

**Testimony by Most Reverend Thomas G. Wenski
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**Hearing on the
2005 Human Rights Report
of the U.S. Department of State
before the
International Relations Committee
of the United States House of Representatives
Subcommittee on Africa, Global Human Rights and International Operations
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INTRODUCTION

Mr. Chairman and distinguished Members of the Subcommittee, allow me to thank you for this opportunity to offer testimony before the committee on the issue of human rights. Let me also express my appreciation to you for your leadership in promoting protection of human rights as a key aspect of U.S. foreign policy.

I serve as the Chairman of the Committee on International Policy of the United States Conference of Catholic Bishops. The Committee's mission and major priorities include the advancement of human rights and religious freedom. I will summarize my remarks and ask that my full written testimony be entered into the record.

This testimony of our bishops' Conference will address: the importance and nature of religious freedom and its relevance to conflicts in the world today; and at the request of the Subcommittee, religious freedom and the status of Christians in some Islamic countries; and recommendations for U.S. policies to improve religious freedom in countries with Muslim majorities. Given the limitations of time and focus, today's testimony will not provide a comprehensive overview of our serious concerns for religious freedom in countries without Muslim majorities. In addition, clearly our Conference will continue to refine and develop our perspectives on Christian-Muslim relations in light of our ongoing dialogue and experience.

The Annual Human Rights Report

The United States Conference of Catholic Bishops once again welcomes the release of the annual human rights report by the Department of State. These annual reports document progress or the lack of it in achieving human rights, and serve as a visible reminder of the commitment that our nation has made to pursue human rights as a central commitment of U.S. foreign policy.

In today's world, a world of unprecedented advances in many fields and yet one marked by crushing poverty, intractable conflicts, bloody violence and widespread denial of human

rights, building an international order on the foundation of fundamental human rights is not simply a moral ideal; it is a practical necessity. As the late Pope John Paul II declared: “[R]espect for human rights [is] the secret of true peace.”¹

Today’s advances in human knowledge and capacity offer humanity an unparalleled opportunity to affirm in law and practice the human dignity of every person, regardless of their religious tradition, social status, ethnic background, racial group, or national origin. But to move toward greater respect for human rights, humanity’s technological and economic achievements must be matched by moral advancement, greater commitment to human rights and the active pursuit of the universal common good of peace with justice. In the words of our late Holy Father, a genuine respect for human rights throughout the world would represent “a true milestone on the path of humanity’s moral progress.”² The annual human rights reports provide one important measure of this moral progress or lack of it.

Experience of the U.S. Catholic Bishops

The U.S. Catholic bishops are not strangers to the struggle for human rights and religious freedom. As pastors within a universal Church, we hear the cries and share the pain of believers of all religions around the world who suffer persecution, violence and discrimination. From apartheid in South Africa and religious persecution in the former Soviet Union and its satellites in Eastern Europe and Central Asia, to the human rights struggles in Central and South America, from today’s challenges to religious freedom in China and Vietnam, Sudan and Nigeria, to those in Russia and Saudi Arabia, the Holy Land and elsewhere, our Conference has worked—sometimes visibly, and sometimes of necessity quietly—to defend, promote and advance human rights and religious liberty.

Delegations of our bishops’ Conference have journeyed to many lands to express personally and visibly our solidarity with our brother bishops, our fellow Catholics and people of other faiths. The Conference has issued many public appeals and initiated numerous private communications to call for legal protections, to protest killings and detentions, and to promote victims’ rights with the United States and foreign governments. Our Conference is deeply committed to promoting religious freedom consistently and persistently. We are proud to have played a significant role in the development and passage of the International Religious Freedom Act of 1998.

In our work for religious freedom, our bishops’ Conference listens carefully to the pleas of those who suffer persecution and discrimination and learns from their experiences and seeks their counsel. This task includes consulting closely with local Catholic bishops throughout the world, with other religious leaders and with the Holy See. Our experience and conviction is that the victims of religious discrimination and persecution are often the best sources of information and the most reliable guides as to what should be done regarding their situation.

¹ Pope John Paul II, World Day of Peace Message, January 1, 1999.

² Pope John Paul II, Address to the 34th General Assembly of the United Nations, October 2, 1979. (The Declaration of Human Rights “remains one of the highest expressions of the human conscience of our time.”)

THE IMPORTANCE AND NATURE OF RELIGIOUS FREEDOM

Religious Freedom and Human Rights

In testimony before this Subcommittee on November 15, 2005, Bishop Ricardo Ramirez of the Diocese of Las Cruces, a member of our bishops' Committee on International Policy, made the case that religious freedom is the first of our freedoms and lies at the heart of human rights from the perspective of Catholic teaching. This assertion is based on both the conviction and the experience of our Church.

Pope John Paul II taught: "The most fundamental human freedom is that of practicing one's faith openly, which for human beings is their reason for living."³ Faith is oriented to the ultimate concern and purpose of human life. To deny religious freedom is to rob human persons of the ultimate meaning and direction of their lives. Constraining religious liberty diminishes our humanity.

