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Chair

Mr. Michael Levitt

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● (1305)

[*English*]

The Chair (Mr. Michael Levitt (York Centre, Lib.)): I call this meeting to order.

I'd like to begin by welcoming Julia Bicknell, director of World Watch Monitor. She is from London and has come to testify before us.

I want to point out for the committee members that, as you see in the committee business schedule, we are going to take 10 minutes at the end to do some in camera work, so we'll adjust the schedule of questions accordingly.

That said, again, thank you for joining us. We'll have you begin with your 10-minute statement.

Ms. Julia Bicknell (Director, World Watch Monitor): Thank you very much indeed. Thank you particularly for having me here all the way from the old country.

As a former BBC journalist, I thought I would just structure what I say for the next 10 minutes around the five questions that are key to any journalist, and that is who, what, where, why, and when.

I'll introduce myself. As you heard, my name is Julia Bicknell. I was a journalist in the BBC World Service starting in 1980. In the World Service, which hopefully many of you might have heard at some point in your travels, I was involved in the main World Service newsroom in English. We were gathering news from all around the world. We were writing it. We were verifying the sources in order to produce those news bulletins. I also spent some time producing *Newshour*, the main news and current affairs program. In that program, we did news analysis.

In 1991, two weeks before the Kuwait war broke out, I was just about to arrive in Pakistan on a three-month travel scholarship. I was due to backpack across the whole of Pakistan, and I fell in love with the country. I asked the BBC if I could go back to be based there. I arrived again 1992. During my year there, I basically covered the floods, the riots, the plane crashes, the government changes, and so on.

I also covered the situation of minority faiths in Pakistan. That included the Ahmadiyya, whom I met very early in my trip, the Ismailis, and the Christians.

There was an issue that was particularly affecting minority faiths at that time. It was about the Pakistan government's intention to introduce compulsory registration ID cards that stated your religion. I covered that for the BBC World Service.

As part of that reporting, I went to visit a minority Christian community just outside Islamabad, the capital, where I was living. These people were living—I'm not kidding—amongst gravestones. They were living in a cemetery. That was their community.

My friend Iqra will know the term *katchi abadi*. It means “slum” in Urdu. Their *katchi abadi* was in a cemetery. Their view of the western world came in through their satellite television. However poor they are, they have a satellite TV. What were they watching in 1992? They were watching *Dallas* and *Dynasty*. That was their view of the world coming into their slum. That really affected me.

Fast forward to the summer of 1994. This was a year when I spent the whole summer in the World Service reading the BBC World Service news: “17:00 Greenwich Mean Time—the news, read by Julia Bicknell”.

That summer was the summer of Rwanda. As you can imagine, I was reading over and over again about the atrocities being carried out in that country. As you know, your own Roméo Dallaire during that summer was pleading to the United Nations to intervene in that situation.

After those experiences, I moved to a part of the BBC called the World Service Trust. That's what I call the international development arm of the BBC. It's what I call bringing international development through developing the media in developing countries. We often went out from the BBC. We were invited by the country governments to transform their media to make them more able to hold their own governments to account and to ask their politicians difficult questions about issues such as corruption in governments.

As part of that, I went to live in Vietnam. When I was living in Vietnam, I trained local journalists on the national radio and TV station to produce—it was not TV, it was the radio station. They were producing, for the first time ever, national radio phone-ins. They didn't know what a phone-in was. When I arrived, thinking I was going to teach them how to produce a phone-in, I realized they had no concept of people phoning in the way you do here in Canada. A friend of mine produces *Cross Country Checkup*. You have a way of having an open national debate across the entire country. In terms of a country like Vietnam, there is no way they were doing that back in 1998.

I really understood what was happening in Vietnam to minority faiths, particularly among the ethnic Hmong. They were being discriminated against if they didn't hold to the beliefs of the Communist Party, the Communist government at the time.

● (1310)

I then moved to Africa and I commuted to Sudan, both north and south. I spent time at the edge of Darfur at the height of the Darfur crisis, and I arrived in Juba three weeks after the peace agreement was signed.

