



TRANSCRIPT

Panel discussion on Tolerance: A Key to Religious Freedom

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Featuring

- **Host and Opening & Closing Remarks:** Thomas L. Gallagher, CEO, Religion News Foundation / CEO & Publisher, Religion News Service
- **Moderator:** Rev. Thomas J. Reese, S.J., Chair, U.S. Commission on International Religious Freedom

With panelists

- **The Honorable Frank Wolf**, Distinguished Senior Fellow of the 21st Century Wilberforce Initiative and former Member of Congress
- **Rabbi David Saperstein**, Former Ambassador-at-Large for International Religious Freedom
- **Dr. John Sexton**, President Emeritus, New York University; President, The Catalyst Foundation for Universal Education
- **Joyce Dubensky, Esq.**, CEO, Tanenbaum Center for Interreligious Understanding

[Editor's Note: Religion News Service (RNS) produced the panel transcription below. Any errors or omissions are the responsibility of RNS.]

GALLAGHER: Good morning everybody, my name is Tom Gallagher CEO of Religion News Foundation and CEO and Publisher of the foundation's subsidiary, Religion News Service. So I want to welcome you here this morning to this important panel discussion entitled "Tolerance: A Key to Religious Freedom." I'd like to thank the U.S. Commission on International Religious Freedom for taking part in this discussion and for having us in their offices. I'd like to welcome members of the media who are here. At your seats you'll find the handouts of the fuller biographies of our panelists and our moderator, Fr. Tom Reese, but I would like to offer just a brief introduction of each.

Father Reese is the first priest to serve as chair of the Commission. He and I were colleagues at the *National Catholic Reporter* for years, he was a long-time Editor-in-Chief of *America Magazine*, is an author and expert on the Vatican, and is often called upon by major media outlets to offer his insights on religious freedom and the Vatican. He received his Ph.D. in political science from UC Berkeley.

During his 34 years in Congress, Congressman Wolf has emerged as a leading advocate for religious freedom, especially among minority groups. He authored the International Religious Freedom Act and legislation to create the US Department Special Envoy to advocate for religious minorities in the Near East and South Central Asia. He has been recognized by many, many organizations for his years of work in advocating religious freedom. He now is part of the

21st Century Wilberforce organization, whose mission is to create a world where religious freedom is recognized by nation's across the globe as a fundamental right. Just three days ago, Wilberforce organized a group of 700 leaders who communicated to the White House a desire to make an appointment to the US Ambassador at Large for International Religious Freedom.

Rabbi David Saperstein has been the US Ambassador at Large for International Religious Freedom and in 1999 he was the first chair of this commission. He served as director and chief legal counsel for the Union of Reformed Judaism Religious Action Center for more than 30 years. He is often described as the most important rabbi in the United States. He's traveled the globe widely in the advancement of religious freedom and among his many achievements and obligations he is an adjunct professor at the nearby Georgetown University Law Center.

Dr. John Sexton, the long-time educator, secured his doctorate in religion at Fordham University and went on to Harvard Law School and a clerkship at the Supreme Court. He was the Dean of New York University Law School before spending 15 years as a transformational president of New York University. During that time he created a network of global campuses, including one in Abu Dhabi and Shanghai. This past November, John invited me to Abu Dhabi to sit in on his classes on religion and government, one of which was for a group of students from among the entire university cohort, and then another group of just Muslim students – men and women – known as the Sheikh Mohamed bin Zayed Scholars.

Joyce Dubensky is a CEO and a lawyer at the Tanenbaum Center in New York on Interreligious Understanding and a champion of religious understanding. She received her law degree at NYU – and if I got my math correct, you were a young student when John [Sexton] was dean!

DUBENSKY: Ah. Yes.

Laughter

SEXTON: Young dean!

Laughter

GALLAGHER: Joyce has undertaken a number of firsts. She works – one of the hallmarks of the Tanenbaum Center is working with corporations on diversity in the workplace around religion. She's created this *Peacemakers in Action* publication, documenting compelling life stories of peacemakers. She just came in from San Diego and is widely requested as a speaker and trainer.

So for this morning's conversation, Tom Reese will open it up with an overview, then each of the panelists will have about five minutes to share their thoughts on religious freedom, and then Tom will facilitate the dialogue. Then we'll go to Q&A. And then I'll just wrap it up with some thanks. Tom.

REESE: Thank you, Tom, for those kind words of introduction. As chair of the U.S. Commission on International Religious Freedom and as the moderator today I want to first of all thank all of you for being here and showing a great interest in the question of religious freedom, and I

especially want to thank Religion News Service and Religion News Foundation for helping to make this event possible. I am the Chair of the U.S. Commission on International Religious Freedom, which is a bi-partisan, independent commission with nine members who are appointed by the President, leaders in the House and in the Senate. Our job is to advise the Congress, the President, and the State Department on issues of international religious freedom.

In my time this morning with you, I will summarize religious freedom conditions today around the world, and as I do, I want to underscore the stakes involved because there are grave humanitarian consequences when religious freedom is violated. We have seen what happens with ISIL persecutes Yazidis, Christians, and dissenting Muslims, when extremists in Burma attack Christians and Rohingya Muslims with impunity, and when Pakistan's blasphemy laws incite extremists to attack perceived transgressors. We see death and dying. We see genocide. And among the living we see the desperate plight of millions displaced and seeking safe-haven from their homes. Make no mistake, for humanitarian reasons alone, religious freedom really matters.

Billions of people today live under governments that fail to protect this pivotal liberty. The behavior of these governments fall into two categories. First of all state hostility involving governments actively persecuting people due to their beliefs. And second, state failure involving governments' failing to take effective actions to protect people from being assaulted due to their beliefs. First, regarding state hostility. Some governments are secular charities which consider all religious beliefs potential competitors of state secularist ideology. North Korea's government, for example, represses all religious activity with dissidents in prison, tortured, or executed. China's government has torn down crosses, shut down churches, and arrested their leaders and deemed unregistered churches evil cults along with some [faith traditions] whose members face forced renunciation of faith, torture, and detention. And the government has tried to eradicate Tibetan Buddhists and Uighur Muslims in their way of life.

Other governments are religious tyrannies which enthrone one religious interpretation over all others, which they see as rivals. In Iran, for example, the government has executed people for waging war against God while targeting reformers among the Shiite Muslim majority as well as religious minorities including Sunni, Sufi, and Sufi Muslims, Wakhis, and Christians.

Saudi Arabia completely bans public expression of non-Islamic religions, enthrone its own interpretation of Sunni Islam – preferable to all others – and punishes individuals for apostasy, blasphemy, and sorcery. And then there is Russia, as well as other post-Soviet states, particularly Uzbekistan, Tajikistan, and Turkmenistan, which defy easy categorization. These states favor government versions of majority religions and treat all other groups with suspension and repression. Those are ones who are actively against religious beliefs contrary to their own.

But second, regarding state failure to protect religious freedom, a number of nations have an abysmal record of not protecting their citizens from religion-related violence. For example, in Burma, in addition to governmental discrimination and military aggression against Christians and Rohingya Muslims, sectarian violence and severe abuses by non-state actors continue against members of these two groups. And as I noted, countless numbers of Rohingya Muslims remains stateless, homeless, and extremely vulnerable.

In Iraq, the government has been unable to protect Christians and Yazidis as well as Shiite Muslims and dissenting Sunni Muslims against ISIL and other violent extremist forces. And in some cases it's been unable to control its own Shiite militia groups.