In its *Declaration on Religious Freedom (Dignitatis Humanae)*, the Second Vatican Council declared: "The right of religious freedom has its foundation in the very dignity of the human person, as this dignity is known through the revealed Word of God and reason itself."⁴ The Universal Declaration of Human Rights, adopted by many nations of the world, is based on human reason. Catholic teaching on human rights is based on both reason and religious faith. Both the United Nations' Declaration and Catholic teaching root human rights in the dignity of the human person. The fact that both human reason and religious faith can lead to respect for human rights is evident in the collaboration of diverse actors and groups throughout the world who work to promote respect for inalienable and universal human rights.

A commitment to human rights is not alien to any authentic quest for religious or moral truth because it flows from the very nature of the human person and emerges naturally in all authentic religious, moral and cultural traditions as they move to express ever more deeply the truth of human life. It is significant that nations with widely varying religious heritages have embraced the Universal Declaration of Human Rights.

It also is important to understand that full religious freedom is a rich reality with broad personal and societal implications. Religious liberty begins with the right to worship according to one's conscience, but it does not end there. Religious freedom covers a broad range of vital activities, from freedom of worship to freedom of conscience, from the right to establish schools and charities to the right to participate in and seek to influence public affairs. Religious freedom is inextricably linked to other fundamental human rights, such as freedom of association, freedom of speech, and the legal recognition of voluntary associations. Religious freedom is a right exercised by both individual persons and religious communities and institutions.

The Importance of Religious Freedom in U.S. Foreign Policy

The promotion and protection of religious freedom is also important for practical reasons. Despite some signs to the contrary, religion can be a powerful force for peace with justice. The

³ Pope John Paul II, World Day of Peace Message, January 1, 1988.

⁴ Second Vatican Council, *Dignitatis Humanae*, 1965 #2.

moral values that flow from authentic religious belief can help build bridges between diverse communities. Our own bishops' Conference is involved in an interfaith initiative that unites religious leaders of the Jewish, Christian and Muslim traditions in the quest for peace in the Middle East. A shining example of the positive role that religion can play in the work of peace was the Day of Prayer for Peace in the World that was held in Assisi on January 24, 2002. The religious leaders gathered there from the four corners of the earth and virtually every major religious tradition adopted a Decalogue of Assisi for Peace. The first of its ten affirmations declared:

We commit ourselves to proclaiming our firm conviction that violence and terrorism are incompatible with the authentic spirit of religion, and, as we condemn every recourse to violence and war in the name of God or of religion, we commit ourselves to doing everything possible to eliminate the root causes of terrorism.⁵

Our Conference is not naïve about the complex and differing roles of religion in the world. We know that religion can be exploited and misused to foster conflict and intensify unhealthy rivalries. But we also know that religion is most often twisted in situations where coercion prevails over tolerance. In places enjoying authentic religious freedom, people are freer to enter into the quest for truth and more open to seeing “the other” as a brother or sister.

Given the enormous potential of religion to contribute to a more humane world, as well as the troubling ways religion can be manipulated, especially in coercive or repressive environments, religious freedom needs to be at the center of the work on human rights in U.S. foreign policy.

Nature of Conflict Today and Role of Religion

Today there is a growing recognition of the pluralism of religious belief. More and more people live shoulder to shoulder with others of different beliefs or no belief at all. Even in countries where one religion predominates, living in complete religious isolation is often no longer possible. Global communications sometimes make the world a virtual village. Increased immigration often makes people of diverse backgrounds neighbors. These new realities can move communities and nations in two very different directions: toward greater respect for others of differing religious belief or toward greater fear and intolerance. The challenge before humanity is to help build a global culture and practice that respects religious freedom as a guarantor of human dignity and a contributor to peace with justice.

Growing pluralism and expanding global communications are making us more aware of the complexity of conflict today. In a world that is rapidly changing, many people are searching for identity and a greater sense of self determination. In the context of globalization, ethnic and religious differences can be more easily manipulated for political ends. We have seen this tragic phenomenon in the Balkans, in Sudan, in Rwanda, in India, and now in Iraq. Since in many

⁵ Decalogue of Assisi for Peace, January 24, 2002; Letter of John Paul II to All Heads of State and Government of the World and Decalogue of Assisi for Peace, February 24, 2002.

societies ethnic and religious identities are closely aligned, it is often possible to exploit these identities for political advantage.

In some cases, there is a temptation to ignore or minimize the denial of religious freedom and its damage to the human spirit, its destruction of human community, and its role in bloody violence. However, it is also all too easy to misinterpret conflicts as primarily religious in nature. Religious differences and tensions certainly exist and there are violations of human rights and religious freedom perpetrated by religious believers of one faith against another or by those of no faith at all. However, the experience of our bishops' Conference leads us to see some, but not all, of these conflicts as less religious in nature and more political and economic in their underlying origins. Sometimes the conflict is a complex combination of several factors. For these reasons, a careful diagnosis of the unique aspects of each conflict is needed if the treatment is to be effective. The misuses of religion should never be minimized or excused, but neither should they become an excuse to ignore other causes of conflict.

This complexity is why our Conference is wary of too easily labeling conflicts as simply or totally religious. Such labeling can mask a complex web of underlying social, economic and political factors that contribute to the conflict, especially when there are perceived or real socio-economic inequalities existing between different ethnic groups. Governments and other social institutions must be careful not to interpret conflicts too narrowly as primarily or exclusively religious in nature because then other important causes of the conflict may not be addressed. Nor should governments and others neglect or turn away from the brutal reality of religious intolerance and violence where it is genuinely present.

