

WPFC 20th Annual Anderson-Ottaway lecture focuses on freedom of expression and religion

News

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"The greatest threat to free speech and freedom of conscience embodied in Article 19 of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights (UDHR) is the current debate over speech and religion," said distinguished US First Amendment attorney Floyd Abrams.

Speaking on the eve of the 60th anniversary of the UDHR, Abrams delivered the World Press Freedom Committee's (WPFC) 20th Annual Anderson-Ottaway lecture, held in partnership with UNESCO at the United Nations. 'The U.S. First Amendment Tradition and Article 19 of the Universal Declaration of Human rights: After Sixty Years, What Relationship?' was the title of Abrams' lecture.

The WPFC, a coordination group of national and international news media organizations, was formed three decades ago in response to the efforts by and at UNESCO, under its then-leadership, to establish what was characterized as a 'New World Information and Communication Order'. WPFC is composed of 37 organizations on five continents, defending the freedom of the press and assisting independent news media organizations around the world.

"When the World Press Freedom Committee was formed, the most critical issues before the UN relating to freedom of speech arose out of, a euphemism for greatly increased state control of what was said and written. That battle lasted for many years and was finally won," Abrams said.

"Today we have a new threat to free speech and freedom of conscience, with powerful proponents in this building. It is one that is not only contrary to American First Amendment notions but to the core of the protections set forth in Article 19 of the Universal Declaration. The threat relates to speech about religion and, in particular, speech that could be said to be critical - or, in the language used by its proponents, 'defamatory' - of religion," Abrams told the audience of media executives, representatives of press freedom organizations and UN officials.

A UN resolution currently before the General Assembly plenary, that calls upon member nations to take steps to ban or punish what is variously referred to as 'defamation of religion', 'incitement to hatred' of religion, has been criticized by freedom of expression organizations as a threat to Article 19.

At the same time, Abrams lauded the stand taken by the United Nations' experts on human rights, the Special Rapporteurs on Freedom of Religion or Belief, on Freedom of Expression, and on Contemporary forms of Racism, Xenophobia and Related Intolerance whom he says, "have all spoken out clearly against creating a ban on such a vague notion of 'defamation of religion'."

"At a joint paper presented at a conference convened by the Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights in October, Ms Asma Jahangir and Mr Doudou Diene observed: "Freedom of Religion

primarily confers a right to act in accordance with one's religion but does not bestow a right for believers to have their religion itself protected from all adverse comment."

Abrams said that he has written to Ambassador Miguel d'Escoto Brockman, the President of the General Assembly, on behalf of a group of organizations that have banded together to create what we have called The Coalition to Defend Free Speech.

Quoting from the letter, Abrams said: "While it may seem a natural response to decry the idea of defaming one's religious beliefs, the implications of doing so present a great danger. Are religions to be totally immunized from criticism? If so, the world would be denied a good part of its most enduring literature and religions themselves denied much valuable commentary. And if not, who is to decide what critical speech is to be permitted and what is to be deemed to be 'defamatory' and thus banned? The lesson of history, after all, is that censorship of speech leads inexorably to more censorship."