

Lord Alton of Liverpool



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Why Freedom of Religion and Belief Is Relevant and Urgent

Professor the Lord Alton of Liverpool

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The BBC's courageous chief international correspondent, Lyse Doucet, reminds us that

"If you don't understand religion—including the abuse of religion—it's becoming ever harder to understand our world".

Understanding its relevance is a *sine qua non* – both in a domestic and international context, whether fashioning measures to counter extremism or promoting community cohesion or, or in trying to understand global conflict and consequences like the 55 million people now living as refugees.

Two weeks ago standing on Jerusalem's Temple Mount – and a few days later in Warsaw – I reflected on both the Holocaust and, in our generation, the genocide of Christians, Yazidis and other minorities.

Like the canary in the mine, early indications of abuses of freedom or religion or belief are a harbinger of far worse that will come. Conversely, societies that make Article 18 a corner stone see their societies stabilise and prosper.

I will divide my remarks today into three parts:

1 The Obligations that Flow From Article 18.

- 2. A Snapshot of The State of the World*
- 3. Some Things We Might Do*

1 The Obligations that Flow From Article 18.

Article 18 of the 1948 Universal Declaration of Human Rights –promulgated in the aftermath of the defining horrors of the Holocaust, and which has acquired a normative character within general international law, insists that:

“Everyone has the right to freedom of thought, conscience and religion; this right includes freedom to change his religion or belief, and freedom, either alone or in community with others and in public or private, to manifest his religion or belief in teaching, practice, worship and observance.”

The declaration’s stated objective was to realise,

“a common standard of achievement for all peoples and all nations”.

Eleanor Roosevelt, the formidable chairman of the drafting committee, argued that freedom of religion was one of the four essential freedoms of mankind an “*international Magna Carta for all mankind*”.

She said

“Religious freedom... must be freedom of all religious people”, and she rejoiced in having friends from all faiths and all races.

Article 18 emerged from the infamies of the 20th century—from the Armenian genocide to the depredations of Stalin’s gulags and Hitler’s concentration camps; from the pestilential nature of persecution, demonisation, scapegoating and hateful prejudice; and, notwithstanding violence associated with religion, it emerged from ideology, nation and race.

The four great murderers of the 20th century—Mao, Stalin, Hitler and Pol Pot—were united by their hatred of religious faith. It was the bloodiest century in human history with the loss of 100 million lives.

When, in 1948, the 30 articles of the UDHR were adopted by the UN General Assembly, the eight abstentions included the Soviet Union and Saudi Arabia.

Although Saudi would argue that there was a conflict with Sharia Law countries like Pakistan believed that there was compatibility and, in 1947, Muhammad Ali Jinnah, Pakistan’s great founding statesman, crafted a constitution which promised to uphold plurality and diversity:

Jinnah said: *“You may belong to any religion, caste or creed—that has nothing to do with the business of the State... Minorities, to whichever community they may belong, will be*

safeguarded.... They will be, in all respects, the citizens of Pakistan without any distinction of caste and creed”

Jinnah’s values were also the values of the United Nations Charter, promulgated in 1945, and which committed all States to “*promote universal respect*” for “*fundamental freedoms*” “*without distinction to race, sex, language or religion*” and for the principles enshrined in the 1948 Convention on the Prevention and Punishment of the Crime of Genocide.

The Polish Jewish lawyer, Raphael Lemkin – who had lost 49 of his relatives in the Holocaust –developed the concept of genocide based on the experience of Armenian Christians at the hands of the Ottoman Turks and the massacre of Assyrian Christians at Simele, in Iraq, in 1933.

Lemkin argued that “*international co-operation*” was needed, “*to liberate mankind from such an odious scourge*”.

Genocide – the crime above all crimes – is defined in Article 2 of the 1948 Convention and the 147 signature countries have a moral and legal duty to, “*undertake to prevent and to punish*.”

Too often, though, never again happens all over again – and it is happening now.

The House of Commons, the American Congress, the European Parliament and many other legislative bodies have all declared today’s crimes in Syria and Iraq, against Christians and Yazidis, to be genocide under the terms of the Convention.

The *Times* said the destruction of Christians “*now amounts to nothing less than genocide...while Boris Johnson said “Isis are engaged in what can only be called genocidethough for some baffling reason the Foreign Office still hesitates to use the term genocide.”*”

In Hillary Clinton’s view:

“What is happening is genocide,”

Words matter: and words like genocide, persecution, and discrimination all have legal definition, but deeds matter even more.

If there is no basis for enforcement rights become meaningless. Unless those whose rights are being infringed have access to a remedy.