RELIGIOUS FREEDOM AND THE STATUS OF CHRISTIANS IN ISLAMIC COUNTRIES

Islam and Christianity

This testimony will of necessity highlight areas of tension and conflict between Christians and Muslims, but it is important to remember that the Catholic Church at its highest levels has declared its "high regard" for Muslims. They worship the one God and trace their faith back to Abraham.⁶ In addition, Christians and Muslims share many moral commitments such as those to the poor, to justice and to family life. Our Conference is deeply committed to and involved in ongoing dialogue and common efforts with Muslim leaders.

The U.S. bishops have been and continue to be very concerned about the clear denial of human rights and religious freedom in a number of countries, including China, Cuba, Russia, India and others. However, at the request of the Subcommittee, this testimony will focus on some of the concerns surrounding religious liberty and the general situation of Christians in some Islamic countries. This focus, which is both timely and relevant, should not be interpreted as suggesting that these are the principal or only countries in which there are serious concerns for religious freedom or that other religious minorities that are not Christian do not suffer from religious discrimination. It is equally important to avoid an overly simplistic view that argues that there is a fundamental clash of cultures between all of Christianity and all of Islam.

⁶ Second Vatican Council, *Declaration on the Relation of the Church to Non-Christian Religions (Nostra Aetate)*, October 28, 1965, no. 3.

Christianity takes many forms as does Islam. Over-generalizing can become an exercise of prejudice. The Islamic community is a very large and complex community of faith and the conditions of religious freedom are different from country to country and region to region.

However, as Bishop Ramirez stated on behalf of our bishops' Conference in his November 2005 testimony to this same Subcommittee, some of the most significant challenges for religious freedom and forging constructive roles for religion in world affairs are developing relationships between Christians and Muslims. The violence in Afghanistan and Iraq, the ongoing conflicts in the Middle East and several conflicts in Africa come close to being perceived, in overly simplistic terms, as just contests of East versus West, of all of Islam versus all of Christianity.

These realities and perceptions require careful analysis, respectful dialogue and candid discussion. Like Christianity, Islam is a religion with different expressions. Tensions among these expressions of Islam have been exacerbated by the rise of militant Islam and the misuse and perversion of faith to justify violence. In our own dialogue with some Islamic leaders, we hear these kinds of concerns: How will Islamic societies meet the social, political and economic aspirations and needs of their citizens? Will violence against the innocent be repudiated and resisted? What religious vision of Islam will gain ascendancy in the hearts and minds of most Muslims—a more tolerant, inclusive and engaged Islam, or a more fundamentalist, exclusive, isolationist Islam?

Regrettably, all religions, including Christianity, have in the past and are today wrestling with similar questions. It is a source of pain to acknowledge that Christians have at times failed to extend the tolerance and understanding that we ourselves expect. Over the centuries, the Catholic Church has deepened its own understanding of religious freedom and how to live our faith in a religiously pluralistic world. The history of intolerance and persecution of those of other religious traditions is a tragic reminder of what has happened and is at stake today. In preparation for the Jubilee Year 2000, our late Holy Father, Pope John Paul II acknowledged this history and expressed profound regret in these words: “Another painful chapter of history to which the sons and daughters of the Church must return with a spirit of repentance is that of the acquiescence given, especially in certain centuries, to *intolerance and even the use of violence* in the service of truth.”⁷

The perception of a great contest between Islam and the West is exacerbated by the history and experience of colonialism that is remembered by many in the Middle East, Africa and Asia. The pervasiveness of extremely secular and other outside pressures through some processes of globalization often cause apprehensions and tensions in these societies. These conflicts in turn can lead some in the Islamic world to conclude, rightly or wrongly, that their culture and religious beliefs are under assault by outsiders or the West as a whole. In this context misuse and distortions of religion tragically serve the political goals of extremists. Terrorism is used for many purposes, none defensible, including the goal of coercing other Muslims to abandon their own convictions and adopt a more militant version of Islam. Casting their cause

⁷ Pope John Paul II, *Tertio Millennio Adveniente*, November 10, 1994, no. 35.

as a conflict with Christianity, or with Judaism, extremists attempt to make their political objectives appear to be religious obligations.

The US bishops' Conference continues to be deeply concerned about the mistreatment of Christians and other religious minorities in some Islamic countries and with growing tensions among different Muslim traditions. This does not mean that every instance of violence against Christians should be interpreted as persecution or that there is an inevitable and systematic persecution of Christians and other religious minorities in countries with Muslim majorities. It generally appears to be the case, however, that in societies with growing militant Islamist influences there are often increases in intolerance and discrimination against religious minorities, including Christians.

Tensions between Christians and Muslims

Our Conference applies the same fundamental criteria regarding human rights and religious freedom to all countries whether or not they have Muslim or other religious majorities. Human dignity demands that people have the freedom to worship and to practice their faith both personally and communally regardless of where they live.

The U.S. Catholic Bishops do not hesitate to voice our concerns, to call on governments and to work with leaders of other faiths to defend the right to religious freedom for Catholics and those of other faiths. In order to be effective, these efforts ought not simply condemn violations of religious freedom, but they should also seek to engage, encourage and persuade. Accurate analyses and reporting of the facts are necessary. This is one of the great values of the State Department's report on human rights and of reports by the U.S. Commission on International Religious Freedom and other human rights organizations.

