



## You Can Count on Cole

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# YOU CAN COUNT ON COLE

By Chris Seiple

Whenever I hear the name “Cole,” I instantly hear the clackety-clack of bear paws typing on a too small keypad. And then I see him: black pinstriped suit, white shirt, non-descript tie, slightly hunched over, diligently typing notes from every presentation, no matter how boring, no matter where we were—China, Vietnam, Norway, America, etc., etc. He typed not only because he was a visionary still capable of learning, but also because he was an expert always seeking the incremental improvement of the rule-of-law in multiple cultural and country contexts worldwide. I first partnered with Cole in China, in October of 2004. I had been introduced to him by my dad, Robert A. Seiple, the first U.S. Ambassador-at-Large for International Religious Freedom. He and my mom had founded the Institute for Global Engagement (IGE) in the year 2000, the same year that Cole had founded the International Center for Law and Religion Studies (ICLRS) at the Brigham Young University’s J. Reuben Clark Law School. Both were founded to make religious freedom more accessible—according to the best of the local culture and majority faith—while contributing to the host country’s transition toward better governance and a more transparent rule of law.

In particular, IGE had been founded not to get people out of jail for their beliefs (a noble cause) but to transition the structures of persecution such that those believers did not go to jail in the first place. We eventually came up with a theory of change (Seiple 2014), to which Cole contributed (along with other country partners).

I knew that if I was to work in another country, I first needed to be invited. Second, I had to provide a product so good it couldn’t be ignored because an excellent product was in the self-interest of the country in transition. When I asked my dad who was the best person to partner with, his answer was immediate: Cole. Cole could provide the non-partisan product of excellence (more on the product below).

After that first-ever conference on religion and the rule of law in Beijing, I flew to Hanoi, and made a simple argument to that country’s leading scholar on religion and public life: “Your fraternal brothers to the north just held this conference, shouldn’t you?” Cole came with me to Vietnam the next year, and by 2006, we were doing the first-ever conference on religion and the rule-of-law in Hanoi (Galli 2007). It would have been impossible without the excellent expertise that Cole, and his global network of scholar-practitioners, bring.

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**Abstract:** In his essay, Chris Seiple shares his personal memories of long-term collaboration with W. Cole Durham, Jr.—one of the founding figures in international law and religion and global religious engagement. Seiple explains that Durham’s non-partisanship, global vision and a value-based approach, as well as the work of the International Center for Law and Religion Studies established by him in 2000, have deeply impacted the field through the support of constitutional and legal reforms, constant engagement with political actors, religious communities and academia, and the promotion of religious freedom for all.

**Keywords:** Cole Durham, international religious freedom, religious engagement, International Center for Law and Religion Studies, human rights advocacy, constitutional law, comparative law

The second thing I think about when I hear the word “Cole” is “integrity.” If Cole said he was going to do something, he did it. From financial partnership to returning to a country time and again, Cole was dependable as the sun rising.

The third thing I think about is his stature. He is (literally) a giant in the field, a pioneer. A graduate of Harvard Law School, a patient builder of relationships and scholarship (beginning in the former Soviet space just after its collapse), and a visionary, people respect Cole. His vision especially is remarkable—from the founding of ICLRS to the establishment of G20 Interfaith Forum, Cole provided answers to questions that people had not even asked yet.

But there are three reasons that make him great. First, as alluded to above, he provided a “non-partisan product of excellence.” What was that exactly? He brought the smartest, and most experienced scholar-lawyers from around the world to teach how religious freedom had developed and been protected in their cultural/country context. What I learned in China that first time was that audiences—seen, and unseen—were not threatened by an academic, comparative discussion of examples from outside the country. I also began to understand that the Q&A was invariably about the host country, referencing the examples from outside their country (so as not to give away their own position). The conference could be a change agent. The conferences that Cole created provided a model that also delivered the message: we outsiders want you to choose for yourself what rule-of-law model is best for you.

Second, Cole is great because he remembers. I once had a long conversation with Cole about

his family, and he shared with me ten generations of his ancestry—some of whom had been persecuted in their movement west to Utah. When one group suffers persecution, there is usually one of two results. The most frequent result is that the group does unto others as was done unto them. The second result is to become educated and to teach their children, and those outside of their group, how to live with deep, even irreconcilable, difference; not least by institutionalizing it in the law.

Your future always runs through your past, but you have to choose how the past enables the future. Cole constantly chose to help others by equipping them to make their own choices—so

what happened to his ancestors didn’t happen to them.

Third, Cole enabled the future. He hired the incredible Brett Scharffs to replace him, who has made

his own innovative mark in the global discussion of dignity; while attracting such fantastic experts as Elizabeth Clark (we once spent three hours with the National Security Council in Uzbekistan, at its invitation, discussing their proposed law on religion). These good people embody the same integrity, commitment to excellence, and scholar-lawyer experience. Cole’s vision and values will continue through them, helping countless people around the world in the future.

There are very few people in the world about whom I have never heard a negative comment. Cole is one of them. He is a practical inspiration to all of us. I, and so many others, are grateful to build on what only he could do, even as that clackety-clack calls us to diligent excellence. ❖

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## About the Author

**Chris Seiple**, Ph.D., is a seasoned leader with over 30 years of experience in creating and implementing strategies among diverse government and non-government stakeholders that build social cohesion through inclusion. He leads The Sagestone Group, consulting for clients such as the Templeton Religion Trust, where he helped develop and implement the “Covenantal Pluralism Initiative.” Dr. Seiple is President Emeritus of the Institute for Global Engagement and a Senior Fellow at Love Your Neighbor Community.

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