



Presidential Religious Liberty Commission

Seventh Hearing Transcript

April 13, 2026

Museum of the Bible

Washington, D.C.

Mary Margaret Bush ([00:00:05](#)):

Are we live? Great. Good morning. My name is Mary Margaret Bush. I'm the director and designated federal officer for the Religious Liberty Commission. It's my pleasure to announce the official opening of our proceedings today at our seventh hearing, our capstone hearing and turn things over to Lieutenant Governor Dan Patrick, our chairman.

Chairman Lieutenant Governor Dan Patrick ([00:00:26](#)):

Thank you, Mary. She's a new mom, so she has a baby backstage, so that's... Thank you Mary, brand new baby. Before we begin, I want to thank everyone from the Museum of the Bible and Carlos Campo, who allowed us to use these facilities and the families behind the Museum of the Bible. We started last June for those of you to not know. Our first hearing was in June of 25. This is our seventh hearing. We had one hearing in Dallas Hall—have been here. I want to thank the entire staff for the Museum of the Bible. You've been just tremendous to work with. And then I want to thank our great committee here. We have two that had a scheduled conflict today, Cardinal Dolan and Reverend Franklin, but I want to thank everyone. You've done great work, and it's been a joy every week that we come together. We're not finished yet. This is the last hearing, but we have a lot of work to do on the report to give to the President and then beyond that, so with that, welcome Helen. You are going to give us opening remarks, and then we're going to ask you questions as well. This is Helen Alvaré. The floor is yours.

Professor Helen Alvaré ([00:01:31](#)):

Thank you so much. Thank you so much, Chair Patrick and members of the commission, for the privilege of addressing you. I appear before you as an attorney and law professor at a public university who entered the profession due to my strong interest in—and really a devotion to—the cause of religion's flourishing

and freedom in the U.S. I speak from a perspective after 42 years of practice, study and scholarship, of pride in the United States' continuing pursuit of religious freedom even as we have of course stumbled from time to time. In fact, likely pride isn't a strong enough word. I should rather say that I'm often moved by the beauty of our founding and continuing commitment, a commitment still visible in our nation's life, not only in law but in interactions between neighbors and in towns and cities in the U.S. Even as the news will always be drawn to stories of conflict, there is in fact far more peace among the many religions represented here, large and small. Thanks in significant part to the manner in which our legal guarantees of religious freedom have shaped our culture. Sometimes there's even more, there's mutual appreciation and even cooperation between religions and between religions in the state though always unsettling church state friction is the exception, not the rule. This is an objective good for our nation, and yes, also beautiful. I've followed the work of this commission, its gathering of a wide array of personal testimonies and the thinking of scholars and religious leaders. These have provided you exposure to the sweep of relevant history and law to the positive roles religion has played in our society and to both the 10,000 foot view and the view from the ground, which has been particularly interesting. By which I mean from the minds and hearts and souls of particular Americans, of many religions who have benefited from religious freedom or have suffered from a governmental misunderstanding of religious freedom's scope. From time to time, the suffering is the result of malice and recently from governmental preoccupation with sexual expression.

Quite often, however, it arises from a misunderstanding of that unfortunate historically and culturally inaccurate and constitutionally inapposite Jeffersonian phrase, separation of church and state. In some religious freedom is a beautiful ideal, but this commission has undertaken the laborious and concrete work required to keep ideals like this aloft. In the next 10 minutes or so, then allow me to highlight a few themes and issues that I hope the commission will take into consideration as you complete your report. These concern, first, recognizing the positive consequences of religious freedom, including some that I propose to be worthy of particular attention because of their timeliness and those that I would propose to be crucially, I would say architecturally related to the ongoing success of this experiment and freedom that is our country. Second and more briefly, I'll address the—and characterize—the negative consequences of the misunderstanding of our constitutional guarantee of non-establishment. And third, I will note the due limits of religious freedom first.

Then even a quick tour of U.S. history can reveal the positive contributions of religion and religious freedom, but today we also have empirical evidence at our disposal. We can better quantify religion's contributions to, for example, the rich tapestry of educational healthcare and social services institutions in the U.S. often serving the most vulnerable, religious Americans' volunteer hours, their charitable dollars, supporting their neighbors of every religion or none. Because of my experience as a family law scholar too, I would like to highlight religion's contributions to strengthening the bedrock of American society, which is the family. Almost 200 years ago, Alexis de Tocqueville observed that the strength of America's families, particularly by way of their transmitting their faiths, importantly grounded our democracy. We can confidently say that de Tocqueville was right. We know today that the family in the U.S. is suffering especially among the poorest and that those communities then reap the consequences.

We have less marriage, a large percentage of children missing the stable presence of their parents. The sexual objectification of women and increasingly of men is common. We're also witnessing high rates of non-marital cohabitation, abortion, divorce. Because children of the poor and those with less educational privilege disproportionately experience these losses, they also suffer the related negative outcomes in the realms of education, employment, income and future family formation themselves. This, in turn, leads to the widening and hardening of gaps between the haves and the have nots in a country that has prided itself upon social mobility. But many religions in the U.S. are devoted to forming and sustaining strong families with precepts, programs, and charities empirically associated with good family outcomes. Some highlight the importance of respecting the link between sexual love and new life or adults' obligations to put children's needs before their own. Some stress healthy dating practices, offer marriage preparation,

marriage mentoring, family crisis interventions, support for single and impoverished parents and for the divorced and widowed, help for new parents, and many more services.

In recent years, more than a few lawmakers proceeded on the opposite assumption—that is, that religion, sexual and family mores were socially harmful and thus should be legally silenced. On this assumption and their own attachment to opposing principles, they trampled religious freedom. This is certainly ironic given what we now know empirically about the positive outcomes of religious ways of doing courtship, marriage and parenting. But happily, it's also increasingly facing legal headwinds as a series of U.S. Supreme Court and lower court opinions vindicate the free speech associational, church autonomy and religious freedom, rights of religious institutions and individuals seeking to live their family beliefs with integrity. Family is the place where children can learn to love themselves and others to respect a wide array of differences between people of all ages, conditions, traits and abilities, to develop capacities for sacrifice, generosity and justice, all indispensable skills for living in our pluralistic democratic society.

This point further counsels respectful deference by the state to parents' decision-making regarding their children's religious upbringing. It's worth taking a moment in fact to celebrate the Supreme Court—and now many lower courts also—recent and welcome articulation of the necessity of constitutional deference to parents, especially by way of the *Mahmoud* opinion. It had always bordered on the absurd to suggest that teachers with no long run connections with or responsibility for other people's children could contradict parents' faith transmission. Finally, today cause for celebration, the constitutional law in this matter is clearly articulated. In fact, religions can be among the government's greatest partners and allies in fostering the ideals and values that our public institutions, including public schools, hope to instill. Our Supreme Court noted this in a case involving Amish parents' rights to homeschool their children, *Wisconsin v. Yoder*, where it pointed out that the exact value that the mandatory education law was supposed to instill adult self-sufficiency perhaps most admirably cultivated by Amish homeschooling practices.

This was also noted in a 1996 federal district court case in Nebraska, which struck down a state law requirement that freshmen at a public university must live in state—not religiously organized—housing in its opinion accommodating religious freedom. The court emphasized that the exact values the state sought to promote pluralistic interaction and mutual interpersonal acceptance among a diverse array of students would likely better be accomplished in the religious housing, which included a more diverse array of students than the university's own dorms, including international students and students of color. But beyond inspiring personally virtuous character and conduct, beyond educating the young, beyond massively assisting the poor, the immigrant, the imprisoned, and the sick, religions with the wind of religious freedom at their back do more. They're the sources of ideas and norms that thinkers as various as George Washington, atheist philosopher Jürgen Habermas and moral psychologist Jonathan Haidt acknowledge to promote cooperation goodness and generosity, reaching even into very private places and exceeding what reason or the law alone could inspire. Religion is also the source of more than a few of those profound and indispensable commitments that shape the idea that is the United States, and of which we are justly proud.

Our Supreme Court has recognized these contributions, these ideas. Religion has inspired dozens and dozens of times in cases dating from the early days of our nation through to very recent years. I catalog these ideas in a recent article in the *Brigham Young Law Review*, and they are many, to wit: the idea of irreducible human rights and dignity that the government does not originate and cannot trample; the idea that every human being is radically equal to every other; the idea that governments and economies are means to the ends of serving human beings, not the other way around; the idea that there is a higher authority to which governments must answer, thus avoiding a totalizing or totalitarian state. One can find these sentiments too in some non-religious sources, but I would suggest that it is quite difficult to find a stronger foundation for these very American convictions than the religious notions that every one of us is created by the same God and are thus radically equal brothers and sisters with responsibilities not only to God but to everyone God loves, which is every other person. Allow me to turn briefly now to two final

points I'd like to highlight for the commission. The first is an affirmation of the importance of the Supreme Court's more recent and welcome turn toward interpreting the First Amendment's non-establishment guarantee. Previously and for too long under the banner of non-establishment, the court had allowed governmental disfavor of religion and even appeared suspicious that religious perspectives might undermine American democratic ideals with the consequence that religion was consigned to social invisibility, to private heads and heart spaces. Sometimes this flowed from the simplistic, ahistorical and constitutionally agnostic attachment to the Jeffersonian phrase, "separation of church and state." It certainly ignored the dozens of Supreme Court opinions linking religion's presence and religious freedom to the above described structural virtues and commitments of American government and society.

It suggested insultingly to religious citizens that they had to leave their minds and hearts and souls, which is to say their very persons and integrity, at the entrance to the public square, which could not whisper that our diverse society also included neighbors and coworkers inspired by divine teachings and obligations. No, allowing visibly religious persons, groups and institutions into the public square, coming as they are to receive equal treatment with the non-religious, does not coerce the non-religious to religion, nor favor one religion over others. Instead, it acknowledges equality between citizens and citizen groups, whether religious or non-religious. It is, in short, not an establishment, and our Supreme Court now has more clearly articulated this. And one final note, while for the most part there is harmony or at least not disharmony between religious precepts and the aims of laws and regulations, given that both ordinarily attend to reason, some disharmony and even explicit clashes are inevitable, religion does not and should not expect to prevail in every case.

Religious believers are aware of this. They're as aware today as they have been through the long history and global sweep of church-state relations. Clearly governments can usually accommodate religion without subverting their legal and social aims, but believers can and do understand that to preserve religious freedom for all Americans, whether members of large religions or tiny ones or for those professing no religion, government can set limits to religious conduct beyond which limits truly compelling citizen interests would be trampled, and there are no means less restrictive of religious freedom to accomplish this. This is not an equation that lends itself to precise solutions in every case, but we can take solace from the fact that our Supreme Court and lower courts have managed this dynamic for hundreds of years, whether under state or federal constitutions, whether under federal or state, religious freedom, protective acts, while overall maintaining the ongoing health peace and prosperity of American society. So again, thank you for the privilege of testifying.

Chairman Lieutenant Governor Dan Patrick (00:15:29):

Thank you, Helen. Kelly.

Kelly Shackelford (00:15:33):

One of the things you mentioned this separation of church and state, which we seen so many witnesses that have been really damaged horribly because people would just take that phrase and not understand anything about it and certainly do things totally outside the law. I mean I think of, for instance, the Coach Kennedy case where people always think about separation. Church-state number one's not in the constitution, it's Establishment Clause, but number two, it's talking about an institutional separation. We don't want a church to control the government, and we don't want the government to control a church. And in Coach Kennedy's case, please show me where the church is. There is no church, it's Coach Kennedy. What they're really doing is trying to say separation of religion from the government. And so we just see all these different violations. So, I would love, as somebody who teaches in this area, you see what the law is, but yet you see the kind of conversations going on out in the community and one of the things—the challenge to us—is what can we do to help people understand that these things that they're hearing are just totally inaccurate, and especially after *Lemon* being overruled, hopefully it's a little easier. But I'd love your thoughts on that idea.

Professor Helen Alvaré (00:16:55):

Thank you very much, commissioner. It is difficult to educate about a particular civic legal social point unless it is spread throughout the system, this point of education and done repeatedly. I remember when I was working in communications years ago, we used to say unless people hear something eight times and very clearly and simply they won't even register. There have been studies done about the way that our students, especially in the earlier grades K through 12 are being educated or not about religion, and first of all itself is done with such care as if even to speak about religion is to somehow break down this wall in a problematic way. But I would propose for the commission's consideration that some kind of very simple curriculum and it has to begin early about the structure of government because establishment is a structural principle. Non-establishment is a structural principle as you suggested.

It is about the government not running the church, the church not running the state. And so I think this would have to be incorporated along with I hope there's other civics education going on at these levels. A lot of the times, I think, and when you read these cases, whether it was the *Lee* case, the *Santa Fe* case, the Coach Kennedy case, the fear and neuralgia, the Good News case about allowing students to gather voluntarily just using a public space, there is a lack of knowledge among generations of the adults who are running these state institutions, and it would be nice to send forth the next generation without this fear of allowing religious persons and expressions to be seen in the public square. I can tell you I teach at a public university, and this is very possible to do in a way that maintains a very welcoming and positive aspect to my students of every religion and no religion and explains to them what the situation actually is, and it produces a sense of pride. We need to get rid of the fear and neuralgia about keeping religion out. But that has to be begun at a very early stage, I think, and schools are a good place to do it.

Mary Margaret Bush (00:19:27):

Thank you.

Professor Helen Alvaré (00:19:28):

Thank you.

Chairman Lieutenant Governor Dan Patrick (00:19:30):

Yes, Helen. One of the things we talked about early on in this commission was that we hope when we give our report, Americans will know their rights, where they can pray, when they can pray, and the areas where people try to stop them, where the rights are on the side of the person, not the person trying to stop them. Bishop Barron,

Bishop Robert Barron (00:19:53):

Thanks very much for the testimony and I always find the philosophical side of these questions the most interesting and you suggest I think quite correctly that these foundational ideas of democracy, so freedom, equality, human rights are ultimately derived from a biblical consciousness. I mean you could point to Locke and so on, but even Locke is derived ultimately from a biblical sensibility. And so, to me, one of the ironies is as religions have faded more and more in our society and disaffiliation has gained speed, that's dangerous for our democracy because people start forgetting they don't hear the story of the Good Samaritan, they don't hear about the Ten Commandments, they don't hear the Beatitudes that affects our democracy. It's not just a religious problem. And so, the disaffiliation issue is bad for religion, but it's also bad for democracy it seems to me. I wonder if you could expand on that a bit.

Professor Helen Alvaré (00:20:44):

Thank you. There have been a number of thinkers, including some atheists, who have suggested that if we try to suggest that a community, a nation, a school should have no mention of religion, no suggestion that

any of its participants are religious, we're basically sawing off one of the branches that we're standing on as a country. This is why when I make arguments whether in an amicus brief at the Supreme Court or in a public setting or in a law review article, I never want to suggest that when religious people seek what we call accommodation, we are asking for some special privilege or especially in the case I pointed out in the sexual expression fights, they're suggesting that religions are seeking a right to do wrong. What you want is an accommodation to be bad. You want an accommodation to hurt people. And I would say actually no.

We want to witness to teachings that are not only ancient, that are not only natural law and philosophically wise that today, because of fabulous work being done in the family systems theory, sociology, philosophy, you name the medical arena, because of empirical studies being done there, we can show that the witness that we are seeking to preserve—not to tell everybody who's not a common community do this, do that—but the witness we're seeking to preserve is beautiful and good for the common good. And that indeed, this is why I make the point that there are non-religious ways of grounding all of these beautiful principles, the equality of every person and the dignity of every person, *et cetera*. But it is very hard to find a substitute for the idea that we are all created by the same God who cares for each of us calls each of us, loves each of us, and requires us to love those who he created, who are not ourselves and I in testimony before, say a US Congress or a state legislature, *et cetera*, even when I was representing religious clients or employers, I would begin with the philosophical and the natural law and say: “*and* faith also affirms reason.” It sheds a little additional of illumination here but does not contradict reason but rather affirms it.

Chairman Lieutenant Governor Dan Patrick (00:23:22):

Ryan?

Dr. Ryan T. Anderson (00:23:24):

Yep. Great. Thank you, Professor Alvaré. I loved everything you said. I want to ask two questions that I think were implicit what you said, and I want to invite you to make it more explicit. You open by saying the benefits of protecting religious liberty and some of which we can now empirically measure the social services that religious groups provide, the marriage and family counseling and just the witness, the source material for the ideas and the ideals that we value. But it strikes me that the deepest benefit of religious liberty is religion itself, the flourishing of religion, making possible friendship with God, allowing people to evangelize, allowing people to convert to respond to the gospel or to whatever religious teaching they believe to be true. So even if religious liberty didn't have all these other kind of secular social civic benefits that we could measure empirically, there's still a reason to protect religious liberty, and there's still a good that religious liberty protects, which is religion itself.

So that was the one thought. And then the second was that all of the benefits that you mentioned religion provides and that religious liberty allows for, it strikes me that you only get those civic social cultural benefits if you actually believe that your religion is true, right? If you do religion for the sake of having a stronger marriage and family or the sake of having democratic ideals or for the sake of civic services, maybe you can carry that off in a one-off in my particular family, but you can't get cultural transmission, right? The grandkids don't believe it for the utilitarian values. And so, both points kind of converge on that. It strikes me that it's for the sake of religion, for the sake of friendship with God, harmony with God, beatitude, that we should ultimately be concerned with religious liberty and that then allows for the various civilizational benefits that religion offers. And I think both of those were implicit, and so I just wanted you to have some more time to say some things about that.

Professor Helen Alvaré (00:25:31):

Thank you. Yes, so I think certainly for a believer of each religion represented in the United States, the “what drives them” is the faith that what they are suggesting is not just good for them, is not just good philosophically, but is part of the reality of how God made the human person who they're supposed to be,

how they're supposed to behave, what it takes to achieve salvation or whatever ultimate good they're seeking. And I think that they need to be honest about that for any person of a particular religion to just suggest that they want to be able to practice so that the society can have the utilitarian and benefits... first of all, as an attorney and a public communicator at sometimes, let's get real: who believes you?

You need to be fully honest that what you believe you believe is good for everybody. At the same time, when we communicate these things in a public setting in testimony before congress, in testimony here, before a public body, one wants also to say: it is also the case that you who do not share my beliefs, whether you have another religion or no religion, can understand that my intrinsic in my religion is love for you and a desire to benefit you intrinsic in my religion. I don't think this sounds very Pollyanna or too sweet for this type of hearing, but I don't think people listen to you if they think you don't actually have some kind of human love for them, some actual respect, but more so yes, the ultimate good is the flourishing of these various religions in a country that allows religious freedom, but I still think you need to explain that this comes from a place of desire for the good for the other and actually has that outcome.

Chairman Lieutenant Governor Dan Patrick (00:27:54):

Paula, I can't. Your water bottle's right in front of your light right there, so I couldn't tell if your light was on or not. Okay, you're good, Dr. Carson.

Vice-Chair Dr. Ben Carson (00:28:03):

Well, thank you for your insights and particularly how religion has been beneficial for society, but there are those who want to exclude religion from the public arena, particularly from education. Where do you think they get their values? Where do they get the ability to distinguish good from evil?

Professor Helen Alvaré (00:28:32):

That's a great question. So first off, I think I would comment that I think ever since really the *Everson* opinion and its very separation take on religion and religious freedom, I think that there has been—and in part, it's public communication about this, sometimes it's the talented communications abilities of groups that, you know, hold that the language of separation of church and state is the proper interpretation of the religion clauses—that this has been communicated to the public very strongly. And again, because news often covers controversies and will cover the statements of those who say religion can't be supported by the state with great fervor, I think this is where you get this separationism often, particularly in the school system, I actually think that the values that we often hear promoted, oh, these are what we're trying to accomplish and therefore we can't allow your religion to be visible or to have an accommodation, the irony is that they often come from religion. They claim that these are humanistic values that are superior to whatever religion is seeking to promote. For me a great strategy, a strategy toward peace, toward dialogue, and ultimately toward what we would call accommodation is for religions. Not just to say we are against X, but we are for X or Y for this reason and support your good aim, but you're off about how you're getting there or your aim will go in the opposite direction, or you will squelch a public witness that you need to get to the end that you wanted. And so, when I talked about the two cases, the case about the college dormitories, the case about Amish home schooling, it was not to the point where they got all the way through litigation and a court said, “Hey, these religions are actually seeking to fulfill your state aims and might well do it better.”

So, to me, I would love to see not just angry parents at a school board, I would like to see dialogue with parents saying, don't you see what we're teaching our children is for this purpose. It will include love acceptance of a wide array of diversity. It simply will not include cooperation with something that opposes our faith. This means not only in addition to what I suggested previously regarding educating the people who are going to become the leaders of these public institutions, so we don't miss a generation and have more people believing in the separation that is false, but we also need to educate parents to be able

to speak. Don't you see, I support my teaching because it's not just some idiosyncratic thing for me and my kids. It's for the common good. Thank you.

Chairman Lieutenant Governor Dan Patrick (00:31:52):

Kelly?