All of this background means that along with visiting places like Kenya and Somalia, I managed to work. I was managing programs funded by UNICEF and UNDP.

John Kerry said last week in the United States, “It’s up to us to recognize that we can’t lead a world that we don’t understand and that we can’t understand the world if we fail to comprehend and honor the central role that religion plays in the lives of billions of people.”

I felt that the story I had seen happening to people of minority faiths around the world was under-reported. There were major violent events that happened in India and Pakistan that, because I was working in Africa, I never even heard about. As I was sitting in the heart of the BBC, I thought that if I'm not aware of them, that means 99% of the world is not aware of them either, because I'm an international news junkie.

That brings me to the what and the when.

In the summer of 2012, I left the BBC and started what I called a niche online news agency that reports what's happening to Christians under pressure for their faith around the world. You might immediately ask why I focus on Christians. Well, our website states that we uphold everybody's right to freedom of thought, conscience, and religion, but we exist to tell with accuracy and authority the part that involves the global church under pressure for its faith, whether that's Catholic, Protestant, or Orthodox.

Now to the question of where.

I should add that while our focus is the developing world, not the western world, I have far more stories than I can possibly cope with coming from Asia and Africa. I'm not at the moment reporting on what's happening in Canada or the United States or, indeed, western Europe. We aim to surface the stories that no one else in the mass media knows and hears about. We aim to be the most trusted, reliable, and authoritative source of information about the global church.

How do we get our sources and our information?

Over the past four years I've built a network of stringers—that's professional reporters—around the word in these places, such as north Nigeria, India, and Pakistan. It's not only my reporters who report back to me, but I have also developed trusted networks of religious leaders, NGOs, and community-based groups in such countries. Because they're on the ground and they're part of the local community, they can get there quickly.

I'll give you one quick example.

In December of 2014, a young Christian couple who were bonded labourers in Pakistan—which actually is technically illegal—were attacked by a violent mob of over 600 people who had been incited to violence by loudspeaker mosque announcements that the woman had committed blasphemy. My reporter phoned me and left a message for me saying that this had happened at about 7 a.m. By a couple of hours later, he was already in the village. He interviewed the relatives of the victims, he drove back to his home, and he wrote a story that night. I got up early the next morning, I edited it, and we got it out to the world. That was a horrific story that shocked Pakistan, but we had a man on the ground telling us that story. He had eyewitness accounts.

Our website is subscription-based. It's free. You don't have to pay for it; you can simply log on to the website. You can subscribe for any country or all countries.

I want to mention one last issue, the Chibok girls, whom many of you have heard about.

What impact do we have from the *World Watch Monitor*? Our report of the Chibok girls—the Chibok girls is not an isolated incident—hit the international headlines, but in fact that was part of a Boko Haram pattern of committing atrocities against women and children that has been going on since 1999. An organization called Open Doors—Paul Johnson is the chief executive here in Canada, and he's been hosting my visit—which had done a lot of research with researchers on the ground, had identified this pattern of violence against women and girls in northern Nigeria. We didn't particularly push that report, but it went out. People from legal centres in New York picked it up, Amnesty International picked it up, Human Rights Watch picked it up, and our report went as part of the evidence to build the case against Boko Haram in the International Criminal Court in The Hague for committing atrocities against women and girls.

● (1315)

I didn't see how long I have, but I think my time is up. That was a quick briefing.

Thank you.

The Chair: Thank you. Actually, you were right on 10 minutes. That's very impressive—

Ms. Julia Bicknell: That's my—

The Chair: I was going to say it was your BBC background.

We're going to begin with the first round of questions.

Mr. Anderson, take it away.

Mr. David Anderson (Cypress Hills—Grasslands, CPC): We're very excited that you're here with us today. We had a conversation the other day, and someone mentioned to me that it's important to know how to separate the signal from the noise.

Ms. Julia Bicknell: Yes.

Mr. David Anderson: In Iraq, for example, everyone was killed or getting killed—all groups were—but when you're going to pick and choose an event to advocate for it—

Ms. Julia Bicknell: I'm struggling to hear you, David.

