

# The International Religious Liberty Association

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## JOHN GRAZ

John Graz, Ph.D. (Paris-Sorbonne University, Paris, France), retired in 2015. He began his ministry as a pastor in France and held director positions in the departments of Communication, Youth, and Public Affairs and Religious Liberty, initiating the “Festivals of Religious Freedom.” He was secretary general of the International Religious Liberty Association, organizing four World Congresses, and secretary of the Conference of Secretaries of World Christian Communion. He wrote and coauthored several books.

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The International Religious Liberty Association was instituted in 1893 by the Seventh-day Adventist Church. Since then it has been an institution for advocating and promoting religious liberty all over the world.

## History

In the *Religious Liberty Library*, a monthly publication, the International Religious Liberty Association (IRLA) and its “Declaration of Principles” were mentioned for the first time in 1893:

We believe in the religion taught by Jesus Christ.

We believe in temperance and regard liquor traffic as a curse to society.

We believe in supporting the civil government and submitting to its authority.

We deny the right of any civil government to legislate on religious questions.

We believe it is right, and should be the privilege of every man to worship according to the dictates of his own conscience.

We also believe in our duty to use every lawful and honorable means to prevent religious legislation by the civil government; that we and our fellow-citizens may enjoy the inestimable blessings of both religions and civil liberty.<sup>1</sup>

A declaration that is almost similar with this one can be read in the IRLA publication in the beginning of the 21st century.<sup>2</sup> At its beginning in 1893, the IRLA listed six offices in the United States and four offices in London, Melbourne, Cape Town, and Toronto.<sup>3</sup> The IRLA appeared in a political context of Sunday legislation in the United States. The young Seventh-day Adventist Church, in spite of its apocalyptic vision of the future, decided to firmly oppose any legislation in favor of a religious day of rest.

Seven years earlier, in 1886, Adventists began the publication of the *American Sentinel* and a number of brochures and pamphlets. A year later the General Conference appointed a committee on Religious Liberty.<sup>4</sup> On July 21, 1889, the committee organized the National Religious Liberty Association with a membership of 110. The campaign led by the National Reform Association in favor of a Sunday law and a change of the U.S. Constitution reached its climax with the National Sunday Rest Bill sponsored by Senator H. W. Blair.<sup>5</sup> On December 13, 1888, Alonzo T. Jones defended the Sabbatarian position before the Senate Committee on Education and Labor. On February 24, 1893, the General Conference in its session held in Battle Creek, Michigan, passed a radical resolution of seven points that defined its fundamental position in favor of religious liberty.<sup>6</sup>

The IRLA was not a new association but a change of the name of the National Religious Liberty Association. After a few years the interest about the defense of religious liberty reached Adventists living in other countries. For a number of them, religious liberty defense and promotion was not to be limited to the United States. But during the decades that followed and until 1950, the name of the IRLA was not used in a consistent way.

In 1897 The *American Sentinel* was published as the organ of the IRLA, but the IRLA did not appear in the pages of the succeeding journal, the *Sentinel of Liberty*, from 1900 to 1904. At that time the Sunday Legislation was rejected in the Senate Committee, and it no longer appeared a threat for religious freedom in the United States. As a result, the *Sentinel of Liberty* was suspended for lack of support. Two years later, in 1906, a new religious liberty magazine, *Liberty*, was published. It was labeled as the "Official Organ of the Religious Liberty Bureau," not of the IRLA, which seemed to be dormant.

In 1909, when the issue of Sunday legislation came back at the United States level, *Liberty* included in its pages the *Declaration of Principles* of the Religious Liberty Association rather than of the IRLA. Petitions were launched by the Religious Liberty Department Secretary, Charles S. Longacre, but not by the IRLA.<sup>8</sup> It was a period of great activities and meetings where the names of some areas of the Regional Religious Liberty Association like the *Central State Religious State Liberty Association* were associated with the events.<sup>9</sup> Various initiatives that followed, like the *Memorial of Gratitude to President Calvin Coolidge* in 1925,<sup>10</sup> read: "We the members of the Religious Liberty Association assembled at Washington DC April 10, 1925..." The letter was signed by Longacre, then the general secretary of the RLA. It was again under the RLA, and not the IRLA, that a report was published in 1928.<sup>11</sup> In 1929 the name of the association printed on *Liberty* changed again. It became: *The National Religious Liberty Association of America*.<sup>12</sup> The change may be related to the Annual Convention of April 26 to May 4 at Takoma Park, Washington, D.C. But in 1931, for the 25th anniversary of *Liberty*, the magazine is presented as the organ of the IRLA (though it still contained the Declarations of Principles of the RLA).<sup>13</sup> In Longacre's biography, published in 1959, we read that he represented the IRLA at the League of Nations in Geneva, opposing the 13th month calendar proposal.<sup>14</sup> According to the biography of another leader Frank H. Yost, he was called by the IRLA as associate secretary in 1940, and the secretary was Alvin W. Johnson. Both served until 1958.<sup>15</sup> It shows that the IRLA was active at certain occasions.