Kelly Shackelford (00:31:54):

Just something really quick, I just want to make sure and kind of get on the record since you teach this. Have you seen a pretty dramatic move in a positive way towards religious freedom in some of these recent Supreme Court victories? I think of *Mahmoud*, which you mentioned for parents, I think of *Kennedy* and getting rid of *Lemon*, I think of *Groff* and the religious freedom in the workplace. It seems like that some really good things are happening. The problem is people don't realize it, and so I would love if somebody looks at the whole field history and then up to current how you see things going now.

Professor Helen Alvaré (00:32:28):

Yes, thank you. Well, of course, from the perspective of someone who's devoted their career to this, there's always further to go, but indeed, we've had a much healthier, more true to American life and culture and true to the constitution reading of both the Free Exercise and the non-Establishment Clause. I often think from the beginning of the United States that the government was cooperating with religious hospitals, the government was cooperating with religious charities, the government was cooperating with religious educators. This is who we were. The idea that who we were was the *Everson* opinion and the *Lemon* opinion, et cetera, and the *Lee v. Wiseman* opinion and the *Santa Fe School* District opinion and the *Locke v. Davey* opinion, the idea that, oh no, that captures it, is mistaking a brief historical period for the actual history and culture and even more the hopes of American citizens who hope whether they are non-religious or of any religion, to actually live in harmony in their school district, in their community as government employees, I think individual Americans are much more likely to make way for one another in institutions than sometimes these regulations or laws have shown themselves to believe. And the Supreme Court is, I think, restoring some of what we had all along, got out of kilter and is now being right sized again.

Chairman Lieutenant Governor Dan Patrick (00:34:06):

Other questions? So Professor, let me ask a few. First of all, and this is just to get your opinion on this question: had we had our current positions when this country was founded, which in many ways is anti-God, anti-religion, I wonder sometimes if we had ever gotten out of the starting blocks as a country, if we were oppressed and oppressed by individuals always filing a lawsuit or newscasters of the day, which would've been the criers of the town square saying, oh no, you can't use that Bible in the one room schoolhouse. You can't pray in the openness of the community. I don't know that this country ever got out of the starting blocks and became the great country that we are for a small population in the world. In the big scheme of things, we do more charity, we do more good things, and that's not an accident. That's who we are. I just go back to the 1700s or 1800s, where would we be today if we had this strong pushback of ignorance, quite frankly by some trying to squelch the word of God?

Professor Helen Alvaré (00:35:31):

So being a proper professor here, I will say that I know some things and I don't know others, and I don't talk about what I don't know. I'd stay in my lane, and somebody like a Professor Mike McConnell would be the most brilliant expositor of an answer, so I can only make a few narrow points. One is that there was no question that a welcome to a variety of religions, which was by no means perfect, we were hostile to some, but generally understanding that people came here as a place of religious refuge was part of what made America what they called it at the time, the shining city on the hill. And if you look at Madison's

memorial and Remonstrance, one of the things he was worried about if we cabined religious freedom was that we would no longer have that reputation in the world, and it's something that makes us admirable. Secondly, I do think that because whether you look at the humanistic enlightenment strain, whether you look at the natural law strain, whether you look at some of the explicitly religious origins of the—and thinking of—the founders, we would not have had the clarity of idea that would have given rise either to the Declaration of Independence or to the Constitution, particularly with regard to the equality and dignity of every person. Of course, with the exception at the time of the revolution of slavery.

Chairman Lieutenant Governor Dan Patrick (00:37:13):

We have in a typical building or a classroom teacher's room, wherever it may be, we have poster all types of federal posters up about OSHA regulations and various regulations. You must follow, your rights must be protected. We've talked about it a little bit on this commission. Would it not be a good recommendation that every school, every university, every business has to have that one cheat on the bulletin board about protecting people's religious liberty and that the separation of church and state is the biggest lie that's been told in America since our founding?

Professor Helen Alvaré (00:37:48):

So, thinking out loud about this, the various workplace and school and public institutional pieces of information usually respond to some recent development, some sign of the time, something that it's felt that people are insufficiently aware of. So, for instance, when OSHA regulations came through, when people wondered about their free speech rights because that was very neuralgic—and it's becoming neuralgic again specifically with respect to people of faith—it seems to me that in line with what has been done throughout history in the context of these public buildings, and in light of the lack of awareness that we've seen, especially vis-a-vis some of the insults suffered by people who came here to testify before you, that it would be an appropriate time to put up some information about these sorts of rights. Again, you're responding to the signs of the times where this has been misunderstood, and like any other thing where people are unclear about their rights, this might be a way to clarify them.

Chairman Lieutenant Governor Dan Patrick (00:38:58):

And I try not to talk about Texas too much, but I love it. But we passed laws this past session Senate Bill 10—11, too—to post the 10 Commandments at every classroom, and I think we're now over 50% of our 9,000 campuses in Texas that have posted those. They're free. A volunteer simply has to print them up, and the schools are required to post 'em. Of course, we're being sued, but that's okay. It comes with the territory, and our allowing prayer in public schools that every student has a private time to pray... And then recently, it's made a lot of news because our state board of education has allowed the Bible certain books of the Bible to be taught as part of the school curriculum to go back to that day, and of course, we're being sued over that. So, how do we come, you said the word controversy that the media likes to climb onto controversy.

What do we have to do to get the media to understand that separation of church and state is a lie and this commission makes it clear to America that it's a lie? Because when I look at the First Amendment, what religious freedom is really all about is your conscience to believe what you want and where does that come from? Does that come from what your parents teach you? Does that come from going to church? Where does that come from? But if we can steal people's right of conscience as opposed to religious liberty, which I think is all one and the same, if we can take that away from you that you can't believe what you want to believe, then the other freedoms fall very quickly. If I can get into your heart and steal that from you what you believe and tell you you can't believe that you can't express it, then everything else falls pretty quickly. So, thoughts on how we can get some news anchor on some network somewhere to say: shock?!—we've been telling you an untruth all of these decades on separation of church and state because I'm just getting tired of it. I know we're on the right side of it by the Constitution.

Professor Helen Alvaré (00:41:05):

So, I've been part of public communications campaigns before, and it's very hard to communicate a message and have it stick. A couple of things I can suggest is to have very accurate and available materials because there's so much out there that's just uneducated, incorrect, reliable, not partisan, not one religion over another, but simply true information. Second, you do need people who can enter into these conversations and there are some wonderful religious freedom groups that already exist, but you have to have people who not only know something but can communicate it knowing something is great, but everybody doesn't want to hear, I know this, I know this, I know this. You need to persuade about what is true by having people who can explain to you that they're no threat, that, in fact, they are for the common good. Here is how they are for the common good, and here is how religious freedom will serve the common good.

It would be wonderful to have harmony between many religions dedicated to this common conversation, this common communication, and you really have to make an effort to get out there. Again, communications is not a lesser art. I'm an academic, so I tend to think that the academic field is the thing. But if you can't communicate it, it's kind of useless and you have to have people who are able and willing to do the hard slog of communications in every venue, academic, public schooling, popular media, regular news in order to be spokespersons for this. I have seen in the pro-life arena the emergence of a different kind of communicator over the last 30 years that has made an impression that's one public communications cause that I can think about that was a really hard slog, but progress was made. The same should be true of religious freedom because it's the 250th anniversary of the declaration because you have personally witnessed in this commission the amount of misunderstandings. It's a moment to do this and again, in a very positive, highly informed, don't be wrong about the slightest thing when you communicate and to assure people that your presence is for the common good, not for your narrow interests.

Chairman Lieutenant Governor Dan Patrick (00:43:59):

Had two other questions, but I want to go to Dr. Phil. And this is a commission of communicators, by the way, great communicators. Dr. Phil?

Dr. Phil McGraw (00:44:10):

Thank you so much for your comments because they're so well stated, and I have to tell you—you might guess I would have a question and comment from a psychological perspective—but focused, I spent a lot of time focusing on why people do what they do and don't do what they don't do, and I'm aware that the number one need in all people is acceptance. And you've talked about religion is being marked by love and acceptance, and you would think this would be a message that everyone could get behind, right? Because we're saying it's not that we want something for us, but not you or him, but not her or her, but not him. But for everybody, everybody gets the same thing, and it's the number one need for all people. This is about love and acceptance, and I have to say that the conspiratorial paranoia part of me kicks in to say: what's really behind this? Because those that are fighting so hard for against this, I have to wonder: is it that they're fighting against this or they're wanting something instead in its place?—that let's keep this out but instead advance an ideology that they think is superior to what is being advocated and has been for centuries. I'm just wondering what you think about that if there is an alternative agenda here. So, if we're not fighting against this, what are they fighting for?

Professor Helen Alvaré (00:46:13):

This is a somewhat educated speculation. I begin by recalling two conversations during the height of some controversy over military chaplains and same-sex marriage ceremonies, and during the height of controversy about abortion and its place in a hospital, I had the occasion to talk to a military chaplain and to a doctor in a very secular hospital. And in both cases, they said to me, listen, my fellow chaplains or

fellow doctors are plenty willing to trade off with me: really, it's a workplace. In the one case, we're in the foxholes together; in another place, we're in a hospital in an intense environment serving humanity together. Nobody says to anybody else, you know, spends time lecturing the other person about their religious precepts. They said people were really pretty willing to say, alright, I can't but you can and to make way for one another. I feel that two things, ideology of particular interest groups and politics have driven so much of this. The... speaking of the latter, adding a particular interest group, this sliver of interest group here, this sliver of interest group there to a political party's base in order to get to the number 51 has led to the assertion of positions that are pretty extreme. They're in line with the interest group but have nothing to do with the way ordinary Americans would perceive or handle it, or you have an interest group that does have particular interests, whether it is a particular ideological outcome, an anger that the church or families or any religious group is standing in the way of this. They are educating their people differently and they're having influence by being in public places. I don't have a nationwide survey on this, but I suspect that neighbors, coworkers, fellow citizens, other parents, other teachers are far willing to make room for one another than interest groups or political parties are willing to let them make room for one another.

Dr. Phil McGraw (00:48:39):

Well, I suspect you're right, and we always say in the media if it bleeds, it leads: if you've got conflict that sells tickets, and I think divisiveness sells tickets. I mean if you go on the news and say today at third and Elm nothing happened, people don't flock to the TV to see let's see that happen. So if there was no conflict at this school today or no conflict at this military base, no ideological conflict here, it's hard to sell tickets. I think divisiveness is being packaged and sold, and I think it's a lot more unified in America across the back fence than it is depicted in the media. So, thank you for saying that.

Chairman Lieutenant Governor Dan Patrick (00:49:30):

One last question, and I'm glad I yielded to Dr. Phil because this ties into get your thoughts on this. The one thing that has been shocking to me during these seven hearings is that government, whether it was a commanding officer to a Navy SEAL, whether it was a superintendent or a principal to a teacher, whether it was someone in higher education to a student, something in healthcare, wherever it was, they didn't just want to deny your right of conscience and deny your religious liberty. They wanted to punish you, take away your health benefits, take away your pension. We had a teacher on our committee who they've put her in a room basically all day and continue to pay her, but they don't want her in the classroom because she wanted to display a cross. This is a new phenomenon, and we had a story this weekend, Kelly and I were talking about two sisters in the Catholic Church are facing 10 years in jail. So, we've gone beyond, Dr. Phil, I think, an argument in the public square: is there separation of church and state? We've gotten to the point where, to your point, what is their agenda? Because it's one thing for a nonbeliever, and we respect them, we love them the same. The Bible says love. I don't see them as enemies, people with a different opinion, but as believers of all face and denominations, that's what we're commanded to do is to love our neighbor. And they don't want us to say that. They want us to punish us for that. Is that a relatively new phenomenon in this battle of separation of church and state, which maybe some newscaster tonight will say, oh my gosh, controversy, we've been misled all these decades. There is no separation of church and state. Just speak on, we will wrap this and go to our next witness on this punishment to go after people.

Professor Helen Alvaré (00:51:28):

Again, I don't know, I can't paint the historical trajectory for you, but I can say with regard to this virulence, this suggestion that accommodating religious people would allow, we would just unleash tremendous harm. I believe it's more often the product of ignorance. I don't think, I mean, look at some of the things that were said to Jack Phillips and the Masterpiece cake. Look at some of the things that the

school board said to the parents who were objecting to transgender material in the *Mahmoud* case. They were irrational. They were born of the same kind of over the top commitment to a particular political or ideological stance that didn't really have support, not medical support, not philosophical support, not anything. And I think this is why the interest of your commission in addressing ignorance with information is so crucial because I think ignorance is behind a lot of it. Thank you.

Chairman Lieutenant Governor Dan Patrick (00:52:33):

Well, thank you. And I sometimes wonder, is it ignorance or they know the truth, but they use it as a throw down reason to go after people of all faiths. You have been stellar. We're blessed to have you here today and thank you very much. Thank you, Helen.

Professor Helen Alvaré (00:52:48):

Thank you so much. Thank you.

Chairman Lieutenant Governor Dan Patrick (00:52:55):

We're going to reset the stage here for a few more chairs, I believe. Clarence Henderson? You're all so quiet. And for those of you asking the question, "where do we go today," we're going to have this group of five witnesses, and then we're going to have a very interesting open discussion between all the commission members—of some of the witnesses that touched our heart, maybe in some cases really troubled us because they were being punished. We're going to talk about a variety of issues and the direction of our report to the President and the recommendations we're going to make. So we're going to have a round table discussion with all of us after this set of witnesses.

Clarence, you're sitting there all by yourself, but they're coming. Yeah. Thank you. I am glad he's the lawyer. He reminded me. There is one more panel after this. Thank you. Hello, welcome, everyone. Thank you.

Clarence Henderson, civil rights and faith leader participated in lunchroom sit-ins during the 1960s civil rights movement. Clarence, the microphone is yours. Pull that close to you. Maybe bring it down a little bit. Maybe tilt that down just a little bit. Thank you.

Clarence Henderson (00:57:07):

My name is Clarence Henderson and I stand before you, not just an advocate, but as someone who lived through a time when America had to confront its own contradictions. As a young man, I participated in the sit-in movement. During the civil rights era, we faced hostility, resistance, and injustice, but we did not stand on frustration alone. We stood on faith. We believed something deeper than the laws around us—that every human being has value because they're created by God. The belief gave us the courage to sit when others around us told us to move, to stand when others told us to be silent, and to endure when others tried to break us. The civil rights movement was not built on political power. It was built on moral conviction rooted in religious belief. Religious liberty was not incidental to the Civil Rights Movement. It was essential to it.

Churches were the meeting places. Faith was the language. Scripture was the foundation. When Dr. King spoke, he didn't just quote the Constitution, he quoted the Bible because the argument for equality was not simply legal, it was moral. It was grounded in the truth that all men are created equal, not by government, but by God. Today, we face a different kind of challenge—not the outright denial of rights—but the gradual erosion of principles that made those rights possible. We see increasing division. We see a tendency to redefine justice without moral grounding, and we see faith being pushed to the margins of public life. But when you remove faith from the foundation, you weaken everything built on top of it.

Religious liberty is not a threat to civil rights. It is what made civil rights possible. The same freedom that allowed black churches to organize, to preach and to mobilize is the same freedom that must be protected

today because once the government gains the authority to limit faith, history shows it will not stop there. If religious liberty had not existed during the Civil Rights Movement, there would've been no safe place to gather, no moral authority to challenge unjust laws, no unifying message rooted in something higher than government. The movement would've been weaker or may not have succeeded at all. We must be careful not to disconnect the rights we celebrate from the foundation that produced them. Freedom is not self-sustaining. It requires moral clarity, shared values, and then freedom to live out these values openly. I have seen what happens when a nation denies dignity, and I've seen what happens when people of faith stand together and say, "that is not right." If we want to preserve justice in America, we must preserve the freedom that made justice possible. Religious liberty is not just part of our history, it is essential to our future. We must learn to live together as brothers or perish together as fools. This is the greatest nation in the world and that is why people are dying to get here, and no one is dying to leave. In 1960, the sit-in lasted 176 days in Greensboro, and I was honored that I was there to put Jim Crow on trial. And because of religious liberty, Jim Crow was found guilty. Thank you.

Chairman Lieutenant Governor Dan Patrick ([01:01:41](#)):

Members. As always, we'll hear all the witnesses and then we'll ask questions. Clarence, no one could have said it better and more simply than you just said it. Thank you, honored to have you. Our next witness, Helen Aguirre Ferré, Nicaraguan-American journalist and a White House media affairs director in the past. You're up.

Helen Aguirre Ferré ([01:02:00](#)):

Thank you. And just by way of background, former journalist... working... worked with the first Trump administration as Director of Media Affairs, then worked with Governor DeSantis as his first Communications Director, and currently I am administrator for government and public policy at the Adam Smith Center for Economic Freedom at Florida International University in Miami, Florida. But I would like to thank this commission for the opportunity to speak about the importance of religious freedom as a deterrence against repressive regimes. A country that fears faith is a country that fears freedom. When a government seeks total control, it does not begin with the economy or even with the ballot box. It begins with the individual. It seeks to replace conscience with compliance, truth with ideology, and ultimately, God with the state. History shows us this pattern from the Russian Revolution to the Cuban Revolution, to the modern repression we see today in Nicaragua—the parents—the country where my parents came from. My father was a political exile from the first Somoza regime, 1947, and yet, he was always clear he was never able to go back to his land of birth. And he always spoke that as bad as Somoza was—obviously, he was a political exile—nothing compared to what eventually came of Nicaragua under the Marxist revolution of the Sandinista regime, which came into power in '79 and has stayed in power with a few brief years—of intervals—but has been very strong and entrenched in Nicaragua. The repressive dictatorship of the Ortega-Murillo regime... they demand total control. They refuse to acknowledge any limits to their power, which is spurned by the Catholic clergy in this country that is overwhelmingly Roman Catholic.

The repression remains intense. Authorities have severely restricted and prohibited public celebrations. Just recently, for example, Palm Sunday in Nicaragua, normally you would have very public processions. This is the third year in a row where you're not allowed to have any type of public profession of faith and gatherings. And the same with Holy Week. During regular Sunday mass, parishioners—as they attend church, if they drive to church—police, political police, take photographs of the license plate of your car. They take photographs of those who are going in and out of church during the reading of the gospel and during sermons, you have hecklers, you have horns honking and loud music blazing outside. Many of the churches don't have air conditioning, so the windows are open and obviously it is to intimidate and to disrupt.

But the bravery of the clergy has been really striking. And even though the totalitarian regime has banned thousands of processions, confining worship indoors, the clergy has really stood up. One of the most renowned is Bishop Rolando Álvarez, who has been a vocal critic. He was sent to 500 days in prison—in a common prison—and he was brutally tortured and exiled. And he is just one of the many examples. All the religious sisters have been expelled from Nicaragua. And the lesson here for us today is that this didn't happen overnight. This happens gradually. And you see that... what happens in schools, what happens in workplaces... you see that this is one of those things that... you see the signs and you ignore it because you don't want to face what it really is. But what happened in Nicaragua can happen absolutely anywhere, and we see it in our own country here today.

We see what happens when you have the Richmond—the 2023 Richmond memo that raises serious concerns about people who go to traditional Latin mass, for example, that they're radicalized citizens and that they need to be infiltrated to get sources of information. During COVID, we saw that places of worship were deemed non-essential, although businesses were deemed essential, and so you weren't allowed to go in. In some cities, those from the Jewish faith who practiced Shabbat in the privacy of their own homes were not allowed to celebrate with their entire families, especially if there was a larger number of people there. So, you see that it goes beyond one specific religion. It's the practice of religion, and it's really going after people of faith. Also, through COVID, you saw how parental rights were challenged, and this is one of the things that you really see in Marxist societies is that it is an attack against the church, but it's also an attack on the family.

They go after the individual, and that's where it really, really begins. And why sometimes it's so hard to spot because when you see an attack on an individual, well, maybe so-and-so has conduct that's inappropriate, or maybe they shouldn't have said this or that or whatever, but by the time you figure out that there's a pattern, you're in trouble because it's gotten too big. What you really need to do, I believe, is that we really need to call out infringement on faith every minute we see it, because if you wait, it's like a wave, and it becomes too big. And it will wash all over you. Fortunately, there are many who have really awakened and seen the dangers of what's going on in our own country, and I was born in the United States. But as a child of exiles, all exiles will come with recommendations because we've seen the movie, and we know it doesn't end well.

And so, some of the recommendations of how to impede this from growing in our own country, you can't defend what you don't know. You will fight to defend what you understand. So, number one, teach against the danger of communism and the record of regimes that suppressed religion such as the Soviet Union to modern crackdowns in Cuba, Nicaragua. Teach civics: learn about the principles that lead to the founding of our country and the Declaration of Independence that states our rights are inalienable, that they come from a creator, and that our founding really makes us exceptional because we declare that our rights come from someone bigger and better than us and does not come from the state. Separation of church and state does not mean divorce from church. As a matter of fact, we want to protect religion from the state, but by protecting religion, you're actually protecting those who believe and those who don't believe alike. Support legal protections that ensure religious individuals and operate institutions—such as schools and charities—and allow businesses to be consistent with their beliefs.

