

# Of Rights and Responsibilities: The Social Ecosystem of Religious Freedom (Kearon)



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## Introduction

1. Distinguished guests, colleagues and friends, it is an honor to speak to you today. The subject of religious freedom continues to raise new questions. We have come to learn a little more from many of the most able minds and willing hearts in the field. If we listen to each other carefully, we will be better equipped to meet the challenges and opportunities of today and tomorrow. Most of us drink from the waters of religious freedom without even knowing it. We think of it as a river that will always flow. But we might not recognize the risks to the tributaries that feed that river.
2. The perpetuation of religious liberty requires that it be understood and valued by the rising generations. There is a need for them to comprehend what religious freedom brings to society and what is lost when this liberty is eroded. When young people come to understand why this freedom is crucial to their own aspirations, welfare and happiness, they will feel inspired to act to strengthen and preserve religious freedom.

## Community and Commitment

3. To better understand the freedoms we now enjoy, we can look to history. My parents came from what you in the United States call “the greatest generation.” They both served in the

British armed forces in World War II — my father in the Royal Air Force, my mother in the Army as a nurse. Between them they served across Europe, North Africa, India and Burma. They fought for their neighbors, they fought in defense of their homeland and they certainly fought for religious freedom, but I don't suppose that was a phrase they would have used at the time. With so many others, they warded off the tyranny of Nazism. So many freedoms were on the line, and that generation gave everything they had in their defense. Vast swaths of Europe were overrun, with massive casualties. Whole nations were subjugated by tyrants whose aim was to conquer and not only suppress freedoms, including religious freedom, but wipe out and destroy people of particular ethnic backgrounds, faith and belief. The generation which confronted these demonic threats did so with phenomenal courage. It took a society that possessed a highly developed social solidarity and mutual accountability to bring about such a moral achievement.

4. After six unspeakably harrowing years, the war was won. In the ensuing years, those who had experienced this conflict saw society through the lens of that experience. After a decade or two, they observed the next generation, which had not been where they had been nor confronted what they had seen. These young people became concerned with what in many cases the wartime generation regarded as lesser things. The cohesion that had come from shared hardship borne of an existential threat began to wear off. I was a child through part of this period. The protests of the 1960s found their way onto our television screen. What they exhibited in raw emotional power, they often lacked in sustained social commitment. These actions ranged from bus boycotts to opposition to the Vietnam War to campus protests over student fees. They were all motivated by worthy purposes, but on their own, these purposes were limited without the continuous obligations borne of shared vision and purpose. Of course, protest is a vital function in a democracy, and free people are free because they are able to challenge the status quo and those they have elected. But during those years, the youth of Britain sometimes appeared to protest for its own sake. My parents lamented the shift toward a mindset of rights with no apparent regard for, or reference to, responsibilities. The two must work together; passion and duty must connect. And that concept is what I would like to address — our rights and the responsibilities associated with those rights.
5. Today it might appear to some that rights just happen — that they are automatically inherited and perpetuated without thought or effort. We can forget the extraordinary struggle, resolve and sacrifice that went into protecting our abundance. We may rarely think about our obligations to keep those rights in place.

## **The Heart of Religious Freedom**

6. For a time, I lived in a country that did not allow the free expression of religion. I witnessed how people who dared to stray from the official line could be punished. Unfortunately, this continues today in many nations across the globe. Violation of religious freedom is one of the main reasons why we see so many refugees and displaced people today. Religious differences become religious alienation, alienation turns into persecution, and persecution turns to conflict, war and mass flight. These crises happen when freedoms, including religious freedom and freedom of conscience, are not protected. Regimes target those who believe differently, force them from their homes and uproot them in terrifying ways. In 2015 and 2016, from one end of Europe to the other, I saw firsthand countless ordinary people driven from their homes and lands further to the east across countries and continents in search of safety and refuge. Often their beliefs were a factor in why they were displaced.
7. Hatred and terror drove these people from their homes. The world needs places of refuge from

such extremism. Where liberty thrives, it flows almost invisibly. We experience the benefits of it all the time but rarely see how it actually works. Religious liberty acts as the heart of society, a key contributor carrying the lifeblood of all that is good to the whole community.