Mr. David Anderson: Your earpiece.

Ms. Julia Bicknell: Oh, I have to put this in. Okay, sorry.

Mr. David Anderson: Channel one is English.

Ms. Julia Bicknell: Sorry. I was thinking I was hearing you naturally.

Mr. David Anderson: I can speak louder. Are you all right?

Ms. Julia Bicknell: Yes, I have it better now. I was thinking that if you were speaking English I would be able to hear you.

Mr. David Anderson: I wanted to ask how you separate the signal from the noise in the events that you choose to cover.

Ms. Julia Bicknell: As I say often, I spend as much time standing down stories as I do standing them up. That means working out which stories are exaggerated, which stories people are promoting. I have to do this because people want to get donor dollars. I always check the sources back to the origination. I don't just read something on the Internet and think it must be true.

With my BBC training, I know a lot about which news agencies are trusted around the world. For instance, on Syria, the Syrian Observatory for Human Rights, based in London, has proven itself to be pretty reliable. There are ones that I know I can trust. There are ones I know I have to be a bit cautious of.

Of course, you can triangulate. You get something from one news agency and you ask whether it's what you're hearing from people on the ground, whether it's confirming. For instance, governments often take a long time to confirm the number of people killed in an atrocity. Often NGOs based in a community have a much clearer idea. It's that kind of thing. My whole background has trained me on how to separate the signal from the noise.

Mr. David Anderson: You talked about your expertise in dealing with Christians who are under pressure. Have Canada and the west been responsive enough to the plight of Christians under pressure in developing countries, or have we gotten complacent and failed to pay attention to this problem?

Ms. Julia Bicknell: People have an idea of what Christianity is. They think it's a western or, dare I say,a North American religion. We sometimes forget, to our peril, that Christianity was birthed in the Middle East. It's actually not a religion of white people. It's a religion that came out of the Middle East. People have told me they're shocked when they hear that Christians speak Arabic. They don't realize that there are millions of Christians who speak Arabic. There's an awful lot of education that needs to happen in our countries.

I think we have to educate the churches as much as we have to educate anybody. There is a real sense of religious illiteracy, particularly in the media, and I can hold my hand up as having been one of them. What often happens is that people, if they don't have a faith of their own, can't put themselves in the mindset of someone for whom that is absolutely part of life. John Kerry says we have to recognize, if we want to understand the world, that for perhaps 90% of the world's population, religion is a key, integral part of their lives. I think we have to get out of our western mindset and start being more aware of how the rest of the world lives.

● (1320)

Mr. David Anderson: Are you familiar with the work of the Office of Religious Freedom?

Ms. Julia Bicknell: I'm a bit familiar with it. I've met Andrew Bennett. I've met him twice. I met him once at the foreign office in the U.K. and once again last year in Rome.

Mr. David Anderson: He was doing some important work internationally. That office has been shut down, as I'm sure you know.

How can the Government of Canada effectively support religious organizations working to promote religious freedom around the world?

Ms. Julia Bicknell: I was very impressed by Andrew Bennett when I met him in London and again in Rome. I walked in Rome with him and had quite a deep conversation with him about what's happening in Ukraine. I was sad to hear that his office had been closed, but that's the government's decision.

I think that we would want the Canadian government to ensure that the work he started is able to continue. It's up to other parliamentarians and people of similar experience to keep tapping into that experience that he had started to develop. I would really recommend that.

Mr. David Anderson: Could you give us your opinion on the ways in which religious persecution is often connected to the repression of other human rights? Do you feel there's a connection between them?

Ms. Julia Bicknell: Sorry, religious...?

Mr. David Anderson: Religious persecution is related to the repression of other human rights.

Ms. Julia Bicknell: We talk a lot about human rights, and I would say that the fundamental human right that we all have is freedom of thought, conscience, or religion. That is number one. As a human being, that is the one everything else stems from, in a sense.

Of course, if people of one religious persuasion decide that other members of their population are not allowed to have that same freedom, that's when you get religious conflict and that's when you get religious persecution. If we're standing for human rights, then we have to stand for that fundamental human right of freedom of religion.

