Adventist leader explores clash between secularism and religious belief

Posted: 25 Apr 2012 09:00 PM PDT

In his keynote address today to the 7th World Congress for Religious freedom, the leader of the 17-million-member Seventh-day Adventist Church challenged believers to grasp the opportunities for open discourse that a secular state preserves.

For women, lack of religious freedom is often just one of many human rights challenges

Posted: 25 Apr 2012 09:00 PM PDT

For many of the world's women, lack of religious freedom is just one of many human rights challenges they face. How to address these issues-and whether or not secularism advances the cause of women's religious liberty around the world-was the focus of dis

Laws do not always tell the full story when it comes to religious freedom

Posted: 25 Apr 2012 09:00 PM PDT

eports from four parts of the world-China, Russia, India and the Middle East-presented Wednesday night, April 25, showed how difficult it often is to state whether or not a country enjoys religious freedom.

You are subscribed to email updates from IAD News
To stop receiving these emails, you may unsubscribe now.

Google Inc., 20 West Kinzie, Chicago IL USA 60610

Spam
Not spam
Forget previous vote
In his keynote address today to the 7th World Congress for Religious freedom, the leader of the 17-million-member Seventh-day Adventist Church challenged believers to grasp the opportunities for open discourse that a secular state preserves.
Pastor Ted N. C. Wilson, president of the Seventh-day Adventist world church, delivers a keynote address at the IRLA 7th World Congress, Thursday, April 26, in Punta Cana, Dominican Republic.

In his keynote address today to the 7th World Congress for Religious freedom, the leader of the 17-million-member Seventh-day Adventist Church challenged believers to grasp the opportunities for open discourse that a secular state preserves.

Although acknowledging the inevitable conflict between the values of believers and that of secular culture, he 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 between 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."

"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, Neil 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."
attended the 7th World Congress for Religious Freedom in Punta Cana, April 24 to 26.
For many of the world’s women, lack of religious freedom is just one of many human rights challenges they face. How to address these issues—and whether or not secularism advances the cause of women’s religious liberty around the world—was the focus of discussion among a group of leaders and delegates at the 7th World Congress in Punta Cana, Dominican Republic, on April 24.

Everyone deserves basic human rights, at the core of which is the right to believe and express your beliefs freely, said Amireh Al-Haddad, North American Religious Liberty Association leader for Southern United States and the discussion leader. She emphasized that regardless of the unique challenges within each culture, raising awareness of rights issues that particularly impact women is key to making small strides.

“The things we take for granted, like driving or going to the store, aren’t allowed [for women] in some societies,” said Al-Haddad. In some countries of Africa, she added, it’s much worse for women. In addition to restrictions on basic freedoms, there is also the practice of female genital mutilation and a high prevalence of domestic violence—although these abuses are often regarded in these societies as protection for women.

"It’s harder to make inroads when it comes to equality between men and women in some cultures," said Al-Haddad. "It’s not about trying to impose religious liberty on anyone—it’s about being concerned with the basic rights of human beings."

John Graz, secretary general of International Religious Liberty Association, joined the discussion. He cited the case of a mother (in a country he chose not to name) who converted to Christianity after becoming a regular viewer of a Christian television program. As a direct consequence of her new beliefs, she lost her job, her family, and her home.

Graz also talked about a young mother in Pakistan who was jailed because she spoke to other women about certain topics which were misinterpreted as contravening the country’s blasphemy laws.

"These cases clearly demonstrate violence against individual rights," said Graz. "Every individual is created equal and should be respected. Freedom of expression allows for respectful differences without violating individual rights."

The discussion also focused on ways that individuals can raise awareness about abuse against women. Suggestions included promoting religious liberty by organizing letter or email campaigns, and alerting human rights lawyers about cases where rights are being infringed.

The bottom line, said Al-Haddad, is that you cannot work out a problem without having a common consensus, getting to know the people and the culture. "It’s important that we recognize these human rights issues when they arise, so we can bring them to the forefront and create awareness." She said people must be informed, and apply their faith in a conscious way to
respect the beliefs of others.

Al-Haddad said where it gets complex is with secularism—the separation of church and state, and how it may go against religious liberty and freedom of consciousness. Secularism could help when it comes to women's rights but it does not always lend itself to freedom of conscience, she said.

For information on religious liberty issues and resources, visit www.irla.org
reports from four parts of the world-China, Russia, India and the Middle East-presented Wednesday night, April 25, showed how difficult it often is to state whether or not a country enjoys religious freedom.

"Is China a Communist country of not? Is there religious freedom there or not?" asked Dr. G. T. Ng, executive secretary of the Seventh-day Adventist world church, who recently visited that country at the invitation of the China Christian Council. The delegation to China included Pastor Ted Wilson, president of the Adventist world church.

Ng pointed out that officially denominations do not exist in China. The China Christian Council controls all Protestant churches. However, churches such as the Seventh-day Adventists are tolerated and retain a separate identity with international connections.

The delegation visited Adventist churches and others belonging to the Three-Self Patriotic Movement. Ng showed a series of slides of church buildings and congregations from the visit.

Adventists often share worship facilities with other congregations that meet on Sunday. In most places they have liberty to preach, baptize, conduct training classes, and follow their own order of worship.

Adventists also have many church buildings of their own. Some are large and well appointed, with thousands of members. They are also prominently involved, through Adventist-owned Loma Linda University, in the running of Sir Run Run Shaw Hospital in Hangzhou. This eminent, state-of-the-art facility has an attractive Adventist church nearby.

The situation in Russia is very different, reported Vladimir Ryahovsky of the Slavic Center for Law & Justice (SCLJ) in Moscow. Although Russian laws supposedly guarantee religious liberty, local authorities often disregard them.

Justice is selective: properties of the Russian Orthodox Church confiscated at the time of the Revolution have been restored, but those belonging to other denominations have not. In court cases psychiatrists can be used to discredit believers.

IRLA director for India, Pastor Rathinaraj John, described conditions in his country. Although the constitution designates India as a secular nation that does not give preference to any religion, many state governments have enacted anti-conversion laws. Many Christians, including Seventh-day Adventists, have been driven from their homes. Many have been killed by Hindu extremists.

Judge Amjad Shammout from Jordan described conditions in his country which, he said, is a model of religious freedom in the Middle East.