However long it takes, we have a duty to bring to justice those responsible for abhorrent mass executions, sexual slavery, rape and other forms of gender-based violence, torture, mutilation and the enlistment and forced recruitment of children.

William Hague was right to described the “*gap between the commitments states have made and the reality of their actions*”.

So much for our obligations.

2. Let me provide a snapshot of the state of the world:

It is a moral outrage that whole swathes of humanity are being murdered, terrorised, victimised, intimidated, deprived of their belongings and driven from their homes, simply because of the way they worship God or practise their faith. Infringement of freedom of religion and belief morphs into persecution and, as we have seen, can morph into crimes against humanity and genocide.

The annual Pew study found that 74% of the world's population live in the countries where there are violations of Article 18.

In every country where there are violations an estimated 250 million Christians are persecuted.

Jonathan Sacks says: *“The persecution of Christians throughout much of the Middle East, sub-Saharan Africa, Asia and elsewhere is one of the crimes against humanity of our time, and I am appalled at the lack of protest it has evoked. What is happening to Christians in these places is the religious equivalent of ethnic cleansing.”*

But many others suffer too.

People like Alexander Aan, imprisoned in Indonesia for two years after saying he did not believe in God; or Raif Badawi, the Saudi Arabian atheist and blogger sentenced to 1,000 public lashes for publicly expressing his atheism.

Or Asia Bibi – condemned to death for so called blasphemy . Having spent five years in prison, her case was again adjourned last week.

One quarter of the world's countries have blasphemy laws –more than one in 10 have laws penalizing apostasy: both used to falsely accuse, intimidate, and persecute.

Whether judged by Asia Bibi's case, the Lahore massacre, or the assassination of the country's Christian Minister for Minorities, Shahbaz Bhatti – who questioned the blasphemy laws, Pakistan has wallowed in a culture of impunity.

Following a visit I made to a detention centre where escaping Pakistani Christians and Ahmadis are incarcerated, I collected evidence and launched a report cataloguing this systematic campaign.

One escapee recounted how his friend, Basil – a pastor's son – was targeted by Pakistani Islamists. Having failed to convert him Basil, his wife and child were burnt alive.

The assailants then turned their attention to his friend.

Attacked and beaten, he reported this to the police. They informed the assailants, who threatened to kill him, his wife, and little girl. They fled the country.

UK policy insists that this as *“discrimination”* not persecution –words, like genocide, that have direct implications for asylum and aid policies.

Note that none of the £1 billion of British aid, given to Pakistan over the past two years, has been specifically used to promote Article 18.

Or think of Iran – with almost 1000 executions last year -including the execution of Baha'is; or how Saeed Abedini, was imprisoned for 10 years for “*undermining national security*” by hosting Christian gatherings in his home

Violation of Article 18 has led to Chinese Catholics like Bishop Cosmas Shi Enxiang, who died last year aged 94, having to spend half his life in prison; to Chinese Protestants, since the beginning of 2016, seeing 49 of their churches defaced or destroyed, crosses removed and a pastor's wife crushed to death in the rubble as she pleaded with the authorities to desist; and to the harvesting of organs of Falun Gong practitioners.

Think, too, of countries like Sudan and Nigeria.

In Sudan, Meriam Ibrahim, – a young mother of two was charged, and sentenced to death for apostasy and to 100 lashes for adultery. Refusing to renounce her faith, and before being freed, she was forced to give birth shackled in a prison cell.

Archaic and cruel laws lead to stonings and lashings and there are pastors currently languishing in Khartoum's jails.

Meanwhile, Sudan's leaders, indicted by the International Criminal Court for genocide, continue to carry out their bombing of Darfur, South Kordofan and Blue Nile – home to many who do not share the regime's religious ideology.

In Nigeria think of the 200 schoolgirls abducted in Chibok by Boko Haram – whose jihadist ideology also seeks to stamp out difference and to eradicate diversity.

And who can ever forget the execution by ISIS of Egyptian Copts in Libya – after they refused to renounce their faith – or the burning or bombing of more than 50 of Egypt's churches in Egypt's Kristallnacht?

And then there is North Korea.

I co-chair the All Party Group and have been there four times. The United Nations Commission of Inquiry into North Korea concluded that around 200,000 people are incarcerated. Along with executions and torture “*there is an almost complete denial of the right to freedom of thought, conscience and religion*” and that “*Severe punishments are inflicted on people caught practising Christianity*”.

One escapee, Hae Woo, a Christian woman gave graphic evidence in Parliament of her time inside a camp -where torture and beatings are routine, and where prisoners were so hungry they were reduced to eating rats, snakes, or even searching for grains in cow dung. She said that in such places “*the dignity of human life counted for nothing.*”

This Baedekers Guide of discrimination and persecution is by no means comprehensive. But it underlines the scale and the urgency of the task.