In the U.K. we're very clear: we say “freedom of religion or belief”, and that includes the right not to have a religion and the freedom to hold a belief.

When we have our all-party parliamentary group on freedom of religion or belief, a representative of the British Humanist Association is involved there. He is very much part of that group, but he's alongside the Baha'i, the Ahmadiyya, the Sikhs, and the Hindus as well.

You can't ignore people's right to chose their religion when you are defending other human rights.

Mr. David Anderson: We've been doing a study of the Rohingya Muslim population in Myanmar. I don't know if you're familiar with Myanmar at all, but if you are, could you give us some advice about what we might recommend in our study on how to deal with some of these issues and the way religious minorities are being treated in that country?

Ms. Julia Bicknell: I visited Burma, as I call it, about three years ago. Of course, I'm really delighted that although Aung San Suu Kyi is not actually leading the country, she's very involved in leading the country. I know there have been decisions and some disquiet that she hasn't spoken out as strongly as she might have done, or a lot of people would like her to have done, about the plight of the Rohingya. I know there's also a discussion as to whether we, or rather they, should even use the term Rohingya.

My colleague and friend Benedict Rogers, an activist with Christian Solidarity Worldwide, is a real expert on the Rohingya, particularly in Burma. From my experience of Burma and looking at Burma, it does seem very strange that the government has introduced a law forbidding a person of one religion from marrying a person of another religion. I just don't get that. It just seems so strange. Of course they want to preserve the Burman identity of the majority population, but I don't see how that is actually going to be the way to go about it, and I don't think many Canadian citizens would—

● (1325)

The Chair: Ms. Bicknell, I'm going to ask you to wrap up that answer. Would you like another 10 seconds?

Ms. Julia Bicknell: No, that's fine. I think I've made my main point. Thank you.

The Chair: The second question is going to come from Ms. Khalid.

Ms. Iqra Khalid (Mississauga—Erin Mills, Lib.): Thank you very much, Ms. Bicknell, for coming in today and giving us this presentation. It's definitely an honour to have you here and to listen to your perspective.

I think it was Weber who said that religion is the opium of the masses. Having been born in Pakistan myself, I have experienced first-hand the troubles undergone by countries like Pakistan, where religion seems to dominate the discussion and seems to be the dominant reason for conflict.

You've had experience with many other different countries. Is there a basic socio-economic reason that you think really defines religious conflicts in these regions? Do you think there are reasons other than religion, underlying core reasons, that could initiate conflict in these areas?

Ms. Julia Bicknell: I think Pakistan is a particular case, because obviously, going back to 1947 and partition—and again, I'm sorry, I'm a Brit, and the British were the colonial power—it was decided that they would carve out a separate country to accommodate the Muslim population, the vast millions of population that were part of colonial India. In a sense Pakistan was set up for the Muslims.

However, Jinnah, its founder, was very clear. He said this is a country of all faiths, and he named the minority faiths, and he said Pakistan is for all of them. That was what his vision was. It was never to become a country in which someone who does not hold Islam as their faith should be a second-class citizen or discriminated against.

As I see it, and you may know Pakistani history better than I do, people like General Zia brought in the blasphemy law in 1987. He said they were going down a path of Islamization, that this was going to be enshrined in law. That law, dare I say—and many people around the world agree—has been abused to settle land scores, to settle disputes with neighbours, etc.

Now, there are a whole lot factors, as you and I know. Again, my facts are a bit out of date, but when I was a correspondent there, Pakistan spent something like 65% of its GNP on its military. That meant it wasn't spending it on schools, hospitals, roads, infrastructure, whatever; it was spending it on its military.

Why is it spending on the military? Because it's afraid of war with India, and other such things. If you have a country that's spending 65% of its GNP on its military, that means you have very high levels, similar levels, of illiteracy amongst the majority population. Therefore you have all those factors that go along with it. There is poverty, lack of money, leading to lack of education. When you don't have money, you can't buy health, so you have all these problems.