Serve the public without being forced to violate conscience. Confront antisemitism and religious hostility, especially in academics and cultural institutions, in schools when it comes to public funding of schools. Let the dollars follow the child. Instead of having the dollars go to specific zip codes, children should be allowed to go where their parents want them to go to the school. And in Florida, I come from Miami. Our parochial schools have waiting lists to get in because with public dollars, school vouchers that go to these parochial schools, it became much more affordable for parents to be able to do that. And so, parents are opting to go to these religious schools. And religious schools are really good on multiple levels, but outside, faith teaches virtues, which are fundamental to developing character, and you need character to then be able to defend democracy.

I think we have great opportunities with digital platforms. I listened to Bishop Barron's Sunday sermons on Hallow, and I really do think that Hallow and these other digital applications have done a lot to reach out to our youth and engage them and bring them as we see that many more are becoming more openly faithful and actually going to church. People are seeking; let's help them get there. And then finally, let's just stay vigilant, especially on small encroachments. Most erosions of freedom happen gradually. A policy here or a restriction there, and then there's a redefinition of what is acceptable. Recognizing early warning signs is critical. And we really have to do this because John Adams made it clear: "Our Constitution was made only for a moral and religious people. It is wholly inadequate to the government of any other." Thank you.

Chairman Lieutenant Governor Dan Patrick (01:13:23):

Thank you, Helen. To your point, quickly, we just opened up our first school choice program in Texas with a hundred thousand slots, which is a lot, and we had 250,000 or more apply. Let's go next to Erika Bachiochi. Is that close?

Erika Bachiochi (01:13:46):

Bachiochi?

Chairman Lieutenant Governor Dan Patrick (01:13:47):

Okay, Bachiochi, a scholar on faith and women's rights. Thank you. Thank you.

Erika Bachiochi (01:13:52):

Chairman Patrick, Vice Chairman Carson esteemed commissioners and fellow panelists, my name is Erika Bachiochi, and I'm honored to join you today to discuss the contribution of religious liberty to the historic achievement of women's rights. It was after all America's tradition of religious liberty that enabled our nation's earliest women's rights advocates to publicly defend their claims in a distinctively religious voice. In these short remarks, I want to reintroduce this theologically grounded account of women's rights, one that has been lost to our nation's collective memory. And so two to our understanding of women's rights. But briefly let me introduce myself, I am a Catholic legal scholar who works at the intersection of constitutional law, political theory, women's history, and Catholic social teaching. After a stint in college as a socialist feminist, I experienced a profound religious conversion back to my baptismal faith and have since been attentive to the role of faith to women's full flourishing.

Today, I am the happily married mother of seven children as well as a Catholic classical school founder, a fellow at the Ethics and Public Policy Center here in Washington, and a professor of practice at the School of Civic and Economic Thought and leadership at Arizona State University. There, I teach a course called Women and Rights in Western political thought and have published three books and many academic articles on the subject about which I've invited to speak. So too often today when we hear the phrase women's rights, we think immediately of abortion rights. This now common association is particularly striking when viewed from the horizon of the 19th century women's movement, which was strongly opposed to the practice of abortion. Like the American founders, the movement knew that human beings are not autonomous bearers of rights to do whatever we please. Rather, they understood that the civil and political rights they sought were intrinsically correlated with responsibilities.

As Lucy Stone said in 1892 of the movement that had grown under her leadership, "we are all getting to be women's rights advocates or rather investigators of women's duties." Now of course, the American founders themselves did not think that the laws of nature in nature's God demanded women's civil and political rights. And so, the emergence of the rights of women like the emergence of full citizenship for black Americans was a historic achievement. One likewise grounded in core principles of the American founding. That is to say the early movement built its rights claims on the scriptural and natural law

foundations that women like men are rational creatures made in God's image and personally responsible to him. They eventually persuaded the nation that as individuals equally accountable to God and especially endowed with responsibilities to care for their families and communities, women should receive a fulsome education and participate in the obligations and privileges of citizenship.

The 19th century women's movement had emerged on the heels of two massive historic events, the Industrial Revolution and the Second Great Awakening. The existential interdependence of husband and wife as they labored together for centuries in the productive agrarian household had begun to fray in the new economy as much traditional work was displaced by the era's new machines as Catholic philosopher Edith Stein put the point in 1930, "industrialization revolutionized average domestic life, so that it ceased to be a realm sufficient to engage all of women's potentialities." The Second Great Awakening for its part had inspired religious women to speak out against the ongoing horrors of slavery alongside abolitionists like Frederick Douglass as well as the deracinating impact of industrialization, particularly harsh for women and children at the margins of society. So, in addition to offering practical relief, religious women organized public campaigns against child labor, illiteracy in moderate consumption of alcohol, unjust laws, poor working and living conditions, and domestic abuse.

They sought to elevate women—just as Christianity had from its origins—calling both women and men to their family and social responsibilities, not the least of which were marital chastity and the shared nurture and education of the young. Therefore, alongside our nation's first female physicians like Elizabeth Blackwell, 19th century women's rights advocates condemned the practice of abortion in the harshest of terms. They sought not the freedom to end the life of an unborn child to whom they knew that mothers and fathers owed duties of care. Rather, they sought the freedom not to be forced by physical coercion or economic circumstance into marriage, prostitution, or unwanted sex. And so they worked to provide far better medical care to both mother and child and to expand women's educational and economic opportunities. Indeed, much like the American Revolution itself, it was unbounded, unjust, and arbitrary rule that these women came together to denounce among the most influential women of the antebellum period or names we scarcely recognize today.

Take for instance, the great abolitionist, Sarah Grimké, who in 1838 penned the deeply influential letter on the equalities of the sexes. Translating Genesis from the original Hebrew and echoing St. Augustine, Grimké writes that dominion was given to both over every other creature but not over each other. Woman, she says, was created man's divine helpmate because she was in all respects his equal gifted with intellect and endowed with immortality. She was a moral and responsible being, Grimké wrote, and the glory of God was the end of her creation. Grimké's interpretation of Genesis would be echoed at the first National Women's Rights conventions in the 1850s, which grounded women's equal moral status in the *Imago Dei*. Paulina Davis, another name that has been lost to history, served as the president of the first two National Women's Conventions in 1850 and 1851. She collected the convention speeches into the aptly named publication, "Woman's Rights Commensurate with Her Capacities and Obligations."

Echoing Grimké's letters, Davis said that the fall described in Genesis 3 had inverted the order of human things. Calling upon the Messiah, the prince of peace who took the form of a servant, Davis bemoaned how power which is properly only a servant of goodness is everywhere it's master. These early conventions echoed Grimké and Davis in their conviction that every mature soul is responsible directly to God, and so they insisted that women like men receive the kind of education and opportunities that would facilitate their full human maturation in the midst of another massive technological revolution. This one accompanied and shaped by widespread secularization women's rights advocates of the 20th century sloughed off these theological and natural law foundations raising up for veneration figures hostile to religion instead. Consequently, in my view, American women as American women have ascended in social and economic influence over the last several decades. Too few have fully embraced the humane moral vision at the very heart of the original women's rights claims. It has been my honor to reintroduce you to, this morning, these forgotten American women. They, like me, were grateful to their heavenly

maker for the sublime dignity of being created a woman and to their nation for providing them the liberty to speak. Thank you.

Chairman Lieutenant Governor Dan Patrick (01:21:40):

Thank you, Erika. Dr. Akshar Patel? Dr. Patel...

Dr. Akshar Patel (01:21:48):

Respected Chairman Patrick, Vice Chairman Carson, members of the commission and my fellow panelists, thank you for the opportunity to speak here today. My name is Akshar Patel, and I'm honored to represent BAPS, one of the largest Hindu organizations in the United States. I'm here to share the experience of Hindu Americans, an experience rooted in faith, service, and a deep appreciation for the opportunities this country provides and to reflect on how religious liberty has enabled our community to flourish. My personal journey reflects that of many Hindu Americans in this country. I immigrated to America legally. I attended medical school here, started a family, and was afforded the opportunity to lay down roots in my community. Living here, I'm fortunate to be able to serve my patients as their physician, serve my family, and serve my community using my faith as my foundational driving force. Hindu Americans are a hardworking and law abiding community. Many of us or our parents and grandparents came to this country seeking opportunity, freedom and the chance to build a better life. Over the decades, we have established roots in communities across the nation, contributing to the economy, participating in civic life, and raising families grounded in both American values and our cultural heritage.

BAPS, the organization I represent, opened its first Hindu house of worship, or mandir, in Queens, New York in 1974. From that single mandir 50 years ago, we have grown to over a hundred mandirs across the United States. This growth reflects something truly special about America. It is a testament to the American promise and to the power of religious liberty—that an immigrant community can come here legally, work hard, establish itself, build meaningful relationships with neighbors and flourish while peacefully practicing its faith. Throughout American history, religious liberty has allowed diverse communities to not only survive but thrive. For Hindu Americans, this freedom has meant the ability to build mandirs, celebrate festivals, teach our children values and morals, and contribute openly to the broader society without fear. It has allowed us to transform faith into action, strengthening both our own families and the communities around us. At the heart of Hinduism is the principle of service.

Our faith teaches us that serving others is a form of devotion to God. My guru, Pramukh Swami Maharaj, has said: “in the joy of others lies our own.” This belief guides the work of BAPS, serving as a responsibility and a pillar of our faith. Through BAPS, we have worked to support communities across the United States in meaningful ways. For example, we have organized nationwide health fairs that provide medical screenings, health, education, and access to care for thousands of individuals regardless of background or income. We have assisted in disaster relief efforts, mobilizing volunteers and resources to support victims of hurricanes, floods, and wildfires. Our volunteers regularly participate in food drives and community outreach programs, helping to address hunger and support vulnerable populations in cities and towns across the country. We also believe in service to our country, as many Hindu Americans have joined our military as a way to serve our nation.

In fact, this commission heard from a BAPS volunteer last December. Lieutenant Rao, who is also an active member of the army, he told you about the challenges he faced by wearing the *tilak-chandlo* on his forehead while in the military. The same symbol you see on my forehead today. These efforts reflect how religious liberty does more than protect faith. It empowers communities to serve and strengthen the nation as a whole and in return, we have been embraced by our neighbors forming bonds of trust, friendship, and mutual respect. I mentioned earlier BAPS went from an organization that made its first footprint in America in a small house in Queens over 50 years ago. Our community soon outgrew that house and moved to a larger facility. We then expanded to two facilities. Over the next 50 years, we expanded to over a hundred mandirs across the country.

In 2024, we opened the Akshardham Mandir in Robbinsville, New Jersey. Some of you may have heard of this mandir or temple. This is one of the largest active Hindu mandirs in the world. I'll say that again. One of the largest Hindu mandirs in the world is located in New Jersey. Over 12,500 volunteers from across the country came together to create this beautiful temple. These volunteers consisted of teachers, lawyers, engineers, doctors, dentists, plumbers, electronics—electricians—and even students. These volunteers took weeks, months, even years out of their lives to come together and build a mandir of this magnitude. A story this amazing is only possible in America. Nowhere else in this world can a community come together, practice their faith, build something so beautiful for everyone's benefit, both Hindus and non-Hindus alike. But recently, something has changed. The force that helped lift our wings of liberty and faith have now become our headwinds. The environment has changed to become anti-religious and specifically for us, anti-Hindu.

A growing number of acts of hate directed towards Hindu Americans and our places of worship have created fear and uncertainty within our community. In the past year alone, there have been eight attacks on Hindu mandirs, four of which were BAPS mandirs. These incidents are deeply troubling not only because they target places of worship, but because they threaten the very religious liberty that has enabled our community to flourish. For many Hindu Americans, this is a new and unsettling reality. Mandirs that once felt like sanctuaries of peace and unity are now places where security is a concern. Families who come to this country seeking freedom of religion are now worried about practicing their faith openly. Today we're seeing hateful messages painted on our mandirs. But what should we anticipate tomorrow? Will we even have a place to pray? This fear and uncertainty have become crippling for our community, and this fear is not reserved just for us.

Unfortunately, many faith groups are experiencing similar, hateful and anti-religious sentiments. I'm here today not only to share our concerns but also to reaffirm our faith in the values of this nation. The same religious liberty that has allowed generations of Americans from many different faiths to build, contribute, and thrive must be protected for future generations. I was afforded this wonderful opportunity when I came to this country 20 years ago. It is my hope and wish that my seven-year-old son, and many children like him will get to experience this same freedom and liberty to practice their faith, enrich their communities, and serve their neighbors as our faith asks of us. Thank you very much.

Chairman Lieutenant Governor Dan Patrick (01:30:14):

Thank you, Dr. Patel. Dr. Paul Brintley, minister, author, entrepreneur. Dr. Paul?

Dr. Paul Brintley (01:30:22):

Thank you so much for having me. Appreciate everybody coming out this morning. I appreciate this commission for having me to giving me the opportunity to speak. My name is Dr. Paul Brintley. I serve as a pastor and overseer of a network of 15 churches, many which include immigrants and immigrant families, particularly Haitian believers who came to this country because they believed America was different. When before I was born, my father got that dreaded disease that Dr. Patel takes care of all the time. The C word, I don't even like saying it. He died a month before I was born, and there was my mom at the funeral of my dad pregnant with me, my 10-year-old brother on one side, and my 8-year-old sister on the other side and trying to figure out how she was going to be a single parent and raise three kids. What got my mom through it all was her faith.

I remember during COVID standing with my congregation and hearing them ask me questions I had never thought they would ever say to me. They said, pastor in America, we've been told that we cannot assemble and worship God. We never thought that would happen. As these families came to me, it began to startle me and got me involved in not only political things that were happening but my civil responsibility in the community. For them, this wasn't political. It was deeply personal. They had seen what happened when their governments became deciding in how their faith had been practiced. As a pastor, I faced a defining moment. Would I treat faith as something optional and adjustable or as

something essential and protected? That experience clarified something for me. Religious liberty is not theoretical. It is lived, or it is lost. Religious freedom has never been a barrier in justice in America.

It has been one of its greatest drivers. The same biblical truth that I preach every Sunday, that every person is made in the image of God has historically fueled movements for human dignity, equality, religious freedom and reform. It is why people of faith have built schools, hospitals, and charities. It is why they stood against slavery. It is why they march for civil rights. Religious liberty does not divide. It forms conscience and a society without conscience cannot sustain freedom. There is a growing narrative in our country today that religious freedom is simply a license to discriminate. That is a fundamental misunderstanding. Religious freedom is not about imposing belief. It is about protecting the right to live according to what you do believe. When people of faith are pushed out of the public square, we don't get neutrality. We get a vacuum, and the vacuum is quickly filled by whatever ideology holds power at the moment.

But I want to tell you here this morning: we are blessed. The founders did not create a system to exclude our faith. They created one to prevent government from controlling our faith. I'll also say plainly, as a pastor, we in the church must take responsibility as well. There has been a weakening in some areas of pastoral leadership where speaking truth has been replaced by silence, and conviction has been replaced by caution. But historically, the strength of this nation has been tied to the pulpits that shape moral clarity, not avoided it. So let me address the question that was posed by this committee just a few minutes ago by our chairman. What would America look like if religious liberty had been restricted 250 years ago?—if pastors had been told what they could preach or if scripture had been removed from the public life or if faith had been confined to private silence? There would have been no more framework to declare that all men are created equal, but we are blessed.

There has been a movement in America that's changed it, but if we would not have had that faith, there would be no movement at all. But we are blessed. So, no civil rights movement would've happened as we know it, but we are blessed. There had been no shared conviction that rights come from God, not from government, but we are blessed. And so, in short, where would America be today if it would went back 250 years ago, and they would've told our fathers the framework of the Constitution to reduce the tone of religion? Religious liberty must remain protected, not just in Word but in practice—as an ambassador of the North Carolina Faith and Freedom Coalition as a network of 2,500 churches in North Carolina that I work with elected officials and candidates that have the opportunity to stand on their biblical worldview and so they can go and challenge voters to come out and vote for them.

Just a couple of stats and I'll be done. According to the national research, nearly two-thirds of Americans still identify as Christian. That means biblical values are not on the fringe. They are rooted in the lives of millions every day of our citizens. And while not every one vote strictly based on faith, about one in four Americans say their religion strongly influences how they vote, with many more saying it plays at least some role in their election process. This is not a small group. This is significant and meaningful for this nation. What even more is important that the data shows those who actively participate and practice their faith. Those who attend church regularly are among the most consistent and reliable voters in this country. So the question is not whether our values matter in elections. The question is whether we are willing to live out those values not only in our churches, but in our civic responsibility.

And for the people of faith, it is a reminder: your vote matters, your voice matters, and your values matter. When people of faith participate, they shape a more thoughtful values and form public square. That means protecting the free exercise of faith and public life, ensuring churches are not treated as non-essentials and safeguarding the rights of individuals and organizations to live according to the sincerity that they hold in their beliefs and doing so for all people of faith equally and without coercion. So, closing, because when a nation begins to treat faith as something to be managed instead of protected, it does not become freer, it becomes more fragile. And if we want to preserve freedom in the next generation, we must protect the very foundation that made it possible in the first place. Ladies and

gentlemen, I see it here today in the greatest nation in the world, and I want to tell you because of our religious freedom, we are blessed. Thank you so much

Chairman Lieutenant Governor Dan Patrick (01:37:35):

And we've been blessed with five great witnesses. We have four more to go and throughout every hearing, every hearing we've just had spectacular people telling their stories. And pastor, you need to get a leave of absence from the church because I'm taking you on the road with me. Okay, Dr. Carson.

Vice-Chair Dr. Ben Carson (01:37:54):

Well, thank you all for those testimonies. For Clarence Henderson, my wife and I have been blessed to hear you speak in the past and see what you've done, and obviously you had a lot of courage to go up against an establishment that threatened your very life. And I'm just wondering what gave you the courage to do what you did, and would you have had that courage without your faith?

Clarence Henderson (01:38:25):

No, I would not have. But it actually started when I was born. My father named me after a sharecropper—he was a sharecropper for an individual—and it helped set the tone for me, help bridge the gap between the races, and I've been called into it ever since then. Faith requires courage and we're going to walk by it. And so, I've dedicated my life to help bridge that gap, so that in America we stop perishing together as fools and start living the life that America affords us. That's where I stand right now, and I see I am so concerned about the inner conflicts that's going on in America, how we are destroying America from within. As you've heard me say it in my speech, it's that we're dealing with an agenda. If America's so racist, why are people dying to come here, but nobody's dying to leave? And so, we who understand what America's all about, have to stand together and fight so that we can preserve the freedom and dignity of American for our people coming behind us, our children... what kind of America we need them if we don't stand up for what we believe in right now?

Chairman Lieutenant Governor Dan Patrick (01:39:49):

Correct. Thank you. Thank you Clarence, Bishop Barron?

Bishop Robert Barron (01:39:55):

Just a brief remark of especially in regard to our first and last speakers, that connection between religion and civil rights movement. Some people said there was a similarity between the civil rights demonstrations, and let's say that one's in 2020. And I always said no for a number of reasons, but one of the most important was the lack of religious leadership or religious presence in the demonstrations of 2020. The Civil Rights Movement religion was not incidental to it, not accidental to it was essential to it. As you articulate well, and we talked, Dr. Anderson mentioned he might draw attention in our report to heroes of religious liberty. Gosh, Dr. King is a great example because he so effortlessly embodied and articulated the connection between the American idea and the great biblical tradition. The letter from the Birmingham City Jail, which is making a civil argument if you want, but it's grounded in as he says explicitly Thomas Aquinas and Augustine, both of whom are grounded in the Bible. And then not far from where we're sitting, king stands on the steps of Lincoln's memorial and again effortlessly weaves together biblical rhetoric, American civil rhetoric, secular poetry. If you had said to Martin Luther King, there's a high wall of separation between religion and civil life... I mean his whole life embodies the opposite of that. And so, I think he's one of the great heroes, if you want, of what we were talking about. So, thank you for that witness.

Chairman Lieutenant Governor Dan Patrick (01:41:24):

Kelly?

Kelly Shackelford (01:41:26):

One of the things I thought was interesting—sometimes, there's a theme that is directed in this by one higher than us—and I think of the first witness and then what you said, and there's a theme to me. It's the fact that our democratic republic comes out of the faith that founded this country and that every country that goes into totalitarianism has to get rid of that. And the COVID example just reminded me we filed the first COVID case victory in the history of the country—it's out of Louisville—and we won every COVID case we filed on behalf of churches and synagogues. But the fascinating thing to me was everywhere we won, within two to three weeks later, the businesses were opened. It was never the lawsuits to open the businesses and then the churches were opened. It was always the lawsuit to open the church and then the businesses were opened. I just think about what our first witness and all of you have said, and I think of what a totalitarian government needs. They have to have direct control over the citizen, and these intermediary institutions like the church get in the way and the authority of parents get in the way of them having control. And so that's why we see these fights and it's just so important to being who we are. So, I just... all different stories, but all such a powerful message that you presented today and I just want to say thank you.

