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IRLA: First-day reflections Why are we here?

Posted: 24 Apr 2012 09:00 PM PDT

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Cuba’s Office of Religious Affairs representative addresses IRLA World Congress delegation

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Dominican Republic: Adventist leader challenges religious organizations to promote beliefs and practice good citizenship

Posted: 23 Apr 2012 09:00 PM PDT

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Addressing nearly 900 delegates and guests at the Seventh World Congress of the International Religious Liberty Association, Denton Lotz, a noted Baptist minister and IRLA president, summarized the purpose of this three-day event: "We're here today because...

**Historic 7th World Congress for Religious Freedom begins in Punta Cana**

Almost 900 delegates from more than 60 countries gathered today for the inaugural session of the 7th World Congress for Religious Freedom in Punta Cana, Dominican Republic. Keynote speaker Dr Denton Lotz, former leader of some 47 million Baptists worldwide.

**Mexican official affirms work of International Religious Liberty Association**

Paulo Tort Ortega, director general of religious affairs in Mexico, spoke earlier today at the 7th World Congress, affirming his government's commitment to protecting the religious freedom rights of its citizens.
IRLA: First-day reflections Why are we here?

Libna Stevens  
Apr 25, 2012

amid the beautiful Caribbean sea, bright sunshine and service-oriented staff in a well-constructed and designed building are government officials, church leaders and religious liberty experts from as far away as Russia, Jordan, Spain, Zambia, Australia and Korea, who are among over 800 attendees who have gathered for the International Religious Liberty Association (IRLA) 7th World Congress.

So, the question that jumps out at me on the first of this three-day congress is: Why are we here?

The March release of the annual report by the US Commission on International Religious Freedom (known as USCIRF) named 16 nations as "countries of particular concern" in its recommendations to the United States State Department regarding which countries fail to protect the religious freedom rights of their citizens. And, according to Dwayne Leslie, IRLA's deputy secretary general, "this year's report paints a grim picture for religious freedom globally."

In his address on Tuesday to the largest-ever gathering for a World Congress for Religious Freedom, IRLA President and noted Baptist minister Denton Lotz said "We're here today because we believe that freedom of religion is basic to all human rights."

'Why we are here' hits me forcefully when, according to Lotz, freedom of religion is now being reduced to freedom of worship.

He said "freedom of religion is the institutional expression of religion beyond the church building. Freedom of religion allows seminaries, colleges, universities, orphanages, publishing houses, hospitals and access to radio and television. On the other hand, freedom of worship privatizes religion, allowing for worship services on certain days of the week with generally little public expression of faith. This narrowing definition of ‘freedom of religion' into ‘freedom of worship' will eventually limit and restrict religion."

In essence, what Lotz has described is a practical scenario of a non-effective church if it cannot utilize its various institutions and tools for reaching people.

The question of why we are here becomes filled with grave concern when we consider the fact that 70 percent of the world's population live in places with religious subjugation.

Conflict or Partnership

The theme of the congress "Secularism and Religious Freedom - Conflict or Partnership" was brought into focus by former Ambassador-at-Large for International Religious Freedom in the US State Department. Robert Seiple posited that the church has, in many respects, led the secularization of the West.
"It has been changed more by culture than the church has changed culture," he said. "And we end up with an insidious counterfeit that puts us on a slippery slope where we lose our ability to be relevant, to speak truth to power, and we lose our seat at the table."

Dr. John Graz, Secretary General of the IRLA sums up the reason 'why we are here' this way. "We are here to affirm and further reaffirm the cause of religious freedom. This congress is about religious freedom, but it is not a religious event. We are all here together. We represent different faiths, different religions and different churches. We are different, but we are respectful of each other. We are here because we believe in human dignity."

So...we are here because in January 2011 the influential governor of Pakistan's Punjab Province, Salman Taseer, was killed by one of his body guards because he opposed Pakistan's blasphemy law and many were angered by his defense of a Christian woman sentenced to death.

We are here because in March 2011, Shabazz Bhatti, a Catholic Christian and the only Christian in the Pakistan Cabinet was killed because he also opposed his country's blasphemy law.

And, we are here because Yousef Nadarkhani, a Christian pastor in Iran is awaiting execution. His crimes? He is an apostate who abandoned Islam. He was convicted of practicing Christianity and questioned the mandatory Islamic religious education of his children. He was given an option to recant his faith and live, or refuse and die. He has not recanted and he is condemned to be lynched.

The Congress, which is being held from April 24 to 26, will not provide all the answers to the religious injustices that exist in the world. But it will provide a catalyst by which each one present can become a voice of freedom and promote and protect the God-given gift of religious freedom for all.

