

CONFERENCE REPORT
ICLRS: 2021 RELIGIOUS FREEDOM ANNUAL REVIEW
JUNE 15-16, 2021

Introduction:

The ICLRS Religious Freedom Annual Review discussed the importance of advocating for religious freedom, and the need for unity rather than polarization. This report provides a brief summary of the discussion organized by speakers and panelists, throughout the two-day conference.

Keynotes: 2021 Religious Freedom Annual Review

Peter Wehner (Hannah author, Angela editor)

According to Peter Wehner, religion can be a tool for overcoming divides, an agent for repair and reconciliation. Right now the basic cohesion of the US is in danger, as people across party lines hold worse views of each other. Wehner warns that much of the current actions of Christians are not helping the situation. They are not in line with what Christ taught, and they are damaging to both the public square and the face of religion. Accordingly, too many people see religion as a force for division, instead of healing.

However, Wehner still suggests the Christian faith can act to strengthen democracy, and outlines a few ways how. We must remember that as we are made in the image of God, so are others, including those we disagree with. We must also model listening well--listening to learn, not just to respond--and thus help others feel heard. Additionally, we must know how to debate and disagree well. As our religion teaches, we should also model humility and epistemic modesty (not self-abasement but self-forgetting). We must also remember that forgiveness--the offer of grace--can result in healing but also in political change. Instead of withdrawing from politics, we can find a better way to peacefully engage with it. Wehner advised us to hold those of your party to the same standards which you hold those of the other party.

Elder Dale G. Renlund and Ruth Lybbert Renlund- (Sara author, Thomas editor)

Elder Dale G. Renlund of the Quorum of the Twelve Apostles, and Sister Renlund presented on the history of Prophet Joseph Smith and the Latter-Day Saints' struggle to fight for religious freedom. At the time Joseph Smith created the church, no law protected the free exercise of religion, and his petition for it was unsuccessful. After which, Joseph Smith decided to run for president in hopes of establishing religious freedom for all. His campaign had four major points: a reform of the U.S. Constitution to protect religious freedom; economic reform; prison reform; and the abolition of slavery.

His advocacy for religious freedom was founded upon the notion of human dignity, which is also why his campaign included changes to the prison system and the abolish slavery. The Latter-Day Saints' gospel principles teach that all people are God's children, and Joseph Smith understood the need to recognize dignity and equality for all. However, Joseph Smith was murdered for his advocacy of religious freedom and universal freedom of all peoples. His view on the absence of religious freedom as a sign of undemocratic governments is still being debated and discussed today and is important to the advancement of religious freedom globally.

Religious Identity and Dignity in America:

Asma Uddin- (Angela author, Sara editor)

According to a Gallup poll, religion is slowly crumbling in the United States. Professional analysts say the problem was because religion has become too tightly associated with political ideologies. Asma Uddin talked about the implications of this decline and how to fix this problem. She used the tense interaction between Muslims and Evangelicals as a practical example in the religious and political division. Uddin discussed the function of group identity, the complexities of intergroup bias, the blending of secular and ideological or religious affiliations, and the impact of vulnerability, especially as it relates to rapid changes in our surroundings.

L. Whitney Clayton- (Thomas author, Taylor editor)

Elder Clayton opened his discussion on religious freedom by stating that “dignity is not earned, it is innate.” Clayton then asked, “Why do people go through this hardship and even martyrdom, for a belief?” His response, it is much more than a hobby, it is the “why and purpose to our lives.” He stated that the COVID-19 pandemic specifically challenged religious freedoms when government leaders shut down churches and places of faith. Elder Clayton’s definition of religious freedom is a human right, and it rests on the foundation of human dignity. He stated, “Human dignity is recognition that there is a divine inextinguishable spark in everyone, everywhere. Cultural freedoms are being pushed by the media while religion is being snuffed out.” In closing he shared that we need to stand together to ensure that human dignity is recognized for everyone everywhere and to project religious identity and religious freedom.

Brett G. Scharffs - (Oliva author, Hannah editor)

In Brett G.Scharff’s presentation, he discussed human dignity, particularly from a Latter-day Saint perspective. He began by discussing the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, explaining how it came from a concept of human dignity. He gave the insight that the declaration (and others like it) are not about having the right argument, but about promoting values. He mentioned that Human Dignity is the foundation of Human rights.

Civil Religion, Nationalism, and Patriotism:

Barbara A. McGraw- (Hannah author, Thomas editor)

Barbara McGraw claims that to successfully balance religion and government today, we must acknowledge that Christianity is relevant to US history, but that it was not particularly designed for Christians. She says that right now Christianity and patriotism are joining in an unhealthy way. To McGraw, there should be more religion in the public square to stay closer to healthy pluralism, but that it must come from all religions. The authoritarian nature of Christian Nationalism is not in line with our founding, but liberal Christianity is. In answering the question of how religion can help heal these problems, McGraw suggests that the Biblical teachings about caring for the needy can unite the religious and nonreligious.