I think creating a country for Muslims out of India combined with a lot of other factors. Then you throw in Afghanistan, you throw in what was happening there with the rise of the Taliban. Let's not forget that I was there in the 1990s. The Americans, the ISI in Pakistan.... There was a lot behind the creation of what is now the Taliban, and we shouldn't be ignorant of that. I think if you throw in Afghanistan and throw in al Qaeda, you have a country that has a lot of problems with its religious minority.

Ms. Iqra Khalid: Thank you for that.

You have mentioned that the fundamental right that every person has is the right to religion and the right to belief. I will respectfully disagree. I think it's the right to life, liberty, and security of person, that fundamental right as to whether we can exist or not, and I don't think that should be based on what we believe in at all.

As our colleague mentioned, we have been studying the Rohingya Muslims specifically and the whole plight of that region in general. My question to you is, are there any socio-economic concerns that, if alleviated, could help the plight of specifically those people in that region?

● (1330)

Ms. Julia Bicknell: I have friends in Pakistan now who are working on the educational curriculum of Pakistan, and you might have seen that there was a recent report just a few weeks ago. I think the U.S. Commission on International Religious Freedom, or one of those bodies, did a report on the education system and the textbooks in Pakistan. When you look at the textbooks, you see that right from the very beginning children are taught that those people who are Ahmadi, those people who are of Christian background—I can't even remember the language—are described in language that I would hate to see in my educational textbooks.

There are some positive initiatives I've seen and reported about, actually, which bring majority faith and minority faith together in dialogue. In places like Lahore, they are getting together and getting to know the other, but they have to overcome all of this, dare I say, misinformation and miseducation about what these people are in their midst. I think the education system would be a really good place to start.

The Chair: You have 45 seconds.

Ms. Iqra Khalid: Then I'll just pass. My question's a bit longer than that, but that's fine. Thank you.

The Chair: Fair enough. All right.

We have a guest on the committee today, MP Weir.

You're up.

Mr. Erin Weir (Regina—Lewvan, NDP): Thanks very much for having me at this committee. I appreciate your testimony.

Regina's St. James Anglican Church is in the middle of my riding, and it has been involved in sponsoring two families of Iraqi Christian refugees. I've attended some fundraisers in support of that project, so I have met Christians who speak Arabic and I appreciated the point that you made.

I should perhaps clarify that the congregation was quite open to sponsoring refugees of any faith, but the initial family was Christian, and I think that family played a role in identifying another related family to bring over.

On this theme of the persecution of Christians, I did want to just touch on the Open Doors World Watch List. The top violators of the religious freedom of Christians seem to be countries that have dictatorial governments and a history of conflict.

Could you speak a little bit about the relationship between conflict and religious persecution?

Ms. Julia Bicknell: That's a big question. When you say the "relationship", could you be a bit more precise about what's behind your question?

Mr. Erin Weir: We're trying to get at the root causes of religious persecution, at why it happens and how it can be alleviated and prevented. You could, I suppose, speak to any factors that might help us with that evaluation, but I wonder if there are certain types of characteristics that would cause this problem in certain countries.

Ms. Julia Bicknell: If you look at many countries around the world, you'll see that there's a whole combination of factors.

I live in London. It's a very multicultural city. We've just elected our first Muslim mayor. I live side by side with people from different backgrounds and I don't have a problem with that, but in many of these countries, if you think about it, what's happening is the other, the other person. They have more money, they have a bigger house. They have privilege, they have this, this, and this, and if I'm poor and I don't have a job and I don't have any prospects of a job, if I feel that I am marginalized in my own society, or whatever it might be, I am likely to take it out against the other.

If, as I go about that, I'm hearing that the other is maybe not to be trusted, maybe always corrupt or whatever—as I was talking about in the Pakistani educational system—If that is in me from childhood or if I'm in a society where the narrative I've grown up with is these people are evil or these people are this, that, and the other, then of course when I come to it with all of those factors and a man comes along and offers, in some cases I've heard about, $20 or $50 to join Boko Haram or join Islamic State or whatever, I have to say that tends to appeal to a particular type of person.

Those are the factors that feed into a community turning against another community.