8. Healthy societies run on trust, confidence and a sense of safety. With freedom of religion and belief, people feel safe in their deepest convictions and can express and exercise them publicly. The great enemy of religious freedom is estrangement and alienation. When a society or government divides people based on what they believe, how they think, the words they say, whom they worship or the manner in which they worship, common ground is lost, and life together becomes a battle. The test of a pluralistic society is to achieve unity without diminishing the diversity within it.
9. Religious freedom means nothing if you protect your own religious practice while neglecting the practice of others, especially those who might be less secure and able to defend themselves. It only works if you protect the rights of everyone. As Elder D. Todd Christofferson, a member of the Quorum of the Twelve Apostles of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, has said, religious freedom is important precisely because it gives everyone — religious or not — the “space to determine for ourselves what we think and believe.”<sup>1</sup> In terms of numbers and inherited culture, the United States has a Christian majority, but unless it honors the lawful practices of Hindus, Sikhs, Muslims, Jews, Buddhists, Native American religions and everyone else, including individuals and groups who profess no faith at all, it will fail to live up to its own ideals.<sup>2</sup>
10. We all need to be consistent in defending and respecting everyone. And doing so does not mean you have to diminish your own beliefs. That’s how all our rights will be taken seriously. We can’t pick and choose who gets what rights. Every religion is susceptible to the fluctuations of prominence and obscurity. The cultural group that enjoys privilege today may lose it tomorrow, even in nations where the rule of law and democratic principles have been enshrined for centuries.
11. Having a broad view of religious liberty helps us see that it is universal, not just the preserve of those who are powerful or popular. Religious freedom is sup apolitical, something that is part of our nature before politics declares it to be so. Every person, regardless of religion, race, gender, orientation or nationality, possesses fundamental rights simply by being human. They include the right to life, liberty, security, equal protection of the law and the freedom of thought, speech, and religion, as well as protection from political extremism. But we all must remember, be taught and pass on the responsibilities that come with these rights.
12. Rights are inscribed in laws, constitutions and charters the world over, but they were first imprinted in the human heart by a loving God. One of the founders of this nation, Alexander Hamilton, wrote, “The sacred rights of mankind are not to be rummaged for among old parchments or musty records. They are written, as with a sun beam, in the whole volume of human nature, by the hand of the divinity itself; and can never be erased or obscured by mortal power.”<sup>3</sup>
13. Though these inalienable rights come from above, they still have to be cultivated by human beings below. It is up to us — it is the responsibility associated with these rights — to implement, protect and anchor them in our daily life.

## **Two Sides of the Religious Freedom Coin**

14. Rights and responsibilities can’t be separated without negative consequences. The symbiosis between rights and responsibilities is often forgotten in the rush to demand that something be given to us, while forgetting to foster the conditions in which that right can even be respected

or have meaning.

15. Appropriately exercised, rights and responsibilities move in a virtuous circle. We are more inclined to honor the rights of people when we know them personally and feel a sense of responsibility for their well-being. Meaning in life comes from giving yourself to others, not demanding that others give to you. Author and commentator David Brooks has written that joy comes from commitment:
16. “In reality, the people who live best tie themselves down. They don’t ask: What cool thing can I do next? They ask: What is my responsibility here? They respond to some problem or get called out of themselves by a deep love. By planting themselves in one neighborhood, one organization or one mission, they earn trust. They have the freedom to make a lasting difference. It’s the chains we choose that set us free.”<sup>4</sup>
17. Important work in religious freedom is found in walking a mile with your brother and sister, listening to a stranger talk about their religious experience, and in the gentle efforts of dialogue and persuasion.
18. The study of religious liberty has so many facets and nuances it can be dizzying. The conversation often focuses on the law — what it is, what it should be, what it protects, what it should protect, how it sets boundaries and so on. Law is vital and is an essential part of a bigger picture. However, rights act more like habits than dry edicts. Law and custom must work together.
19. Behind every right, if we look closely enough, stand layers upon layers of social practices that regulate innumerable human interactions in societies, families, marriages, friendships and all human relationships. They are called “norms,” and they require innumerable transactions of give and take. The demands we make of the law only make sense when embedded in a web of countless norms that make our society possible. We need to keep finding ways to align what we demand with what we can contribute—to our families, workplaces, neighborhoods, churches, schools and communities.
20. Understanding and appreciation of religious freedom will need to move from the exclusive realm of specialists to a much broader audience, to include those who don’t grasp the intricacies of the law nor have the capacity to influence the law in conventional ways.
21. To do this, we will need to reframe our own understanding and more effectively articulate what this freedom means and the responsibility it brings. We have a particular obligation to carry this to a younger audience who will be charged to see these freedoms protected and responsibilities fulfilled in the coming years.

