various types of Muslims. The coup that took place recently was a manifestation of a big power struggle among Islamists themselves. The unrest is actually causing a huge brain drain and an outflow of capital. We’re seeing this reflected in the drop of the Turkish lira, a fall in the growth rate, and so on. Here, then, is another example of the connection between religious freedom and economic growth.

BRIAN GRIM: Thank you. Tony and Timur, you’ve both talked about this sort of back and forth between religious freedom and economic growth. Rachel McCleary is from Harvard, and she has researched this interaction. What do you think?

RACHEL McCLEARY: In our research we looked at a two-way causation in terms of the effect of economic development on religion. If you look at that causation, urbanization actually has a negative effect on religiosity, particularly religious participation. New York City, for example, is an urban center
with scores of hedge funds. A large portion of the work force spends its time thinking about money and the markets. People are connected by their work in the financial sector. One finds that urbanicity has a negative effect on religious participation—not necessarily on religious belief, but on religious participation.

You then find that education—which is really interesting because these people are very well educated and have university degrees—actually has a positive effect on religiosity because it trains people to think independently for themselves. As opposed to having an imam or a priest or a rabbi telling them what to think, they begin to think for themselves and develop more convincing reasons for why they should not only be religious, but stay religious. So although the effect of economic development is to decrease religiosity, this effect does not work through education. In other words, one cannot conclude that wealthier societies are less religious because the people living in them are better educated.

We also tend to find that extending life expectancy has a negative effect on religion because it means people are putting off questions about salvation and the afterlife until the end of their lives. If you live into the 80s or 90s, then you have all of those years to engage in secular activity and do other things.

Another one of our findings is that the decreased birth rate has a negative effect on religion. We tend to introduce children 15 and under to formal religious practices. That is, we tend to take children to the church, the mosque, or the synagogue to become educated in our religion. Yet, if you don't have young people in your family, you're less likely to engage in formal religious activities.

In our research, when you look the other way at the effects of religious belief on economic growth, we tend to find that there is a balance between religious beliefs and religious belonging. If one wants to encourage economic growth, then there is an optimal window of religiosity. You want people to be religiously active so that they are inculcated with the right values. You want them to learn, work hard, be honest, and be thrifty. However, you don't want them to spend too much time in religious activities because then they siphon off resources—not only in terms of their time but also their funds and talents—into religious activities instead of employing them to earn a living and to be productive in the marketplace.

BRIAN GRIM: With economic growth, people begin to spend more of their daylight hours in diverse workplaces, as opposed to working on the farm with family. This change in work environment has been raising some interesting questions regarding religious freedom in the workplace: namely, to what extent should an employer accommodate faith in the workplace?

For the midshipmen here in the audience, what's the biggest structure on the yard of the U.S. Naval Academy? It's the chapel. Within the military there's been some very interesting accommodations of religion in workplaces. What are your thoughts on the place of religion within the workplace where people spend their best or creative hours? Should employers expect workers to leave their faith outside the door? Does secularization mean that faith no longer can inform what we do in our day-to-day work?

RACHEL MCCLEARY: Our research shows that, to promote economic production, you want to foster religious beliefs. You're trying to build up the belief side of religion. From this standpoint, minimal activity in formal religion is the ideal type of activity for an adult. I would suggest that employers facilitate minimal religious participation in the workplace, without being disrespectful, to accommodate workers who wish to fulfill certain requirements of a religion. However, there's a fine
line beyond that minimal accommodation when introducing formal religious participation in the workplace.

**BRIAN GRIM:** How interesting. Let me follow this line of thought. Among the questions that people might have is: Is religious freedom really good for things? Let me address this question to Ilan Alon from Agder University in Norway and formerly with Rollins College. What do you think? In what ways does religious freedom—or even just religion—foster economic development, and in what ways might religion hinder it?

**ILAN ALON:** Let me preface my comments by giving a little bit of background. I started doing research on religious freedom in the early 2000s. I was intrigued to see whether religious freedom, as an element of the institutional environment, adds to the economic prosperity of countries beyond and above providing a space of economic and political freedom. Through some of my empirical analyses, I was able to publish an influential piece in the *Cato Journal* 11 years ago to show that religious freedom makes a valuable contribution to economic prosperity.

As a result of this piece and a few others, I was invited to take part in the RFP about three years ago and to work on the economic group with my colleagues and eminent scholars in the field. I’ve learned a tremendous amount from them, and I want to commend Tom Farr and Timothy Shah for making this singular contribution to the field of religious freedom. Thank you for enhancing the understanding of religious freedom’s implications on both economic and political life.

That being said, my academic background is in international business and economics. My ideological slant is that I believe in freedoms in general. I’m a libertarian at heart. I believe that freedoms—economic, political, social, and religious—are essential not only economically but for people’s ability to thrive on a personal level.

In my opinion, there are three paths by which religious freedom contributes to economic development. The first one was alluded to in the earlier panel: the institutional path. The institutional path has two schools of thought: the economics school of thought and the sociological school of thought.

The economic school of thought talks about both formal and informal rules that govern our behavior. The formal rules and regulations are like the U.S. Constitution, which protects religious freedom and which is the foundation of this great country. The informal rules are things that are a little bit softer, such as norms and cultures.

The sociological perspective to institutions gives closer examination to the informal rules; it attends to the cognitive, cultural, and normative dimensions of institutions. When we think from that perspective, the second dimension shows how religion contributes to economic development through the creation of a moral fabric. It is through rules that attempt to make us better and more moral people.

I was talking to a colleague of mine who is a dean at Shanghai Jiao Tong, one of the leading business schools in Shanghai. I work quite a lot in China. He actually became a Christian and attends a house church. He told me that he believes that religion is essential for China’s ability to maintain its growth because otherwise immoral and illegal practices will prevail. We probably remember the scandals of the melamine in the milk and the lead paint in children’s toys. I was curious about his assertion, because China has chosen to be nonreligious to a large extent, and I further inquired into it. What about the law? Isn’t the law enough? After all, the law says that we shouldn’t do these things. We shouldn’t put melamine in the milk. We should be careful about this, and there are some remedies in the law. He said that the law is not enough; if the law alone governs our behavior, we will break it when we believe we can get away with it.

The third path through which religion contributes to economic development is when religion serves as a source of capital. For example, religious groups help one another by financing...
their businesses through social networks. Several people in this group have done research on this. They also contribute intellectual capital. I just visited Austria, and I looked at the singular contribution the Jews made to the development of Vienna prior to World War II. It was phenomenal. Vienna is a great city today to a large extent because of the financial and infrastructural development that Jews provided right before World War II. Another form of capital is the skill set that Tony talked about. I was recently in Madrid and was impressed by the contribution that Muslims have made to the development of buildings and infrastructure in the city. They did much of the masonry work, developed some amazing infrastructure, and constructed many of the buildings. We saw that the Spanish Inquisition, which eradicated both Muslims and Jews from Spain, had an awful effect on the development of Spain. Religion as a whole is a resource—intellectual, political, social, and economic—that we could harness and leverage for economic development.

Now, having said that, I think my most controversial piece is the one currently under review in a prestigious journal. It shows that we often look for simple solutions and linear relationships. It shows that religious freedom is, in fact, not always beneficial to society. Despite my ideological slant, this particular research actually showed that religious freedom does not always promote economic growth. We tend to think of religious freedom in terms of the Western experience. We give examples like the United States. Tony just gave an example of the Netherlands. And Brian, you asked a wonderful question about context. Does context matter? Does the country or the governance of a country matter?

What we found is that religious freedom is very healthy and promotes economic well-being in democratic and mature economies such as the United States and Western Europe. We also found that religion is quite good for dictatorships. In fact, dictatorships often collude with religious institutions to provide self-reinforcing mechanisms for governance and stability, as we have recently seen in Russia, for example. We did find that for the set of nations in transition from dictatorship to democracy—what political scientists call anocracies—religious freedom can have a very negative impact. The reason is that when you have an institutional environment that is not mature, religious groups vie for control and end up creating all sorts of conflict.

I also wanted to touch on the impact of trade. I just came back from Cozumel, Mexico. I went to see the Mayan ruins. I was on a tour, and a guide told me about the history of the Mayans. I asked specifically about the Mayan religion and the Mayan culture. Apparently, when the Spaniards came to Mexico to colonize it, the relationship between the two peoples initially was very good. They were trading with one another. They found each other’s artifacts worthy. However, the Spaniards were
revolted when they found out that the Mayans engaged in all sorts of pagan practices, such as human sacrifice or digging up the dead and speaking to them. That marked a turning point, and the initial trade that started on very good terms ended up in war and conquest. The Spaniards believed in the authority of the Bible and condemned Mayan practices, and ultimately they conquered and dominated Mexico and Christianized it as well.

BRIAN GRIM: I would like to go back to your previous point on how religious freedom in transitional states can have a negative impact. I think the idea of religious freedom is to have a society where there are set rules for rich pluralism. A society with religious freedom is a place where you don't stack the deck for one religion to be able to dominate the political and power structures of a country. In that understanding of religious freedom, it is not “anything goes.” Would a framework where rules and laws set boundaries so that one group doesn't take over and dominate others be productive for countries in transition?

ILAN ALON: Again, I think context is important in the sense that rules and laws are good in countries where rules and laws are followed. However, the social structure of many transitional countries is such that rules are no longer followed and social norms and practices prevail. Sometimes the competition for control and the desire of one group to dominate and exert influence leads to conflict. We’re seeing that now throughout the Middle East. We’re seeing that play out in various parts of the world. In my research, we just looked at the influence of religious freedom on economic growth empirically, without any value judgement.

But what are the solutions in transitional environments? I don’t know. There is another set of research questions that we need to explore in more detail on this matter.

BRIAN GRIM: Timur, did you want to jump in on this point?

TIMUR KURAN: I can comment on the notion that greater religious freedom under certain conditions can have negative effects. The example that jumps to my mind is the relaxation of restrictions on Muslim groups in Arab dictatorships—such as Egypt under Mubarak, Libya under Gaddafi, and in a few other countries of that sort. What happened in the 1970s is that this relaxation gave some religious groups more power to promote Islamic socialism. This was precisely what these overregulated countries did not need. The reason these Islamist groups promoted Islamic socialism was to be a part of the growing state regulatory apparatus. They harmed their countries in the long term.

A more recent example is that of the Muslim Brotherhood. When the Brotherhood came into power in Egypt after 2011, it maintained many of the subsidies that finally, years later, the IMF forced Egypt to scale back. The Brotherhood maintained many of the subsidies that were harming the Egyptian economy on the grounds that reducing them would be inconsistent with Islamic fairness. The freedom that the Muslim Brotherhood gained, at least in the short run, produced negative impacts. Again, context is important.

RACHEL MCCLEARY: I want to respond to the idea that religion introduces morality, as in Ilan's Chinese case, and fights corruption in the state. I've done several years of field research in Guatemala, and I actually find the opposite. In Guatemala, I find that the predominant religion is some form of Pentecostalism. They thrive on the family unit and practice redistribution. There's a difference between having an open market and economic exchange and having redistribution going on—a system of mutual aid, for example. Pentecostal churches, particularly in Latin America—Brazil and Guatemala in particular—rely a lot on mutual aid. That's because they spend a lot of time in religious activities at night and on the weekend, and a lot of their family resources are directed toward religion.

If you have a religion that's based on a strong sense of community, that is, a close community engaging in high mutual aid, that can facilitate corruption. You have the sacralization of politics.
When a Pentecostal becomes president—which has actually happened in Guatemala, where two evangelicals and now a Pentecostal have been elected—they take that paradigm and move it into government. What you get is a religion sacralizing politics and bringing in a club-like mindset where people within the group deserve certain benefits that other people don’t.

In comparison, our American democracy is supposed to have a level playing field. We haven’t functioned on the basis of family clanship. That hasn’t been the nature of our politics. I’m just flagging it as a concern, because in my research I see family clanship moving toward a sacralization of politics.

**BRIAN GRIM:** It seems that in a context where a religious monopoly has developed, religious freedom can help promote pluralism and a counterbalancing within the religious sphere. I want to come back to Tony on this point.

**ANTHONY GILL:** In discussions of religious liberty, we’ve got to talk about liberty in general, right? We’re worried about groups taking over and imposing their will on others, and I’m strongly opposed to that. If you want religious liberty, then you have to work for liberty in every other context. Establishing religious liberty is about the devolution of power to people at the grassroots level who have more knowledge about what they can do with their lives and what they can’t do with their lives. For Catholics, this is the idea of subsidiarity.

**BRIAN GRIM:** Earlier, you mentioned whisky and other things that come from cornfields. Did I tell you the story about the religious history of cornflakes last year?

**ANTHONY GILL:** No.

**BRIAN GRIM:** The Kellogg brothers invented cornflakes. Why? Well, they were Seventh-day Adventists, and Adventists are more or less vegetarians. They focus a lot on health and well-being. They have networks of hospitals and teachings on health and well-being. Well, the Kellogg brothers were bemoaning the breakfast diet of America 100 years ago, which consisted of greasy eggs and bacon. “What a terrible way to start the day,” they thought. This was not a good way to get the temple of the Holy Spirit—your body—activated for life and morality. With this in mind, they looked out at the cornfields and, voilà, cornflakes came about. Because of their religious convictions, they looked at the world in a different way. That different way then produced a product. You may not like cornflakes, but it’s revolutionized how people eat in nearly every country of the world. Even in China there are cornflakes these days.

Let me give two other examples. The founder of JetBlue, an innovative airline that flies up and down the East Coast, said he learned everything he needed to know about management in serving his two-year mission as a Mormon missionary. Then he created a second successful company that came out of his religious experience.

Another example, perhaps a controversial one, is Walmart. Not everybody knows the religious history of Walmart. Walmart came out of Arkansas, the most rural and least industrialized state of the United States. Yet it produced the largest and one of the most tech-savvy corporations in the world. How did that happen? Well, a lot of that came out of building up what is now known as the service industry. That service industry arose when Walmart started to recruit women from the farms who wanted to supplement their farm income and yet still be able to take care of their families. The money they earned at Walmart covered gaps in family income when the farm wasn’t productive. This arrangement kept the man in charge, thereby fitting in with the evangelical, Baptist culture in Arkansas. It was also part of a service industry because Walmart wasn’t selling diamond rings and fancy items. It was selling basic goods that helped the family make ends meet, all at a good price. Now, you may or may not like Walmart. It’s a company that is not without controversy. Yet the broader point is that religion in very different ways has contributed to new economic ideas.

Does anybody want to address the relationship between religion and entrepreneurship? This panel isn’t just about religious freedom, but religious innovation. Ilan, you were talking about the Jews in Vienna. How do these religious communities add to our economic climate? Think of Chick-fil-A. It stirred up some controversy because its founder said he stood for marriage between a man and a woman. His stance prompted a protest and counter-protest. Is there something to be said for having different religious beliefs manifested in how we do business and for diversifying the philosophies that add to the rich pluralism that is America?

**ANTHONY GILL:** Well, the capacity for innovation is not unique to religious people. It’s present in everybody. Human beings have an innate ability to be creative. If you give people the ability to do that, it doesn’t matter if you’re religious or
not. If you create a great sandwich or whisky, I’m there at your table. [Laughter]

Part of what I would like to get across is that religious liberty is contingent upon every other liberty that makes people better off. So to all of you religious folks, if you start to impose views on other folks and use the power of the state to that end, then you’re going to start restricting lots of other liberties. Don’t do that.

The same argument applies to the secular folks, too. If you’re not really happy with religious persons and some of their values, and if they don’t want to interact with you, that’s okay. Don’t interact with them either. But don’t impose restrictions on them because that is going to restrict what they think. Someday they might come up with something really unique and creative on a dimension that you want to interact with, and that’s really great. So for the folks who are interested in religious freedom, let’s also work for other types of freedom, such as property rights and freedom of speech. Amen?

BRIAN GRIM: Thanks, Tony. In a minute we’re going to invite questions from the audience. Before that happens, let me give time for each of our panelists to make a short comment.

ILAN ALON: I somewhat agree with everything that has been said by every panelist here, even though there were some contradictory comments. Part of the reason behind the occasional contradictions is that we all speak from a different theoretical lens and from a different context. All the examples that Tony has given, for example, are American examples. They are well-taken and very good examples. Ideologically, I agree with Tony very much, and I agree with the empirical findings of our other speakers as well. Yet I think we have to remember that context is important. We should work to better understand and think about the relevance of context.

I currently live in Norway, for example. I live in the southern “Bible belt” of Norway, where there is a huge conflict between religious Christians and nonreligious, cultural Christians. There is almost hostility. The nonreligious Christians are almost hostile toward the religious ones. Culturally, it’s a huge problem even for children going to school, and it’s a prominent feature of discourse.

Also, there’s a state religion in Norway. The state sponsors religion, and the state Christian religion is the dominant one, even though the state funds everyone irrespective of religion. I had a chance to speak to one of those state-sponsored church leaders in my hometown in Kristiansand. (Note the name, by the way.) He apparently believes that if you want to teach or preach religion, then you also have to have religious competence. He believes that, for example, the Islamic terrorists are simply not competent in Islam. They need to be taught what Islam is about, like he was taught about what Christianity is about. He has a license to practice from the state because he’s attained proper education.

Oftentimes, I think we confound the concept of religious freedom—which is to some extent a civic institutional issue—with the concept of religion, which is a faith-based issue. When we confound those two concepts, I think we arrive at very different results. We need to think a little bit more about the conceptual difference between religious freedom and religion.

BRIAN GRIM: Yes, Timur.

TIMUR KURAN: One context where religious freedom has led to remarkable achievements is architecture. Denominations have competed with one another to build bigger and more impressive churches. Religions have competed with one another. In the city where I grew up, Istanbul, the great mosques you see today have spectacular structures partly because successive architects saw the Hagia Sophia—the great church from the sixth century that was transformed into the
One of the challenges for the architect—which you’ll see if you go to Suleymaniye, one of the great mosques in Istanbul—is how to create enough space to fit a larger congregation than could fit in the Hagia Sophia. So here is an example of how, if you allow denominations and religions to compete with one another, they will advance human knowledge and capabilities. There have been huge spillover effects for secular architecture as well.

BRIAN GRIM: That’s a good point. One of the things we found in a research study I conducted is that there are four times as many houses of worship in the United States that are visited for their art and architecture as there are museums in the United States. Even in the United States, which is not as rich in architecture as Europe, churches and mosques and temples outnumber museums in terms of showing off art and architecture by a ratio of four-to-one. So I second your point, Timur.

RACHEL MCCLEARY: I have something to add. I want to return to the point that Tony raised, that after the Act of Toleration was passed in England, the Quakers became very innovative. For example, they founded Cadbury chocolate. The Quakers saw something that other groups didn’t see as society was deregulating. Maybe one way to think about religious freedom is that when you deregulate a market, you might see a spurt of innovation. The Quakers immediately took advantage of the railroads. They understood their significance. They saw things differently. They also had no-cost transactions because they loaned each other money without interest. But as they became wealthy, they became more worldly.

BRIAN GRIM: Okay. Let’s allow time for some questions from our audience.

