



## Citizen of the World: Cole Durham in Action

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# CITIZEN OF THE WORLD: COLE DURHAM IN ACTION

By Katherine Marshall 

**A**dvocacy for religious freedom speaks to the fundamental goals that we see as right at the heart of human conscience—thus integrity and true human freedom. Freedom of religion or belief (FoRB) relates to and complements the objective of constructive religious engagement. The underlying goal of this engagement is related to the noble ideal of a unified effort to advance the common good. In practice, however, significant challenges arise, as respective proponents (of religious freedom as distinct from religious engagement) too often pursue alternative, even diverging paths towards results. In a similar vein, linking the right to freedom of religion or belief in sensitive and meaningful ways to the broader objectives set out in the Universal Declaration of Human Rights and related international covenants present some hurdles, as advocates grapple with questions like which rights come first, and how do they relate to one another? Further, how are apparent tensions among rights and goals and responsibilities to be addressed?

No one has faced these complex and often polarizing topics with as discerning, compassionate, and creative an eye as W. Cole Durham, Jr. It is well worth the effort to appreciate the qualities and approach that have made it possible for him to navigate sensitive and potentially divisive topics in ways that lead to constructive action and to earn the wide respect and extraordinarily diverse friendships that mark his long career.

My observations about Cole Durham's roles as a true global citizen derive primarily from our shared work on the G20 Interfaith Forum, which Cole has led since 2014. The Forum's rather heroic goal is to engage the broadest global agendas through the lens of religious communities across the world, drawing on their most pertinent and persuasive wisdom and experience. It addresses the fundamental challenges facing the world's most powerful leaders and their governments. The work also engages the full range of what we term civil society and the private sector, both elaborate and dynamic ecosystems as complex as the world's religious communities. The G20 Interfaith Forum's work, therefore, demands a blend of

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**Abstract:** This essay comments on W. Cole Durham, Jr.'s work as a global religious freedom and human rights advocate. Since 2014, Durham has led the G20 Interfaith Forum—an initiative with an ambitious goal to engage the broadest global agendas through the lens of religious communities across the world, drawing on their most pertinent and persuasive wisdom and experience. Religious freedom has been rather far removed from the core and even broader G20 agenda. However, due to his broad vision, commitment to networking, intellectual rigor, and inherent tolerance, Durham has helped to bring religious voices and actors to contribute to the discussion of the most profound challenges of the current world in addition to the incorporation of religious freedom and engagement into the global agenda.

**Keywords:** Cole Durham, international religious freedom, religious engagement, G20 Interfaith Forum, human rights advocacy, multilateral, religious discrimination

vision and humility, soaring ambition and appreciation for the art of the possible. The aim is to draw on an extraordinarily diverse set of actors and, above all, networks, some well-established with clear mandates and operational approaches, others with positions that are far less established within a complex global pecking order. The central goal, which Cole and I have shared from the outset, albeit coming from very distinctive backgrounds, is to engage the very best wisdom and experience from widely different religious communities in discussions of the G20's far-ranging global agendas.

The context of the G20 Interfaith Forum presents challenges that have called on Cole's many qualities and his long and diverse international experience. His leadership has required skill, determination, and creativity.

Religious freedom, his field and forte is, in practice, rather far removed from the core and even broader G20 agenda. The G20's distinctive, powerful role in the multilateral governance system was established with economic and financial management as the central goal. Never in the G20's 26-year history have religious voices and perspectives been seen as important to its mandate, and indeed some members are hesitant even to acknowledge that religious communities merit special consideration, much less an active voice. Thus a first and continuing objective of the G20 Interfaith Forum has been to make a persuasive case that religious voices and actors belong at global policy tables, in meaningful ways. That has required a constant navigation of the goal that we term "religious engagement"—broad and active involvement in the full range of policy matters with a perspective that takes religious teachings and experience fully into account. The aim of addressing religious inequalities and discrimination against religious communities and especially minorities thus must be seen as integrally related to broader understandings of positive religious roles.

As an example, during the COVID-19 pandemic, a central argument for religious engagement that was likely to attract the attention of policymakers focused on the relatively high levels of trust in religious leadership and the communities' remarkable

communication capacities to reach audiences far and wide. The fact that discrimination against some religious communities was exacerbated during the pandemic and that some policy actions had negative effects—advertently or inadvertently—needed to be set in the broader context if it was to have an impact on policy debates and implementation.

Cole's approach to religious engagement and religious freedom throughout the G20 Interfaith journey has thus been solidly grounded in his convictions about the importance of religious freedom, as a fundamental part of the broader challenges of global governance and above all human rights, and his appreciation for its complexity and multifaceted dimensions. Religious freedom has represented a basic motivation and grounding for his continuing effort to engage diverse religious issues in approaching global policy challenges and response. He has skillfully woven topics such as technical gaps in legal recognition of religious communities in specific settings into the fundamental goals of assuring freedom of conscience and respect for both individual and community rights of expression and assembly. He has grounded his approach to specific topics such as environmental protection and religious literacy in his underlying and broadly based approach to the priority of freedom of religion and its intricate links to the framework of human rights as a foundation for action towards social cohesion.

I highlight for this essay four qualities and approaches that I have seen as marking Cole's distinctive approach, among the many that colleagues cite. Cole's personal qualities rank high in assessing his longstanding approaches and, above all, impact.

I have, first and foremost, witnessed a special blend of broad vision and operational humility that has allowed him and the G20 Interfaith team to navigate the complex challenges of establishing relationships each year with a different G20 host country and their specific operational agendas. Cole sees the agendas broadly, and narrowing down priorities to manageable agendas is visibly painful to him, given his breadth of vision, but he respects the need to focus on strategic priorities.

Second, Cole’s remarkable care and commitment to maintaining personal relationships has stood the tests of time and space in striking ways. He has respected contacts across a wide range of countries and communities and is purposeful in maintaining them and reaching out to his colleagues whenever possible.

A third consistent quality is his intellectual rigor, colored by legal training and experience but informed by and extending beyond to a wide range of disciplines. This breadth of approach has allowed him to maintain rigor and objectivity when passions and deeply held beliefs polarize discourse and approaches.

Fourth comes the deep conviction that the call of conscience and the merits of religious freedom underpin the framework of rights in practical ways that relate to essential qualities of life. The core values involved never stray far from Cole’s value compass, and they bring together his spiritual and practical core.

I could add qualities that are endearing as well as topics of wonder. They include his traveling office, which requires multiple screens

and heavy bags, his focus on the demands of specific spreadsheets, and his stoic determination to withstand the demands of long voyages and the constant demands of people intervening at pretty much any hour of the day or night, weekday or weekend. Cole seems truly indefatigable, always willing to take on the challenge of the hour.

Cole Durham’s approach to his work and professional life defies the challenges of time, academic discipline, and space, making him something of a legend in a broad set of fields. In meeting after meeting, in far corners of the world as well as in his Utah home base, he truly brings out the best of what a religiously informed and

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inspired approach is meant to be: intellectual excellence, meticulous links among topics, and a global, creatively comparative perspective. But perhaps most of all, Cole Durham exemplifies a human care

that brings to bear spiritual insight, rigorous theory, and lived experience on issues large and small, local and global, and individual and humanity as a whole. ❖

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## About the Author

**Katherine Marshall** has worked on international development for over five decades. She is Senior Fellow at Georgetown University’s Berkley Center for Religion, Peace, and World Affairs, and Professor of the Practice of Development, Religion, and Conflict in the School of Foreign Service. She is also Director of the World Faiths Development Dialogue (WFDD) and is Vice President of the G20 Interfaith Association. She served at the World Bank for 35 years.

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