

BYU Religious Freedom Annual Review

Religion and Religious Freedom in the COVID-19 Era: Finding Community and Hope

June 17, 2020 Welcome, Brett Scharffs

Good morning, good afternoon, good evening – depending upon where in the world you are. And special greetings to those who join us in the middle of the night on account of insomnia (or your love of the subject).

Welcome to the 7th Religious Freedom Annual Review, “Religion and Religious Freedom in the COVID-19 Era: Finding Community and Hope.” We’re grateful for this **community** that has gathered, albeit virtually, and **hope** you will find your time well spent.

My name is Brett Scharffs, Director of the International Center for Law and Religion Studies at Brigham Young University Law School. Together with my colleagues at the Center and the Law School, we are so happy to welcome you to this special online edition of what has become one of our favorite annual traditions.

In ordinary times, we would be talking to some of you in person. But these are anything but ordinary times, and

we are able to be with a much larger number of people, including in many places around the world, but without the intimacy, informality, and opportunities for lunchtime and hallway conversations that have been a highlight of previous gatherings.

Our schedule will be abbreviated, because we don't want to ask you to stay online for hours on end, but we believe it is of extraordinary quality. For one hour today, one hour tomorrow, and one hour on Friday, we are pleased to present what we believe will be both interesting and important programming.

We gather at a moment of historical importance, a time when we are experiencing simultaneously at least three major intersecting crises, indeed crises of a magnitude that any one of them might be called a "once-in-a-generation" event.

During March and April, it seems all we could talk about was the health crisis, as we became experts on Covid-19 and “flattening the curve.”

During May, attention shifted to the economic impact, which has been massive, and the appropriate way to begin reopening the economy.

And since Memorial Day, our attention has been focused primarily on police misconduct and racial injustice.

First, the health crisis that is COVID-19 – a Global pandemic that to date has infected at least 7 million people around the world (and probably many more), and killed at least 500,000 people (and probably many more).

In the US alone, the country with the largest number of reported cases and deaths, there have been more than 2 million cases, and already well over 100,000 deaths.

Behind each of these numbers is a person and a family that is grieving their loss. We have not seen a global health pandemic of this magnitude since the flu pandemic of 1918.

Second, the economic crisis, most graphically illustrated by the highest levels of unemployment since the Great Depression of the 1930's. We have experienced stay-at-home orders and lockdowns that have brought entire economies to their knees. Globally, job losses are estimated at approximately 200 million full-time jobs. In March and April, unemployment in the US went from 3.5% to nearly 15%, with more than 20 million people filing for unemployment benefits.

The latest report showed unemployment dropping to 13.3 percent in May (which was good news, especially considering expert consensus was that it would increase to as high as 20%), raising hope that the economic recovery might be more speedy than many feared. But the economic impact of Covid will be devastating for many families and many small businesses, an unknown number of which will close for good. The economic impact in some other countries, especially for those who are homeless or displaced, or who live in poverty, will likely be dire.

Finally, with the killing of George Floyd by police officers during an arrest in Minneapolis on May 25th, we have seen an unprecedented wave of racial unrest -- peaceful protests, as well as violent riots and looting, perhaps unlike anything we have since since 1967 and 1968.

A moment of national unity (outrage at the 8'46" that an officer kneeled on the neck of George Floyd, taking his life, while he pleaded, "I can't breathe"), quickly descended into partisan difference about the significance and meaning of what we had all witnessed.

And so we gather at a remarkable and unusual time, a time of great stress and uncertainty, and our hope is that we can do the moment justice.

As we begin, I'd like to tell you a bit about our Center. The International Center for Law and Religion studies is an academic center, housed in a law school, dedicated to the promotion of freedom of religion and belief for all people in all places. Our work lies at the intersection of law (where practical solutions to difficult problems are forged) and religion (with deep implications for conviction and identity, for individuals and communities, both for those who are religious and for those who are not).

We strive to accomplish this mission by engaging in world-class academic research, writing, and sponsoring gatherings, such as this, where informed, respectful and robust dialogue can take place on important issues involving the relationships between faith communities and the state.

Last year, we helped organize major regional or global conferences in ten countries, as well as here in Utah and in Washington, DC. In addition, last year we participated in conferences in seven states, as well as more than thirty additional events in more than twenty countries.

I mention this, because we have participants in this series of Webinars from many of these places, as well as many others. Unlike most of our other events, the Religious Freedom Annual Review focuses primarily on issues here in the United States, but we welcome our global audience, including many friends and colleagues from around the world.

Again, welcome and thank you for joining us. We know that these days you are inundated with online media. Our hope is that this brief series of three sessions over the next three days will be valuable and constructive.

Now, let me turn it over to Professor Elizabeth Clark, our Associate Director who has been the primary organizer of this event.