

# Women in Faith: A Freedom of Religion or Belief Perspective<sup>1</sup>

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Jean B. Bingham

Dear Mrs. Zábroska, thank you for hosting this very important event.

Members of the European Parliament,

Distinguished Guests,

Dear Friends,

Faith plays an incalculable role in women's lives—83% of whom are estimated to identify with a faith group.<sup>2</sup> Religion influences these women's lives daily, through prayer, meditation, scripture study, and even food selection.

Religious devotion informs life-long decisions such as marriage, child bearing, and end of life care. Faith informs humanity's most basic questions such as "Who am

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<sup>1</sup> Keynote speech delivered at the European Parliament on November 9, 2017

<sup>2</sup> "The Gender Gap in Religion Around the World." Pew Research Center's Religion & Public Life Project. March 22, 2016. Accessed November 03, 2017. <http://www.pewforum.org/2016/03/22/the-gender-gap-in-religion-around-the-world/>.

I? Why am I here? Where am I going?"<sup>3</sup> These questions are felt in the yearnings of every human soul to understand his or her situation.<sup>4</sup>

A human being must be permitted to find meaning in life, and for the vast majority of individuals that involves investigating, adopting, and even adapting religious beliefs.<sup>5</sup> That is why freedom of religion or belief rights are foundational human rights.

I hope to offer some understanding on why religious freedom is such a critical right to empowering women. To that end, I would first like to highlight the importance of religious devotion to women. Second, I would like to show the intimate connection between freedom of religion or belief with women's other rights. And third, I would like to describe how laws that mandate women's belief or behavior can be harmful, even if well-intentioned.

## **I. The Importance of Religious Devotion to Women**

The freedom to search for life's meaning, and to believe that a higher power has provided that meaning, belongs to women as much as to men.<sup>6</sup> Indeed, an

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<sup>3</sup> Jeffrey R. Holland, "Religious Freedom and Preventing Sexual Violence." Speech, Religious Persecution: A Driver of Forced Migration Conference, Windsor Castle, Berkshire, United Kingdom, September 11, 2017. Accessed November 6, 2017. <http://www.mormonnewsroom.org/article/transcript-elder-holland-religious-persecution-forced-migration-conference>.

<sup>4</sup> Ibid.

<sup>5</sup> Ibid.

<sup>6</sup> Ibid.

“estimated 97 million more women than men claim a religious affiliation.”<sup>7</sup>

Religious freedom is among the most important freedoms a woman can have in societies where cultural traditions might seek to impose upon her a lesser conception of her life’s meaning.<sup>8</sup>

Religion grounds us through life’s high points and elevates us through the lows. Such was the case for a young 14-year old girl who was captured and held against her will. Her nightmare began on June 5, 2002. She was tethered to a tree, deprived of food, forced to consume alcohol and drugs, and raped daily. Here is her story: [<http://faithcounts.com/elizabeth-smart-faith-heals/>]

Elizabeth Smart lived in a country where she could hold to her faith. That faith carried her through some of the worst things people can suffer. Yet, in a striking contrast, her victimization was committed in the name of religion. When she was found on March 12, 2003, she had been dressed in robes and her face veiled. Her captor claimed to be a prophet.

Sadly, Elizabeth’s circumstances are not unprecedented. Women can be the victims of terrible acts supposedly committed in the name of faith. Female genital

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<sup>7</sup> "The Gender Gap in Religion Around the World." Pew Research Center's Religion & Public Life Project. March 22, 2016. Accessed November 03, 2017. <http://www.pewforum.org/2016/03/22/the-gender-gap-in-religion-around-the-world/>.

<sup>8</sup> Jeffrey R. Holland, "Religious Freedom and Preventing Sexual Violence." Speech, Religious Persecution: A Driver of Forced Migration Conference, Windsor Castle, Berkshire, United Kingdom, September 11, 2017. Accessed November 6, 2017. <http://www.mormonnewsroom.org/article/transcript-elder-holland-religious-persecution-forced-migration-conference>.

mutilation, bodily appendages being removed, and honor killings are just a few of those horrors.

