

CENTENNIAL REVIEW

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NOW IS THE TIME TO PUSH FOR RELIGIOUS FREEDOM

Ambassador Sam Brownback, WCS19



Ambassador Sam Brownback at the 2019 Western Conservative Summit.

I'm a blessed man. I've been a congressman, a governor, a senator and an ambassador. The Lord has allowed me to take on many different roles, often positions I never expected. And I tell you, I have not been in a more important role than the one I'm in now.

I'm working to support international religious freedom. There are things happening around the world both good and horrific. After the fall of communism, there was an explosion of freedoms around the world, but over time, hostile regimes and totalitarian governments have crept back to power and are trying to take away those freedoms.

These regimes don't recognize that, in the entire history of mankind, the kingdom of God has never been subdued by the government of man and it never will. Unfortunately, they continue to try. They lock people up, they beat people, and they kill people. Around the world, people of faith are being persecuted, Christians most of all according to Pew and a recent British report. In the news and often not reported in the news, thousands of people are killed each year for their faith.

The Western mindset had it that, as modernity would grow, as our scientific understanding would grow, religion would become less important, but that hasn't happened. In fact, religion has grown in importance as people search for meaning and that inner drive in their soul that says, "there's something more, I'm looking for it, where is it?" People want the freedom to pursue that.

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Amb. Sam Brownback is an attorney, politician, and diplomat who has served as the United States Ambassador at Large for International Religious Freedom since February 2018.

STAND FOR TRUTH WITHOUT SHAME OR APOLOGY

Pastor Andrew Brunson, WCS19



Dr. Don Sweeting, speaking with Pastor Andrew Brunson, at the 2019 Western Conservative Summit.

Dr. Don Sweeting (DS): Andrew, thank you for making a special trip to be here today. Let's start by asking, where were you last year this time?

Pastor Andrew Brunson (AB): Last year at this time I was in the Buju maximum-security prison in Turkey. This is a much better place to be.

DS: I'm sure. Tell us why you were in Turkey?

AB: It's simple. Turkey is the largest un-evangelized country in the world, and we were there to tell people about Jesus.

DS: You'd been there many years before. Was this a potential threat you thought about or did it surprise you?

AB: It surprised me because until my arrest, nobody had been arrested as a missionary there.

DS: How did the arrest take place?

AB: We thought we had qualified for a long-term residence permit. When we went to pick up our papers at the police station, instead they informed us we were going to be deported. They arrested Norine and me for deportation. After 13 days, they let her go, and they kept me.

They told us I was a threat to national security and then kept changing the reasons. They said we were involved in human trafficking; then with the Fethullah Gulen movement which Turkey accused of planning a coup; then that I was in Syria

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Andrew Brunson, American pastor, spent two years in a Turkish prison for preaching Christianity.

CENTENNIAL INSTITUTE

Faith ★ Family ★ Freedom ★ Future

Dear Reader,

I've been working on religious freedom issues for the past decade. During my time in Washington, D.C., I served the organization Open Doors U.S.A., raising awareness about the persecution of Christians around the world. With Open Doors U.S.A. colleagues, we created the first international religious freedom scorecard, holding elected officials accountable for supporting religious freedom.

On my office desk is a framed business card from Shahbaz Bhatti, the federal minister for minorities in Pakistan. I met him at an event hosted by the U.S. Commission on International Religious Freedom. A Christian, he was assassinated shortly after our meeting. He was shot many times by multiple gunmen in his car after leaving his mother's house. Upon his death, he released a pre-recorded video saying, "I believe in Jesus Christ who has given his own life for us, and I am ready to die for a cause. I'm living for my community ... and I will die to defend their rights."

While awareness about religious freedom has increased, religious restrictions are getting worse. According to a Pew study released this summer, "Government restrictions on religion have increased globally between 2007 and 2017 in all four categories studied: favoritism of religious groups, general laws and policies restricting religious freedom, harassment of religious groups, and limits on religious activity."

America didn't create religious freedom; religious freedom created America. Stable and prosperous societies require religious freedom. If the current trends continue, our nation and many other nations will crumble as religious freedom weakens.

We must protect religious freedom at home and promote religious freedom abroad. Religious freedom is a God-given right for each individual to approach God according to their conscience. It is foundational to tolerance, good-will, and peace in our communities.

Western Conservative Summit 2019's theme was *Defending Religious Freedom and America's First Amendment*. Muslim, Jewish, Evangelical, Roman Catholic, Sikh, Maronite, Mormon, Seventh-Day-Adventist, and many other faith leaders joined together committing to promote religious freedom.

I hope you will enjoy these speeches from two of our distinguished speakers at Western Conservative Summit 2019.



Jeff Hunt
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Ambassador Sam Brownback speaking at the 2019 Western Conservative Summit.

Often governments or communal violence get in the way, and we find ourselves at a pivotal time for religious freedom. There is a window of mercy for nations to move and embrace this fundamental human right. Never doubt this is a fundamental human right. It is in the U.N. Declaration of Human Rights and even in the list of the rights that must be maintained if a nation goes into martial law. Religious freedom is one of the few rights that must be maintained according to international bodies.