In Nigeria when Boko Haram attacks Christians and fellow Muslims, the government fails to prosecute those who inflict violence that has killed many thousands of Nigerians – both Christians and Muslims – since the turn of the century. And in Pakistan, the government's failure to protect members of religious minorities – including Ahmadis and Christians and Shiites and Hindus – from attacks from violent religious extremists – is coupled with its failure to prosecute and convict the actors in these violent activities. Pakistan also disproportionately prosecutes members of the Christian and Ahmadi communities for blasphemy. USCIRF knows of at least 40 individuals who have either been sentenced to death or who are serving life sentences for this so-called crime.

In short, religious freedom conditions abroad are bleak indeed and require a firm response from our own government and the world community. These conditions underscore the need for a different way forward. One of tolerance as a key to religious freedom, as well as stability and security. Our panel today could not be more timely. And now I would like to turn things over to our distinguished panelists who already have been introduced. And we'll begin first with the honorable Frank Wolf, followed by Joyce Dubensky, and then Dr. John Sexton and followed up by with our dear friend Rabbi Saperstein

Applause

WOLF: I want to begin by thanking Ambassador Saperstein for the job that he did at the State Department. I think he has been an example of hope and hopefully the type of person that the new administration will have. And I do not believe the designation of genocide would have taken place had it not been for Ambassador Saperstein. So I want to thank him and those who care deeply about this issue ought to be very, very grateful – not only for the last two years but for the last two decades in this town. Secondly, when I was asked to highlight a couple points, if I leave out someone it does not mean that I think it's important. For instance I don't prepare to mention the Wakhis in Iran, but nobody seems to advocate for them, so I think anywhere where persecution is taking place, we should deal be them, but following the request to highlight two or three or four issues, that's what I am going to do.

China, an equal opportunity persecutor, the Catholic Church, the House Church, The Uyghurs, the Muslim Uyghurs there will tell you that the young Uyghurs in China feel forgotten about and as a result you're finding more radicalization because they don't think that anybody will really advocate and speak out. I went to Tibet a couple years ago, went there with a young Buddhist monk, what's taking place with the Tibetans in Lhasa... 130 poured kerosene on their bodies, set themselves aflame, because they feel frustrated no one will really advocate, if you will, for them. We have 300 lawyers that are now in jail. You saw the *Washington Post* Piece, the fellow who has mentally now been stripped because – and yet – we find almost no one advocating and we

find the business community not wanting to touch this, and this is not unusual in China. And you have to go after China because that's the goliath and if you're not willing to take on the goliath, then you're not willing to go into the equal places where it's easier to do what you're not going to do.

Secondly is Nigeria. Nigeria – and I would urge all of you, get on USCIRF, Judy [Judy Golub, Director of Congressional Affairs & Policy and Planning, USCIRF, click [here](#)] puts out a wonderful news bulletin to keep up every single day. I read the other day, 900 churches in Nigeria have been burned and destroyed. While we were in Nigeria, the stories that we heard were unbelievable and they believe that the West have somewhat forgotten about them. And quite frankly I agree.

My hometown newspaper is the *Washington Post*. The *Washington Post* has barely mentioned the issue of Nigeria, and the guy who covers Nigeria is based out of Nairobi, that's like covering Chicago from Washington, DC. So, Nigeria. What has taken place? As someone said, Boko Haram is the most dangerous terrorist group in the world – they're more dangerous than ISIS and they've pledged allegiance to ISIS and yet there is silence.

Bono, the Irish rock star, stated about two months ago (and I agree with him) he said, the breaking up and the fragmentation of Nigeria is an existential threat to Europe. And what he was meaning was that we have seen 1 million refugees destabilize parts of Europe. Well, now a large portion of the people who are now crossing the Mediterranean into Europe are Nigerian and from the Chad region and if Nigeria fragments – and let me just say we have a new, good Ambassador, Ambassador Symington, he's a good, good person – if it fragments and breaks up, it will be an existential threat to Europe. That's not the only reason. We have hunger and famine and everything else. But Nigeria is almost forgotten about in the Western media.

In Iraq, we have genocide. We missed genocide in Rwanda. We missed genocide in Serbia. Genocide. And yet we are seeing the end of Christianity in the cradle of Christendom. Abraham is from there. Ezekiel is buried there. Daniel is buried there. And the Christian community has gone from one and a half million down to two hundred and twenty five thousand. And David was there when he gave the Tom Lantos Award to the Yazidi Member of Parliament who broke out her comments yesterday. She said there are 3,900 Yazidi girls and women still with ISIS. Still with ISIS. She was taken to the Shiite and others.

You know, anti-Semitism growing all around the world and unfortunately no one wants to say it, even on American college campuses. I just saw a video the other day, what's taking place with Jewish students on American college campuses. And nobody wants to kind of really talk about it.

Lastly, I think, where does this go? This needs to be bi-partisan response. The group that I'm with – 21st Century Wilberforce – is putting out what we call a Congressional scorecard in a couple weeks. It is equally – when you see the leaders – it is literally split 50-50 between Republican and Democrat, even between conservative Republican and liberal Democrat. And so this issue internationally – and we are polarized domestically – but this issue must be bi-partisan. It must be Jackson-Vanik, it must be Henry Hyde and Tom Lantos. It must be Ronald Reagan if you will, there should be no daylight. And when you look at this list coming out you will see that

there is not a difference between many liberal democrats – who are very good on this issue – and many conservative republicans. Nancy Pelosi and Chris Smith – there’s not a difference of them on the issue of China, with regards to the Falun Gong, with regard to the Uyghurs. So, I urge all of you to make sure that this issue stays bi-partisan.

And lastly I think the prisoner’s list that the USCIRF will now put out is an opportunity for all of you to be working with the USCIRF and then any time that you hear that there is a Congressional delegation, or a delegation from the [White House] Administration, or even a business delegation, give them the [prisoner] list.

In the old days during the Soviet Union, no one would go to Moscow without a list of the dissidents. As Sharansky will tell you, his life got better when people advocated for him. Sharansky said the commandant of Perm 35 wanted to protect him. He didn’t know why all these letters were coming in – and all this interest from Moscow is coming in. And so by advocating for these prisoners, by going to the country, by maybe meeting with their families – the worst thing in the world is being in the darkest place and thinking no one cares.

I believe that the [USCIRF] prisoner’s list offers an opportunity for the USCIRF to engage with all of you but to engage with the Congress piece – if you don’t want to find out who is in prison and what’s taking place, and I think there is an opportunity. We have – I think we have – a moral obligation and there’s a book I read by a pastor and it was entitled, *Men of Whom the World was Not Worthy*. The world is not worthy if we do not advocate for these people across all denominations. And I think we have the ability to do it.

And President Reagan said the words in the Constitution, the words in the Declaration were words of a covenant. Not only with the people in Philadelphia in 1776 and 1786, but a covenant with the entire world. It is a covenant with the Wakhis in Iran; it is a covenant with the Uyghurs; it is a covenant with the Wakhis; it is a covenant with Catholics in China; it is a covenant with the House Church. And we should restore and make sure that that covenant is still as good as ever. And if we do I think we can make a big, big difference over the next couple years. Thank you.

Applause

DUBENSKY: Can you see me? Can you see me if I stand on my toes? No. It has to do with the papers. Alright. Well. Good morning. It is a pleasure to be here and a particular honor to be here with this panel of incredible leaders. I think of today’s subject as always important, every day. But given what is happening right now, the changes that are rapidly appearing in the United States and the reactions that are happening across the world, I think it is a particularly important time to be talking about religious freedom. But what I want to do is take it, for a moment, from the global and talk about what it means in an everyday way.

So for me, religious freedom is not only an abstract idea that’s memorialized, it’s something that is very real and tangible. It’s the right to believe, or not. To be able to share those beliefs in trust, or not. And to feel safe and to be able to do so without fear. In other words, if you had to explain it to a five year old, you would say religious freedom means you treat everybody fairly and

you're nice to them, you respect them, and you listen and you want to learn from them when they believe in a way that's not like you.

