

## **Second Day of the International Religious Freedom Summit 2026:**

### **Protecting Freedom of Belief for People on the Move**

The second day of the International Religious Freedom Summit 2026 opened with highlighting the “double challenge” faced by people fleeing religious persecution. They are first forced from their homelands and then continue to struggle to freely practice their faith even in exile. The discussion emphasized that displaced people—refugees, asylum seekers, and internally displaced persons—often fall through the cracks of legal protections and social support systems.

#### **Katherine Marshall: Linking Vision, Compassion, and Practical Action**

Katherine Marshall offered the panel’s central moral framing. She stressed that the most vulnerable people require both principled advocacy and practical implementation. She described two sources of moral energy: the “fire from above,” meaning prophetic voices and high-level vision, and the “fire from below,” meaning community-level compassion and lived experience.

Marshall argued that effective protection of freedom of belief requires connecting these two forces. As she put it, we must “link both the words and the message—the knowledge and facts—with the compassion and care” shown in everyday life. She emphasized that each displaced family needs not only legal rights but also the equipment, support, and hospitality that allow them to survive and flourish.

Looking toward a pluralistic 2026, she insisted that societies must bridge “the highest level of human inspiration and vision” with the way people care for their neighbors. She called for better documentation of what diverse communities are already doing, noting that many people quietly live out their core belief of “being a neighbor” without recognition.

#### **Nazila Ghanea: Freedom of Movement and the Rights of the Displaced**

Nazila Ghanea, UN Special Rapporteur on freedom of religion or belief underscored that freedom of religion or belief applies to everyone, including those on the move. She reminded the audience that most people throughout history “were born and died in the same town,” but today millions must cross borders to escape persecution. She warned that displaced people are often “bracketed out” of human rights protections and treated as security threats rather than rights-holders.

Naz urged governments to ensure coherence between their commitments and their actions: if freedom of belief is universal, it must also protect refugees, asylum seekers, and people in IDP camps.

#### **Raising Awareness Through Storytelling**

The panel noted that podcasts and media storytelling can help raise awareness of religious persecution. Marshall again emphasized the need for more stories from communities who are

already practicing hospitality and solidarity. These narratives, she argued, help counter fear and build moral imagination.

### **Transnational Repression: A Growing Threat**

Authoritarian governments target religious and belief communities beyond their borders. Tactics include threatening phone calls, digital harassment, arrests, and physical assaults. Between 2023 and 2024, Freedom House documented **1,194 incidents** involving **28 governments**, including China, India, Iran, and Turkey. Activists are often labeled political threats, and minority groups—such as Uyghurs, Kurds, and dissident Muslims—face ongoing intimidation.

### **Ambassador Waltz: Engagement, Reform, and Accountability**

Ambassador Waltz described the U.S. approach to the UN and global human rights mechanisms. He acknowledged public skepticism about the UN but argued that “we need one place in the world where everyone can talk,” including adversaries. At the same time, he criticized the UN Human Rights Council for allowing “some of the worst, most egregious abusers” to serve as members.

He explained that the U.S. is pursuing a dual strategy: reforming some UN bodies while defunding others that fail to uphold their mandates. He highlighted cases of Iranian dissidents whose stories were brought to the UN Security Council, noting that their testimonies “penetrated all the way into Iranian villages” and gave people hope.

### **Enes Kanter Freedom: Authoritarianism, Repression, and Moral Courage**

Enes Kanter Freedom, the Turkish-born NBA player and human-rights advocate, described the personal cost of speaking out against authoritarianism. He has not seen his family in eleven years, and his father was imprisoned in Turkey as retaliation for his activism. Despite playing in the NBA, he faced intense pressure for criticizing the Turkish government’s repression of Kurds, political dissidents, journalists, academics, religious minorities, and supporters of the Gülen movement.

He emphasized that Turkey, though a NATO ally, does not behave like one, especially given its cooperation with China and Iran. He noted that China represents an even more formidable challenge, and that while the NBA supported him when he criticized Turkey, speaking out against China triggered far greater resistance. He urged advocates to pressure Congress, impose targeted sanctions, and support political prisoners worldwide. He stressed that authoritarian regimes often retaliate by coercing families, which can be even more devastating than direct punishment.

He recommended using Freedom House as a reliable open-source verification tool for documenting abuses.