The stark realities of religious repression should not be overlooked or minimized for political, economic or other reasons. At times, clear judgments and sanctions are required, but our Conference primarily emphasizes sustained engagement, persistent dialogue, and collaborative international efforts to improve and strengthen the commitment to religious freedom in affected countries around the world.

There appears to be a serious structural failure to adequately recognize the right to religious freedom in some countries with Muslim majorities. This fact should not be denied or minimized. This serious problem of a lack of religious freedom in some Muslim countries can be made worse in two ways: by ignoring or minimizing the problem, and by responding in ways that make the problem worse and put religious freedom at greater risk. But the example of countries with Muslim majorities that better respect the rights, practices and principles of religious freedom should be acknowledged and held up as models.

Serious tensions and religious conflicts do exist between Christians and Muslims in some Islamic countries and the denial of religious liberty in these situations is a painful reality. But it is essential to recognize that these problems can be made worse by ignoring them or exacerbated by policies that reinforce the sense that Islam itself is under siege. Our nation must get the diagnosis right. In addition to addressing forthrightly infringements on religious liberty, our country must be cognizant of a number of other social, economic, political and military factors

that contribute to situations in which religious intolerance toward Christians and other religious minorities is more likely to grow. None of these factors justifies religious discrimination or persecution. Nothing can justify the denial of this basic human right, but these factors clearly contribute to a climate that is more conducive to religious intolerance in Islamic countries.

First, “identity politics” can inflame religious differences. A resurgence of Islamic faith is serving to reinforce identity in many countries leading at times to overt discrimination and actual mistreatment of Christians. Our nation must promote equitable economic opportunity, equal participation in political decision making, and respect for local cultures. These actions can reduce the appeal of “identity politics,” which flourishes in places where there is inequality between ethnic or religious groups.

Second, the powerful forces of secularization and materialism that often accompany globalization are perceived by many Muslims as threatening traditional Islamic values. We see an example of this most recently with the publication of the religiously offensive cartoons in Western Europe and the subsequent violent reactions, a number of them orchestrated by governments. The cartoons were religiously insensitive, but the violence they engendered was unjustified. The U.S. and other nations need to find appropriate ways both to promote freedom of expression and to promote religious respect and cultural civility, especially in the media.

Third, many in the Islamic world interpret aspects and tactics of the struggle against terrorism as a struggle against Islam itself. This misinterpretation precipitates a reactionary impulse to equate anything western with Christianity. Indigenous Christians, who in most cases have local roots that predate the arrival of Islam, are erroneously identified and targeted as allies of adversaries of Islam. The struggle against terrorism must be conducted principally with non-military means and with the just and discriminate use of force only when absolutely necessary.⁸ Tragically, the abuse and humiliation of prisoners and detainees in U.S. custody has reinforced negative perceptions of the struggle against terrorism in Islamic countries.⁹ The conduct of the so-called “war on terrorism” merits careful and comprehensive review for its broader impact and consequences.

Fourth, religious nationalists, political extremists, such as Al Qaida and other terrorist groups, misuse religious language and imagery to pursue their own political objectives, along with coercion and terrorism, to inflame hatred and prejudices. Our nation needs to build relationships of mutual respect with religious leaders in Islamic countries and support in appropriate ways those courageous religious leaders who seek to correct the distortions and abuse of religion by militants and extremists.

Fifth, the failure to secure a just and peaceful end to the Israeli-Palestinian conflict with its resulting occupation of Palestinian lands, the current occupation of Iraq by U.S. troops, and

⁸ cf. U.S. Conference of Catholic Bishops, *Living With Faith and Hope After September 11*, November 14, 2001, and Administrative Committee, United States Conference of Catholic Bishops, *Statement on the Anniversary of September 11th*, September 10, 2002.

⁹ cf. Bishop John H. Ricard, Chairman, USCCB Committee on International Policy, Letter to Senate on Prohibition on Torture, October 4, 2005; Statement on Abuse of Iraqi Prisoners, May 14, 2004.

the continuing presence of the U.S. military in a number of Muslim countries contribute to some Muslim suspicions and hostility toward our nation and its Christian majority and sometimes spills over into prejudices and distrust of indigenous Christians in Muslim nations.

Some Country Examples

Let me now cite specific examples to illustrate aspects of the situations in which Christians in some Islamic countries find themselves. These examples focus on problematic situations that vary widely.

Saudi Arabia. The U.S. Department of State has accurately declared that there is “no religious freedom” in Saudi Arabia. Islam is the official religion and only the state-sanctioned version of Sunni Islam is allowed. The legal and societal structure of the Kingdom discriminates against Shi’a Muslims and other religious minorities. While it is difficult to get an accurate census of the number of Christians in the country, rough estimates suggest that there are over 500,000 Catholics alone in Saudi Arabia as a result of the presence of many Filipinos. Catholics do not enjoy freedom to worship; it is forbidden by Saudi law. There are no churches and no public expressions of Christian faith. Strong societal pressures backed by government decree to conform to a strict version of Sunni Islam create a situation of extreme discrimination and a clear and on-going denial of the fundamental right of religious freedom.

Of course, the historic presence and role of Islam in Saudi Arabia needs to be acknowledged, but the persistent and complete denial of religious liberty to persons of other faiths living in the Kingdom needs to be addressed and overcome. The record of Saudi Arabia is one of the worst in the world. The U.S. government ought to make every effort to urge its ally to adopt and practice greater respect for religious liberty and human rights.

