

For Your Information

January 22, 2013| by [Katrina Lantos Swett](#) and [M. Zuhdi Jasser](#)

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On Wednesday, the United States observed its annual National Religious Freedom Day. This day commemorates the Virginia General Assembly's adoption in 1786 of Thomas Jefferson's Virginia Statute for Religious Freedom and celebrates the enshrining of this right in the U.S. Constitution and our country's culture.

While religious freedom is an integral part of our heritage, it also is misunderstood. A key misunderstanding concerns the matter of belief. Simply stated, religious freedom means not only the right to believe, but the freedom to disbelieve — to embrace any religion and to reject every religion.

People express their religious freedom by choosing theism, atheism or any other response to

ultimate questions. Religious freedom allows them to follow wherever their conscience leads.

Through such documents as the 1948 Universal Declaration of Human Rights and the 1966 International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights, nations around the world have acknowledged on paper that freedom of religion or belief is an inalienable human right.

These documents capture the broad essence of the right, speaking of “freedom of thought, conscience and religion.” Yet according to a Pew Research study released last August, nearly 75 percent of the world’s population lives in countries in which this fundamental freedom is significantly restricted.

The U.S. Commission on International Religious Freedom (USCIRF), on which we serve, has found that countries that typically persecute atheists also target members of disfavored or minority religious communities and individuals belonging to majority faiths who dissent from government-sanctioned interpretations.

In a number of nations, disseminating atheist views is specifically prohibited or restricted. Among these countries is Egypt, which USCIRF recommended in 2012 that the State Department add to its list of the world’s worst religious freedom violators. Just last month, Alber Saber was given a three-year jail sentence in Egypt for “offending” religion as a result of administering an atheist Facebook page.

Another such country is Indonesia, which USCIRF continues to monitor due to its permitting serious religious freedom abuses. Last June, Alexander Aan, a 31-year-old civil servant, was sentenced in Indonesia to a 2½-year prison term for creating a Facebook group supporting atheism and posting questions about the existence of a deity and cartoons depicting and insulting the Prophet Muhammad.

Both of these cases underscore how states that persecute atheists violate not only freedom of religion or belief, but other precious freedoms, including freedom of expression. They remind us that, in the end, freedom is indivisible. There is no bright line that can be readily drawn in the sand to separate them.

The implication is clear. Those who stand unequivocally for other freedoms, including freedoms of speech and press, association and assembly, also must support religious freedom, just as those who stand for the right of believers to follow their conscience must do the same for nonbelievers.

While history bears stark witness to the persecution of atheists in the name of belief and believers in the name of atheism, the call of conscience requires us to pursue a brighter path of freedom and dignity for all. Thus, as we mark National Religious Freedom Day, we'd do well to recall these wise words from the Virginia Statute for Religious Freedom:

“No man shall be compelled to frequent or support any religious worship, place or ministry whatsoever ... nor shall otherwise suffer on account of his religious opinions or belief.”

For believer and skeptic alike, freedom of thought, conscience, religion or belief merits our firm support around the world.

Katrina Lantos Swett serves as chairwoman of the U.S. Commission on International Religious Freedom (USCIRF). M. Zuhdi Jasser serves as a USCIRF commissioner. To learn more about the commission, go to uscirf.gov .

To interview a USCIRF Commissioner please contact Samantha Schnitzer at sschnitzer@uscirf.gov or (202) 786-0613.