LAUREN HOMER: I’m Lauren Homer with Homer International Law. I want to drill down into the statement that research has shown, in transitional countries, that religious freedom has a negative effect on economics. I’m going to use Russia as an example, since I’m very familiar with the country. In 1992, Russia went from having six religions to, in a period of about three or four years, having something like 20,000 different registered religious organizations. At the same time, there was a huge increase in commerce and capitalism. Years later, the argument that the Russian government then gave to restrict religion was that they didn’t want people thinking things harmful to society. Can you explain how, as a practical matter, religious freedom in Russia during its post-communist transition had a negative impact on the economy? How did the presence of so many different religious organizations hurt the economy?

ANTHONY GILL: I want to jump on this question. I have not done research on the effect of religious freedom during times of political transition, but the situation in Russia illustrates a point I have been making. This is a cautionary tale to the folks who are big on promoting religious liberty from the top down. If you move into a country that has certain regulations or laws that allow religious groups to be here and not here, to do this and not that, then every introduction of a brand new law, every single policy from the top down, is going to produce winners and losers. The losers are not going to like it, and they’re probably going to strike out against the winners at some point. These top-down regulations will spur conflicts that can be deleterious to economic growth.

ILAN ALON: If we talk about post-Soviet Russia, I think it was largely an economic disaster. Thus, I’m not sure the example that you’re giving is a good one. I’m a beneficiary of it. I married a woman who was originally from Belarus who happens to be Jewish, and she was able to get out of Russia because of the glasnost and perestroika moves that Gorbachev had initiated. What we actually saw transpire in post-Soviet Russia was an exodus, for example, of all the Jews out of Russia. Again, I don’t think we can attribute the economic disaster to religion per se. I think we could attribute it to a regime that was oppressive and repressive of various religious groups and hostile toward religions in general. It’s interesting to see now that the Russian Orthodox Church has really gotten a boost. You see religiosity has moved up tremendously, and with it the reorganization of the economy in general, especially in the Putin years.

TONY LAUINGER: I’m Tony Lauinger of the Religious Freedom Institute. Would you comment on a recent phenomenon where the intersection of business and religious freedom has resulted in businesses opposing those who are seeking religious freedom in our country? In Indiana, for example, the CEOs of some big corporations threatened to move out of state if a particular law protecting religious freedom was not repealed. And in North Carolina, the
transgender bathroom law led some entities to boycott events and businesses in the state of North Carolina.

BRIAN GRIM: I can say a few things. First, a counterexample to the events in Indiana and North Carolina was what happened in the state of Utah. In Utah, the state passed legislation that was more focused on fairness for all. It allowed religious organizations and people to take exception to certain LGBT issues, but at the same time the law respected LGBT concerns and protected them from discrimination.

I think part of the problem in Indiana is that some people identified the proposed legislation as an attempt to protect religious people from the LGBT agenda. There wasn’t a parallel track where the state made sure that the legislation reflected a commitment to fairness for all people, which happened in Utah. Instead, efforts in Indiana were seen as an attempt to use religious freedom as a shield against what religious persons saw as an LGBT attack on certain values.

We certainly have to be concerned about fairness for all citizens. All people have dignity. If you are a believer in God, then you see all people as having dignity from God, and we have to protect that. At the same time, we also have to protect religious rights. I think part of what happened in Indiana and North Carolina reflected a lack of dialogue between the different stakeholders. That’s one interpretation of the events in those two states.

Do we have another question?

ALLEN HERTZKE: I’m Allen Hertzke, a professor at the University of Oklahoma and a scholar here with the RFP. One of the fascinating findings that I’ve read in your work is a counterintuitive finding that suggests real scientific advancement. Timur, I want you to comment on the fact that when Muslims were privileged in law in the Ottoman Empire, their privileged status led them to be treated worse in terms of interest rates, which actually had a huge long-term economic impact. I think it illustrates the connection between restrictions on religion, or religious favoritism, and economic development.

TIMUR KURAN: Certainly. Traditionally, before the twentieth century in the Ottoman Empire and other Muslim-governed places, to be a Muslim was to live by Islamic law. There was no choice of law. If you wanted to do business, you had to do business under Islamic law. Additionally, there was no exit from Islam. One of the consequences was to make the clerics lazy, if you will. They felt that they did not have to listen to their flocks, respond to their needs, or adjust the law as conditions changed.

The non-Muslims living under Islamic law in the Ottoman Empire and other Muslim-governed places were much more fortunate in this regard in that, from the start of Islam, they were given a choice of law. Christians and Jews were free to do business under Islamic law. They had the option to try disputes in Islamic courts, but they didn’t have to. They could do business under Christian law, under Jewish law, or under any law they chose. Individual Christians and Jews were also free to leave their religion of birth. This made Christian and Jewish clerics much more responsive to their own flocks.

It also meant that in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, when it became advantageous to start borrowing European institutions and technologies, Christians and Jews could do so much more easily. Christian priests and rabbis could accommodate their needs much more easily than Islamic religious leaders.

So here’s a case where the dominant religion hurt its own adherents by limiting their choices. The dominant religion actually provided advantages to other religions by giving them choices that it denied to its own adherents. Accordingly, where Christians and Muslims lived together in the nineteenth century, Christians pulled ahead because they were able to make adjustments, whereas Muslims fell behind. So here is a case where the victims are the members of the majority religion who have political control.

BRIAN GRIM: Fascinating. Let’s field another question.

AHMED SUBHY MANSOUR: I am Sheikh Ahmed Subhy Mansour. I have lived here in the United States since 2001, and I usually hear the same argument. My question is, why do you usually confuse Islam and Muslims? Islam is a religion of peace and of tolerance. It has the Ten Commandments mentioned in chapter six of the Qur’an. The concept of a Muslim is different from Islam. Muslims are humans. Most Muslims—at least 99 percent of them—are peaceful.

What you call “radical Muslims” represent just 1 percent, and they belong to many sects. Could you please define what you are talking about? When you talk about radical Muslim Wahhabis, then say they are Wahhabis. If you are talking about
Shi’a, then talk about Shi’a. Shi’as have many sects—more than 16 sects at this point. Sunnis have four schools. Sufis have more than 70 tariqa. Given this diversity, defining one’s terms is very important, as it helps us to understand what you are talking about even in commercial or economic issues. Thank you.

BRIAN GRIM: Thank you. I think it’s a great point that when talking about any religion, we may have stereotypes. The same is true for Catholics, for example. When you look at Catholicism, there’s so much variety within it. You have everything from Opus Dei to the Knights of Columbus. The Catholic community is such a wide community. The same applies to Islam, which has tremendous variety. Thank you for your point. Let’s take another question.

HOWARD AHMANSON: I’m Howard Ahmanson of Fieldstead and Company. My question is directed to Rachel. You were talking about how, in many ways, the desirable result is for people to retain their beliefs but not to be overly involved in religious communities. But other scholars such as Robert Putnam and Brad Wilcox say that participation, and not nominal belief, causes people to maintain good families and to enjoy other related benefits.

RACHEL MCCLEARY: I take issue with Bob Putnam, our colleague. We tend to argue over whether religion is unique and whether the set of beliefs that you get from religion is equivalent to social capital. Bob has probably changed his position on this issue since our last debate. I think he calls it spiritual capital now. I agree that, yes, you can gain social capital from being religious. In fact, Ed Glaeser, one of our colleagues, found that the better educated you are, the more likely you are to go to church to network, to find jobs, and to hang out with people in your neighborhood—especially with people who share the same socioeconomic status. However, he’s talking about social capital. What I’m talking about is religious capital. I’m talking about the beliefs that a religion inculcates in you. I’m actually arguing along the lines of Max Weber. I take the view that you want to inculcate the right values. You don’t want to inculcate the wrong values. That’s why there is a dark side to religion. It isn’t just all rosy and positive.

That’s why I made the argument that you should have this balance. You want to raise your kids in a religion up to a certain point. However, if you keep spending every night at church, and maybe over 20 percent of your income is going to the religion, then you’re going to have a negative effect on your economic output. Then, the values that you’re supposed to be learning—to work hard, be honest, and be innovative in the market—do not translate into action because you’re so focused on that religion.

BRIAN GRIM: Let me add another perspective on that. My study found that religious congregations, such as the local church or mosque or synagogue or temple—though predominantly churches in the United States—contribute more than $400 billion to our economy every year. A big portion of that contribution comes from the direct spending that happens at the level of the local congregation. These 344,000 congregations are paying for electricity, having snow plowed, hiring people who pay taxes on their income, and using sound systems. They also build parochial schools. Then, when you move to the institutional level, you see the economic contribution of religion in a place like Georgetown—a Catholic-affiliated university.

The activity that results in some of our great institutions in the country starts down at the local level because you couldn’t have these institutions grow without a sense of local belonging. They would not come about as a result of merely believing. Religious belonging contributes money to the economy. All of these faith-based universities have come out of that local experience of religious belonging. Belonging at the community level creates communities that do more than simply coming together, praying, and giving money that goes nowhere. That money goes somewhere. Religious congregations create all kinds of volunteer activities and programs for unemployment. One hundred and twenty thousand congregations help people get jobs. The contributions of religion to the community stem from belonging. They do not come about merely as a result of belief.

RACHEL MCCLEARY: Right. I understand the difference, but the argument is that the sort of contributions you highlight can be
understood in terms of social capital. Again, I think my example of Guatemala is very salient. Religious persons don’t get outside those club models within each church. In fact, philanthropy in Guatemala is limited to trusting your neighbor. Philanthropy understood as giving to the broader community does not exist in Guatemala as it does in the United States.

Thus, the central question is, how do you get a society to be open and trusting enough that people are willing to serve the stranger? This is what you’re talking about. The emergence of an open and trusting society, one in which social capital moves into civic activities, is exactly what Putnam likes to study. What I’m saying is don’t confuse the influence of social capital with that of fundamental religious beliefs, particularly beliefs about the afterlife. When you have beliefs about hell, heaven, and salvation, they motivate you in very interesting ways to behave economically.

SAHAR AZIZ: Thank you. My name is Sahar Aziz. I’m a law professor at Texas A&M School of Law. I wanted to inquire about the flipside of how business or economic power can impede religious freedom. The halal market or the halal shops in New York are examples of what I mean by the other side of it. People sometimes use boycotts, leveraging their economic power to punish religious minorities by refusing to use their services. After September 11, we saw this happen to a lot of doctors who were Muslims. Suddenly, patients stopped going to their usual practice simply because of the fact that their doctors were Muslim. Using economic power to sanction beliefs plays into law, business, and de facto and de jure rights, even where it is illegal to discriminate based on religion. If you have economic and political power, you can in fact impede religious freedom through those actions.

So I want to explore the reverse side of the relationship between religion and economic power—that is, the threat to religious minorities and their religious freedoms by those with economic power.

ANTHONY GILL: I’ll take a shot at that one. You should buy products and services that you like, and you should avoid ones that you don’t like. Why are some companies refusing to do business in Indiana? Well, because they can. If you don’t want to interact with somebody on a specific dimension because of certain beliefs, then you try to find other markets and goods.

For example, I avoid Scotch because it’s horrible. [Laughter]

ANTHONY GILL: I love bourbon, yes. [Laughter]
TIMUR KURAN: You mentioned that after September 11, Muslim doctors saw their patients leave. I haven’t seen the data that you’re referring to, but I just wonder whether that was just a short-term effect. Over the long run, Muslim doctors in the United States have done extremely well. For reasons that Tony mentioned, the type of reaction that you mention will ultimately dissipate. People flock to good doctors. Any patients who leave will be replaced by other patients who’ve been waiting in line to get their services. This is what appears to have happened with Muslim doctors in the United States.

ANTHONY GILL: I agree. I mean, imagine if somebody after September 11 doesn’t want to go to a Muslim doctor who is the best heart surgeon in town, and that person has a heart attack a month later. They made a bad choice, right? Over time, we come to understand the different dimensions that we want to interact on. A lot of that understanding comes from tolerance. Facilitating economic interactions between people does not mean everybody loves one another, but simply encouraging the understanding that we’re all different.

ILAN ALON: I think we’re also obfuscating the three issues: religion, religiosity, and religious freedom. As I understand it, we want more religious freedom. The big question will be whether we want to also regulate religion.

In a capitalist system, economic freedom is good for economic growth. However, unchecked economic freedom would lead to monopolies who abuse their power, and so monopolies have to be regulated. The question that we have to ask ourselves is not whether we should restrict religious freedom, but whether we need to regulate it to some extent. I think it’s contentious and debatable, and we need to have a discussion about these issues.

BRIAN GRIM: We have time for one last question.

CHELSEA BOMBINO: I’m Chelsea Bombino with the Institutional Religious Freedom Alliance. Brian, I was wondering if you or any of the other panelists could talk about the phenomenon we see in business, where businesses are having a social consciousness that consumers find very appealing. Consumers are being much more conscious about where they source their goods.

Brian, you gave a couple of examples of religious businesses. Most of them are either not known for being highly religious now, or they’re not popular. However, I’ve read articles that focus on religious businesses, like one in the New Yorker, for example, that focused on Muslim modeling businesses. The Muslim modeling businesses are viewed as innovative, and they are accepted and esteemed by the mainstream liberal media in a way that Hobby Lobby is not. Have you come across any interesting examples of diverse faith-based institutions or businesses that are making unique contributions to their communities? How do we start to tell those stories in unique ways that can transcend political ideologies?

BRIAN GRIM: That’s a great question. I’ll give two examples touching on both parts of your question. At the United Nations, the largest corporate sustainability group is called the UN Global Compact. I’m active in that. We have a partnership with them to give awards to businesses that are promoting interfaith understanding, religious freedom, and peace.

Take IKEA, for example, the Swedish furniture store. I was with the CEO, and he was talking about his company’s mission. The mission is to make everyday life better. That’s their mantra. That mission starts to inform what they do, such as helping homeless people in Texas and developing a line of products in local stores that are being made by refugees. So companies realize their responsibility to society at the top levels. The bigger the corporation, the more attuned they are to this issue. Recognition of their corporate social responsibility is a great opportunity for them to engage on issues that help promote interfaith understanding, religious freedom, peace, tolerance, and social good.

As for examples of faith-based businesses that are making unique contributions to their communities, I like what I’m seeing come up from the grassroots. To give a Muslim example, one of the awardees was the founder of Azizah Magazine. It’s a Muslim fashion magazine. She passed away two years ago, so we gave the award to her daughter in Rio de Janeiro during the Olympics. Her daughter, when she came up and received the award, was in tears because she got the award two years to the day that her mother had passed away. Azizah Magazine has pioneered the coverage of Muslim fashion, making a point to highlight it.

The niche markets that result from religious diversity—whether filled by businesses that cater to Muslims, Hindus, or Mormons—add to the rich tapestry we have in the United States.

THOMAS FARR: Join me in thanking our panel. That was a terrific panel. We have a little bit of controversy going on here, and a little bit of disagreement. I think that’s good. That in itself is an example of religious freedom. [Applause]
TIMOTHY SHAH: Good afternoon, ladies and gentlemen. As we continue our symposium on “Religious Freedom and the Common Good,” I would like to extend a warm welcome to all of you in our Georgetown community and to all those from outside Georgetown who have come for this very special occasion. We are very pleased to be able to welcome Senator Ben Sasse, who will be delivering his first major address here at Georgetown. I want to particularly welcome our contingent of Nebraska students here at Georgetown. Go Cornhuskers! Every time I say the word “Nebraska,” they’re going to lead us in a special cheer, right? [Laughter] It’s great to have you here to welcome Senator Sasse.

We are excited to welcome Senator Sasse here. But I have to be honest and say that it is difficult to give an introduction because there is no way to offer a simple, straightforward introduction of someone who has accomplished so much in so many fields in such a short period of time. Introducing someone like Senator Sasse is just not that easy. It’s also not much fun, not just because it makes me feel like an underachiever, but because if I really did justice to all of Senator Sasse’s accomplishments, you would probably think I was just making it all up. [Laughter] Well, you have to trust me; I’m not making it up.

We are truly honored to have him here, a man who has demonstrated such high principles and such dedication to the cause of religious freedom. In the spare time Senator Sasse has when he’s not driving an Uber, he has done an awful lot. [Laughter] Senator Sasse’s life has been marked by a powerful unity of purpose and a unity of focus. Indeed, I think virtually all of his professional life has been marked by a dedication to three passions. First, he has demonstrated a passion for public service, not in the narrow sense of political office but in the broad sense of service to his country. Second, he has a clear passion for learning, scholarship, and the life of the mind. And third, Senator Sasse has a deep passion for freedom, conscience, and fierce independence.

First, a passion for public service has animated the whole trajectory of Senator Sasse’s life. He’s only 44 years old, and yet he has already enjoyed a rich and varied career as a public servant, a career that began long before he was elected to the U.S. Senate. He first entered public service in 2004 in the United States Department of Justice, where he became chief of staff for the Office of Legal Policy. After that, he went to Capitol Hill, where he served as chief of staff to our good friend, Representative Jeff Fortenberry—who, by the way, also represents the great state of Nebraska. Jeff Fortenberry is a graduate of this great
After that, Ben Sasse returned to the executive branch, where he advised the Department of Homeland Security on national security issues. Following that, he became counselor to the secretary at the Department of Health and Human Services. And not much later, he was nominated by President George W. Bush to assistant secretary for planning and evaluation in the Department of Health and Human Services, which he held until 2009. Just a few years later, in 2013, he announced that he was running to represent Nebraska in the U.S. Senate. In 2014, he won a landslide victory with nearly 65 percent of the vote. Ben Sasse accomplished all of that in just 10 years, between 2004 and 2014.

Yet public service is only one of the organizing passions of Ben Sasse’s life. A second is his dedication to scholarship, serious intellectual inquiry, the life of the mind, and the university. Yes, I am talking about a United States senator. Yes, I’m aware of all the jokes about the intellectual ability of the members of Congress. I’m not going to tell any of them now. [Laughter]

Senator Sasse is not your average senator. He went to Harvard College and graduated in 1994. Despite that, he managed to get a decent education. [Laughter] After he graduated, he went to St. John’s College in Annapolis, Maryland for a master’s degree centered on the great books of the Western tradition. He did it because of his pure love of learning; I don’t know why else anybody would do that. After that, Ben went to New Haven, Connecticut to pursue a Ph.D. in history at Yale. He completed his doctorate in 2004 with a dissertation on the rise of the American religious right—a dissertation that, by the way, won the top prize at Yale for dissertations in history.

Shortly after that—and more or less at the same time as he was pursuing all of those achievements in Washington which I described above—he began teaching at the University of Texas at Austin. Then in 2010, he became president of Midland University in Nebraska. In so doing, he became one of the youngest university presidents in U.S. history at the age of 37. At a time of real challenge in American higher education, he oversaw extensive restructuring and enjoyed real success as president of Midland. You get the impression that maybe he wanted to become a senator just so he could have unrestricted access to the Library of Congress. That’s my theory; I haven’t asked him if it’s true. [Laughter]

Finally, in line with the theme of our conference, “Religious Freedom and the Common Good,” Ben Sasse has demonstrated in public service and as a scholar a third passion—a passion for freedom. A passion for freedom remains a major theme and focus of his service in the U.S. Senate. He has consistently, eloquently, and courageously stood up for the principles of self-government. At a time in our nation and our world in which more and more people define themselves by narrow and exclusive loyalties of tribe, identity, or political party, Senator Sasse has placed a premium on a different approach and a different kind of leadership. He has consistently placed conscience and the common good above party and popularity. That has not always been easy for Senator Sasse. In fact, doing so has made him pretty unpopular with just about every group along the whole political spectrum, from left to right—and it has made for, shall we say, a lively relationship between Ben Sasse and our President-elect!

