

Mervyn Thomas



Mervyn Thomas has been Chief Executive of Christian Solidarity Worldwide (CSW) since 1999. CSW is an international organisation working for religious freedom for all, through advocacy and human rights, in the pursuit of justice. Together with British MP, the late David Atkinson, he founded the organisation in 1979, and chaired the Board between 1983 and 1999. As part of his work, Mervyn travels widely to countries where Christians and other religious minorities suffer persecution because of their faith. He speaks both in the UK and internationally on behalf of persecuted minorities and seeks to raise awareness of the issues to as wide an audience as possible. Mervyn is a member of the World Assemblies of God Religious Liberty Commission, and currently chairs the Religious Liberty Partnership (RLP) which is an international network of Christian organisations focused on religious freedom. He was also a member of the Foreign and Commonwealth Office Advisory Group on Freedom of Religion or Belief, whilst it was in existence.

NGO's in Partnership with International Parliamentarians

Mervyn Thomas 19 October 2016

As we've already heard today, the fundamental human right to Freedom of Religion or Belief (FoRB), embedded in Article 18 of the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights is one that at first can appear daunting and difficult to raise. Professor Heiner Bielefeldt, UN Special Rapporteur on FoRB has said that "*it is the most challenging of all human rights, it is the spice in the soup of human rights.*" However, although daunting it is extremely important to intensify our joint efforts to promote it.

The latest information from the Pew Research Centre stated that in 2014, 74% or roughly $\frac{3}{4}$ of the world's population, live in countries with either high or very high restrictions on religious freedom. That means that over 5.1 billion people in this world are not able to fully

recognise their inalienable human right to practice or change the religion or belief system of their choice.

Furthermore, FoRB is part and parcel of peace and stability; a cornerstone of democratic societies, and it can certainly provide an important antidote to rising violent extremism. High-levels of discrimination based on religion or belief and FoRB restrictions can undermine peaceful development and in fact increase the grounds for the rise of extremism.

It is clear that some of the most significant foreign affairs challenges the international community are currently grappling with, involve violent extremism, and many of the challenges are deeply rooted in violations of the right to freedom of religion or belief.

According to a US State Department report, in 2014, nearly 33 000 people were killed in attacks worldwide, which is nearly twice as many as in 2013. Since 2000 there have been over 61,000 terrorist attacks, killing more than 140,000 people.

Unfortunately, religious extremism has become one of the drivers of these attacks and many conflicts find their roots in, or are exacerbated by, religious differences. Whether it be Boko Haram in Nigeria, Al Shaabab in Kenya, Daesh across the Middle East or extremist Hindu nationalists in India, part of the antidote to this problem of extremism is religious freedom.

Human rights are never easily won and what is needed is strategic and coordinated actions from various stakeholders. I am convinced **this conference** has an important role to play in helping us all to increase our understanding of the link between sustainable security, Countering Violent Extremism and human rights, including FoRB, and will empower us all to take action to promote FoRB and ensure its integration in comprehensive and “whole of society” CVE programmes.

In promotion of FoRB, all stakeholders, including parliamentarians have a crucial role to play. Where freedom of religion or belief is threatened, it is crucial that Parliamentarians across the world are engaged and informed as much as possible about FoRB and its importance in order to tackle the conflict, instability and often appalling human situations in countries where this fundamental human right continues to be violated. To this end my organisation, CSW recently produced a FoRB Toolkit for Parliamentarians, both to make them aware of the problems and to resource them for engagement.

Sadly, and particularly in Western Europe, there is a good deal of religious illiteracy, and therefore we need religious literacy training Parliamentarians in order for them to even understand why these issues are important to most people in the world. Until they have

some understanding of religion and how it impacts every facet of people's lives, we cannot expect them to see the need to engage.

Parliamentarians in all countries have numerous prominent platforms. In the UK, MPs and Peers can raise the profile of FoRB through parliamentary questions, formal letters to the Minister, engagement in Parliamentary debates, and in parliamentary committees such as the Foreign Affairs Select Committee. And the more these issues are raised the more the Government is held to account for their record on FoRB.

