

**REMARKS OF FCC CHAIRMAN AJIT PAI
AT THE U.S. DEPARTMENT OF STATE
MINISTERIAL TO ADVANCE RELIGIOUS FREEDOM**

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Good morning. It is truly humbling to be a part of this event with so many who have sacrificed so much for the cause of religious freedom.

It might not seem obvious why the leader of America's expert agency on communications technology would be speaking at a forum on religious freedom. But I believe that any discussion of promoting religious liberty around the world has to include changes in how we communicate with each other—changes that are being driven by new technologies.

Most people accept the idea that the Internet revolution is transforming virtually every aspect of modern life. It might feel odd at first to think of religion in this context. But it makes sense. We use digital tools to connect with others. We use digital tools to take in new ideas. We use digital tools to express our views and beliefs. So naturally, the Internet revolution will impact the way we practice our faiths. And that impact has been positive and, well, not so positive.

On the positive side, these new communications technologies have enabled countless possibilities for people of faith.

They create new ways to study your religion in your way, on your time. For example, YouVersion's Bible App has been downloaded onto more than 380 million phones, in every country on Earth. Last year, users of the app read 27 billion chapters and shared 409 million Bible verses with other members of the community. (Perhaps one of the verses shared was Matthew 9:17, which could be read to embrace technological innovation: "Neither do people pour new wine into old wineskins. If they do, the skins will burst; the wine will run out and the wineskins will be ruined. No, they pour new wine into new wineskins, and both are preserved.") And to be clear, YouVersion's BibleApp is just one of many apps out there.

Digitization has given new life to some of the world's most ancient religious texts. Father Columba Stewart of St. John's College in rural Minnesota has waged a global campaign to digitize sacred manuscripts for minority religious communities from Egypt to Ethiopia to India. Preserving these words digitally preserves these worlds forever. And that is especially important as civilization's patrimony hangs by a thread in certain parts of the world. Consider that several years ago in Mali, the fabled city of Timbuktu came under the control of Tuareg rebels and then al Qaeda affiliate Ansar Dine for almost a year. Tens of thousands of ancient texts, including very old copies of the Qur'an, were saved only because a 50-year-old librarian risked his life to distribute them to families who agreed to hide them. Technology can help us in cases when we're not so lucky.

Digital technologies also create new avenues for faith communities to live the word of God and serve others. Last year, the Vatican hosted its first hackathon—yes, you heard me right, I used the word Vatican and hackathon in the same sentence—attracting 120 Catholic, Muslim, Jewish, and Evangelical Christian coders from more than 30 countries. Among the many inventions developed over 36 hours, students built a social network that empowers churches to tap into the volunteer networks of other organizations, and a web-based app that pairs employers with homeless job seekers.

And perhaps most important, the Internet creates unprecedented opportunities for people of faith to connect with other believers. This is incredibly critical to religious minorities. If you are one of the few people in your community of your faith, you can feel alone. But the Internet can reduce that feeling

of isolation. If you have a broadband connection, you can participate in online services, study groups, prayer circles, or other ministries, even if the nearest church, temple, mosque, or synagogue is hundreds of miles away. I can only imagine how empowering this must be for religious minorities in countries where people don't enjoy the same freedoms that we do in the United States.

But as with so many other things, with the good comes the bad. For all the promise of digital technologies to promote religious freedom, there are also very real downsides.

Just look across the globe at the most well-known cases of religious persecution, and you can see technology increasingly being used as a tool of oppression.

The suffering of Rohingya Muslims in Burma goes back years. An estimated 700,000 refugees have been forced to leave the country for Bangladesh. And now, state forces are aggressively using online tools to harass this population. Facebook launched in Burma in 2011 and became enormously popular. As one journalist put it, "the arrival of Facebook provided a country with severely limited digital literacy a hyper-connected version of the country's ubiquitous tea shops where people gathered to swap stories, news and gossip." But unfortunately, government officials and militants have aggressively used this platform to incite a culture of hatred against the Rohingya. They used Facebook to spread false rumors of attacks. The government's Information Committee identified more than 1,300 Rohingya Muslims as "terrorists" on its official Facebook page, posting names and photos without any due process. And according to the U.S. Commission on International Religious Freedom's annual report, "the rapid rise of false information through social media [in Burma] may be a precursor to genocide."

Not only did Facebook fail to curtail this harassment, in a cruel twist, it actually took down posts documenting violence against Rohingya and suspended a user group that was telling Rohingya where attacks were taking place so they could be avoided.

But when it comes to harnessing digital tools to punish religious minorities, the biggest offender is the world's most populous country: China.