How do we put this into practice, which is at the heart of the work we try to do at Tanenbaum? Our mission is to combat religious prejudice and stereotypes and religious hatred and violence. But our vision is bigger: it's to create a world that is safe for difference, including religious difference. And I think when you take those two together, it really tracks the theme of today's conversation – tolerance (although that is not a word we like to use, we prefer respect) if you are going to have religious freedom in a pluralistic society.

So how do we actually make that happen on a daily basis?

Well, we try to develop programmatic strategies that focus on how people treat one another, their behavior, which is something that can be managed and can be taught. So we do it in a range of ways but I'm going to focus on one example.

In schools every day, kids are being bullied based on their religion or their perceived religious identity, and it's not only happening from their peers...it's also happening from their teachers and their administrators. That's what intolerance looks like and that's how it plays out on a daily basis. And that's how you chill religious freedom, and the practice of religious freedom. So what we do, we work with teachers, that is our focus, because they can create the environment where less of this happens.

We help by training them with new skills, providing them with academic curricula, but also we have to work with teachers often because they have certain fears and misconceptions about whether they can teach about religion. And even wonder, sometimes, whether they have to avoid talking about the reason the Puritans came to the U.S., religious persecution.

We train them how to take a math lesson or a science lesson – the academics kids need to learn – and simultaneously infuse into those lessons respectful curiosity so that kids ultimately come out with knowing not only how to do math, but the true belief that being different is normal and interesting and that that includes different ways of believing. Acting respectfully is not an abstract idea.

Teachers can put it into practice in their classrooms and students can learn listening skills, actual ways to recognize stereotypes – actual ways to recognize and debunk them – and to manage disinformation. They can learn how to be curious about someone else's beliefs and to ask respectful questions.

Tanenbaum's other practices – which may come up later in the discussion or not but I thank Tom for mentioning them – emerge in our work with multinational corporations. We provide them with data and strategies and policies. So for instance, over on the table if anyone is interested in seeing it later, we have a national survey week that we did on the American worker which documented that one in three American workers either experienced religious bias or have witnessed it.

We work in healthcare, because sometimes more than 40 percent of people sometimes make a health choice based on their religious beliefs, but doctors and nurses are rarely trained to recognize this, address it, and ensure that the patient is given the best care given those circumstances.

How do we manage that?

We've identified 15 ways that religion is likely to show up and we train providers in that and we give them user-friendly materials including the medical manual for the geo-cultural competence which is on the table.

And internationally, we work with religious peacemakers. Individuals who put their lives at risk in some of the places that have been mentioned today and in others that have not. And who are a key resource for diplomats here and abroad. And so one of the practical ways that we try to do this is not only the direct work with them but also by documenting what they do, how they do it, how others can replicate it, and how diplomats can work with them.

In closing, I want to emphasize that religious freedom is a very big idea, but it's much more. When we do it well it can be a lived reality. That's why it's worth finding the ways to put it into practice on a daily basis. But that's why it's also important to be vigilant and to stand up and counter those who would seek to undermine it. Thank you.

Applause

SEXTON: So it's not just formula to say that I am honored to be here today. I am in the presence of heroes and heroines of mine. I know the work of these four. I am here because 57 years ago a man at a Jesuit high school in Brooklyn called me into the vocation of teaching – and that's what I write: when you have the same profession as you move from country to county...I am a teacher, that's my vocation. Along the way there was an accident that happened and I became what some of our colleagues thought would be useful – the dean of our law school – and the president of the university. And I came to those positions imbued with a real Jesuit education.

You're not really educated by the Jesuits unless you've gone to a Jesuit high school and a Jesuit college that required Latin and Greek for the BA, as well as philosophy and theology and then went on for a Ph.D., preferably in religion, while the Vatican Council was going on, and Teilhard de Chardin was on campus and John Courtney Murray walked the halls. It was a great time. And that's a Jesuit education.

Laughter

If you get that then, when you become president of NYU, Father Joe McShane, SJ, the president of Fordham University, can begin to refer to NYU as the world's largest Jesuit University.

Laughter.

So I'm here to talk to you as a teacher. I'm going to come with, not from a different perspective in the sense that there's anything that's been said that I would not have proudly said myself, but perhaps with an orthogonal perspective. When I listen here to Father Reese and Congressman Wolf and the glorious reports from the field, it reminds me of concupiscence, it reminds me of the effects of original sin, how broken the world is, how much there is to be done.

But I want to bring to you that spirit that has to keep all of us going. The spirit of Don Quixote. In fact not even of Don Quixote, of Graham Greene's Monsignor Quixote, who thought he was a descendent of Don Quixote, this fictional character, but still kept fighting the spiritual fight. So I'm going to take a much more hopeful response to this. I'm going to move beyond tolerance as being too *de minimis* although given the reports and effects of original sin so evidently needed, beyond even respect, to the embrace that for those wonderful years of the Vatican Council we called ecumenism...toward Point Omega, as Teilhard would say.

So it was possible to refer to NYU as I did as the first ecumenical university, the first truly ecumenical university. And I didn't mean that in the religious sense, I meant – and this is the connection I want to make here – I meant it in a way of looking at a healed world.

So it started because the Jesuits, having given the education they gave me, forced me – and to go back to my installation speech, I didn't know that the answer would be, but I said in my installation speech we are going to think about what *Ratio Studiorum* is, what the purpose is, what the useful life of NYU is, we've got to explain that to the world, we got to explain why it is we exist and what our purpose is. And it happened to coincide with some work I was doing with some friends of mine to bring the Olympics to New York. Now you might not think that's connected to today's agenda but it is. Because they taught me as we did that that New York was the first city in the world that had a neighborhood for every country in the world that was populated by people that had been born in that country. So the punchline for the New York Olympic bid was "Come to New York, the world's second home, every team will have a neighborhood."

But if you went out into those neighborhoods – and yes you would hear the prayers and the music and taste the food and hear the language of those, the heritage that those people had brought, they hadn't lost that, the way my folks hadn't lost their Irish heritage – but if you asked them what they were they would say were New Yorkers. So there it was. In New York City. The world's first ecumenical, an adumbration, a foreshadowing of Point Omega, an adumbration of what the world could be if we only learned to live as a community of communities, not giving up our individual spot to look at the world, but not simply tolerating – not even simply respecting – but going even beyond embracing to say as John XXIII and Teilhard said to us, which is that we could understand ourselves, our own faith and yes our own citizenship better if we actually went beyond it to see, as Pope Francis says, how the world views us. We can only see ourselves as others view us. And that's the ecumenical. That kind of dialogic dialogue that really tries to have the perspective to put yourself in the place of the others.

So this notion of the marriage of what had come to me first as a gift about my faith and allowed me to understand not only the glory of my life's love's faith – which was Judaism – but also the glory of the faith of all others I encountered, and learn more about my own faith in the process.

This gift became a way of looking at the world in a secular sense and then startlingly – and I first began to write about this, and it's so probative this week, I'd feel that I'd have violated my conscience if I didn't bring it up.

In 1997, when I was the president of the Association of American Law Schools, I was given a copy of an 80-page memo by a man named Frank Luntz that said to people running for office, there is nothing too negative you can say about lawyers and judges: vilify them at your will, as extremely as you can. And I wrote a pastoral letter to all of legal education, and I said we're a nation without an official religion, but Tocqueville has noticed that law is the sacred religion that binds us as a society. How dare people attack judges, or "so-called" judges, how dare they do that?