Chairman Lieutenant Governor Dan Patrick (01:43:01):

Any other questions or comments? Thank you once again, and Paula, I sit here and I listen to the testimonies and the great questions and remarks, and I just reflect on—thank the President of the United States, Donald J. Trump for establishing this commission. And we said it in the first hearing, but God has his hand in all things and it all started when the President called me thinking I had called him, which I would not have done, and talking about a lot of things. And I said, here's an idea. And he said, we're going to do it. President Trump... I believe this will be one of his greatest legacies at the end of the day, and I'm just so thankful to the President for allowing all of us to serve here and introducing all of us to all of you. That was a God thing. I hear you called. No, I didn't call.

Pastor Paula White-Cain (01:44:02):

Just thinking how Kelly said it was perhaps a higher thing that was happening. Absolutely divine providence. And I was reflecting about... thank you so much for all of your witness, and it just takes us back to why we're all here because the foundation of this nation was absolutely established with religious liberty and how it affects women and ethnicity and our churches and synagogues and BAPS and every single thing we do. Thank you so much.

Chairman Lieutenant Governor Dan Patrick (01:44:32):

Thank you, Dr. Ben?

Vice-Chair Dr. Ben Carson (01:44:35):

For our second witness, I appreciate you talking about communism and socialism effects. It's sprung up all over the world, and it's springing up in our country now, too. What is the reason that everywhere it springs up it is so anti-religion and anti-God?

Helen Aguirre Ferré (01:44:58):

Thank you, Dr. Carson. That's an important question, and it's because totalitarian governments fear the individual, fear the individual conscience and what that can do. We speak of, you know, what Clarence Henderson did and the bravery that that required... Dr. King, what that required... The power of one. Totalitarian governments fear the power of one. And they can't control our thoughts. Once we speak,

that's where the battle really begins. But they know we're thinking, and we're thinking freely. And what they want is to really take away conscience and truth, so they can implant ideology. That's why they tend to be successful with the very young and then when the very young get older and wake up, in some cases, it's too late. But strong religious presence is really the antidote to totalitarianism, to communism and socialism, so the stronger we are as faith-based people and communities, the freer we will be.

Chairman Lieutenant Governor Dan Patrick (01:46:28):

And Clarence, just to close one thing that you said, certain things I've heard from different witnesses, stay with me. Where would you have met if you couldn't go to the church in the Civil Rights Movement? Where would that meeting have taken place? Where would that meeting have taken place where people prayed? Where would that meeting have taken place? That launched a movement, and I just had not heard that. It's obvious, but I had not heard it articulated before. So thank you, Clarence, appreciate you. Members, thank you all of you... oh yes, I'm sorry Eric, I didn't see your light.

Eric Metaxas (01:47:12):

Thank you. I'm always curious what ideologies are the enemies of religious liberty? We know that Marxist atheist ideology typically is against the idea of religious liberty, the idea of faith, but Dr. Patel, you mentioned many attacks on the Hindu communities, and this has ramped up. Who are some of the groups behind these attacks against Hindu communities? It seems somewhat unimaginable to me that Hindu communities are such a big threat that we need to attack them. Can you tell me—give us—hear some idea of who have attacked you all?

Dr. Akshar Patel (01:48:06):

Thanks so much for asking that question. When our first temple got attacked a little over a year ago, it was in Long Island, New York, and this was the first time something like this had ever happened to us. We had heard of other temples, not part of BAPS, but other Hindu temples that had been attacked. But this was the first time that it happened to us, and there were some, you know, the way we had been attacked was that they had painted some really offensive and racist messages on our property. And so, the first thing we did was we called law enforcement, because we didn't really know what to do. We didn't know who would feel this way about us—generally, I know I'm biased, but we're a kind community—we don't go out of the way and poke our fingers at anybody else. And so, it caught us off guard, and we let law enforcement do what they do best. Everybody has theories as to who it might be, who it might not be. We still don't know the answer: who did this to us? And then the subsequent three other attacks on our temples... we also did what we were supposed to do. We called law enforcement, we spoke with the right people and many community groups, the Jewish community, the Christian community, they came to our defense.

Eric Metaxas (01:49:46):

Did the Muslim community come to your defense?

Dr. Akshar Patel (01:49:50):

I believe so, but what I'm trying to say is our larger community supported us. But we still have not figured out, and we have not been told who has done this to us. And that's something that continues to instill fear in our community, because if at least we had an answer as to who did this, we could ask the appropriate authorities to do something about it. But we don't even know who did it. And that's the scariest part of all this. Thank you for asking that question.

Chairman Lieutenant Governor Dan Patrick (01:50:27):

Anything else, Eric?

Eric Metaxas (01:50:29):

No, I'm just so fascinated because we have in America, it's just one of the joys of living in America is that the love most Americans have for genuine diversity of creeds. And so, when you hear of something like this, you just want to know who is doing this. And it's baffling to me that law enforcement would not be able to figure this out. It shouldn't be so difficult. But we're sorry to hear of it, but we're grateful for your testimony. Thank you.

Chairman Lieutenant Governor Dan Patrick (01:51:02):

Thank all of you. You've come a long way for some of you, and a privilege to have you here today... thank you for your words. Thank you all. We have one more panel of four witnesses, and then we'll have our open discussion. I must admit, sister, when a nun walks in, it gets all of our attention that we have to behave, so thank you for being here. Heather Rice, is it minus?

Heather Rice-Minus (01:53:38):

Yes.

Chairman Lieutenant Governor Dan Patrick (01:53:39):

With the Prison Fellowship. You have the microphone.

Heather Rice-Minus (01:53:43):

Thank you so much. Good morning, Lieutenant Governor Patrick, Dr. Carson, members of the commission. Thank you for the opportunity to speak with you today. Heather Rice-Minus with Prison Fellowship, and Prison Fellowship is the nation's largest Christian nonprofit equipping the church to serve currently and formerly incarcerated people and their families and to advocate for justice and human dignity. Our work is grounded in the belief that all people are created in God's image and that no life is beyond redemption. Our mission is to encounter Jesus with those impacted by incarceration, and we envision a revival of the church inside and outside prison that brings justice, mercy, and hope to our culture. This year actually marks the 50th year anniversary of Prison Fellowship, and for five decades, we've partnered with churches, volunteers, correctional leaders to support rehabilitation, restore families, and promote safer communities. And as many of you may know, our ministry was born out of the story of Chuck Colson.

The late Chuck Colson was former White House Counsel in the Nixon Administration. As a result of his involvement in the Watergate scandal, he landed himself in federal prison, but that wasn't the end of the story. He promised he'd never forget the men he met inside, and he went on to found our ministry and to become a prominent leader in evangelical circles and author of many books. And today, our work offers a clear example of how faith-based social services strengthening the United States by addressing some of our most pressing social challenges. We appreciate the President's creation of this commission because religious liberty plays a foundational role in making our work possible. The First Amendment guarantees the free exercise of religion, and those protections do not end at the prison gate. Every incarcerated individual retains the right of religious expression, and that right should be carefully protected. For more than two decades, the Religious Land Use and Institutionalized Person Act, legislation that Prison Fellowship helped passed alongside our founder,

or RLUIPA, has helped ensure that people in prison are not subjected to unjustified barriers when practicing their faith by requiring governments to use the least restricted means before limiting religious exercise. RLUIPA enables faith-based organizations like Prison Fellowship to serve individuals in meaningful ways. These protections matter. First, because Dr. Anderson—to the question you asked my

favorite law school professor, Helen Alvaré, earlier—because friendship with God in and of itself is a good, and it is something that is a means in and of itself. But second, faith-based programs also contribute directly to rehabilitation and to public safety. When incarcerated individuals can participate in religious services, mentorship and spiritual formation, they often develop a renewed sense of purpose and hope and these qualities are essential for reentry. At Prison Fellowship, we believe that reentry should start actually from the moment of arrest, not just upon someone's release.

And the Prison Fellowship Academy is our most intensive program. This voluntary year-long initiative is offered at no cost to the government and is available to anyone of any faith or no faith at all. It combines mentoring, community building and faith-based instruction to help participants develop values such as community affirmation, productivity, responsibility, restoration, and integrity. These values support personal transformation while reinforcing accountability. And a recent study in Texas found that a 6% recidivism rate among our graduates. That represented a 53.8% reduction when compared to a match comparison group with similar criminal history. More than 6,000 people have completed the academy, and faith informed programming contributes to safer correctional environments. Participation in religious activities fosters respect and healthier relationships amongst the incarcerated as well as benefiting the staff. These outcomes extend beyond the prison walls. As transformed individuals are more likely to return home prepared to contribute positively to their communities and families.

In fact, in just a few weeks, I'm going to be joining a group of graduates from the Prison Fellowship Academy from decades ago. One of them is now an attorney, one of them is a pastor. Another is overseeing a reentry home that he founded in Arkansas, and I can think of also our mission ambassador at Prison Fellowship. Germaine Wilson, who after graduating the Prison Fellowship Academy in Kansas, went on to become the mayor of Leavenworth, Kansas. So much good can come from a partnership between faith-based organizations and the government. There's also such importance in recidivism reduction through the connection between family, those who have stronger connections to their families are more likely to succeed. Post-release and prison fellowship's Angel Tree program is one example of how we can strengthen this. Approximately 1.3 million children in the United States have a parent in prison. Angel Tree partners with local churches to support these children, to strengthen families, and we try to do that not just at Christmas time but year round.

In fact, I've had the pleasure of serving with Prison Fellowship Angel Tree here in Washington DC and not only was able to deliver Christmas gifts year over year to the same family, but I also had the privilege of driving this family down to visit their dad incarcerated in North Carolina. And they had not been able to visit him in prison for much time even though they talked to him on the phone because they just were living paycheck by paycheck—didn't have a vehicle. And so, I got to be a fly on the wall as they had a first meeting after not seeing each other in 15 years. Angel Tree has served more than 12 million children since its inception, and 120,000 children have also attended an Angel Tree camp. And none of this would be possible without the partnership that we have with chaplains inside prison who make this application available to parents who want to sign their children up.

Scripture calls us to seek justice, to encourage the oppressed, and faith-based social services strengthen the United States by addressing individual transformation and community wellbeing. When individuals return home equipped with values support networks in a renewed sense of purpose, neighborhoods become safer, families are stronger. And as you consider the future of religious liberty on this commission, it's important to recognize that the protections under RLUIPA enable this work to continue. Ensuring incarcerated individuals can freely exercise their faith allows faith-based organizations to provide programming that supports rehabilitation. And to that end, I want to share just a bit of hard fought good news. In closing, director Marshall and Deputy Director Smith, their recognition of the role of faith-based programming within the Bureau of Prisons is opening the door to more faith in community-based programs than ever before. We're proud that the Bureau of Prisons has recently designated the Prison Fellowship Academy as an evidence-based recidivism reduction program under the First Step Act.

Additionally, over 30 Bureau of Prisons wardens are currently participating in the Warden Exchange Prison Fellowship's leadership development program designed to help corrections professionals envision and build healthier prison cultures. Since 2013, we've actually had over 820 graduates of this program, many from Texas, but this year marks the very first year that we've actually been able to have a federal warden and participate in this free program made available to corrections leaders across the country.

For 50 years, Prison Fellowship has witnessed the impact of faith in action. We've seen individuals transform their lives, parents reconnect with their children, and communities benefit from successful reentry, and these outcomes demonstrate how religious liberty empowers faith-based organizations to serve the common good. Commission, thank you for your time, for your commitment to protecting religious liberty and supporting faith-based social services, including for those who are behind prison walls today.

Chairman Lieutenant Governor Dan Patrick ([02:01:54](#)):

Thank you, Heather. Sister Mary Elizabeth with Sisters of Life Ministry to Women and Children in Need. Sister?

Sister Mary Elizabeth, SV ([02:02:06](#)):

Chair Patrick and members of the Commission, thank you for inviting me today to share what motivates my religious community, the Sisters of Life, to serve the most vulnerable among us and how a recent threat to our religious freedom could have seriously impeded it. The Sisters of Life were founded in 1991 to promote a sense of the sacredness of human life in society. Through prayer and service, we bear witness to the inherent dignity of every human life created in the image of God. Each of our sisters has encountered a love that is so great, so beautiful and true, a love that captivated her heart and called her to respond. This love became incarnate in Jesus Christ. We as Sisters of Life offer our lives to the Lord Jesus, so that others may come to know and experience this great love.

This love we believe is the source, the meaning, and the destiny of every human life. Our community engages in a variety of works in order to share this love. Today, I am going to highlight our mission, serving courageous women who are pregnant and in crisis in need of support, friendship, and practical compassion. We are also privileged to serve women who are seeking hope and healing after the experience of an abortion. We are blessed to see time and again how Jesus's perfect love and tender mercy cast out fear and transforms lives. We believe that every human being is sacred, unique, and infinitely loved by God. And we want every person we encounter to know their own dignity as beloved sons and daughters of God, especially the pregnant women we serve. Because once a woman experiences that she is loved and believed in, she can do anything, but only if she has meaningful support and options available.

Such was Nicole's story. When Nicole found out she was pregnant, she felt overwhelmed and afraid. She was already a single mother working 12 hour shifts in a factory to make ends meet, and she was barely getting by. She had previously had an abortion and didn't want to go through that again, remembering the pain and regret it caused. But she felt like she had no other option, so she obtained abortion pills but couldn't bring herself to take them. Her boyfriend kept saying: "it's your choice." Nicole told us what she really needed to hear was: "I will be with you every step of the way no matter what."

She found us through a friend and in our first conversation she shared a weighty list of needs from a mortgage to baby clothes, school fees, and a broken washing machine. So, we packed up our van and hosted a baby shower at her home, providing her with a crib, stroller, car seats, maternity clothes, and everything she needed for her baby. We also called upon local friends who supported Nicole with meals, car rides, groceries, community and friendship. Receiving this tangible support, Nicole was empowered to discard the abortion pills she had contemplated taking and instead to make a leap of faith and welcomed her baby into the world. She named her daughter Emma Grace. Emma, because it means my God has answered me, and Grade because he answered when she least expected it.

Supported and invited to dream again, Nicole began school to become a paramedic. It wasn't easy, but she graduated with honors and got a job driving an ambulance, an accomplishment she would have never dared to dream of before she became pregnant with Emma, who recently turned five years old. Nicole is now reaching out and sharing her story with other women in her position and connecting them with our sisters. Speaking with Nicole last week, she told me, I can't imagine life without Emma. She brings such joy. She gave me a new beginning and I am so much the better for it.

Nicole's story is one of countless examples of how Christ's redeeming love has changed lives over the course of our community's existence. Through locations such as our visitation mission in Manhattan, we build relationships with each woman who seeks us out, listening to her hopes and her fears. We desire to meet her needs, emotional, spiritual, and practical, so that she may have the greatest freedom to choose life for both herself and her child. Our large network of coworkers of life enables us to provide all of this support free of charge, and regardless of a woman's religious affiliation. The support we provide continues far beyond a mother's decision to give birth to her baby. Some reside with us during pregnancy, childbirth, and for whatever time each woman needs, often several months after her child's birth. Melanie was one such woman, and her story shows how God's love poured out overflows into the next generation.

18 years after Melanie's son Zion was born, he came to see us. The doorbell rang at our midtown Manhattan convent. The sister who answered found a group of tall, strong college aged young men on our doorsteps. The one in front had a huge smile on his face and he said: "Hi, sister! I was born here." Zion explained that his mom had told him about us and the convent where she lived when he was born. All his life he had wanted to come back and see it for himself. He was proud of his mom knowing some of the sacrifices she had made to bring him into the world. So, as a college freshman on a football scholarship, he found himself in New York City with his teammates. The football players crowded into the front foyer of the convent to meet the sisters.

Zion recently graduated from Yale and moved to New York City. He comes to volunteer at the convent where he spent the first few months of his life. How beautiful that God allowed our religious mission to inspire others. Zion, his team members and classmates at Yale, and all who are touched by Zion's goodness. Ours is just one of thousands of religious ministries seeking to be such a light in the world, to create a society in which people are cared for, valued, and protected. Together, we sacrifice for the vulnerable, the downcast, and enable human flourishing. But not everyone understands or shares our commitment to the sanctity of human life at all stages.

In 2022, the state of New York passed a law targeting our ministry to pregnant women. It allowed government officials to force pregnancy centers, but only those that do not perform abortion, to turn over internal documents, including sensitive information about the women we serve. Our missions are a place where women can feel safe with the knowledge that their stories are kept confidential. Many are in search of refuge from abusive partners and situations. We could not in good conscience break trust with the women who come to us for help. Because we could not comply with the new law, we faced the threat of serious financial and legal punishments. After much prayerful discernment, we sued the state of New York with the help of the Beckett Fund for Religious Liberty, eventually winning a court order, protecting us, and allowing us to continue providing for the needs of women who seek our help. Through this experience, we learned that we must value religious liberty as a society enough to continue prioritizing it anew for each succeeding generation. Most acts of charity by religious groups go unnoticed by the world at large, but it is through these actions motivated by the love of God that the world is changed, one heart at a time. Protecting religious ministries by protecting religious freedom is one of the best ways our policy makers can promote true human flourishing. Thank you for all you're doing to ensure that we can keep reaching out to serve those in need. God bless you.

Chairman Lieutenant Governor Dan Patrick (02:12:25):

Dr. Phil. I was thinking of you in your question earlier, and I know we're holding questions, so I'm not asking a question, but when you said who's behind all of this—when you're trying to separate a woman in

need and the sisters—there's evil behind that. There's evil behind that. We will talk more in a moment. Oriel is that?

Oriel Ekşi (02:12:53):

Oriel.

Chairman Lieutenant Governor Dan Patrick (02:12:53):

Oriel Ekşi?

Oriel Ekşi (02:12:55):

Ekşi. Yes.

Chairman Lieutenant Governor Dan Patrick (02:12:56):

Ekşi. Okay, managing partner of The Woolf Group.

Oriel Ekşi (02:13:00):

Chairman Patrick, Dr. Carson and distinguished members of the commission. Thank you for the opportunity to testify today. It is truly an honor. My name is Oriel Ekşi and I serve as managing partner at The Woolf Group, a government relations firm based here in DC focused on social impact initiatives. Our firm works with organizations across the nation, including many faith-based organizations to help them navigate in government systems, serve victims of crime, and build sustainable programs that protect human dignity and strengthen communities. But long before any title, long before Washington and long before policy work, I was a little girl growing up in rural Kentucky. I was raised in a Catholic environment. I attended Catholic school. My mother was heavily involved in the parish and in the school as a parishioner and a donor. Faith was not something distant or occasional in my childhood. It shaped the rhythm of my life. It formed my understanding of right and wrong, sacrifice and mercy, truth and hope.

And then beginning at the age of 13, my mother trafficked me. She sold me to men. That kind of betrayal changes a person forever. It attacks not only your safety, but your very identity and sense of worth. It attacks your ability to trust other people. And for many, it attacks faith itself. There are people who hear a story like mine and assume that the natural result would've been bitterness towards God, anger at religion, or the complete collapse of belief. They assume that suffering like that would make faith impossible, but that was not my experience. Instead, it is when God held me closest. My faith did not disappear in suffering but carried me through it. It gave me the language for dignity. When other people treated me like an object, it gave me a conviction that my life still had inherent value, even when the people closest as to me acted as though it did not. It reminded me that evil is real, but so is truth. So is mercy. So is purpose. So is the image of God in every human being.

I have often thought about Viktor Frankl's insight that suffering when it cannot be avoided does not have to be meaningless. That has been true in my life. My faith did not make suffering good, and it did not make evil less evil. But it kept suffering from having the final word. It taught me that pain could be carried without surrendering—resolve to survive through it, to see light in the distant future, and that even wounded places in a life can become places where God builds resilience, clarity, and purpose. During my trafficking at age 16, I became pregnant and the first words out of my mother's mouth were, “what about an abortion?”

I was aghast. “What about it?” I snapped back with an absolutely not stance in my heart. Even though I was talking to my trafficker, someone I feared and who had put me in this situation, all trepidation vanished in that moment of rebellion. Consequence be damned because it was a line I would never cross. A line that my faith upheld in the darkest of circumstances. Again, I was at a point where other people wanted power over my body, my future, and my choices. But I fought back, and I did so with courage

because of my faith. In the years since, I have often thought of the words of St. John Paul II, “the Gospel of God's love for man, the Gospel of the dignity of the person, and the Gospel of life are a single and indivisible gospel.” I did not have that sentence in front of me.

I was 16, but I knew its veracity. My child was not a problem to be erased. She was a person with value, a life with purpose, a gift entrusted to me. Today, that baby is named after a nine-day prayer for special intervention that I prayed over her and a saint who lived and died in the name of God's love for mankind. Novena Valentine is a faithful, beautiful, clever, athletic, cheerful, 14-year-old girl. And every time I look at her, I'm reminded that faith is not merely a private comfort. It is a force that shapes choices, preserves lives and changes generations. That is why I'm here today.