## **A Challenge to Embrace**

22. Many in the rising generation today are concerned about serving those in need, making a difference, changing the world and helping their community. They seek morality and responsibility and understand the language of universality. Our young people can be jaded by exclusion, inconsistent application of laws and entrenched interests of a few to the detriment of many. They are attuned to the authentic. They are outward-looking and deeply sensitive to treating people fairly and equally. Their yearning to serve is deep. All of this is wonderful and promising!
23. But on the whole, the religiosity of young people is shifting. They are much less inclined to identify with a particular religion, let alone attend church.<sup>5</sup> They can see religion as stifling their values of inclusion and tolerance. But it is not only the youth; the trend toward a secularized public life affects all ages.<sup>6</sup> One of the results is that our culture is fragmenting into cultural and ideological tribes.

24. President Gordon B. Hinckley, former president of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, once said, “Men everywhere seem to be groping as in darkness, casting aside the traditions that were the strength of our society yet unable to find a new star to guide them.”<sup>7</sup>
25. Peter Beinart, a writer and political science professor at City University of New York, sees a connection between decreasing religious activity and increasing political conflict. He recently wrote, “Maybe religion builds habits and networks that help people better weather national traumas, and thus retain their faith that the system works. For whatever reason, secularization isn’t easing political conflict. It’s making American politics even more convulsive and zero-sum.”<sup>8</sup>
26. We can help fill this void with a positive message and constructive actions. There is a need, and a real opportunity, for religious freedom to be framed differently and be more clearly understood.

## **Be a Force in the World**

27. Do we fear the world more than we shape it? Do we let our anxieties prevent us from making a difference? Do we spend more time hiding from society’s flaws than fixing its problems?
28. How we answer these questions determines what our social environment looks like. It is always changing and improves or deteriorates depending on our actions. Society is not something that just happens to us; it is something we help shape.
29. The main thing is to engage, dialogue, bridge and interact with people of all sorts. Unless we participate, we lose our ability to both influence the world and learn from it. As British novelist E.M. Forster put it, “Only connect! ... Live in fragments no longer.”<sup>9</sup>
30. We all have a stake in this debate. “No man is an island, entire of itself; every man is a piece of the continent, a part of the main.”<sup>10</sup> The poet John Donne wrote these words nearly 400 years ago, but they still resonate today.
31. Contributing to the good of society is part of our spiritual stewardship. Jesus taught his followers to be the light of the world and the salt of the earth. Let your light shine, he said, as a city on a hill. Salt was an ancient symbol of friendship and generosity. And like salt, we have a duty to savor person-to-person connections and nurture amity between adversaries. We must not cloister ourselves with others who think like us and congregations that believe like us. Jesus demonstrated how to lift society, moving deliberately to the despised, the diseased and the misunderstood, listening to and healing them.
32. I have been inspired by the goodness and selflessness of members of my own church who reach out to those in need. Wherever I have witnessed, in the course of my service, those afflicted by fire, flood or any manner of natural disaster or humanitarian crisis, our people have been there. When visiting such a location in California, I was asked if I knew what FEMA stood for.
33. As I struggled with “Federal... Emergency...,” my friend said, “No, it’s ‘Find Every Mormon Available.’” It was said in jest, but more than once media has reported that the first two groups at the scene were the Mormons and the Latter-day Saints — reminding us of the uphill task we have to be known by our full name. The point is, our people do go out of their way, a very long way out of their way, to help in crises the world over. This isn’t only disaster response and assisting refugees. These devoted souls are there in those often invisible, private, chronic situations which can last a lifetime. And of course, it’s not just our people; we work alongside representatives of numerous other faiths, often partnering with them in some of the most challenging parts of the world. There are certainly those involved doing extraordinary work for whom faith is not a driving force. But these contributions with our fellow believers are vast.

And, importantly in today's context, they are often overlooked. Part of that is our own fault, as we can have something of a tortured relationship with the idea of telling people about these good works. As a church, we are torn between having these efforts be private and letting that light shine in a way that will create awareness that we take our responsibility of contributing to society very seriously. We will probably need to talk more openly about these contributions, letting people know that at the heart of our faith is the desire to help our fellow human beings, wherever they are, people of faith and no faith at all. And that we do so without seeking converts in these most trying moments in people's lives.