Bob Roberts - (Thomas author, Sara editor)

Bob Roberts was asked the question, “What role is christian nationalism playing or not playing in evangelical communities?” To which he explained three concepts. First, confusion in the evangelical

world is causing internal issues amongst clergy. Second was a historical confusion that spurs from questions like “What is the church’s past? Or history?” which is leading to an integration of church and state. Lastly, he stated that there is a disruption due to political tensions and integrations in the US. The global church campaigns are being affected, and pastors don’t know how to talk about it. In a whole, the agenda of the evangelical church isn't traveling down the church chain fast enough, and the question is left, “How do we move forward?”

Andrew L. Whitehead - (Hannah author, Taylor editor)

Before the panel discussion began, Andrew Whitehead gave some background information on Christian Nationalism and how it can help us understand the current political polarization in the US. He defined Christian Nationalism as “a cultural framework (narratives, traditions, value systems) that idealizes and advocates for a fusion of Christianity with American life.” Unlike patriotism, Christian Nationalism demands tribal loyalism, has a history of violence, and has a strong in-group sense. It has affected much of today’s world, from COVID-19 vaccine policies to racial justice issues. Americans who embrace Christian Nationalism are more likely to limit their media intake to only one side. It’s a threat to a pluralistic democratic society.

In their work, Whitehead and his colleagues have sought to measure the amount of Christian Nationalism in the US through value surveys and creating four groups--rejectors, resisters, accommodators, and ambassadors. Statistically, religious affiliation affects how likely someone is to fall into a certain group. However, although someone who is religious is more likely to be an ambassador, those who practice their religion more are more likely to argue that instead, a difference in opinion is okay. Interestingly, Christian nationalism is linked to conspiratorial thinking. Yet, the more religion is practiced, the less likely conspiracy theories will be believed.

Discussion of the talk, “Defending Our Divinely Inspired Constitution” given by President Dallin H. Oaks, First Counselor in the First Presidency, April 2021:

Christine M. Durham- (Oliva author, Angela editor)

Christine Durham said that the timing of the talk was significant especially with what is happening right now. She discussed issues of constitutional literacy and the moral agency that are embedded in the constitution. She said that Oaks encouraged members of the church to revere and become knowledgeable about the constitutional principles. Moreover, she noted that we should not make our allegiance to parties and partisan activities. She also noted that President Oaks referenced the evolving nature of the Constitution. Furthermore, the constitution is not something that was written merely to govern the people in the 18th century, but it is a document that people must live and uphold now.

Thomas B. Griffith - (Taylor author, Thomas editor)

In response to the talk by Dallin H. Oaks “Defending Our Divinely Inspired Constitution”, Thomas B. Griffith begins by stating that this talk teaches that American citizen’s loyalty should apply to the Constitution rather than any political party or figure. Griffiths emphasizes that independent thinking is important to voting in elections and that it is important to accept that our political views may be wrong at times and to approach politics with humility.

Griffiths explains that the purpose of the talk and how we can apply it in our lives is through learning how to compromise in order to create societal unity. When the Constitution was created in 1776, the basis for it was compromise to preserve the unity of the newly founded United States. The public interest was more important than personal interests, and this mindset is vital to the country even today. Learning and compromising for the sake of unity will help to uphold our divinely inspired Constitution and protect our nation from division. The analysis of Elder Oaks's talk by Griffiths shows that the Constitution is an important and inspired document that should unite the United States and protect from political party polarization.

Paul E. Kerry - (Angela author, Hannah editor)

Paul Kerry invited the audience to reflect on the aspects of the US Constitution that President Oaks highlighted in his general conference talk. In answering the questions of how the talk applies to those outside of the US, Kerry said that it is full of applicable principles. The US Constitution influenced those of many other countries, so the message can directly apply to some other countries. Kerry illustrated this through the story of how President Oaks discussed the theme of his talk during a specific visit to the UK, as well. He also stressed the importance of citizens improving their overall constitutional literacy. One other interesting message Kerry gave about the relationship between religion and government was that part of keeping governments healthy includes obeying the unenforceable, which is something religion helps us to do.

Supreme Court Roundup:

David H. Moore - (Hannah author, Thomas editor)

Professor David Moore is the Associate Director of the International Center for Law and Religion Studies. He gave the audience an overview of cases that have occurred in the past year involving religious freedom and COVID-19. They were instances where people felt that free religious worship was unfairly encroached upon by particular COVID-19 policies. Besides the first two cases, all were given injunctive relief while the courts then worked to make their decision. One thing the court looked at was if the law in question was generally constitutional, even if it placed a small burden on religious freedom. It also looked at if secular organizations were currently being given more favorable treatment, like if secular gatherings had fewer restrictions than religious ones. One question people are now asking is if the court has adopted a “more favored nation” approach to issues of free exercise (if a secular activity is granted more favorable treatment, then a religious one automatically gets it).