Starting then I began to notice that a dogmatism which had infected my way of looking at the world as a young boy in Brooklyn, in a Jesuit high school, where a great man who I admired tremendously, Daniel Berrigan, could write on the board the words "*Extra Ecclesiam nulla salus*," in our religion class – outside the church there is no salvation. Daniel Berrigan wrote those words. And when I went up to him after class and said, "Father Berrigan, does that mean my best friend Jeremy Epstein won't go to heaven?" He said, "He will not go to heaven unless you baptize him." Now Daniel Berrigan would never have said that in the last years of his life. He'd be ashamed that he said that – but he said it.

I even then knew as a 13-year old that this was wrong. What I began to notice – and I wrote about this for the first time publically in 2005 after the 2004 election – that the kind of dogmatism that I had been taught, the triumphal dogmatism (that our dogmas are right and others are wrong) that that dogmatism, which I had recognized and grown out of thanks to Jesuits and Teilhard and John XXIII – that that kind of dogmatism had infected our political discourse. I wrote that in 2005, ladies and gentleman. Okay? 2005. And what is this heuristic of dogmatism? It's a certitude that connects to triumphalism.

So what's the lesson here? The lesson is that religious dogmatism and secular dogmatism are somehow in a feedback loop with each other and we should never neglect that. There's a heuristic mindset that characterizes both. And as we talk about religious liberty, we've got to talk about it in the context of a genuine openness to the connectivity of humanity – just as we worry about the extension of animal species or plant species, we should worry about the extension of any human, and we should understand how interconnected we are. Otherwise there's this kind of subtle reinforcement loop that goes on, which even as we could talk the language of religious liberty, we can be talking the language of division if we're not careful. That's my concern.

Now, the hope is that I'm a teacher and I can tell you, having taught two principle courses to undergraduates in the last 15 – I had to give up teaching at the law school when I became president because I didn't want to get in the way of the dean – so I taught all to undergraduates, so I was the only university president in the world teaching a full faculty schedule, five courses every year, taught on all three campuses: New York, Abu Dhabi, and Shanghai in person – taught government and religion in all three campuses to students drawn from virtually every country in the world. And then taught a parallel course which really had the same theme – I'm not going to go into how they connect which was called my book "[Baseball as a Road to God](#)."

Laughter.

But the basic theme was that in – in all of the courses, and I use the sixteen words of the First Amendment (“Congress shall make no law respecting an establishment of religion, or prohibiting the free exercise thereof...”) in teaching these kids, and of course in New York, 75 percent of them are American but in Abu Dhabi they’re from 140 countries and NYU and then of course there’s, as you heard, the other class I teach simply to Sheikh Mohamed Scholars, all Muslims, and then I go to China and half the class there is Chinese, but they’re among the top Chinese – you can’t apply to NYU Shanghai unless you’re in the top 16,000 among the 12 million Chinese high school graduates, so students are drawn from that group, then the rest from around the world, so these classes are highly diverse in terms of what they bring to it.

We use the US Constitution because we don’t see it as perfect, we never present it triumphalist, and we ask the question, we say, the key thing you’re going to learn is a healthy disrespect for authority. A healthy disrespect for authority, which is not an adolescent disrespect for authority but a skeptical approach to everything.

And you’ll see the [U.S. Supreme Court] justices doing that – this is an institution that requires written explanation of decisions that requires the co-publication of concurrences and dissents. That there is a whole chorus of people called law professors whose job is to shame and honor how well you do your job. This is taking questioning seriously. And I’ll just close with one example before I tie it all together.

I love to get, with all of my classes, but especially with my Muslim students in Abu Dhabi, to Justice [William] Douglas’s [dissent](#) in the *Allen* case, the school textbook case. And of course what the court was handling there was could the government give to religious schools textbooks – could it give to those students attending religious schools – or was that an impermissible aid to religion that constituted religious doubt?

And of course they ruled 6-3 that textbooks could be given if they were public school textbooks. And Justice Douglas writes this wonderful dissent, in which he uses the example of Cortes and the Incas. And he says it might make a difference what your religious background is, Christian or Inca, with how you taught that. And especially with my Muslim students in Abu Dhabi, I’m delighted that that point turned into, I know I used to teach the Quran at Saint Francis College in Brooklyn, and I was chairman of the religion department, so I know a good bit about their culture, but I pretend not to, and they know I’m pretending.

Laughter.

I say to them – and I had to bring something up here – I say I don’t know if you’ve heard of it, it’s a big thing in the West, it’s called the Crusades.

Laughter.

Of course they laugh. I say who were the good guys in the Crusades? Does that depend on who's teaching you? And, I want to tell you, I've done that now for 12 years, 12 different groups of students, and without any prompting, I taught it last Sunday in Abu Dhabi, without any prompting, on their own, within 15 minutes, they're talking about Israel and Palestine, and did they get only one side of the picture.

So my message here is that when we talk about these issues, if we're really going to take the long view – and that's what we, and you know, religions take the long view. We think in centuries at least millennia sometimes, we're going to take the long view on this: the heart of the matter is to understand that a core problem here is not anything other than a mindset of certitude and triumphalism that can manifest itself secularly as well as religiously.

I did my dissertation, my doctoral dissertation on whether the Unitarians succeeded in creating a dogma-less religion and my answer back in 1966 was they didn't, they just became more subtle about it. And we have, yes, brought religion into our politics in the sense that there is the religious acts or whatever but we have brought a religious mindset to our politics that is dangerous, and the answer is education.

And if we are really going to get out and begin to push back we have to know the fact, not only the number in the world today, but that there are 85 million children in the world today of primary and secondary school age who will go through life without having one day of school if we don't change things. And there are another 360 million people who will – young people, right now – who will never get more than a 4th grade education. You put those two numbers together that's a half a billion kids who don't have as much as a wit of hope in their lives, and if they can't get past the fourth grade...how can we expect them to accept the world in which they live without anger? How do we expect them to understand difference? Be tolerant? Or respectful? Or embracive? Or ecumenical?

So shame on those who turn their backs on refugees. Shame on a country that will not give money to honor the [U.N.] Millennial Goals on Education while still at the same time talking with great vigor about religion. You have to be consistent. Thank you.

Applause.

SAPERSTEIN: Well, what a delight to be here. I look at – we're looking out at you – this is kind of a “who's who” gathering of some great champions of religious freedom, so it's really and honor and pleasure to be here with you and with the people here. I'll take a second just to acknowledge those. But we have omitted in our acknowledgements one of the most important people in the room, and that is our coordinator of this, Tom Gallagher and Religion News Service. It is one of the jewels of American life and American religious life. It is an invaluable tool to anyone who really cares about understanding what is really going on with religion here. And for what you folks do, you and your staff do every day, thank you.

Applause.

John Sexton wouldn't know this, but a couple of years ago I had the opportunity to sit in on one of his baseball lectures – you know, don't think I've ever learned as much while laughing so hard as I did at that lecture. He is one of these larger than life visionaries who, we talk about transformative leaders, who's a truly transformative leader. It's always an honor to hear him and to be with him.

Father Reese and I go back decades and are kindred spirits from the very beginning: his intellect, his writing skills, I have learned so much both listening and reading what he has done over the years, so it's an honor to be with him. He's turned out unsurprisingly to be a great chair of the U.S. Commission on International Religious Freedom.

Joyce Dubensky and I also go back quite a ways and she's a force of nature and does a tremendous job running the Tanenbaum Foundation and I'm really appreciative of everything you do.

It brings me to the fellow sitting way over on the other side. We're in the presence of one of the great heroes of our time. I cannot adequately pay tribute to Frank Wolf and what a difference he has made on this issue in America, in the political scene in America, in the religious communities in America, and on a global level. The world is a better place because of you. It is true. All of those challenges he listed is true. It is also true that, you know, cue statistics, three quarters of the world's population lives in countries with severe restrictions... but three quarters of the countries in the world do not have such restrictions...it just happens to be that some of the most populous nations on the world do. We tend to lose sight of that, to the extent that we have made improvements and have made a difference over this time. And I'll talk a little bit later about some of the ways we've made a difference. We owe it to this man, Frank Wolf.