Underlying all this is Senator Sasse’s profound conviction about the crucial importance of our theme today: freedom of conscience and freedom of religion. Following the dictates of his own conscience wherever they may lead means many things for Ben Sasse. For one thing, it means that he writes his own Twitter feed. [Laughter] But it also means he courageously stands up for freedom of conscience for everyone. As he recently put it in a speech on the Senate floor, “People of faith or no faith at all are simply exercising their humanity. They do not need government permission to do so. We can and should disagree. And we must jealously defend every right to conscience and self-expression.” I can’t think of words more fitting for today’s gathering.

Thank you, Senator Sasse, for your passionate dedication to serving the common good of our country and our world. Thank you for your passion and dedication to the life of learning and intellectual inquiry that this great university, Georgetown, represents. Thank you for your passionate dedication to protecting and advancing freedoms for everyone, including religious freedom. And thank you for being with us today. It is our great pleasure to welcome you today to Georgetown to speak to this Religious Freedom Project conference on “Religious Freedom and the Common Good.” Welcome, Senator Ben Sasse.

**SENIOR BEN SASSE:** I’m a big fan of Tim Shah, and it’s not right to beat up the guy who introduced you. But I’m going to go ahead and do it for a minute anyway. [Laughter]
Tim and I went to college together. He was a few years older than me, although I know he looks 25 or 30 years older. [Laughter] He became a graduate student as I was finishing my undergraduate time. At first we were students together, and then later he was an overachieving nearly-junior professor as a second or third year grad student. So I’m a student of Tim’s as well as a fan of his.

But he did claim in his introduction that he was going to explain the focus of my career. When he said that, my mom sat up and said, “Really? Well, tell us what it is because we have no idea.” [Laughter] My mom says that I am “intellectually promiscuous and unable to keep a job.” That’s a much better shorthand for my career track. [Laughter]

I’m also really interested in the disintermediation of the economy. Fintech—financial services and new technologies—are creating all sorts of industries. Sometimes we talk about it as the sharing economy. It is really fascinating and really a boon to consumers and going to be really interesting in the workplace for producers as well. And yet there’s a lot of disruption that scares people for understandable reasons. I want to get to know that space.

“ When you advocate for people that are in the community of belief that you already share, no one sees that as anything other than power, and the entire point of our First Amendment is that we believe most of life isn’t about power.”

Senator Ben Sasse
As it turns out, we found a way. My team and I found a way for me to become an Uber driver. Last weekend, I drove Uber in Lincoln, Nebraska. We had absolutely zero press strategy for this; it was not a planned press event. The purpose was simply for me to talk to different people. All of a sudden, passengers had their U.S. senator hostage for 11 minutes. I tell them, “If I don’t wreck this vehicle by the time we get to where we’re headed, I want to hear your thoughts about the disintermediation of the economy, particularly things like Uber, Lyft, ridesharing, and Airbnb. And more generally, what do you want to talk about?” Driving Uber was a chance for me to do focused town halls.

I should’ve assumed this was going to happen, but I hadn’t really thought of it. Of course, the people whom I picked up as an Uber driver were a little surprised. Some of them would start tweeting about what was happening, and it became a viral event. Reporters thought it was a big spoof, that somebody was trolling them. So I confirmed on Twitter that, in fact, I was an Uber driver for the weekend. Mostly, my experience as an Uber driver has been pretty interesting. It has led to lots of great interplay on Twitter.

During my time as an Uber driver, I learned lots of things, and some of them were humorous. For instance, if you throw up in an Uber vehicle, the surcharge is substantial. The surcharge serves as a market incentive to persuade more drivers to come into the marketplace on Friday and Saturday nights when a lot of people need rides home. We don’t want them driving drunk. Yet it turns out that cars get a little messier on Friday and Saturday night. [Laughter] Thus, you need the driver to be incentivized to work on the weekends.

When Tim introduced me, he mentioned some of the positions I took in the presidential election. I don’t want to talk about anything related to the presidential election today, except to say that I was skeptical of both candidates. Let’s just leave it at that. The Omaha World-Herald has a headline this morning about the fact that I drove Uber this weekend. The headline of the piece is “Senator Sasse Explores Fallback Career Options.” [Laughter] Not kidding.

Anyway, I’m a fan of the Religious Freedom Project and the work that you all do as well as the work that’s done at Baylor. I’m new to my position as a senator—and I’m only one of about five people in the Senate who haven’t been a politician before—but I’m very interested in how it relates to the work you do here. I hope that you consider my office and me as partners in the project. Jess Prol, who is on my team, has been here all day live-texting and tweeting back to me what was happening in the event since I had another obligation this morning. So I’m going to pivot a tiny bit and cut out of my talk anything related to the instrumental uses of religion in the development of civil society around the world. I believe strongly in that, but I don’t think you need me to echo stuff that more expert panelists have covered earlier today. As far as the promotion of political stability, intellectual discourse, economic development, and the rights of women, there are a whole bunch of really important things to say here. Yet I’m going to put a big bracket around it and say, “See this morning’s program.” Instead, I’d like to assert five theses that I believe to be important. Then, we can have a dialogue where we argue about them or refine them.

Before I do that, I want to parse the title of the address slot I’ve been given. Officially, I think it said in your program that I was here to discuss “International Religious Freedom Promotion as a Moral, Economic, and Geopolitical Goal.” I’d like to add a phrase there: promotion by whom? Right now, there are a whole bunch of scholars, some journalists, and other advocacy organizations who are promoting this really important goal of international religious freedom. And yet when you look at the U.S. government right now and the discourse surrounding our two political parties, it’s really hard to figure out where in our political conversations you would find a lot of zealous, persuasive promotion of international religious freedom. That’s a crisis.

I’d like to parse the environment a little bit to consider why that is the case. Again, we’re talking about international religious freedom; but who is promoting it? The U.S. government is not nearly the clarion voice on this issue that it has been in the past and that it needs to become again in the future. To this end, I’m going to offer five theses. I’ll speed through them first. Then I’ll unpack them a little more slowly and invite audience questions, when you can argue as you see fit.

Here are my theses. Number one, our political environment—and again, as a backdrop, I believe most of the American people have largely checked out of a lot of our conversations in American politics right now—is highly polarized. In that polarized environment, religious liberty is increasingly being heard as a kind of identity politics play. That’s a really, really big problem. I have the third most conservative voting record in the U.S. Senate, but I was pretty skeptical of the nominee for president of my own party. So I’m a very conservative guy, but I’m not a particularly partisan guy. As a guy who is not particularly partisan, I am aching to know where all of the 1945 ACLU liberals have gone. I can’t find them. To be in an environment without ACLU liberals is a really strange place to be if you look at American intellectual history. If religious liberty becomes some sort of phrase that’s viewed as a placeholder for identity politics, then we have a whole bunch of other problems—
not merely that our foreign policy and the things we promote may not be coherent, but also that the fundamental American identity centered on the First Amendment isn’t at all clear.

Second, I think it’s worth identifying three different sets of opponents of religious liberty in our country right now. I would suggest that the political class can be located at the far right and far left of our political spectrum, and there’s a problem at both of those extremes. And remember, the vast majority of the public is not participating in the debate whatsoever. Thus, I think we have ended up with three sets of opponents of religious liberty. The largest opponent is a lack of civic catechesis. Our people don’t understand what the American experiment was about at its founding. We have a real crisis of identity right now. Once you have that crisis of identity, the resulting vacuums are going to be filled by individual voices that aren’t very persuasive to the 70 percent of the population. We shouldn’t be talking right versus left when we talk about religious liberty. It is the first freedom of the American experiment, the first thing listed in the Bill of Rights. In other words, when we name those three opponents of religious liberty, I’d like to talk about a progressive problem, a white-grievance identity politics problem, and a larger political apathy problem. This last problem recognizes that America hasn’t been passing on the meaning of this glorious experiment in self-government to the next generation for almost half a century.

Third, in the American tradition, I think we are all called to think of ourselves as minorities. In a weird way, if you believe what we believe in this anti-statist tradition, you should always have implicit, gut-level skepticism of any sense that you’re a part of a majority power play. If you go back to Philadelphia and think about the Constitutional Convention, the American experiment is largely about how to restrain potential threats coming from the tyranny of the majority. So you don’t want to be a part of a majority in the American experience. You want to understand that your minority status makes you sympathetic to lots of other minority statuses. There are times when the words that were used in the American founding were exclusively negative terms, such as “faction.” But there are other ways to talk about this notion, such as “principled pluralism,” that are much more constructive. I’d like to argue as a
thesis that every American should rightly be predisposed to think of themselves as a minority. Therefore, every American should feel a visceral need to defend their local community against overreaching majoritarianism and be biased to sympathize with lots of other minorities.

Fourth, I think that there is a creedal claim about the soul that is built into the American experiment. We can have lots of debates about theology in American culture, in American private life, and in American public life (but not in state life). We have a language deficit, in that the American version of the English word “public” usually is rendered as “state.” In the British context, “state” is a subset of “public.” But in America, we often collapse the two terms. In our public, creedal sense of what it means to be American, we have lots of communities that should have lots of debates about theology— theology X, Y, Z, or no theology at all. There’s a theological anthropology built into the American founding documents and into this experiment, and we should revive, recover, and reteach it.

Fifth, with respect to international religious freedom, when we have debates about foreign policy and try to net out some of the really important realist versus idealist arguments, we make a mistake when we allow the words “democracy” or “elections” to become proxies for religious liberty or religious freedom. Religious freedom is actually much more important than those other things. It allows us a much more nuanced way to say: Those fights between realism and idealism need not conflict over religious freedom because the idealism of religious liberty is true about the order of things. The realistic value of religious liberty promoting civil society across the globe is a lot more demonstrable than a realist claim that elections or the word “democracy” promote all those same civic virtues that we would like to see across the global landscape.

Those are my five big theses. I’ll unpack them at a slower pace, and then I’d rather have dialogue than for me to monologue at you. And my clock is ticking because I have an Uber pickup at 1:30. [Laughter]

In our present polarized political environment, the term “religious liberty” is being perceived as if it is a placeholder for some sort of bigotry. That bridges to our second point: looking at what these three different communities are. You can’t have an American experiment pass on our core values to the next generation without understanding where we come from—I mean, where we came from politically 240 years ago or 225 years ago—and understanding where we came from as a people that rejects a national identity based on blood and land. The American identity needs to be made up of a community of people that choose to be a part of this creedal community.

But America is a community of ideas. This is a community that believes certain things about where rights come from. This is a community that believes we defend people even when we differ from them. We defend them from violence. That’s the only time it’s really interesting to have to defend someone—to defend something that’s also your own right doesn’t ever surprise anyone. Yet it is now the case that many on the progressive left increasingly talk like “religious liberty” is just a code or placeholder. The U.S. Civil Rights Commission has recently used this line of argument. The terms religious freedom and religious liberty were placed in scare quotes in an official U.S. government document to suggest the terms are placeholders for a certain sort of political oppression. Such a conception of religious freedom demonstrates a lack of understanding of where we came from historically. And we also have a coalition emerging—somewhat in reaction to the epiphenomenal disruptions in the marketplace of industrial jobs—that seems to think there might be an ethnic way to talk about what America means.

Both of these groups are tragically wrong. We err when we respond to a critique of one of these sides by reflexively standing in solidarity with them—by refusing to disagree with them at all—merely because they are typically our allies in political battles. We make a mistake when we cease to criticize anybody on our side politically, or when we reflexively attack the people wearing the other color jersey. When we behave in a partisan way, we undermine the ability to transmit the really important parts of religious liberty to a vast majority of the public that is not paying attention to any of these questions right now. If we allow substantive politics to be reduced to symbolic politics, signaling, and partisan tribalism, we become part of the problem that makes other people look at this city of Washington with cynicism. When we behave in a partisan way on the issue of religious liberty, we push people who are not as engaged in politics to support one conception of religious freedom over another merely because they usually align with one set of people politically in opposition to another set of people.

Today the really interesting calling for those of us who believe deeply in religious liberty is to figure out ways to advocate for creedal and racial minority communities that we’re not a part of, and not to be disinterested in your partisan commitments. When you advocate for people that are in the community of belief that you already share, no one sees that as anything other than power, and the entire point of our First Amendment is that we believe most of life isn’t about power.

I want to be clear: I’ve had some interesting run-ins with the president-elect. He was frustrated with me for a while and began
referring to me as “gym rat” because he said I didn’t look like I was up to snuff for being a U.S. senator. What he doesn’t know about me is that I’m the son of a football and wrestling coach. Moreover, in Nebraska, there’s really no higher praise you can give somebody than calling him a gym rat. For these reasons, I’ve decided to fully embrace my new moniker. [Laughter]

As a guy who has been skeptical of my own political party, I say that as a backdrop for something that I don’t want you to interpret as too partisan right now. Last night and this morning, as you listened to President Obama as he was leaving the country—and now as he’s in Greece today—he talked about what he thinks about the election. One of the things he said was, “I will never apologize for the fact that I continue to believe in X, Y, and Z…” He basically said that his really important principle for America is allowing everybody from every community to participate in our government. Now, I actually think that’s an important thing to do, but that’s nowhere near the central thing that America is about. To say that America is about everyone participating in government is to claim that government is the center of things. That claim implies that it is really important for everybody to have enough of their hand on a lever of power to make their life meaningful. It suggests that the worth of life is connected to power levers in Washington, D.C. Such a claim fundamentally misunderstands the American experiment.

To understand the American experiment in protecting the pursuit of happiness, one could import all of Arthur Brooks’ work on what gives life meaning and happiness. When you look at macro data on what makes people happy, there are only about four determinants besides genetics. About half of whether or not you’re a half-full or a half-empty guy or gal turns out to be largely based on basic genetics, according to the University of Minnesota study on twins. Some of us are just cheerier and some of us are just grumpier than others. Yet in everything about which we can make a difference, either individually or communally, one could summarize all of the social science literature on happiness to demonstrate that Aristotle was right.

The main takeaway from the social science is that happiness is most likely to come through textured communal living, where you are connected to a material world in a relational world and where you make a difference in people’s lives. There are not 4,700 variables that determine whether or not people are happy. There are basically four. Do you know what you believe about life and death and meaning and existence? Do you have some sort of theological framework? Do you have a family? Do you have what Arthur Brooks calls community—which if you look closely is really Aristotelian friendship? Are there one or two or three people in the world that when they suffer, you hurt? And when they’re happy, you’re happy? Is there an expansive sense of the self where you really have a couple of friends in the world besides your family? Do you have meaningful work? Meaningful work may hurt. You may get scabs and blisters. You may not get paid a lot of money. Here is the key question that determines the meaningfulness of your work: When you leave on Monday morning to go to work, do you think there is anybody in the world for whom your work is going to make a difference? Does somebody benefit? Is there a neighbor that flourishes a little bit more because of the work that you do? I care deeply about all four of those indicators of happiness.

The social science research would suggest that meaningful work is by far the biggest component of happiness. If you think you have meaningful work, you’re going to be happy. If you don’t have meaningful work, then you’re not going to be happy. The antidote that sort of proves this finding is that the single most

In this room, there’s a huge diversity of opinion about the nature of God, about heaven and hell, about meaning and what happens after death. These questions are far more important than the marginal tax rates of the upper 10 percent of the American public. And yet, we have to have a polity that defines a framework for ordered liberty so that you can go persuade and be persuaded about the really important things over your dinner table, in your houses of worship, or in the town square—even if there’s shouting involved.

Senator Ben Sasse
unhappy people on earth, according to social science literature, are not people who have had some cataclysm in their life. Rather, the unhappiest people are lottery winners. They have a massively expanded denominator about how much they can consume. They also have almost no need to produce. Free of any pressing need to produce, they usually stop producing. They have no neighbor who benefits from what they do and their lives are miserable.

The American founding is essentially a grand claim that says we believe that people are created with dignity. In my tradition, we say that we believe people are created in the image of God. If you believe people are created with dignity, then government exists as a shared project to protect people from violence so they can go live full lives trying to glorify God, benefit their neighbors, work, build families, have friendships, and support Husker football.

In this view of happiness, the local, textured community where you live is the center of the world. Washington isn't the center of the world. The places where every life and every soul lives and needs to flourish are the centers of the world. Government is a shared project to secure those rights to pursue a flourishing life.

We have to do the hard work of talking about government again in the sense that we believe rights precede government. The government is our shared project not to allow other people in a fallen world to infringe on people's lives, liberty, and pursuit of happiness, including their free exercise of religion.

The American founders—-and this is why we should think of ourselves in terms of minority status—were motivated by ontological reasons of theological anthropology and by pragmatic reasons arising from more than 100 years of European wars of religion. They came at the problem with the belief that anarchy should not exist in the world and that governments are necessary. However, they disagreed with what most peoples in the history of the world have thought about government. Namely, that since government is necessary, we should be really grateful we have one, find a way to defend the divine right of those people who have the power, and hope that those in power will rule benevolently and occasionally grant people some rights.

The American founders thought power worked in exactly the opposite way. People are endowed by their Creator with inalienable rights. We get our rights to life, liberty, the pursuit of happiness, freedom of speech, assembly, press, religion, redress of grievances, and the right to protest to government. We believe that all these rights flow to people because of their inherent dignity as they were created. The government is a shared project to secure those things. You have to get the ordering correctly: rights precede government.

The American founders had a mental picture of an island surrounded by an ocean. Throughout history, they claimed, almost everybody has understood the picture wrongly. They have had an inverse impression of what's actually true. They felt that the island was the rights that the people were given, whereas the king, the guy who had a monopoly on violence, was the ocean. The common view held that rights are those things granted by government. The American founders insisted that the picture be understood exactly the opposite way. “We're going to enumerate our powers,” they declared. “We're going to say that the Constitution will be the most important founding document of any polity in human history because it's a negative document.” The Constitution, properly understood, doesn't in any way give us any rights. All it does is define the compact by which we, the people, give the government a limited set of enumerated powers. When those powers end, you reach the shoreline of the island of government, and the limitless ocean of human freedom and liberty begins. It simply isn't the case that the shoreline marks the end of the rights that are granted to us by the powerful.
And yet, in this city, we increasingly talk like government has the power to extend or withhold rights. We have a situation where civics data now shows us that roughly a third of the public knows that we have three branches of government. We’re on a campus here: 41 percent of Americans under the age of 35 tell pollsters that they think the First Amendment is dangerous. Think about that. Two-fifths of people under the age of 35 think the First Amendment is dangerous. Why? Because you might use your freedom of speech to say something that hurts someone else’s feelings. This sentiment is closely connected to the “safe space” movement. Actually, the entire purpose of America is to give you the freedom to hurt somebody else’s feelings. In addition, neither of you when you argue should fear that you’re going to be subject to violence. The American experiment is about protecting people from violence so that they can go out and debate the really important things that are much more important than government policy.

In this room, there’s a huge diversity of opinion about the nature of God, about heaven and hell, about meaning and what happens after death. These questions are far more important than the marginal tax rates of the upper 10 percent of the American public. And yet we have to have a polity that defines a framework for ordered liberty so that you can go persuade and be persuaded about the really important things over your dinner table, in your houses of worship, or in the town square—even if there’s shouting involved. As Americans we have not done the hard work of explaining that to upcoming generations.

