

Transcript

Sacred and secular

Brian Grim

Brian Grim:

I'm Brian Grim, and I'm the president of the Religious Freedom and Business Foundation that works globally. Personally I'm a social scientist and I measure issues related to religion including measures for religious freedom around the world. And then I can analyse that and see what the trends are and also where problems are and where solutions might be.

In addition, my foundation works to not only study religious freedom, but help to promote it through incentivising, giving awards for success. Also to bring together businesses and religious groups and forums so that they can discuss and make progress in religious freedom.

Interviewer:

Is there a positive role for all that business can play in the protection of religious freedom?

Brian Grim:

Perhaps one of the biggest missing players in the struggle for religious freedom is business. And that's somewhat ironic because the data clearly show that religious freedom is good for business. And vice versa, business can be good for religious freedom.

So part of the goal of the foundation is to help businesses understand this message and then involve them. Some examples of how religious freedom can cause barriers to business are that there are laws that sometimes penalise certain kinds of economic activity.

Or even religious laws like blasphemy laws that one competitor can use against another. And if you have to fight these laws, sometimes they bring the penalty of death. So that can dampen business.

But where there's religious freedom, you tend to have more open societies. Innovation is stronger, and the data show this as well.

For instance, religious groups often are the factories for new ideas. And in fact, some of the products that many people take for granted these days, like cornflakes for breakfast, came out of a religious motivation to help people live healthier lives that reflect God within them.

This is a Seventh-day Adventist teaching. And the makers of cornflakes, Kellogg's Cornflakes, were motivated to try and get rid of fat and grease from breakfast and provide it with something more nutritious.

So businesses themselves are motivated by religion. When there's religious freedom, these religious motivations then can help stimulate business.

But if I can flip back to how religious freedom can hinder business, there's many countries where women are restricted in their free expression. So some countries require women to wear headscarves. Others require them to take them off.

So in Turkey, a Muslim majority country, for many years women were required to not wear headscarves to show that they were a secular Muslim country. But women who wanted to wear them then were barred from university. Barred from jobs.

And that policy was recently changed. But as I was talking to some Turkish trade representatives on this issue of religious freedom in business, they said, well we don't quite get it.

And then we talked more about the headscarf issue and he said, I've got it. Religious freedom is one of the biggest problems for economic progress in Turkey because about half of Turkish women today, by his estimates, wear headscarves.

But only 6% of them can get a job because nobody wants to hire a woman with a headscarf because of religious discrimination within this Muslim majority country. So these restrictions in religious freedom can have very direct and economic consequences that hurt the lives, the economies of countries. It can hurt women's possibilities.

So that's what the work that I'm doing at the foundation is studying. Looking at these examples of how religious freedom can promote business.

And if I can give one more example, it's just a very heartwarming example of a big corporation that did something to try to bring understanding between two countries where there's a lot of mistrust and even coming to the brink of nuclear war sometimes.

This is India and Pakistan. India, predominantly Hindu country. Pakistan, predominantly Muslim country. Both suspicious of each other. In this project of Coca-Cola, they said well these are hurting our markets. And we need to bring people together.

So they put these what they call Small World Machines in a mall in Pakistan and in a shopping mall in India. And they had very innovative video hookup so that when you walked up you didn't see your reflection in the machine, you saw someone in the other country walking up to their machine.

And then as they came up they noticed, who are they? And then it said, say hi to somebody from Pakistan when you're in India and vice versa.

And then they didn't just wave, they could come up and touch hands on the machine. And they could dance and sing, and draw peace signs and messages to each other.

So it's a big company but they recognise that this will religious tensions can create barriers for business. So that was one company's attempt to help lower restrictions on religion.