Stephanie Barclay - (Angela author, Taylor editor)

Stephanie Barclay is an associate professor of law at Notre Dame Law School and an expert in the religion clauses. She discussed *Fulton v. City of Philadelphia*. Barclay stated that this case could be one of the most significant of our time in terms of how the court will provide provisions for a pluralistic society where individuals have deep differences of opinion about critical topics, such as marital relationships and adoption, or taking agencies and the child welfare context much further. The case raises questions about the overall interpretation of the free exercise clause, not only for religious foster

care and adoption agencies. People with diverse ideas about fundamental aspects like marriage should be free to live in this nation and be a key component of a diverse nation.

Meanwhile, the government argued that because this is a government transaction, it never had to follow any financial government norms, but also the government should be allowed to mandate anything it wishes from contractors in settings that do not prompt strict scrutiny in court proceedings. The justices appear to be unconvinced of that argument, partly because this arrangement is basically a license, since institutions cannot offer foster care services without it.

Reflections:**Taylor Nikolaus**

Overall, I thought that the ICLRS Religious Freedom Annual Review was an effective way to gather information about the concept of religious freedom and connect it to our lives. Through the conference, I was most impressed by the emphasis on developing unity and eliminating the polarization of political parties. The polarization of the political parties has resulted in people being dead-set in their beliefs and refusing to see the other side, as that could be perceived as a weakness. The vicious cycle of going deeper into one side of the argument has pushed the parties farther and farther apart and generating greater hostility (Asma Uddin). By implementing religious freedom, we are accepting the different beliefs of others and creating a more peaceful and loving society. Therefore, religious freedom is essential for the establishment of peace.

Through the speakers, panel discussions, and evaluations of Supreme Court cases, a common theme of unity was identified. Religious freedom can bring individuals together, regardless of their different beliefs. Whether religious or not, it provides people with the freedom to believe what they want. The acceptance of differences can aim to unify us rather than divide us. Society can strive to eliminate polarization and join together in love and unity through the expansion of religious freedom. In the address by Dale Renlund and Ruth Lybbert Renlund, they state that the legacy of our Church is to establish democratic freedom and encourage religious freedom for minority groups. This call to action emphasizes the importance of the topic of religious freedom to individuals. Gaining a knowledge of the concept and then finding ways to take action are important for all individuals to take part in.

Thomas Nebeker

I thoroughly enjoyed the ICLRS Religious Freedom Annual Review and felt that the topics discussed were appropriate and accurate to what we are experiencing today, such as tensions between religious and political agendas, and various movements for human rights. Presentations by Asma Uddin, Elder L. Whitney Clayton, and Thomas B. Griffin stood out because they portrayed a common theme in today's society, the decline of religion. The relationship between religious freedom and human dignity was displayed through these talks and showed a prediction of what will continue if religion and its freedoms are ignored. For example, Asma Uddin put forth solutions in her book to how we can counter the loss of religion such as empathy and understanding, while Thomas B. Griffin explained the role of self governance in elections and its effects. I believe that these concepts together may help in the protection of these freedoms and rights by helping all world citizens who have power to choose

authority, try to envision another's situation or position and help change the world for the better in choosing to act and educate upon these principles.

In summary, the ICLRS did a wonderful job to educate and give simple solutions in which we may help in our communities and nations. As we strive to do this, I find it necessary that we too need to educate our friends, family, and peers about the decline in religion, and how that affects everyone's individual rights.

Angela Morales

I realized how much work is needed in upholding religious freedom. The Annual Review taught me the implications of religious liberty in our society. Due to the increasing political hyperpolarization, society has been more divided and contentious. I learned how our rights to religious freedom can serve as an avenue to unite people around the world. I also learned that there is a growing danger in associating Christianity to patriotism that does not fully bring honor and dignity to both of these concepts. We need more presence of religious pluralism in the public square. Our efforts to uphold religious freedom can bring about equal treatment and dignity for all. Furthermore, I was reminded to check my biases and always hold the same standards I have for those that may not agree with my political values.

Oliva Damanu

The ICLRS Religious Freedom Annual Review simply discussed Elder Oaks talk. The panels enlightened us with their view of the talk. My favourite analysis of the talk was by Christine Durham. She pointed out three major points of Elder Oaks talk. The three points were that Oaks encouraged members of the church to revere and become knowledgeable about the constitutional principles; we should not make our allegiance to parties and partisan activities. And that the constitution is not something that was written merely to govern the people but it is a document that people must live and uphold now.

Thomas B. Griffith summarized President Oaks' talk: "We are in a perilous moment, and [members of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints] have a special obligation to help lead the country out of it. ...we're not going to do that by doubling down on our prior political biases. [President Oaks is] asking us to act differently. ...we should seek to moderate and to unify."