

# Religious Freedom Priorities:

## A Summary of the International Religious Freedom Summit 2025

February 4-5, 2025

The organizers of the International Religious Freedom Summit (IRF) 2025, Katrina Sweat and Senator Brockbank, introduced the event as the largest religious freedom summit in the world. They emphasized that religious freedom is foundational and essential for authentic human flourishing and individual human dignity. This event's aims were to promote religious freedom for everyone, everywhere by reducing clashes, and protecting religious differences. Both Katrina and Senator Brockbank encouraged participants to remember their personal mission of advocating religious freedom and helping those imprisoned for their faith.

### **Opening Plenary: Priorities for the Next Administration**

The opening panel focused on promoting religious freedom in the early days of the second Trump administration. Prof. Brett Scharff, the director of BYU Law School ICLRS, was the moderator with panelists - Annie Wilcox Boyajian, David Beasley, and Scott Flipse. The panel stressed the importance of respecting people's faith, even when dealing with extremist groups. Respecting others' religions, even without agreeing, is essential for successful dialogue and cooperation.

The panel shared experiences of engaging with individuals from these groups by discussing common beliefs, and thus, lowering tensions which can provide solutions to current conflicts, such as how to deliver aid to refugees or improving education access to displaced children. The administration should appreciate the need to find common ground and respect different faiths.

**David Beasley**, the executive director of the World Food Program, made the point that food can be used as a weapon, or it can be used as a powerful method of bringing people together in peace. With religious persecution, you can't come against it with a hammer; instead, you must come at it from different diplomatic angles. Eventually, you'll find a path forward. One of the ways Beasley has promoted this path forward is by forming prayer groups that work together to solve problems.

**Scott Flipse**, director of policy and media relations for the Congressional-Executive Commission on China, was asked the question: If you were stuck in an elevator with Secretary of State Rubio, what would you tell him? Scott quipped that he would probably just listen to the Secretary of State. Scott pointed out that Secretary Rubio will get people into positions in the bureaus as quickly as possible who know what the political priorities are for this administration. As a man of faith, Secretary Rubio advocates for religious freedom and as he undertakes his review of these issues, he will continue the excellent religious freedom work that has been done.

**Annie Wilcox Boyajian**, co-president of Freedom House, told of her experience in Nicaragua where about 250,000 people gathered to pray and worship and the Ortega regime began to arrest these people. She pointed out that they were imprisoned for expressing their love of Jesus. She

gave an impassioned plea for governments to help people who are being unjustly imprisoned for their beliefs.

In conclusion, the panel emphasized that respecting others' religions can build trust and open paths to peace. The Trump administration was urged to promote practical, empathetic strategies that will support and promote global religious freedom.

### **Vice President J. D. Vance's Speech**

The highlight of the IRF Summit was the appearance and speech of Vice President J. D. Vance. He spoke about fostering a culture where faith can thrive allows men and women to appreciate and respect the God-given rights of their fellow citizens. Religion, while connecting us to the sacred and universal, also deepens our commitment to our neighbors and our obligations to one another. Church brings together people of different races, backgrounds, and walks of life, united in their commitment to God and their shared communities.

President Trump's first administration made significant strides in advancing religious freedom, both domestically and internationally. This included rescuing persecuted pastors, bringing relief to faith communities facing genocidal terror, and defending religious liberty while combating antisemitism. The administration also removed barriers for religious organizations to contract with the federal government, ensuring that faith did not have to be left at the door. The current administration aims to build on these achievements. The administration stands ready to act with moral clarity when religious freedom is under threat, both at home and abroad, recognizing the importance of protecting the rights of the faithful and ensuring religious liberty for all people of faith.

### **Rainn Wilson on Religious Liberty**

Rainn Wilson from the TV series, *The Office*, spoke after Vice President Vance and commented that he believed he could play J.D. Vance in a television movie. While he could not be at the summit in person, he was still thrilled to be a part of the discussion via the Internet. He is currently preparing for a new Broadway musical. Just as Broadway musicals bring people together, the IRF summit focuses on the universality of spiritual and religious beliefs, building community and fostering selflessness in service to something far greater than ourselves – whether you call it God, the Great Spirit, or another name.

Wilson highlighted the plight of the Bahá'ís in Iran, where they face severe persecution and are denied basic rights, such as marriage, burial, and education. Despite this, Bahá'ís foster "constructive resilience" or finding ways to educate themselves and build community even under oppression. He encouraged all to investigate the situation of the Bahá'ís in Iran and support their efforts. Additionally, he discussed the mental health crisis in the U.S. and applauded the efforts of university chaplains who are providing essential support and healing to young Americans. He concluded by thanking the IRF participants for their work in bringing people of all faiths together and in believing in the power of faith and community.

### **Elder Ulisses Soares on Religious Freedom and Human Dignity**

Elder Ulisses Soares, an apostle for the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, highlighted the importance of human dignity as the foundation of human rights, stating that societies thrive when they recognize, respect, and protect the inherent value of every person. Elder Soares emphasized that dignity is a universal birthright that transcends religion, race, gender, and nationality. The Universal Declaration of Human Rights underscores the importance of dignity as the foundation of freedom, justice, and peace. He urged the audience to uphold these rights universally.

Elder Soares spoke about the role of compassion in fostering religious freedom, defining it as a sympathetic consciousness of others' distress combined with a desire to alleviate it. Compassion, he explained, enables people to see themselves in one another and to recognize shared dreams, hopes, fears, and suffering. He encouraged the audience to practice compassion daily and to let it guide their efforts for greater religious freedom worldwide. Religious freedom matters because religion itself plays a crucial role in society. Prayers, meditations, and religious rituals dignify important moments in people's lives and provide a framework for meaning, belonging, and identity. Religion also fosters civic involvement and neighborly virtues

Elder Soares concluded by emphasizing that religious freedom must be rooted in principles that foster moral individuals, encourage peace, and promote service to vulnerable communities. He urged the audience to continue their efforts in preserving religious liberty, recognizing the shared responsibility for each other's well-being. He underscored that the protection of sacred rights depends on a society that prioritizes cooperation and compassion and that human dignity and rights must be respected and preserved for all people.

### **Additional Highlighted Talks**

Members of the G20 Interfaith Forum Association also participated in the IRF Summit, as IF20 was a supporting sponsor. **Professor Brett Scharffs**, director of BYU Law School's International Center for Law and Religion Studies and a member of the IF20 Board, led a discussion and spoke at the Summit. In his speech, he emphasized that promoting religious freedom fosters virtues essential for societal prosperity. He argued that while religious freedom is an inalienable human and constitutional right, it is equally important to focus on its virtues. Scharffs identified three paramount virtues: habits of the head (curiosity, open-mindedness, truth-seeking, tolerance), habits of the heart (reverence, awe, faith, hope, charity, humility, kindness, respect, love), and habits of the hand (service to the downtrodden, aiding those in need). He urged that valuing religious freedom should be ingrained in our character through these virtues.

**President W. Cole Durham, Jr.** was also on a panel advocating the forging of the next generation of FoRB champions. Pres. Durham discussed key strategies for advancing and protecting the FoRB movement as younger players are mentored to become leaders in the fight for freedom for religion or belief. Looking to the future will ensure the future strength and long-term sustainability of this important movement.