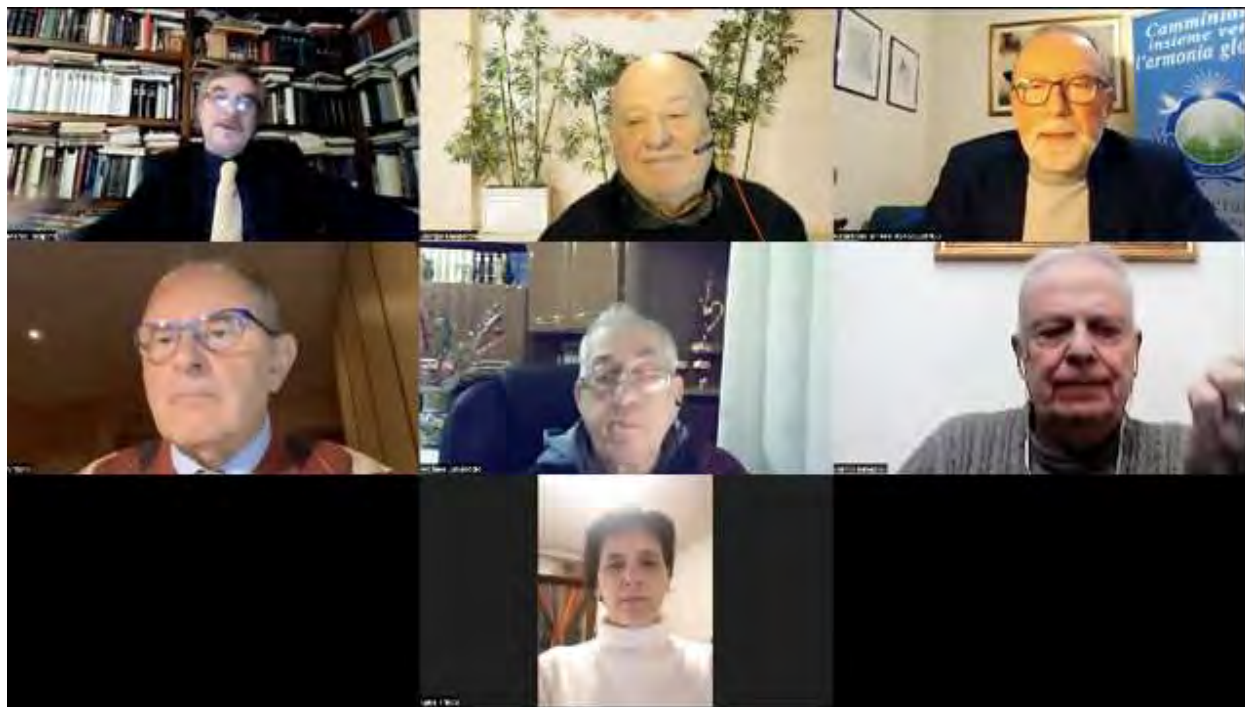


UPF Rome, Italy: The First Human Freedom, Including Political Freedom

Carlo Zonato
February 27, 2023



Rome, Italy - Dr. Marco Respinti, a leading advocate for religious freedom, was the speaker at the second UPF-Italy Peace Forum of 2023.

The title of his presentation, given on February 27, 2023, was "Religion and Belief: The First Human Freedom, Including Political Freedom."

Dr. Respinti, a journalist, essayist and lecturer, is the editor-in-chief of both the Journal of CESNUR (Center for Studies on New Religions), an academic publication on new religions, and Bitter Winter, a journal on religious freedom and human rights in China.



He is also a UPF Ambassador for Peace and has attended several UPF events, including international ones.

Carlo Zonato, the president of UPF-Italy, was the moderator of the webinar.

Dr. Respinti began by quoting Article 18 of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights:

Everyone has the right to freedom of thought, conscience and religion; this right includes freedom to change his religion or belief and freedom, either alone or in community with others and in public or

private, to manifest his religion or belief in teaching, practice, worship and observance of rites.

