

**Video Message by HRH The Prince of Wales at the launch of Aid to the Church in
Need's Religious Freedom in the World Report – 2014**

Ladies and gentlemen, I hope you will forgive me not being with you in person as you gather together for the release of this most comprehensive report on religious freedom, compiled by the international charity "Aid to the Church in Need".

The horrendous and heart-breaking events in Iraq and Syria have brought the subject of religious freedom and persecution to the forefront of the world's news. We have learnt with mounting despair of the expulsion of Christians, Muslims and Yezidis from towns and cities that their ancestors have occupied for centuries.

Sadly, incidents of violence in Iraq and Syria are not isolated. They are found throughout some, though not all, of the Middle East; in some African nations; and in many countries across Asia.

Thankfully, despite this bleak picture, there are inspirational people of different faiths joining together to overcome division and hatred. And, if I might say so, it is a well-established principle of inter-faith dialogue that we judge each other by the best expression of our faith rather than the worst.

Over several decades I have been working to encourage dialogue and greater understanding between different faith traditions. Indeed, last December I hosted a reception at Clarence House in response to the growing plight of Christians threatened by persecution in the Middle East. Having listened to their concerns, I did my best to highlight the gravity of the crisis. In February, during a visit to the Middle East, I attended an inter-faith dialogue in Qatar which included key Christian and Muslim scholars and clergy, during which we discussed the subject of the "Christian-Muslim relationship". It is an indescribable tragedy that Christianity is now under such threat in the Middle East – an area where Christians have lived for 2,000 years, and across which Islam spread in 700 AD, with people of different faiths living together peaceably for centuries.

It seems to me that our future as a free society – both here in Britain and throughout the world – depends on recognizing the crucial role played by people of faith. And, of course, religious faith is all the more convincing to those outside the faith when it is expressed with humility and compassion, giving space to others, whatever their beliefs.

With this in mind, I would like to suggest several tangible courses of action that I believe might be helpful.

First and foremost, rather than remaining silent, faith leaders have, it seems to me, a responsibility to ensure that people within their own tradition respect people from other faith traditions. We have yet to see the full potential of faith communities working together.

However, to do this effectively, with a truly fraternal approach, requires not only maturity in one's own faith, but also an essential humility. I believe that to speak to another faith tradition and to defend those who follow it, it is profoundly helpful to speak from the core of one's own spiritual experience. My own Christian faith has enabled me to speak to, and to listen to, people from other traditions, including Islam. And, as Pope Francis has

recently said, such inter-faith dialogue is a necessary condition for peace in the world, and should be seen as a duty for all Christians, as well as for believers from other religious communities.

Such efforts aimed at peace and mediation are possible. The report from Aid to the Church in Need highlights the example of a Muslim Imam, a Catholic Archbishop and a Protestant Minister coming together to form an inter-religious peace group in the Central African Republic. These seeds of hope can germinate even in nations and regions torn apart by war and violence.

Secondly, it is essential that governments honour their duty to uphold the right of people to practise their faith. Article 18 of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights is clear in stating that this right includes the freedom to change one's religion or belief. Yet even in the West this right is often challenged. Sadly, in many other countries, an absence of freedom to determine one's own faith is woven into the laws and customs of the nation.

However, in seeking to persuade others of our point of view, it is essential that we all take steps to understand the values and beliefs of others. It is for this reason that I can only commend a recent initiative by the Foreign and Commonwealth Office to establish an in-house training programme aimed at British diplomats, on the subject of religion and foreign policy.

Finally, we are living in a world in which we are frequently presented with so many profoundly disheartening news stories. Yet it is important that on a personal level, we do not lose hope. And this is why I was encouraged to see the story of Meriam Ibrahim feature in this report. Imprisoned in Sudan, pregnant and facing a death sentence for reportedly converting to Christianity, Meriam remained true to her beliefs.

It is cases such as that of Meriam, who was eventually released, that remind us of Saint Paul's words, so relevant to all of those enduring persecution for their faith, that "suffering produces endurance, endurance produces character and character produces hope, and hope does not disappoint us".

So my heart goes out to all those around the world, but especially at this time in the East – whether Christian, Muslim, Jewish, Buddhist or Hindu – who are so brutally persecuted solely for the faith they profess. I pray, too, that all people and communities will engage in building respect and tolerance – for without these, the very freedom on which society is built is threatened with destruction.

-Ends-