Violent acts like these can overshadow the great good that religious faith and devotion can help women accomplish in our society. If women of faith do not recapture the narrative of what their religious devotion means to them, and the negative narrative dominates, unintended consequences could occur. For example, if religion wanes in society, well-intentioned governments could override freedom of religion or belief protections in ways that harm instead of help women. As the largest group currently being proscribed in exercising these rights, women have the most to lose or gain with any changes.

## **II. Freedom of Religion or Beliefs Link with Women's Other Rights**

I come before you today to assert that protecting women's freedom of religion or belief empowers them as well as the communities in which they reside.

Article 9 of the European Convention on Human Rights reads:

1. *Everyone* has the right to freedom of thought, conscience and religion; this right includes freedom to change his religion or belief and freedom, either alone or in community with others and in public or private, to manifest his religion or belief, in worship, teaching, practice and observance.

These rights are part of a seamless whole which cannot be delinked from women without harm to them. The World Conference on Human Rights indicated

that “[a]ll human rights are universal, indivisible and interdependent.”<sup>9</sup> The Special Rapporteur for Freedom of Religion or Belief at the United Nations has highlighted the “positive interrelatedness of freedom of religion or belief and equality between men and women.”<sup>10</sup>

He goes on to say that “[a]n empirical study of 143 countries supports this idea, further noting that ‘countries with no restrictions on conversion, in particular, tend to have higher levels of fundamental freedoms, have better lives for women, and less overall armed conflict.’”<sup>11</sup> Religious freedom creates the optimal environment in which to protect and enhance women’s rights.

As you are probably aware, Article 9 of the European Convention on Human Rights also provides protections against individuals that may seek to abuse this freedom. Individuals cannot destroy public order, health or morals, or infringe on the rights and freedoms of others.<sup>12</sup>

These limitations did not allow Elizabeth Smart’s captor to justify his actions for religious reasons. He had claimed that he was a prophet and received a

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<sup>9</sup> United Nations General Assembly, Sixty-eight session, *Elimination of all forms of religious intolerance*, A/68/290, ¶ 69 (Aug. 7, 2013), <http://www.ohchr.org/Documents/Issues/Religion/A.68.290.pdf>, 19.

<sup>10</sup> United Nations General Assembly, Sixty-eight session, *Elimination of all forms of religious intolerance*, A/68/290, ¶ 69 (Aug. 7, 2013), <http://www.ohchr.org/Documents/Issues/Religion/A.68.290.pdf>, 19.

<sup>11</sup> Brian J. Grim, *Religious Freedom and Social Well-being: A Critical Appraisal*, 2 IJRF 1,44 (2009) as quoted in: Gregory Clark and Robert E. Snyder. “Promoting Religious Freedom: A Corporate Social Responsibility,” 47. Accessed August 17, 2016.

[http://www.jrcls.org/annual\\_conf/Promoting\\_Religious\\_Freedom\\_A\\_Corporate\\_Social\\_Responsibility.pdf](http://www.jrcls.org/annual_conf/Promoting_Religious_Freedom_A_Corporate_Social_Responsibility.pdf).

<sup>12</sup> *Article 9: Freedom of thought, conscience and religion*, European Convention on Human Rights, [http://www.echr.coe.int/Documents/Convention\\_ENG.pdf](http://www.echr.coe.int/Documents/Convention_ENG.pdf), 11.

divine revelation to kidnap this sweet, innocent, 14-year-old girl from her bedroom. He now serves a life sentence without parole. His actions were not recognized nor protected as religious freedom rights.