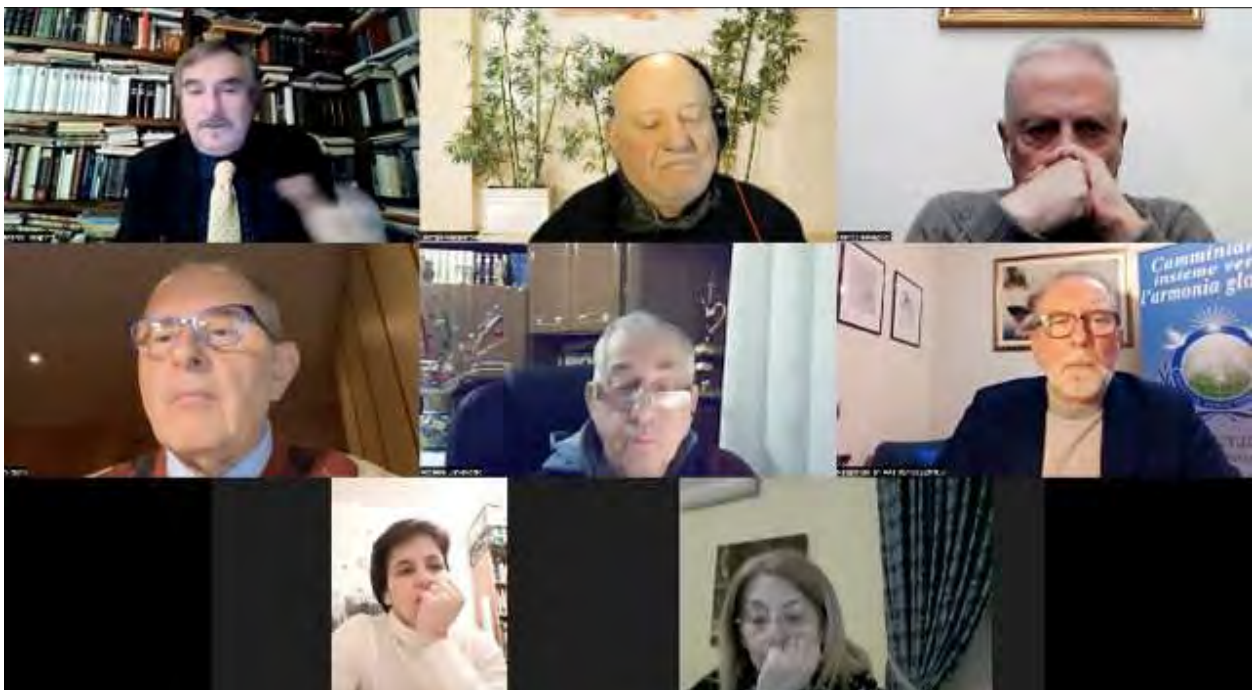
Dr. Respinti continued: "There is no full public freedom of the person unless it starts from the princely freedom, which is to be able freely, sovereignly - without any intrusion, without any interference from anybody, from any private group - to set up the foundational relationship, the one that grounds all the rest of the relationships between self and ... the Being that we hold to be the Creator ... that defines the rules of the universe and whatever, that is God as Greek philosophy defines it.



"Why is this the most fundamental foundational relationship? Because behind this question there is no other. All faiths, all religions, all creeds, whatever they call God, even when they don't call Him or give Him different names or different definitions, evidently hold Him to be the initial and ultimate principal and final issue. And if it is principal and ultimate, from the setting of the relationship between self and this entity, then derives the way human beings set their lives. It derives morality, it derives criteria of right, wrong, good, evil, how to achieve good, how not to do evil, and so on and so forth. ...

"I want to believe in God and to believe that God, whatever name I give Him, exists or does not exist, and to be free to draw all the practical, concrete, material, organizational, social, political consequences, subject to the limits we were saying before: natural law and existing law. If I have this guarantee, if the state guarantees me this, I can live my life peacefully, I can contribute to the common good peacefully. ... I have the opportunity to make common stretches, common path stretches with different cultural and religious sensitivities, even with those on religious discourse who conclude differently, because I recognize the universality of this first and fundamental freedom."

To read the entire presentation, [click here](#).