### **Sikyong Penpa Tsering: Tibet’s Struggle for Identity and Religious Freedom**

Sikyong Penpa Tsering, the political leader of the Tibetan Government-in-Exile, described the ongoing destruction of Tibetan identity 76 years after China's forceful invasion. He explained that Tibet, a Buddhist civilization for over 1,300 years and the "water tower of Asia," faces systematic efforts to erase its religion, language, and culture. Temples are being taken over, violence is widespread, and Tibetans live under intense surveillance and control.

A major concern is China's attempt to control the reincarnation of the 15th Dalai Lama. Tsering outlined three points:

1. China intends to search for the reincarnation within its borders.
2. The traditional Golden Urn process is being misused for political gain.
3. China seeks final authority over recognizing the Dalai Lama, which he compared to allowing a foreign government to choose the Pope.

He urged the United States to take a clear position, including sanctions on officials who interfere with Tibetan religious succession, and to affirm Tibetans' right to choose their own spiritual leaders. He emphasized the Dalai Lama's lifelong message of oneness, peace, and shared humanity.

### **Nancy Pelosi: Universal Values and the Moral Imperative of Religious Freedom**

Former Speaker Nancy Pelosi delivered greetings on behalf of His Holiness the Dalai Lama. She reflected on the universal values of love, compassion, forgiveness, contentment, and self-discipline—principles shared across religious traditions and essential to human dignity. She stressed that religious freedom is fundamentally the freedom of thought: the right to question, reflect, and choose one's beliefs without coercion.

Pelosi highlighted the Dalai Lama's teaching that all people, whether religious or not, share the basic desire to be happy and avoid suffering. She lamented that religion has too often been used to divide, insisting that cooperation among faiths is now essential for global peace. She praised the work of IRF leaders such as Ambassador Sam Brownback and Dr. Katrina Lantos Swett, encouraging continued commitment to mutual respect and shared responsibility.

Her message concluded with the Dalai Lama's reminder that cultivating compassion and integrity is vital not only for spiritual life but for humanity's survival.

### **IRF Closing Plenary: A Call to Courage and Responsibility**

The closing plenary of the IRF Summit emphasized gratitude, inspiration, and a renewed sense of mission. Dr. Katrina Lantos Swett reflected on the Raoul Wallenberg monument at the United Nations—a bronze briefcase symbolizing Wallenberg's urgent rescue work during the Holocaust. She described it as a moral challenge to today's advocates: *Who will pick up the briefcase?* She urged participants to see themselves as those who step into danger on behalf of the vulnerable and carry forward the work of protecting freedom of belief.

## **Recognizing the Team Behind the Summit**

Ambassador Sam Brownback honored the small team that organizes the summit each year, highlighting their behind-the-scenes dedication. He thanked staff members responsible for programming, logistics, and technical operations, noting that their quiet, year-round work makes the gathering possible.

## **Small Groups Drive Global Change**

Brownback emphasized that major human-rights movements are almost always led by small, committed groups—not by large crowds. He described religious-freedom advocates as the people who stand with marginalized and unpopular communities, even when it is inconvenient or risky. Defending minority faiths does not require theological agreement, he said, but moral conviction. Standing up to bullies brings personal cost, yet ultimately expands freedom for everyone. He closed by expressing affection for the community and sending them forward with blessings.

## **Digital Frontiers and Algorithmic Bias**

Technology is being used as a new tool of oppression. Miriam Lexmann opened the session by warning that digital technologies—especially AI and facial recognition—are increasingly used to undermine human dignity. She cited China’s surveillance systems, social-credit scoring, and censorship of religious content as examples of technology enabling repression. She noted that some of these tools were developed through partnerships with Western institutions, underscoring the need for accountability.

Lexmann also highlighted global misuse of deepfakes, blasphemy accusations, and AI-driven dress-code enforcement in countries such as Iran. She stressed that democratic governments and tech companies must take responsibility for preventing their innovations from becoming instruments of persecution.

## **Expanding Use of Technology to Suppress Religious Freedom**

Speakers emphasized that methods of repression long used by authoritarian regimes and extremist groups have become far more extensive due to modern technology. Terrorist organizations such as Boko Haram in Nigeria now coordinate attacks through social media, targeting Christian communities and amplifying fear. Even within democratic societies, digital tools are being used in ways that threaten freedom of belief. A Finnish political leader, Päivi Räsänen, is facing legal charges for quoting the Bible on social media, raising concerns that content-removal requirements under EU law could have broader implications for religious expression across Europe.