In my own faith's scriptures, the Book of Mormon, we read of a righteous people who established religious freedom, yet were also able to punish harmful practices, without any contradiction: "[T]here was a law that men should be judged according to their crimes. Nevertheless, there was no law against a man's belief; therefore, a man was punished only for the crimes which he had done." (Alma 30:11). It is entirely possible to protect religious freedom but punish the perpetrators of harmful practices against women.

In countries with a good track record of protecting religious freedom, these types of exceptions are well established. The principle of religious freedom does not condone crime, including crimes against women. In fact, faith can be, and often is, a vital comfort to those who are victimized, who are disproportionately women.

### **III. Mandating Acts of Women's Faith Can be Harmful**

Government bodies are vital to enacting provisions that protect victims. However, if we are not careful, those same provisions can also potentially strip those victims of the solace and peace that they find in their beliefs. Remember what Elizabeth said, about how her belief in God made her a survivor.

At times, some seek to restrict religious freedom with the aim of protecting women. However well-intentioned, intervention sometimes does more damage than good. Let me share a couple of examples where interfering with religious freedom rights also inhibited women's rights; then I'll explain why it's so important to make room for empowered women of faith in our societies.

Out of concern that certain clothing might be forced on Muslim women, a city enacted a law banning the so-called "burkini," a garment that allowed women to participate in sports activities such as swimming while still honoring their religious commitments to modesty.<sup>13</sup> Previous to this time, there was no religiously acceptable way for them to do so.

Even if the law had good intentions, it did not give women greater freedom but merely imposed a different restriction. Banning their swimming wear isolated women and put them in danger of violence and hostility if they tried to access public spaces when wearing it. Although the nation's judicial system quickly ruled that such a ban was illegal, courts nor legislatures have always been so quick to recognize when they have erred.

Another example of a woman who was limited by religious restrictions is Meriam Yehya Ibrahim. In 2014, Meriam was put on trial by her government and

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<sup>13</sup> Loi interdisant la dissimulation du visage dans l'espace public,"(Act prohibiting concealment of the face in public space") 14 September 2010.

sentenced to death. Although raised as a Christian by her mother, a court considered her to be Muslim due to her father's religion. Because of her father's religion, the court found her marriage to a Christian to be invalid. In their view, Meriam had committed both adultery and apostasy. Imams visited her daily to recite the Koran to her and pressure her to renounce her Christianity.<sup>14</sup>

Eventually Meriam was freed, but not until after spending several months in prison, where she also gave birth to her daughter. When asked about her experience Meriam said "I would never leave my faith. [I]f you don't have faith you are not alive."<sup>15</sup>

These struggles remind me of the words of Rabbi Jonathan Sacks, who wrote:

“Violence is what happens when you try to resolve a religious dispute by means of power. It cannot be done.... Just as might does not establish right, so victory does not establish truth.”<sup>16</sup>

Instead of governments compelling what women do, how to do it, and when to do it, we must make sure their human rights—including their right to the religious beliefs of their choice—are respected.

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<sup>14</sup> Abdelaziz, Salma, Catherine E. Shoichet, Daniel Burke, and Ed Payne. "Christian in Sudan Sentenced to Death for Faith; 'I'm Just Praying,' Husband Says." CNN. May 16, 2014. Accessed June 29, 2016. <http://www.cnn.com/2014/05/15/world/africa/sudan-christian-woman-apostasy/>.

<sup>15</sup> Josie Ensor. "Sudanese Christian Meriam Ibrahim tells for first time of her ordeal." Telegraph. September 16, 2014. Accessed July 19, 2016. <http://www.telegraph.co.uk/news/worldnews/northamerica/usa/11098535/Sudanese-Christian-Meriam-Ibrahim-tells-for-first-time-of-her-ordeal.html>

<sup>16</sup> Jonathan Sacks, *Not in God's Name: Confronting Religious Violence*. London: Hodder & Stoughton, 2015.