We should think back to Madison’s statements in Federalist 10. Back when the founders were setting up a new kind of government—there was no more divine right of kings and rulers couldn’t be chosen because their grandpa was king—many people were saying, “Well, one of the most important things we need to do is extinguish diversity of opinion. There’s so much religious difference in our society. How do we get rid of that religious difference?” Madison said that’s exactly the wrong question. You will never succeed at extinguishing diversity of opinion. And why would you ever want to do so through power? The only thing you can do is try to open the floodgates of diversity of opinion and to ensure greater ability to debate every issue. If there is complete openness to discussion and debate, all of us will come to realize that we are not totally unified with anybody, even in our own narrow faith communities. We are each a minority. Let us stand together against those who would ever want to be in the majority so as to enforce their will by using force to extinguish your dissenting opinions.

All Americans should embrace the vision of Madison and the founders that as minorities, we should go out and find other minorities to defend. I’m inspired by a passionate, idealistic eighth grader who is thinking and arguing about the Skokie march—that case when the Supreme Court upheld the right of the KKK community to march through a Jewish neighborhood. Those debates are the debates that all American kids need to have and understand: whether or not you can permit a KKK march in the name of freedom of assembly, and whether or not a local government can interfere with a march. These are really important things to differ about.

But the idea of the founders was that the only safeguard of your own dissenting minority rights is your willingness to defend the rights of other people to say things with which you disagree. When you advocate for positions that you already hold, nobody hears you. They only hear you when you defend people from whom you have some creedal difference. To do that requires that we understand that the public square, culture, and the really important stuff in life are much bigger and broader than the much narrower set of things that we would seek to solve by power and by government.

I think that brings us to the mistake that we make when we advocate for religious freedom in the international space. I was getting summaries of the discussion from this morning as the excellent panelists were speaking, and I think my takeaway is that we make a mistake when we ignore the important philosophical debates about idealism versus realism. What is the responsibility of the U.S. government when it is abroad? What are we trying to do with our State Department and our Defense Department and our intelligence services? Are we trying to promote justice, order, peace, enlightenment, and liberty across the globe as abstractions? Or are we trying to think about America’s security interest first?

I tend to incline toward the realist side of this debate not because I’m not an idealist—there are many things that I would want for all seven billion people who I believe are created in the image of God—but because I believe the U.S. government isn’t a limitless tool. The U.S. government is a specific tool that’s created with the consent of the governed. It does not have unlimited authority to do things that require it to regulate and compel people, to forcibly tax them, to conscript them in times of war, or to take any number of actions that take away liberty in the interest of national security. The project of the U.S. government is a limited project and, therefore, I have a realist conception of the primary set of responsibilities we have when we forge a foreign policy.

At the same time, I believe the data show us that the best thing we can do for our own national security is to create a more orderly and stable world. We should pursue a world where jihad is not spreading
wildfire across the globe. We should pursue a world where we can feel secure from the threats that currently face us, like those of cyber warfare, jihad, and miniaturized nuclear technology. These threats are unparalleled and unprecedented in a post-Westphalian, post-1648 world. For 350 years, we have believed that state actors are the only entities that can wage war and can have global reach. That’s no longer the case. We know since 9/11 that smaller entities, like death cults of hundreds or thousands of people, can have global reach in this age. We should want to prevent these threats from reaching our shores. We should want to end jihad for the good of the people who are suffering under jihadi communities, but we should also want it because we don’t want terrorist attacks to come here.

One of the most effective long-term plays we will make in that space is to see the promotion of a more vibrant civil society, where there is economic development, political stability, a promotion of free assembly, freedom of religion, a recognition of the rights of women, and again, greater intellectual diversity and the communities that flow from that. The way to encourage all of that is to do the kinds of work that so many of you are engaged in, either through scholarship or journalism or advocacy, to promote religious liberty across the globe.

Yet we must not allow the discussion of religious liberty to be marginalized on the belief that it is a natural product of elections and democracy. Elections and democracy alone are not enough to secure true freedom, because elections and democracy alone may lead to the short-term majoritarianism that extinguishes so many of these other rights that we all care about.

I will not try to put a neat bowtie on this speech. But I offered you five theses, and now I want to give the audience a chance to show me where I’m wrong.

TIMOTHY SHAH: I want to note that even though Senator Sasse has Lutheran leanings, he gave us five theses, not 95. [Laughter] That would have taken a lot longer. Thank you for the five. Thank you, Senator Sasse, for covering such a huge range of issues in such a provocative and inspiring way.

ILHAN CAGRI: Hello. My name is Ilhan Cagri from the Muslim Public Affairs Council. Thank you very much. I enjoyed your talk tremendously. I agree with you that we need to protect people’s ability to say what they believe in. But just this last weekend, in Silver Spring, Maryland, one mile from the district line, two
churches were vandalized with hateful imagery. And in Bethesda, Maryland, a swastika was painted on a middle school. How do you find the balance between allowing people to express their views and then preventing them from going to an extreme and hurting others or breaking laws? How do you navigate that?

SENATOR BEN SASSE: Thank you for the question. I don’t really see the advocacy of violence against religious communities as frequently coming from religious people. If we do see one religious community advocating violence against another religious community, we should ask the offending group if their religion really requires faith-based violence. The destruction of property, violence against people, and violence against property are and always should be prohibited. It is not a legitimate form of public expression to go vandalize somebody else’s property. To me the interesting question is, who did it? Why did they do it? Are people of other religious communities defending the communities that had the violence promulgated against them? If the communities perpetrating the violence are religious communities, are people in that community standing up for religious freedom and religious liberty and free association? Are they condemning those actions from their co-religionists?

SPENCER SLAGOWITZ: Hello.
My name is Spencer Slagowitz. I’m a freshman at Georgetown. I just wanted to ask about values inherited based on their historical significance. I think many people try to talk about the premise of the American experiment as a way to evaluate the values that we have inherited. But my worry is that maybe this is the wrong question. There is great value in looking at that path, but maybe our core values have changed. Our understanding of society has changed and, in fact, our social contract perhaps has changed as well. We’re saying we support religious pluralism and religious freedom because they are the premise of the American project. But maybe we should just support them because they are positive goods in society. I guess my question is, are we asking the right question here? Should solely pastors be able to determine what is good for society? Is there another question we ought to be asking?

“We should recognize the folly of saying that government is just another word for those things we choose to do together. No, it isn't. Government is another word for coercion, and there are places to coerce and to compel things. But community is another word for things we choose to do together. The American experiment is about voluntarism.”

Senator Ben Sasse

SENATOR BEN SASSE: Thank you for the question. I will touch on the social contract term for a minute. One of the glories of the American construct is that it permits change but requires it to occur in an orderly way. It isn’t the case that everything in the Constitution has been unchangeable. But the Constitution itself has mechanisms for change, and if we abide by these mechanisms, then we don’t have to resort to uncertainties, violence, or amorphous claims about the will of the people in order to produce change. We have a process by which we can debate correct changes.

What’s great about our structure, again, is that our Constitution is a negative document that enumerates the powers of the government, and it does this for the basic presupposition of securing the freedom of the people. Our rights, as listed in the First Amendment or in the whole Bill of Rights, are not in any way meant to be a finite list. The construct of the Bill of Rights is itself catechetical. Remember that these are amendments, on purpose, placed outside the document just to clarify things. It’s not because when you get to the end of the list, you’ve somehow gotten to the end of the freedoms. So the First Amendment is supposed to list the most important thing first, and it provides a laundry list—it’s freedom of religion, speech, press, assembly, petition, and the right to redress of grievances—all bundled in the First Amendment. And then the Second Amendment is to secure the first. You go down this list and you get to the Ninth and Tenth Amendment.

The entire point is, again, catechetical in that the Tenth Amendment states that any powers that were not expressly given to the federal government are powers that could only be exercised by states and locals. The Ninth Amendment states that any freedoms that haven’t been expressly listed are still freedoms that belong to the people. I think our presupposition is liberty. There may be places where the fundamental law changes over time. But our document enshrines a way to have that debate in an orderly sense because we believe in the rule of law.
TIMOTHY SHAH: Are there any students who would like to ask a question?

AUDIENCE MEMBER (Unidentified): Well, thank you very much, Senator Sasse. I'm from Lincoln, Nebraska. I am a member of the Yazidi community and I represent the Yazidi Human Rights Organization-International. Concerning this Religious Freedom Project, I would just say that the Yazidis know that the American government and the American people are great. We are very grateful. We really thank them for respecting the religious minorities in America and outside America.

What do you think are the plans of the U.S. government concerning the religious minorities in Iraq and Syria, especially this persecution of Yazidis and Christians by large religious majorities and by their governments? Thank you.

SENATOR BEN SASSE: Thank you for your question. For those of you who don't know, the largest portion of the Yazidi community in the United States happens to be in Lincoln, Nebraska, due to accidents of history and the influence of Catholic refugee services and the State Department. Jeff Fortenberry in the House and I in the Senate were lead sponsors of legislation to force the Obama administration to declare what was happening to your community as a genocide. The House finally passed it, and it was awaiting action in the Senate when the Obama administration officially made that declaration. There's an important wedding between the Yazidis and Nebraska.

Regarding your question, I'll acknowledge that I think we're in an uncertain time. The president-elect is establishing his team right now. I'm hopeful from some of the signs of the last six or seven days that he is choosing voices who will be more aligned with a long-term vision for action in preventing genocide than may have been indicated by some of the past campaign rhetoric. Again, I was skeptical of both major party candidates. But my view is that once we've had an election and a president-elect with constitutional status, all of us should be rooting for his success and personal flourishing. At my house, we have prayed every morning for three or four weeks and will continue to do so in the future for our president-elect, soon to become President Trump. As we prayed in the past for President Obama, a guy I wasn't aligned with on lots of issues, we should all be praying for President-Elect Trump's wisdom as commander-in-chief.

In the U.S. system, the vast majority of policy is made by the legislature. Four hundred thirty-five out of the 535 members of Congress can be fired every 24 months. The president's main job in our constitutional system is to faithfully and dutifully execute the laws that have been passed by the Congress, except in the case of a national security emergency, in which case the president has a much larger prime mover responsibility as policymaker. We should all be praying and hopeful for President-Elect Trump's ability and wisdom in his new job. We should pray and hope that he will be surrounded by folks that have a thought-out, long-term vision in this space. I am hopeful about some of the voices we hear being considered due to the promotion of Vice President-Elect Pence to the head of the transition team.

I'm going to be cautiously watching and hopeful. But I don't think our future foreign policy is clear. I think there is a lot of anxiety in the American public about particular aspects of our foreign policy over the last two decades. Let me go back further. We're still in the post-1989 moment since the fall of the Berlin Wall and the end of the Cold War. It's been 25 years since the Soviet Union dissolved, and we don't really have a coherent national security strategy. We've bundled a whole bunch of issues around trade and immigration with a larger question about the role of the United States in the world. Anxieties about the transformation of the economy have led many folks to feel a tendency or a desire to draw inward and to withdraw from the world. I think that would be a very bad thing. We saw a lot of that rhetoric in the campaign. I'm hopeful that we'll actually see something different play out as the initial policies are rolled out and as personnel decisions are made.

TIMOTHY SHAH: We have time for one more question.

NATHAN BERKELEY: Hi. I'm Nathan Berkeley from the Department of Justice. I have a question about your view of nondiscrimination laws and especially their interaction with religious freedom. Nondiscrimination laws are a particular form of government coercion. Many people find them very well-justified in some circumstances and not in others. I'm curious what your view is of the conditions that should be present that would make nondiscrimination laws appropriate for the state in terms of exercising appropriate uses of coercion.

SENATOR BEN SASSE: That's a fair and important question, though it's probably a few steps too technical for a forum like this. My general view is that any conversations we're having, especially regarding public accommodations, need to start with the assumption that people are going to have strongly dissenting views about the appropriate nature of pluralistic communities. We should also start with the assumption that we should be working hard to protect the rights of people to hold dissenting views. It should not be the ambition of the government to shift society to a
place where everyone thinks exactly the same way. We should have lots of important debates about the role of the government around public accommodation and around public investments. What do we spend money on? And what do we explicitly prohibit in the interest of justice?

At the same time we must recognize that it is not the government’s goal to get to a place of uniformity of belief on a broad range of cultural questions, which are well upstream of politics. We should recognize the folly of saying that government is just another word for those things we choose to do together. No, it isn’t. Government is another word for coercion, and there are places to coerce and to compel things. But community is another word for things we choose to do together. The American experiment is about voluntarism.

Tocqueville understood this in the 1830s and 1840s during the early American flowering. I’ll close with a quote from Tocqueville on this. Tocqueville said that Europeans were confused by the flowering American economy in the 1830s and 1840s. They thought, “Who are these people? These are nut jobs. They’re a bunch of religious zealots at the edge of the globe that won a war in the 1770s, really because the Brits were distracted. Britain had a crazy king, they were at war with France, and they were using a bunch of mercenary German Hessian soldiers who didn’t really want to fight that hard. The Americans were only able to win because they used quasi-guerilla tactics.” You know, it wasn’t until the War of 1812 that we finally secured our liberty in the eyes of Europe. Europeans rightly understood war primarily as a debate about the free people’s rights—the rights of free people to self-govern and self-discipline. We say those words like they’re passive things that maybe our grammar school kids know how to say. All too often, we don’t really think about what they mean.

When you say you believe in self-discipline and self-control and self-government, you are saying that you want to minimize the other-government. This is not a debate about minimum wage, for example, which simply descends into a debate about small-versus medium-sized governmental regulations. In general, we want to limit the compulsory powers of government to decide for us what is right and what is wrong, to decide between heaven and hell, or to determine meaning of life and death. We want limited other-government because we believe in a republic of
virtue in which people should self-control, self-discipline, and
decide for themselves these questions of ultimate conscience.

The founders believed in these things, and so they sought to create a
free society where free people could honor God in the ways that they
felt were appropriate, even if they differed from their neighboring
communities. Europeans may have understood the value of that
liberty, but they never thought that economic flowering could be a
byproduct of that liberty. Yet in 1830s, two decades later after the
War of 1812, America had a robust, thriving, flowering economy.
There had been the transportation revolution and the canal
revolution and the proto-railroad revolution. Europeans looked at
this and were totally perplexed.

So Tocqueville comes to America. I think the right way to think of
his 1,500-page Democracy in America is not as a linear argument
from beginning to end. It’s a collection of travel reports. Tear your
book apart if you have it. Rip the binding off and leave it in five
to seven-paged chunks all over your house and read it as travel
dispatches. Tocqueville writes back to Europe and explains what
America means. He says that what’s crazy about American people
is that because they have diversity of belief and because they believe
most things can’t be solved by power or compulsion, they have
created a competition of ideas. This competition of ideas is present
in a whole bunch of places, including within the market, and that
has led to a completely unanticipated economic flowering.

He said when he wrote back to France—that “I went to America. I went to find the center of
this place that has economic vitality.” He said, “I assumed that
because they have this flowering economy, they must have the
best bureaucrats. And so I went to Washington, D.C. to find the
meaning of America.” He gets here and he writes home to say that
Washington, D.C. is really a swamp inhabited by a bunch of people
that aren’t that ambitious or creative or interesting. If I weren’t in
Washington right now, I might say that it hasn’t changed all that
much. [Laughter] Then Tocqueville says, “To find the meaning of
America, I realized you have to go out and you have to go to the
places where people actually live.” He traveled to 17 of the then-25
states. When he wrote back again, saying, “I found the meaning of
America. It’s the rotary club.”

There isn’t a continuum in America between isolated
individualists—like the Unabomber alone in Montana—and
collectivist statists. America is really about a whole bunch of
civically minded people who believe in having the freedom to
persuade you to buy their product, to marry your daughter,
to join your church or synagogue or mosque, or to participate
in your venture philanthropy project. We believe in a robust
marketplace of ideas.

I’ll close with the Tocqueville quote which comes when he sees the
relationship between the freedom of the people in their faith and
in their civic participation. It is a quote rooted in diversity, the right
dissent, and an understanding that culture is well upstream from
politics. Tocqueville writes, “Despotism may govern without faith,
but liberty cannot. Religion is much more necessary in the republic
which they set forth in glowing colors than in the monarchy which
they attack. It is more needed in democratic republics than in
others. How is it possible that society should escape destruction if
the moral tie is not strengthened in proportion as the political tie
is relaxed? And what can be done with a people who are their own
masters if they are not submissive to the deity?”

The assumption is that people who are self-controlled and self-
restrained have to believe that there are other powers beyond the
state. When they believe that, religious freedom flourishes and
allows people to defend the rights of others, even though they
might dissent with them on the most important things. They still
believe in protecting them from violence. I think that’s the mission
that you’re all involved with in this project. So to the Religious
Freedom Project and everyone who attended this keynote, thank
you for having me.

TIMOTHY SHAH: We’re very grateful to Senator Sasse for
joining us today—the Uber driver by night, U.S. Senator by day.
[Laughter] We’re immensely grateful to Senator Sasse for joining us
today and for defending religious freedom in Congress. Plato spoke
about his hope that there could be philosopher-kings. It’s very good
that we have at least one philosopher in the Senate of Ben Sasse’s
caliber. [Applause]
TIMOTHY SHAH: In this panel we’ll cover authoritarianism, majoritarianism, and religious repression. These topics are complex. Growing restrictions on religious freedom are tied to the rise of autocratic regimes all around the world. What challenges do religious communities face under these kinds of repressive governments? How is the persecution of religion related to other infringements of basic human rights? What can the international community, including the United States, do to discourage religious persecution and advance religious liberty for believers and non-believers alike, particularly in authoritarian as well as quasi-authoritarian regimes? This is what our scholars Karrie Koesel and Ani Sarkissian call “hybrid regimes.”

Here to discuss these questions are three members of our Religious Freedom Project team plus a distinguished guest. Ani Sarkissian is an associate professor of political science at Michigan State University and an associate scholar with the Berkley Center’s Religious Freedom Project. Her research focuses on comparing and investigating the role of religion and politics in countries around the world. Her book, *The Varieties of Religious Repression: Why Governments Restrict Religion*, examines how and why authoritarian regimes use religious restrictions as an instrument of their rule.

Karrie Koesel is an associate professor of political science at the University of Notre Dame and an associate scholar at the Religious Freedom Project. She previously taught at the University of Oregon. Dr. Koesel is an expert on the contemporary politics of Russia and China, as well as on authoritarianism, religion, and politics. She’s the author of *Religion and Authoritarianism: Cooperation, Conflict, and the Consequences* and her work has appeared in a variety of academic journals.

John M. Owen IV is the Taylor Professor of Politics at the University of Virginia. At UVA, he is a faculty fellow at the Institute for Advanced Studies in Culture and a faculty affiliate with the Miller Center of Public Affairs. He is an associate scholar with the Religious Freedom Project. His books include *Confronting Political Islam; The Clash of Ideas in World Politics;* and *Liberal Peace, Liberal War: American Politics and International Security.*

Let me finally welcome Peter Danchin. I’m delighted that he is joining us. His role is somewhat different from the other three panelists in that he has not been part of our Religious Freedom Project team. Rather, he has been leading a different research project on religious freedom that has produced a very impressive
body of scholarship. Much of it is highly critical of religious freedom, both as a norm and as a policy. We’re delighted to engage him this afternoon. Peter Danchin is a professor of law and co-director of the International and Comparative Law Program at the University of Maryland’s Francis King Carey School of Law. He holds a B.A. and B.L. with first class honors from the University of Melbourne, where he was editor-in-chief of the Melbourne University Law Review and president of the Law Students’ Society. From 2000 to 2006, he was lecturer and director of the Human Rights Program at Columbia University’s School of International and Public Affairs. His scholarship focuses on competing conceptions of the right to religious freedom and belief present in international legal theory, with a special focus on tensions between liberal and value-pluralist approaches. Among his many publications is the volume he co-edited with Elizabeth Cole, Protecting the Human Rights of Religious Minorities in Eastern Europe. Most recently, he was co-editor of Politics of Religious Freedom published by the University of Chicago Press. He has also published numerous pieces on the blog, The Immanent Frame.

