

## The Foundation of All Freedom

Nick Miller speaks at Harvard event on religious liberty

[Campus News](#) | Posted on October 27, 2016



(Photo by Darren Heslop)

By: Chris McLean-Wheeler

Nicholas Miller, professor of church history at the [Seventh-day Adventist Theological Seminary](#) on the campus of Andrews University, attended the 18th annual “Meeting of Experts,” which is hosted by the [Andrews International Religious Liberty Institute](#). During the meeting, which was held over three days in August of this year at [Harvard Divinity School](#), attendees presented papers and discussed the issue of religious restriction. Despite a trend over the past few decades of advocating religious tolerance, many places across the globe still restrict religious practice.

Progress has been stymied by this paradox. In a statement written by the meeting’s attendees, the authors state, “In sum, a major shift in the debate about freedom of religion or belief may well be occurring in its intellectual heartlands. Until recently, religious freedom norms were widely accepted; debate was about their details, about how they should be applied in different contexts, and about how they could be more effectively extended and implemented. Now their very legitimacy is being challenged, whether explicitly or implicitly.”

Miller's role in the meeting was to compile a document that provided an overview of everyone's presentations.

"I was the main respondent at the end that summarized, synthesized and responded to all the presentations made in trying to help facilitate with the group a way forward based on the three days of meetings," explained Miller.

In his document, he identified two themes of those who presented, "the philosophical and ideological challenges to the idea of international religious freedom," and "the practical and political challenges to the realization of international religious freedom."

The IRLA's secretary-general [Ganoune Diop](#), who is also director of public affairs and religious liberty for the Seventh-day Adventist church, described some of the reasons behind why countries are reluctant to maintain these standards of religious freedom. Getting to the root of the problem means analyzing the critiques that these countries launch against tenets of religious liberty in the first place.

A common critique is of the idea of "individual rights," which tends to be associated with religious freedom and, according to Diop, "doesn't sit well with cultures based on a more communal and community-based approach to rights." Depending on the society, religious freedom can be seen as liberal permissiveness, a slippery slope that descends to widespread moral decay.

Yet another worry is that the dominant religion of a country, especially ones with major historical significance, will be undermined by advocating freedom of religion.

Diop continues, "Examples of this are some forms of Islam in many Middle Eastern countries, or Orthodoxy in some Eastern European countries." Some countries simply worry that these ideals serve western imperialism more than anything.

Also causing problems for religious freedom is postmodernism's influence. The worldview's emphasis on scepticism of universal norms means that the many societies, notably western ones, lack interest in religious freedom, dismissing it as having little importance in today's world. Secularism has also lent a hand to decreasing interest, as has a waning trust in government's ability to uphold our freedoms.

"It's little wonder that many people dismiss international institutions and laws—even those that purport to promote universal human rights—as futile, at best, or as a political tool of repression, at worst," Diop commented.

Miller's document summarizes the steps needed to overcome the issue.

"We need to explain why a community of rights, freedoms and values, allowing for diverse moral frameworks to co-exist, is superior to a system where one moral framework is imposed by the state," he says. "We have to point out why religious freedom is foundational to all other

freedoms, in that it acknowledges a zone or realm of transcendence that is not subject to the state, and thus beyond its control, and that this serves as the basis for all other rights.”

The Meeting of Experts will meet next year at [Princeton University](#) in New Jersey.

“These meetings are immensely valuable,” states Miller, “in that they bring focus and attention to important religious freedom concerns.”

## **Related Links**

- Read more about [centers and affiliates of the Seminary](#)
- [The Seventh-day Adventist Theological Seminary at Andrews University](#)
- [Upcoming events](#) of the International Religious Liberty Association
- [Harvard Divinity School](#)
- [What is religious liberty?](#)
- [The Adventist Church and religious liberty](#)

## **Contact:**

PR

[pr@andrews.edu](mailto:pr@andrews.edu)

269-471-3322