So yes, there are all the social and economic factors, and politicians can play a part as well. Politicians are very good at using religion to whip up a particular position, saying that if you support me, you will do this to those people or whatever. I'm sorry to say that the church can and in the past in my country, back in the 1600s, has used the other, as in "We don't want the other. They're evil. They're wrong. We will get rid of them. We'll kill them."

That's what's happening. It's a whole complex system of factors, I think.

● (1335)

Mr. Erin Weir: In terms of the role of the church, Pope Francis has been fairly outspoken about the persecution of Christians around the world. Do you believe his efforts have been effective? Have they made a difference?

Ms. Julia Bicknell: I'm an admirer of Pope Francis. He's living out his Christian faith through the very practical things he does in washing the feet of homeless people and those very tangible symbols that he enacts in his own life. When he goes to a refugee camp like the one on the island of Lesbos, in Greece, and he meets the refugees and talks to them and takes some of them back on his plane to Rome, I think he is showing what living out his Christian witness is all about.

I think he's also drawing attention to the fact that many of these refugees are in fact Christian—not all of them, of course, by any means. He's allowing that discussion to get into the mainstream of society to increase the understanding of the factors that have driven Christians, if they've been in a country like Syria or Iraq, to get on a boat and try to cross over from, say, Turkey to Greece—all these things I've talked about, such as discrimination in jobs, in education, or in employment.

In Eritrea, certain churches are registered. Anyone who is not a member of those five registered churches not only risks military conscription, which affects everybody, but also is completely without opportunity to practise their own faith, so eventually they jump on boats or they cross Africa first, which is in itself a massive achievement, and try to come to the U.K. or to France.

Mr. Erin Weir: Thank you.

In terms of the work you've been doing, could you speak to the main barriers to investigative journalism on human rights abuses? Are there things that Canada could be doing to try to promote and facilitate that work around the world?

Ms. Julia Bicknell: The main barriers are just protecting our sources and protecting the people whose story we want to tell. Quite often they're terrified, and the last thing they want is for us to spread in the media the story of what's happened to them, so we're always dealing with a very complex discussion about whether we can name them.

As you know, when we as journalists verify our sources, one of the key things is to ask where we got our information and how we know what we know. If we're talking to someone who's in fear for their life, who's maybe deeply traumatized but who has witnessed an atrocity, the last thing we want to do is to risk having them victimized again, either immediately or later. Maybe their family could be targeted.

When we interview people who've come even as far as the U.K., often they say, "I'm happy to talk to you, but I do not want you to put my name out there, because my family are back in the country and they may get killed". A country like Iran is a good case in point. You might have someone who's converted from Islam to Christianity, who's found their way to Europe, and they are being harassed. Maybe they're being taunted; maybe they're even being attacked by other refugees in a refugee camp. Two of my reporters have been to one of the refugee camps and have met these people, and they're very afraid for their family back in their own country.

That's the key thing: building the relationship, having them trust you, being able to trust what they say to you, and also checking them out.

I'll give you a very practical example. I was talking to my colleague, a woman called Lindsey Hilsum, who's the chief international correspondent of Channel 4. She went to the refugee camps and—

● (1340)

The Chair: Ms. Bicknell, can I ask you to finish?

Ms. Julia Bicknell: Yes, let me just finish this one; it's quite interesting. She said that because the German government had said it would take Syrian refugees, everybody was claiming to be Syrian, so she was starting to say to them, "What's your name? Which part of Syria are you from?" She said it was amazing how many of them were not in fact from Syria; they were Afghans or they were from other countries.

But of course she knows, because she has that experience, the same way I do. If someone says to me—

The Chair: Thank you.

Because we have only about 10 or 12 minutes left, if it's okay with the committee, I'm going to suggest we move to shorter questions for this period. That way we can get through everybody with a three-minute question.

Starting with that, it would be Mr. Tabbara.

Mr. Marwan Tabbara (Kitchener South—Hespeler, Lib.): I'll make my question very short.

Thank you for being here.