Applause.

I am so honored to have served as the U.S. Ambassador at Large for International Religious Freedom. Some of the great staff of the Commission is here, many of the distinguished commissioners and the great staff of my office, my former office, are here as well, Victoria Amarado and Robin Shulman and others – I'm really proud of what they've done. I had the opportunity to travel to – it was a parting gift from my staff, they actually counted this out – I had been to, in two years to 35 countries, 82 countries, 82 cities, a number of rural areas, sometimes really trying to get out to the most grass-root levels, to try and see the human face of some of these problems where other people hadn't done it. So I've been to some of the obscure places around the globe. I found out I had flown 384,000 miles during this period of time. And you know what the most common thing who are facing persecution whether in cities or in small towns: “Oh, Frank Wolf was just here...he just left.”

Laughter.

And in the handful of places where there wasn't the case, it was Mohammed El Senussi was just here – they are the two most traveled people I've ever seen. I don't know how they get to all the places that they do. I'm going to make, very quickly, a few brief comments, I'm not going to try – [Father] Tom [Reese] gave the speech I normally give – he did it beautifully, I won't be

repeating any of that. I'm actually going to do something a little strange. I actually looked at the title of this, and I'm going to talk to what the title of the session is, which will take me into somewhat different territory.

So we use a lot of terms here to talk about religious freedom, religious liberty, religious pluralism, religious tolerance, and here I want to acknowledge my debt to my good friend Donniel Hartman, who is the distinguished president of the Shalom Hartman Center, in Jerusalem a great, great teacher. He defines the way we think about how to set boundaries of what is, what holds us together and what's acceptable and what's not acceptable in groups that hold us together in four categories: the concept of pluralism, the concept of toleration, the concept of tolerable deviants and the concept of intolerable deviants. What he means by this is pluralism suggests that we recognized equal values in people who hold different views than we do. It's pretty easy to grant of comity and cooperation and respect and protection to those who hold views that we acknowledge we see equal merit in, even if they differ from our own.

Toleration presumes that we have significant differences with people. Bernard Williams said that toleration is required only for that which is in principle intolerant. In other words, we tolerate things that we think may be wrong. But we're prepared to tolerate and protect them as they are. And that is the way many of us are. Just to give one example, building on what John Sexton said, the normative, Christian view that Jews, not knowing the Messiah, will not be [saved], but we're prepared to have them in our midst and give them equal rights and treat them equally is an example of toleration.

When in Vatican II, the decision was made that the covenant with the Jewish people had not lapsed and so continued and then the widely overlooked – Victoria you were there last summer – with this extraordinary statement of the Vatican saying that Jews did not have to accept Jesus as the Messiah in order to get to heaven, it moved from toleration to pluralism in this regard.

But toleration presumes that we can accept people with those differences, even if we think they are absolutely wrong, we can accept them within the norms of society together. The problems arise when there are limits beyond which people won't go and say "yeah I can kind of live with that," and that brings us into the deviance category. The point that Donniel made, and I think adds to this, is there are a lot of forms of deviance here that we think is absolutely wrong, it goes beyond the pale and yet we've given up as a society trying to penalize it and we kind of accept it.

You know, those kinds of things range from running a red light to speeding to adultery, I mean it's a whole range of things that we say clearly violate laws, rules, norms about it – but we don't act on it. Where you get into intolerance – intolerable deviants that you can't accept – that's where we get into problems in our religions. This applies to some of the domestic debates going on now here. I respect the idea that I as a traditionalist Christian – and this is a hypothetical statement.

Laughter.

I understand that there are people who think that gay marriage is right but it does beyond the pale of what I can accept, I don't want to be implicated, I don't want to be complicit in this. I know the law protects abortion, I don't want to be complicit – it goes beyond what I can accept here.

And, frankly, if I had the power to outlaw it, I would outlaw it because it is an intolerable deviance for me in this regard. Across the globe, the problem – one more statement about America. The way we set up our First Amendment right structure, was to say that you have these fundamental protected rights but they are not absolute. But the level at which we will justify government restriction of them will be very high. It's not just any government interest, not just any important government interest, it requires a compelling government interest applied in the way that least infringes on the rights that are involved.

In countries across the globe, and built into the ICCPR itself, is language that is a much lower standard than this. There are caveats in terms of freedom of religion, in terms of other fundamental rights in which things that might offend other religions, things that might upset the social norms of a country, things which might offend the fundamental cultural values of a country could be bared about it – but that of course is such a broad category, you could through anything into it. So all of those examples that Father Tom Reese and Congressman Wolf gave of these violations all across the globe that we hear of so often fit into countries justifying it on these over-broad, vague language statements about offending, you know, social worries or offending the religious sensibilities of others therefore blasphemy laws are okay because we have this provision that says we can do that in our legal system etc. So where you draw these lines are crucially important.

Obviously the problem of toleration, with toleration – from the title of our – the problem with it is that it presumes if you can give something, if you can tolerate something, you can also not tolerate it. And that is a fundamental dilemma for us on the concept of toleration. We find this...Thomas Paine in the *Rights of Man* talks about this...he says both tolerance and intolerance are despotisms, one of those assumes that the right of government to withhold liberty of conscience – intolerance – and the other presumes that it grants the government the right to give it or take it away. And of course freedom, as our fundamental freedoms suggested, is something that comes from within. It was one of America's ideas that came both from religious traditions about what it meant to be created in the image of God but also the secular traditions of the age of reason that some could argue in turn was influenced by religion...but these came together in America for the first time and then in France soon afterwards for a brief period and these ideas came together and took political form for the first time where your rights did not depend on the government.

The government wouldn't give or take away this fundamental rights. The role of governments was to respect and protect those rights. But they came from within – “We are endowed by our creator with certain unalienable rights” – this was a revolutionary notion. It doesn't matter in this country if all 330 million Americans think that what we say here in today is wrong. It doesn't matter if all 535 Members of the Congress of the United States and all 9 members of the Supreme Court believe that the way we worship is incorrect...we have the unalienable right to say what we want, to worship what we want, and we celebrate those rights not just in the abstract but because we believe that they are absolutely indispensable to the free market place of ideas

alone out of which truth can really rise in the testing of ideas and that is of the things that makes American an absolutely extraordinary country in this regard. It's different than toleration.

Toleration presumes somebody's decided to grant it to you and they can take it away, this says these are fundamental rights that must be protected. These ideas were enshrined in the Universal Declaration on Human Rights, they were enshrined in the ICCPR, but in the political, really dealing in the particularly normative ICCPR that it was binding upon people as a contractual device so they'd sign on to it, these exceptions that were necessary to bring these countries on really led to over-broad, vague formulations that continue to vex many of our efforts to make these dreams an ultimate reality.

When passing a religious freedom bill in Virginia, George Mason proposed "all men should enjoy the fullest toleration and exercise of religion according to the dictates of conscience." To enjoy the fullest toleration. Madison urged successfully for him to substitute that "religion, or the duty we owe our creator, and the manner of discharging it, being under the direction of reason and conviction only, not of violence or compulsion, all men are equally entitled to the full and free exercise it according to the dictates of conscience."

And Washington, in his famous letter to the Congregation of Newport wrote "It is no more that toleration were spoken of as if it were the indulgence of one class of people that another enjoyed the exercise of their inherent, natural rights." This was one of America's great gifts to the world, in focusing on freedom. Not just freedom to worship, freedom of religion in the broadest sense that was described by Joyce [Dubensky] and others in the description here, remains one of our most precious gifts that we have given the world.