Now I’m going to engage our panelists in something that I hope is as close as possible to a real conversation, rather than a series of speeches. I’m going to begin by posing a question to John Owen. In a way, it picks up on a discussion we’ve had over the course of the day and is perhaps the central question of this panel. How does religious liberty relate to other liberties and freedoms? How does it relate to civil rights? We just heard a very eloquent discussion of the First Amendment by Senator Ben Sasse, in which he talked about the ways in which the First Amendment bundles a variety of rights and freedoms, including freedoms of speech, press, and assembly. We’ve heard some talk recently in our public discourse that these liberties are separable from each other and that religious liberty is dangerous to the other liberties. Can you have some of these liberties without the others? What is their relationship, John?

JOHN OWEN: I agree it’s an important question, Tim. Let me start by answering a question you didn’t ask me. What’s the relation between rights in general—civic rights and human rights—and democracy? The senator said, I think quite correctly, that using free and fair elections in other countries as a proxy for religious liberty just doesn’t work. As Americans, sometimes we forget this. We think democracy is this big blob that includes regular competitive elections and majority rule, plus a bundle of rights that are enumerated in the Constitution. We forget that historically, and even logically, they don’t necessarily go together.

Liberal democracy is a marriage of two things: majority rule, through a set of rules that are usually a basic adaptation of our Constitution; and civil rights, especially the individual claims against the state. Historically, those things don’t always go together. You can see very quickly how they might conflict: What if the majority wants to violate the rights of a minority? If you have majority rule, they get to do that. In our system, majorities and minorities check each other.

In my view, although this can be an uneasy marriage between rights—individual rights on one hand and majority rule on the other—history shows that sustaining majority rule over time requires enshrining individual rights. An uneasy tension exists between the two, but it’s a permanent and stable equilibrium in country after country, including this one.

Now on to your question, Tim: How does religious liberty relate to other rights? We are seeing some tensions now, but in general they have existed harmoniously through much of history.

Rather than try to give an abstract account of that, let me just talk about history. A lot of my work is historical, comparing religious liberty and democracy now to democracy and religious liberty in the past, covering different parts of the world. I have in mind the story that Tony Gill alluded to earlier today: the advent of religious liberty in England in the seventeenth century. It was not complete until the nineteenth century, when we saw Catholic emancipation and when Jews and religious dissenters could finally sit in parliament and go to Oxford and Cambridge. However, the story starts in the seventeenth century with the coming of William of Orange from the Netherlands. The Netherlands was Europe’s pioneer in sustaining religious liberty. One of the conditions that William set was that if he were to come to England to rule, England would have to guarantee religious toleration for dissenters, especially Roman Catholics, but also Puritans and others.

The effort to bring William of Orange to England was led by Anglicans who didn’t have a great history of religious toleration. William had to persuade them. This was a condition he laid down. England still had Test and Corporation Acts that were passed in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries; under these laws, you had to be an Anglican in order to go to a university, sit in parliament, and so on. But other rights that were not officially allowed were allowed in practice, and England gradually came to embrace toleration.

The people who opposed the rights of religious minorities in England were the same people who wanted to concentrate power
in the crown. The Tories were skeptical about religious toleration because they saw it as the edge of the wedge. If you start allowing religious dissent, you’re allowing institutions and groups to self-organize and possibly threaten the power of the crown. The Whigs favored more religious liberty, though a limited kind compared to the modern view. Still, this was significant at the time. They were the ones who wanted power dispersed. They believed that the House of Commons should have more power.

So you see, the British experience is just one example that shows that people have historically recognized that these liberties all are part of the same package. If you want to concentrate power, one thing to do is quash religious dissent; in other words, put the state in charge of all religion and don’t allow any exceptions. I think that story is told time and time again in country after country.

TIMOTHY SHAH: Thank you. John, you’ve given us a nice summary of a historical episode in which religious and civil liberties went together. Well, that’s a perfect segue to you, Ani. Religious repression went along with political repression to a certain extent in early modern Europe. Ani, you’ve produced volumes of research concerning patterns of religious repression today. We might tend to think about religious repression and say, “Well, if you round up a few Jehovah’s Witnesses, big deal.” We might think that it really doesn’t affect the political make-up or health of a society. It’s maybe not a good thing to round up the Jehovah’s Witnesses, but it’s really not such a big deal.

Your research complicates that picture and dovetails with Senator Sasse’s point that merely having elections is not necessarily the best indicator of whether a country is moving toward democracy. Your research has suggested that religious repression is a pretty good proxy for the overall political liberalization of a society. Could you talk about that and about why religious groups might be vulnerable to repression in an authoritarian context?

ANI SARKISSIAN: Sure. Religious groups, like other social or ethnic groups, are self-defined and part of civil society. In authoritarian countries or semi-authoritarian countries—what are called “hybrid regimes” that are not liberal democracies and don’t have extensive protections for rights—repression of religion is oftentimes used by states in order to suppress a part of civil society that might challenge the regime or the state.
argue in my work that when we study regimes, we shouldn’t just look at elections to figure out whether they’re democratic or not. We should also look at the host of rights that are protected or violated in those states to determine what type of regime they are.

We find that, in societies where religion is most influential—the population is highly religious, religion has been a divisive issue, or religion has been part of that society’s foundational moment—you tend to see more restrictions against religion. You might think that not allowing a group to put a cross on its church or pass out pamphlets is not a big deal. But those are all indications of a state’s unwillingness to protect the rights of everybody in society. We must remember that democracy is not just about the majority; it’s about protecting the most vulnerable minorities.

Now, in authoritarian regimes, it’s not only minorities that are targeted. Many authoritarian regimes are religiously based or have a lot of support from the majority religion. In those societies, when the state is creating laws that are either favoring or outright establishing a religion, religious repression often develops. It hurts the majority religion as well as minority religions. We need to look at the range of restrictions against religious groups in the same way that we look at the range of restrictions against other groups in civil society to determine where the regime falls on the spectrum from democracy to authoritarianism.

TIMOTHY SHAH: In some of the states in Central Asia—an area you’re familiar with—there is widespread repression of both majority and minority groups because those regimes see all of these groups as potential sources of opposition.

ANI SARKISSIAN: Yes. This repression is fueled by both secular and religious perspectives. Sometimes secular leaders are worried about religious groups that oppose them, but there are also religious leaders who are nervous about groups from different religions. It’s not just the secular atheists or the militant secularists who are repressing religion; it’s people on all parts of the spectrum.

TIMOTHY SHAH: Karrie, let me turn to you. You’ve done extensive work on religion in authoritarian contexts and you’ve also done work with Ani on levels of religious repression and religious freedom in semi-authoritarian contexts. Based on your research, what are some of the coercive tools that you see authoritarian governments using against religious groups? To what extent are those tools indicators of wider political pathologies or possibilities for reform?

KARRIE KOESEL: Thank you, Tim. It’s a terrific question and not an easy one to answer given the diversity of authoritarian regimes and the way that they restrict religious communities, whether it’s a majority or minorities. In our work, we use the phrase “authoritarian toolkits,” the common tools that regimes use to monitor, manage, control, coerce, and channel religious communities.

We’re not suggesting that religious groups are necessarily political actors, but they have a distinct set of resources or skills that many other civil society groups don’t have. Religious groups often have their own places to meet, receive financial donations, have charismatic leaders, and attract devoted followers. These resources make most authoritarian leaders nervous because they enable these groups to mobilize politically.

We find in our research that these regimes treat many religious communities in the same way that they treat civil society groups seen as distrustful or as a potential source of opposition. They employ a two-part strategy. First, they use straightforward repression: targeting religious minorities, restricting individual rights of association and freedom of conscience, and implementing laws that limit religious communities and their activities. Second, they co-opt religious groups; they don’t use force to manage or coerce religious actors, but instead try to persuade them to be supportive of the regime, or at least neutral toward it. Regimes use a variety of tools to co-opt groups, including bribes or kickbacks, favoritism, and granting certain religious communities special freedoms. These could be energy subsidies or access to prime pieces of real estate, which help them build houses of worship and attract members. Regimes could also increase funding for religious schools, expand access to hospitals and the military, and so on. These are common ways to encourage religious groups to avoid making trouble for the regime.

“The Dutch realized that if people were loyal to the state, that’s all they needed. Adhering to a minority religion does not ipso facto mean disloyalty to the state.”

John Owen
TIMOTHY SHAH: Great. I want to raise a question about the Muslim majority world, beginning with John. Your recent work has placed a fresh emphasis on the powerful role of culture, religion, and ideas in world politics, factors rarely considered decisive by international relations scholars. You've recently written about political Islam in particular. Do you think there is evidence that religious repression is a greater challenge in Muslim-majority societies? Is there an intrinsic characteristic that causes Muslim-majority societies to have embedded patterns of religious repression? If so, why might this be?

JOHN OWEN: It's a question discussed by many for a number of years now. I'll start out by saying that it is empirically true. If you take a snapshot of today's world, the answer is yes, there are special challenges in Muslim-majority societies. But we must be careful not to jump to the conclusion that this is a problem with Islam as a religion. I say that because there's enormous variation across time and space.

Across space, look at the world's most populous Muslim nation, Indonesia. It of course has social problems. Jihadism is a very small but consequential movement. But Indonesia is a liberal democracy, and its constitution was drafted by a religiously diverse coalition. We tend to cherry-pick and look at the Middle East. I don't mean to downplay the problems in the Middle East, but if we look across time we see that Islam has been around for about 1,400 years. In certain periods, it hasn't been as religiously tolerant as a modern liberal democracy but has been more tolerant than the Christian world. The most notorious time is the Reformation and Counter-Reformation periods in Central and Western Europe, a time when the Ottoman Empire was much more tolerant. The Ottomans must have thought, “These Europeans are crazy.” It's ironically similar to the way Western people tend to look at the Middle East now. We think to ourselves, “Why do they kill each other over these insoluble questions?” These are the questions that the Turks were asking at the time.

So something else is going on. If we look empirically across time and space, Islam does not have a special problem. I think much of the Islamic world—though not all of it—is going through a multi-decade period that's analogous to what Christian Europe went through 400 or 500 years ago. That is, a sustained contest over questions as old as Aristotle: What is the best regime? What's the right regime? What's the best way to order public life? How far should the state's role extend? Where should the laws come from? These are acute questions in many Muslim societies now.

These questions are not easily answered. There are different interests and institutions within societies debating the answer. They take a long time to solve. The so-called “wars of religion” in early modern Europe went off and on sporadically for many decades. The West has also had other ideological conflicts about picking the right regime: conflicts between communism, fascism, and liberal democracy. These went on for a long time and were extremely violent. Europe was nearly destroyed over those questions.

But now, those questions have largely been answered. I say that with some uncertainty given recent trends in the West. But Westerners, with few exceptions, don't kill each other over these questions.
learned is that the Dutch didn’t kill each other over religion anymore. This relates to Karrie’s point about the authoritarian’s toolkit; the Dutch realized that if people were loyal to the state, that’s all they needed. Adhering to a minority religion does not ipso facto mean disloyalty to the state. That lesson took hold because the Netherlands was so successful at implementing it.

TIMOTHY SHAH: It became a successful exemplary state modeling religious freedom for the Western Christian world.

JOHN OWEN: Yes, and it makes for a stable, secure society over time. One of the issues in the Middle East now is the lack of a successful exemplar, so the regimes are still up for grabs. Nobody in the region knows yet what the winning regime type is. If I’m right, the bad news is that this could go on for a while longer. The good news is it will end. But I’m not sure what the United States can do, frankly. It might be more of a problem to manage and help at the margins than one that has a clean solution.

TIMOTHY SHAH: So we should hope that exemplary nation-states in the Muslim-majority world are successful in modeling religious freedom, at least at some level. This is extremely significant for the whole future of the Muslim-majority world. There are states that are promising in this regard, such as Tunisia and Indonesia. Turkey was promising a few years ago, but has become less so.

JOHN OWEN: I agree. I’ve been quite dismayed at what’s been happening in Turkey. Tunisia is an interesting case. Geographically, it’s small and peripheral, but I do think its success is having some signalling effects, at least in elite circles.

TIMOTHY SHAH: Ani and Karrie, in your work, do you see autocratic regimes in the Muslim-majority world as having any distinctive patterns with respect to religious repression and its connection to political repression? Or do we see patterns very similar to autocratic regimes in the rest of the world?

ANI SARKISSIAN: If we look just at indexes of religious repression, we do find there to be higher levels of religious repression in the Middle East. But, like John, I don’t think it’s just about religion in those places.
TIMOTHY SHAH: Well, maybe it’s because many nonreligious regimes fear the mobilization potential of Islam. Is that part of what’s happening?

ANI SARKISSIAN: It is. I’m a scholar of religion and politics, but I’m also a scholar of regimes. There are post-colonial regimes that are authoritarian and have been for a very long time. Many of these regimes have legitimacy problems. They try to gain legitimacy by co-opting religious groups, as Karrie mentioned, or by fighting back against religious groups that challenge the legitimacy of the state or regime. I think that there are a lot bigger issues in these states in addition to religion. That’s not to minimize the problem of religious repression in these countries. Keep in mind that religious repression is not just against minorities in these places. It’s oftentimes against the majority. And I think that means it’s not just about religious repression.

TIMOTHY SHAH: Repression may occur because there may be a greater threat than religion, I suppose.

ANI SARKISSIAN: Right, exactly. And it’s not just repression against religion. It’s repression against any sort of free speech or association.

TIMOTHY SHAH: Is there a country that’s kind of a poster child for this pattern today? A regime that represses not only minorities but the majority because of a legitimacy crisis?

ANI SARKISSIAN: Kazakhstan or Uzbekistan are two good examples. I would also argue that countries like Saudi Arabia and Iran are repressive of the majority religion in that they control it completely.

TIMOTHY SHAH: Karrie, is there anything you want to add on this issue?

KARRIE KOESEL: In part of my research I focused on Russia. When we think of Russia, we see an Orthodox Christian country. But Russia is incredibly diverse in terms of its religious landscape and ethnic diversity. One of the regions where I spent a lot of time doing field work is the Republic of Tatarstan, a Muslim-majority republic. The majority of the population, some 51 or 52 percent, is ethnic Tatar who identify as Muslim. The second largest group is ethnic Russians, who are Orthodox. This republic is in many ways a shining example of tolerance and of interreligious cooperation, and it’s coming from the grassroots. You see imams collaborating with priests, but also reaching out to non-Orthodox Christians, Bahá’ís, and Jehovah’s Witnesses.
It's a really good example of interethnic and interreligious cooperation.

Tartarstan also has a government that is sensitive to issues of religious minorities and ethnic minorities, perhaps because they are a minority republic nestled within a larger Russian nation. They are very sensitive to how they manage and encourage cooperation and foster dialogue. There are mandatory dialogues two or three times per year that bring together interfaith communities—not only leaders but ordinary participants. They get to know one another through simple activities like football games, cleaning up parks, or planting trees. These types of activities seem small, but in terms of creating interreligious dialogue and minimizing tensions, I think it has gone a long way. Tensions exist in Tatarstan, but I think it can serve as an example, and maybe a model.

TIMOTHY SHAH: Thank you. Well, Peter, you've been waiting patiently. This is where you come in. A common-sense observer might look at the world and say that this phenomenon of religious repression is a massive problem. Groups like the Pew Research Center tell us that 74 percent of the world’s population live in countries with high or very high restrictions on religion. Not all of those countries are authoritarian countries—some of them are democracies that might have illiberal tendencies, or social groups within them perpetrating informal kinds of violence against some groups. But many of the countries where people are suffering the worst religious repression are those with authoritarian regimes. We have the Rohingya in Burma, a country that is democratizing. And in many other countries, Muslim groups, Christian groups, Hindu groups, and Buddhist groups are suffering terrible repression.

One might then conclude the United States should do something about this, that the United States should be promoting religious freedom—which, by the way, doesn't necessarily have to mean a Western or Jeffersonian model of church-state separation. It doesn't mean secularism. Religious freedom is just the idea that no human agent should subject individuals and groups to arbitrary interference in their private and public religious beliefs and practices—in other words, all people should be equally immune from coercion in matters of conscience and matters of religion and belief. Shouldn't this be something that the United States and the international community should get on board?

PETER DANCHIN: I think my role here today is to be provocative and to raise some dissenting questions, but I do so within the general agreement about the fact that we are facing extraordinary political violence and repression of religious communities around the world. On that empirical fact, there can be very little disagreement. The critical notes that I raise go to the questions you've just posed to me, and how we understand both the nature of the problem and the proposed solution.

Here’s my somewhat heretical question: Is religious freedom part of the problem? In a sense, I am reversing the direction and the trajectory of some of these questions. I want to raise some perhaps unsettling questions that suggest that what we’re proposing as a solution to some of these problems may well be implicated in the very causes that we seek to address. Now, of course, this is a very big argument. But let me just raise a couple of ideas to pose to the panel and to the audience.
First, the question was framed in relation to a type of state or regime labeled authoritarian. The necessary implication is that another type of regime is not authoritarian, which would be something like modern, liberal, secular, and democratic—or some combination of those terms. The phrase “liberal democracy” is often used, but I think the term is often really used to refer to modern secular nation-state. So that’s the first premise of a juxtaposition between the modern state, which is necessarily secular, and the so-called authoritarian regimes, which may or may not be secular but have certain elements that undermine that identity.

Ani said that some authoritarian states have established religions. In the case of England and the Islamic world, the idea of a state religion seems antithetical to our conceptions of liberal democracy. Of course, in the United States, we tend to think of this in terms of disestablishment. But if you look comparatively around the world at constitutions, you’ll find that the U.S. solution to this problem is extraordinarily unique and exceptional. In most states around the world, the vast and overwhelming majority have particular types of relations and settlements between both majority and minority religions and the state.

So I don’t start from the premise that liberal democracy necessarily is the only antidote to authoritarianism. I think one can have very different types of state arrangements. These categories often obscure more than illuminate the difficulty we face. I think you find violations of religion and religious freedom in all states. And of course, much empirical work will have to be done to demarcate and delineate cause and effect.

The second interesting part of this discussion is the word “repression.” Of course, we could think of lots of different words: restriction, persecution, discrimination, unequal treatment, and so on. There are lots of different forms of limitation or violation of rights. The sort of axiomatic solution to this is thought to be religious freedom, the right understood as a basic constitutional guarantee in much modern work on international rights. My work seeks to challenge that notion and to pluralize what we mean by the right to religious freedom. I don’t think we should think of religious freedom as a solely individual right to belief or conscience, but in terms of much more contextual and pluralistic forms of communal and individual claims. Interestingly, if you look at international law, you see this well reflected. The International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights (ICCPR), for example, has at least four different rights that speak to religious freedom: Article 18, which has individual and communal dimensions; Article 27, which speaks to the rights of religious minorities; and Articles 2 and 26, which speak to nondiscrimination and unequal treatment. So the normative and legal picture of these rights is very complex.

