

BARONESS BACKS RELIGIOUS RIGHTS WORLDWIDE

Belief freedom 'is necessary'

GLOBAL technology is making the promotion of religious freedom a pragmatic necessity, said Baroness Berridge during a debate in Central London.

Taking part in the latest of the Westminster Faith Debates, the peer referred to the way in which 'Moocs' (massive online open courses) were giving people access to ideas from other parts of the world.

Technology is 'pushing the boundaries' of education, she said. 'EdX, [the not-for-profit venture] which provides these Moocs, reaches one million students in 192 countries. So if you're a government leader you have to realise that – unless you're going to be like North Korea – your community will hear ideas that you have very little control of.'

'What has not quite happened yet but is beginning to happen in education is that religious groups will understand how to use global technology – apps, smartphones, internet, YouTube – to communicate religious messages. Once they do, you will see a fluidity of people's views that is going to necessitate people understanding that they have the right to believe or not believe.'

Lady Berridge, who chairs the Parliamentary Group on International Freedom, cited instances of groups of individuals being imprisoned and persecuted because of their faith or not to have a faith.

Elizabeth Shakman Hurd, Professor of Political Science at Northwestern University, Chicago, argued that, although attempt to promote religious freedom is 'good', it is possible that its effect is to exacerbate the very problems that it claims to solve.

She said it 'singles out for legal scrutiny individuals and groups on the basis of religious and sectarian affiliation. People are described in religious and sectarian terms rather than on the basis of other affiliations. Religion is taken to be above these other identities and ties and above them. The effect is to over-emphasise religion as a basis of identity and as a claim to rights.'

The professor said that, as a result, tensions between groups became 'more available to be mobilised by religious power for political reasons'.

In their contribution to the debate, Lord Burt, former Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Foreign Affairs, said he would not accept that religious freedom was being elevated above human rights, and Islamic academic Jørgen Elmer said that campaigns for religious freedom had to be conducted with 'careful consideration' that they did not harm the community or country.

Baroness Berridge says technology is allowing ideas to spread globally

PHILIP HALCROW

Families reunited

IN the four-week period leading up to 7 March, The Salvation Army's Family Tracing Service found 137 family members who had lost contact. The service closed 165 cases in that period, which represented an 83 per cent success rate.



PHILIP HALCROW

HONOUR FOR CZECH CHURCHMAN

Secret network priest wins prize

A CZECH priest who worked for religious and cultural freedom when his country was under Communist rule has been awarded the Templeton Prize, which 'honours a living person who has made exceptional contributions to affirming life's spiritual dimension'.

Monsignor Professor Tomáš Halík (above) was condemned as an enemy of the regime in Czechoslovakia in the 1970s. He built a secret network of theologians, philosophers and students dedicated to creating the intellectual and spiritual basis for a democratic state.

Since the country's transition to democracy, he has advocated religious tolerance and understanding among religious people and non-believers.

At the announcement of the prize in London, he said that the chief task of religious thinkers today was to help people live with paradoxes and reject dogmatism.

'In today's world we encounter a self-assured religious fundamentalism as well as a no less arrogant and naive militant atheism. I regard both these extremes, which greatly resemble each other, as a blind alley,' he said.

Becoming a Christian

There is no set formula to becoming a Christian, but many people have found saying this prayer to be a helpful first step to a relationship with God.

Lord Jesus Christ,

I am truly sorry for the things I have done wrong in my life. Please forgive me. I now turn from everything that I know is wrong.

Thank you that you died on the cross for me so that I could be forgiven and set free.

Thank you that you offer me forgiveness and the gift of your Holy Spirit.

Please come into my life by your Holy Spirit to be with me for ever.

Thank you, Lord Jesus.

Amen

PRAYERLINK

YOUR prayers are requested for J who has been having problems with employment and accommodation, for her mother, Sadie, who is feeling stressed; for David, who is going through a divorce; and for Lauren, who is

THE War Cry invites readers to send in requests for prayer, including the names of individuals and details of their circumstances. Send your requests to PRAYERLINK, The War Cry, 101 Newington Causeway, London SE1 6BN. Mark your envelope 'Confidential'