"Religion and Belief: The First Human Freedom, Including Political Freedom"

Dr. Marco Respinti, a journalist, essayist and lecturer, is the editor in chief of Journal of CESNUR, an academic publication on new religions, and Bitter Winter, a journal on religious freedom and human rights in China. Dr. Respinti is a UPF Ambassador for Peace and has participated in UPF events, including international conferences.

Thank you for the invitation to share some reflections with you. It is always a pleasure to participate in UPF's activities in Italy and abroad. I am not saying this because I am a guest of UPF; UPF's friends know these are sincere words.

When I talk about freedom of religion, I will use the term as it is internationally understood, even with an acronym which has become canonical in the scholarly field: FORB, which stands for Freedom of Religion or Belief, i.e., freedom of religion and belief.

One could continue with the list of synonyms such as Freedom of Thought and Conscience, Religion and/or Belief, meaning freedom of thought, conscience, religion or belief. The list may get longer, but the problem is not the multiplication of entities but the attempt to understand in the broadest and most inclusive way this expression. For some, the expression "religion" as such is too reminiscent of an institution; some expressions have a very different conception of divinity than others. And so somehow, Freedom of Religion or Belief—religion, if you will, more institutionalized and belief, in the broadest sense of possible spiritual ways—is the definition that is adopted.

I have quoted Article 18 of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, which is a canonical place where we find this definition:

Everyone has the right to freedom of thought, conscience and religion; this right includes freedom to change his religion or belief, and freedom, either alone or in community with others and in public or private, to manifest his religion or belief in teaching, practice, worship and observance.

(Universal Declaration of Human Rights, 1948, Article 18)

This is the sense in which academically but also journalistically I use the expression “freedom of religion”: to call human rights those natural rights. They are called that because they derive from the nature of humans.

Then someone can question what the nature of humans is, and contemporary philosophies do that. And here the problem gets complicated.

However, if we wanted in every way to contemplate even this complication, we would need at least another seminar. Let us at least begin by holding firm the idea that human rights are those rights that pertain to human nature—meaning by “nature” humans as they are; humans as they are made; that nature which causes to exist prerogatives of the human being that are so radical and so definitive that they precede any and all human power and which no power can modify, reduce, trample or deny. No power of any kind—be it political, be it cultural, be it social, be it economic, be it even religious. That is, not even a human power of a religious kind has the right to trample the rights that pertain to the nature of humans as such.

Human rights are that identity card that belongs to the nature of humans as humans, precisely because they are human, and they constitute a free zone; we might say a no-fly zone; the metaphor indicates that there is a territory within which no one has the right to intervene. These are human rights, and we fight for these rights because we recognize that this human characteristic is

absolutely pre-eminent over everything else and absolutely inalienable and intangible.

The first of these natural rights is the right to exist. The right to life is self-evident in the sense that when faced with a subject who is not alive, it makes no sense to talk about rights. If we talk about rights, we need to postulate the existence of the subject I am referring to, and therefore the first of these rights that no one can disparage and that must be protected, beyond any human power, is the right to exist, the right to live, the right to life.

From the right to life, the first of these human rights, immediately follows the second right: freedom to deal with this first right. It is the technical ability to be able to deal with the first. I am alive, and therefore with my life I do as wisdom advises me, as reason advises me. I do, if you will allow me the expression, what I want. This is my life; I have the freedom to deal with it.

So the first is the right to life; the second and immediate, which is implementation of the first, is freedom. When we consider human life not only as an individual, but as a collection of people, as a community, as a group—for example, ours tonight, we are in a way a community—we give this human group the name of society, and politics is the life of this human group considered in its public dimension, because even a human group which has a community identity still retains a private level. Here, where instead we consider the public level, we speak of the political dimension. And then freedom as the implementation of the right to life, not only of an individual but of a group of people we call society, is the freedom of a group, caught in its public dimension; therefore freedom immediately takes on a political content, a content of community life.

A beautiful sylloge of all this is contained in the Declaration of Independence of the United States of America, enacted on July 4, 1776. I quote it not out of a whiff of Americanism or Americophilia, but because it seems to me to be one of the most brilliant

and succinct definitions of what those inalienable freedoms are, according to the scan I have been following until just now.

