

## Defending Religious Freedom is Important

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Distinguished participants in the Conference of Hope, I found out how important it is to sit with leaders from other political persuasions and leaders of other faiths, from all over the world, advocating for religious freedom for all, as I know faith is central to the decline of terrorism and the growth of societies.

I followed two US Ambassadors for International Religious Freedom and have since worked with the three who succeeded me and have had the privilege of meeting and working with the leaders of many faith traditions, including the Unification Church and others who are fighting for their rights. I also have the task of helping those persecuted and imprisoned for their faith, to be rescued and freed, including Christian pastors from my own Christian tradition.

But I sat with everyone, including Uyghurs, Rohingas, Muslims, members of the Unification Church, and even Pope Benedict who held the first International Religious Freedom conference ever, in Rome, where I advocated for everyone to exercise their right to worship, wear religious attire and raise their families in their choice of faith. Freedom of religion is freedom of thought, and is an essential foundation of democracy, alongside the freedoms of speech and assembly.

We must uphold religious freedom in these countries where the State is their leader, and where they dismiss, denounce, and deny people the right to choose their faith, countries, like China, Japan, North Korea.

When we are free to choose who we are, and what we choose to believe, then this world will truly be a better place. My heart and my prayers go out right now to those who are being persecuted because of their beliefs.