And indulge me just one second more, I know we've gone way over the time here, I simply want to say something about the annual report that we put out because it is one of the overlooked contributions of the Bill. We're talking not just about the commission's report but the annual report of the State Department that covers all 199 countries and territories. I just want to describe the impact of this. I cannot tell you how many times, how many times, when traveling across the globe, sat across the table from leaders of persecuted groups and attorneys that we courageously, bravely represent them but they would look at me and say we thought we were alone. And you've taken our story and put it out there to the whole world, we cannot tell you what strength it gives us to know. And now the world knows and they read about it in this report.

And that applies as well to the commission report focuses on the problematic countries and lifts us up as well here. But what we didn't think – and Frank, maybe you did – but when I was working with you in putting that bill together (The International Religious Freedom Act) it did not occur to me and I didn't hear it at any of the debates but it's so obvious, every year, there are foreign service officers that are assigned to draft and research this report. And they have to reach out – they have to reach out – to these persecuted groups. And what we heard, even in the first year, when Bob Seiple and I traveled and I chaired the commission and Bob and I traveled together and we would meet with these groups who'd say we never had anyone to talk to. Now there's this guy – this woman, this guy – at the American Embassy who's reached out to us and knows what's going on – we can go to him when we're in trouble and he'll intervene with the government. It happens all across the globe because of this. And the other piece of it is that over

the years there's probably been about 1,500 foreign service officers that have had to engage with this, some of them are now ambassadors – and they owned this issue. Many personally feel strongly about this issue and this has equipped them to be really effective in this.

So, Frank, you have helped change the face of this because of the vision that you brought here and I simply wanted people to have a powerful sense of what that has accomplished. Thank you.

Applause

REESE: Thank you very much. One of the privileges of the moderator is he gets to ask the first questions and so I am going to just very quickly ask each of the panelists a question and I am going to encourage them to also respond briefly so that we can then have questions also from the audience – and I'll go in the order in which the panelists spoke.

I'll start with you, Congressman Wolf. You spoke a lot about China. And I guess my question is what can the US Government do to influence China in terms of religious freedom? I ask this question because clearly they're very thick-skinned. They – any time you say anything about them they say “well this is internal affairs in China you shouldn't, America has no right to intervene here – you know, this is totally wrong.” On top of that, they're our banker and one of our big trading partners and investors. How can the US Government realistically put pressure on China in a successful way to get them to change their activity in how they treat religion?

WOLF: At the top, the [U.S.] president speaking out could make a tremendous difference. And you can do it in a very kind, in a very respectful way. If you remember President Reagan, who went to the Danilov Monastery, and with Gorbachev and you recall later on he said “tear down that wall” – you remember the comment he made at the Berlin wall. At the Danilov Monastery he spoke out for religious freedom. Gorbachev was by his side and yet if you press fast forward, Gorbachev came to President Reagan's funeral. And so you can do it in a very respectful way.

Secondly, in the '80s, no member of Congress would go – when Tom Lantos would go to the Soviet Union or to Romania under the dark days of Ceaușescu, he always had a list, he would advocate for, the leader was former Senator Dole, he got Father Calicu out in Romania and so adopted a precedent – so I think at the national level it can. When the Secretary of Defense goes, to have a list and to be able to speak out.

The business community can make a difference. You don't have to bang on the table and shout and all – and I think you can do that in a tremendous way and then you may get to the point to do what Senator Jackson did and Congressman Vanik: Jackson-Vanik, some sort of modified sanctions. But not to raise it almost sends a message that we really do not care. So I think there's a lot that you can do in a very, very respectful way.

REESE: Terrific, thank you. Actually let me just continue that. Joyce, you work with a lot of big corporations in terms of encouraging tolerance and if a corporation was working in China, what would you advise them on how to encourage religious freedom in China?

DUBENSKY: Okay. Well, it's always fact-specific. We start from the premise that businesses are in business to do business and so we have to work with them from that premise. And then the question is – and businesses also have values, but they are in business to do business and that is their responsibility. So we have to look not only at what our ideals might be and the ideal scenario but also what's going to work in the real world for them and with them. A lot of companies have learned – and there's a lot of data on this, increasing data – that when you can practice an inclusive workplace, and when it comes to religion one that is good at religious accommodation, you can improve morale and then there's a direct correlation between that and retention and attracting talent and all of that inures to the bottom line.

So that may put into practices being inclusive in their workplaces, but they don't ask us (and so far we haven't – well I'll take that back, that's not true). They will not ask us what their CEO should say in a private conversation but they can use their weight. We are very mindful that many of the multinational companies with which we work have an influence that is greater than many small countries. And they can wield that influence with where they decide to operate and where they bring their economic power and create jobs and, you know, help to create stability. The data is also that religious freedom in practice in a country correlates with stability, correlates with economic benefits...so that knowing all of this you work with the data and the outcomes that will make them more successful and help them become companies that attract talent because they're inclusive, because they're effective in their functioning and we would encourage them to operate in that way in that country.

REESE: Thank you. John, you're our educator. If you had a classroom of teachers here. What would you say to them on how to bring their students from this kind of dogmatism that they might pick up from their culture or from their families – how to move from that kind of dogmatic approach to life to one of tolerance to one of respect, to what you call ecumenical. How do you move your students along that path?

SEXTON: Well, I think the first thing you have to do as teacher is understand where your students are. This is the ecumenical act of kind of putting yourself in another person's place. And, in that spirit, the first thing that I try to inculcate in my students is to liberate them to be critical of me. So in this religion and government class that I've been teaching to undergraduates for 25 years – which I've also been teaching for 12 years in Abu Dhabi and four years in Shanghai – the quintessential moment that they will all remember is a debate. They have two weeks to prepare to understand an article that I wrote as a student on defining religion for the First Amendment religion clauses. And they each have eight minutes – no holds barred – to debate me. And we have judges. And at the end of the eight minutes, the judges hold up a card, just like at the Olympics. I say to them I've won the debate the minute that they begin questioning what I wrote.

So, I accept, for example, the Congressman's question about China. What I am trying to add is that there's this kind of intellectual move that's not related to religion at all that is fundamental to the long-term solution. And what we have to do is develop this kind of intellectual ecumenism and build it in everywhere we can.

So with my students at NYU Shanghai, it's very interesting to me that there were people in authority in China that said to NYU we want you to bring liberal arts education here. They'd seen what we've done in Abu Dhabi. We're the only American university that's licensed as a Chinese university and fully supported there and our faculty circulate through and, apart from the fact that the students are different, I teach my course without any worry about where I am; but I teach it to reach the students. I had to explain to them what religion was in many cases. But the good news is that they gravitate toward this intellectual ecumenism which becomes a secular ecumenism and then that becomes the underpinning of critical thinking – and, ultimately, of religious tolerance. I would say don't preach at them because if you preach at them you're saying – I have the truth. Avoid certitude, avoid triumphalism.

REESE: David, you mentioned that you normally give the talk that I gave.

SAPERSTEIN: Just not as well.

Laughter.

REESE: No, much better. I just, ya know, my talk was all doom and gloom, you know, and a lot of what Congressman Wolf said is that. I mean, David, you've been working on this in the State Department. Please tell us some good stories. Tell us some of your successes. Give us some hope here. Tell us about some of the good things that you were able to accomplish in the last couple years.

SAPERSTEIN: First, the Congressman already mentioned one piece of work that is extraordinarily gratifying. And that is the work they are quietly doing day in and day out on behalf of prisoners of conscience. And the ones who we've been able to get in, and for me to have been in the courtroom in Khartoum where the two most prominent prisoners of religious conscience were released and they're saying to us – the lawyers, the defendants – we're out, simply because the United States government was being such a good advocad for us and kept raising the issue constantly.