This is about you as an individual having the right to do with your own soul what you choose, whenever you choose, however you choose. It is a fundamental God-given right that no man has the right to interfere with. Sadly, governments try to do it in countries around the world.

I wonder, will our children and grandchildren have the religious freedoms we enjoy or will their world be more authoritarian?

Thousands of people are killed each year for their faith.

I am concerned about which authoritarian model will win. We see China putting forth a very aggressive authoritarian model. They are using artificial intelligence and cameras with facial recognition systems to create social credit scores to grade people. If you go to the mosque or the church too much, you get a low credit score and you can be frozen out, kept from participating in society and limited in the things they will allow you to do.

People are reporting that they are losing their apartments and that they can't get their children into school. In Hong Kong, they have a bus system that uses facial recognition to identify you, and in seconds hits your credit card for the bus fee. Some say this is a great convenience, but what if you have a bad social credit score? Perhaps you are seen as too religious and the system decides they don't want you. The bus system recognizes you and blocks you entering.

It is not just you. Soon the people that ping you on your cell phone are tracked and your social credit score impacts them. They may not be as religious as you but, by association with you, they are frozen out by the system.

People in the underground church movement in China say this new system scares them more than the era of Mao and the Cultural Revolution when people were locked up and killed for their faith. The communists created a group of martyrs and saints. It was horrible, but Chinese prisons became Chinese seminaries where people would go to intensely study their faith. In this new system there will be no martyrs. Instead, people will be locked out and marginalized. People won't be able to engage in society, to buy and sell what they need.

That's why this is a critical time to push for religious freedom. We have an Administration that is pushing back on religious persecution around the world, but they need help. We need other countries, other groups, and people of all faiths to come together around this common human right.

We do not agree on a common theology, but we do agree on a common human right, and that is religious freedom for all, everywhere, all the time.

On Tuesdays, I host a religious freedom roundtable in Washington. I bring together outside activists, people from different faiths and no faith. The American Humanist Association will often participate because they want their right not to believe

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- Jeff Hunt, Director



anything protected. The objective is not a common theology, it's our common right to religious freedom.

Often it is the United States faith community that's pushing for these rights. We are all working to push open the gates of religious freedom around the world.

The United States is the center of gravity in this push. The rest of the world agrees with us, but they won't push for it. Around the world, people live in fear because of their faith. I know right now there are people huddled together hoping they are not discovered by the authorities, hoping they aren't locked up, hoping their families will not be persecuted, and praying God will help them to be free to share their faith. We push for the right of these people to experience religious freedom.

Next week the Administration is hosting a ministerial to advance religious freedom. It will be the largest gathering of religious freedom activists ever with over a thousand activists from all religions around world. I'm looking forward to the reminder and inspiration that will come from hearing from many who have been persecuted for their faith.

There is a tug of war going on between authoritarian governments and democracy governments. Unfortunately, the authoritarian regimes are winning more of these fights than the democracies. We think it is inevitable that our ideas will win because religious freedom is an inherent human right, but it is not inevitable. Truth is, there are many regimes putting religion down. We must be willing to engage.

One day, a friend of mine was going door-to-door with Mother Teresa trying to raise money for her orphanage. A man answered a door, didn't like what she stood for, and spit in her face. Can you imagine? She wiped her face and said, okay, that was for my humility, now I need something for the kids. He gave her some money.

Isn't that beautiful? You think you are doing the right thing standing up for religious freedom when somebody yells saying you are trying to push your values on others. Well, that's for our humility, but it still stands that we've got to push for this right.

We are accountable, and now is the time to push for religious freedom around the world. I ask you to pray about it, meet with people who have been persecuted for their faith, and do all you can now. ■

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Pastor Andrew Brunson, WCS19

working with the PKK, a Kurdish terrorist group; then that I was insulting Turkey; and then that I was involved in military espionage. But the charges against me were very different from the real reasons they were holding me, which I believe is because they wanted to make an example of someone to intimidate other missionaries and local Christians. As it developed, I became a hostage to use for leverage to get things from the United States.

DS: You were called all kinds of accusing names in the press.

AB: Yes, they called me the spy priest, dark priest, and my favorite was Rambo Priest.

DS: Rambo Priest, absolutely amazing. When did it dawn on you that this imprisonment might be for a long time?

AB: When they put me into a high-security prison, that was a clue. When President Trump asked for my return three times and they didn't return me, I thought this is as high as it can go and they're still keeping me. Another time, they charged me with crimes that would require three life sentences in solitary confinement with no possibility of parole. I thought it would be a long time, yes.

DS: Were you aware of the many people who were praying for you?

AB: Especially in my second year, we became aware that this was an unprecedented prayer movement. I think God started it and sustained it. It was unprecedented the number of people who were praying, the intensity with which people prayed, and the duration. I thought people would move on to the next crisis, but all over the world, people prayed. I believe one of the reasons for my imprisonment is that God was raising up this great prayer movement. I rode a wave of prayer out of Turkey but a tsunami of prayer crashed into Turkey to be a blessing to that country.