Iraq. While our Conference has raised serious moral questions about the decision to use military force in Iraq, we hope that Iraqis will be successful in forming a viable, stable, unified and democratic national government. However, we remain very concerned about human rights, including religious freedom, in Iraq. Even though the new constitution includes key affirmations of basic human rights and some helpful language regarding religious freedom, it also contains contradictory and ambiguous language that is deeply troubling. Constitutional provisions circumscribe religious liberty by not allowing any law to contradict the principles of Islam and by authorizing the appointment of experts in Islamic law to serve on the Supreme Court, even if they have no training in civil law.

These concerns are shared by the Assyro-Chaldean community and other religious minorities in Iraq. Chaldean Patriarch Emmanuel Delly III of Baghdad met with Iraqi President Jalal Talabani and Prime Minister Ibrahim Jafari on September 18, 2005, requesting that Article 2.1(a) be removed from the constitution. This article states that “no law that contradicts the established provisions of Islam may be established.” The Patriarch, together with other bishops and religious leaders of other minority communities, rightfully worry about the possibility of discrimination and persecution unless the constitution, and laws that will implement it, guarantee full and unhindered religious freedom.

Already thousands of Christians and other minorities have fled Iraq. Much of this emigration is due to the lack of general security and economic opportunity that affects all religious and ethnic groups in Iraq. But there are also fears of discrimination and persecution in light of the adopted Constitution and in the wake of repeated instances of violence, the bombing of churches, and harassment. Our Conference repeatedly raised these serious concerns with the Administration and other government officials and expressed our ongoing solidarity with the Church in Iraq.

In light of the recent attack on the Golden Mosque of Samarra and the subsequent deadly increase in violence between Shi'a and Sunni Muslims, our Conference is even more deeply concerned for the protection of human rights and religious freedom in Iraq for both Muslims and religious minorities. Both adequate security and religious freedom are keys to peace in Iraq. The U.S. government must continue to make security a priority in Iraq and should encourage Iraqis to adopt constitutional provisions, implementing legislation, and policies and practices that fully respect religious freedom.¹⁰

Pakistan, and Bangladesh. These two countries have relatively small Christian minorities, including Catholics. In both countries there have been shameful attacks on Christians, resulting in the burning of churches, false accusations of blasphemy—a capital offense in Pakistan—and not a few murders. Some of the underlying prejudices that may contribute to harassment and attacks relate to socio-economic status, but religion is clearly a factor. In both countries, the government has made excuses about its inability to control groups of extremists, but it seems abundantly clear that much more can and should be done to insist that these governments act with improved effectiveness, greater conformity with international law and stronger respect for religious rights.¹¹ The U.S. government has close relationships with these countries and needs to work with them to improve their records and performance on religious freedom, including more robustly defending the lives, property and rights of religious minorities. In the case of Pakistan, the blasphemy laws and their implementation remain serious issues.

The Holy Land—Israel and the Occupied Palestinian Territories. Most Christians in the Holy Land are Arabs. The exodus of Christians from the Holy Land and other parts of the Middle East has been occurring for decades and the reasons for it are complex. Surveys of Palestinian Christians suggest that most leave for lack of economic opportunities. Others leave

¹⁰ cf. Bishop Thomas G. Wenski, Chairman, USCCB Committee on International Policy, *Toward a Responsible Transition in Iraq*, January 12, 2006; Letter to Secretary Condoleeza Rice and National Security Advisor Stephen Hadley, Bishop John Ricard, August 8, 2005; Letters to Secretary Colin Powell and Interim Prime Minister Iyad Allawi on Iraqi Christians, Bishop John Ricard, October 22, 2004.

¹¹ Letter to Ambassador Jehandir Karamat on Terrorist Attacks Against Christian Churches, Bishop Thomas Wenski, February 24, 2006; Letter to Pakistani Ambassador on Attacks, Bishop Thomas Wenski, November 17, 2005; Letter to Pakistani Ambassador on Intolerance in Bahawalpur, Cardinal Bernard Law, November 2, 2001; Letter to President Bush on Violence in Bahawalpur, Cardinal Bernard Law, November 2, 2001; Letter to Secretary Albright on Religious Freedom, Archbishop Theodore McCarrick, December 2, 1998; Letter to Pakistani Ambassador on Blasphemy Law, Bishop Daniel Reilly, February 22, 1995.

due to the continuing violence and political turmoil. These surveys appear to indicate that Palestinian Christians do not leave primarily for reasons of religious discrimination.¹²

In the Holy Land, Christians are often caught between the Israeli Jews and Palestinian Muslims. While Christians in the past have often played a bridge role, this is becoming more difficult as the two sides move further apart and as the numbers of Christians continue to diminish. Since the second intifada and the collapse of law in parts of the occupied territories, Christians feel more vulnerable for a variety of reasons, including the route of the Israeli security wall that divides many Christian communities and isolates them from access to holy sites and economic opportunities, and seizures of land and water resources related to building the wall and to criminal groups that the Palestinian Authority has been unable or unwilling to control. The groups have fraudulently taken some of the homes of Christians, e.g. in the Bethlehem area.

The difficult situation of the Church in the Holy Land is exacerbated by the failure to make adequate progress in the Vatican-Israeli negotiations on implementation of the Fundamental Agreement between Israel and the Holy See. Many Church agencies and institutions are put at risk by tax policies and other problems. It is long past time to fulfill the promises and potential of this landmark agreement.