For me, religious liberty is not an abstract legal theory. It's not a slogan or a talking point. It is the freedom to live according to what I know for a fact to be accurate. It is the freedom to remain rooted in faith in the face of evil. It is the freedom to reject coercion. It is the freedom to choose life. It is the freedom to heal without being told that faith has no place in healing. And it is the freedom to serve others openly, generously, and genuinely. That brings me to the work I do today. At The Woolf Group, I lead a team that helps organizations navigate the complicated relationship between mission and government. Many of the organizations we support serve victims of crime, survivors of trafficking, women facing violence, vulnerable children, and struggling families. Many are organizations of faith. Some were founded by people of faith. Some maintain an explicitly faith-based identity, while others simply carry religious conviction in the way they show up to serve. And what I can tell you from my direct experience is this: faith-based organizations are often among the first to show up, the last to leave, and the most trusted by the people they serve.

In the anti-trafficking field especially, faith communities are often where survivors first encounter consistency, compassion, and hope. Sometimes, it is a church member; sometimes, it is a pregnancy resource center; sometimes, it is a faith-based nonprofit, a volunteer mentor, a safe home, or a local ministry willing to walk with someone through the long and difficult road of recovery. These organizations do not merely provide services. They restore belonging. They remind people they are more than what has been done to them. They often reach people that formal systems have missed, and they do it with extraordinary sacrifice, love and endurance. But too often, government systems treat faith-based service providers not as valued partners, but as problems to be managed. Sometimes, the barrier is direct. A faith-based organization is told, either formally or informally, that to participate in a program, qualify for funding, or partner with a public entity, it must effectively secularize itself.

It must mute its religious identity. It must strip away the very beliefs that motivated the work in the first place. Sometimes, the barrier is bureaucratic. Small and mid-size ministries doing life-saving work are buried under layers of compliance, procurement requirements, reporting structures and cultural assumptions that large secular institutions are simply better equipped to absorb. The result is that trusted organizations closest to the suffering are often kept furthest from the resources. Other times, the barrier is ideological. Faith-based groups are viewed as inherently suspect, because they believe that moral truth is real because they maintain convictions about life and family or because they believe that spiritual care can be part of holistic care. And sometimes the barrier is subtler but just as damaging. The assumption that religious belief is acceptable in private life but unwelcome in public service—that is not religious liberty. A nation that truly values religious liberty does not tell people of faith: “you're free to believe whatever you want as long as your beliefs do not shape your work, your institutions, your hiring, your witness, your compassion, or your service to others.” That is not freedom. That is containment. And for survivors, that kind of containment can be devastating because survivors are not simply bodies with material needs. They are whole people. Many are wrestling with shame, identity, purpose, motherhood, forgiveness, and whether or not their life still has meaning. Many want their faith respected as part of recovery, not dismissed as irrelevant to it. If religious liberty means anything, it must include room for faith informed care when it is freely offered and freely welcomed. This commission has an opportunity to say clearly that

religious liberty must include the freedom of faith-based organizations to serve the public without surrendering their identity.

That means first that faith-based organizations should have equal access to grants, partnerships, and public programs without being forced to choose between participation and religious integrity. Second, organizations serving victims of crime should be allowed to offer holistic care that includes spiritual support when requested and welcomed by the person being served. Respecting faith is not coercion. In many cases, it is a part of respecting the survivor as a whole person. Third, conscience protections must be real, not theoretical. People working in victim services, healthcare, pregnancy support, foster care, education, and other mission-driven fields should not be forced to violate deeply-held beliefs as the price of service. Fourth, we should reduce unnecessary barriers that keep smaller ministries and faith-based nonprofits out of the room. Some of the most effective organizations in this country are not the largest or the most polished. They're the most trusted. Government should not make trust, conviction, and community roots a disadvantage. And finally, we need to remember that protecting religious liberty does not only protect institutions. It protects people like me.

It protects the girl who still believed that God saw her when the world did not. It protects the young mother who refused to sacrifice her child. It protects the survivor who needs care that does not ask her to leave her religion at the door, and it protects the people in ministry who opened those doors in the first place. For Christians, we may call that Kingdom work. Others may describe it differently, but in a free country, government should not stand in the way of people living out their faith through service, prayer, mercy and love of neighbor. My daughter and I are living proof that faith not only matters, but saves, preserves, and perseveres. The ability to practice faith matters. The ability to serve through faith matters. Religious liberty matters because it protects the freedom not only to believe but to live out the meaning that faith gives to suffering, to life, and to service. In my own story, faith transformed survival into responsibility. It called me not only to endure but to fight for others. I'm deeply grateful to President Trump for making religious liberty a national priority, and I'm grateful to this commission for taking seriously the role that faith plays in human flourishing, moral courage, and service to others. Thank you for your time, for your work, and for the opportunity to share my stance on the most important of issues.

Vice-Chair Dr. Ben Carson (02:24:35):

Well, thank you for describing what faith can do to get you out of a terrible situation but also the barriers that are faced by those who are trying to help communities of faith. And now, I think we will hear from Rabbi Aaron Lipskar.

Rabbi Aaron Lipskar (02:24:55):

Good morning, Chairman, Vice Chairman, commissioners, and all of you have gathered here. Thank you for the opportunity to speak and to share with you a little bit this morning. My name is Rabbi Aaron Lipskar. I am the CEO of the Aleph Institute and National Non-for-Profit organization, which was founded almost 45 years ago by Rabbi Shalom Dovber Lipskar of blessed memory, and we have worked at the intersection of faith and the criminal justice system supporting incarcerated individuals, their families, and the institutions that serve them. The work that we do at the Aleph Institute was inspired and directed by the Lubavitcher Rebbe, Rabbi Menachem Mendel Schneerson of blessed memory, our mentor who I proudly serve as his emissary, to approach this work in a holistic way and to make sure that we address the needs of all of those that are affected or connected to that community in a dignified and respectful way.

This is all done, of course, through faith—through faith-based programs—through education, and through preventative education beforehand. In order to try and minimize those challenges, we have a very unique focus on the families that are affected by this and specifically the children. As we heard earlier, some statistics of the amount of children in the United States that have an incarcerated parent. We know the studies that show that children of an incarcerated parent have a greater likelihood of ending up

incarcerated themselves. Our work is rooted in Torah and Jewish values, the belief in the infinite dignity of every human being and the responsibility to care, especially for those on the margins. But while our foundation is Jewish, our advocacy is not limited by faith or practice and is open to all. We serve individuals of all backgrounds because the principle is universal. Every human being deserves dignity, purpose, and faith.

Now, while we do not minimize the accountability or responsibility of those that are incarcerated, we also live by the motto: “no one alone, no one forgotten.” We will not allow people to be defined by their worst moment or to define themselves by their worst moment. When we want to raise a society—when we want to raise a building and stabilize it—we know that we have to go to the foundation to ensure that it is strong in order to stabilize all aspects of that community. So let me begin with this simple premise. Faith is not a privilege in prison. It is a necessity. There is a reason why the prison environment is called a correctional institution. It is there to help people to correct, to rehabilitate, and to hopefully reenter society as a productive member of society. We see every day that when people practice their faith in a meaningful way in the prison environment, it completely transforms them.

It instills a certain level of responsibility, structure, and hope and creates a safer, more stable environment for everyone. We think about safety and security in those environments and, of course, about those that work there and those that are entrusted to care for these individuals are all part of the approach that we take. Often, through the countless visitations that I've personally participated in prisons and through the hundreds of volunteers that participate from the community, rabbinical students and others throughout the year, one thing is always a underlying message: people that are neglected, disconnected, or alone and forgotten, ask a very simple question, “why are you here? Why have you come to see me?” And when the answer is always the same, it is because we are family and we have a responsibility to each other. All of a sudden you feel that something shifts within that person, a moment where people start to see themselves, that they have value, that they're a human being, that they want to care, and that they may be able to maintain and protect their connections to their families.

We're certainly very grateful to the Department of Justice to the Bureau of Prisons. As you heard earlier about the inclusion of so many more religious programs. Of course, the First Step Act, which was put into law during President Trump's first term, and how faith is now a critical component of the First Step Act utilizing faith-based programs as necessary requirements in order for people to earn their first step credits. Although there will always remain gaps within the environment because of the safety and security, we continue to strive to work with the departments of corrections, with local county and prisons to create policy that allows for the full extent of observance according to the level that the person wants to observe. I must point out that when it comes to Judaism, specifically, Judaism governs a person's entire life, every moment of that life. How they pray, what they wear, when they pray, what they eat, how it's prepared, how they observe Sabbath observance—every moment is governed by Torah law, and it's specifically in a restricted environment where we try to create the policies and opportunities that those that wish to observe properly have those opportunities. Although we have seen great strides within the Bureau of Prisons and the federal system, we continue to see certain challenges within the different state systems, and we continue to try to work. And we'll work closely with Department of Justice, and of course, we look forward to the recommendations of this commission to ensure that RLUIPA and other critical religious rights are observed.

But beyond creating policy, we have to think that this is about people. A person sitting in a cell asks, do I matter? When a person can pray, connect and believe that their life still has meaning, they're no longer alone. And when a system supports that moment, it affirms that dignity. So, if there's something I'd like to leave you with, it is this. The Rebbe, of saintly memory, taught that no individual is ever beyond redemption, and no system should treat them as if they are. At the Aleph Institute, we live by a simple principle: “no one alone, no one forgotten.” And when we ensure that those behind bars can pray, still connect, and still believe and have the freedom to practice their religion, we are not just protecting

religious liberty, we're affirming that they are not alone and they're not forgotten. We're restoring human dignity.

And dignity is restored. Lives change, institutions improve, and society become stronger. This is not just policy; it is who we are. And if you'll be so bold as you'll allow me in closing with a remark to the esteemed commission, to all of those that have given testimony to all of you that are here in the room today or listening online, I challenge you: take a moment today to think about somebody in your life that might be forgotten, might be feeling neglected, and think about how to help them restore their faith, how to help them restore their dignity. Thank you.

Chairman Lieutenant Governor Dan Patrick (02:32:53):

Thank you, rabbi. Open up for questions for our witnesses. Kelly?

Kelly Shackelford (02:33:01):

I'll do it.

Kelly Shackelford (02:33:04):

Ms. Ekşi, that was probably one of the most powerful testimonies I've ever heard. Thank you for doing that. And I want to ask you also the expertise you have would really help because one of the things we want to make sure we can do is if there's something we can recommend to the President that would help on making sure that faith-based groups aren't treated differently, we want to do that. I mean, I think there's a Supreme Court case, *Carson*, that says if you have a generalized program of benefits, you can't exclude the recipients because of the religious or they're doing it in a religious way—and that should take care of these issues, and so are these problems—can you tell us a little bit—are you seeing these problems on the federal side, on the state side? I mean it shouldn't matter. They're both unconstitutional, but I'd just love to know where this is happening to help us know how to resolve it.

Oriel Ekşi (02:33:57):

So, at both the state and federal and even the local level, religion is encouraged to be left at the door. And so, as I work with organizations, things get tense whenever we begin to talk about faith or a faith aspect of it. And yeah, I really just think it should be able to be incorporated as much as it is welcomed by the people. I would be happy to prepare full recommendations for what we could do to make this situation better.

Kelly Shackelford (02:34:41):

We would love to have any thoughts you have as we're putting these together. And I mean it sounds like maybe just a lot of education needs to occur with these government officials to understand that not only is it not okay—it violates the Constitution—so they almost feel this pressure to go the other direction when what they're doing is illegal.

Oriel Ekşi (02:35:04):

Absolutely.

Kelly Shackelford (02:35:06):

Well, thank you.

Chairman Lieutenant Governor Dan Patrick (02:35:08):

Dr. Phil?

Dr. Phil McGraw (02:35:12):

Mr. Chairman, you made a comment earlier about what a competing agenda is. And this is really a comment to Bishop Barron and Sister Mary Elizabeth about what you were talking about and these competing agendas. There's a case right now going on in New York, another case in New York with the Dominican Sisters of Hawthorne, and their Rosary Hill Home, which is probably the most well-known. This is a group that for 125 years, for those that don't know, have provided comfort and skilled nursing care for indigent patients with incurable cancer, just helping them on their journey out. They charge no fee, they take no government aid, they accept no insurance. These holy women are a hundred percent focused on just lovingly accompanying patients on the final journey. And now, the government through the New York State Department of Health has started issuing a series of Dear Administrators Letters and a training curriculum as part of its implementation of the New York LGBTQ+ Bill of Rights for patients in long-term care facilities.

It exempts Christian Scientists, but no exemptions for Catholic or other faith-based nursing homes. And they're requiring the sisters to train the nurse, the nuns, and the staff in gender ideology, requiring them to engage in speech and services that are gender-affirming: biological men in women's rooms, even over the opposition of a female roommate; permitting residents and visitors of one sex to access bathrooms set aside for those of the opposite sex; using language concerning pronouns; affirming patient's sexual preferences; and accommodating patient's desire for extramarital sexual relations. And if they don't, the sisters and their staff may lose their license to provide services to these dying patients. They face potential jail time if they don't do this. And that's what I mean, Mr. Chairman, about competing agendas. Here, we have this group that for 125 years asking nothing in return, just assisting people in their final time in this world. And they view their work as a form of living their faith, not merely social service. And it is the roots of their faith, the dignity of the human being and charity to the poor and suffering. But yet, the government is now coercing them to adopt things absolutely antithetical to their faith. And that's where we have to look at religious liberty being more than just where someone worships, but how it goes into their life and how they're living. And sister, I'm just curious how you view this kind of intrusion by the government.

Sister Mary Elizabeth, SV (02:38:59):

Well, I think it's dangerous, obviously, and limits access to really life-affirming care and compassion that should be available and accessible and also limits the expression of our religion. You know, Jesus said, "whatsoever, you do to the least of these, you do to me." So, our religion actually impels us forth to charitable service to others, and that has been welcomed in our country for many years. And I think our country will just be a colder, sadder place without it. But Bishop Barron, I'd love to hear from you.

Bishop Robert Barron (02:39:46):

Well, thanks for mentioning the Hawthorne Dominicans, of course, founded by the great Rose Hawthorne, daughter of Nathaniel Hawthorne, maybe our greatest writer. She's another figure that embodies both faith and the culture. I'm going to talk about it when I make my general remarks, but it's one of the basic forms of this problem is that we have an ideology that really is an alternative religion that's asserting itself in the public square and then therefore forcing us out of it. So, I think that's the fundamental problem. It's a religious battle, but it's a kind of secularism, which I'll speak about, I think should be central to our report. And one of its manifestations is precisely this sort of thing.

Chairman Lieutenant Governor Dan Patrick (02:40:28):

I find it interesting both of those cases are in New York. What's wrong with the people in New York and government? I mean, I have to ask that question. I mean, you're coming against the sisters, you want to put them in jail. And I had a little text from someone that said, you said evil. There are lots of non-believers. They're not evil. They're living their life. They choose not to believe. That's fine. But the people

trying to stop those sisters from helping people dying of cancer and stop you from helping someone who's having a crisis pregnancy experience, I don't know what else you do. I mean, I don't know what else you say to them or how you describe them. You're talking about destroying potentially a person could die or not have a baby, which means the baby dies because... that's just pure evil. It's like—would be like—running into an emergency room and saying, stop. Don't save that patient because you're wearing a cross around your neck to the emergency room doctor. Don't do that.

Dr. Phil McGraw (02:41:30):

And if a group wants this type of palliative care or whatever with those values, then establish one. That's the whole point of the freedom. Establish one, but don't interfere with this religious group that's doing it consistent with their belief system and have been doing it in New York for 125 years and asking nothing of no one other than just to have the privilege of ushering people to the next life in the way their belief system dictates. Let them do what they want and go do what you want. That's the great thing about this experiment called America. You can do that and no one will bother you, but don't bother them doing what they believe their religion and their heart tells them to do. But that's not the thing. It's attack them and stop them from doing it instead of doing what you want to do. And that's the problem. That's the problem, I see. And it's an absence of common sense.

Chairman Lieutenant Governor Dan Patrick (02:42:39):

Yeah, Eric?

Eric Metaxas (02:42:44):

Well, first of all, thanks to all of you. I feel like I have a personal connection to Heather and to Sister Mary Elizabeth because I had the great privilege of working with Chuck Colson at Prison Fellowship. And I think the tremendous good that Prison Fellowship has done for innumerable people. It's unbelievable. And Sister Mary Elizabeth, my wife, we live in New York City. But we're Christians, and we love America, I promise you. And my wife, Suzanne, for 12 years ran the largest crisis pregnancy center now called Avail. And every now and again, she'd come home raving about meeting with the Sisters of Life, how I have to meet them. They fell out of heaven. They're unbelievable, the joy. And I thought, oh, they're just faking that. But I joke because you can't fake it because it's real and just as real as the love of God is.

And as God is in our lives, so is evil real and we have to stop from shrinking when we use such terms. There is such a thing as evil. And when we think about who would come against the Sisters of Life for trying to do what they do, it is evil. Perhaps the people doing this themselves are unaware that they're tools of evil, but they are evil. But to take it away from those terms and to think of us as Americans and are founding documents, it is the establishment of a secular religion. It's what Father Neuhaus referred to in his book, the *Naked Public Square* in 1984, an attempt to establish a secular religion, which is as wrong as to establish any religion. It is unconstitutional. It is fundamentally wrong, but obviously there's an attempt to dodge this and to pretend that secularism is not the establishment of religion. It's the opposite of that, but in fact, it's not. And we have to be clear that sometimes people game the system. They use religious liberty, for example, to impose a lack of religious liberty or to impose ideologies that are antithetical to religious liberty. And that's what's going on here. And of course, we see it in the bluest states like New York and Washington state and Oregon and Michigan. We see that over and over.

But I guess I just want to ask the sister, surely when they're coming after you on something like this, that what you're dealing with is in fact spiritual. I mean, I do think we need to have some recommendations on this commission of how do we face the reality of the establishment of a secular religion? We've been dealing with it for many decades, but we never name it. And we kind of go along with the lie that it's not a religion. It is. These are secular ideologies that they're trying to establish. But just on a spiritual level, sister, it seems to me that you can smell the evil behind this, that even if the people themselves think that

they're doing well, that when they would come after you in the way that they do. I guess I'm just wondering what it feels like to you, and I assume that you all know that it's spiritual and that you're in prayer about it.

Sister Mary Elizabeth, SV (02:46:29):

Well, yeah. Our primary mission is actually prayer on behalf of promoting a sense of the sacredness of human life because Pope John Paul II wrote in the encyclical, the Gospel of Life, that we are in the midst of a dramatic struggle between the culture of life and the culture of death between good and evil. So, he named it for that. And yeah, life is at the heart of it. So that's why we devote our lives, particularly to prayer, intercessory prayer on behalf of human life. And I think that, yeah, it kind of boggles the mind, and it's not the sentiment of ordinary New Yorkers. I'll let you know. I mean, we walk around like this in Manhattan and people are very welcoming and open to the work that we do. Even people who vehemently disagree with us about abortion, they think providing access to resources and services to women who want to parent their child is a good and noble thing. So, I think it's the minority that's promoting an agenda against the work that we do, and regular Americans are in support of it.

Rabbi Meir Soloveichik (02:47:57):

Ryan?

Dr. Ryan T. Anderson (02:47:58):

Yep. Thank you. I thought these were amazing testimonies. Halfway through, I thought the AC system was pumping in a bunch of pollen, because all of a sudden, my allergies were very much kicking in. And so, I wanted to ask a question following from what Helen Alvaré and I had talked about kind of like the goods of religious liberty, one of which being religion itself, friendship with God. And then what all the stories kind of drove home to me is that following very closely after that is transformation—that religious liberty allows for the flourishing of religion, which then allows for transformed lives. I think it's the very last chapter of CS Lewis's *Mere Christianity* where he says, “are we looking for nice people or new men,” and we get new people as a result of this encounter with Christ. And that there are things that each and every one of your ministries is doing that the secular government equivalent, if it even exists, couldn't do.

I'm not even sure if there are government-run pregnancy resource centers. I think all of them are in essence faith-based or faith-inspired. And that the miracles that you work on almost a daily basis, whether it's with inmates, whether it's with women facing unplanned pregnancies, women who have been trafficked, *et cetera, et cetera*, that there are things you can do that simply couldn't be done if you were secular or if you were government-run. And that—that's one of the goods of American religious liberty is working these transformations of people's lives. So, I just wanted to invite any of you, all of you, one of you, whoever wants to take the ball and run with it: can you share a little bit about what it is that you're able to do that you wouldn't be able to do if you were a government-run institution, if you were the DMV Sisters of Life or the DMV Prison Fellowship? Right. Some of us have better DMVs than others, but there are things that they can't say they can't do that you can. And I think it's why we see these lives transformed and turned around, and we should cherish that. We should report on this. This should be something we highlight as one of the fruits of religious liberty.

