Adventist president explores clash between secularism and religious belief
Religious freedom 'bears signature of God’s love,' Wilson says

Ongoing religious freedom advocacy difficult, but often effective, U.S. official says
Veteran advocate Thames on sway of private citizens, faith groups, NGOs

In world fields, religious liberty often a struggle
Imprisonment, death, police raids not uncommon, panel says
Adventist world church President Ted N. C. Wilson addressed the audience at the 7th World Congress for Religious Freedom on April 26. Tensions between the "values of believers" and secular culture are an inevitable part of a free society, he said. [photos: Ansel Oliver]

Nigel Coke is an International Religious Liberty Association leader in Jamaica. He is one of nearly 900 delegates at the IRLA 7th World Congress in Punta Cana, Dominican Republic this week.

April 26, 2012
Punta Cana, Dominican Republic
Bettina Krause

Seventh-day Adventist world church President Ted N. C. Wilson today challenged believers to grasp the opportunities for open discourse that a secular state preserves.

His comments came during a keynote address to the 7th World Congress for Religious Freedom. The gathering has drawn hundreds of religious liberty advocates, government officials, scholars and legal experts to the Dominican Republic this week to examine the influence of secularism on religious expression.

Although acknowledging the inevitable conflict between the values of believers and that of secular culture, Wilson said, "We have to accept this tension as part of a free society. We have to accept the challenges and find appropriate responses, through God’s leading."

Wilson drew a distinction between “radical” or “extreme” secularism—which seeks to exclude religion from the public sphere—and “secular governance,” which remains neutral toward religions and protects the religious freedom rights of minorities.

“If intolerant and ideological secularism attacks our religious values, we have to stand up for them with conviction,” he said. Wilson cited examples of where secularism has been taken too far, including attempts to prohibit Muslim girls from wearing headscarves to public school, or to mandate the provision of abortions by institutions that reject the practice as a matter of conscience.

“It’s taken too far when the mention of creation of the world is totally forbidden in the public schools or when Christian agencies for adoption of children are threatened to lose their legal recognition, if they refuse to list as potential parents same sex couples,” he said.

However, Wilson also said that people of faith should reject the temptation to see a “religious state” as an acceptable alternative to secular governance. "If the state gives one religion a privileged legal position, no equality is possible and life becomes a nightmare for those who are different," he said.

“Which type of society is it that condemns to death someone for apostasy because they have changed religions?” he asked. "Is that a secularized or religious society?"

Wilson said that Adventism’s strong heritage of religious freedom activism and its support for state neutrality between religions has firm biblical foundations, and that Adventists “feel very close to believers who have stood for religious freedom during thousands of years of restrictions and persecution.”

He said his life-long passion for promoting religious liberty has its roots in memories of his father, Neal
Wilson—a former world church leader—who often spent hours with government officials explaining the value of freedom of conscience.

“We need to instill in young people the love for preserving religious liberty and freedom of conscience,” said Wilson. “Let us encourage them to join in this vitally important pursuit of freedom of conscience for all.”

Ongoing religious freedom advocacy difficult, but often effective, U.S. official says

Apr. 30, 2012
Punta Cana, Dominican Republic
Bettina Krause/IRLA with Mark Kellner/Adventist Review

When veteran religious liberty advocate Knox Thames addressed the 7th World Congress for Religious Freedom last week, he held a piece of rubble from a Seventh-day Adventist church building in Ashgabat, Turkmenistan, demolished some years ago by government authorities.

Thames, who directs Policy and Research for the United States Commission on International Religious Freedom, said he has seen first-hand the results of the current global religious liberty crisis while representing the U.S. Department of State worldwide.

Yet, at the same time, Thames sounded a note of optimism. “I’m not without hope that religious liberty advocates can make a real difference,” he told an audience of 900 religious liberty advocates, government officials, scholars and legal experts in the Dominican Republic to examine the influence of secularism on religious expression.

Thames illustrated the power of advocacy by chronicling the state of religious restrictions in Turkmenistan.

After a decade of advocacy by individuals and organizations, the U.S. and other governments were motivated to pressure Turkmenistan to ease restrictions, Thames said. Today, minority faith groups such as the Adventist Church face eased registration requirements in the central Asian country, he said.

“I have seen that the efforts of individuals, faith groups and non-governmental organizations can save lives, change laws and expand religious freedom,” Thames said. He warned that ongoing advocacy is difficult and results are never assured. He also advised advocates to act with discernment and
persistence, and to reject the temptation to exaggerate their cause or to speak without knowing all the facts.

Later, Thames joined president of the Center for America’s First Freedom Robert Seiple and director of National and Legislative Affairs for the American Jewish Committee Richard T. Foltin to discuss the role of grassroots advocacy.

Whether it’s involvement in local religious freedom issues or helping to change the situation for believers in Laos or Vietnam, the presence of non-governmental organizations and private citizens is essential to the promotion and protection of religious liberty, the panel said.

“Governments can be very, very helpful. But ultimately it has to be people who are committed to this for the duration,” Seiple said. “Never expect more from the government than the government is prepared to do.”