The recent election of a Hamas-led government certainly presents a major new obstacle to the peace process. Hamas must recognize Israel and renounce terrorism if it is to be in a position to promote a just peace and to secure a viable state for Palestinians. The failure to achieve a genuine two-state solution to the conflict will continue to put pressure on the Christian community. In recognition of the growing poverty and despair in the occupied territories, our Conference has urged the U.S. to find appropriate ways to deliver urgently needed assistance to the Palestinian people, especially through non-governmental organizations. Christian agencies provide valuable social services and cutting off aid will hamper their ability to maintain a presence and have an effective role in Palestinian society.

The election of Hamas could also present new challenges and dangers for religious freedom for Christians. Hamas' stated commitment to building an Islamic state raises great concern; however, it will be important to see what a possible Islamic state will mean in practice and whether such a state will adopt discriminatory practices against Christians or allow others in society to do so.

The U.S. should made clear to all those in the Holy Land that their future requires peace and security for two peoples and genuine religious freedom for the three religions for whom the land is holy (as well as for all other religious minorities). Strong and persistent U.S. leadership is needed to hold Palestinians and Israelis accountable to their "road map" obligations. The U.S. must challenge and restrain both parties to the conflict, but in different ways. Hamas has to reject terrorism and recognize Israel in order to enter into a sustainable peace process. Israel must restrain military responses and avoid actions that compromise a two-state solution. In addition,

¹² Palestinian and Arab Christians: The Challenges Ahead. Dr. Bernard Sabella, University of Bethlehem, September 22, 2004, p. 14.

the U.S. must continue to press Israel to conclude successfully negotiations with the Holy See related to the Fundamental Agreement.¹³

Egypt. The indigenous Coptic Church in Egypt is the largest community of Christian Arabs in the world. Catholics make up a relatively small percentage of the minority Christian population. Christians in Egypt face serious patterns of discrimination and intolerance. Violence against Christians has grown, especially with the rise of the Muslim Brotherhood with its Islamist agenda and opposition to the government. Christians accuse the government of being lax in protecting Christians from violence and of discriminating against Christians in making government appointments and actively inhibiting evangelization. In addition to the discrimination and harassment suffered by individual Christians, the Church faces significant institutional restrictions. Serious complaints include discrimination in granting permission for building or repairing churches. Until recently, school textbooks ignored Coptic contributions to Egyptian history. This recognition of Coptic history is a modest improvement that must be built upon in order to promote full respect for religious minorities in Egypt. Perceived economic inequalities in a country of high unemployment and poverty contribute to discriminatory behavior toward Christians.

Egypt is a strategic ally of the United States and a major recipient of U.S. foreign assistance. Our government should effectively press our Egyptian allies to improve the treatment of Christians and other religious minorities and to encourage democratic, economic and human rights reforms to address the wider social factors that contribute to a climate of intolerance and denial of religious liberty.

Nigeria. Religious conflict between Christians and Muslims has increased since the new government came to power, a situation aggravated by the imposition of Sharia law in Muslim-dominated northern states. Since 1999 more than 10,000 Nigerians have died in violence along sectarian lines. Churches and mosques have been destroyed. The government of Nigeria has not responded decisively to the violence or to the sharia controversy. Impunity makes the situation worse; few of the Christians and Muslims who have been implicated in the violence over the years have been prosecuted. Christians living in the Muslim-dominated northern states express deep concern over the imposition of sharia law and discrimination that manifests itself in the denial of permits to build or repair religious institutions, lack of access to education and state-run media, and discrimination in government representation and employment. Muslim minorities living in the south report some of these same concerns.

The situation in Nigeria is not solely a religious conflict. Difficult social, economic and political factors aggravate the conflict that flows along ethnic and religious lines. Despite the country's vast petroleum-based wealth, the average Nigerian is growing poorer. The failure of Nigeria to provide adequate education for the vast majority of its citizens has given rise to a large, frustrated and angry underclass of mainly urban, unemployed youths. The presence of many unemployed young men has repeatedly proved to be highly combustible fuel which cynical demagogues are able to ignite into violence. The patterns of conflict that have emerged in

¹³ cf. Bishop Thomas Wenski, Chairman, USCCB Committee on International Policy, Letter to Chairman Henry Hyde on Palestinian Aid, March 1, 2006; Bishop William S. Skylstad, President, USCCB, Letter to Dr. Condoleezza Rice, Secretary of State Designate, on Negotiations Between Israel and the Holy See, January 18, 2005.

Nigeria over the past decade suggest that violence can be traced to the exploitation of disempowered groups by ambitious politicians (and sometimes religious leaders) for their own purposes. There are reports that outside groups are funding extremist Muslims attempting to impose a radical Islamist agenda that is foreign to Nigeria. Significantly, recent troubles among fellow Christians in Akwa Ibom State in the Niger Delta demonstrate the impact of economic differences, social divisions and political manipulation in fostering conflict.¹⁴

The U.S. government needs to employ an integrated strategy in Nigeria that addresses both religious freedom and the other factors that contribute to the sectarian violence. The U.S. should urge the Nigerian government to combat religious coercion, to protect the religious freedom for both Christians and Muslims, especially when they find themselves in the minority, and to address the imposition of sharia law, ensuring that it does not apply to non-Muslims and that its implementation does not violate basic human rights. The U.S. should also work with the Nigerian government to encourage stronger action against sectarian violence and to adopt greater transparency and anti-corruption efforts. The difficult economic situation needs to be addressed through both reform and sufficient, effective and accountable foreign aid.