Life, first and foremost, from which follows the possibility of enjoying this life. Freedom, ergo the pursuit of happiness. It doesn't say the pursuit of happiness like Diogenes Laertius, who went around looking for the mystery and pursuit of happiness. Freedom exists so that human life can concretely pursue happiness.

This synthesis, and I cited this paper for its brilliant synthesis, contains centuries and centuries of human reflection on this issue. It is a synthesis that finds within it religious strands, secular strands, so it has a universality that makes it citable, for example, as we are doing it this evening; you find within it St. Thomas Aquinas; you find within it John Locke, who had metaphysics that were not only different but even conflicting. And that is why it is worth keeping in mind.

We have talked so far about life and freedom. Freedom understood as setting the former in motion; freedom making life usable. But we have not defined what freedom is. Now I don't begin this evening to define what freedom is, because the West has been trying to define freedom for 2,500, maybe 3,000 years now. The East has other dates.

I emphasize that freedom—understood as the first of the natural human political rights because it is a dimension of public life—is substantiated to be, first and foremost, religious freedom.

I do not define what freedom is, but I do arrogate to myself the presumption of defining the content of freedom, first and foremost, as religious freedom. In what sense? In the sense that there can be no full public freedom—not only behind the walls of one's own home but in the public arena, in public life, in society, everywhere—without the freedom to be able, first and foremost, to set the question of principle, the one from which everything

else starts and which thus grounds every other social, political, cultural and economic relationship.

This freedom is the relationship between self, as a human being, and God. When I say “God,” here we can call it Supreme Being, we can call it Infinite Being, we can talk about cosmic transcendence, we can give it any name we want. Greek philosophy 2,000 years ago started working with this concept. We take it almost as a technical term. The important thing is the substance.

There is no full public freedom if it does not start from the princely freedom, which is to be able freely, sovereignly, without any meddling, without any interference from anybody, from any private group, to set up the foundational relationship, the one that founds all the rest of the relationships between self and whatever name we give it, the Being that we consider for somebody to be the Creator, for somebody to be the Being that defines the rules of the universe and whatever, that is God as Greek philosophy defines it.

Why is this the most fundamental foundational relationship? Because behind this question there is no other. All faiths, all religions, all creeds, whatever they call God, even when they don't call Him or give Him different names or different definitions, clearly they hold Him to be the initial and ultimate, principal and final issue. And if it is principal and ultimate, from the setting of the relationship between self and this entity is derived the way in which human beings set their lives: morality, criteria of right, wrong, good, evil, how to achieve good, how not to do evil, and so on.

All the rest of my freedoms depend on how I establish the principal and ultimate relationship between me and God, even if I should conclude—and here the universality of the principle of religious freedom, which applies to everyone—and decide in full conscience, in full freedom, that God does not exist.

When even an atheist has resolved or has decided to resolve in a completely sovereign and free way this principal and ultimate relationship with the Divine, it follows also for this person how he will organize his life, his private life and his public life. It will derive from his way of understanding good and evil.

In recent years there have been those who reflect on secular ethics, on non-religious ethics, on what are the sources of secular ethics. Ethics is not another issue; it is the same issue we are talking about. It is solving the nodal, fundamental and main point of the relationship between humans and God in a certain alternative way to that of religions.

I am not interested here in how a person solves this question, this fundamental relationship. What is of interest is that it is the fundamental relationship that is, therefore, even a non-religious choice. And help define this, that is, religious freedom, as the main point; main precisely because it is the one from which everything else is derived.

I always use universal documents because of their universal value. It's so true that after the Americans wrote the Declaration of Independence in 1776, giving birth to a new state, what we call the United States of America, in 1789 they wrote the Constitution outlining the duties of the state. They realized very soon that the Constitution was deficient in some fundamental and principled aspects. Less than two years later they produced an additional document of 10 amendments to the Constitution, called the Bill of Rights, which sets out the basic rights of American citizens.

The first of these points is that Congress, the parliamentary assembly of the United States, will not promote laws establishing a state religion or prohibiting the free profession of religion.

Religious freedom is the first of the rights of the American citizen; in this case the first of the duties of the American state, which

must recognize it. And what should the American state do in the way of religion? Nothing! It must leave freedom to the citizen.

I immediately draw your attention to two points. The first is that the government should not establish a state religion, nor prohibit free profession.