Thames noted that the U.S. Commission on International Religious Freedom’s budget is limited, so they are “delighted to partner with NGOs and religious organizations” to monitor religious freedom on the ground overseas. The commission exists to inform the U.S. Congress on issues of religious freedom worldwide.

While different organizations can and do united on common issues, having “space” for differences of opinion is also vital, Foltin said.

“To get your voice heard, you have to leverage your presence by working in coalition,” he said. “What’s important is that there’s a relationship that allows us to work together.”

And whether the issue is local or global, Seiple added, achieving results can often take far longer than expected. He noted that it was only after decades of work in Laos and Vietnam that NGOs began to see positive results. And in some countries, where an American diplomat may have difficulty in presenting a wide range of issues, the NGO that focuses on global engagement in the religious freedom sphere can often be more warmly received, he said.

All three experts stressed the need for NGOs and religious liberty advocates to get young people involved. Thames reaches out via the Twitter messaging service; Seiple commended youth involvement; and Foltin observed that it’s also necessary to let young people express differing opinions as part of the engagement process.

In world fields, religious liberty often a struggle
It's one thing to lose a job because of your religious beliefs. It's quite another to be deprived of your freedom -- or even your life.

Those are perhaps the most extreme challenges facing believers of many different faiths around the world today, and the situation can sometimes change without warning or even explanation, attendees at the 7th World Congress of the International Religious Liberty Association heard this week during a panel discussion in Punta Cana, Dominican Republic.

Tiffany Barrans, international legal director for the American Center for Law and Justice (ACLJ) in Washington, D.C., recalled the torture and murder of Pakistani Christian businessman Rasheed Masih in 2010. Four Muslim competitors lured Masih to a rural farmhouse, ostensibly to discuss the potato business. Instead, they tried to force Masih to convert to Islam, and, it was alleged, beat him to death when Masih refused.

ACLJ's European affiliate got involved and, working with attorneys in Pakistan, helped secure convictions of three of the alleged killers, each of whom received a life sentence.

The center is also very active on behalf of Iranian Christian Pastor Yousef Nadarkhani, arrested in 2009 on charges of "apostasy" from Islam, a faith Nadarkhani never practiced. He was sentenced to death in 2010, but massive international pressure has delayed the execution so far.

Barrans said of the ACLJ's work, "Our attempt is to use the judicial system ... and create a precedent, so people know they cannot kill, cannot beat and cannot hurt the religious minority with impunity," she said.

In both Russia and Kazakhstan, the roughly 60-year-old Church of Scientology is facing persecution and discrimination, said the Rev. Susan L. Taylor, president of the Founding Church of Scientology in Washington, D.C.

"Last December, police entered our church in Moscow full force, burst into homes of staff members, and also brought a man from a TV station to film the raid," Taylor said. "The idea is to close down various churches of Scientology," she added.

"In Kazakhstan, we're also experiencing persecution. Members have had to go underground," Taylor said. "In Almaty, the Ahmadi Muslims were shut down all over Kazakhstan, and a local news report asked, 'Is the Methodist Church next?'"

Scientologists, Taylor explained, "have a policy in our church that we abide by the rules of the land. Working in that framework, we fight for our rights, we fight to exist."
Attorney Kevin Kimball, legal counsel for the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints (LDS) in Santo Domingo, capital of the Dominican Republic, presented his personal views on the subject, saying he was "a longtime student of religious liberty" issues.

"We protect and reverence the right of liberty, the privilege of worshipping almighty God," Kimball noted after quoting statements from several LDS leaders including founder Joseph Smith, Jr. Societies, he said, "need to respect other's rights to practice their own religions."

Such respect is growing in the Dominican Republic, Kimball said. In 2011, the national government enacted a law granting civil (legal) recognition to marriages performed by churches other than the Roman Catholic Church. He said this was an important step for Dominican churches and their members.

Now, leaders of evangelical, Seventh-day Adventist, LDS and other churches are meeting informally to advance other laws aimed at gaining rights and privileges in Dominican society, he noted.

"It's our hope that we will continue to build on the momentum we have here, [during this] period of time when our host country affords a measure of religious freedom," Kimball said. The goal, he added, "is not to diminish rights the Catholic Church has, but to extend those rights to other religions."

For Vladimir Ryahovsky of the Slavic Center for Law & Justice (SCLJ) in Moscow, the challenges are basic. "I represent a country where the institution of religious freedom is still in the process of developing," he said.

While there was considerable religious freedom after the end of the Soviet Union in 1991, much of it was later withdrawn. Evangelical Christian movement The Salvation Army was under fire from Russian authorities because of the word "Army" in their name and the fact that the movement's international leader carries the rank of "General." Ryahovsky's group helped in an eight-year legal battle to gain recognition for The Salvation Army in the country.

The SCLJ focuses much of its activity on educating lawyers, judges and government officials on the details of religious freedom. "We organize training seminars for religious organizations as well as for governmental officials. [University] chairs of church/state relations have been established; and we publish an academic journal on 'Religion & Law' to which many people subscribe," Ryahovsky said.

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