As you know, the Syrian conflict has now been going on for five years. Many individuals have been displaced—millions, more than half the population. In the case of the Syrian Christians there, what's their situation like? Can you elaborate on the situation of the Syrian Christians who are in Damascus, and that of those outside of Damascus, where it's much more dangerous?

Ms. Julia Bicknell: That's not surprising; it's a civil war.

I would say hundreds of thousands, if not a million.... I don't know. I don't want to put a figure on it at all, but many, many Christians have fled Syria over the last five years, as have many others of the civilian population. However, many of them actually, consciously, want to stay.

They're actually choosing. I know of people personally who have the opportunity to go to America. They have family in the United States and they're choosing not to go. The reason they're choosing not to go is that they don't want to leave the heartland of their faith and their home. It's their home. Their family, their tradition, their culture, and their language are all rooted in that country.

I know personally of people who, despite bombs falling on top of their heads and despite their children not being able to go to school, are staying there because they want to remain. They don't want to leave. They also know that leaving is not necessarily the answer to everything. When a refugee arrives in a country such as the U.K. or Canada or America, it's just the beginning of another set of complex questions. Many of them say that more than anything, they just want to go home or they want to stay in their homes.

I would think it depends on where they're from in the country. As you will know, because your family roots are in the Middle East as well, Marwan, different parts of the country are much more severely affected at different times than others, and at the moment, it's everybody in Aleppo. There are many Christians who've chosen to stay in Aleppo. Now they are very anxious because the war has literally come to Aleppo. Damascus, controlled by al-Assad, by the government, is not in such a difficult situation. I think it does depend on which part they're from as to how their mindset is situated right now.

The Chair: Thank you very much.

Next would be MP Sweet.

Mr. David Sweet (Flamborough—Glanbrook, CPC): Thank you, Chair.

I want to posit a different notion than what was discussed earlier in regard to the inalienable right to religious freedom.

When you came into this building, on that tower that you came in under, you would have passed three scriptures:

> Give the king thy judgments, O God, and thy righteousness unto the king's son.
>
> Where there is no vision, the people perish.
>
> He shall have dominion also from sea to sea.

I think we have been the beneficiaries of.... Certainly our jurisprudence here in Canada has been a beneficiary of our faith background.

Those scriptures, by the way, Chair, are from the Torah as well as the Christian scriptures.

I firmly believe that when fighting for religious freedom.... If you have religious freedom, you have freedom of conscience, freedom of assembly, and freedom of speech. Many of what we call "inalienable" human rights fall out of that.

I'm wondering how you feel in that regard, and if I'm on the right track. Is that a motivation you have?

● (1345)

Ms. Julia Bicknell: Yes, it is, and coming back, of course, to life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness, as the Americans would put it, what's the pursuit of happiness? How do you as an individual citizen follow your dream of what it is to be happy? I would argue that it's to have freedom of conscience, to have freedom of belief or no belief.

For me, as someone who happens to have been very privileged to have been born in the U.K., when I've been in these countries and I've seen that just by accident of birth other people happen to have been born in a country where those freedoms are not available to them, part of what motivates me is that if I believe that for every human being life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness involve freedom to believe what they choose to believe, then I would want to fight for that right for them as much as I would for my own fellows in the United Kingdom.

Mr. David Sweet: You are kind of an expert on Pakistan. You knew Shahbaz Bhatti, as I did, and as a number of people around the table here did. He was brutally killed. He was the minister for religious minorities.

Has anything changed in Pakistan in regard to the blasphemy laws? Are we seeing any hopeful signs going forward?

Ms. Julia Bicknell: The latest thing, as I understand it, is that the judiciary agree. The Pakistani judiciary have realized that there are a lot of loopholes in the blasphemy laws, I think particularly in the light of the latest atrocity in Lahore, where, although many Muslims were killed as well, the branch of the Taliban who claimed that bomb said that it was specifically targeted at Christians on Easter Sunday.

I think that a lot of wonderful Pakistani people, the kind of people I met and really loved being with, see that the blasphemy law is something that is abused, and I think the vast majority of Pakistani society realizes that this is an unjust law. The judiciary agrees that it is. They are waiting for their parliament to amend.... They've basically sent that law back to the parliament and said that they want to bring about changes.

