According to Amnesty International, "a new refugee is created every 21 seconds." Many of the world’s 15 million asylum seekers flee their homes and countries to escape persecution because of their religious beliefs and practices. "It is estimated that over 75% of the world’s population claim adherence to a religion and yet, 2.6 billion people are denied freedom of religion including one million religious prisoners." These facts alone should draw particular attention to ‘religious freedom’ as a human rights issue in need of greater public address.

Often, the question of ‘religious persecution’ is complex in terms of making a significant distinction between persons persecuted based on religion and other types of asylum seekers since the violence may be intertwined with issues of ethnicity, race, nationality, political views, and/or membership in a specific social group. Nonetheless, it is essential that human rights organizations and foreign affairs departments not discriminate between groups of refugees based on their religious beliefs. The focus must be on confronting the problem itself. By campaigning against religious rights violations, issuing reports of abuse inflicted on explicit individuals and/or groups and helping to ensure protection for such displaced and vulnerable persons, the democratic mandate of moral and social responsibility is being fulfilled.
The refugees based on religious persecution around the world are being forced to suffer unspeakable cruelties: displacement and disease, torture, rape, starvation and even death. Alexander Solzhenitsyn (a former target of Soviet persecution for practising freedom of expression and belief) wrote, “though it is impossible to expel evil from the world in its entirety, it is possible to constrain it within each person.” Whether academician or artist, religious cleric or laity, student or teacher, entrepreneur or politician, activism is the universal call to which we must all respond if we are to help those whose lives are being shattered and forced into exile. One refugee named Renata (who fled the carnage in former Yugoslavia) made the sobering comment, “People are not chairs that can be moved around constantly.” Lest we forget, remember the persecuted.

NOTES