Empowering women should be a priority for all, because they are a potent force for creating a society where peace, religious freedom, and human rights can truly thrive. Carla Kopell, former Senior Gender Advisor at USAID, notes that the potential of women is one of the most underappreciated tools to counter violent extremism.<sup>17</sup>

Women often have unique and powerful influence in the home and family. Kopell observes that “[a]s community members frequently left behind in conflict zones to maintain the home and care for children and other family members, women and girls often have information and insights that can provide early warning of conflict or the potential for violence. Because they often maintain families under siege, women can help de-radicalize and enable successful reintegration of former extremist group members.”<sup>18</sup>

There are many examples of women already combating violence and extremism from all around the world. For example:

In Somalia, the cross-clan linkages women gain through marriage [make them...capable of mediating across clan lines]. In Central America, women [have been] key voices in... discouraging young people from joining criminal gangs and committing crime. Along the Tajik and Afghan border, ... the Austrian NGO Women Without Borders is establishing schools for

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<sup>17</sup> Carla Kopell. *To Fight Extremism, the World Needs to Learn How to Talk to Women*. August 12, 2015. Foreign Policy. <http://foreignpolicy.com/2015/08/12/to-fight-extremism-the-world-needs-to-learn-how-to-talk-to-women-boko-haram-isis/>

<sup>18</sup> Carla Kopell. *To Fight Extremism, the World Needs to Learn How to Talk to Women*. August 12, 2015. Foreign Policy. <http://foreignpolicy.com/2015/08/12/to-fight-extremism-the-world-needs-to-learn-how-to-talk-to-women-boko-haram-isis/>

mothers to educate them on how to prevent the radicalization of their sons. So far, they have trained over 150 mothers, who report reconnecting with distant sons and daughters, persuading them not to attend illegal meetings or read radical material.<sup>19</sup>

These contemporary examples parallel a powerful story in the Book of Mormon, our companion set of sacred scriptures to the Holy Bible. There is an account of a small army of young warriors faced with the task of defending their homeland and people from invaders. These attackers are seeking to deprive them of their freedoms, including the freedom to worship according to the dictates of their own conscience.

Though they were young and untrained, these valiant warriors went off to battle and, miraculously, all returned victorious in the defense of their people. When asked why they had taken on such a formidable task instead of fleeing, they replied that they knew God would strengthen and protect them. They added, “We do not doubt our mothers knew it.”<sup>20</sup> They had been taught by mothers of faith, which helped them develop the faith needed to carry them through their own challenges.

#### **IV. Conclusion**

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<sup>19</sup> Carla Kopell. *To Fight Extremism, the World Needs to Learn How to Talk to Women*. August 12, 2015. Foreign Policy. <http://foreignpolicy.com/2015/08/12/to-fight-extremism-the-world-needs-to-learn-how-to-talk-to-women-boko-haram-isis/>

<sup>20</sup> *The Book of Mormon: Another Testament of Jesus Christ*, Alma 56:47

If all individuals understood that the world improves when the situation of women improves, there would be far less heartache in this world. A powerful religious insight in this regard comes from the Bahai, who teach,

“The world of humanity is possessed of two wings: the male and the female. So long as these two wings are not equivalent in strength, the bird will not fly. Until womankind reaches the same degree as man, until she enjoys the same arena of activity, extraordinary attainment for humanity will not be realized; ... When the two wings . . . become equivalent in strength, enjoying the same prerogatives, the flight of humankind will be exceedingly lofty and extraordinary.”<sup>21</sup>

Ladies and gentlemen, friends and colleagues, a bird with one wing will never soar. I invite each of us to look at our own circles of influence and find ways to encourage women’s right to freedom of religion and belief. Let us do all within our reach to empower our sisters, and society, to take wing.

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<sup>21</sup> "The Promulgation of Universal Peace: Talks Delivered by ‘Abdu’l-Bahá during His Visit to the United States and Canada in 1912." Bahá’í Reference Library. Accessed November 03, 2017. <http://reference.bahai.org/en/t/c/CP/cp-39.html>.