

An innovation in the global fight for religious freedom

The Religious Freedom & Business Foundation

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Abstract

While the intersection between religious freedom and business is not often seen, religious freedom strengthens societies and businesses.

Keywords Religious freedom, business.

Over lunch in downtown Washington DC, a Turkish trade representative puzzled, “We almost never put religion and business in the same sentence, so, what’s the connection between religious freedom and business?” Fair question, given that I was introducing him to the Religious Freedom & Business Foundation.

His ah-ha moment came about halfway through our meal, but for a different reason than mine had come.

We began by talking about different ways religious barriers inhibit financial cooperation between Muslim countries. For instance, one country’s sharia (Islamic law) board might consider a financial investment instrument acceptable while another country’s does not.

We also discussed attempts in Europe to restrict Islamic halal meats because of the purported ill treatment of animals in the slaughtering process. Of course, such restrictions similarly impact kosher businesses supplying meat for Jewish communities.

But, neither of these were his ah-ha moment.

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We then talked about Pakistan where businesses have accused rivals of blasphemy – a capital offense – to undercut the competition or exact revenge. The blasphemy law has also been used to ban websites like Facebook, YouTube, and Wikipedia. And even questioning the blasphemy law is perilous, as two high-ranking government officials were recently assassinated for merely suggesting that they be overturned.

But his ah-ha moment came when we moved on to Egypt, where ongoing religion-related violence is not only sapping the important tourist industry, but driving young entrepreneurs from the labor market.

The loss of Egypt's young entrepreneurs was his *Ab-ha!*

He recalled how until recently, it was illegal for Turkish women to wear headscarves in public jobs or even to attend public universities. While the bans on headscarves in Turkey have been lifted, ongoing employment discrimination persists against more religiously conservative women who don the headscarf. And the loss to the labor market is significant.

By his estimates, as many as half of Turkish women today now don a headscarf but only 6% of them can find a job. "That's a religious freedom and business problem," he proclaimed. "How can Turkey hope to compete economically if half of women are essentially kept out of the labor market because of their religious dress," he said, inviting me to Turkey to help them address the issue.

And this brings me to my ah-ha moment – conversations like this – not only with Muslim business people, but with people of multiple faiths as well as with people in high levels of government and civil leaders.

But, these conversations are driven by the research I did for well over the past decade.

For instance, in my book with Roger Finke, *The price of freedom denied* (Cambridge 2011), we documented that religious freedom not only leads to less violence, but that it is also associated with a host of other socio-economic outcomes.

And my new research finds that the main drivers of economic sustainability and global competitiveness are stronger in countries where the government and civil society respect and protect freedom of religion or belief. For instance, more than twice the share of countries with high religious freedom are strong in innovation, as measured by the World Economic Forum, compared with countries with low religious freedom.

Based on the responses from many, the power of the data and a belief that involving businesses in the efforts to roll back the rising global tide of restrictions on religion, the Religious Freedom & Business Foundation has been set up to pioneer efforts that help businesses see how religious freedom is good for business *and* how business is good for religious freedom.

The Foundation engages businesses, governments and civil society leaders worldwide with this message through four interrelated global initiatives:

- Religious Freedom & Business Global Awards presented initially in 2016 in Rio de Janeiro, the host city of the Olympic Games, and thereafter in the host cities of subsequent Olympic Games, for best initiatives by businesses to improve respect for religious freedom
- Executive training, workshops and symposiums on ways to implement policies that promote innovative and sustainable businesses where religious freedom and diversity are respected in businesses and societies
- Empowerment projects that help religious minorities identify sustainable business opportunities that meet real needs and increase their position in society

I've found that the fourth initiative arouses quite a lot of interest. One such initiative is to help Tibetan Buddhists develop micro tourist businesses to serve the growing number of tourists to Tibet, many of whom are from other parts of China. These ventures provide income, celebrate Tibetan heritage and raise Tibetans' social standing. And the Chinese government likes the idea because it engenders cooperation rather than conflict.

Finally, I'm glad to announce that the Foundation's first association outside the U.S. has just been set up in Brazil, where the first Religious Freedom & Business Global Awards will be hosted in Rio de Janeiro, the host city for the 2016 Summer Olympics.

And, as with any new global initiative, there are many ways to get involved and contribute to this game-changing initiative. Check out the Religious Freedom & Business Foundation's website and be in touch!



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