This document guarantees free profession in public. It means that not only in your little room can you profess your religion, but you have the right—and the state has the duty not to clash against this right of yours—to profess it in public and to draw all the consequences from this public profession. Do you want to establish a school? Do you want to establish a free association? Do you want to establish a bank? So, freedom of religion in all its public, that is, political dimensions.

The second thing I would like to call your attention to is that it shows a concrete way, appropriate to nature, to return to the principle of being human, of regulating the relationship between conscience, state and religion. Congress does not enact laws establishing a state religion.

So religious freedom is the first of the rights. Then the others—freedom of speech, freedom of the press, the right to peaceably assemble, and we can list all the other rights—they all come in sequence after the first one, which is freedom of religion. This is like saying that freedom of religion regulates the most important and most fundamental relationship between humans and divinity.

This one that I showed you just now, which is the first of the amendments to the Constitution of the United States in 1791, has its *raison d'être* in a document that is coeval with the Declaration of Independence of 1776, which is the Virginia Declaration of Rights from the colony (and later, U.S. state) of Virginia, which is noteworthy for its liberality and for its universality and, if you will allow me, its beauty.

... [R]eligion, or the duty which we owe to our Creator and the manner of discharging it, can be directed by reason and conviction, not by force or violence; and therefore, all men are equally entitled to the free exercise of religion, according to the dictates of conscience. ...

In the beauty and roundness of this sentence there is in it from St. Thomas Aquinas to Plato to Locke. But the more I study the East, the more I see that Confucius is also in it. I mention it precisely because of its richness, because of its beauty. I would say this is the correct way of the political, therefore public, relationship between state, people and religion.

However, I realized that I have talked so far about FORB, freedom of religion, but I have not yet defined religious freedom. Defining religious freedom is like defining the essence of God, so God forbid. But certainly, some points we can list; I have listed three.

First, religious freedom as God's right to be worshipped in conscience and sincerity by human beings. This pertains to believers obviously; others have a different opinion, which I totally respect. God, if He is God, has the right to be worshipped freely by human beings, and therefore no human power has the right to stand in the way.

All the more so for a believer who considers God to be the most important being, the Supreme Being, this deity has the right to prayer, to worship by humans in total freedom, not in constraint, not in captivity, not in a condition of minority. God has the right to be worshipped by humans freely, in the public square, in the ways that God and humans imagine, obviously subject to the law. If to worship my God I have to blow up buildings—this clearly not—but in the ways permitted by law, by natural law, by the true law of good and evil. The right to worship God in the manner that I consider to be the most appropriate; in the ways, with the rites,

with the gestures that I consider in full conscience to be appropriate. God has a right to this on the part of humans.

The second dimension of religious freedom is the right to believe or not to believe, which is a form of belief. A person has the right to believe or not to believe, and no constituted power can trample or take away or curtail this right. By what right can a person be denied the right to believe and to live out his belief in public?

The third is a person's right to truth. I think this is perhaps the most beautiful summary; it is not mine, but I grasped it once I saw a conference organized with the title "The Right to Truth." And I made it my own because it seemed to me the fullest, most rounded expression to define religious freedom.

What do we talk about when we talk about religious freedom? We talk about a person's right to the truth, to believe that a truth exists, to pursue it, to search for it, to find it, to change one's opinion about the truth, to change one's opinion about the ways to reach the truth. So the right to conversion from one group to another is part of religious freedom, and when we talk about truth, obviously we are talking about the ultimate truth about all things. So the right to truth, believing it exists, the right to pursue it, to search for it, to find it, to change one's mind about the truth, to change one's way of thinking and seeking the truth and to live this truth in public, drawing all the practical consequences.

When we had started earlier from that document that I quoted for its concise beauty, freedom, life and the concrete, material possibility of being able to pursue what I consider happiness, is the public political dimension of my right to truth. I want to believe in God and to believe that God, whatever name I give Him, exists or does not exist, and to be free to draw all the practical, concrete, material, organizational, social, political consequences, subject to the limits we mentioned before: natural law and existing law. It is clear that if I am in the Soviet Union or China or the Third Reich, the discourse on the law may change a lot, but it

is a special case. So, to draw all the consequences allowed precisely by the law, because that is the first of my rights.

