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Hearing on “China’s War on Religion: The Threat to Religious Freedom and Why it Matters to the United States”

Thursday, November 20 – 9:30 a.m.

James P. McGovern
Commissioner, Congressional-Executive Commission on China

As delivered

Good morning. I want to thank Chair Sullivan and Co-chair Smith for convening this important hearing. I want to thank Senator Merkley and Representative Strong for their leadership on these issues as well. We have different political philosophies but we are together in championing human rights and religious freedom.

Religious freedom has been at the core of the Commission’s work since its founding. It has been the subject of numerous hearings and well-documented reporting. I understand the 2025 Annual Report is close to finalization. I look forward to its publication so that all Members can benefit from its analysis and recommendations.

I commend the dedicated, non-partisan staff of the Commission for their hard work in getting this 300+ page report researched, written and

released. It is a lot of work. And it is good work. And it's important work.

Religious freedom is protected under Article 18 of the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights, which affirms that every person has the right to freedom of thought, conscience and religion.

In the United States, it is protected by the First Amendment to the Constitution: "Congress shall make no law respecting an establishment of religion, or prohibiting the free exercise thereof." We Americans are very proud of this protection of our rights.

As a practicing Catholic, I feel a deep personal connection to the right to worship and belief according to one's conscience. Defense of this fundamental right, in both national and international law, is essential to our work as public servants.

China's constitution also provides that the state cannot "compel citizens to believe in, or not to believe in, any religion" or "discriminate against citizens who believe in, or do not believe in, any religion." But as we will hear today, such protection is honored in the breach. They don't respect it, they don't follow it.

This is a reminder that even the strongest constitutional provisions on paper cannot protect citizens' rights if those in power choose to disregard them for political ends.

In 2022 I was honored to co-chair this Commission's hearing on how Chinese authorities were expanding digital tools to surveil and suppress online religious expression.

I'm pleased that today's witnesses will update us on the PRC's policies and tactics for coercive control of religion and their impact on individuals and communities. I welcome Ambassador Sam Brownback, who headed the State Department's International Religious Freedom office and remains a powerful leader in the field.

I look forward to the testimony of those who will speak to the experiences of Hui Muslims, Christians and Tibetans under the PRC's ongoing repression.

In July, several UN special rapporteurs and working groups issued a statement on the Chinese government's interference in the succession of the Dalai Lama and the enforced disappearance of the 11th Panchen

Lama Gedhun Choekyi Nyima. This is a U.S. priority, as Senator Marco Rubio and I put into law in the Tibetan Policy and Support Act.

We will also hear very personal testimony. Last month, Chinese authorities launched a multi-city crackdown on the unregistered house Zion Church and detained several individuals including Pastor Ezra Jin. Many of us condemned this violation.

His daughter, Grace Jin Drexel, joins us today to speak about her father and call for his release. Grace was recently a staff member of the CECC helping raise awareness about prisoners of conscience persecuted for their faith. Now her own father is one. We stand with Grace and her family and join in their call.

We must commit our voices, loudly and clearly, to defend the rights of those targeted for exercising their right to freedom of thought, conscience and belief.

But to be effective, our voice must carry moral credibility. I worry that we are not living up to what is expected of us.

The United States is at its best when we lead by example. When we do not, we do a disservice to those overseas we are trying to help.

Earlier this week -- you may have read this in the news -- congregants of a church in Charlotte, North Carolina, scattered into the woods when masked federal agents arrived and detained one of their members. The church has suspended services until members feel safe to gather again without the threat of Border Patrol raids.

In July, the Bishop of the Diocese of San Bernardino, California, told the 1.2 million people in his diocese to stay home from Mass on Sundays to avoid being questioned or detained by ICE.

I spoke with three Catholic bishops yesterday who reinforced the concern that they have about members of their church being afraid to go to church.

Imam Ayman Soliman, who fled persecution in Egypt and served as chaplain at the Cincinnati Children's Hospital, spent two and half months in ICE detention.

Our message to the Chinese government is that is wrong for them to round up members of the Zion Church, to force worshippers to go underground, and to put clergy in jail. Our voice would have much more credibility if our own government were not acting in a similar way.

The freedom of thought, conscience and religion is universal. This right exists regardless of one's beliefs, national or citizenship status. Let us be clear and consistent in this message that we are sending to the people of China.

Again, thank you, Mr. Chairman, for your leadership. I yield back my time.