Also in the UK we have very active FORB APPG, which is an excellent and unique example of Parliamentarians across political parties working together with NGO Stakeholders to raise awareness of FORB issues.

In last few years we have had more debates and questions in parliament on the issue of RF than ever before.

Besides promoting FoRB in their respective legislative chambers, parliamentarians can also highlight the issue through the media. In the UK, we know that if an issue is debated in Parliament, it is guaranteed at least live coverage on the BBC TV and of course may also be followed up with other broadcasters, and in the print media. MP's speaking out gives hope

Furthermore parliamentarians can also mobilise public opinion through education and promoting FoRB campaigns – such as those undertaken by Christian Solidarity Worldwide and other NGOs.

As we have already heard with the IPPFORB there is now also an international forum for parliamentarians to work together to promote FoRB. Following successful meetings in New York last year, a further consultation took place in Berlin last month (addressed by Chancellor Merkel), which provided a great opportunity for around 100 MPs from 60 countries to not only showcase FoRB but to take action by writing letters of protest to the governments of Vietnam, Sudan, Pakistan, Burma and Eritrea. This global movement of parliamentarians committed to promotion of FoRB can inspire and encourage fellow parliamentarians from even more countries to promote FoRB and thus, help to “mainstream” FoRB across parliaments.

As NGOs we have a significant role in raising awareness of FoRB. Part of our bread and butter work is to spell out firstly what FoRB is and then explain its importance. We also seek to draw attention to the intersection of FoRB and other human rights, such as Freedom of Expression and Freedom of Assembly. Human Rights are indivisible, interdependent and mutually reinforcing which means that the right to FoRB is closely connected with those and other human rights.

We find that where freedom of religion or belief is denied, other human rights violations are also likely to occur both against individuals and communities. FoRB therefore has value not only as a fundamental human right per se, but also as a prerequisite for the realisation of many other human rights.

Speaking as the Chief Executive of a human rights NGO with nearly 40 years advocacy experience, it is clear to me that we most definitely need Parliamentarians. We need them to use their significant platform to boost awareness of FoRB's importance, and to ensure that governments use all relevant foreign policy and human rights platforms. These range from the various international UN processes such as the Human Rights Council, General Assembly and Universal Periodic Review to the more regional platforms such as Commonwealth CHOGMS or EU, as well as to domestic human rights platforms.

We need parliamentarians to champion examples showing how societies have benefitted and prospered from protecting and promoting FoRB – we are talking about a multifaceted right including not only the right to choose and change religion or belief but also the right to express or manifest beliefs alone or in community with others, in public or in private.

We also need parliamentarians to outline the serious global consequences if FoRB is not promoted and protected.

This leads me to a second important point on awareness raising; while we as NGOs need Parliamentarians to promote FoRB, Parliamentarians in turn need NGOs in order to be able to do this most effectively. CSW works in over 25 different countries around the world, and although Christian, we advocate for the rights of those from all faiths and none.

The FoRB and human rights conditions in each of these countries are often intricate and complex. Thus, we travel to every country in order to conduct primary research and to meet local partners on the ground. They are courageous women and men from all faiths and none, they are religious leaders, community workers, human rights defenders, lawyers and many others, who over the years have constantly provided accurate first-hand accounts of FoRB violations in their home countries. Their reports of attacks against various religious communities, are both accurate and authentic, as in many cases they were actually present and indeed often suffered themselves. Without these partners – some of whom are here today – we could not continue our work and I would like to pay my highest tribute to them.

As we work closely with multiple partners across the world, I know that we are not alone in the NGO community in exercising extreme diligence about the sources we use for conducting secondary research. As an organisation, we will not publish information on an

issue unless we know that information has been corroborated by at least two or three verifiable sources. Conducting advocacy, driven by high-quality research is methodical and time consuming work, something Parliamentarians understandably have almost no time to undertake themselves. It is therefore critical that in the pursuit of promoting and protecting FoRB around the world, Parliamentarians and civil society build long and trusted relationships, where informed, in-depth and objective analysis from NGOs can be translated into Parliamentarians raising awareness that ultimately moves their respective Governments to safeguard and increase realization of this vital human right across the globe.