TIMOTHY SHAH: Doesn’t what you’ve just said suggest that we have legal and conceptual tools for having a richer, broader, and more encompassing view of religious freedom? In other words, the ICCPR understands religious freedom not to be merely individual but also communal, not to be merely a matter of individual conscience but also a matter of practice. But it seems to me that you want to make a more robust argument that religious freedom itself may be problematic.

PETER DANCHIN: I do think the international jurisprudence offers a broader terrain for thinking about these problems. But what I find particularly interesting is an assumption that runs through all the literature in this field—historical literature, legal literature, and moral and philosophical literature. The idea that we’re interested in seems to arise somewhere in the mid-seventeenth century, with names like Hobbes in political theory and Grotius in international legal theory. There’s a moment where these ideas start to gain a political valence. There is a kind of post-Enlightenment understanding of what we mean by the right to religious freedom. If we focus more on what that moment was, it would be quite helpful, because there is a direct correlation between that moment and the rise of what we think of today as the modern secular state. And the paradoxical idea that I’ve tried to explore is that efforts to promote religious freedom end up creating more and more state power.
TIMOTHY SHAH: And promoting only one unitary Western secular model as the model that needs to be adopted by other countries. Of course, colonial expansion helped to replicate some of these structures.

PETER DANCHIN: Right. John spoke about the Dutch model, which emphasized loyalty to the state, but of course, in religious freedom discourse, even in the West, we have a very complex debate about what loyalty to the state means when it conflicts with conscience. But the idea that ultimately the state decides the scope, limits, and meaning of religious freedom is a particular conception of freedom that many people resist. I think that the promotion of this idea causes much of the political violence and turmoil we're seeing. If I'm right about that, religious liberty promotion has a serious problem.

TIMOTHY SHAH: I'd like the other panelists to comment, but particularly you, John. We heard the Treaty of Westphalia mentioned by the learned Senator Sasse, and Peter has just mentioned Grotius and Hobbes. In fact, the 1648 Peace of Westphalia, as you know, had two treaties: the Treaty of Munster and the Treaty of Osnabruck. Maybe it's too ambitious to call it our idea of religious freedom, but both of those treaties had provisions for toleration of religious minorities in various parts of Germany.

So, as it relates to Peter's point, is there something to this idea that there's a powerful yet almost unspoken conjunction in the Western mind between the reordering of the Western world that took place after the religious wars and the concept of religious freedom as a part of this social order? What do you make of that?

JOHN OWEN: I hesitate to say anything about 1648 with Dan Philpott in the room, who's an actual scholar of the Westphalia Treaty, but I will give it a try and have him correct me privately later. My understanding of that moment is that the goal of the princes was to end the war and prevent wars like this from happening.

TIMOTHY SHAH: To stop the hemorrhaging.

JOHN OWEN: Yes. These were horrendous decades, especially in Central Europe. And it was happening in a specific context. A rule had been set up in 1555, a century earlier, that whoever controls the region or the territory gets to determine an established religion—in other words, the prince gets to decide if his state is Catholic, Calvinist, Lutheran, and so on. But these treaties introduced nuance to that rule. They said that particular states with Calvinist or Catholic or other minorities must make allowances for them. It was a much more intrusive pair of treaties.

The big picture is that this is a time when the state religion is declared by the sovereign. That's the system Europe spread all over the world through colonialism, and which was then rejected by anti-imperialism. Colonized people decided they wanted their own state. They wanted the autonomy that the Europeans had.

TIMOTHY SHAH: It's not a plenipotentiary state, though. It's a state that has to respect certain limits on how to treat its minorities.

JOHN OWEN: Yes, exactly. You see this in Hobbes' Leviathan; the princes were very concerned with controlling religious dissent, particularly the Catholic Church and dissenting Protestants. Even in Catholic states like France, it was a big problem because the Church owned a lot of property and the bishops were accountable to a foreign prince, the Pope, and that needed to be addressed as well.

There's a bit of a paradox at work here: Religious liberty for dissenters is intimately tied up with the concentration of power in the prince. The settlement was also taking power away from the Catholic Church. This is why the Pope at the time declared the Peace of Westphalia null and void.
So I agree with Peter that we should keep in mind the full picture when we say things like a state can recognize religious freedom as long as all citizens are loyal to the state. That is an assertion of power. The international system we inhabit is a system of sovereign states. Today, sovereignty is being compromised and questioned in many ways. But it’s still a system of sovereign states. Often, dissenters in a state—perhaps with the exception of Al-Qaeda, but not the Islamic State—want their own state. They’re not actually saying they don’t like sovereign states. They’re saying they don’t like the sovereign state they live in, and they want their own. And if they get their own, they reproduce the same system.

So yes, I recognize what Peter said, but I think this state system is self-replicating. It’s extremely powerful, notwithstanding our normative and empirical problems with the way it operates. I don’t have a problem saying they don’t like sovereign states. They’re saying they don’t like the sovereign state they live in, and they want their own. And if they get their own, they reproduce the same system.

TIMOTHY SHAH: And that states do need to be the guarantors of religious liberty or dissent in order to be respected.

JOHN OWEN: Retaining some kind of coercive power, right.

TIMOTHY SHAH: Well, let’s turn the conversation over to our audience.

GEORGE TAYLOR: Thank you. My name is George Taylor, and I’m here as an affiliated friend of the Romanian Evangelistic Medical Mission. I’ve listened to all of the panels and to Senator Sasse with great appreciation. I want to bring the conversation back to the topic of the United States. My concern is not about any religious conflict between Christians and Muslims, but about how countries have dealt with LGBT issues. The Chick-fil-A situation was mentioned earlier. Now, Chick-fil-A did not discriminate against LGBT persons, but the vice president voiced his personal conviction. The counter-demonstration was, as far as I know, peaceful. Chick-fil-A did not stop selling their product to or even hiring members of the LGBT community.

In the case of the bakery, however, they refused to make a wedding cake for a gay couple. We have a professor of law here, Professor Danchin. How was it possible in America that the case went to the courts and that couple who owned the bakery lost everything? They were fined and experienced all sorts of retaliation when, in fact, they were just trying to stand up for a religious principle.

TIMOTHY SHAH: Thank you. Peter?

PETER DANCHIN: Sure. I’m not going to go into the many details of the cases that you mentioned, but let me just make an interesting observation about them. They show the reach of modern American nondiscrimination laws and the increasing power of the state to regulate individual behavior by intruding into what we used to consider the private sphere—although of course, this commercial setting cannot be strictly private. It raises quite fascinating questions about the First Amendment, particularly how religious freedom relates to the space where it is exercised in society. I’m one of those people challenging much of the so-called consensus around nondiscrimination laws, but it’s very hard to make those arguments. The question is, why is it so hard to challenge the enormous power of nondiscrimination principles?

I would argue again that there is an almost global acceptance of a certain understanding of religious freedom: religious freedom as a right of individuals to believe freely. But it’s well accepted in law,
at least, that any manifestation of one’s religious belief is subject to rational regulation by state law.

TIMOTHY SHAH: Well, it ends up being a creation of truncated little islands of free belief within an ocean controlled by the sovereign state.

PETER DANCHIN: Right. Religious freedom as mere freedom of belief is something we need to examine carefully, because, of course, it has deep Protestant theological genealogies that many of us celebrate, but it also has deep implications for pluralism and state power. There’s a great paradox in the United States that the so-called home of religious freedom is the home of the most effective regulation of religion.

TIMOTHY SHAH: Thank you. Do you want to add something to this, John?

JOHN OWEN: Yes. In relation to what Peter just said about the regulation of religion in the United States, I want to clarify that my point about loyalty to the state is not limited to absolutist states. All states seek that kind of loyalty from citizens; we don’t have to be talking about a plenipotentiary state.

TIMOTHY SHAH: Excellent. Tony Gill has the next question.

ANTHONY GILL: Professor Danchin, if religious freedom is merely a Western European concept from the Enlightenment, what do you tell Yazidi Christians who are victims of genocide in Syria or Chinese evangelicals who are having their house church bulldozed over? They might benefit from religious liberty. What do you tell them? That it’s a Western construct?

TIMOTHY SHAH: In other words, if your persuasive critique of religious freedom renders it untenable, what is left to help those who are the targets of religious persecution? What is the principle on the basis of which we can say that treatment is wrong and we need to intervene?

PETER DANCHIN: I have just two quick responses. The question is what I would call a form of Enlightenment blackmail. The idea is, if you’re critical of these principles, then we fall into the abyss where no justice is possible.

TIMOTHY SHAH: Where and how do you locate the basic rights that need to be respected?

PETER DANCHIN: That’s an ongoing question. If you look around the world, you find fascinating attempts to protect these kinds of rights.

TIMOTHY SHAH: Can you give us an example? What would be a fruitful path for respecting the Yazidis and articulating the rights that they need to protect themselves?

PETER DANCHIN: Well, one of the areas that I’ve spent a lot of time looking at in recent years is the Middle East. I’m examining how Islamic law has its own history of respect for religious pluralism.

Now, of course, the automatic liberal response is that these forms of pluralism are limited and that they invite discrimination. This is absolutely true, but within the Islamic world there is a rich history of pluralism. Once you discover this, you see it opens great hope and possibility for different forms of social and political order.

I’m interested in challenging the assumption that some liberal calculus of rights within a liberal democratic state necessarily protects religious freedom. Empirically, if you look at any so-called liberal democratic state today, you’ll see that as a matter of law, there is consistent discrimination against minority groups. There’s a consistent privileging of majority religions. The idea that individual rights from the Enlightenment free us from this inequality is, in my view, a fantasy.

TIMOTHY SHAH: Thank you very much. Please join me in thanking our outstanding panel. [Applause]
THOMAS FARR: Before we begin this panel, I want to briefly respond to Professor Danchin from the previous panel, who argued that disestablishment is a core value that America is attempting to export. First of all, in my view, disestablishment is not the core of the American system of religious freedom. The free exercise of religion is the core. The disestablishment provision of the First Amendment is there to protect the rights of all Americans to free exercise. The purpose of disestablishment is, in other words, to protect all those groups that Senator Sasse mentioned from the intrusion of state power, not to protect the state from them. This understanding—aside from being historically more accurate in the American context—is also more helpful in U.S. foreign policy. It is more open to religion in public life, and therefore more helpful in advancing religious freedom in Muslim-majority countries or other highly religious societies. It is much more likely to be successful than the disestablishment norm that Professor Danchin posits.

In this panel, we turn to the question of violent extremism. We all know that we have a serious problem in the world with violent extremism. The phrase “countering violent extremism” has become so important that it has its own acronym: CVE. If you haven’t heard of it, you should be proud of that, because that means you’re not a member of the intelligentsia, the chattering classes, the academy, or the policymakers. [Laughter]

I recently spent a few days in London at a conference on countering violent extremism, sponsored by the Foreign and Commonwealth Office of the United Kingdom. That conference asked a question shared by this panel: Is there a relationship between countering violent extremism and religious freedom? There was a great deal of resistance to the proposition that countering violent extremism should have any reference to religion at all.

There are many violent extremists—and I dare to say, there are many throughout history—that had little or nothing to
do with religion. Certainly, in the twentieth century, the most violent extremists were the ideologues of communism and Nazism; both wanted to destroy religion. Today when we talk about violent extremism, we tend to talk about the so-called Islamic State, Al-Qaeda, Boko Haram, and other groups that associate themselves with Islam. Of course, there are other violent religious groups in the world today. There are violent extremists who are Christians. There are violent extremists who are Hindus in India. There's a group of violent Buddhist extremists that few have likely heard of. So this is not about one religion; it is about whether freedom and protection for all religions can impact the problem of violent extremism.

Religious freedom is freedom of belief. In fact, the European expression for freedom of religion is “Freedom of Religion or Belief,” which has its own acronym: FORB. The problem, in my opinion, with FORB is that it reduces religion to a form of opinion, diminishing its meaning and significance.

This panel will talk about the issue of whether religious freedom can be understood as part of our collective effort against violent extremism and whether it is legitimate to speak of violent religious extremism—or in the case of the Islamic State and Al-Qaeda, violent Islamist extremism. We have a sterling panel, and I'm going to introduce them briefly to you now.

Dan Philpott is a professor of political science at the University of Notre Dame. He's also an associate scholar with the Religious Freedom Project. He specializes in the relationship between religion and politics as well as Catholicism’s contributions to freedom and democracy. He’s participated in faith-inspired reconciliation efforts in some tough places around the world. He's the author of many books and articles on religion and international affairs. Dan is also writing a book for the Religious Freedom Project on Islam and religious freedom. Of all the splendid things he's written, one of the most incisive and relevant to our discussion today is an article published in the American Political Science Review called the “Political Ambivalence of Religion,” in which he discusses how religions develop their own understandings of what he calls “political theology.” He argues that each becomes associated either with violent extremism on one end or with more democratic values on the other. That's helpful in framing the way that we're going to approach today's panel.

Next, William Inboden is the executive director of the William Clements, Jr. Center for National Security. He's an associate professor in the Lyndon B. Johnson School of Public Affairs and distinguished scholar at the Robert S. Strauss Center for International Security and Law at the University of Texas in Austin. Will, I don't know if you were insulted by Senator Sasse’s reference to Texas earlier today, but I certainly hope so.

WILLIAM INBODEN: He used to teach at the LBJ School, so he should know better. [Laughter]

THOMAS FARR: Yes, indeed. Previously, Will served as senior director of strategic planning at the White House's National Security Council. He was a member of the policy planning staff of the secretary of state, similar to a think tank for the secretary. He was also a special adviser in the Office of International Religious Freedom at the Department of State. He's the author of another book that I use in my courses, Religion and American Foreign Policy, 1945 to 1960: The Soul of Containment, which examines the role of religion in the development of the American doctrine of containment during the Cold War under the Truman and Eisenhower administrations.

Allen Hertzke is the David Ross Boyd Professor of Political Science at the University of Oklahoma, faculty fellow in religious freedom for Oklahoma's Institute for the American Constitutional Heritage, and Presidential Teaching Fellow in the Honors College. He’s also an associate scholar with the Religious Freedom Project and co-chaired its research project on “Christianity and Freedom.” Allen has written the definitive work—and a third book I use in my courses—on the creation of the International Religious Freedom Act of 1998, called Freeing God’s Children. It offers a compelling exploration of the coalition of religious and nonreligious groups that came together to pass this act, as well as the Victims of Trafficking and Violence Prevention Act and the Sudan Peace Act at the turn of the century. I highly recommend this book. Allen, we're delighted to have you with us.

Now, as in the previous panels, we have another voice we're excited to invite into this conversation. Sahar Aziz is professor of law at Texas A&M University School of Law. Previously, she was adjunct professor at the Georgetown University Law Center, where she developed and taught a new course entitled “National Security and Race in a Post September 11 America.” She served as a senior policy adviser for the Office of Civil Rights and Civil Liberties at the U.S. Department of Homeland Security, where she worked on public policy at the intersection of national security in civil rights. She's litigated class action suits related to civil rights and has conducted a human rights
investigation on child trafficking in the Middle East—a fascinating portfolio for someone who is also a professor of law. She’s written eloquently on many subjects, but has been especially critical of American legal and state institutions and the stigmatization of American Muslims in national security policies and by some nongovernmental organizations.

As you can see, this is a magnificent group to bring together to talk about the issues of religious freedom and violent religious extremism. Let me begin with Dan Philpott. If you would, briefly summarize how your work relates to these issues.

DANIEL PHILPOTT: Well, I’d like to speak a little bit about Islam because of how frequently it is associated with religious violence. Issues around Islam form the core of my work at the Religious Freedom Project, including my forthcoming book.

The popular image associated with Islam is a lack of religious freedom and the presence of violence, and there’s a lot of truth to that as an empirical pattern. Islam has a disproportionately low level of religious freedom. If you look at the 47 or so Muslim-majority countries, they exhibit less religious freedom than the rest of the world on average. Also, some 90 percent of the world’s religious terrorist groups are Islamic, and Islam has a disproportionate share in religious civil wars. But while you do find the broad global pattern of both low levels of religious freedom and high levels of religious violence among Muslim-majority countries, it would be a mistake to simplify this observation and say that Islam is directly responsible for the violence.

I find in my work that there are two types of Islamic countries that lack religious freedom. One is very familiar: religiously repressive countries, such as Saudi Arabia or Iran, which are governed by an Islamist ideology and which foment religious violence. But the second type is more surprising to many: secular Muslim-majority countries, where governments are modeled on a Western, French Revolution-style of governance, which involves a very heavy management of religion. The standard bearer is Kemal Ataturk’s Turkey, where even today the regime is built around this heavily secularist model. Ataturk had very ambitious plans to remake the soul of Turkey in a secular, Western image. His vision for the future was guided by nationalism, science, enlightenment rationality, and so forth.
Gamal Abdel Nasser followed suit as president of Egypt in the 1950s, and many of the Arab countries have adapted this model, as well as the Central Asian countries—Kazakhstan, Turkmenistan, Uzbekistan, and so forth. Both of those patterns of governance tend to promote and foment religious violence.

THOMAS FARR: Great. Professor Inboden?

WILLIAM INBODEN: I want to start from the vantage point of recent history, drawing a little bit on my background as a scholar and a recovering policymaker. I joined the State Department shortly after September 11, where I worked with Tom and the Office of International Religious Freedom. After that, I moved to the National Security Council and worked on the collection of issues we’re discussing—religious freedom, human rights, counterterrorism, and counter-radicalization from several vantage points.

Of course, we just passed the fifteenth anniversary of the September 11 attacks. If, shortly after the September 11 attacks, you had described what the world would be like 15 years later, I wouldn’t have believed you. Three big things about today’s world would have seemed truly shocking at the time.

The first is that the United States has not been attacked again in a large-scale, mass-casualty attack since September 11. Many in this room were here in Washington or New York that day, and you remember the environment in the weeks and months after the attacks. It was sheer terror. We didn’t wonder if we were going to get hit again; we wondered when. The fact that we haven’t seen an attack in the 15 years since is noteworthy, and I think any discussion about fighting terrorism and the ongoing threat needs to begin with that fact. It’s certainly a credit to the counterterrorism policies of the Bush and Obama administrations.

But the second surprise is that, today, violent jihadist groups are proliferating. I know the lexicon itself is problematic, and we can talk about it. There’s no perfect way to describe the extremist phenomenon, so I’ll use jihadist as a placeholder right now. After September 11, the main threat came from the old core of Al-Qaeda, but now we face a growing number of Al-Qaeda affiliates across multiple continents, as well as the Islamic State, Al-Shabaab, and other groups. This menagerie of jihadist groups that continues to proliferate shows us that the threat is still out there, and it demonstrates the strength of this ideology and the terrorism that it inspires.

The third surprise is that 15 years after September 11, the United States still lacks an effective counter-radicalization policy. That is a religious freedom problem. The fact that it’s a surprise to call it a religious freedom problem shows how impoverished our thinking remains on this issue.

Tom, if I recall, it made your hair turn gray and it made me turn bald to spend our first couple of years in the Office of International Religious Freedom trying to get some of these concepts into the early international religious freedom reports. [Laughter] This is not just a boutique, feel-good human rights or humanitarian issue. We are not concerned about just helping a few prisoners of conscience around the world. Rather, this is a strategic imperative to promote religious freedom, pluralism, and tolerance as antidotes to violent extremism, militant Islam, or whatever you want to call it.

