

The Importance of FREEDOM OF RELIGION OR BELIEF



Freedom of religion or belief is an issue of growing global importance. Despite the inclusion of religious freedom as an integral part of the *Universal Declaration of Human Rights* (UDHR) and the *International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights*, persecution and violence against individuals on the basis of their religion or belief persists in many countries. These violations of religious freedom can and do touch religious communities from all of the world's major faith traditions, including Muslims, Christians, Buddhists, Hindus, Jews and those who profess no particular faith.

Freedom of religion or belief can be violated through government restrictions that deny religious freedom to one or more faith communities, or through social hostilities that target one or more religious communities in a society. In some countries where religious freedom is not respected, government restrictions exist alongside social hostilities. Recent studies have shown that religious intolerance and discrimination are rising around the world, with one third of countries registering “high” or “very high” restrictions on freedom of religion and/or social hostilities involving religion. As some of these countries are also very populous, nearly 77 percent of the world's population lives in countries with high government restrictions on freedom of religion and/or social hostilities committed by individuals and groups involving religion, up from 76 percent in 2012 and 68 percent in 2007¹.

Canada's Office of RELIGIOUS FREEDOM

The promotion and protection of human rights, including freedom of religion or belief, is an integral part of Canada's constructive leadership in the world. In response to growing religious persecution around the world, the Government of Canada in February 2013 established the Office of Religious Freedom within Global Affairs Canada. The Office is led by Canada's first Ambassador for Religious Freedom, Dr. Andrew Bennett. Its activities are focused on advocacy, analysis, policy development and programming related to protecting and advocating on behalf of religious communities under threat, no matter which faith they profess. The Office opposes religious hatred and intolerance and promotes peaceful pluralism and tolerance abroad.

Canada's approach to freedom of religion or belief is integrated into broader efforts to promote human rights, accountable governance, and respect for diversity – building on Canada's past and current diplomatic efforts in this regard. The Office does not have a domestic mandate, but draws upon the Canadian experience of pluralism that is grounded in our multicultural and multifaith society.

Advocacy and Outreach

As part of its efforts to advance freedom of religion or belief internationally, the Office has engaged in consultations with domestic religious and belief communities and like-minded partners abroad. Ambassador Bennett has released statements drawing attention to violations of religious freedom internationally; delivered speeches at international and domestic events; and, travelled abroad to engage with leaders of belief and non-belief communities, government officials and, civil society representatives.



Policy Development and Leadership

The Office supports the conduct of Canada's bilateral relations in countries where religious freedom is an ongoing concern. With high levels of global religiosity—approximately 84 percent of the world's population in 2010 was affiliated with a religious tradition²—the Office provides policy support in the area of religion and foreign policy.

Canada has emerged as a global leader in promoting freedom of religion or belief as a human right, which has an important role to play in the development of inclusive societies. To enhance and deepen international coordination on religious freedom, Canada established in June 2015 the International Contact Group on Freedom of Religion or Belief. The Contact Group brings together foreign ministries from more than 20 countries in a diverse and innovative multilateral effort to advance religious freedom.

The RELIGIOUS FREEDOM Fund

The Religious Freedom Fund is the principal vehicle through which the Office of Religious Freedom delivers programming in support of its mandate to promote and defend freedom of religion or belief in the world. The fund, which has an annual budget of \$4.25 million, supports projects outside Canada, through a variety of civil society and international organizations. These international projects include awareness-raising activities that provide education on religious freedom, research on religious freedom to support government engagement in the area of tolerance and pluralism, and legal support or specialized services aimed at supporting religious freedom and respect for pluralism on behalf of persecuted individuals and groups.

Following are some examples of projects funded through the Religious Freedom Fund:

- **Iraq:** Through a \$250,000 project with Minority Rights Group International, the Fund is helping to strengthen the ability of local Iraqi civil society organizations to monitor and report on religious persecution. Additionally, a \$500,000 project with Mennonite Central Committee will increase inter-religious dialogue and access to resources that promote religious cooperation at the institutional level in Iraq, Syria and Lebanon.
- **Nigeria:** The Fund supported a two-year, \$730,000 project to promote interfaith dialogue and conflict mediation in Plateau State, where conflict between different communities had left thousands dead in recent years. The project developed a road map to a peaceful resolution, established local mediation capacity, created dialogue opportunities between community and religious leaders, and improved the federal government's capacity to support conflict management and resolution. The project concluded in January 2015.
- **Ukraine:** The Fund supports two projects valued collectively at over \$1 million with the Organization for Security and Co-operation in Europe and the Catholic Near East Welfare Association that aim to foster a political culture in Ukraine conducive to democratization, religious freedom and pluralism. In particular, the projects seek to improve the documentation of religious persecution in Ukraine, facilitate interfaith dialogue among Ukrainian youth, and train Ukrainian security forces on reporting and reacting to hate crimes involving religion.

Key Resources and Contact Information

- Global Affairs Canada:
www.international.gc.ca/international/index.aspx?lang=eng
- Canada's Office of Religious Freedom:
www.international.gc.ca/religious_freedom-liberte_de_religion/index.aspx?lang=eng
- The Religious Freedom Fund:
www.international.gc.ca/religious_freedom-liberte_de_religion/fund_fond.aspx
- External Advisory Committee to the Office of Religious Freedom:
www.international.gc.ca/religious_freedom-liberte_de_religion/eac-cce.aspx?lang=eng
- To contact the Office of Religious Freedom:
www.international.gc.ca/departement-ministere/form_contact-formulaire_contacter.aspx?lang=eng

The Ambassador for RELIGIOUS FREEDOM



Dr. Andrew P. W. Bennett was appointed Canada's first Ambassador for Religious Freedom on February 19, 2013. Ambassador Bennett heads the Office of Religious Freedom and is based in Ottawa.

Ambassador Bennett is a public servant and academic with an extensive educational background in history, political science and theology. He received a Ph.D. in Political Science from the University of Edinburgh in 2002, and is in the process of completing a degree in theology in Eastern Christian Studies at the Metropolitan Andrey Sheptytsky Institute of Eastern Christian Studies at Saint Paul University in Ottawa.

Prior to his appointment as Ambassador, Dr. Bennett worked for the Privy Council Office, Export Development Canada and Natural Resources Canada in a wide variety of analytical, research and corporate roles. Since March 2014, he has also served as Canada's Head of Delegation to the International Holocaust Remembrance Alliance. Ambassador Bennett is also a religious leader in his capacity as subdeacon and cantor with Holy Cross Eastern Catholic Chaplaincy and St. John the Baptist Ukrainian Catholic Shrine, both in Ottawa.

¹ Latest Trends in Religious Restrictions and Hostilities, Pew Research Center, February 26, 2015.

² The Global Religious Landscape, Pew Research Center Forum on Religion & Public Life, December 18, 2012.