Heather Rice-Minus (02:50:00):

I'd be happy to speak to that because Prison Fellowship—we in 2024—updated our mission statement from to restore those impacted by incarceration to encounter Jesus with those impacted by incarceration. Certainly, the work we do leads to restoration, but just a recognition that the unique thing that Prison Fellowship has to offer is an opportunity to encounter Jesus. And we believe that we get to offer that to people whether they may know it or not. And I think some of the unique things that come out of the ability to operate authentically in our Christian faith in the context of prison is one, we have the

opportunity to pray with people—we have the opportunity to have discussions about. Oftentimes people come to prison, they've hit rock bottom, and they're asking the big deep life questions. They're asking about concepts like forgiveness. They're seeking healing. They're trying to understand purpose.

And to be able to engage in a dialogue, and to be able to accompany someone in prayer through that process and perhaps unpack some of the worst choices someone's ever made in their life with them, is just something the government can't do. And furthermore, we bring in volunteers. We bring a connection between our programs and the church, and that means that we are not just a program isolated into prison. But we're actually an ecosystem. We have an opportunity not just to care for the person in prison but for their family through our Angel Tree program. We can come alongside their family, and we can also connect them to the local church. I was mentioning earlier about the Iowa event that I'm going to be attending in a few weeks where we're reuniting some of our Prison Fellowship Academy grads, and one of them is Pastor Cudi Marshall of Hope City Church.

(02:51:55):

And when he was in prison, men came inside, mentored him, walked with him, and “what does it look like to live out your faith?” And meanwhile, also, the church did Prison Fellowship Angel Tree and came alongside his then girlfriend and his daughter who was two at the time. He later married Angela. And when he got out, he joined that church, and they actually helped him found Hope City Church, which is now one of the fastest growing churches in Iowa. And they're now doing Prison Fellowship, Angel Tree, and their multi-campus—they just launched their next campus in prison. And so, this ripple effect happens, and I think there's something that faith communities are so good at, and that is community and belonging—and that's just something the government can't offer.

Chairman Lieutenant Governor Dan Patrick (02:52:45):

Any other questions here? Heather? Thank you for mentioning Texas a few times. We do have a lot of people in jail, so we might, you know, we're a big place, so we might lead in some categories. We, some states believe in law and order as well as religious freedom. But we have a program there called The Heart of Texas, as you're aware of, which works alongside of you. And Christian Fellowship is it's just a tremendous organization. And Colson, again, God picked one person out of jail. You could go back, make that a very biblical connection to others. But we have graduated over 200 pastors who take a full four year seminary course, and we primarily look for people who are serving 20 years to life.

And the wardens at our other prisons tell us when they come in because we send them out, they're there 24/7, 365 at 2:00 in the morning when someone needs help, they're at a crisis, a suicidal attempt, or they're in fear because they've never been in prison before. And it's a nonprofit. Then the ladies who are about 10% of the prison population in Texas and in America, they said, we want to, so now we have our first women. So, I feel like there's an uprising for good reasons in our prison system members. These are people who, as you said, rock bottom. They don't think they can be forgiven. They don't think they can be forgiven because they can't forgive themselves for what they did. And there are some very evil people in every prison that are evil, but there are many people who just want an opportunity. And when they find out whatever faith it is, when they find out, it changes them and gives them hope. And going back to this—what secular reservoir they trying to establish in America—this is really all these groups should be titled: “we're the group trying to stop good things from happening.” Because...

Someone doesn't even want us to even turn in our report. That means they're really afraid. They're really afraid when there's a group suing us, it's public suing us from even turning in our report. What are you afraid of? What are you afraid of? Oh, don't turn in the report because it's going to have testimony from some of the most incredible witnesses in America. So, thank you for doing what you're doing and all of you thank you. But no other questions. We'll excuse you from the panel. Thank you.

So, we're going to do something that we have not done in any of these hearings because this is our last hearing. We're going to have an open discussion here about things we think we should recommend to the

President talking about some of the testimony we've heard in the past. And so, I'm going to just open up the floor and each member we've said, have five, 10 minutes, 15 minutes, whatever you want to discuss and make it a discussion. This is really rare to have a discussion like this in public, which is the law also, but it's good to have this discussion and I'll start with Eric stepped away. So, Bishop Barron, would you like to begin?

Bishop Robert Barron (02:56:28):

Sure. Thank you, Mr. Chairman. And I've just prepared five minutes of remarks just to give you an overview.

Chairman Lieutenant Governor Dan Patrick (02:56:34):

All you want, take all the time you want.

Bishop Robert Barron (02:56:36):

I want to begin by reiterating something that I said at the opening session of our commission, namely that the principle enemy of religious liberty in our country is what I call the ideology of self-invention. This is the philosophical program that denies the objectivity of moral values and the stability of human nature, and which proposes, consequently, that individual choice alone is the determiner of purpose and meaning. This dictatorship of relativism has taken hold in many of our institutions of government, education, and healthcare, and its advocates correctly recognize that their most important intellectual opponents are precisely those who subscribe to traditional religion. It's no exaggeration to say that the proponents of the culture of self-invention want religion out of the pivotal institutions of our society. So, we should be very clear-eyed about this. Now, this philosophical opposition manifests itself in a number of concrete ways, and we've heard about them throughout this year.

I'd mention first, the anti-religious violence that's been increasing dramatically in our country over the past five to 10 years. Attacks on churches, statues, and most terribly of course on religious people themselves constitute a direct threat to religious liberty. The rise of antisemitism encouraged by figures on both the left and the right sides of the political spectrum is a particular concern here. In regard to healthcare, the culture of self-invention expresses itself in an aggressive attitude toward those physicians and nurses who refuse on religious grounds to participate in certain medical procedures. Conscience protection for such individuals is therefore of crucial importance. This extends to among other issues the HHS mandates regarding abortion and contraception, IVF insurance mandates to which Catholics strenuously object, and the requirement to perform so-called gender transition surgeries. As we've heard now many times, this entire gender ideology, which proponents endeavor to insert into programs of education across the country, represents a very real threat to the religious liberty of those who find such ideas repugnant to their beliefs about the human person.

And finally, under this healthcare rubric, we should continue to advocate for pro-life demonstrators who simply want the right to pray at sites where abortions are being performed. Criminalizing such righteous activity is a gross violation of religious liberty. We must also be vigilant with respect to religious social service organizations such as Catholic charities that receive federal funding. That financial support should not be contingent upon a repudiation of traditional teaching regarding marriage and family. Furthermore, since parents are the first and most important educators of their children, they should not be penalized through the tax code for choosing religious schooling. Also, the attempt in a number of states to require priests to break the seal of confession should be exposed for what it is, namely, a particularly gross violation of the Free Exercise Clause of the First Amendment.

Finally, though it's somewhat oblique to my central argument, I like to say something about immigration. The Catholic Church strongly holds that a nation has the right to defend its borders and enforces immigration laws, but it insists that such defense and enforcement be conducted in a morally upright way. Accordingly, it insists that those Catholics who are incarcerated in connection to immigration violations

have a right to humane treatment and access to the sacraments. It furthermore requires that immigration agents should never disrupt worship services in the carrying out of their duties. In a word, the religious liberty of detainees and worshipers should always be respected. And just a word by way of conclusion, I want to say the work of our commission is of supreme importance in the life of our country. Religious liberty is rightly called the first of our freedoms and the linchpin of our fundamental rights. So, though it's far above my pay grade to make the suggestion, I nevertheless urge the President to allow this commission to continue in some form going forward. Threats to religious freedom both at home and abroad are not disappearing anytime soon, and I believe it's very much in the national interest to persevere in monitoring them. Thanks.

Chairman Lieutenant Governor Dan Patrick (03:00:56):

Thank you, Bishop. Yes, we would like to continue our charter expires in a couple of months, and I think if we all sent a letter and signed it to the President, we'd like to continue to monitor the outcome and to continue to have hearings as needed, as stories break and news breaks would be a great privilege. Eric Metaxas?

Eric Metaxas (03:01:22):

Thank you, Chairman. I grew up in the Greek Orthodox tradition, and so because of what we celebrated on Sunday, I want to say to everyone in that tradition, *Christós anésti* — that is at the heart of my story as an American. My father came to this country in the mid-fifties, grew up in the Greek Church, and we didn't learn much really in terms of doctrine, but we knew that we were supposed to hate the Turks. As I grew in my faith, I came to see that that was not quite right, but that we were supposed to hate the ideology of the radical Muslim Ottoman Turks, which brutally, brutally subjugated and persecuted Greek Orthodox Christians for four centuries. I was made to see that what one believes matters, and that not all faiths are equal, and that there are some faiths that there don't believe in what we call religious liberty, who are in fact the enemies of religious liberty.

My father raised me also in terms of being a good Greek to love America, and many times because my mother came out of a communist—came from East Germany—to love America and to love freedom. But I wasn't really able to articulate these things. And I think the reason we have this religious liberty commission today is because we have for many decades failed to articulate what it means to be an American, what liberty is and is not, what religious liberty is and is not. And my principal recommendation to the commission and to everyone in America is that we must know our story: we must know what liberty is. We have to be able to articulate why it is that some faiths hate liberty and some faiths love liberty. And I would say to you that having just written a book on the founding of America, on the American Revolution called *Revolution*, I really learned myself only in the last couple of years doing my research how liberty and religious liberty are inextricably intertwined with biblical faith.

Faith in the scriptures leads to the idea of religious liberty, and I think we used to teach that in schools, and we've ceased to teach that in schools. Just by way of background, on August 2nd, 1776, when the 56 signers actually signed the declaration, it wasn't on July 4th—that's a whole story—it's a chapter in my book, but it was on August 7th second that they signed what's called the engrossed copy. And the day before they did, Samuel Adams gave a speech to all of the members of Congress. And the headline, his main line was: “Today we have restored the Sovereign.” Capital S.

And what he was saying—and I think it is vital that Americans understand this—was that in forming the United States of America, we were creating a form of government that had not existed since the Sinai Covenant when the Israelites in the desert made a covenant directly with God, that God would be their sovereign. They were no longer under the slavery of the Pharaoh. They were now free. But what does it mean to be free, free to be governed by the Sovereign—capital S—so the God of the Christians and Jews? That was the guiding light when we talk about liberty and the founding of America. And unless we teach that, unless we make it clear that that's what the founders were about, we can't possibly understand what it

is to be free and what liberty is. And we wouldn't be in the mess that we're in with all of these witnesses talking about these horror stories if most Americans understood what we ought always to understand.

So, I think it's important for us to understand that it is only out of the biblical tradition that you get religious liberty, and it's vital to understand it and to stop pretending that you can find it in Enlightenment principles. That's simply not true. Thomas Jefferson didn't invent the idea that all men are created equal. It wasn't even his idea. It comes from the Bible. Everyone at that time understood this comes from the Bible. Without the Bible, you're not created equal. The idea that even we're created by a God who loves us and creates us equal, these are radical ideas. And when these ideas are imported to form a government to create a nation, it creates what we call the United States of America. And it had never been done before. And we used to know this as a people and used to cherish this. And we have to stop confusing this idea of religious liberty with the idea that all faiths are equal.

They're not all equal. It really was. In fact, it was the critics of Christian faith, the French Enlightenment, secular critics of Christian faith that I think forced American Christians to sharpen their theology and to say, okay, we're not going to do what the Puritans did when they first came over and insist—create a little theocracy. No, we're going to have this thing called religious liberty. It forced them to sort of squeeze the Christian faith to see what it's really made of and what pops out of genuine Christian faith—so the founders understood—is this thing called religious liberty, that even though I may have a belief that is different from yours, I will defend your right to your faith. Classic example of this, George Washington, when he sent Benedict Arnold through the wilds of Maine up to Canada, he said to him, when you get to Canada, you're going to encounter what we call Catholics.

And we, George Washington, we don't agree with their theology, but we are not there to correct their theology. We want to respect them. What a radical idea that you could have a different ideology but that at the heart of your ideology is to respect someone else's ideology, to respect them as human beings created in God's image that's at the center of our founding. And we cannot underscore enough the religiosity, the faith of all of these men who signed the Declaration of Independence, which is inescapably a Christian document. You cannot say we're endowed by our Creator with certain inalienable rights. It is fundamentally a biblical idea. You don't have to like that, but it's a fact. So, at the heart of America, at the heart of American liberty and religious liberty is faith in the God of the Bible. And I think part of the reason we're in this mess is because that used to be assumed, but secularists in the last a hundred years or so have undermined this on the Liberty Bell, as many of you know, is a quote from Leviticus.

These things cannot be wiped away, but we've forgotten them. So, I would say the more Christian faith we have in our culture, the more liberty we have. In other words, if I'm somebody who's not of Christian faith in America, I want there—and Dennis Prager said this very often—I want there to be more Christian faith. I as a Jew will be more protected and more free as a Jew if there is more Christian faith, not less Christian faith. Wherever there are enemies of freedom, when you look around, we've talked about it., you have in the Soviet Revolution and the French Revolution, the enemies of freedom are the enemies of biblical faith. And in our day, the enemies of the Jews. We have to recognize who the enemies of liberty are. We mentioned a lot of cultural Marxists. Sharia law is antithetical to American liberty.

We have to be able to talk about this without buying into the lie that we're criticizing Muslim individuals. You can love a human being and see that person as created in the image of God, but you have an obligation to understand that that ideology is at war with liberty, with religious liberty. I would say the same of Catholic integralism. There are all kinds of twistings of faith away from genuine faith and away from liberty. We have to teach kids that it was the Great Awakening and the evangelistic efforts of George Whitefield that led to the possibility of America being born. Everyone used to know these things. And so, I simply wanted to say that unless we teach these things in schools, unless most Americans understand that our liberties are fundamentally out of the Christian scriptures, out of the Bible, we cannot go forward. And so otherwise, all we're doing here is these are just stopgap solutions. It's vital. We understand our identity as a Christian nation, which because of its Christian faith respects those of other faiths. Thank you.

Chairman Lieutenant Governor Dan Patrick (03:11:53):

Thank you, Eric. And throughout these seven hearings we've had Sikhs, Jews, Muslims, Hindus, Catholics, Protestants. We've had everyone here because one of the things that the President and I talked about is this is a commission to look at religious faith and freedom. And so, we respect all of those different faiths. And it's interesting... the secular movement attacks all of us. They don't just attack the Christians. They don't just attack the Jews. They don't just attack the Hindus. They go after everyone. And if someone doesn't want to believe, we're not the wrong to believe. It's your right as an American, that's a faith in its own. When you have no faith, there's a faith. I believe there is no God—they may not know that—but I don't know where they all meet on Sunday or Saturday or Tuesday, but that's the faith in their own. Kelly.

Kelly Shackelford (03:12:56):

Yeah. I've spent 35—37—years of my life defending religious freedom, Catholic, Protestant, Native American, Indian, the Falun Gong, I mean you name it. Because either religious freedom for everybody or religious freedom for nobody. And I just want to say it's just been such an honor serving with all of you on the commission. I mean, this has never happened before. There's never been a Religious Liberty Commission for domestic. So, but when I think of the commission, I can't, over the last year, I can't help but think of the testimonies. You can just start thinking back, and I mean, it seems like it's a hearing requirement that we have to tear up at some time... including testimony today, just so powerful. But the things that we're hearing should never be happening.

That's the thing. It's happening to women, children, men, it's happening to groups, and it's in America. And so, the good news about that is I think we have a lot of recommendations that we can make to the President that can really make a difference, not just now, but for the future. And I'm not going to go through the—I think 35 or whatever recommendations—but I thought I would... some big themes arose for me in the recommendations. First is education, and by that I mean there's been some big changes in the last even five to six years in the religious freedom law. You think about the Coach Kennedy case, which overturned *Lemon*. You think about the *Groff* case, which dramatically changed religious freedom in the workplace. You think about the *Mahmoud* case, which just came down about the religious freedom of parents over their children in the schools.

And I don't think most Americans have caught up with what's happened. And a lot of the government officials haven't caught up with what's happened. And so—horrible thing—people's rights are being violated when the law protects them now and they don't know. So, I think there are things we can do. And so, one of the things we talked about that I think is a real obvious one, because you spent two hearings on this, is the Department of Education produces guidelines on religious freedom in our schools, the rights of parents, the rights of students, the rights of teachers. We heard testimony on all those things. And I think the ones they just released recently can be strengthened a little. For instance, *Mahmoud* and the right of parents to opt out and to be notified, I think should be more clear. But you can take... one of the recommendations that I think we should make is to take those and to have the President require that anyone who, any school district which receives federal money, which is every school district, should have to certify that they have these guidelines, they have trained their teachers on these guidelines, that they've taught their students on these guidelines, and then anyone who either refuses to do that or violates them and the rights of their students, their parents, their teachers should lose their funding because the incentive will educate people. There has to be something that starts to get them the information. So that's one area. A second area that we've discussed just here and there in the hearings, but I think it's probably one of the biggest problems in religious freedom are judges who want to avoid these controversial cases.

You understand the humanity of, and Ms. Ho just won a Supreme Court case with a bunch of judges who tried to do that in her case—she just overturned them nine to zero at the Supreme Court. But this is so common, and when I train attorneys on how to do these cases, I always tell them, most of these cases are not won and a loss on the substance of religious freedom. They're lost with all the trapped doors that are

created to allow the judge to avoid your lawsuit. And this is not just my theory. Supreme Court justices have said this, other judges have said this. And so, one of the strong recommendations, I think, and the most important to the President is to encourage the President when he's picking judges—we have to pick people not just with the right philosophy but with courage, people who have shown in their life that they're willing to pay a price to do the right thing because good philosophy doesn't do it if you're going to avoid the religious freedom case—you're going to avoid the controversial cases because you want to be elevated in the future.

The third area is what I would call giving power to citizens. And so, for instance, when HHS won't do anything, when somebody's religious freedom and conscience is violated right now, the citizens have nowhere to go. They should be able to bring their own cause of action. We can't depend upon whether the administration in power at that time likes them. Right? Same thing with when there are violations of religious discrimination, which we heard Jewish students not even be allowed to go into the classroom, and yet, the administration not doing anything with these clear civil rights violations—they should have a right to bring those claims. Right?

And a real big one, which we talked about when we had Dr. Heim here, the whole idea that citizens are at such an imbalance when the government comes after them. And the idea the government should not have that kind of authority over citizens. If you win your lawsuit against the government, if they come after you, and you win—whoever that citizen is—they should have their attorney's fees paid for, their costs paid for, then they could all get attorneys. But what happens now is even if you lose your finances and everything is destroyed, and that should be easy—it should be bipartisan. Everybody should say, yeah, I don't trust the other side when they're in power to misuse the power of the government. And if anybody understands this about lawfare and the use, it's the President of the United States right now. Now, he had the resources, but most citizens don't. So that would be a huge shifting of power in favor of citizens.

And then the last area that I saw was the opportunity the President has with the Department of Justice. And a few things popped out for me. We had a lot of professors say that if the DOJ would push this point on religious liberty, if they would push for clarification. I remember when we had a case that has been up the Supreme Court down is probably on its way back up, is the whole issue of the authority of parents. It was the Amish case, the *Miller* case, the authority of parents over their children with vaccination and New York trying to force the Amish who've just been trying to be left alone for 250 years, try to force them to vaccinate their children. What a wonder it would be if when that case gets to Supreme Court that the Justice Department joins on behalf of the religious freedom of those parents.

And so, there's a lot that DOJ can do. And I would add one more that I think is sort of an IRS and DOJ recommendation is we just saw just a few weeks ago—yet again, this whole idea of scaring churches from talking about political issues—there was a lawsuit that should have been decided. We had a judge find a way not to rule. It just happened a few weeks ago. And there is a way to deal with this, and that is if the President would ask the IRS to go ahead and issue a small fine against any church for talking about politics and then make clear to the DOJ, we want a decision on the constitutionality of this IRS regulation versus the First Amendment of the United States Constitution, then we can finally get a precedent that then will make clear to every church the freedom they have. But until we get that, everybody's going to be scared. And this is something that the President can do.

So, there are a lot of great things. But since, I'll say one last thing since Franklin Graham is not here, his recommendation at our military hearing, which we all agreed with, which is when we had the Navy SEAL testify, and we learned about all the military. There was a victory eventually in court on behalf of the Navy SEALs. And a lot of people were stopped from being thrown out of our military. But there are a number of great people who served our country who were pushed out before that decision. And Reverend Graham asked if we could ask the President to make them whole. They lost their pensions, they lost all kinds of things, and that's something the President can do. So those are at the top of my list, but I'm just excited because we're going to get this report and recommendations to the President. And it's going to change religious freedom and the future of our country. It's just been an honor to be a part of it.

Chairman Lieutenant Governor Dan Patrick (03:22:38):

Kelly, let me, and I'll come to the rabbi next. Let me—and all of you please feel free to ask anyone who's talking a question—so I'm one of the few non-lawyers on the panel. I feel like I have some type of degree after all of this and being in legislature for 20 years. But my question is, it's a simplistic question: when the sisters are being threatened—this latest case of going to jail for 10 years, or our whistleblower from Texas children over transgender surgery was threatened with prison and a number have been threatened with prison—exactly what law are they breaking? What law are they breaking to allow the government to come after them with such harsh penalties?