This is 'why we are here!'
Sonia Garcia, assistant director of the Office of Religious Affairs in Cuba, addressed more than 800 delegates at the 7th IRLA Religious World Congress in Punta Cana, Dominican Republic, on Apr. 24, 2012.

April 24, 2012 - Punta Cana, Dominican Republic...Libna Stevens/IAD

Sonia Garcia, assistant director of the Office of Religious Affairs in Cuba, addressed more than 800 delegates at the 7th IRLA Religious World Congress in Punta Cana, Dominican Republic, on Apr. 24, 2012.

Garcia was among several officials who spoke to the audience about the current religious liberties enjoyed in their country and the challenges to further protect religious rights.

"In Cuba," Garcia said, "the state recognizes, respects and guarantees religious liberty, such as the freedom to change beliefs or not have any, and to profess their religion within the law."

In her speech, Garcia read a statement citing legal documents on amendments to the constitution since 1976 and after, and the religious transition the island has experienced since its colonial era in the 1490s.

She challenged religious liberty leaders and attendees to unite in the search for peace and mutual respect.

"Religions which are defenders of moral and ethical principles today, more than ever, have a great challenge to secure a better world, where respect to diversity can strengthen unity, love and the development of peoples," said Garcia.

The 7th IRLA World Congress is scheduled to continue through April 26, 2012.

For more news, information and view photos of the event, go to www.irla.org
Dominican Republic: Adventist leader challenges religious organizations to promote beliefs and practice good citizenship

Libna Stevens   >   Communication Department
Apr 24, 2012

Pastor Israel Leito, president of International Religious Liberty Association (IRLA) for the Inter-American region, spoke today to more than 800 delegates on the definition of moderate secularism versus militant secularism.

April 24, 2012 - Punta Cana, Dominican Republic...Libna Stevens/IAD

Pastor Israel Leito, president of International Religious Liberty Association (IRLA) for the Inter-American region, spoke today to more than 800 delegates on the definition of moderate secularism versus militant secularism. He made his comments during the first day of the 7th IRLA World Congress in Punta Cana, Dominican Republic.

"Moderate secularism tends to promote strongly the separation of church and state, and therefore facilitate religious freedom for all," said Pastor Leito.

Although secularism and secular societies have done much to guarantee equality in religion and religious freedom of various kinds, "there are still pockets of democratic countries in the [Inter-American] territory where officially there are state religions, and other religious organizations, while not banned or persecuted, are merely tolerated," Pastor Leito said.

Pastor Leito pointed out that moderate secularism has done much to promote equality of religion and religious freedom in many places, yet leaders and organizations must be vigilant "for today's moderate secularism may well turn into militant secularism and turn the authority of state on all religious organizations, or at least the potential exists of favoring one religious group over others," he said.

It's a practice he has seen throughout the Inter-American region which comprises of countries from Mexico, Central America, the Caribbean, the French Guiana, Colombia and Venezuela.

"Religious organizations," he told the crowded auditorium, "must realize they have a debt to the society where they are active."

He further challenged religious organizations to preach not only their beliefs but also to be good citizens, and promote peace, well-being, and harmony among citizens.

The 7th IRLA World Congress will continue until April 26, 2012.

For more news, information and view photos of the event, go to www.irla.org
Addressing nearly 900 delegates and guests at the Seventh World Congress of the International Religious Liberty Association, Denton Lotz, a noted Baptist minister and IRLA president, summarized the purpose of this three-day event: "We're here today because we believe that freedom of religion is basic to all human rights."

That view, sadly, is not shared in many parts of the world, something Lotz said made holding the sessions even more important.

"It's incumbent upon us to work together that we live together in harmony and concord," Lotz said to an audience of leaders from Christian, Muslim, Jewish and other communities. "We don't need religious wars."

That violence against believers remains a problem was evident from a session-opening video presentation noting the death sentences pronounced - but not yet carried out - on Christians in Pakistan and Iran on charges of "blasphemy," and the assassinations of Pakistani officials Salman Tasser, governor of Punjab province and minorities minister, Shahbaz Bhatti. Also cited was the extreme religious repression found in North Korea.

While the main congress theme, "Secularism and Religious Freedom - Conflict or Partnership" may seem far removed from lands where persecution is active, Lotz took a different view.

"Most people worldwide suffer from a lack of religious freedom. Seventy percent of the world lives in places of religious repression," he said.

Speaking to an audience that included Seventh-day Adventists, Mennonites, Roman Catholics, Baptists, Mormons and Scientologists, among others, IRLA secretary-general John Graz noted the world congress is a multifaceted event.