To make sure people aren't sharing religious messages online, or any other messages the government finds objectionable, China has built an army *two million* strong to police the Internet. For context, the actual U.S. Army has about 500,000 active duty personnel, and we have about 1.3 million active personnel across our armed services. So China employs significantly more people to violate the rights of their citizens than the United States employs to militarily defend rights like free expression and freedom of assembly.

Last year, the Chinese government's office of religious affairs proposed new rules to ban religious services, prayer, or preaching online. These restrictions would deny people the ability to practice their faith and would also make open discussion of faith with others much more difficult.

Arguably, the most distressing stories coming out of China lately are the government's efforts to crack down on Uighur Muslims. Already, as many as two million Uighurs have been sent to re-education camps in the western province of Xinjiang. And now, the Chinese are building an unprecedented surveillance state in Xinjiang. Disfavored communities are subject to near-constant monitoring and data collection using tools like facial recognition technology, under the threat of being sent to the camps. Meanwhile, the Han Chinese in the region are generally left alone. As one China researcher for Human Rights Watch put it, "These systems are designed for a very explicit purpose—to target Muslims."

What's particularly troubling is that the Chinese government is looking to export its repressive digital policies and practices. Chinese officials have hosted trainings and seminars on "cyberspace management," which have been attended by representatives of at least 36 countries. And in the past year, according to Freedom House, countries have passed restrictive cybercrime and media laws after engaging with Chinese officials.

Of course, it's not just governments that are using technology as tools of religious oppression. In 2018, the State Department designated eight non-state actors a "entities of particular concern" for severe religious freedom violations. Unsurprisingly, the Islamic State of Iraq and Syria was at the top of this list. Among its many atrocities, ISIS aggressively targeted religious minorities. They specifically targeted members of the Yazidi faith, taking thousands captive and treating the women as sex slaves. And ISIS's persecution of Christians has been designated by the European Union as genocide.

The authors of a book on the weaponization of social media have written that "the self-styled Islamic State owes its existence to . . . social media." Its online recruitment strategy is so extensive that it distributes content in a long list of languages, including sign-language. They also use social media to project strength greater than their actual numbers and to terrorize the public. They announced their 2014 invasion of Northern Iraq with a Twitter campaign using their hashtag #AllEyesonISIS.

So when it comes to religious freedom, the digital revolution is a two-sided coin. On one hand, technology can be harnessed for tremendous good. It can make it easier for people of faith to practice their religion, to connect with fellow believers, to organize a religious community, and to learn more about the teachings of their faith. But that same technology can also be used as an instrument of oppression. It can be used to incite hatred against religious minorities. And it can be used to facilitate their persecution.

So what approach should governments take to the intersection of the digital revolution and religion? Speaking for myself, I believe that our top priority must be to safeguard the freedom of expression. After all, the freedom of speech and the free exercise of religion are practically intertwined. One supports the other. And when government has the power to restrict free expression, religious minorities too often pay a price.

Second, it is vital for countries that believe in religious freedom to join together on the international stage to fight for an Internet where the freedom of conscience is respected. That also means joining together to speak out against those governments that are using the Internet to repress their populations and seeking to export that repression to other nations. And we certainly must not allow countries to hijack international organizations to legitimize or aid those efforts.

And third, we need to recognize that these problems can't be solved by just changing an algorithm or passing a law. Instead, people with open hearts and minds from all faiths need to come together to promote positive narratives to counter extremism and hatred. After all, we're all in this together. And countries are stronger when they support the freedoms to worship and believe and speak as one might choose.

Perhaps the best example of this came courtesy of America's first President, George Washington. In August 1790, he wrote a now-famous letter to the Hebrew congregations of Newport, Rhode Island. In that letter, he promised the Jewish community that this newly-created country, the United States of America, would give them a safe home.

As he put it, borrowing from the Old Testament, "May the children of the stock of Abraham who dwell in this land continue to merit and enjoy the good will of the other inhabitants—while every one shall sit in safety under his own vine and fig tree and there shall be none to make him afraid." And tellingly, just one year later, the United States would ratify the First Amendment, putting into our Constitution the core protections of religious freedom. Today, our world is quite different, partly because it is quite digital. But Washington's beautiful sentiment still resonates and calls us to the path of tolerance and freedom, aided by technologies that connect and inform and inspire and protect.

As I close, I'll borrow from President Washington once again: "May the father of all mercies scatter light, and not darkness, upon our paths, and make us all in our several vocations useful here, and in His own due time and way everlastingly happy." Let us all go forth and do our part to spread the good word. Our gathering here is a good start.