The fact that we haven’t made more headway since those very early days is discouraging. We still haven’t cracked the code on how and why a very tiny percentage of the world’s Muslims are radicalized—and by the way, that percentage needs to be remembered. That’s why I fiercely reject some of the rhetoric out there blaming Islam and treating the religion itself as a problem. Islam in a lot of ways can be the solution to this.

“There seems to be a common thread in that they’re not very religious. They don’t understand Islam. Many of them are young men who, for example, were not raised in very orthodox Muslim families. They did not attend a very orthodox mosque, read the Qur’an multiple times, and then decide they must commit violence in order to go to heaven. They often are lost youths.”

Sahar Aziz
Yet the fact remains that a tiny, but still very troubling, percentage of the world’s Muslims—or converts to Islam, for that matter—are being radicalized. They are seeking to take up arms, to harm women and children and other innocent civilians, and to blow themselves up in the process. The fact that we have not made more progress in combatting radicalization is very, very troubling. We can talk about why I think radicalization is a religious freedom problem, but I think acknowledging that radicalization is the problem is the beginning to tackling it.

THOMAS FARR: Thank you, Will. We’ll come back to exactly that point, which I think is at the core of our concerns today. Professor Hertzke?

ALLEN HERTZKE: For at least a couple of decades, I have immersed myself as a scholar, participant, and observer in the world of religious freedom, advocacy, and persecution. As a social scientist, I think we are at an historic moment in which the philosophical and normative claims that philosophers, thinkers, and religious leaders have been making for centuries are now being corroborated by massive social science research. The claims that religious freedom, conscience rights, and the freedom to follow your transcendent duties are inherently good things—these are normative claims—are finding abundant support through research. One of the key findings is that there’s a powerful causal relationship, documented with global data and corroborated through sophisticated methodological analysis, showing a link between religiously repressive societies and states with religious violence—civil wars, religious terrorism, and interstate conflicts. It’s one of the most powerful relationships I’ve seen in the social sciences. The relationship between religious repression and religious violence is almost nomothetical, or like a law of physics. If you repress this fundamental human dimension of religious freedom through favoritism, restrictions, or mob violence, then you’re going to produce religious violence and instability.

I’d like to share with you one of the most dramatic findings. We now have global data—not just the Pew restrictions reports, but global terrorism databases and polity scores—that enable us to test these theories. Upon analysis of the 289 international terrorist acts since the Cold War, only 3 percent originated from religiously free societies, as defined by Pew reports; 8 percent from moderately restrictive states; and 88 percent from very religiously restrictive states. This figure includes international terrorism from a variety of religious actors, whether Islamic, Hindu, Sikh, Muslim, Jewish, or Christian, and accounts for every conceivable terrorist incident. The vast majority of terrorism comes from, or originates in, religiously repressive states, and the targets are predominantly in those same societies. Hence, of the targets of religious violence, 69 percent are religiously repressive states; 24 percent are moderately repressive states; and 7 percent are religiously free states.

Clearly, repressive measures produce religious violence. What we know is that a key antidote to religious violence—the great challenge of the twenty-first century—is to reduce religious repression. To me, the research is compelling.

THOMAS FARR: Let’s hear from Professor Aziz. It’s great to have you with us.

SAHAR AZIZ: First, thank you for inviting me. It’s nice to be back in D.C. I want to make three points and then unpack them. I found Dr. Hertzke’s comments to be interesting because the literature that I’ve been reading, particularly political science literature, does not identify a direct cause for terrorism. My research focuses on terrorism—not just religiously motivated violence. There’s no universal definition for terrorism. There’s a big debate over its definition, like whether an actor should be regarded as a freedom fighter or a terrorist. I utilize a very generic definition: Terrorism is motivated by social, political, or religious ideology that seeks to coerce a population or influence government policy and directs its violence at civilians. There are many debates as to whether the cause of terrorism is poverty, political repression, human rights violations, or general economic conditions.

Everybody is looking for the silver bullet, the root cause of terrorist activity. There have been different empirical studies. One study by Alan Krueger in the West Bank and Gaza showed that, in fact, many of the suicide bombers were educated and were not disaffected, impoverished individuals. But then another study in Pakistan of 200 people who are either part of a terrorist organization or engaged in terrorism themselves

“Religious freedom and counterterrorism are too bureaucratically separated. They almost inhabit different bureaucratic universes.”

William Inboden
reached a contradictory conclusion. It found that poverty and marginalization, political humiliation, or revenge-seeking from state violence was correlated with terrorist activity. I simply want to highlight the disputed origins of terrorism as we try to determine the role of religious freedom.

My second point is that I think we inadvertently silo religious freedom from other types of freedoms. That is, I think religious freedom is connected to political freedoms, such as freedom of speech, freedom of expression, and freedom of assembly. It’s not feasible to have a society where you can have religious freedom without also having other types of individual freedoms. Therefore, to the extent that one’s priority is religious freedom, I think one also has to deal with other individual freedoms as well. A climate of general political freedom is the context in which religious freedom thrives or is supported.

When talking about countries that restrict religious freedom, I appreciated the fact that you highlighted secular authoritarianism. We tend to focus on Iran, Saudi Arabia, Hezbollah, or Al-Qaeda. However, we are prone to overlook the military regimes, monarchies, and other types of regimes that govern Muslim-majority countries, but which are not Islamic governments. They are not run according to Islamic law. They’re not Islamic in any way. They’re just Muslim-majority countries, and there’s a difference in that. The United States is a Christian-majority country, but it is not a Christian country. I think we need to look at authoritarianism and the role it plays in producing terrorism, of which a subset is religiously motivated. We also need to examine instances in which religion is used to justify politically motivated violence.

Finally, I see terrorism—whether perpetrated in the name of religion or in the name of some secular ideology—as a form of resistance to state violence or to societal changes that people find to be unacceptable, oppressive, or offensive. I think if we can understand those motivations, then terrorism appears as a rational act, even though it’s not something that we find to be moral. By seeking to understand the underlying motives, perhaps we can start finding ways to channel the rational grievances in ways that are nonviolent. Yet as long as you have a society in which violence is the currency by which the state exerts control, then the response from the non-state actors is going to be violent as well.
THOMAS FARR: Thank you. Let us now turn to each of the three panelists, starting with Dan. Dan, please respond to Sahar. Let me repeat her three points. First, no one can find a direct cause of terrorism. There are many possible causal factors—poverty, political repression, marginalization, human rights violations, and the revenge culture. Her second point was that religious freedom is connected to other political freedoms. There is a concern that stressing the connection between religious freedom and religious violence may lead researchers to over-conceptualize a hierarchy of freedoms. If I understand her point correctly, it is that religious freedom is connected to numerous other political freedoms and should not necessarily take precedence over them. Her final point was that terrorism is often a form of reaction and resistance to state repression.

DANIEL PHILPOTT: I think Allen’s and Sahar’s insights are reconcilable. Let’s remember, as Sahar has said, that regimes that repress religion are not necessarily religious ones. They may be regimes like Saudi Arabia or Iran. However, the repressive regime could also be a secularist or communist regime like China, North Korea, or Vietnam, or even a religiously nationalist regime like India. Regimes that restrict religion come in many varieties.

In the Islamic world, one of the things we’ve seen is a pattern of secular repression. I can think of at least three examples of secular repressive governments that bred civil wars. For example, consider Algeria in the early 1990s, when the military government nullified the election results when an Islamic party won the election. Rather than allow it to govern, the secular government simply nullified the election. A civil war ensued, resulting in nearly 200,000 deaths.

After the Cold War, Tajikistan experienced something similar. The secular-minded government was very repressive of Islam, and it ended up producing a major civil war. I also think of Egypt in the late 1980s and early 1990s. Mubarak launched a major crackdown on a wide variety of Islamic parties and groups, not just those with hardcore violent extremists. That broad crackdown resulted in very high levels of violence. This pattern is very important to note.

THOMAS FARR: Let me follow up on your example of Egypt. An American realist is going to look at General Abdel Fattah el-Sisi in Egypt today and say, “Well, this regime seems to have solved the problem.” All the violence that you talked about seems to have gone away. The Muslim Brotherhood has gone away. How do you fit that into your paradigm?

DANIEL PHILPOTT: Indeed, his crackdown on the Muslim Brotherhood has been massive. I would expect it to result in more instability. To his credit, he has given protection to Coptic Christians, but his is a secular repressive government. What we’re sharing and discussing today suggests that this is not a sustainable, long-term solution.

By the way, let me share just one more insight. I wrote a chapter in my book on the Arab Spring, and I don’t think it should be called the Arab Spring anymore. I call them the “Arab uprisings” because they turned out not to be a spring, but more like a winter. Except for Tunisia, all of the uprisings did not result in a democracy. In fact, almost all of those countries are less religiously free now than they were before the uprisings. Tunisia is the one example where a country has made some strides toward religious freedom and toward a kind of contested democracy. But even Tunisia is not without its problems. It’s an interesting case given that Tunisia is where the uprisings started.

I would argue that in all these cases, the reason why the uprisings didn’t succeed was partly due to a lack of religious freedom. The common theme before and after the uprisings was religious repression, whether from the religious angle, the secular angle, or some combination of the two. I think that’s what we’re seeing now in India, too. We vacillated to religiously repressive regimes, and now we’ve swung back to secularly repressive ones.

THOMAS FARR: Your opinion, then, is that the realist assumption that we’re in good shape in Egypt is probably a fool’s bargain?

DANIEL PHILPOTT: Yes. To truly be a realist, I would argue that one must seek to understand the importance of religion and religious freedom for long-term stability.

THOMAS FARR: Okay. Sahar, do you want to respond to Dan?

SAHAR AZIZ: Egypt is a country that I study in depth. I think el-Sisi is breeding the next generation of terrorists in Egypt. He’s laying the foundation, unfortunately, for an unstable future in terms of political instability. We’re already seeing signs of that in the Sinai. There’s very little coverage of the Sinai by design because he’s imposed a media blackout. Yet there are reports that many of those who were on the Muslim Brotherhood’s side, who were urging the peaceful use
of the political system in order to gain power, are now taking the violent route. Those in the Sinai have made many public statements saying something like, “You fools! We told you not to go down the nonviolent route, and now you’re in the same place we are—in jail, tortured, killed, or chased by the security services.”

Let me point out that mine tends to be a minority perspective on Egypt, particularly among my colleagues who live in Egypt. I don’t think the Muslim Brotherhood had a chance or the power to be repressive. They were starting to appeal to the Salafist right because the secular left was so angry at them. The secularists opposed the Muslim Brotherhood aggressively, and they ultimately pushed them to the right. Yet the Muslim Brotherhood was too weak to turn Egypt into a theocracy. Moreover, the people didn’t want a theocracy. Egyptians are devout, but they don’t want a theocracy.

The Muslim Brotherhood showed that being an Islamist opposition group is easier than being an Islamist government. The Muslim Brotherhood was probably going to fail at ruling the country. I thought that their failure was going to turn a new page in Egypt and in other countries by showing that religion is better left to the private space because religious parties are not the panacea that they claim to be. They were using religion to claim that they could fix corruption. “We’re going to fix all these social problems,” they promised. “The reason why Egypt is suffering is because it’s lost its way,” they said. They alleged that Egyptians are no longer as religious as they should be—which, by the way, echoes what many people in the United States say with regard to Christianity and social mores.

THOMAS FARR: I want to introduce one more example on behalf of the realist perspective—or the perspective of people who style themselves as realists—that I think we’re going to be seeing here soon. That is the example of China. China has been very effective in doing what some think el-Sisi is doing. Granted, China has a very different system than Egypt, but religious groups are growing in China. Despite the growth of religion, China seems to be very, very stable—maybe not economically, but with respect to its capacity to repress. It has shown amazing resilience. I just want to throw that in as fuel for debate. Will, what do you think?

WILLIAM INBODEN: I would like to express some thoughts or provocations on three themes. On the theme of autocracy
and secular government, I very much echo the other sentiments shared on Egypt. Short-term stability is bringing long-term instability. Again, this has been a recurring pattern, going back to our support for the Mubarak regime. Who is the current head of Al-Qaeda? Ayman al-Zawahiri. What nationality is he? Egyptian. He was involved early on with the Muslim Brotherhood. He was imprisoned and further radicalized under the oppressive Mubarak regime in Egypt, and now he is leading Al-Qaeda, which may be making a resurgence. I am also not optimistic about the trends we’re seeing with el-Sisi. These are difficult tradeoffs because sometimes the choice is between short-term stability or short-term instability and violence.

THOMAS FARR: American governments often think in the short-term.

WILLIAM INBODEN: Yes. We always seem to fall in the short-term mindset, and that creates some of these larger, long-term problems.

Let me elaborate on how and why I do think religious freedom can be an antidote or ameliorative to radicalization. The first antidote to religious violence is obviously a constitutional order and a society that has the cultural and constitutional protections for religious pluralism. Such an order encourages habits of peaceful coexistence and of differences being resolved through peaceful means. A stable constitutional order doesn’t expect everyone to believe the same thing. However, this is where I very much echo Professor Aziz’s comments that we still don’t really know what causes a person to become a terrorist.

Peter Bergen has just finished a really expansive study of every known incident of domestic, home-grown radicalization in the United States. He crunched all 368 cases, and he did not find a common denominator. People go down these pathways of violence for very different reasons. Yet we do know that by and large—going back to the macro data that Allen was sharing—societies that have legal and cultural protections for religious freedom foment much lower levels of radicalization and violence.

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Recall my comment about Islam being the long-term solution to countering violent jihadism. When a regime protects religious freedom, the ones who will benefit the most will be the vast majority of peaceful Muslims. I don’t want to use the term “moderate,” because moderate and extreme are too subjective to serve as useful labels in my opinion. Oftentimes, the ones who speak out against violent jihad and intolerance are the ones most victimized. I have to remind friends who get worked up about this that, in terms of sheer numbers, the largest victims of violent jihadism in the world are other Muslims, more so than non-Muslims. Thus, empowering and supporting peaceful and reformist voices as a matter of religious freedom equips them to speak out from their own interpretation of their faith against the extremists.
Finally, let me give three thoughts or reasons why I think the U.S. government as an entity still has not made this fundamental connection between religious freedom and counter-radicalization. The first is ideological. I do think that there is still a crippling lack of willingness to identify the religious roots of a lot of terrorism, even when the terrorists themselves will tell you they’re acting due to a religious motivation. For me, combating terrorism starts with that self-evident fact. Listen to what the terrorists say about their motivations. Take it at face value. However, we have a pervasive secularism in the national security establishment that won’t even admit there’s a religious element to this. Certainly, it is not a good religious element, but it still is a religious element.

The second is bureaucratic. The few instruments in our government that are tasked with promoting religious freedom are in the Office of International Religious Freedom at the State Department, which is stuck underneath the Human Rights Bureau. By comparison, our lead entities for countering terrorism are mostly in the Defense Department and the intelligence community, which are not directly involved in diplomacy. Religious freedom and counterterrorism are too bureaucratically separated. They almost inhabit different bureaucratic universes.

The third one is the practical one. It is really hard to promote religious freedom internationally, period—let alone in environments where it is needed most, which are often strong, repressive, authoritarian states. These states don’t want to allow religious freedom at all, because it is a bundled commodity of other freedoms. Here, I very much echo Professor Aziz’s point, because religious freedom encompasses freedom of assembly, freedom of conscience, freedom of speech, and freedom of association. Thus, securing religious freedom is anathema to the dictators out there.

Finally, let us consider the other context that arguably needs religious freedom and religious pluralism: the weak and fragile failed states. It’s Yemen. It’s Iraq. It’s Syria—if we can even speak of Syria existing as a state anymore. We have learned that it’s very hard to create good governance and a stable order there in any form or fashion, let alone embedding the constitutional and cultural protections of religious freedom. Thus, even as I sit up here now, as the snarky professor who’s saying all the things our government is getting wrong, I recognize that it is really, really hard to protect religious freedom. My concern isn’t that it’s so hard—that we’ve tried and failed—so much as that we haven’t even tried yet.

THOMAS FARR: Allen?

ALLEN HERTZKE: I think that there’s tremendous hope in the findings of our research, and perhaps even in the events on the ground as well. I actually think we’re at a liminal moment, where we haven’t caught up with the reality of our own insights. The world is more thoroughly religious than we ever thought it was going to be a century ago, and because we’re more diverse and in closer proximity with each other than we ever could have imagined, we just have to figure out a way to live with our differences in a shrinking world.

What kinds of dynamics operate in societies where people with different religions are treated equally and without favoritism? What happens in those societies? People channel their energy in more positive ways. Dissenters can articulate their opinions. They can form their own faiths. Majority faiths become less militant. Again, we need to look at the causal pathways. What is happening in religiously free societies? What is happening in religiously repressive societies to produce these powerful outcomes?

What I find fascinating about this research is that it obtains the same results even when controlling for democracy. In other words, the illiberal democracies are as conducive to religious violence as authoritarian regimes. Additionally, some hybrid
or authoritarian regimes that exhibit broad toleration—maybe not full religious freedom, but some broad toleration—are actually less likely to be incubators of religious violence.

We might reprise Immanuel Kant and his famous thesis. How do you get perpetual peace? Well, democracies don’t go to war with other democracies. Thus, if all societies are democracies, you’ll have perpetual peace. Nilay Saiya’s research suggests that it’s not democracy that brings about peace. Actually, religious freedom ushers in peace in the sense that religious freedom is the ingredient that seems to undercut militancy, grievances, cycles of violence, and the export of instability. To me, that’s a pretty profound finding, and a hopeful one.

I don’t know how the American government can promote religious freedom. I’m not sure how to do that, but there may be a modeling effect over time, as countries that succeed demonstrate how to become successful economically and politically.

THOMAS FARR: Terrific. Sahar, could you respond to these arguments? Your first point was that no one has been able to find a direct cause of terrorism. Will insisted that you have to ask the terrorists what their motives are. Often, their answers have to do with religion. How do you respond to that?

Your second point was that religious freedom is connected to other political freedoms. Will, I think, helpfully agreed with you on that. Yet, I wonder if you fear that religious freedom is being viewed as superior to other freedoms. In fact, if you listened to Ben Sasse’s speech today, he didn’t use the word superior. Still, religious freedom is the first freedom as our founders understood it. Religious freedom is foundational, not in the sense that it’s superior, but in that it energizes the others that you spoke of: freedom of association, freedom of speech, et cetera.

All of these freedoms are in the First Amendment. There are others that come later, including Senator Sasse’s idea that government has enumerated powers. Government only has the power given to it by the states and the people, a principle which isn’t a product of our First Amendment. So as you talk about your second point, would you elaborate on that?

SAHAR AZIZ: First, I want to clarify that when I talk about religious freedom, my concern is not so much that it is considered superior, but that it is not being connected to all the other freedoms. I don’t think that you can have one without the other.

For example, going back to Egypt, when el-Sisi took power, he put the entire Muslim Brotherhood in jail, and took other steps that violated human rights. Then, he started to take control of the mosques, because it was quite a free market with regard to Friday sermons.

