



## Cole Durham—An Indispensable Founding Father of the International Religious Freedom Movement

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# COLE DURHAM—AN INDISPENSABLE FOUNDING FATHER OF THE INTERNATIONAL RELIGIOUS FREEDOM MOVEMENT

By Katrina Lantos Swett

All who have had the pleasure of meeting Cole Durham know that he is a towering figure. He is a giant of a man in more ways than one. When Cole enters a room, he cuts an imposing figure that manages to be impressive without being intimidating—no “small” achievement. And yet, this seeming paradox in some ways encapsulates the impact that Professor Durham has had in the world of international religious freedom.

We first became acquainted in 2012 when I was appointed to the U.S. Commission on International Religious Freedom (USCIRF) where I served two terms as Chair and one as Vice-Chair. As someone who had long been active in the field of human rights, but less so on the “International Religious Freedom Turf,” it soon became apparent that Cole was someone who commanded respect and even reverence from people of vastly different political and religious persuasions. Many of my new colleagues in the world of international religious freedom advocates would refer to Cole as one of the “indispensable” leaders of the movement and it was easy to understand why.

A quarter of a century ago, on January 1, 2000, Professor Durham established the International Center for Law and Religion Studies (ICLRS) at Brigham Young University’s J. Reuben Clark Law School. The vision and mission of this new center was both vast and deeply humane, namely to “secure the blessing of religious liberty for all.” What immediately set ICLRS apart from other religious freedom advocacy organizations was its focus on serious scholarship and related educational activities.

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**Abstract:** The essay elaborates on W. Cole Durham, Jr.’s role as a long-term leading academic and expert in the field of religious freedom. Durham has played a key role helping countries in transition from Southern Asia to the Middle East to Eastern Europe in drafting constitutions that robustly protect freedom of religion, conscience, and belief. The International Center for Law and Religion Studies has set up the highest standard of academic integrity, commitment to excellence, and promotion of religious freedom for all. This has made Cole Durham a founding father of international religious freedom.

**Keywords:** Cole Durham, international religious freedom, law and religion, International Center for Law and Religion Studies, legal reform, FoRB, constitutional law

Many organizations that share the goal of securing the blessings of religious liberty do not have the resources or the expertise to build their advocacy on a solid foundation of academic research, analysis, and publication. My late father Congressman Tom Lantos, a human rights hero in his own right, used to joke that sometimes he would begin a human rights crusade with one foot firmly planted in mid-air! It was Cole Durham and the outstanding team he built at ICLRS that helped establish a sturdy foundation under the cause of defending freedom of religion and belief globally.

And indeed, his focus has been global in scope. Cole Durham’s work has taken him to every continent and almost every corner of the world. In the spirit of building strong foundations to protect religious liberty, Cole has played a key role helping countries in transition draft Constitutions that robustly protect freedom of religion, conscience, and belief. This mission has taken him to Nepal, Thailand, Iraq, and numerous countries of Eastern Europe as well as most of the former Soviet bloc nations. Cole’s expertise and insight are widely sought and the list of his honors, affiliations, and initiatives is incredibly impressive.

Cole is, without a doubt, one of the most respected voices in scholarly circles when it comes to virtually every aspect of the international religious freedom movement. His

prodigious memory, expansive intellect, and strong sense of justice make him a wise and sought after counselor to activists and academics alike.

I would be remiss if I failed to mention the “practitioner’s bible”—the outstanding case book that Cole co-authored with his colleague, Brett Scharffs (Durham and Scharffs 2019). Their *Law and Religion: National, International and Comparative Perspectives* is a “must have” resource for those who work or teach in the field of freedom of religion or belief and my personal copy is well worn, dog eared, and always close at hand.

As notable as the list of Cole Durham’s accolades and achievements is, it cannot possibly convey the intangible power of his life and his example. Cole brings to mind the writings of the Dutch historian Rutger Bregman who talks

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COLE HAS PLAYED A KEY  
ROLE HELPING COUNTRIES IN  
TRANSITION

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about the importance of what he calls “moral ambition.” Moral ambition is what you get when you combine the idealism and noble values of an activist with the pragmatism and toughness of an entrepreneur. People with moral ambition actually make a difference and move a cause forward and that is what Cole Durham has done to secure the blessing of religious liberty for people around the world. He has truly been a founding father of the international religious freedom movement, and I have been privileged to call him both a mentor and a friend. ❖

## About the Author

**Katrina Lantos Swett** is the former Chair and Vice Chair of the United States Commission on International Religious Freedom (USCIRF) and teaches Human Rights and American Foreign Policy at Tufts University. She currently serves as Co-Chair of the Board of the Committee for Human Rights in North Korea (HRNK) and the Budapest based Tom Lantos Institute. Dr. Lantos Swett also serves on the Advisory Board of UN Watch, the annual Anne Frank Award and Lecture, and the Warren B. Rudman Center for Justice, Leadership and Public Policy. She serves as Co-Chair of the International Religious Freedom Summit, which held its inaugural gathering in 2021.

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