

July 20, 2020

Statement by Faith Leaders on the U.S. State Department's Commission on Unalienable Rights

As leaders from diverse faith traditions, we join together to express our grave concerns about the draft report of the State Department's Commission on Unalienable Rights and the potential that its approach—which seeks to elevate religious freedom above other human rights—will weaken religious freedom itself and undermine respect for and damage the protections of the universal values of human dignity.

We believe strongly that every person is entitled to enjoy the right to freedom of conscience and belief. We also believe that freedom of religion must never be used as a pretext to diminish other rights we hold dear, nor to justify infringing upon those other universal human rights.

Freedom of religion is equally and inextricably linked with all the other interconnected rights that enable humans to live in dignity. Without the rights to peaceful assembly, freedom of speech, freedom from violence and freedom from discrimination in access to basic needs, education, employment, or health, and the right to participate in all social practices, freedom of religion would be hollow. Human rights are mutually reinforcing; none is subordinate to another, nor should anyone be denied these rights because of who they are or whom they love.

In addition to its misguided attempt to create a hierarchy of rights, we are troubled by the Commission's attempt to "Americanize" universal human rights by asserting a unique conception of rights in the American context. While Americans can certainly be proud of our tradition of religious liberty, our fellow people of faith who are suffering persecution around the world—Uighurs in China, Christian and Jewish minorities in the Middle East, Rohingya Muslims in Burma—are not helped by making it easier for their governments to disregard religious freedom as a foreign or "Western" concept that they are not obliged to follow, especially when the United States is seen to be endorsing its own culturally contingent hierarchy of rights, with freedom of religion at the top.

The Commission's director recently [scoffed](#) at such concerns, characterizing the Commission's report as nothing more than "reflections on the nation's founding principles." And we know from Secretary Pompeo's [repeated comments](#), including at Thursday's public presentation of the report, that he will seek to use the Commission's report to justify marginalizing certain rights, thus diminishing human rights advocacy and stifling demands for accountability for those whose rights have been violated.

Such politicization of human rights—and of freedom of religion in particular—is dangerous, particularly now when the forces of authoritarianism are on the rise globally. We urge members of the Commission to consider the risks of complicity in such an effort and use this comment period to ensure that the final version of the Commission's report firmly upholds the universality and indivisibility of rights as set forth in the Universal Declaration of Human Rights. This will put the United States in the best position to stand up for religious freedom around the world. For our part, we will steadfastly defend the freedom of all people to follow their faith, while standing firm against the use of religion to suppress human rights for the most vulnerable people.

Sincerely,*

For more information, contact Maggie Siddiqi (msiddiqi@americanprogress.org) or Guthrie Graves Fitzsimmons (ggravesfitzsimmons@americanprogress.org). For press inquiries, contact Sam Hananel (shananel@americanprogress.org).

Rev. Amanda Hambrick Ashcraft, Executive Minister for Justice, Education & Movement Building, Middle Collegiate Church
Robert Bank, President and CEO of American Jewish World Service
Susan Barnett, Founder, Faiths for Safe Water
Rabbi Sharon Brous, Founder and Senior Rabbi, IKAR-LA
Rev. Jennifer Butler, CEO, Faith in Public Life
Shaun Casey, Georgetown University
Sister Simone Campbell, SSS, Executive Director, NETWORK; Leader of Nuns on the Bus
Shane Claiborne, Co-Founder, Red Letter Christians
Miguel H. Diaz, PhD, Ambassador to the Holy See, Ret., Loyola University Chicago
Marianne Duddy-Burke, Executive Director, DignityUSA
Rev. Nathan Empsall, Faithful America
Dr. Sharon Groves, Vice President for Public Engagement, Auburn Seminary
Guthrie Graves-Fitzsimmons, Fellow, Faith and Progressive Policy Initiative, Center for American Progress
Prof. Dr. Hille Haker, Richard McCormick Endowed Chair of Ethics, Loyola University Chicago
Lisa Sharon Harper, Founder and President, Freedom Road, LLC
Rev. Dr. Katharine Henderson, President, Auburn Seminary
Rabbi Jill Jacobs, Executive Director, T'ruah
Valarie Kaur, the Revolutionary Love Project
Rev. Jacqueline J. Lewis, PhD, Senior Minister, Middle Collegiate Church
Rev. Michael-Ray Mathews, Deputy Director & Director of Clergy Organizing, Faith in Action
Dr. Keisha E. McKenzie, Auburn Seminary, New York, NY
Rev. Brian D. McLaren, Author
Rabbi Jack Moline, Interfaith Alliance
Elaina Ramsey, Interim Executive Director, Red Letter Christians
Bishop Gene Robinson, The Episcopal Church
Simran Jeet Singh, Visiting Professor, Union Theological Seminary
Maggie Siddiqi, Director, Faith and Progressive Policy Initiative, Center for American Progress
Michael A. Vazquez, MTS, Religion & Faith Director, Human Rights Campaign
Rev. angel Kyodo williams, Transformative Change
Ahmed Younis, JD PhD, Former Principal Deputy Assistant Secretary of State, Deputy Special Envoy (GEC), Department of State
Rev. Katey Zeh, Interim Chief Executive Officer, Religious Coalition for Reproductive Choice

**Affiliations are listed for identification purposes only*

For more information, contact Maggie Siddiqi (msiddiqi@americanprogress.org) or Guthrie Graves Fitzsimmons (ggravesfitzsimmons@americanprogress.org). For press inquiries, contact Sam Hananel (shananel@americanprogress.org).