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Remarks at the Panel Documenting International Religious Freedom at the IRF Summit in Washington D.C.

31st January 2023

Dr. Ronald Boyd-MacMillan

The question was asked, “Global Christian Relief is about to launch a new initiative – the Global Index of Religious Freedom. Could you tell us about the index and why you are doing it?”

Though it has improved in the years I have been working in this space, there are still three significant obstacles that make it hard to influence successfully with data.

- The policy tier remains too bowled over by single stories, often untypical, usually over-emotional.
- The academic realm cannot find enough incontrovertible facts.
- And the Faith world struggles to cross religious divides in the fight for a better deal.

The situation is better, but the task is to do much better still.

We want, at Global Christian Relief, to enable a new data instrument and by doing so walk in the ways of three giants who showed us the way to combat repression of religion. When it comes to successful influencing on behalf of the suffering religious communities of the world, we tread in the footsteps of those greater than us. So, we want to combine the ways of three great men who each in their own way showed how to combat oppression.

First, **Alexander Solzhenitsyn**, who showed that only the power of STORY could bridge the gap between those who suffer and those who do not. He told us so in his Nobel Prize acceptance speech of 1970:



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“Who will enlighten mankind as to what is genuinely oppressive and intolerable and what only rubs us the wrong way because it is close to hand ... In such matters, propaganda, compulsion, and scientific proof are all powerless here. Happily, however, a means does exist—and that is art, literature.

Art is capable of the following miracle: it can overcome man’s characteristic weakness of learning only from his own experience, so that the experience of others is wasted on him. From man to man, augmenting his brief span on earth, art can convey the whole burden of another’s long life experience, with its cares, colours and flavour, can re-create in the flesh the experiences of other men and enable us to assimilate them as our own. Art is endowed with the miraculous capability of transferring experience ... thereby somewhat straightening the tortuous twists of human history.”¹

This storytelling though has to be **monumental** in scale so that it breaks the common dismissal – “well, that’s just an extreme case.” For Solzhenitsyn, this was overcome with the Gulag Archipelago. All three volumes of it. He knew, *data alone sears no conscience*. Only story does.

So whatever else we do, we must rehabilitate the **power of monumental storytelling**.

Then there is another way to add to this. The way of Martin Niemöller, and **the power of generous coalitions**. The leader of the Confessing Church in Nazi Germany is famous for confessing, rather shamefacedly,

“First they came for the Socialists, and I did not speak out because I was not a Socialist. Then they came for the Trade Unionists, and I did not speak out because I was not a Trade

¹ Solzhenitsyn, Alexander. “Nobel Prize Speech.” *Index on Censorship* 1, no. 3–4 (1972): pp. 17–18.



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Unionists. Then they came for the Jews, and I did not speak out because I was not a Jew. Then they came for me, and there was no one left to speak for me.”

Niemoller woke up far too late to the dangers of Nazism. But a great principle was released into the world of advocacy – that to successfully defend the freedom of your own group you must prioritize freedom for all. ***One group can make a difference, but no one group can make all the difference.*** The Niemuller principle has not been taken up enough in our pluralistic Western world. I labored for ten years as head of a unit that produced a famous list of persecuted Christians. It has its place. It has its use. But it was Christians advocating only for other Christians. And I began to get a lot of push back on that stance ... and rightly so.

Finally, a third great man to notice, not so well known. Father Lazlo Ladany, who shows **the power of an unimpeachable source**. He was a Hungarian Jesuit who became one of the great China watchers in the world. As a journalist in Hong Kong, we all had to read his particular product, which was *China News Analysis* - a twice monthly summary of what was going on in China that he started and edited from 1953 to 1982. It was short. It was regular. It was unmissable. Because he limited himself to profiling the story of China from purely official sources – statistics, reports, articles. He was able to show that ***even propaganda secretes the real story*** ... if you knew how to interpret it. If Ladany said it was a fact, then it was fact. No one could counter his narrative because it was based on the most unimpeachable sources. It did mean there was a story he couldn't tell, but he realized the world that needed to be influenced would take nothing on trust.

And so, at Global Christian Relief, we intend to facilitate an entirely new product in this field, combining these three ways to influence. We wish to publish a Global Religious Freedom Index for all faiths, in all countries, and uniquely, to an academic standard. There is no such instrument in existence today.



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The Ladany principle. The power of unimpeachable sources. We will fund Bar Ilan University's Religion and State Project, which has the largest set of variables on government and social hostilities per country, and all produced from published sources. It is the picture of persecution worldwide with the most pixels as it were. At the moment it is stuck at 2014. We will analyze and publish the data in cooperation with the world's first think tank on religious liberty – the *International Institute for Religious Freedom*. This data will not have to be taken on trust.

The Niemuller principle. The data spread is so extensive it covers all faiths in all countries. It is offered to all for analysis. And we wish to form teams across faiths and disciplines to make the most of the data set. We will bring it to a ranking of who is persecuted where and why. It will not replace the Pew report on Global Restrictions, but it will far surpass it in the specificity of persecution per religion which the Pew report cannot provide.

The Solzhenitsyn principle. Because it is the list with the largest set of factors by far, the storytelling can will be anchored in the deepest profile of what is going on. Sure, the data will need faces, but there will be a new umbilical link between the testimony and the fact.

Unimpeachable sources. Generous coalitions. Monumental story-telling. Into this crowded space, we venture to think an entirely new instrument of extraordinary power is being brought into being.

Because the persecuted of the world deserve it.

Will it make all the difference? Of course not. No one thing will make all the difference, but it will make a big difference.

- It will make the story of oppression more difficult to refute,
- and easier to understand in all its complexity,
- and more valuable in the specificity and range of policy recommendations.

Be informed. Stay tuned. And consider yourself invited to be part of this generous coalition.