

International Freedom of Religion or Belief Day

Thursday 27th October 2016, 12:30pm – 2:30pm

Committee Room 3A, House of Lords

Remarks by Fabio Petito

Thanks Stephen Timms. Let me start by thanking the APPG and in particular their chairs the Honourable Jim Shannon and Baroness Berridge for hosting this important new initiative. In a world in which FoRB is in crisis in many parts of the world, it is an absolute responsibility for institutions like this one to keep public and policy awareness alive. And what we are learning as academics working in this field, is that this is not only a moral imperative but also a political one.

I have been asked to present a very short overview of the state of the art of FoRB from an academic perspective – this is an impossible task in the 5 minutes that I now have – so I will focus on one crucial academic debate in the light of my experience running a FoRB transatlantic policy dialogue project. This project focused on how to promote and protect FoRB Internationally and involved policy makers, academics and other stakeholders. The project culminated in a seminar hosted by the APPG on 7 September 2016 to discuss the final Policy Briefing produced with recommendations on how to strengthen transatlantic cooperation on FoRB promotion. Today we are making also available a summary report of this House of Lord seminar attended by many key Western policy makers and experts. You are very welcome to take a copy.

Seen from an academic perspective, we live in a contradictory time: while on the one hand there are clear signs of a deterioration of the global environment for FoRB, with religious persecutions and discriminations rising all over the world. On the other, if we look at the scholarly discussion in the West there has never been so little intellectual consensus on FoRB and so much intellectual controversy on this human right: the titles of a number of recently published books show that: *The Impossibility of Religious Freedom*, *The Rise and Decline of American Religious Freedom*, *Beyond religious Freedom*. Once a self-evident truth, religious freedom is now subject to growing dissensus and profound deconstructionist suspicion.

Why? The new critics of religious freedom essentially argue that religious freedom is a Western Protestant invention. They argue that the FoRB promotion strategy is a form of cultural imperialism politically driven by different geopolitical interests (including classical religious ones). While there are some well-taken points in this perspective I think that overall this thesis can be academically challenged. This is because it is based on the typical exaggerating trends of post-modern deconstruction and relativism. It's a very predictable academic story of a strange 'sanctification' of difference and endlessly repetitive mantra of the power/knowledge nexus.

But is this of any relevance for the real world? Yes, because some of the most enduring violations of FoRB today are increasingly driven by religiously-shaped political ideologies as part of what some scholars have called a worldwide search for cultural authenticity or a 'cultural revolt' against the West: think of the case of political Islam, Hindu or Buddhist Nationalism (and perhaps Orthodox Nationalism) and even different Asian values ideologies supporting, like in China, the

curtailment of spaces of individual freedoms in the name of the priority of collective responsibility and enhancing of social harmony.

In the light of this observation, then, and as a way of concluding my short reflection from an academic perspective:

What is the needed academic research agenda that will in the medium/longer term create the condition for a different – more effective – policy impact in this field?

When minorities are faced with brutal choices: give up your religion, or die – or leave your country; there is an almost universal recognition that such religious coercion is an unacceptable violation of a fundamental universal human right. I have now doubts that all the great worldwide religious and cultural traditions of the world have the resources to reach a consensus on that. But more research needs to be done to flesh out more clearly this cross-cultural consensus on core ethical principle of FoRB. For example Daesh is not about a particular civilization it is barbarism.

However, what the new critics have rightly alerted us about is the significance of the different legal and institutional interpretations of FoRB as a legally protected right. This is visible within and in particular beyond the transatlantic community (France, UK, US, Italy).

That's why we have provocatively argued in our Policy Brief that recognising the different legal and institutional interpretations of FoRB within the West may be an asset in promoting FoRB beyond the West. Research needs to take the historical, legal and religious contexts of FoRB arrangements more seriously. Particularly in a context where religious leader and communities are becoming more engaged in different aspect of politics worldwide. It is time to for a more nuanced strategic engagement to develop a realistic way forward. This will not only defend the universality of FORB as a human right but at the same time undercut the growing accusation of Western cultural imperialism.