You can think of Meriam Ibrahim's case even before I came on where Mohammed El Senussi and I and others were working together in my old life – either on behalf of this and the impact that all of us working together had and what the Congress of the United States said about it – this all makes a difference. And there are times where we really can be helpful, so that's one big piece of it. Secondly, Congress has, with bipartisan support, in part again thanks to this Congressman but to others as well, both sides of the aisle significantly increased our programmatic activities. Our budget in the program area went from \$3.5 million in one or two years to \$20 million – and this is money that has been put into save religious human rights defenders and religious freedom defenders.

You know, we get people when they're in trouble sometimes security, sometimes they're already out of the country. Sometimes we get them legal support – and this is making a huge difference in specific countries, let's say Vietnam, that was writing a new omnibus religion law, their willingness to engage with us really made a profound difference. The bill – and they still have

very serious problems in some rural areas. My trip to the Central Highlands was just absolutely fascinating in that regard. But their willingness to engage with the international community – allowing us to put together a team of international lawyers who can talk about this model from other countries and resolve some of the issue they were concerned about – has led to the passage of a bill that will ease the lives of many, many of the (particularly the registered) religious communities, and even just a little bit the unregistered communities in the country in a way that will make a profound difference.

And now we'll focus on still the much that remains to be done. But boy will this be different. And I can remember up in the Central Highlands the bishop saying that's what's hard for me is that I can't assign my priests legally because you have to go through levels of government approval – well the fact that in many areas the urging of the international community and the Vietnamese religious community had moved from an approval system to a notification system, I was able to look at the bishop and say the new law, when it gets passed, (and it did stay in) under the new law you can just put your priests wherever you want and just notify the government and that's the end of it. And his eyes lit up, so what a difference that was going to make.

So the ability -- we've put together this international contact group now and we had worked together in the parliamentarian group, we got a parliamentarian caucus group of over 60 countries across the globe that are coordinating on this issues. And an intentional contact group for the governments themselves, of nearly 30 governments that are coordinating on this. We've weighed in together – quietly, behind the scenes sometimes, sometimes publicly – on issues. That's really made a difference there.

So on a range of issues I think that there have been some encouraging signs. But the real task for us: what is life like for the still scores of millions of people who, simply because of the way they worship God, simply because of their beliefs, are second-class citizens, are oppressed or persecuted, are victims of societal violence where the government does not act to protect them, or end up in jail tortured, beaten, put to death, because of what they believe. So yes we can focus on the glass being a third full – we still have about two-thirds to go and we can rest until the cup of justice is fully filled.

REESE: Terrific. Thank you. Okay, we'll open it up for questions. We'd ask you to identify yourself and ask the question. And, well I turned my phone off, so Tom's going to have to tell me when we're done. Yes, in the back.

KANSARA: Thanks, I'm **Jay Kansara**, and I'm the Director of Government Relations for the Hindu American Foundation.

REESE: And please direct your question to one of the panelists.

KANSARA: So this is actually directed to, it could be directed to you directly as well Ambassador Saperstein and Congressman Wolf, and anyone on the panel who would like. From my vantage point, and this is something that we see as a systemic concern, the conversation about religious freedom from a US Government perspective, has often been dominated by those who adhere to the Abrahamic faiths and I would say that that's quite representative of the panel today, the

commissioners on USCIRF historically, as well as those who are the loudest voices. And that doesn't mean to say that those from the Dharmic faiths or from Eastern philosophy, or those of no faiths are not equally active on this issue. I just don't see those voices given a platform on US Government agencies. And so can you address that? I'm friends with many of those on the panel today – we work with many of those on the panel – so this is not a personal jive at anyone, it is simply something that those from our vantage point would like to see remedied so that we can have a more broader conversation on this topic.

REESE: Yeah I'll certainly be willing to answer that in terms of USCIRF. We are very concerned about the treatment of Hindus in Bangladesh and also in Pakistan. And that has been a focus of attention in our annual reports and in our testimony statements. So we're very happy to work with you and with other Hindu organizations to get us, you know, up to date information on the discrimination and persecution of Hindu groups in these countries – I think that's very important for us to focus on. And I, you know – we have to defend not just Christians, not just Jews, not just people from the Abrahamic tradition, but people of all faiths – or people who have no faith whatsoever. And I think that is a fundamental principle of religious freedom that we should have.

DUBENSKY: I'd just like to say something from a different perspective because I can't speak to that. But, I think, when you asked the question how do you get leadership and who you're speaking with and who is part of the decision making body and part of the reporting body and, you know, where is the representation in the group of persons beyond those who represent that Abrahamic faiths, I think you're asking a very important question. And I think that there's a practical way for that to be approached when appointments are made and we decide with whom to work and I think it's to ask the question: who's missing? Who is not here with us who's equally concerned with these issues and should be here at this level of the table? And if we start asking those questions, we'll not only have more people addressing religious freedom from Eastern traditions and who fall into the category of the “nones” in our society, we will also have more women, and so I think that is a way to address a great many inequities, if we institutionalize that practice.

AUDIENCE QUESTION: Thank you so much being here. I work for The Network for Religious and Traditional Peacemakers and, you know, Father Reese, I wanted to infer on your last question to Ambassador Saperstein and that is we really tend to, of course it's simple to talk about all of these persecutions and lack of religious freedom around the world but also, I think, the commission and the US Government also need to work harder with initiating and then positively advancing religious freedom and I'm pleased to learn that now the commission is engaging in their work with governments in Saudi Arabia and others. So we have to engage particularly the Muslim world, the Muslim communities, those who are working for religious freedom. The Moroccan Declaration, as you know, and I hope this is something that could be supported and is something that could also be used as a tool to advance religious freedom. So I want just to see if we can just a little bit focus on that, not only reporting those stories on religious freedom, but even make an effort to address and to partner. There are scholars that we know today in Pakistan, in India, and in other places, they don't even actually find a safe space to discuss issues of blasphemy laws or apostasies. So what effort that you can do? And I'm interested in Congressman Wolf addressing that question.

WOLF: Well, I think personnel as policy – if you have the right people in government that will advocate and do these things, and in some respects everything that takes place in Congress is downstream from culture and if you are a part of the culture, you should be advocating for the conscience of the Congress to push. And lastly, members of Congress today don't travel anymore to that degree. Chris Smith, who's one of the best guys in Congress, Chris went to Iraq and northern Iraq on December 23rd and the embassy wouldn't allow him to go out, so he broke away – you can't go, you can't see, and so in many respects I would challenge all of you to put together delegations. There's nothing like seeing it. I got interested in '84, gone to Ethiopia during the famine. It changed my -- if you look at my '81, '82, '83, '84 – it's transportation, it's Metro, it's I66, it's HME3, it changed with that trip. And Congressman Tony Hall, who was my best friend, he took me to Romania where they were bulldozing churches and synagogues, and so to see it – and members are not traveling.

So I would encourage all of you to get together, to take them to these places, to show them...let them sit across the table, let them go into the hut to talk to a person, let them...and so in some respects, you will determine that and not so much the Congress because they're so tied up doing this and that. And last thing. I would urge you, if you wanted to do that, to take a group – a Republican and a Democrat. Tony Hall and I – a liberal Democrat, a conservative Republican – my good friend. By traveling together, by being together, by experiencing together, and then eating lunch together and traveling on a plane together, so I would encourage all of you: if you have an issue you care deeply about, bring a Republican, bring a Democrat...and I think the more you emphasize and stress on a freshman, a sophomore, and a junior, because those who are there are there and they generally, you determine where you're going to go in the beginning.