Sudan. Our bishops' Conference has been deeply involved in addressing the heinous violence and religious persecution in Sudan. Delegations of bishops have visited Sudan, witnessed untold human suffering that results from assaults on innocent civilians, and met with religious and government leaders. Our Conference has issued numerous statements and public letters and has initiated many meetings with U.S. officials.¹⁵

At the heart of Sudan's deadly civil wars there is a violent struggle for ethnic identity, of which religion forms an important component, as well as a struggle for control of the country's natural resources, especially oil. For many years, the government in Khartoum has aggressively pursued a program of Islamization and Arabization that has resulted in attacks on and war with the Christians and other non-Muslims in the south, attacks against innocent civilians and a vicious war that still rages against African Muslims in the western region of Darfur, and continued harsh discrimination against religious minorities, including Christians, in the north. Our Conference has repeatedly condemned Khartoum's actions, actions that the U.S. government has labeled genocide. In Darfur, widespread violence and violations of human rights continue, despite inadequate international attempts to alleviate the suffering.

¹⁴ cf. Catholic Bishops' Conference of Nigeria, *Building God's Kingdom of Justice and Peace*, March 10, 2001.

¹⁵ Bishop John H. Ricard, SSJ, Chairman, USCCB Committee on International Policy, Letter to the Honorable Richard G. Lugar on the Darfur Peace and Accountability Act of 2005, October 31, 2005; Statement on National Day of Action for the People of Darfur, September 21, 2005; Letter to the Honorable Henry Hyde on the Darfur Peace and Accountability Act, August 10, 2005; Statement on the Death of Dr. John Garang de Mabior, August 3, 2005; Statement on Southern Sudan Peace Agreement, January 13, 2005; Bishop Wilton D. Gregory, USCCB President, Cry of the People of Darfur, November 16, 2004; Bishop John H. Ricard, Protect Human Lives in Darfur, October 27, 2004; Bishop John H. Ricard and Mr. Ken Hackett, President, Catholic Relief Services, Letter to Secretary Powell Supporting Emergency Funding for Sudan, September 30, 2004; Bishop John H. Ricard, Letter to Secretary Powell on Darfur, June 28, 2004; Statement on the Crisis in Western Sudan, May 5, 2004; Testimony by Catholic Relief Services before the Senate Foreign Relations Committee Subcommittee on African Affairs, "Implementing U.S. Policy in Sudan," July 11, 2002.

The signing of the North-South Comprehensive Peace Agreement and the formation of a government of national unity has raised some hopes for a peaceful and equitable solution to the strife between northerners and southerners, but obstacles remain to the full implementation of the comprehensive peace agreement. The situation of Christians in the south in terms of religious freedom has improved dramatically, but there are urgent needs to direct humanitarian and development assistance to southern Sudan as they rebuild their devastated communities and refugees return. Adherence to the terms of the Comprehensive Peace Agreement also requires monitoring.

The situation of the Christian minority living in the north remains precarious. Christians report discrimination in accessing limited government services and in securing permits to build churches. It is unclear if Christians in the north will be exempt from the requirements of sharia law and there are reported instances in which this has not been the case. Conversion from Islam is a capital offense in the north.

Despite the agreement reached at Abuja on July 5, 2005 between the government in Khartoum and rebel forces in Darfur, and the efforts of the international community and the African Union peacekeeping force, the innocent people of Darfur are still suffering from the effects of violent clashes between the Sudanese army and the rebel forces, as well as from the continuing attacks against innocent civilians by the Janjaweed militia.

The U.S. needs to ensure effective monitoring of the implementation of the north-south peace accords, direct much needed aid to southern Sudan, keep pressure on the government to end severe violations of religious freedom in the north, and take steps to bring an immediate end to the heinous acts of destruction and violence against the people of Darfur. The U.S. should provide concrete support for peacekeepers in Darfur and demonstrate that it protects the human rights and religious freedom of persons of all races and religions wherever they are threatened.¹⁶

POLICIES TO SUPPORT RELIGIOUS FREEDOM IN SOME ISLAMIC COUNTRIES

While the difficult situations of Christians vary in different countries with Muslim majorities, our Conference offers several general policy recommendations to support religious freedom in some of these countries.

First, the U.S. government needs to *make religious liberty even more central* to its foreign policy in both policy and practice. Our bishops' Conference vigorously supported the creation of the Office of International Religious Freedom in the Department of State and the U.S. Commission on International Religious Freedom in the belief that religious freedom lies at the heart of human rights and deserves greater support and higher visibility in U.S. foreign policy. Religious freedom is also a key to achieving greater justice and peace in our world.

While every country needs to respect human rights and religious liberty, the U.S. needs to work collaboratively, consistently and intensively with Islamic countries to foster respect for religious liberty in theory and practice. The U.S. government is closely allied with countries

¹⁶ cf. Bishop John H. Ricard, SSJ, Chairman, USCCB Committee on International Policy, *A Milestone for Peace in Southern Sudan, A Call for Peace in Darfur*, January 13, 2005.

such as Saudi Arabia, Pakistan and Egypt and can have considerable influence on their policies. At the same time, it is important to do this in ways that are respectful of the concerns of all religious communities, including Muslims. A strong and culturally respectful approach will help our nation to avoid inadvertently strengthening the perception that native Christian populations in Islamic countries are somehow identified with the West and are not truly members of their own societies.

