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International Conference Urges Support for Religious Freedom and Human Rights

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“Religious freedom is a hallmark of an open society”

The greatest difference between open, free societies and authoritarian regimes is respect for human rights and religious freedom, speakers told the Conference of Hope for Universal Human Rights and Religious Freedom, sponsored by The Washington Times Foundation and Think Tank 2022.

The conference, held Nov. 12 in South Korea and livestreamed to millions of viewers globally, concluded with a call to action for people worldwide to sign a Declaration on the Universal Value of Religious Freedom. “We call upon all people throughout the world to stand firmly against all forms of intolerance, prejudice, slander, and hate toward believers of our world’s religions,” says the statement.

“When we speak of human rights, the most basic, fundamental right would be religious freedom,” said Dr. Yun Young Ho, Chairman of the Steering Committee for Think Tank 2022. This right is well-known, he said, noting that freedom of religion was included in Article 18 of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, adopted in 1948 by the United Nations General Assembly.

At a time when many religious groups face persecution, intolerance, discrimination, and violence in many countries, this is “a critical moment in which we must unite, we face the truth, and we move forward courageously based on the principles expressed in the Declaration on the Universal Value of Religious Freedom,” said Conference of Hope co-host Thomas P. McDevitt, Chairman of The Washington Times and board member of The Washington Times Foundation.

Speakers pointed to persecution of religious groups including Muslim Uyghurs, Tibetan Buddhists, Jews, Christians, Muslims, Ahmadis, Bahais, Jehovah’s Witnesses, Yazidis, Falun

Gong, and, more recently, the Family Federation of World Peace and Unification, formerly the Unification Church, in Japan.

The Chinese Communist Party is “at war with all faiths,” said Ambassador Sam Brownback, former US senator who served as Ambassador-at-Large for International Religious Freedom (2018-2021).

In contrast, “religious freedom is a hallmark of an open society in a democracy” and democracies “must stand for religious freedom for everybody, everywhere, all the time,” he said.

“Why is evil so influential in today’s world? Because it has many allies. Three siblings are the most spread and efficient: Indifference, ignorance and fear (when we don’t care, when we do not know, or when we are scared to say or do something),” said Hon. Jan Figel, First Special Envoy for the Promotion of Freedom of Religion, European Union (2016-2019). “To overcome these siblings, we must invest more into active engagement, lifelong education, and civil courage. Then a century of hope may come, and a culture of human dignity may prevail over extreme violence, aggressive wars and a century of genocides.”

Several speakers addressed the persecution of the Family Federation in Japan that has intensified since the tragic and senseless assassination of former Prime Minister Shinzo Abe. The Paris-based CAP Freedom of Conscience, a respected UN NGO, filed a formal complaint with the UN Human Rights Committee in Geneva, saying that Japan’s “national tragedy” has been turned “into a bizarre narrative that makes the alleged assassin into a victim.”

“Religious liberty has been defined by the Holy See as the most violated human right in the 21st century,” said Mr. Massimo Introvigne, Founder and Managing Director, Center for Studies on New Religions in Italy. “The events in Japan prove that the use of the word ‘cult’ to discriminate against and persecute peaceful religious movements has now reached intolerable levels and should be stopped. Those who do not publicly reject and denounce the campaigns against ‘cults’ are not real friends of religious freedom.”

“After World War II, the Soviet Union was aggressively working to bring Japan into the Communist sphere of influence,” said Hon. Newt Gingrich, US House Speaker (1995-1999). Japanese leaders, including Mr. Abe’s grandfather Prime Minister Nobusuke Kishi, met with Rev. Sun Myung Moon during the Cold War, he said, and “a natural relationship formed between the victory-over-communism movement, Mr. Kishi and many members of the Diet, especially the Liberal Democratic Party.”

Today, “we are seeing that many in the [Japanese] media are trying to dissolve the movement in Japan without any legal due process,” Mr. Gingrich said.

“We are not surprised that so many current and former members of the Liberal Democratic Party and other parties in Japan understood that work with the Universal Peace Federation, co-founded by Dr. Hak Ja Han Moon, was so important and collaborated with it,” said Pastor Paula White-Cain, former advisor to US President Donald Trump and director of the White House Faith and Opportunity Initiative. She added, “it is good for Japan, good for the Republic of Korea and for America and good for peace in Northeast Asia and the world.”

Former BBC Correspondent Humphrey Hawksley, who spoke live from London, recalled how the Family Federation and other NGOs helped him lead a BBC crew into North Korea. “The work the church did in the 1990s helped bring about a peace deal that took the prospect of war off the table on the Korean Peninsula, and it has been doing similar work since,” he said.

Cardinal Kelvin Felix, Archbishop emeritus of Castries, Saint Lucia, recalled meeting Japanese volunteers with the Women’s Federation for World Peace in the island nation of Dominica. “For 26 years, they have been conducting art classes at our Teachers’ Training College and in many schools around the country,” while also holding programs to strengthen family unions,” he said.

The Family Federation has had 4,300 of its members in Japan kidnapped and held in forced confinement by highly paid professional “faith breakers” during the last 45 years, said Norishige Kondo, an attorney in Japan who has been serving as legal counsel to the Association of Victims of Kidnappings, Forced Confinement and Conversions. Kidnapped victims have also suffered sexual assault, violence, and threats, he said. In one case, a medical doctor—who had critically ill patients under his care—was held for more than a year by kidnappers. Another man, Toro Goto, was held for more than 12 years. “Mr. Goto was able to maintain his faith,” Mr. Kondo added, “but 70 to 80 percent of the victims of forced conversions and kidnappings lose their faith due to these inhuman and illegal detentions.”

“Religious freedom has long been called the first freedom, like the famed ‘canary in the mine,’ the violation of which warns us of impending danger elsewhere,” said Doug Bandow, Senior Fellow at Cato Institute, who specializes in foreign policy and civil liberty.

A group called Open Doors lists 50 of the top persecutors of Christians and other faiths, starting with Afghanistan’s Taliban and North Korea’s regime, said Mr. Bandow. “Governments which refuse to protect us as we seek God—or otherwise address the transcendent—are unlikely to

protect us as we exercise our conscience in other ways,” he added, noting that eroding of religious freedom leads to denials of free speech, debate, and elections, and breeds terrible conflicts, including terrorism and genocide.

Prof. W. Cole Durham Jr., who directs the International Center for Law and Religion Studies at Brigham Young University’s J. Reuben Clark Law School, recalled how leaders and members of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-Day Saints (LDS) endured decades of persecution, brutal rejection, and bloodshed. Today, the LDS Church is a major denomination, and its members are widely accepted. “Standing up under persecution builds a kind of strength, which is its own reward,” he said. Moreover, surviving persecution leads to “an intensified appreciation of the practical importance of the freedom of religion” and “empathy for the suffering of others,” he said.

The Washington Times Foundation, founded in 1984 in Washington, D.C., hosts numerous programs, including its monthly webcast “The Washington Brief,” to gather expert commentary on issues relating to peace and security in the world. Think Tank 2022, a project of the Universal Peace Federation, regularly mobilizes its worldwide network to promote dialogue, reconciliation and peace on the Korean Peninsula.

The Washington Times Foundation and Think Tank 2022 plan to continue sponsoring the Conference of Hope programs to promote peace and security globally—and especially on the Korean Peninsula and the Pacific Rim.