The panel stressed that while it is difficult to pressure authoritarian governments or violent groups, democratic states and technology companies must strengthen accountability and uphold their responsibility to protect fundamental freedoms.

## **Digital Repression Across Borders: Tibetan Voices on Transnational Control**

Tsela described how digital repression extends beyond China's borders. Inside Tibet, any sensitive content is shadow-banned, while influencers are encouraged to promote sanitized "good news" narratives. Algorithmic bias and short-form videos distort global perceptions of Tibet, suppressing evidence of abuses. Chinese authorities also use surveillance technologies to track Tibetans abroad. One example involved a Tibetan religious figure who refused to host a Chinese-appointed "fake" Panchen Lama; after fleeing to Vietnam, he was detained and died in custody, a tragedy enabled by advanced tracking systems.

## **Transparency, Regulation, and Platform: Media Policy and Platform Conduct**

Levi Brode argued that transparency is central to countering digital repression. He highlighted the need for clearer public-policy frameworks, especially around media institutions that receive significant funding and enjoy special protections. He noted that platforms often demonetize or restrict content without clear conduct rules. He also emphasized supporting groups inside China who work to circumvent the Great Firewall, and he pointed to the need for better mechanisms to track terrorist threats transmitted through online communication systems.

## **AI-Driven Disinformation and Influence Operations: Automation, Personas, and Social Engineering**

Bill Marczak described the rapid evolution of disinformation campaigns. Fake news websites now blend fabricated and believable content, while direct-message campaigns push targeted narratives. With AI tools, a single individual can operate multiple personas, replacing the need for large teams. AI-generated content is more polished, free of typos, and increasingly effective at social engineering. Meanwhile, funding for researchers and platform moderators is shrinking, making it harder to detect and remove coordinated disinformation. He called for greater transparency, research investment, and accountability to reduce repeat offenses.

## **Responsibility in Democratic Societies: Ethical Obligations of Governments and Companies**

Miriam Lexmann underscored that freedom cannot exist without responsibility. She warned that early cooperation between Western and Chinese institutions—often driven by naivety or profit—helped build technologies now used for repression. She urged democratic governments and private companies to recognize the consequences of their innovations and to work together to ensure that technology serves human dignity rather than undermining it.

## **Testimony: Persecution of Bahá'ís in Egypt**

Samandar Hindami shared his experience of discrimination against Bahá'ís in Egypt. His family members were detained simply for their faith. Bahá'ís face systemic barriers, including refusal of marriage registration, denial of burial grounds, confiscation of property, and constant surveillance. Religious gatherings are monitored, and participants are interrogated or harassed. Because the Bahá'í Faith is not recognized by the state, its followers lack basic civil protections.

## **The Law of Conscience: Return and Restoration for Religious Communities**

Humility, careful listening, and moral conscience can address the long-term needs of displaced religious communities. She noted that law and policy alone cannot capture the depth of trauma or the requirements for genuine coexistence.

### **Armenian Testimonies: Displacement, Loss, and the Right to Return**

Nina Shaherdigan described the devastation of the 2020 Nagorno-Karabakh war, during which 5,000 Armenians were killed and more than 100,000 were displaced. She recounted the blockade that left civilians without food or electricity for ten months, the destruction of cultural heritage, and the loss of her home. She argued that acknowledging truth, recognizing responsibility, and ensuring reparations are essential steps toward justice. She stressed that the right to return must be guaranteed so that displaced Armenians can rebuild their lives.

### **Rebuilding Pluralism Through Sacred Spaces: Restoration, Memory, and Shared Futures**

Tugba Erdenir reflected on the power of physical places—churches, sacred sites, and community buildings—to anchor identity and enable healing. She highlighted examples of restored Armenian religious sites where communities have been able to celebrate Easter again. She argued that inclusive dialogue, strong alliances, and courageous political leadership are necessary to create lasting peace. Restoration is not merely symbolic; it is a foundation for rebuilding trust and coexistence.

### **Policy Perspectives on Protecting Sacred Sites: Rules of the Road for Conflict Zones**

Knox Thames offered guidance for policymakers working in conflict-affected regions. He emphasized that sacred sites should never be targeted except in extreme wartime necessity. Drawing on examples from Iraq and Cyprus, he urged governments to protect heritage sites, allow access to spiritual places, and avoid actions that unintentionally destroy cultural identity. He also noted that governance, land rights, and geopolitical dynamics must be addressed to ensure long-term stability.