34. We need to help many more young people see the opportunities the free exercise of religion provides to serve others in need and unite communities in ways that benefit all people. And we need to help them understand that the expression of religious belief through community service is dependent on religious freedom. With this understanding, they will not only value religious freedom more deeply but will courageously act to strengthen and perpetuate it. Influencing society always seems to be the job of someone else — someone with more power, more money, more time. Perhaps we expect some program or sponsor to take the lead. But when it comes to taking care of people, there is no "someone else"; there is only us. Civic engagement requires people to freely act on their beliefs and solve the problems of their communities. If the prevailing philanthropic desires of our rising generation are to be harnessed and maximized, our young people will need to come to the same conclusion as have so many of us here today. And that is, that this is the most worthy of causes — a spring and holiest beliefs, and at the same time, blesses individuals, families, communities of all descriptions and entire nations. How to unite these benevolent desires of the rising generation with the responsibility of preserving religious freedom, along with every other inalienable right, is the task before all of us, and I am so grateful that you have gathered in this way to address just that.
35. We have a responsibility to help and, as God told the Prophet Jeremiah, "seek the welfare of the city where I have sent you into exile, and pray to the Lord on its behalf, for in its welfare you will find your welfare."<sup>11</sup>

## Conclusion

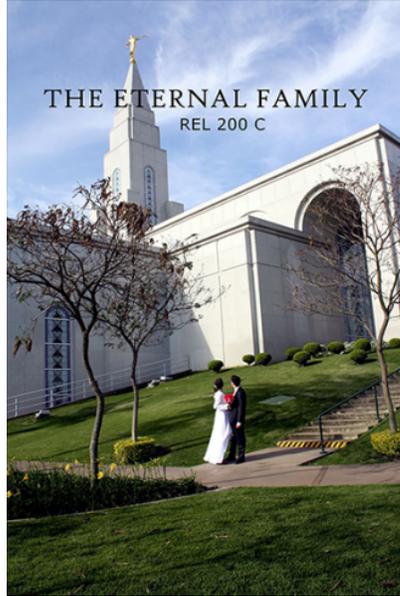
36. Now to conclude, every society has a foundation of truths, rules, expectations and norms which guide their thinking and their actions every day. Many take them for granted. And like all things we suppose will simply always be there for us — like the air we breathe — we hardly notice them. That is, until they're challenged. And then we have to look closely and really get to know them, as if discovering them for the first time. So it is with religious freedom.
37. The way we all as human beings form our deepest beliefs is perhaps life's greatest journey of discovery. The freedom in which we do so is precious. Our ability to practice and share those beliefs as we learn of and come to understand the beliefs of others enriches us all, broadens our view and creates harmony. A climate in which we are free to believe and practice is also a climate in which we can contribute. Religious freedom demands both the universal right and the universal responsibility, and it is our turn to do our part.
38. As human beings and the children of divine creation, we all want to live by a moral vision and want to share it with others. In doing this, we enter the realm of both religion and politics. This can be messy and contentious, but we have reason to be optimistic. As Martin Luther King Jr. was so fond of saying, drawing from the abolitionist Theodore Parker, "The arc of the moral universe is long, but it bends toward justice."<sup>12</sup>
39. We are in that arc, and God expects us to do our part in nudging it toward justice. This is our

work. Thank you.

## Notes

1. "A Celebration of Religious Freedom," interfaith address in São Paulo, Brazil, April 29, 2015.
2. Pew Research Center on Religion and Public Life, Religious Landscape Study, 2019, <http://www.pewforum.org/religious-landscape-study>.
3. Alexander Hamilton, *The Farmer Refuted*, 1775, p. 5.
4. David Brooks, "Five Lies Our Culture Tells: The Cultural Roots of Our Political Problem," *The New York Times*, April 15, 2019.
5. Michael Lipka, "Millennials Increasingly Are Driving Growth of 'Nones,'" Pew Research Center, May 12, 2015.
6. Becka A. Alper, "Why America's 'Nones' Don't Identify with a Religion," Pew Research Center, August 8, 2018.
7. Gordon B. Hinckley, "Pursue the Steady Course," *Ensign*, January 2005, 4.
8. Peter Beinart, "Breaking Faith," *The Atlantic Monthly*, April 2017.
9. E.M. Forster, *Howard's End*, 1910, chapter 22, p. 214.
10. John Donne, Meditation XVII, Devotions upon Emergent Occasions.
11. Jeremiah 29:7, English Standard Version Anglicized.
12. Martin Luther King Jr., "Remaining Awake Through a Great Revolution," speech given at the National Cathedral, March 31, 1968.

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