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Bishops told religious liberty is in growing 'global crisis'

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A man stands amid debris inside Holy Family Syrian Catholic Church in central Kirkuk, Iraq, north of Baghdad, in August. A car bomb and two unexploded bombs targeted three churches in northern Iraq in coordinated attacks that wounded more than 20 people. (CNS/Reuters/Ako Rasheed)

ATLANTA -- There is an increasing "global crisis" of "government restrictions on religion and social hostilities toward religion," an expert on religious liberty told the U.S. bishops Wednesday during their spring national meeting in Atlanta.

That crisis has "enormous consequences for the church, the United States, the success of democracy, the defeat of religion-based terrorism and the cause of international justice and peace," said Georgetown University's Thomas F. Farr, a former U.S. diplomat who has devoted the last 13 years to studying religious liberty.

Farr teaches at Georgetown's Edmund A. Walsh School of Foreign Service and is the director of the Religious Freedom Project at the university's Berkley Center for Religion, Peace and World Affairs.

In a three-hour afternoon session devoted almost entirely to issues of religious freedom at home and abroad, Farr led off the international segment.

Also speaking was Auxiliary Bishop Shlemon Warduni of the Chaldean Catholic Patriarchate of Babylon, who is also president of Caritas Iraq, the aid agency of the church in Iraq.

Warduni described movingly the desperate straits of Iraqi Christians since the 2003 U.S. invasion.

"Our situation in Iraq became a tragedy of immense proportions after 2003," he said. "All Christians were harmed, but especially we Chaldeans, the largest Christian community in Iraq."

"More than half our faithful have left Iraq since 2003" because of the terrorism and fanaticism directed at them, said Warduni, who himself has escaped several attempts on his life. "We have freedom of worship, but no freedom of religion, of conscience."

Even the worship of Iraq's Christians isn't entirely free. Warduni said "more than 20 churches have been attacked," including one at the Syrian Catholic cathedral in Baghdad in which more than 45 worshipers were

killed, including two priests.

He said when U.S. coalition forces took over the Chaldean major seminary in Baghdad as a "combat outpost" for 18 months, "our brother Muslims accused us of collaborating with the Americans because we were Christians," and extremists used that "to stir up more hatred against Christians and encourage more persecution."

"As leaders of the church in the United States, you bear a special responsibility toward the people and Christians of Iraq," he told the gathered U.S. bishops. "In 2003, your government led the war that brought some terrible consequences. ... Iraq was very rich, but now is very poor, because of the war and much discrimination. ... We want peace, justice, stability, freedom of religion. No more war, no more death, no more explosions, no more injustice. ... Push the cause of peace."

Farr said, "Both history and modern scholarship demonstrate that a robust system of religious liberty in both law and culture is indispensible to individual human dignity and to the social, economic and political flourishing of civil societies and of nations."

As evidence of the global crisis today, he cited two recent comprehensive Pew Research Center studies: the first in 2009 on the state of global hostility toward or restriction of religious freedom in 2006; the second in 2011 on the state of the question in mid-2009.

"The first report revealed a profoundly disturbing statistic: Seventy percent of the world's population lives in countries in which religious freedom is either highly or very highly restricted, either by governments or by private actors," Farr said.

"Most of these people live in 66 countries," he added. "Of those, most are either Muslim-majority nations, communist regimes such as China, North Korea, Cuba and Vietnam, or large non-Muslim states such as India, Burma and Russia."

"The second report demonstrated that the problem is getting worse," Farr said. "Between the first and second reports, restrictions on religious freedom increased in twice as many countries as those in which restrictions decreased."

"And because the problem countries tend to be populous," he added, "the increasing restrictions affected some 2.2 billion people, or about a third of the world's population, whereas the small numbers of improvements affected only about 1 percent of the world's population."

Christian and Muslim minorities are the ones who face religious harassment the most, he said -- Christians in 130 nations and Muslims in 117.

"Strikingly, Europe, compared with all other regions, has the largest proportion of nations in which social hostilities toward religion are rising," he said. "Here the problem is not a religious majority but an aggressive secularist majority that refuses to permit religiously informed moral arguments into public life."

"Religion in Europe is no longer seen as intrinsic to human dignity and social flourishing," he said. "It is generally understood as merely an opinion and, as a species, a dangerous opinion at that. ... To bring it into politics endangers democracy."

That secularist mentality seems to be growing in the United States -- and as it weakens the role of religion in U.S. public life, it undermines U.S. efforts to promote religious freedom and democracy around the world, he said.

He quoted from the Second Vatican Council's Declaration on Religious Freedom: "Government ought ... to take account of the religious life of the people, and show it favor."

"Most in the Muslim world, when they hear the phrase 'religious freedom' ... are far more familiar with the French model of privatization -- moving religion to the margins of public life," he said. "It is one of the greatest ironies of all that the United States, which has traditionally invited religion into public life, has utterly failed to overcome that perception in its foreign policy. Our policy is viewed by Muslims, with some justification, as offering the French model, rather than the American model."

He said one explanation for the "anemic" U.S. foreign policy on religious freedom and democracy is that "the State Department under any administration is a highly secular organization. But the deeper reason is that for many of our elites -- including some in this administration -- religious freedom is a threat to the modern project of sexual liberation. This is why many wish to define freedom of religion as a private right ... not as the right of citizens to employ religiously informed moral arguments in the political life of the nation, and to win."

[Jerry Filteau, *NCR*'s Washington correspondent, spent Wednesday and Thursday in Atlanta for the U.S. bishops' meeting.]

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