Kelly Shackelford (03:23:30):

Well, they create laws, regulations to have this power over them. And when it comes to the federal government, I think the power will begin to equalize if you could actually have the right to know that you can get an attorney—that if you win, they'll have to reimburse all the attorney's fees because then the attorneys will do it *pro bono*. They'll do it in order to get their attorney's fees. So, you put the power back on the same level for the first time because right now the power is all with the government, their attorneys, the DOJ attorneys, everybody else. If you've got a bad administration, it's going to attack religious freedom. And I would say though, talk about this case that we mentioned today with the nuns and maybe trying to put them in jail of up to 10 years. Wouldn't it be wonderful the DOJ would come to their rescue, too? That they would join? I wish. I mean, there's plenty of things that going on with DOJ, but I would love it if there were some attorneys that that was their job is to get involved, make a difference, stand for what the President stands on—religious liberty—and take some of these cases like the case in New York.

Chairman Lieutenant Governor Dan Patrick (03:24:46):

I should have clarified my question. I realize they're being threatened because of regulations that a certain—New York seems to be enemy number one here. However, there's nothing they're violating in the Constitution. The sisters aren't violating it.

Kelly Shackelford (03:25:03):

Well, the sisters can't violate the Constitution. Right? Only the government can violate the Constitution. But the beauty is they have the Constitution on their side. And so, when the government comes after them, the government's going to have to deal with it.

Chairman Lieutenant Governor Dan Patrick (03:25:17):

So, the issue of our report recommendations, there's a lot centered around giving people not only information, not only maybe I'll print up a million bumper stickers saying there is no separation of church and state. I think we all need to say that every time a reporter says separate: no, there is no such thing—show it to me in the Constitution. But that we want these people, and we have to empower the individuals. Rabbi?

Rabbi Meir Soloveichik (03:25:46):

Thank you, Mr. Chairman. I'll try to be brief. I appreciate it, but it's very dangerous to tell a rabbi take as much time as you want. So, thanks.

I want to thank you for seizing the providential moment to help bring this commission into being. It's really been a privilege. I agree entirely with the bishop about the importance of continuing our work. I also want to thank the bishop for referencing the rise of Jew hatred and its sources on various parts of the political spectrum. Part of what I've been thinking about is not only what are our policy proposals, to which Kelly eloquently discussed, but also what can we do to ensure that the value of religious liberty

endure. And so, I'll also speak about education, which the chairman and others have spoken about, but in a slightly different way. And it's inspired by a personal experience of mine from last week, I happened to be at the White House in the Oval Office for a wonderful meeting with the president. Paula was there. It was a gathering to mark the Jewish community's celebration of Passover. It was also the day of the Easter egg roll. So, as I was in line to get into the White House — nice family, I was wearing a hat — and the nice family looked at me and said, hello, and said, are you also here for the Easter egg hunt? And I said, no, I'm here for a different event.

And then after the Oval Office meeting, there was a lovely little Passover party actually in the EEOB, in the executive office building. And then I had to run out to catch my flight, and I stopped because in one of the corridors of the executive office building, there was a little exhibit that I think was called "Moments that made us" — something like that. And there was an image from a painting of a story from American history that I tell all the time. So, I was struck to see it, a story that occurred in 1774, I may even have mentioned in our discussions here. And this was the gathering of the First Continental Congress in Philadelphia, which was not in what became known as Independence Hall, but was actually nearby in what's called Carpenter's Hall. And we know about what occurred there because of John Adams' letter about it to his wife.

And one of the delegates, Thomas Cushing proposed that they begin with prayer. And this was opposed by some of the attendees originally, because this is Adams' words, because "we were so divided in religious sentiments, some Episcopalians, some Quakers, some Anabaptists, some Presbyterians, and some Congregationalists, so that we could not join in the same act of worship." Now, to us, the notion of this, considering the future religious diversity of America, that these are unbridgeable divides, it's kind of striking. But again, in Europe, people had been killing each other over these disagreements. And then Sam Adams stood up and said that he would hear a prayer from any gentleman of piety and virtue who was also a friend to his country. And a clergyman was brought in, and he read Psalm 35, Plead My Cause, oh Lord. And, Hebrew, *Riva Hashem*, plead my cause with them that strive with me, fight against them, that fight against me, say unto my soul, I am thy salvation.

And John Adams wrote that evening to his wife: "I never saw a greater effect on an audience. It seems as if heaven had ordained that psalm to be read that day," and that he concluded, "I must beg of you to read that psalm" this described in part on the oval — an OEOB wall. But to me it was always a striking story, not just because this passage from the Hebrew Bible that was read seemed itself. Heaven sent that it be read that day as Adam said, but also because the story captures how religion can be a positive force for unity in America without denying our differences. And that was certainly my experience at the White House that very day as I came in for the Passover, meeting the President on the day of an Easter celebration at the White House. So, how religion and its unity and diversity has been a central part of our nation's story was captured by my own experience but also by that '74 event and marked how different we are from say the extreme secularism of post-revolutionary France.

And it certainly marked in history an important moment in the story of disparate colonies coming together. It seems to me though that this prayer of Carpenters Hall and others like it should not merely be a moment marked in the OEOB, though it's wonderful that it is, but also perhaps in — say — a monument on the federal land that is Independence's National Historical Park. The President is rightly inspired us to think about the way in which we mark America's 250th birthday, not only in the moment but in the way that we mark it so that aspects of how we mark it will endure for generations. I've had the opportunity of traveling with my family to most of the central sites of American history. Our family has visited Independence Hall, Antietam, Fort Ticonderoga, Valley Forge. Though I say with shame, Mr. Chairman, that we've not yet been to the Alamo. I hope maybe you'll host us there in the future.

Chairman Lieutenant Governor Dan Patrick (03:31:28):

We are having a tremendous rebuild, and I'll be sure you get an invitation

Rabbi Meir Soloveichik (03:31:31):

Okay, please. I'm going to hold you to that. I'm going to hold you to that.

Chairman Lieutenant Governor Dan Patrick (03:31:36):

I appreciate the hat you wore today. I'll get you a Davy Crockett Coonskin Cap.

Rabbi Meir Soloveichik (03:31:42):

I did share with the chairman that if there was a Chief Rabbi of Texas, just think of the hat that he could wear. I thought that would be, that was my way of putting my name in for the job. I think I did. But we take educating our children about America seriously. We've taken them many different places. I took my son on a Segway tour of Gettysburg — actually, though, I did crash my Segway, and now I can say I've been injured at Gettysburg. But it is — we care about what the next generation knows about America. But as I think back to all the places we've been, it actually struck me that it's hard to think of national park sites whose monuments and public material go out of its way to describe the importance of religion and religious freedom in the American story. There are the words of Jefferson and his memorial, but there's not a Religious Liberty Memorial itself, at least not as a federal endeavor. There are memorials to the story of religious liberty, but not in the way that I'm describing as the chairman has said today and previously. Part of what we have to address is not only how to protect people like the courageous witnesses from whom we've heard, but also how we educate and also as importantly, commemorate for the future. Anything considerations of this matter should, I believe, also be part of our report. Thanks very much.

Chairman Lieutenant Governor Dan Patrick (03:33:17):

Thank you, Rabbi. And let's see, I have Alison, I'm going to come to Alison, then Ryan, then Paul, Dr. Phil and Dr. Ben, my great Vice Chair will finish with all of you. Allison?

Allyson Ho (03:33:28):

Thank you, Mr. Chairman and Mr. Vice Chairman. I'm so grateful to President Trump for creating this commission and for the opportunity to serve as a commissioner. It's been an exceedingly great privilege and great blessing. Religious liberty is the first freedom, the foundation for all others. Without religious liberty, no other freedom survives. Courage is the first virtue, the one that makes all others possible. Without courage, religious liberty cannot be defended. As I reflect on the witnesses that have come before this commission over the past months, what strikes me most is the courage demonstrated by these extraordinary ordinary Americans—fathers, mothers, sons, daughters, coaches, veterans, doctors, teachers. When faced with a choice, no American should ever have to make—a choice between conviction and capitulation—these brave witnesses chose conviction at great cost to themselves, their families, their careers, their communities. We owe these courageous men and women and children much more than our gratitude.

We owe them no less than our sacred commitment to stand with them and defend religious liberty with the same courage. When Americans seek to vindicate their religious freedoms in court, they deserve judges who will carry out their oaths to support and defend the Constitution of the United States with the same courage that we've seen witness after witness demonstrate. But too often, courts hide behind judge made doctrines that deprive people of faith of their day in court. They invent legal excuses, distort facts or even insult the parties and their counsel to avoid dealing with religious liberty claims on their merits. This must stop. People of faith deserve better. Our nation deserves better. I hope the commission will recommend to President Trump that he nominate men and women to the federal courts who have demonstrated the same courage we've seen in witness after witness before this commission. These brave witnesses deserve judges who aren't afraid to make the tough calls and to incur the wrath of elites who

ridicule people of faith, distort the constitution's guarantees, and erase our nation's history to serve their own agendas. Extraordinary ordinary Americans are standing up for religious liberty at great personal cost. The least we can do is stand with them and ensure that the courthouse doors are open to protect and preserve the first freedom whenever and wherever it comes under attack. Thank you.

Chairman Lieutenant Governor Dan Patrick (03:36:56):

Thank you, Allison. Ryan.

Dr. Ryan T. Anderson (03:36:58):

Great, thank you. What I would like to share follows very nicely with what Allison just shared. I was struck someone who has done work in religious liberty — liberty — for the past 10, 15, 20 years. I was struck by the expert witnesses we had who were themselves, the victims of religious liberty violations, ordinary people who didn't seek out persecution, but when it came to them, they refused to bend the knee. And many of us on this commission, we have politicians, we have lawyers, we have a radio show host, a TV host, a rabbi, a bishop, a pastorate, we're public people. These were largely not public people until their religious liberty was violated. And two things that struck me, one is that they refused to bend the knee to Caesar, but then also they didn't just go away quietly because some people will say, look, I'm not going to violate my conscience. I'll just get fired and find a new job. They said, I'm not going to violate my conscience and then I'm going to sue, and I'm going to get Kelly to represent me—and we're going to win. So, it strikes me that one recommendation, something I would love to see happen is these people should be honored as heroes. I would love to see them, a selection of them. I would love to see Jack Phillips at the White House for the Presidential Medal of Freedom, I guess is the one that would be there, right?

A champion of religious freedom winning the medal of freedom strikes me as something that would be very appropriate. But just in general, what a political community chooses to celebrate and honor demonstrates what it actually values. And so, I would like to see some of these heroes, people who started as being victims but who rose above that victimization honored in a public way. And I hope the stories end up in the report. If this is the first hearing that you've attended, I encourage you to watch the video that's online of our prior hearings because all of the testimonies have been very convicting, and the experts that we had were heroes. So that's one thought is that we should honor these people beyond what we were able to do during the commission. Encourage the President to honor them, celebrate them as a way of teaching religious liberty by honoring the heroes of religious liberty.

Second thought was about the foundations of religious liberty. Going back to that very first hearing that we held, looking at both the philosophical and the theological roots. Religious liberty matters because religion matters, because God matters. It's not our opinions about God. There's a reality about God as the Creator and then our duties to that Creator. That's just a gloss on James Madison's memorial on Remonstrance where he's citing the Virginia Declaration on rights that we have rights amongst men because we have duties to the Creator. And that religion is about the duty that we owe to the Creator, the manner in which we discharge that duty. And that's why government can't control that, right? That before we're citizens of the civil society, we're subjects of the governor of the universe. Again, paraphrasing Madison. It strikes me that it's very important to highlight this because that then also demonstrates the scope of religious liberty.

It's not just about what we do Friday night in a synagogue or what we do Sunday morning at a church. It's what we do seven days a week, 24 hours a day. Religion impacts every aspect of a believer's life. What cakes they can bake or not bake, what photographs they can take or not take, what vaccines they can take or not take, what they can teach at school, what they can say or not say at school, what they can do in the military... it's all encompassing and that scope of religious liberty should be robust. We've seen recent threats where people would want to narrow religious liberty merely to the freedom of worship. And that was language that we heard from the State Department during the Obama administration. Secretary

Clinton repeatedly referred to the freedom of worship, which in the international context has huge implications for whether or not you can evangelize whether or not you can convert really important protections of religious liberty for the flourishing of religion.

George Washington in the letter to the Hebrew congregation of Newport, Rhode Island. He says it's no longer that toleration is spoken of. He's taking a dig at John Locke. Locke at the time was at the forefront of religious — the letter concerning toleration. Washington says, no, we're not about tolerating the Jewish people as if there's something bad that we're merely putting up with, right? We're going to tolerate you, Rabbi Soloveichik. He's like, no, we're going to respect your inherent natural rights. I think that's important to see that this is not a gift from political communities. This is an inherent natural right and that we have duties to respect it and to protect it. It's not about tolerating something as if it's like a disease.

Third thought were about some of the threats to religious liberty. Eric already mentioned Father Neuhaus's influential book from 1984, the Naked Public Square. Many people seem to think that a public square devoid of religion is somehow neutral. But as Bishop Barron pointed out, that's just an alternative religion. It's an alternative ideology that will impose itself. Nature abhors a vacuum. Something's going to be the governing philosophy of any given political community. Governor Patrick, you had asked, I think you asked Kelly what the source of these laws that the nuns were violating. Unjust laws are one of the primary threats to religious liberty, right? And so, what's at stake in many of these—thank God it has not yet passed at the federal level and God willing it will never pass at the federal level—but in many states, they have elevated sexual orientation and gender identity to a protected class in civil rights law. And so, imagine had that taken place either during the Obama or Biden administrations when it was pending, every federal civil rights law that we have that prohibits discrimination on the basis of race and every mechanism that the federal government has to go after racists would be used for people who hold a biblical conviction of the human person.

That's what the nuns are facing with their nursing home and the Hawthorne nuns in New York—Dominican nuns in Hawthorne, New York. And so, an effective response can't just be exemptions from unjust laws, but it has to be establishing a just law in the first place. This is what Martin Luther King was getting at in the letter from the Birmingham Prison that Bishop Barron cited. He cites Augustine to say, an unjust law is no law at all. And then he cites Aquinas to say that a just law is a manmade code that's in harmony with the natural law and the eternal law. That's the best defense of religious liberty in the long run.

And I think we want to highlight that some of the other threats that we saw was that many jurisdictions placed physical wellbeing over spiritual wellbeing. You could get an exemption from the vaccine if you had a physical medical condition but not if you had a spiritual or religious concern, right? The casino and the liquor stores could be open during COVID, but the churches couldn't, right? It's when we place physical wellbeing over spiritual. We saw this in the healthcare context, we saw it in the military context. The primacy of the spiritual is vitally important. And when we forget that and when we focus on the primacy of the physical as if that's what we're living for, we're living for something beyond the physical. And then as both Kelly and Alison have said, we have cowardly public officials. Sometimes, they're judges, but sometimes, they're just government bureaucrats who refuse to protect religious liberty. We have executive branches who won't enforce these also. So, both the recommendation is to have private right of actions, so ordinary citizens can sue to vindicate their religious liberty rights and then also having judges who won't skirt the issue. So better nominations.

And then the last thing I want to mention were the benefits of religious liberty. And it strikes me that the first benefit of religious liberty is religion itself. It's our ability to respond according to our own conscience and convictions, to what we believe we owe the Creator. That's the primary, the first benefit of religious liberty. It has other subsidiary benefits. Helen Alvaré was great in talking about all the various social services that a religious community provide, all the various ways for marriage and family formation and things like this, that religious liberty allows for the better ministering to people. It also allows for a peaceful pluralism. In a certain sense, I think it would be better if we didn't disagree about the truth about

God. But so long as we are disagreeing about the truth about God, I would prefer that we don't kill each other over it. Religious liberty, I mean people fled the wars of religion in Europe to come here so we could peacefully disagree. Religious liberty is about that peaceful pluralism while we disagree about God.

And then the last—strikes me—benefit is that it's the sources of moral reform. The first panel we heard this morning, the Civil Rights Movement, the Women's Rights Movement. So many of our sources of moral reform have come from religious traditions. The reason this commission was established is because it's a 250th anniversary of the declaration. The declaration itself is a philosophical theological statement that we're created equal endowed by a creator with certain inalienable rights. Religious liberty and religion is the source of these moral, philosophical, theological truths. And look, sometimes political leaders don't want to hear it, and I think it's good to have reform movements, whether it was Martin Luther King Jr. during the Civil Rights Movement, whether it was a variety of female leaders that Erika Bachiochi cited earlier today, it's helpful to have the space for religious leaders to bear witness to spiritual and eternal and transcendent truth claims, even when political leaders might want to cut corners. And with that, thank you Chairman Patrick.

Chairman Lieutenant Governor Dan Patrick (03:46:17):

Thank you, Ryan. You can feel free to applaud. So, Paula and then Dr. Phil and Dr. Ben. Paula?

Pastor Paula White-Cain (03:46:28):

Thank you, Mr. Chairman. I'm so grateful to be here and to be a member of this very important commission and the work we're doing and to be with all my colleagues—and just friends and people who are really in this battle. So much has been said. I want to say a huge thank you also to our President, President Trump, who formed this commission with you. Just over a year ago, President Trump took the historic action by establishing the White House Faith Office, which I'm honored to lead. The Faith Office is the very first White House office focused exclusively on faith located in the West Wing, not as a symbol, but because it was a place of importance. As it's been stated so often here and almost in everyone's closing remarks, if we don't have the foundation of religious liberty and the freedom of it, we lose all other freedoms.

It is the bedrock and he understands that very, very clearly. So, he elevated it to the highest place and put it all throughout government with either a faith director or an entire faith center in every department and agency, not only in the Executive Office of the President, and, as we are, a top priority in our White House Faith Office is religious liberty, protecting religious liberty for people of all faith. A few months after establishing our office, President Trump once again made history by establishing this commission, the first body of its kind focused exclusively on religious liberty and answering directly to the president. This could only happen with the President who understands the importance of the faith community and of religious freedom. And that is why we are all here today. I look out and I'm so excited to see so many students and young people who are engaged.

And not only have our witnesses been so profoundly impactful, and sometimes, we've been very teared up, at least I have myself or found myself just feeling all those emotions of the really persecution and rejection that many of them went through. I remember as a parent was testifying on her two children were crying there because not only had they been rejected for their stand on faith by a school and a play that they were in a talent show, but then it went on to their community and their own church. I mean, this, this broad impact of what people have gone through is just overwhelming. But President Trump really has that commitment and recognizes that religious liberty is a bedrock of American life. And that's why he gave the Faith Office in this commission the crucial task of helping him to ensure that all Americans of all faiths, from Christians to Jews, to Muslims, to Sikhs, to Hindus, are able to approach God freely, to worship him fully and to live out their faith without governmental interference.

And Kelly, I love what you recommended there in favor of citizens and Ryan reiterated and so many have is that if a person, and I've heard that up to 85% of the prosecutions are against come from government.

And so that—I don't know if that's stat is correct, but it seems to be the one that I've heard in recent years. We do know it's very high, and the government should never be able to weaponize against people for practicing their faith legally in this great country of freedom. And so that recommendation, I just third, fourth, triple, quadruple, I mean, I think it would stop some of that weaponization and certainly people that don't have the resources don't even know what attorney to turn to would have a fair shot at a true defense. So, President Trump understands that we have this right without government interference. And over the past year, the Faith Office has been hard at work to work alongside our president and partners of the administration to do just that.

The federal government was taking away the rights of Americans of faith with outrageous policies that discriminated against its own people. I want you to think about this, all the witness and testimony we've heard, whether it was literally putting people in jail for praying silently in front of an abortion clinic or kicking them out of the military or surveilling pastors and churches and having the IRS go after them or as we saw a child in a talent show or we could just continue to go... nurses that were tricked into performing abortions. It's outrageous. It's hard to even think how prevalent it is in this great country. In previous administrations, people of faith were not welcome. As we said, people being put in jail, people being discriminated against. But President Trump has made history for the faith community by boldly not only bringing faith back in the public square and working to all ends to end every form of any kind of religious discrimination. Along with this commission, many know we have two DOJ task forces against religious persecution of Christian bias and all other forms of religion and against antisemitism. He's pardoned pro-life activists, prosecuted those who attack churches, issued prayer guidance for school children, expanded school choice, and forced the Hyde Amendment directed federal agencies to protect religious expression in the workplace, placed faith directors or faith liaisons in every federal department and agency. And through these and other efforts, he's done what seemed nearly impossible just 13 months ago made religious freedom great again.

