Annual 'meeting of experts' studies influence of secularism on religious freedom

Impact of secular values is 'nuanced,' IRLA secretary general says

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Bettina Krause/IRLA/ANN

Whether secularism threatens religious freedom will become an increasingly significant question for religious groups -- especially religious minorities -- in the coming years, legal experts and academics predicted last week.
"There's a widespread fear that secular values are undermining the role of religion in society," said Dwayne Leslie, deputy secretary general of the International Religious Liberty Association, which sponsored a three-day think tank in Sydney, Australia. "But the truth is much more nuanced than that."

Leslie pointed out that, globally, religious freedom is strongest in countries where governments are grounded on secular principles, and where religion is excluded from the political sphere. "Just take a look at the news headlines and compare the level of peace, security and freedom enjoyed in 'secular' societies versus that seen in 'theocratic'-style countries," he said, "and it's easy to see that secularism can actually be a friend to religious freedom."

But Leslie acknowledged that there is a point where secular values can begin to express themselves as hostility toward religion, and especially toward religious minorities. "This is a developing trend that needs close and continuing study," he said. He pointed to recent French legislation outlawing the public wearing of the burqua for Islamic women as an example of a state appealing to the idea of "secularism" to actually limit religious expression.

The 13th IRLA Meeting of Experts, hosted at the University of Sydney, School of Law, drew 27 religious liberty advocates and academics from 12 countries. According to John Graz, secretary general of the IRLA, these annual forums bring together some of the world's foremost scholars and practitioners in the field of religious freedom to track legal and sociological trends.

"Over the years, IRLA meetings of experts have built up a significant body of academic and practical resources," Graz said.

Greg Smith, attorney-general of New South Wales, addressed the delegates along with university students and members of the public. In what University of Sydney professor Patrick Parkinson described as a "substantial" speech, the attorney-general outlined the history of the Australian Constitution, in particular its provisions for religious freedom. He also discussed test cases in various states of Australia.

"I wouldn't say that right now in Australia the secular perspective is privileged," said Ken Vogel, IRLA secretary general for the South Pacific region, "but the secular perspective is being very loudly voiced and there is a chance that that voice could actually gain so much ground that the religious voice is not only not heard but actually rejected."

The gathering was bittersweet for some who had been friends and associates of Karel Nowak, IRLA secretary general for the Euro-Africa region. Nowak was in Australia, intending to participate in the meetings, when he died August 19 while snorkeling near Cairns, Queensland.

Established in 1893, the IRLA is the world's oldest religious freedom advocacy organization. It has 13 regional chapters worldwide and national associations in more than 80 countries. Along with the annual Meeting of Experts, the IRLA sponsors regional religious freedom festivals and forums, and every five years organizes a world congress, which attracts an international mix of scholars, legal practitioners, government officials and human rights advocates.

Next year's 7th IRLA World Congress is scheduled for April 24 to 26 in Punta Cana, Dominican Republic.
ADRA project in Nepal seeks to help affected children in wake of conflict

Initiative to provide 4,000 children with literacy, psychosocial support

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ADRA/ANN staff

The Adventist Development and Relief Agency last week announced it is implementing a project in Nepal to provide protection and promote the rights of former child soldiers and conflict-affected children.

The project, "Action for Social Inclusion of Children Affected by Armed Conflict in Nepal," is being implemented in in four districts of mid-western Nepal.

Before Nepal's decade-long conflict, the country was among one of the worst ranked in terms of socioeconomics and health. Thousands of children in the mid-western region of Nepal were exploited, assaulted and faced other forms of violence.

The primary focused of the project improves literacy and job skills for 4,000 vulnerable children and adolescents, enhancing availability and improving access to psychosocial support for 2,000 abused and exploited children, and increasing awareness of child protection, child labor, gender-based violence and human trafficking among 50,000 people at national, district and local levels.

At least 70 percent of beneficiaries targeted are expected to be girls and adolescents. Other marginalized groups represent members of low castes, ethnic minorities, and indigenous groups.

In addition to suffering from psychological trauma, the continuing political instability and violence have made life for children in the region particularly difficult. Access to education, health care and other basic services is severely limited. These children are more vulnerable to labor, sexual exploitation, homelessness and human trafficking.

The project, worth nearly US$650,000, is being funded by the European Union through ADRA UK and in partnership with Association for Social Transformation and Humanitarian Assistance Nepal. It is expected to last for 36 months.

For more information, visit adra.org.

Adventist leaders say 'Religious freedom divide' is troubling, not surprising

Pew research says China, Iran, Uzbekistan, Egypt have most government restrictions

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Bettina Krause/IRLA/ANN

The global religious freedom "forecast" looks grim for the 2.2 billion people around the world who suffer discrimination or persecution because of their faith, according to the results of a recent study by the Pew
Research Center's Forum on Religion and Public Life.

Dwayne Leslie, the Adventist Church's liaison to Washington D.C.'s Capitol Hill, said new research underscores how vulnerable church members can be in countries without traditions of religious freedom. Here, he speaks at a religious liberty event in Washington, D.C. in April. [ANN file photo]

The study, released earlier this month, analyzed masses of reports and data from 2006 to 2009 and identified recent trends in the level of religious repression and protection in different countries. It found, in part, that there's no immediate relief in sight for those suffering for their faith. In fact, the situation seems to be worsening in many countries that already have high levels of religious restrictions.

John Graz, Public Affairs and Religious Liberty director for the Seventh-day Adventist Church, said the results of the study are troubling but not particularly surprising. "There's an old saying that 'The rich get richer and the poor get poorer.' Well, this study suggests that, globally, the 'free' are enjoying even stronger legal protections, while those who already suffer religious persecution are facing ever-more stringent restrictions on their freedom."

China, Iran, Uzbekistan, and Egypt topped the list of countries with the highest levels of government restrictions on religious freedom. The study also looked at "social harassment" of religious minorities. It cited China, Nigeria, United Kingdom, Russia and Sweden as among those countries with the largest recent upswing in the number of malicious acts or violence motivated by religious hatred.

Graz said these trends are borne out in the day-to-day work of the department he heads up, which is charged with tracking and responding to religious liberty concerns around the world on behalf of the world church.

"Just in the past few months we've seen the de-registration of many religious organizations in Hungary, including the Adventist Church, the destruction of Christian churches in Ethiopia, the assassination of religious freedom advocates in Pakistan, and continuing legal persecution and social violence against Christian minorities in some countries of the Middle East," Graz said.

Dwayne Leslie, the church's representative to the United States' Congress and Washington's diplomatic community, says it's hard for those in the West, who can freely practice their faith, to understand just how vulnerable church members are in countries without strong traditions of religious freedom.

"Protection of religion becomes politicized," Leslie said. "Rights become dependent on political whims or changes in governments rather than established legal principles."
This reality often generates work for the PARL department that falls into the "under-the-radar" category. "Often we're dealing with situations that are too sensitive to publicize," Leslie said.

He cites a recent example, where a church leader from an African country appealed to PARL for assistance following notice that some church property was about to be seized by the government based on a spurious legal claim.

The PARL team responded with a multi-faceted approach, which included consultations with the U.S. State Department, outreach to the country's Washington embassy, and extending counsel to the local church leaders as they worked through what quickly became a complex and sensitive situation.

"This incident ultimately had a happy outcome and the church property was saved," Graz said. "But far too often, the opposite is true."

The results of this new study paint a sobering picture for the immediate future of religious freedom around the world.

"I expect we will be kept increasingly busy," Graz said of his department.

--See the results of the Pew Forum study at: http://pewforum.org/Government/Rising-Restrictions-on-Religion.aspx