From the beginning of this year, as far as I'm aware, nothing much has happened on that, but it would be good for other governments around the world to ask Pakistan what it is doing back in their parliament with this law and to say, "If the judiciary has sent it back and says it needs improving, can we see some action in the parliament?"

The Chair: Thank you.

MP Mendicino is next.

Mr. Marco Mendicino (Eglinton—Lawrence, Lib.): Thank you very much, Mr. Chair, and Ms. Bicknell, thank you for being here and for bringing your worldly experience in journalism to this subcommittee.

There's so much to cover and so little time to do it in, but I'm wondering if we can explore two ideas.

You have already heard some questions from my colleagues about the correlation between religious persecution and the suppression of other fundamental rights, such as freedom of expression. I wonder if you agree with the proposition that there is a correlation between religious persecution and the repression of other fundamental rights, including discrimination based on certain inalienable characteristics like gender, disability, and sexual orientation.

Do you agree with that?

Ms. Julia Bicknell: Do I agree with the proposition...?

Mr. Marco Mendicino: Do you agree with the proposition that along with religious persecution also comes the repression of inalienable human rights like the ones I've just outlined?

Ms. Julia Bicknell: It can. I'm not saying it always does, but the evidence shows that where there is religious persecution, there is also repression of.... For example, in Boko Haram, there's repression of the rights of women and children. They are raped, tortured, traumatized, abused, taken away from their families.

You have to look at the evidence around the world. Look at Islamic State. What has it done to the women and children, not only Christian but Yazidi women? The evidence is there.

But again, in answer to your question about how you get those facts out, how you get those details out, sometimes it's very difficult to gather that evidence.

Mr. Marco Mendicino: I take it you agree as well that in the last 30 years religious persecution has evolved in a very negative way in that we see more violence and more extremism. I think that's fairly self-evident. Indeed, I'm sure it has been covered in many of your stories.

Is that a fair comment?

● (1350)

Ms. Julia Bicknell: We're in a 24-hour digital media world now, so we are aware of things that are happening on the other side of the world that maybe we weren't aware of previously. These kinds of atrocities were happening in the past, but we didn't necessarily know about them.

Again, the evidence shows...and it's something that you mentioned. The World Watch List that's compiled by Open Doors International every year shows that the rate of religious persecution is rising and that more countries are under religious persecution than ever before. That's not only their research. Peer research from the United States and other reputable research is proving that this is on the rise, and it's on the rise because of a number of factors. You have to look at the evidence, and it's clear.

Mr. Marco Mendicino: I'll use these last few seconds for the simplest question of all. To what extent does your own personal faith inform your work?

Ms. Julia Bicknell: Of course it has an impact, but I also have a complete set of what I call BBC DNA in me. My BBC DNA tells me that you have to look at the evidence and you have to tell fairly, reliably, and accurately what's going on. If that involves criticizing church leaders or whatever if they've been involved in abuse, then I will do that. I'm not going to just be an apologist for things I believe to be wrong.

It's hand in hand really. I have a personal faith, but I would argue that enables me to be clear about how I understand other people's faith, including that of Muslims. I would say some of my closest friends in Pakistan when I lived there were Muslims, are Muslims, continue to be Muslims, and they continue to be my friends.

Mr. Marco Mendicino: Thank you, Ms. Bicknell.

Thank you, Mr. Chair.

The Chair: Thank you very much.

I think that is it for questioning for this committee. Once again, I want to thank MP Sweet for recommending you to come in. It's been a very enlightening discussion and one that I know is going to provide a good perspective for us to reflect on long after this meeting is over.

Again, thank you for travelling from London. Thank you to your colleagues who are sitting with you. That's great.

Ms. Julia Bicknell: Thank you very much.

I would just remind you, as my host Don is here, to go to worldwatchmonitor.org if you want to look out for more.

Thank you very much.

The Chair: Thank you for the plug.

We're now going to suspend and go in camera. We'll give the room a couple of minutes to clear.

[*Proceedings continue in camera*]