But our work is far from being done. Religious liberty matters not only for America, but for all nations. If we fail to stay strong in the religious liberty in the United States, I have come to recognize more than ever in this position at the White House Faith Office that there is no hope for the world. If we collapsed with religious liberty, the world is in great danger. 344 million people will be persecuted worldwide or killed this year for their faith. And I promise you, on a daily basis, I see it that America is the beacon of hope. We must uphold religious liberty for our own citizens but also never forget that we truly are the light to the world. People are suffering at high levels of persecution and discrimination for their faith around the world. They're being killed on a daily basis. And President Trump has fought for international religious liberty by issuing targeted strikes against terrorists, attacking people of faith in Nigeria, standing firmly with believers under threat in the Middle East, and using faith diplomacy to secure eight peace agreements and ending religious conflict throughout the world. The President and the Faith Office have also placed a spotlight on religious persecution by inviting victims from many parts of the world and the countries all over the world. Recently, we had people from Sudan and Turkey, China, Cuba, Finland in telling their testimony and their stories. And as long as oppressive regimes continue to silence and punish their citizens for their faith, we will continue to champion religious freedom as a foundation of freedom and peace. On behalf of President Trump, I want to thank the members of this commission for their dedication to the vital work, the sacrifices you all have made, the expertise that you have all brought to bear, and the devotion that you've given to the sacred cause have made this commission an extraordinary success.

I also want to thank the witnesses who courageously shared their stories from students banned from talent shows to counselors forbidden to speak freely. You have shown us that religious discrimination is far too common in America and that we must act swiftly to eradicate such bias from our nation. This administration's dedication to protecting religious freedom will not end. President Trump and this Faith Office will continue to protect this fundamental liberty and absolute devotion, working to implement the recommendations of this commission and ensure that freedom flourishes.

There are a few things, so much has been recommended, but as our great speakers concluded today, I was thinking and thought of some recommendations for grants under the Biden administration and previous administration. Our numbers would bear out that approximately \$7 trillion of government money went to grants. We'll know at the end of the studies they do how much we DOGE bad ones, whether it's making an impact.

President Trump recognized that this was an important position and put a grants director in our office, but we have a lot to do. And some recommendations could be that there is a lack of grant readiness. We need funding for that. We need to educate, as Kelly has brought up, the NOFOs—the notice of funding opportunity—needs to be more faith welcoming. It's not inclusive of people of faith. Not only do we know the competition's very tough because the way the grants are written and the things that are put on, but it's hard for small ministries and synagogues and parishes to compete against universities and hospitals. And I think one of the things that could help with that is to put an overhead cap of 15%. That's the indirect cost. So, we have heard that in some of the grants that awarded to these big companies and big, I call 'em companies—not-for-profits—have 50% going to staff, *et cetera*.

There could be perhaps a cap. We also need reviewers to be more faith friendly, and we need peer reviewers. We need people involved, and we need to give some guidelines. And we need to keep in mind that 95% of agency staff are career and not political appointees. So perhaps there could be better guidelines and cooperation that we would lay down for that one person perhaps in an agency making a very big decision. It's difficult, and I'm very passionate about this because I've been in ministry for 42 years. And the best things I've ever seen is the ground roots people that just care about people. They don't ask you, are you a Christian? And now I'll feed you. It's: “Are you hungry? Do you need help? They're the greatest community champions they are. And we need to make sure if we aren't direct”ly helping them help others, that we at least take all the restrictions off of them that's preventing them from helping others.

Chairman Lieutenant Governor Dan Patrick (03:59:14):

Thank you. And they also don't ask her, you are a Republican, independent, or a Democrat.

Pastor Paula White-Cain (03:59:20):

It's true. Absolutely.

Chairman Lieutenant Governor Dan Patrick (03:59:21):

Just need help, Dr. Phil.

Dr. Phil McGraw (03:59:29):

Well, thank you. Thank you Mr. Chairman. What a journey this has been. I'll never forget the day you called to ask me if I was an—accept an appointment to this committee. I was with my two sons and I had my phone on speaker and I hung up and they went, nah—butt dial—had to be a mistake. You better call him back and make sure it was actually him and not some radio station punking you, but it was you. And it has been an amazing journey, and I thank you for your leadership on this committee as well as you, Dr. Carson. I thank you. And let's not forget Mary Margaret Bush, our director from the Associate Attorney General's office.

I think she worked right up to the first minute of labor and was back within minutes thereafter. So, thanks to her and most of all thanks to President Trump because he has made a serious commitment to this. He's been here to commission meeting and spent time with us. And he's not alone in this leadership in this country. Many have gone before him. You think back, Thomas Jefferson in 1776, “that we hold these truths to be self-evident, that all men are created equal and that they are endowed by their creator with these inalienable rights.” George Washington in 1783 said, “the establishment of civil and religious liberty was the motive that induced him forward.” James Madison in 1789 said, “the civil rights of nun

shall be abridged on account of religious belief or worship." John Adams in 1812 said, "nothing is to be more dreaded than the national government meddling with religion."

And Ronald Reagan: "Freedom prospers when religion is vibrant and the rule of law under God is acknowledged." President Clinton: "Let us instead respect one another's face and fight to the death to preserve the right of every American to practice whatever convictions he or she has." President George W. Bush: "Religious freedom is a cornerstone of our republic," and God bless each and every one of these leaders and others along the way. But President Trump, in my view, tops that list because he has shown an ongoing commitment establishing this office of faith and this ongoing commitment with this committee here. It's been action. So, he's built on those that have gone before him. And on May 1st of 2025, he created this presidential commission, a commission established by a president that's committed to amplifying and elevating the God-given right of religious liberty in the life of every citizen, in every walk of life. This isn't just choosing where you worship but in every walk of life.

And to do so in a way that our national government never encroaches on those inalienable rights and further to do so for generations to come. And think about it: there will be millions of people he will never meet—will never have the opportunity to thank him for creating this opportunity for them to have this religious liberty. And he charged this commission with a responsibility to investigate the state of and then make recommendations to solidify the foundations of religious liberty in America so we can be a beacon for the rest of the world. And these liberties, they do seem to be under attack in more ways from more different angles than perhaps any other time in our 250-year history. A definite downside to the internet for sure—used to be somebody could have some nutty ideology in some farm community or something, it went to like eight or 10 mouth breathers hanging around.

Now, it spreads like wildfire on the internet and they can recruit people all over the place. So that's one of the downsides of the internet, that we were asked to identify the origins of those attacks and the modern day orchestrated threats and I say orchestrated threats—that we now collectively face—including government interference, because there has been and is the threat of government interference and to create a report on how to mitigate these in lasting ways. And it quickly became apparent that we are dealing with so much more than just the right to choose your place of worship but also the right to exercise the tenets of that faith in every aspect of life without restriction or harassment by government or community. Because religious liberty is profoundly enmeshed into every aspect of our existence and every day of our lives, not just on the day or days of formal traditional worship because it includes daily choices of conscience, public exercise in schools, military workplaces, healthcare, community gatherings.

If you think about it, it's gotten to where they have attempted, as I was speaking about earlier with the nuns in New York, they're trying to push into everything and try to regulate it as though it's not religious. Now our protocol has been to hear verified testimony from Americans with amazing courage and those that have sat in these chairs, oh my gosh, they have been amazing from Coach Kennedy, who was disciplined for taking a knee after a game to pray with players and it cost him his job. He was disciplined from Marisol la Roya Castro, who had—what—a six-inch crucifix on a bulletin board and was threatened with her job if she didn't take it down and put it in her bottom drawer. And when she was brought, allowed after pushing back to come back to work, sat in a room by herself—we have lost our minds—and she had to fight back legally.

And I'm not a lawyer—I don't mean to brag, but I'm not. But to have to go through that is crazy. Sophia Schumacher—they had a day where on senior day you can decorate your parking spaces in the parking lot. She was not allowed to decorate hers with any religious symbols because it might offend somebody parking next to her. Are you kidding me? We don't have enough to worry about that. We got to be concerned that Billy Bob in the parking space next door is going to be offended by her having a cross. Military servicemen, because they wanted to adhere to the religion—who all they wanted to do was fight for America—and we find a way to take away their pension, take away their commission, take them out of the service, and the attacks on this first right have escalated.

Until a few years ago, it seemed like most Americans supported religious freedom. I think they still do. I think we are being programmed, brainwashed with the tail wagging the dog, the tyranny of the fringe that has hijacked the legacy media to make this more than it is because the vast majority of the people are not standing up and saying, wait a minute, that is not offensive to me. I don't need your help in this. But it's being pushed. It's an agenda being pushed. It seems like those days are gone because we have ideological campaigns that are focused on redefining human sexuality. What constitutes a male and a female, what defines a marriage, procreation, the value of human beings, not just at the beginning but also at the end of life. And we have people now trying to impose this postmodern ideology on others, especially those who have deeply held religious beliefs.

And the religious community increasingly find themselves targeted by government restriction and coercion and cultural intimidation. In other words, just persecution. And this all adds up to the reality that the fight for religious liberty is much more layered than simply the right to worship at the church, temple, mosque, or synagogue of their choosing. And psychologically, this is a dangerous reality. And I have seen documents from the old Soviet Union talking about how to attack society here, and it talks about starting to nibble at the edges to sabotage the young people rather than aggressively being overt by trying to totally eliminate a given religion, just suppress the right to live it on a day-to-day basis. And it seems like that's where the focus has been. Stop them from being able to express their religion at work or in the service or in the world of medicine. But then again, we look at what's happening at synagogues in New York City and the outrageous antisemitism on campuses nationwide. I have heard things that I never thought I would hear in my lifetime. Antisemitism in America? I never thought I would hear this in my lifetime. And so, we as a commission, if you're a late comer to our process, we at the commission have sought to identify strategies to generate and support robust protections against encroachment on religious liberty, not just as a freedom, but again as the first freedom. And it's important to distinguish religious liberty as the first freedom. We must guard against listening to the loudest voice.

I often say to parents, you are not going to be the only voice in your child's ear, so you better be the best voice in your child's ear. And we sometimes listen to the loudest voice, the most shrill voice. Twitter isn't a real place, by the way. That's not a real place. You can't drive over to Twitterdom or Xdom. Now, less than 20% of people use these platforms, and 10% of all the posts come from less than 10% of the people. I mean this is a minuscule part trying to drive an agenda. And what better issue could there possibly be to unify Americans than a return to our first defining declaration of right, promoting public awareness of religious pluralism, treating each other with tolerance, dignity and respect, protecting rights for individuals and institutions to exercise their right without government interference. And that is profoundly important.

We do need to come together. What better way to do it than all coming together and unifying over religious freedom? You practice what you want to practice. I'll practice what I want to practice and I'll fight for your right to do so. That's not political, that's not political, that's human dignity, and it transcends all politics. And it protects—religious liberty is so important because it protects not what you do but who you are every other right governs your actions in the world. The right to religious liberty governs the inner life from which all actions flow, the freedom to form your own conscience, to live according to your deepest convictions, to worship or not worship as you see fit. This is the precondition for human dignity itself, and that's where psychology and religion intersect. They're not at odds. They intersect, and history delivers a consistent warning to totalitarian regimes—which Paula articulated so well—of what's happening around the world.

Thank you for talking about that. These totalitarian regimes invariably couple suppression of religious liberty with a broader repression of civil liberties. No regime has ever systematically crushed religious liberty and left everything else intact—otherwise, do what you want to do. Soviet Russia silenced the church and the press, Nazi Germany, the pulpit and the courts in the universities. Maoist China suppressed worship and free thought and free expression of every kind. This is not coincidence. Attacks on religious liberty don't happen in isolation. They're always part of a larger seizure of control over

human life where you see one, the other follows. When the state claims authority over your innermost convictions, it has already decided the individual exists to serve the state.

Religious persecution is not a destination. It is a road sign telling you where you're headed. And the founders put religious liberty number one out of a clear-eyed suspicion of power. They had lived under governments that reached inside the conscience and thought to redirect it. So, religious liberty is not protecting one group at another's expense, it's protecting the principle that no government ever well intentioned is wise enough or trustworthy enough to be put in charge of what a person believes or has access to. In America, we must recognize and systematically resist those who want to make choices for us. If somebody's pedaling hard, if you need to be backing up hard. Now, look, we're committed to providing information and data from everyday Americans, central to protecting that first right and making sure that government is never allowed to come between an individual and their belief in their higher power.

We need to be making choices that matter at a time that counts, and that's right now, look, this is chess, not checkers. Every walk of life is involved. There's a purpose for everyone you meet, some you encounter to trust you, some to teach you or use you, some to bring out the best in you. And maybe all of these ideological attacks right now are meant to wake us up. Maybe it's meant to wake us up. Maybe it's meant to put us on point. Maybe it's meant to say that we need to rise to meet the challenge because if responsible people don't talk about responsible things responsibly, irresponsible people will talk about them irresponsibly. We need to surround ourselves with people that share this passion and we need to take back the right to religious liberty and the heartland of America needs to stand up and say, "I am not a second class citizen because I believe in God, because I have a spiritual part of my life. I am proud of that. I claim it. It may be different than yours, but I celebrate you and you celebrate me." This can unify this country and I am so proud to be a small cog in those works and part of this commission, and I thank President Trump for his vision. I thank you for your leadership. Dr. Carson, thank you for your leadership. Thank you.

Chairman Lieutenant Governor Dan Patrick (04:17:57):

Thank you, Dr. Phil, Dr. Carson.

Vice-Chair Dr. Ben Carson (04:18:01):

Well, I'm not from one of those professions with a lot of loquacious people. I was a surgeon. Surgeons tend to be laconic, so I'm not going to put you through a lot here, but I will say that shortly after President Trump started second term, I was with him, and I said, "most people your age are sitting on the porch in a rocking chair: where do you get all this energy from?" And he didn't even have to think about it, he said: "it's from God." So, this is a subject area that is very important to him. I want to thank you, Mr.

Chairman. It's been wonderful working with you. Thank you for your courage and your leadership and thanks to all who are here—members of this outstanding commission, terrific people—and to the public, it's been a privilege serving the President and the American people. Alongside all of you, we have heard the inspiring and heart-wrenching stories of incredible witnesses from across this great nation, religious freedom has always been very important to me personally.

As a pediatric neurosurgeon, I could not and would not have done the things that I did without praying before, after, and during challenging procedures. One of the things our work has shown in this last year is how important religious liberty is to America's entire way of life. Faith is so woven into the fabric of our culture, our art, our habits and holidays, our political and economic institutions that it's easy to take it for granted—easy, that is—right up until the moment you realize how vulnerable religious liberty is. Ronald Reagan famously said, "freedom was never more than one generation from being lost." Religious freedom is our first freedom. It's our foundational freedom—with it goes all the others. In the last quarter of a century, it's come under attack. Religious students, teachers, parents, workers, businesses, and nonprofit organizations have been targeted by every branch and every level of government in this country to say

nothing of the anti-religious pressure groups working every day to strip God from the public square and God-fearing people from their constitutional rights.

In many of America's most influential boardrooms, newsrooms, state houses and faculty lounges, antisemitism and anti-Christian bigotry are considered chic, sophisticated progressive virtues. And so, as the President charged us, this commission's work cannot just shine a light on threats to religious freedom. We have to offer concrete proposals to overcome those threats. That's what our report is going to do. We don't want a sectarian government, but we need a government that understands American's duties to our God and Savior come first. America's Declaration of Independence, our Constitution, our Bill of Rights, are all premised on human dignity and inalienable rights endowed by our creator that no man can take away, unless, by fear, we let them. Logic and common sense are some of our best weapons to resist religious persecution. When we are willing to put the facts on the table and then discuss our differences first privately, but then out in the open, we are much more likely to reach a populous, ignited, and driven agreement.

For example, should religious institutions be required to hire people who do not believe in God? Should places like the Museum of the Bible be required on the basis of fairness to hire atheists or should the Holocaust Museum be required to hire a holocaust denier? There was a time in this country when these would be considered ridiculous questions, but we as a society have now reached a point where everything is questioned and common sense is a thing of the past. The work of this commission has shown how important it is to discuss and address these kinds of issues before they fester in pools of division. The report of this commission will help people to distinguish between violations of one's conscience, which would be in serious conflict with our constitutional rights, and willful disregard for the safety of others because of disagreements about their lifestyle. Many of these kinds of issues cannot be resolved by executive order, but open non-threatening discussions with the facts on the table will lead to a better place for all mankind. If Americans learned anything over the last 250 years, it is that religious liberty is worth fighting for, and if we want to keep it, we're going to have to engage in the perilous fight. We cannot be the land of the free if we're not the home of the brave.

Chairman Lieutenant Governor Dan Patrick (04:24:00):

Thank you, Dr. Carson. I'll be brief. It's been a long day for everyone. Thank you for your patience and sitting and being here in the audience. Going back to the beginning, very quickly, I knew some of the people here. I've known Kelly a long time. I've gotten to know Dr. Carson over the last several years, and I can tell you he's a pool shark. I've never won a game from him—must have been that delicate working on brain surgery—here, you know the angles. I'd just gotten to meet Dr. Phil when he moved his productions to Texas and we're glad to have you in Texas, who left Los Angeles because they thought he mentioned God too many times in a show and he reminded them he can take it elsewhere. To Paula, who I've gotten to know during this process, and thank you, Ryan and Alison, who I know a little bit, and Eric, I've known you for a couple of years. But I want you to know that all of us came together not really knowing where we were heading. We didn't have a plan on day one except we were going to have witnesses and ask them questions and talk about religious freedom in America. And the very first hearing that we had on this stage on middle of June last year, we really all got together about 10 minutes before the hearing and it became a symphony of thought.

Everyone worked together. They're all professionals, they're all speakers and warriors for what is right and believers of different faith, different denominations. This has been really a miracle. And when the President called that day—again, an error that started all this—within five minutes he said, I want Paula White, I want Reverend Graham, I want Cardinal Dolan. And I said, I want Dr. Carson. I want Dr. Phil. I want Kelly Shackelford. And then we got to meet Rabbi Soloveichik. And so, we don't have planning meetings before we come out here. We just come out here and say what we think, and we listen. We're all good listeners to our witnesses.

The one witness and so many have touched our hearts was little Shay. And if you haven't watched as you're watching today, if you haven't watched and go back and look at some of the various witnesses when we have a little boy who was forced to read a book about being transgender to another student in his school, and he went home and said to his mom, "I don't want to disappoint my teacher. I don't want to get a failing grade, but I don't believe this is what you would want me to do. And this is not how you brought me up." And when he was sitting here, he was in the last chair and his mother was next to him. And I happened to be on that day sitting on the other side. He just had such soulful eyes. His heart hurt every witness he heard, Dr. Phil, you could see he was reliving what he went through. And that school district drummed them out of school, drummed them out of the community, and he was courageous enough to fight. And while his mother read some of her testimony after he had talked, this little boy put his arm around his mother. Remember that, Paula?

That was a moment that I'm saying this is what we're doing to people in this country is wrong. And I agree with you, Dr. Phil, America's with us and out of this committee, I can only speak for myself: I'm going to push back hard. I don't have any malice towards anyone that doesn't believe in any type of faith. That's fine. That's what America is about. But these organizations, these organizations that are pushed by some ideology and pushed by someone's bank account who wants to remove God from our country? We need to push back. Every time we hear separation of church and state, we need to say there is no separation of church and state. That's a lie. And every time I think we have some interviews after this, I'm going to make it very clear because we know that's what the Constitution says.

I want to thank also Brittany Baldwin and Vince Haley. They were assigned to me by the White House last March and the two of us—and then we brought Kelly into the fold early—and this all became a reality. I think in terms of my recommendations, I do want to make a recommendation that we do post a person's rights on religious liberty in all of our school teacher lounges and our businesses. I'd love to see some type of hotline, and I know you need more staff, Paula, because you're getting calls all the time. But a place where someone is told you can't do this because you violated the Constitution, that they can pick up the phone and maybe the first thing the voice says, a recorded voice—I'm sure it'll be AI—there is no separation of church and state. Go back and tell them. And then we need to push back and let individuals be able to sue.

There's so many other things we can do, but this has been a wake-up call. Can this happen on America? Like you said, Dr. Phil, and you come down to the conclusion that these people who throw this always, they throw it out there. Separation of church and state. I know they'd never have me on The View because they're such hateful people on that show, but I'd like for them to defend it. I'd like for 'em to defend the hatefulness that goes on every day against people of faith. And remember when someone throws that down, it's either their pure stupidity, and these are people in power in elective office. Again, superintendents, high-ranking officials, the CEO of a company... it's either stupidity, total ignorance, or they know the truth and they're using a lie to deny someone their religious liberty.

This Easter—and the Rabbi and the Bishop Barron had to leave for a flight—this Easter, sometimes God gives us reminders! And God has given us this commission, I believe, to stand up and fight. You know, through, I say fight through—our—by pushing back every time there's a lie set against people of faith. But on the Friday before Easter, they thought they had killed him. He was in a tomb, like a crevasse. And on Sunday he emerged. I'm not talking about Jesus. I'm talking about a colonel who flew a plane. They thought they killed him on Friday. He hid in a tomb on Saturday. He left the tomb on Sunday, and the people rejoiced. That was not an accident. That was a reminder from God of who we are. And he's looking for brave colonels and brave citizens to stand up for his Word in this country. God bless you all. We'll continue our work. Thank you all, and we'll see you all soon. Thank you. This commission hearing is over.