As advocacy NGO's we have to be creative in the way we do our work. For example, besides working closely with parliamentarians in the UK and in the European Parliament, we have engaged with Parliamentarians in the South American countries of Brazil, Uruguay and Mexico and have noticed that they can have significant impact in raising concerns over issues in countries such as Iran.

For those here today who are representing the UK overseas, in our Embassies and High Commissions on the ground, do please be encouraged to meet, exchange information and engage with the local NGOs and civil society. They are so often the same partners that NGOs in the UK will work with and are a huge mine of informed

insight and information that I would encourage you to partner with yourselves and encourage Parliamentarians to do the same.

Something we are beginning to see and which I would encourage, is the establishment of regional groups and networks working together promoting FoRB.

Whilst promoting FoRB, we often refer governments not only to the international human rights standards they are party to, but also to their national and regional legal obligations. International human rights instruments promoting FoRB such as the Universal Declaration of Human Rights and the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights enjoy nearly universal support and have a fundamental role in ensuring universal agreement on this right. However, regional human rights treaties can also be effective in capturing similar cultural traditions and political histories that large multinational treaties might struggle to cover. This is why different UN human rights bodies have encouraged the development of regional human rights mechanisms as well. The same focus on regional networks and platforms should also be encouraged amongst Parliamentarians. Networks of Parliamentarians will be very well placed to see the trends in FoRB across their respective regions, noticing patterns and analysing them within the relevant cultural contexts. They can then develop long-term regional strategies that address problems such as violent extremism by tackling the symptoms and root causes using FoRB in a way that

acknowledges nuances and contexts which might be difficult for the outside international community to ascertain.

Now I'm not an academic or theologian or a debater but I am a campaigner – I believe in action! And the action element is of critical importance. Amassing groups of Parliamentarians, whether regional or international, to talk about the problems of violent extremism and freedom of religion or belief, is not an end in itself. The very root of the word Parliament, means to talk, and it doesn't take the wildest imagination to believe that talking might not necessarily get a lot done! Conferences good but not enough

However, while in depth discussion and debate should be encouraged in order to formulate comprehensive policy and advocacy for FoRB, there also must be action for protecting and promoting FoRB on the ground. Otherwise not only are we failing the communities who suffer as a result of human rights violations but we are potentially creating future problems such as violent religious extremism that stems from a suppression and restriction of FoRB.

So in conclusion, I hope from what I've touched on in these remarks and from everything else that has been said at this conference, the need to raise awareness and the imperative to act to realise freedom of religion or belief for those of all faiths and

none is crystal clear. Failure to do this harbours some of the greatest conditions for violent extremism to exist and prosper.

I encourage Parliamentarians to use the significant public platforms they have in order to highlight and promote the importance of FoRB as well as raise awareness of the serious consequences which may ensue when it is not realised. In order to do this properly however, it is crucial they use the informed body of work produced by reputable and experienced NGOs in civil society.

Parliamentarians can add an authenticity to their voices by travelling with NGO's to countries where religious freedom violations take place, in order to see firsthand the horrors which are often taking place. In 1985 I took Congressmen Frank Wolf and Chris Smith to Romania where Christians and Christianity were under great threat at the time. Apart from the very specific result of seeing an Orthodox Priest who had been in prison for 21 years set free and allowed to emigrate to the US, the trip inspired both men to dedicate their lives to this cause. Congressman Frank Wolf went on to author the 1998 IRFA which resulted in the formation of both USCIRF and the State Department office of IRF. Congressman Chris Smith has also spent the last 30 years championing religious freedom and human rights on various caucuses and House Committees.

So while we need the voice and influence of Parliamentarians, in turn their work regularly needs our expertise and specialist knowledge. A strong body of Parliamentarians whose work is enriched and informed by collaborative relationships with reputable NGOs, will be a hugely powerful and potent force for combating violent extremism through FoRB.

It's a force that I am proud to be a part of, and I very much look forward to seeing it grow in both numbers and potency. We must never forget that although we play different roles we are all on the same team.

Word of caution – we're in it for the long haul – we're not in it for the sound bite!