DS: During that process, it's easy to overlook the fact that at times things looked hopeless.



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Dr. Don Sweeting welcoming Pastor Andrew Brunson.

AB: They did, yes. I didn't know that I would get out. The Turkish government was telling me I would spend the rest of my life in prison and never see my family again.

DS: Your release happened rather dramatically. Tell us about that.

AB: It was in my fourth trial. I had been under house arrest for two months. While we were hopeful, nobody knew if I'd be released. I thought the court was moving toward conviction. The night before, people from the embassy were planning how I would get out of the country if I was released. There wasn't an easy way. Tony Perkins was there representing USCIRF as a commissioner. He contacted the White House and they sent a plane to be on standby in Germany.

That day in court, they convicted me of aiding terror groups and I thought, "Well, the pressure didn't work and I'm going back to prison." Then suddenly they said they were letting me go with time served, and there was a race to get me out of the country. Anything that would offend the Turkish government, a tweet or somebody saying something publicly, could land me back in prison.

DS: In 24 hours, you literally went from prison to the White House.

AB: It was surreal because I'm standing in a Turkish court being convicted of terrorism and a day later I'm in the White House meeting with President Trump. Quite a roller coaster.

DS: What did the president say when you met him?

AB: He was very friendly. In my short experience with him, I think he has a big heart and genuinely cares about setting people like me free. I was told that there was an unprecedented amount of engagement by the president in my case, and I'm very grateful for that. It took his involvement and taking unprecedented steps like imposing sanctions to set me free.

DS: I was at the State Department last summer at the first ministerial on religious persecution, and your daughter gave a report on how you were doing.

AB: My wife stayed in Turkey during my imprisonment, she was the only person who could visit me. My daughter became the face of the family and attended the ministerial representing the family. This year I will be there.

DS: How did this experience change your understanding of religious persecution?

AB: I was aware of the history of religious persecution and had seen it in Turkey. Christians can have a difficult time there. But my mother said, "For 2,000 years, there's been a long line of people who have suffered persecution for the sake of Jesus. Now it is your turn to stand in that line." Persecution is nothing new. Even now, Christianity is being wiped out in the Middle East, and while we have not yet experienced that, it is coming to this country.

DS: How did this experience change your understanding about the importance of religious liberty?

AB: It certainly underlines the importance of religious freedom and reminds me that religious freedom is rare. The religious liberty we have in this country is exceptional. It comes from our Judeo-Christian stream and it is something we need to protect and pass down from generation to generation. If we don't teach our children the blessing that is religious freedom, we are just one generation from losing those freedoms.

DS: As you reflect on your experience returning to the United States, what do Americans and American Christians need to understand about religious persecution and religious liberty?

AB: First, religious persecution is coming to the U.S. After being isolated for a couple of years, the U.S. felt like a different country. I'm astounded at the speed at which the U.S. is imploding.

It seems it is no longer enough for a person of faith to get along with, serve, or treat someone well if they disagree with them.

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Sam Brownback has been the ambassador at large for international religious freedom since February 2018. Prior, he served as Governor as well as in the U.S. House and Senate from Kansas. He was a key sponsor of the International Religious Freedom Act of 1998. He has also worked as an administrator, broadcaster, teacher, attorney, and author. He graduated from Kansas State University and received his law degree from University of Kansas.



Andrew Brunson is an American pastor. He and his wife, Norine, were involved in starting churches, training, aiding refugees, and leading house prayer in Turkey for 23 years. In October 2016, he was falsely accused of terrorism and held in a Turkish prison for two years. Thanks to a worldwide prayer movement and significant political pressure from the United States government, he was released on time served in October 2018. He holds a doctorate in New Testament from the University of Aberdeen, Scotland.



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Political and business leaders, media and entertainment celebrities, and academia demand that people of faith approve, validate and celebrate things that we actually disagree with. Activists are demanding that businesses and schools punish those who don't agree with them, and Christians are especially in the cross hairs.

It used to be, if you stayed in the church and were quiet, they would leave you alone. That is changing. You are not supposed to talk about your beliefs based on the Bible. There is an effort to marginalize, silence, and shame Christians.

In contrast, that is not happening with Muslims in the United States. You don't see LGBTQ activists going into a Muslim bakery demanding a wedding cake that the Muslim baker disagrees with according to the Quran. A Muslims should not be pressured, but neither should a Christian baker. There is clear hostility towards Christians.

I'm deeply concerned about the direction our country is heading. We know that the great civilizations of the past didn't collapse from external attacks, they collapsed from within. They became corrupted, decayed, and fell. It used to be the elitist fringe, but now is it more main stream, this hostility toward Christianity and our Judeo-Christian values.

We need to stand for truth without shame or apology, but it is going to become increasingly difficult to do so.

DS: Do you think it's important for Christians to stand up and speak out on religious liberty, now?

AB: If they do stand, there will be opposition, but if they don't stand, there will be serious consequences. To stand for truth, we cannot avoid conflict. We must teach the Bible and stand for truth. ■

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