

Habits of the Head, Heart, and Hand: A Review of Remarks by Brett Scharffs at the IRF Summit 2025

By Marianna Richardson

At the International Religious Freedom Summit, Brett Scharffs, Professor of Law at J. Reuben Clark Law School and director of the International Center for Law and Religion Studies and a member of the IF20 board, focused on the point that promoting religious freedom actively promotes virtues that are needed for society to prosper. Religious freedom is one of our most basic, fundamental, and cherished rights. In his speech, Prof. Scharffs tried to convince the IRF audience that there is another equally important way of thinking and talking about religious freedom, which is almost entirely neglected. He wanted his listeners to learn to focus on and talk about the **virtues** of religious freedom.

Virtues of Religious Freedom

What are the virtues that countries and cultures committed to religious freedom will actively promote? If Heraclitus was right that character is destiny, what kind of character—both individual and social—should we strive to develop if we want to be people who value religious freedom? There are three types of virtue that Prof. Scharffs believes will be paramount: (1) habits of the head, (2) habits of the heart, and (3) habits of the hand.

First, the habits of the head involve the development of people who are curious, open-minded, who see and stand for truth, and who are tolerant of others. Habits of the heart include valuing reverence, awe, and wonder. Where better to learn these virtues than in Sunday school, the synagogue, or the mosque? The habits of the heart will include faith, hope, and charity, as well as humility, kindness, respect, and love. Habits of the hand involve a desire to lift the downtrodden, to be of service to those in need, and to reach out to the vulnerable and the broken.

Final Challenge

Scharffs reminded us that in all of our talk about rights, he hopes that we will not forget to speak about the virtues of religious freedom. If we want to live in cultures that cultivate people who will value religious freedom, not just as a right but as deeply ingrained traits of character, we should promote the habits of the head, heart, and hand. Then, we must individually cultivate these virtues in our very soul.