If I have this guarantee, if the state guarantees me this, I can live my life peacefully, I can contribute to the common good peacefully. And I think that's one of the issues that UPF is so interested in and therefore interested in all of us who participate in UPF's activities in different ways. I have the opportunity to make common stretches, common path stretches with different cultural and religious sensitivities, even with those in religious discourse who conclude differently, because I recognize the universality of this first and fundamental freedom.

It is not simply the freedom to be free in my enclosure but to take freedom, this freedom of mine, outside and live all its consequences without being denied by any organized power or competing religious power of any state or group.

I simply close with this line: Working with different religious groups or new religions, I have never found any believer, in any religion, who defined religious freedom as relativism; today I am one thing, tomorrow I am another or, better yet, a little bit of everything like a mixed bag. I have always found people who firmly believe in their own religious tradition, so much so that they are so gentle, so charitable, so loving toward their neighbor that they say, "Look, I think this is true." It is only with these people that I have been able to work, personally as a journalist, well together; even though they have different religious affiliations but they are all respectful of their own tradition. Even this happened to me with non-believers. Religious freedom must be the ability of each individual person to organize himself freely and sovereignly by suffering its positive and negative consequences in regulating the first and most important relationship: that between self and, as a very dear American friend used to say, "the One who lives upstairs." Thank you.

Excerpts from Dr. Respinti's Answers to Questions and Comments

(...)

You say some very important things, but they open a huge thread. I set the question by maximum systems because I think it is important to be clearer and clearer, and I say this also for me, what I do from morning to night when I try to work for religious freedom by being a journalist. So in a very particular way, minimalist if you will, however what you say is the real point because then the maximum systems have to be dropped into the practical.

Above all, we have said religious freedom is a political human right because it has a public dimension, and therefore we cannot but take into consideration that maximum systems then have to be lowered into practice. And here I believe that there is no recipe; I believe that there are different forms and ways that political bodies and organizations should consider when dealing with this issue. I say, if you don't mistake me for a nutcase, that the less that states legislate in terms of religious regulation, the better. Because of virtuous examples I have not seen very many.

I quoted the First Amendment of the Bill of Rights where it says precisely the best way for the state to act in politics is not to deal with it, because all the places where it deals with it are really not good (in the egregious cases of totalitarian regimes we have that clear; however it's not that, as you were saying, in the countries of so-called accomplished democracy, including the United States, which is the bearer of that document rather than others, then it's all good).

But because almost always states think they have to legislate on religion, even have to legislate to guarantee religious freedom, where instead, paradoxically, a total leave-behind is better. Except that if someone kills, steals and rapes, it doesn't matter

what religion, but he has broken the civil covenant and therefore should be prosecuted to the full extent of the law. And it doesn't matter whether he did it for religious reasons, for non-religious reasons, and what religion it is. But beyond this obvious flagrancy of crime, the less the state legislates and the more religious communities are allowed to regulate themselves, the better.

Here then would come into play the disagreement between the communities, the stronger one and the weaker one; here perhaps the only role the state can have is to arbitrate between these communities; but to decide who does what is wrong.

Having said that, I am, however, convinced that somehow one must take into account the fact that in a certain country there is a felt, strong, shared cultural identity tradition which one cannot disregard. This clearly does not justify any kind of prevarication of one group over the other. The intelligence of the politician or, better yet, the intelligence of the majority communities must be not to throw overboard their own cultural and religious identity but not to turn this into the denial of what I have called another group's right to truth.

There are small oases, there are places where someone tries, there have been in the past as well, and I am not saying this because I live in Milan, but here we had in the 18th and 19th centuries, with all its flaws, a political order that tried to make at least four religions stand together.

(...)

It is very true, and it is beautiful, this concept of spiritual diplomacy. I said FORB to mean Freedom of Religion and Belief that is the broadest thing possible.