"This congress is about religious freedom, but it is not a religious event," Graz said. "We are all here together. We represent different faiths, different religions and different churches. We are different, but we are respectful of each other."

With the theme of "Secularism and Religious Freedom -- Conflict or Partnership," speakers and delegates will attempt to negotiate the challenges of a world which is increasingly hostile to a variety of religious expression in the public square. While standing for separation of church and state, IRLA leader Lotz issued a call for religion to avoid following a secular society's lead.

"When religion becomes secular, I believe it is the greatest challenge to religious freedom, allowing secularism to define what a religion believes," Lotz told delegates. "When we allow the secularization of our faith to transcend the transcendent, it loses its meaning," he added.

According to Lotz, "Religion will die when it no longer focuses on God, but only on autonomous man. Religion will thrive when it focuses on God."
In a statement read to delegates, the country's president, Leonel Fernandez Reyna, offered “a most cordial welcome to the Dominican Republic, a land of freedom. The Dominican Republic is a place of freedom for Christians, Muslims, Jews and people of other faiths.”
Almost 900 delegates from more than 60 countries gathered today for the inaugural session of the 7th World Congress for Religious Freedom in Punta Cana, Dominican Republic. Keynote speaker Dr Denton Lotz, former leader of some 47 million Baptists worldwide, summarized the purpose of this three-day event: "We're here today, because we believe that freedom of religion is basic to all human rights."

"It's incumbent upon us to work together that we live together in harmony and concord," Lotz said to the audience of leaders from Christian, Muslim, Jewish and other faith groups, who together represent more than 60 countries. "We don't need religious wars." Lotz, who is General Secretary emeritus of the Baptist World Alliance, urged those present to do all they could to contribute to a culture of respect and tolerance.

These thoughts were echoed in a statement read to delegates from Dominican Republic President, Leonel Fernandez Reyna, who offered "a most cordial welcome to the Dominican Republic, a land of freedom."

"The Dominican Republic is a place of freedom for Christians, Muslims, Jews and people of other faiths," he said.

Later, Ambassador Robert Seiple, former United States Ambassador-at-Large for Religious Freedom, spoke passionately about the "complicity of the religious establishment in advancing secularism" and he argued that strong faith is still compatible with respect for the religious beliefs of others.

Delegates also took time to remember the millions of men, women and children around the world who live in countries that restrict religious freedom or which engage in persecution of religious minorities. A video presentation highlighted the death sentences pronounced -- but not yet carried out -- on Christians in Pakistan and Iran on charges of "blasphemy," and the assassinations of Pakistani officials Salman Tasser, governor of Punjab province and minorities minister, Shahbaz Bhatti. Also cited was the extreme religious repression found in North Korea.

While the main Congress theme, "Secularism and Religious Freedom -- Conflict or Partnership" may seem far removed from lands where persecution is active, keynote speaker Dr Lotz took a different view. "Most people worldwide suffer from a lack of religious freedom. Seventy percent of the world lives in places of religious repression," he said.

The three-day event is organized and sponsored by the International Religious Liberty Association—a non-sectarian organization, chartered in 1893, dedicated to defending and promoting freedom of religion for people of all faiths. Daily news, video and photos are available at http://www.interamerica.org/users/index.php?type=news&id=2043&lan...
Cesario Acevedo, left, IRLA president for the Dominican Republic, and Israel Leito, president of the IRLA for the Inter-American region, at the 7th IRLA World Congress in Punta Cana, Dominican Republic, Tuesday, April 24, 2012.
Mexican official affirms work of International Religious Liberty Association

Paulo Tort Ortega, director general of religious affairs in Mexico, spoke earlier today at the 7th World Congress, affirming his government's commitment to protecting the religious freedom rights of its citizens.

April 24, 2012 - Punta Cana, Dominican Republic, April 24

Paulo Tort Ortega, director general of religious affairs in Mexico, spoke earlier today at the 7th World Congress, affirming his government's commitment to protecting the religious freedom rights of its citizens.

"In Mexico, we have separation of church and state and there is freedom of belief and freedom of worship," said Ortega. "However, we see these freedoms to be part of two rights that fall under religious liberty." Ortega explained that Mexico's legislative assembly has approved inclusion of this concept in the constitution, pending final approval from all the states in the nation. He also commended the work of the IRLA in Mexico for encouraging dialogue between religions and with the federal government.

Ortega is one of a number of regional government officials attending the three-day event. Others include Senators Aurekio Iragorri and Charles Schultz, both from the Republic of Colombia, Prime Minister Gerrit Schotte of Curacao, and The Honorable Brent Symonette, Deputy Prime Minister and Foreign Minister of the Bahamas.