So you have a whole freshman class who find the issue get a Republican, get a Democrat. Take them, approved through the Ethics Committee, and these are not going to be junk trips where they're going to go to Paris, they're going to go to Nigeria, they're going to go to Iraq, but I would urge all of you...but you really have a greater impact than you realize. And so everything takes places in Congress, downstream from culture, you are shaping the culture: adopt a Republican, adopt a Democrat on your issue take them there. And I tell you, once they see it and experience it and touch it and taste it, they'll never be the same.

SAPERSTEIN: I was just going to say something personally, as long as I've known Congressman Wolf, we've actually never had this conversation. It was my trip to Ethiopia in '84, '85 that actually had a profound impact on me, on these issues that we shared in common. I just want 30 seconds on Mohammed El Senussi. He has done some absolutely remarkable work. When I was there at the dedication of his school in the Central African Republic, in Bangui, which they help underwrite, their program helps underwrite, that is a mixed Muslim and Christian school at a very difficult time in that country. One of the few shining examples – hundreds of these kids, Muslims and Christians, and that's the kind of example of what we need. And it has to start in the educational systems of the country. You talk about successes, our embassy there, in that country has played a significant role in being supportive of the efforts of those who have tried curtail the violence that has gone on and to try to change the conditions in the country. It's really be an extraordinary thing, so I just want to acknowledge Mohammed's extraordinary work.

REESE: Okay, we only have time for one more question. Tom.

ROBERTS: Hi, **Tom Roberts**, National Catholic Reporter. Over the last number of years, the Catholic bishops in the United States have spent a lot of money organizing – and some very hot language – trying to convince the culture that religious freedom is at risk here. It has to do mostly with the Affordable Care Act and some gender issues. Two questions. One, would anyone on the panel raise that concern to a level which would put it on one of your lists internationally? And two, has it effected your work overseas? Do governments look at you and say you've got your own problems?

DUBENSKY: I do think that at this point in this country there are any number of very serious issues with the core beliefs of one community absolutely conflict with the core beliefs of another. And the question for us as a society is how can we, to the greatest extent possible, accommodate both while ensuring the protection of each? And so that comes up, for example – and a very specific example – in Catholic-run hospitals where the issue of abortion can come up in an emergency situation and you might have a Jewish woman needing it in early. And she might believe in her tradition that the mother's life needs to take priority in this crisis moment and then how do you manage that situation? And so I think we have issues in this country where we practice in the actual practice of religious freedom for all, sometimes it's a conflict and there is a compromise to be made that is as equitable if you can if you're coming from the conviction that both beliefs have value. So yes. And then in terms of outsiders saying that you've got your own problems, I've not only heard that but I've heard something else which I think is a key reminder which is you really need to guard your freedoms now, and your religious freedoms in this country, because when people from other countries look at us – and I was talking to peacebuilders, religious peacebuilders – they said we look to you as an example of how it can be done. And if that ceases to be, where is any hope? And what can we look for? So I think that speaks to our responsibility in this country of trying to get it right.

SAPERSTEIN: as fate would have it, the House Judiciary Committee Constitutional Subcommittee is holding hearings on the state of religious freedom next week, and I'm going – in the United States – and I'm going to be testifying on that. I've worked on an issue that brings together the most liberal and conservative people, all behind international religious freedom. It will be interesting to see if I can walk that tightrope and not end up in some of those very painful divisions that you were alluding to. So, over the last year, in every single country I went too (without exception) where I would talk about how essential religious tolerance, religious respect, religious pluralism, religious freedom are, what about your country and what's being said about Muslims. Every single country raised it – and certainly in every Muslim country I went to, but even in non-Muslim countries. It was: we thought you were different. And my response was always the same so it would be interesting to see – whatever someone says in a campaign that the Constitution of the United States prohibits treating one religious group different than another, when someone becomes president, they're bound by the Constitution and I think that that is still going to be the case. Second issue: what do Massachusetts, Pennsylvania, Wyoming, Oklahoma, and South Carolina all have in common? They all have blasphemy laws on the books. In every place, when I went to a corner of the country – and most of you, even though you're out there active in the field may not know that – but every country that has a blasphemy law that I went to to speak to said well what about the states in the United States that have blasphemy laws on the books? So, yes, we get that. One final word on this. I take seriously, with a great deal of respect,

the competing claims in the United States between religious civil rights claims of people on behalf of their religious freedom and to live in accordance with their conscience without being complicit in behavior that they find to be anathema and I take equally serious the civil rights claims of people who say the protection of my civil rights is a compelling interest that should trump the claim of religious people to discriminate against me. Because it's the same argument is made by religious beliefs that would lead me to discriminate against blacks against Jews against Catholics – but how do you differentiate between groups that are targeted now and those groups as well in terms of who you're serving and public accommodations, etc. I take seriously that these are competing claims that have a linear, that validity. The tough issues are those that can be valid moral, religious claims against each other. And we need to take it seriously and do our best to find common ground and ease some of these tensions about it. But make no mistake, as painful and real as these issues are, and the hearts and souls of the people making these competing claims, we are talking about people who are being brutalized. We are talking about people who are being who are being imprisoned. We are talking about people who are being tortured. We're talking about people who are being ethnically cleansed and victims of genocide and these things. I pray for the day when across the globe the worst problem that we have is how do we balance our competing civil rights claims. I will take them seriously then. But what a day for Hallelujah that will be in terms of the whole entire vision of the international religious freedom efforts.

SEXTON: So, I have to say something before we close on this. I am a Catholic. I also teach this seriously. By “this” I mean these competing claims and what those 16 words mean seriously around the world and, in the interest of full disclosure, before 1988 when I became dean, in those eight years I was a lawyer in mostly cases that went to the Supreme Court of the United States. My general argument today is that it's very, very easy to go for the shiny object here, that it's important to go for the shiny object, because there are people suffering – who have to be, who want out of that suffering, as much as we can, but the lists have to be there. But in the long run our strategy has to be a wise one that tries to remove as many of the shining objects as possible that demand immediate and acute attention.

A general case has been education is important so it's inconsistent if you're not trying to educate these kids, either where they are or by bringing them into this country, such as the 125,000 college-ready Syrian refugee kids who were in camps in Turkey, Lebanon, and Jordan, who American colleges were prepared to accept. A hundred and twenty five thousand. I'm exactly where you are on this issue – this is the one point I took the microphone to add. As a Catholic who knows this area, I think the bishops go for a shining object that undermines the cause when they bring a case like Little Sister of the Poor. Now I think their legal position was wrong -- people can disagree on that, including justices of the Supreme Court. I would not have advised bringing that case on the merits of the case and as of religious liberty. But it's a tough balancing issue – just like the moment of silence case, and I litigated that. But the one thing I know is the sight of my church appearing to care about the money that was involved when there was no money involved that cost them anything. You could make an argument, a very serious argument, that all they had to do is refrain. There are some arguments best not made, and sometimes refraining from an argument is the best way to advance a cause. And I think that the American bishops happened to think seriously about which they care about more.

REESE: As chair of the US Commission on International Religious Freedom, I have absolutely nothing to say.

Laughter

However, if you want to know what I think you can just go to NCR online.org and you can read my column. What a great way to end it.

GALLAGHER: So I felt halfway through we were experiencing a master-class in religious freedom and pluralism. And the *Religion News Foundation* and Religion News Service are in deep gratitude to Congressman Wolf and Joyce Dubensky, and Tom Reese, Ambassador Saperstein and my good friend John Sexton. So thank you very much. And before we go I want to recognize my colleague Jerome Socolovsky, the Editor-in-Chief of *Religion News Service*, and Adelle Banks, one of our great writers, and Cathy Grossman is here today, a long-time *USA Today* reporter, who's helping us with the camera. And thank you to Erin Singshinsuk [Executive Director, USCIRF] and Judy Golub [Director of Congressional Affairs & Policy and Planning, USCIRF] and the team at USCIRF for making this panel possible.

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