

Speech: Foreign Secretary speech on Christian persecution around the world

Thank you Henrietta for those very moving words. I recently moved house and I was moving some of my books and one of the oldest books I've got – which I've had since about the age of 10 – is called God's Smuggler by Brother Andrew and I only realised literally as I was walking over today the connection between Brother Andrew and Open Doors and it's a great privilege to be here and an extra thrill for me in that context. But that book is the extraordinary story of daring do of Brother Andrew, a Dutchman who smuggled Bibles behind the Iron Curtain and the incredible courage and extraordinary adventures he had in doing that.

Since then of course we had in 1989 the fall of the Berlin Wall and that ushered in a great era of freedom for the world. In fact in the period directly after the fall of the Berlin Wall, 45 more countries became democracies across the world which is about a quarter of all the countries in the UN so it was an immensely positive period. But I think we also became a little bit complacent that this was the inevitable direction of human history and unfortunately in the last three years according to Freedom House, which is an American think tank, 71 countries have seen a net decline in their freedom and that is why I think this is a particularly important issue and I want to thank everyone at Open Doors for the work they've been doing in shining a spotlight on this issue. I think it is an extraordinary figure that nearly a quarter of a billion people are suffering persecution today because of their Christian faith. It's also extraordinary to think that 80 percent of people who are suffering persecution because of their faith are Christian. And when you look at the countries on that watch list, countries like Afghanistan, Somalia, Sudan, Libya, North Korea you realise that life is very very tough indeed for some of the people that you're going to hear from later this evening.

I want to think about what Britain's role could be. We are not a superpower but we are a global power and just as we shouldn't overestimate our strength we shouldn't underestimate it either and one thing we have despite all the travails of Brexit that we brilliantly timed this event to coincide with is we do have the most fantastic links around the world through our links with the Commonwealth our alliance with the United States, our links with our European friends and neighbours. And I want us to use those links to be an invisible chain that binds together countries that share our values. And I'm very pleased that we have Lord Ahmed here who is my Foreign Office Minister responsible for Freedom of Worship and who has been banging the drum for this for much much longer than I have and does an absolutely fantastic job and is himself someone who has a faith that is a branch of Islam that had to leave Pakistan because they were being persecuted in Pakistan. So this is someone who himself understands from his own family what religious persecution is about. We've also got Mark Fields who is the Foreign Office Minister for Asia. And Henrietta mentioned issues in both India and China where we need to

draw attention to the issues.

So I want us to think about what we can do to use those connections that we have as a country and I've asked Bishop Philip Mounstephen, the Bishop of Truro, to do an independent report looking at what the FCO does. And what I want to do is to remove any nervousness or sense of political correctness that might have said that Britain shouldn't be championing the rights of Christians around the world for whatever reasons, reasons of history and empire and all that sort of thing which may have been an issue that we have been a bit shy about in the past and we mustn't be. And I think it's also very important to remember that although we are a western country and a very wealthy country and a Christian country, the vast majority of people we're talking about are Christians in much much poorer countries and they are entitled to our thoughts and prayers and action just as any persecuted minority are anywhere in the world and I think that must be part of our mission.

So, let me just finish by making two requests; firstly for those of you that are Christians the next time you go to church, please hold in your thoughts and prayers those people in other parts of the world for whom that very simple act is an act of great courage. For me when I go to church the biggest stress is trying to get my kids to come along with me. But for other people who have much much more serious issues and we must remember that indeed Christianity has its heart in the story of persecution and so we should always be alive to those people suffering it today and secondly, please don't just hold it in your prayers but also remember there are things that we can do about this and this is not something that is just about making speeches. This is something where I want Foreign Office Ministers when we're interacting with countries where there are these issues for it always to be high on our list to raise with our Foreign Minister counterparts whether in private or in public. And I also want those people suffering this terrible persecution to think that there are people who understand what they're going through and are sincerely trying to do everything they can about it. So let me leave you with the words of a great American thinker Margaret Mead who said "never doubt that a small group of thoughtful committed people can change the world indeed it's the only thing that ever has."

Thank you very much.