One thing that often escapes us—it escapes me first, so every once in a while I try to force myself to remember it—all the problems between faiths, religions, institutionalized religious

groups that are not free, stem from people. It is people who adhere to one or another religion who have problems with other people adhering. It is not religions, it is not religious groups, it is not faiths that have problems, it is people who experience them in a particular way. I can bring some trivial examples because I am a journalist and I cover these issues. I find myself defending Muslim groups being persecuted by other Muslims who interpret Islam differently. "That other person is not Islamic." Why? "Because I said so." Because it obeys a normally non-religious criterion, i.e., a political type that is given a religious garb. Sometimes it is a religious type but of an inauthentic religious interpretation and whatnot. This has happened within Christianity; this has happened in any religion.

You may have heard the case of the Ahmadiyya, who are a few million Muslim believers who have a particular interpretation of Islam certainly, but still based on the six pillars of the Muslim faith. When I visited them in their holy city in the Indian Punjab on this side of the border in India in a country with a Muslim majority and a Hindu majority and with a government of a certain kind but which guarantees religious freedom on this side of the border, in the Indian Punjab we do what we want. They took me to see wonderful mosques; they have cultural centers. They cross the border, and they are branded as heretics; they have to sign a document that has to be attached to their passport that says, "I am not a Muslim," which, however, for him who is a Muslim, because the Pakistani state persecutes them for it, almost borders on—I won't say blasphemy, but denying his faith. And there is a political boundary in between. People have the problem, people who live religions in a certain way.

I closed by defining freedom of religion in the first place as the right of God to be freely and fully worshipped. Secondly, a person's freedom to believe and he must be left free to believe; he has this basic human right to be able to believe. Third,

religious freedom as the right to truth. If these things are true, God is absolutely untouched by disagreements among people.

Then people should first begin, and I want to sound utopian, to think first of all, when they persecute someone else for religious reasons, whether this is appropriate to the faith they say they profess.

If people began to do this little examination of conscience with respect to the seriousness with which a living person does not live their religious setting, even the atheistic one, as we were saying earlier, perhaps things would begin to change. Serious people are serious about their religious tradition. That seriousness is seriousness with respect to the religious tradition or the name of God that I give.

Even if someone else calls God differently or has a different interpretation, a different reading, I can legitimately consider it different and wrong, but I have no right to say that he should be slaughtered or whatever or prevented even simply from opening a school, opening anything, simply because my interpretation that I continue to believe is right is different. I don't know if nations or states are doing soul-searching today but if they would start.

(...)

If you give me half a minute, I will tell you an episode. Every time I think about it, it still touches me today. I was on my honeymoon in Salzburg and was invited to lunch when a certain person learned that I was there with my wife, fresh and newlyweds. He was one of the greatest legal scholars, Thomas Kaimowitz, a German of Slavic origin, a practicing Jew; he invited us to lunch.

Before lunch he put on his yarmulke, gave thanks in Hebrew and then translated the thanksgiving to me; he thanked God for the lunch, for the guests and thanked God for the gentleman he had pictured in his house behind him. Behind him he had a portrait of

Emperor Franz Joseph of the Habsburgs. I then asked him why, and he replied, because I was Jewish, he was Catholic, and we were secure. And he began to list for me a number of public rights that Jews had under that empire. And he said: Do you know when it ended? When there was, in the decades after, the coming to power of National Socialism. Everything changed there, and I never forget to pray to this gentleman.

I tell it because every time I think about it, maybe because it was my marriage, it seems like a beautiful thing. This gentleman from a persecuted minority who did a lot of things but was guaranteed by the majority. Just what you were saying—a majority who feels responsibility; the emperor who conceives of himself as a father, and even though he has different children, he guarantees them. When, instead of this father, there came to power clearly a Bluebeard, the diverse children became children of a lesser God and not even human beings. There is a profound difference.

(...)

I think diplomacy can start once again and first of all by knowing each other. If one does not know, one says nonsense and is wrong. And then respect is needed, which is not a sticky label, respect. I am a believer and so are you; I believe that you have a divine spark within you and that any human being has this spark because he is created in a certain way. What is my faith, if it is not first of all respect, and I would say kneeling before the divine spark that is in the human? And then a man lays his hands on, another man doesn't, so he starts to listen to him, to say okay, let's try to talk. Diplomacy begins that way, I believe; so knowledge and that respect that comes from this deep divine dignity of the human being that is the principle, then to take every other step.