His regulations extended to small, neighborhood mosques, where private citizens in the community could be selected as imams to lead the prayer. These mosques weren’t necessarily part of the Ministry of Awqaf, or the state’s religious institutions. Now, these mosques have Friday sermons that are written by the state. I’m not sure if state officials expect the sermon to be given verbatim, but I’ve heard that it’s getting closer to being a requirement.

The regulations started with the government suggesting the topic of the sermon. If the sermon in the mosque did not talk about the proposed topic, the government threatened to shut down the mosque or punish its leaders in some way. Then, the government required mosque leaders to be certified. Hence, all of these private citizens could no longer be imams. In this way, the government has bureaucratized religion since el-Sisi has come to power. I think the regulations have been imposed because he doesn’t want anyone espousing any kind of religious viewpoint that could have taken an oppositional position vis-à-vis the regime.

I bring up these restrictions to say that you cannot have the moderates simply debate the extremists—and I acknowledge that these are, of course, very subjective terms—if you don’t have an environment of open debate. What I find fascinating and somewhat perturbing about our American or Western policy is that we are quite good at pushing for secular, political free speech, but we don’t realize that you need religious free speech as well. You need to be able to debate theological issues as well as secular and political issues. You cannot do either without an open environment.

What sometimes happens is that the governments abroad will selectively allow their people to talk about some issues but not others, thereby marginalizing groups that have very real possibilities of organizing political opposition. If a group is relatively weak, the state permits them to talk, and then cites the group’s freedom of speech to demonstrate their openness to Westerners.
Frankly, my point is a policy recommendation. Don’t create these silos. Freedoms have to be taken together to be effective. The secular civil society is just as important as the theological, religious civil society.

My other point is that research shows that regimes experience problems in transitional periods. You don’t just become a democracy overnight. You have to go through a transition, and some are more painful and longer than others. That period of transition is when the country is the most vulnerable to being sabotaged or hijacked by extreme groups. If you live in a part of the world where religion is the most prevalent or most common ideology, then extremists will make use of religion. If the most common ideology is Marxism, communism, or capitalism, then extremists will seize on these ideologies instead.

The Middle East, for better or worse, has been experiencing a rise in religiosity since the 1970s. After the post-colonial era, religion has become an organizing principle in social relations. Although religion is interpreted differently by various groups, and there are numerous sects, religion is a common cultural belief system. For this reason, extremists are going to use it in order to mobilize people for their political agendas, specifically to overthrow regimes and eliminate the Westphalian nation-state model.

THOMAS FARR: I think you’re making a very important point here. My interpretation is that religious people in many of these countries are not allowed to express themselves openly. I would call that a restriction on religious freedom. Some call it a violation of free speech. Yet when you’re talking about religion—Islam in particular—blasphemy laws often stand in the way of an open environment in Muslim-majority countries. I acknowledge, however, that there are still blasphemy laws in other countries, too, and historically they’ve been a problem.

SAHAR AZIZ: Right. Before we move on, I want to add something to my previous point. What happens during transitional periods, for example, is that there will be a political Islamist group that is very far on the right. It will take advantage of the political climate and the insecurity. The political Islamists will mobilize people, and they’ll mobilize them in ways that perpetuate the authoritarian way of governance—but this
time religiously rather than militarily, or using religious rather than secular instruments. Then, the secularists react to the authoritarian tactics of the political Islamists. They refuse to recognize the legitimacy of a single election if they fear it will entrench an authoritarian group of political Islamists in power.

Thus, the period of transition is a fundamental problem. How do you get through that hump and not let the Islamists, communists, capitalists, secularists, military, or whomever use instability as a pretext to take power? They can use it in an authoritarian manner and throw democracy out the door.

THOMAS FARR: Dan?

DANIEL PHILPOTT: Tunisia is an example where we have seen a better outcome. As in Egypt, the Brotherhood had to rule in a coalition with the Salafists, who had won 24 percent of the vote. That’s part of the reason why former president Mohamed Morsi had to make a lot of Islamist statements to appease the Salafist coalition. Yet just as Sahar has said, the secular forces were not willing to cooperate and enter into a coalition, and thus Morsi ended up walking a tightrope from which he could easily be pushed off.

In Tunisia, we also witnessed the fall of the longstanding, secular, and repressive government of Ben Ali. However, you then had the Ennahda Party come in to power, which is an Islamic party. It didn’t have to rule in coalition with hardcore Islamists. It formed a coalition with the more secular-minded groups, and you had a pretty successful transition to democracy. The most important test was that a few years later, after they had had a lot of difficulty in government, they lost the election. They were willing to stand down. They did not view the election as a zero-sum contest. They were willing to stand down and allow another group to take control of the government. In fact, they were shooting off fireworks and celebrating the election. Tunisia, I think, is an example of the possibility of Islamic democracy.

The first comment is that I work on a human rights report card. When I was working on Algeria, a lot of human rights advocates and religious rights advocates were concerned that priests in Algeria do not get government salaries, whereas Muslim imams do. Well, the reason Muslim imams receive salaries is because they become government workers. Then the khutbah, or weekly sermon, comes directly from the government, and they do not have freedom of speech in the mosque. The priests rejected their salaries for that exact reason, protecting their freedom of speech in the churches. In terms of who doesn’t have rights, I think it’s debatable in that instance.

The second thing is that in terms of countering violent extremism in the United States, both law enforcement and the American Muslim community have reached a consensus that the way to fight extremism and radicalization, which mostly occurs online, is to open up the mosque space. The strategy is to make the mosque a space where vulnerable youths can come in, have open discussions, and actually talk about some of these crazy ideas. Then other people can reason with them, and explain why their ideas are neither religious, nor ethical, nor practical. This strategy has worked well. People in this space have concluded that opening up the discussion is actually much more beneficial in terms of fighting extremism than aggressive crackdowns, which is exactly what some of you have alluded to.

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Daniel Philpott
Now, my question is, if we’re not able to find a root cause for terrorism, is it not maybe because the definition is wrong? Might the concept of terrorism, as we use it, combine actions that don’t necessarily fall into one category? We pool them all together, and then we say, “Okay, all of these things are going to count as terrorism, and here we should look for a root cause.”

I served briefly with the army. We were told that terrorism is a very specific thing, in that it has to involve an act against the U.S. government. When I asked about Timothy McVeigh or the Unabomber, I was told that they were not terrorists. I assumed that was because they weren’t Muslim. However, I was told that they were not considered terrorists because their attacks were not seen as acts to overthrow the government. Whenever a Muslim committed an act of violence, however, it was clearly interpreted as an attempt to overthrow the government. That way of defining terrorism was very, very surprising to me. Could you speak on that, please?

THOMAS FARR: Let’s start with Sahar. I will rephrase the question. Is the problem the definition of terrorism, or is terrorism something that we can agree on? And as for the issue of root causes, is there one identifiable cause? To what extent do we need to talk about religion as part of this phenomenon? Can we link terrorism to religion?

SAHAR AZIZ: There is no definition that everyone agrees on, which is a reflection of the fact that there is a problem with defining terrorism. There’s a problem in terms of how we define it or fail to define it. My personal opinion is that it’s a type of crime, but it’s a politicized crime. Terrorism tends to be used relative to the political environment, or with reference to a political circumstance surrounding the crime, such as the identity of the perpetrator, the identity of the victim, or the actor’s motivation.

Perhaps one way to solve this definitional difficulty is to do away with terrorism as a category altogether, and instead create multiple types of crimes that are more specific, like bombing an airplane, bombing a government building, or assassination. Whether purposefully or not, terrorism has become a very political term, as opposed to a formal, legal term. I agree with you that it’s a problematic term. What we usually refer to as terrorism I’d rather just label as a crime in order to disaggregate a troublesome term.

I’m sure many of you instinctively are thinking, “No, it’s terrorism. Just call it terrorism.” Why? It certainly has a cultural connotation, and we want to condemn it on those grounds, but I think murder is also condemnable.

THOMAS FARR: What is the role of religion in explaining that?

SAHAR AZIZ: For the record, I’m not a theologian. I’m not qualified to engage in a theological discussion, and I think it’s better for someone who is more versed than I am to do that. When I study these different groups, they are using religion to justify their violence and their criminal activity. However, if you investigate how they recruit people, whom they recruit, and how they retain momentum, it is often based on the various things we talked about—poverty, unemployment, and humiliation. Maybe a family member was killed by the police, or maybe they’ve been tortured.

Yes, there is a small group of people whom you could call purely ideological, but I haven’t yet seen evidence that those are the majority of people. Religious ideology is simply how a recruiter taps into a potential recruit’s grievance. Many of them have mental health problems as well.

Finally, I’m doing something that I always warn against: aggregating. I really think there’s a big difference between those...
engaged in violent activities in the Sinai, Syria, Iraq, Algeria, or the Basque region. One of the problems we have with terrorism is that, as an umbrella term, it decontextualizes everything. We try to use this one word to define very complex and different problems.

THOMAS FARR: Okay. Allen?

ALLEN HERTZKE: First of all, I really like the thrust of the comment and the question, because it sounds like the military uses a really awful definition of terrorism: an act of violence intended to overthrow a state.

The idea that you need to open up spaces is precisely right. The research suggests that where people can discuss, debate, dispute, challenge their own faith, and challenge other faiths, it tends to diffuse the militant theologies. Militant theologies tend to come out of environments where you have outbidding, where the militant groups can outbid the state by being even more militant.

I find that the term religious violence is actually useful. Scholars have suggested that religious terrorism or religious violence is actually more resilient and more ruthless than other forms of politically motivated violence, which might be ameliorated by actual political victories or concessions. Religious violence is uniquely destabilizing.

THOMAS FARR: It's more tenacious.

ALLEN HERTZKE: Yes, it's more tenacious. It's uniquely destabilizing in the global environment right now. We need to focus not just on this vague thing called terrorism, but rather on religion-based violence. It could be communal violence. It could be civil war. It could be terrorist activities, insurgencies, or transnational operations. Whatever it is, religion-based violence is a uniquely destabilizing aspect of our globe today. Therefore, we need to look at what creates it in order to ameliorate it.

THOMAS FARR: Will?
WILLIAM INBODEN: I’ll offer a few thoughts, partly in agreement with what’s been said and partly in disagreement. I agree that definitions are hard, but I still like to take a stab at them. My working definition of terrorism has been the use of violence against civilians by non-state actors to achieve a larger political or religious goal. There are some sub-components of that, but those are the distinctive marks. Sometimes that means terrorism is an act of war. Other times it means terrorism is a crime. Sometimes terrorism is in its own little nebulous world.

As with the problem of violent jihadism—again realizing all these terms are problematic—the beginning of strategic wisdom is realizing that, yes, there are a lot of very particular differences among terrorist groups. Some of them have more global ambitions, and others are much more localized. Boko Haram is mostly localized, for example. At the same time, it’s clear there are some commonalities that enable us to talk about a family of groups with a single term.

What is ISIS doing? What ISIS is doing in Iraq and Syria right now is essentially waging war to try to defend their incipient notion of a state. What does that have to do with Orlando or San Bernardino or Paris or Brussels or Nice? Well, the terrorists who committed those crimes or acts of war—again, both terms could apply depending on the situation—saw themselves as acting as part of a much larger ISIS cause, as identifying with their rather perverse caliphate.

Thus, I do not think we can understand those terrorist acts outside of the Iraq-Syria orbit without understanding that the terrorists do see themselves as being inspired and, in some ways, directed by ISIS. We need to understand this if we’re going to be able to address and combat it.

ALLEN HERTZKE: I want to add something to what Will said. Will’s own research has suggested that the very self-definition of the jihadist is in opposition to religious pluralism and religious freedom. That’s their self-identity. It’s not incidental. It’s their direct identity that they want to create religious uniformity in a diverse world.

WILLIAM INBODEN: And to use violence and coercion to impose that religious uniformity, which is anathema to religious pluralism.

SAHAR AZIZ: Sure, but there are also those whom we call the foreign fighters. I see them a little differently from those who are either trapped within ISIS territory or have in fact joined them voluntarily or under coercion. These are mainly anecdotes or case studies; I’m trying to understand who these people are.

There seems to be a common thread in that they’re not very religious. They don’t understand Islam. Many of them are young men who, for example, were not raised in very orthodox Muslim families. They did not attend a very orthodox mosque, read the Qur’an multiple times, and then decide they must commit violence in order to go to heaven. They often are lost youths. They have identity crises, and some have mental health problems as well. Perhaps they went to prison.

I hate to use the word radicalization because in America being a radical has a historical connotation of patriotism, so I don’t like the word. Still, they’ve transitioned into using violence based on whatever their motives are.

I think this is where it gets a little bit sticky, and this is where I start to question, as a non-theologian, the role of religion as the substantive motivator versus a recruiting tool. You’re upset, and you want to act. How can I convince you to act and keep acting in a very high-risk activity? I turn to religion.

THOMAS FARR: Dan?

DANIEL PHILPOTT: Sahar, I think what you’re saying is right about the recruitment, and that those who joined ISIS may not be deeply religious. However, I think that religion still functions in a very powerful way. ISIS has a deep theology that shapes and motivates the group. I think there is much that ISIS has done that cannot be explained apart from theology, such as,

“They are not necessarily motivated by a sociologically or textbook definition of religion. They most certainly haven’t done the Hajj to Mecca before or things like that. Even so, if they think they’re doing the will of God—and they tell us that they’re doing the will of God—then who are we to infer that that’s not actually their real motivation?”

William Inboden
for example, their ways of treating religious minorities, like we heard from a Yazidi earlier.

There was a *New York Times* article about a year and a half ago. They took a very close look at the theology of ISIS, and even the way they treat different minorities differently. They treat everyone harshly, but some minorities receive harsher treatment than others. They treat the sexes differently; women are raped and made into sex slaves. Again, depending on which sect they are from, they are treated more or less severely.

Some of these are distinctions that can only be understood theologically. I think political theology is evident in different ways, even though it’s true that a lot of the recruits are not necessarily joining out of a pervasively theological mindset.

**WILLIAM INBODEN:** For me, it’s a much more visceral, almost gut-level motivation. ISIS recruits think they’re doing the will of God. Yes, they often come out of uneducated and secular backgrounds. They didn’t receive elaborate theological training. But at some point they go from being average—garden-variety gang members, thugs, alienated teenagers, or unemployed twenty-something-year-olds—to now strapping on a suicide vest and going out to kill as many men and women and children as possible, and killing themselves in the process. That is not what the vast majority of the world’s alienated or unemployed youth do.

Something causes them to cross the threshold. I think it’s believing that there is a supernatural imperative commanding them to do this, and also an eternal state of rewards and punishments that follows—rewards for following God’s will, and punishments if you don’t.

They are not necessarily motivated by a sociologically or textbook definition of religion. They most certainly haven’t done the Hajj to Mecca before or things like that. Even so, if they think they’re doing the will of God—and they tell us that they’re doing the will of God—then who are we to infer that that’s not actually their real motivation?

It’s not rational to blow yourself up. It’s not rational to blow up a lot of other innocent people, too. Something else is going on there.

**THOMAS FARR:** Today we’ve talked a little bit about the shortcomings of the State Department. By law, the State Department is supposed to address this problem, and it has an office, an ambassador, and some resources—though not enough—to do this. How can it be done? Is combating terrorism or religious violence a matter of creating religious freedom for Muslims in these societies to rid their religion of this pathology, this ideology? Does that have anything to do with it?

**WILLIAM INBODEN:** Tom, I think that’s the fundamental starting point. Religious freedom by its nature needs to be universal and inclusive, meaning it is religious freedom for everybody. However, I think the focus here does need to be religious freedom for Muslims. In turn, providing religious freedom for Muslims creates more space and protection for other religions.

**THOMAS FARR:** Space that Allen was talking about, right? Dan, do you want to add anything to that?

**DANIEL PHILPOTT:** Yes. We talked about the realists before. I think an effective strategy to address religion-based violence would be to incorporate mainstream religious thinking into our high levels of policymaking, much like what you’ve called for in your writings, Tom. Awareness of religion and religious thinking ought not to be confined to an isolated corner of the State Department, but needs to permeate high levels of diplomacy. We’re realizing that to provide stability, democracy, and peace—which are key to safeguarding various economic interests—you’ve got to account for the religious factor. You’ve got to understand which dynamics tend to promote stability and how religious freedom is part of stability. We must integrate an understanding of religion into the warp of security policy.

**THOMAS FARR:** Great. Allen?

**ALLEN HERTZKE:** After the presidential election, I walked into my American government class of 265 students, mostly freshmen and sophomores. The night before, a couple of Muslim students of mine came up to me, and they said they were afraid. They felt vulnerable. In class I felt that I needed to say, “No, that’s not who we are here in America.” We have to affirm the protection, the inclusion, the dignity, and the rights of all of our citizens. To a certain extent, what we do at home is a more profound statement than anything else we can do about religious freedom around the world.

My second point is that I think we’ve done a terrible job as a government by not empowering Muslim Americans who are the best ambassadors for an understanding of how Muslims...
can live fuller, better, and more authentic lives in a society that respects their freedom, compared to societies where the government ordains for them to be a particular kind of Muslim. I favor lots of exchanges—whether scholar exchanges, student exchanges, or diplomatic exchanges—where people from Muslim-majority societies and Western societies, especially the United States, can experience one another's lives. I interact with them, interview them, and have gotten to know a number of wonderful Muslim leaders and scholars in the United States whose voices are not given the megaphone that they deserve.

THOMAS FARR: Thank you, Allen. Sahar, will you wrap up the panel for us?

SAHAR AZIZ: Yes. I wanted to push back a little bit on the issue of religion, because, as you stated, 99 percent of Muslims—99.9 percent of the world's 1.5 billion Muslims—are not using violence in the name of their religion. We're having an internal cultural war within the Middle East among Muslims as to how to interpret a book that was written centuries ago. The same thing could happen to Christianity or Judaism. We can take verses out of context to justify violence.

The problem is that you don't have community leaders with legitimacy, including American Muslims. This is the problem with American Muslims. I cannot go to the Middle East and say, “Hey, look at me and listen to what I tell you,” even if I have an Islamic studies degree, because I'm not legitimate in their eyes. If I cannot effectuate change, then I'm simply an appeaser. I will be the moderate Muslim who will tell them to persevere and suffer. "Yes, you're unemployed. Yes, you're poor. Yes, you've been tortured. Yes, your son has disappeared, and you don't know where he is. All of these things are facts of life, but just accept it." This is not a persuasive argument from an outsider living abroad.

My recommendation for the foreign policy of the State Department is as follows. If you want to support the debate within Muslim-majority countries and among Muslims about the sabotage of Islam—which is an important debate that needs to be had—then you have to make sure that those who are speaking in the name of pluralism and nonviolence can act and effectuate change. Otherwise, the chronically frustrated people will be more vulnerable to recruitment by violent people.

The travesty of the Muslim Brotherhood failing—and I’m not a Muslim Brotherhood supporter—was that they could have been the legitimate Islamists who might have pushed society into a more pluralistic realm, because they had to in order to govern. Then, a regime respectful of pluralism could have set an example for the rest of the Middle East in a manner similar to the path on which Turkey has embarked. The travesty of Turkey, however, is that they are now regressing back into authoritarianism.

In sum, the situation is very complex, and we need to be thinking about ultimately serving the needs of the people on the ground who are vulnerable to joining these terrorists groups.

THOMAS FARR: Ladies and gentlemen, join me in thanking our panel. [Applause]
Religious Freedom Project

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