Second, we urge the U.S. government more intensively and directly to *engage religious communities and religious leaders*. Often governments, including our own, work constantly with non-religious and non-governmental human rights organizations. We commend these groups for their often valuable work and encourage the U.S. government to continue and enhance this collaboration. In order to model religious tolerance and demonstrate respect for religious communities, the U.S. government and others also need to consult and work with religious leaders in ways that respect the distinct complementary roles of state and religion. Since religious leaders can impact the attitudes and behaviors of believers, they should be a key constituency for genuine engagement and consultation for U.S. officials.

Third, we recommend greater participation in and support for genuine *interfaith dialogue*. Dialogue is not easy in times and situations of conflict. But our experience suggests the necessity of encouraging honest dialogue that is candid and respectful. Government leaders can help create conditions favorable to such dialogue, but must allow religious leaders and communities to enter into such dialogue constructively and in ways that respect the appropriate freedom and role of religion.

Earlier in this testimony, I cited the Second Vatican Council which declared our “esteem” for Muslims and committed the Church to interfaith dialogue. Authentic dialogue cannot be just vague expressions of good will, empty of a search for truth and unity. Genuine interreligious dialogue can be a force to heal divisions only if dialogue safeguards and respects the truth in each religion and culture. Attempts to water down, denigrate or distort the particular character, beliefs or practices of respective religious communities can itself be an offense against religious freedom. Efforts to compel religions to alter fundamental tenets or moral principles can lead to further stumbling blocks on the path to religious liberty and to peace.

Promoting religious freedom and improving relations between Christians and Muslims are complementary goals that demand honesty, intellectual rigor and authentic commitment to one’s own faith tradition. As Pope Benedict XVI said in his August 20, 2005 meeting with Muslim leaders in Cologne, “Interreligious and intercultural dialogue between Christians and Muslims cannot be reduced to an optional extra. It is in fact a vital necessity....” Both the Holy See and our Conference are carrying forward important dialogues with Islamic leaders to deepen understanding and to determine what can be done cooperatively. Dialogue can clarify differences, increase understanding and reduce tensions. Our bishops’ Conference remains committed to this vital task.

Fourth, we recommend promotion of concrete *reciprocity* in policies and practices of law that relate to religious freedom. At the heart of the Holy See’s current efforts there is a call for mutual respect and reciprocity. As Pope Benedict XVI, said in an address to the Ambassador of Azerbaijan:

Such commitment demands that religious freedom, which preserves the singularity of each faith community, be sanctioned as a fundamental civil right and afforded protection by a robust framework of juridical norms which respect the laws and duties proper to religious communities (cf. Second Vatican Ecumenical Council, Declaration on Religious Freedom, *Dignitatis Humanae*, 2). Such practical support of religious freedom by political leaders becomes a sure means for authentic social progress and peace.¹⁷

Reciprocity means, for example, that the Catholic Church expects support for efforts to permit the construction of Christian churches, schools and other religious institutions in Islamic countries, and expects countries with Christian majorities to allow the same for their Muslim minorities. Our nation, with its long tradition of religious freedom should encourage reciprocity in the treatment of religious minorities in countries with Muslim majorities.

Fifth, the U.S. must *address the social, economic, political and military factors* that make it easier for opponents of religious freedom to incite religious intolerance. Although nothing justifies religious discrimination and persecution, social inequities, intense secularization, some abuses in the struggle with terrorism, the use of religious language to justify violence, and military occupations provide fuel for the fires of religious extremism and intolerance.

CONCLUSION

As leaders of a religious community, our own faith and our respect for the faith of others commits us to defend and promote human rights and religious freedom as a central moral priority. We seek to protect the right of our Church and of all other religious communities to exist and to express their faith in society and the public arena as well as in private prayer and public worship. Our bishops' Conference defends the right of religious communities to engage in public debate and to offer their moral vision, their values and their view of the common good. What the U.S. government says and does to protect and promote religious freedom and to advance other human rights has a powerful impact on other nations— for good or ill – and can help shape a world more respectful of human rights and religious freedom.

This testimony has focused on some problematic areas of relationships between Islam and Christianity. Our Conference calls for new and better efforts to understand and engage Islam and Muslim leaders. Constructive and respectful dialogue with Islam is imperative in today's world. Rather than deploring a clash of cultures, we need to foster cultures of dialogue and respect as keys to justice and peace.

Promoting human rights and religious freedom is critical to the Church's life and mission and to the pursuit of international peace. It is also at the heart of our nation's founding principles. My hope is that this important hearing and this human rights report can help advance religious freedom and human rights in important and concrete ways. In the words of Pope Benedict XVI, "The defense of religious freedom...is a permanent imperative...."¹⁸

¹⁷ Address of Benedict XVI to H.E. Mr Elchin Oktyabr Oglu Amirbayov, Ambassador of the Republic Of Azerbaijan to the Holy See, Thursday, June 16, 2005.

¹⁸ Address of His Holiness Pope Benedict XVI to Representatives of Some Muslim Communities, Cologne, August 20, 2005.