3. *Some Things We Might Do*

Article 18 is a foundational human right—many would say the foundational right. While there should be no hierarchy of rights, and all rights are interdependent, without the freedom to choose, practise, share without coercion and change your beliefs, what freedom is there?

At every opportunity, we must promulgate freedom of religion or belief. When we in the UK say we don't need a special envoy to promote this because “*every ambassador will do so*” we need some way of benchmarking the effectiveness of their efforts.

And when the Government say this is “*one of the Government's key human rights priorities*”, we need to provide resources which are commensurate with the scale of the challenge – certainly more than one full time FCO desk officer. Compare the £34 billion spent on military operations since the Cold War with the paltry resources deployed in promoting Article 18.

We also need a consistent, coherent international strategy.

It is inconsistent to denounce some countries while appeasing others, complicit in jihaddism, through financial support or the sale of arms.

For example, since the present conflict began in Yemen, we have sold £3.3 billion of arms to Saudi Arabia. We are perceived as hypocrites when business interests determine how offended we are by egregious human rights violations.

And we can be much more proactive in galvanising an international strategy.

Nelson Mandela once said that *the Commonwealth makes the world safe for diversity*. We need to use it more.

Kofi Anan called the BBC World Service “*Britain's greatest gift to the world*” and it now reaches some 265 million people. In deploying smart power what better vehicle is there?

And social media: ruthlessly and grotesquely used by ISIS.

The next generation are being reached via the internet and smartphones – but the religious and secular communities are failing to counter this with common perspectives, common ethical ideals of and underlining how we can learn to live together.

We urgently need a persuasive new narrative capable of forestalling the unceasing incitements to hatred which pour forth from the internet, capturing unformed minds, and manifesting themselves in hate crimes, discrimination, persecution and worse.

As General Booth, the founder of the Salvation Army observed, the devil needn't have all the good tunes. The Facebook for the Bible page has 4.5 million followers while the God Wants You To Know app has 2 million active users each month.

Note also that there are 44 countries world wide that censor the internet – and the five worst offenders when measured against the criterion of “an open and free” internet are Saudi Arabia, China, Vietnam, Yemen and Qatar – while North Korea completely bans the internet. Look at the direct correlation with the curtailment of freedom of religion or belief.

If we are to successfully combat this, Jews, Christians, Muslims and others must no longer see one another as an existential threat. The media and scholars must help with this task.

People of faith and of no faith must understand and enter in to one another's stories.

Jonathan Sacks reminds us how the displacement narratives of Isaac and Ismael, Jacob and Esau, Leah and Rachel, can all be used to promote, mutual respect, coexistence and reconciliation. As Lord Sacks says: “*The great faiths provide meaning and purpose for their adherents. The question is: can they make space for those who are not its adherents, who sing a different song, hear a different music, tell a different story?*”

Those societies that make space for those who sing a different song see many blessings.

We should better emphasise – as Dr. Brian Grin has done – the tangible benefits that accrue to a society that protects its minorities, encourages diversity and promotes freedom of religion or belief. In 1965, *Dignitatis Humanae*, the Second Vatican Council's proclamation on religious freedom, correctly observed that a society which promotes religious freedom will be enlivened and enriched and one that does not will decay

Perhaps we also need a new Convention on Religious Freedom to sit alongside the Convention on Genocide – but if we promote such Conventions let's dedicate ourselves to upholding and enforcing them too – and with universal application – making sure that words like genocide, persecution and discrimination are matched by deeds and are reflected in the way we do business with; sell arms to; or provide aid programmes to those who violate Article 18.

The urgency of the life and death task facing this conference was starkly underlined by the execution of the 84-year-old French priest Fr. Jacques Hamel and by the murder of the Glasgow shopkeeper, Asad Shah, who often reached out to Christian neighbours and customers. Tanveer Ahmed, allegedly drove up from Bradford to kill Mr. Shah because he said he was disrespectful of Islam. Mr. Shah was an Ahmadi who, in Pakistan, are denied citizenship unless they renounce their description of themselves as Muslims – but this murder

took place in the UK. So never suggest that these issues are about far away places that are no concern of ours.

In examining the obligations that flow from Article 18; in providing a snapshot of the state of the world and in suggesting some things we might do, I have tried to answer the question posed to us this morning, why is freedom of religion and belief relevant?

It is because, as Lyce Ducet pithily remarked: *If you don't understand religion —including the abuse of religion — you won't understand what is happening in our world.*