In 1958 the name of the IRLA reappeared in *Liberty*. It was presented as organized in 1888 (sic).<sup>16</sup> During the Seventh-day Adventist Church's Autumn Council of 1960, it was recommended that the Board of Trustees of the IRLA study the organization of the National Religious Liberty Association. According to the board, the current world context did not favor use of the term international anymore. Organizing national associations with the name of their countries but affiliated to the IRLA seemed to be more effective. It was also voted to study the change of the word *International* to *World-Wide*.<sup>17</sup>

Three years later, in 1963, during the IRLA legal meeting, it was voted to delete "article V of the article of incorporation on Liberty as being the official organ of the IRLA."<sup>18</sup> In its issue of 1964, *Liberty* is then presented as the organ of the Religious Liberty Association of America (RLAA),<sup>19</sup> a new association under the leadership of the North American Division.<sup>20</sup>

The long period of confusion about the name ended. It was decided that the IRLA would publish an international edition of *Liberty*. But this would only happen later, starting in 1998, with the publication of *Fides et Libertas*, the house journal of the IRLA. The RLAA, which became the North American Religious Liberty Association (NARLA) in 2001,<sup>21</sup> had its origins in 1889 with the NRLA.<sup>22</sup>

The IRLA became the association supported by the General Conference and acting in cooperation with affiliated associations or partners of national religious liberty associations. In its structure, the Public Affairs and Religious Liberty directors of the divisions of the General Conference became the IRLA regional secretary-generals.

The activities of the associations depended on the dynamism and the strategy of the Religious Liberty Department at the GC and divisions levels. A number of associations had been organized in 1893. Some became active after the Second World War, like the Association de Defense de la Liberte Religieuse (AIDLR) in Europe. The founder, Dr. Jean Nussbaum,<sup>23</sup> was already known before the Second World War as the leader of the South European Religious Liberty Association. During the Home and Foreign Officers' Meeting of May 30, 1946, he suggested to enlarge "the scope and the influence" of the IRLA "by establishing a membership and constituency of the association beyond the present denominational plan."<sup>24</sup>

Following its strategy, the IRLA became open to all those who shared its view and philosophy on religious freedom for all and church state separation. For a while the GC president served as the IRLA president and the GC secretary served as the secretary of the Religious Liberty Department.

But it was under the leadership of Bert B. Beach (1980-1995) and John Graz (1995-2015) that this wish became a reality. They used their large network of world Christian leaders<sup>25</sup> to invite some prominent personalities to join the IRLA: Carl H. Mau, 1988-1990, and Gunnar Staalsett, 1989-2001, both were Secretary-Generals of the Lutheran World Federation; Denton Lotz was Secretary-General of the Baptist World Alliance, 1990-1992, 2001-2007. Since that time a number of non-Adventists also became members of the IRLA Board of Trustees, among them Robert Seiple, U.S. Ambassador-at-Large for International Religious Freedom (1999-2001), who served as

president from 2007 to 2017.

## Organization

The IRLA was legally recognized and incorporated in the District of Columbia on August 16, 1946, by its leaders: S. A. Wellman, E. W. Dunbar, and H. H. Votaw. According to the bylaws the association members elected the new members and the Board of Trustees, which became the Board of Directors, during their biennial session. To make this process easier, the legal meeting of the IRLA was held during the General Conference Autumn Council (later Annual Council) every two years. The Board of Directors elected the officers: president, secretary-general, and the treasurer. Sometime later the GC Nominating Committee proposed a nomination of officers for the IRLA. The first legal meeting that was registered in the GCC minutes of the Annual Council was held October 13, 1947.<sup>26</sup> It was held every two years until 1970. During the years 1971 to 1974, no legal meetings were recorded. But in 1975 it was voted to reactivate the IRLA in setting up a fund-raising program and in holding a meeting after the GC Session in Europe and to arrange an organizational meeting.<sup>27</sup> The Public and Religious Liberty (PARL) Department was requested by vote to reorganize the IRLA and to organize a meeting in the Hague, Netherlands, during 1976.<sup>28</sup> A year later, October 19, the first Religious Liberty meeting was voted to be held in Amsterdam on March 21-23, 1977.<sup>29</sup>

The IRLA was reactivated, and during the next decades, a new period of activities began. A series of public events made the IRLA one of the major international associations for religious freedom. On October 10, 1980, during the IRLA legal meeting, Bert B. Beach, the new PARL department director, was elected IRLA secretary-general. The president was the GC president, Neal C. Wilson. The Board of Trustees became the Board of Directors with 13 members. The American Liberty Association became the Religious Liberty Association of North America. The legal meeting continued to be held during the General Conference Annual Council every two years. It was a short meeting in which the vacant offices were filled and the Board of Directors was elected. A report about the IRLA activities was given. The meeting was followed by the Board of Directors meeting. From 2005 the IRLA gave a report every year during the Annual Council and held its board meeting twice a year. The secretary-generals, a term which became the official title under the Bert B. Beach leadership, have been the secretaries or directors of the GC PARL Department.<sup>30</sup>

## Public Activities

Until 1977 most of the religious liberty public activities like petitions against the Sunday legislation were led on behalf of the Religious Liberty Department by the same team leading the IRLA. The First Religious Liberty World Congress in Amsterdam on March 21-23, 1977, opened a new way. It was a meeting voted by the world church during the 1976 Annual Council. There were 350 participants registered, and government officials, as well as religious leaders, attended. It was a successful congress, and the delegates wished "that further such congresses

be planned.”<sup>31</sup> It gave birth to a number of international symposiums and congresses. The other World Congresses were held in Rome in 1984, in London in 1988, then in Rio de Janeiro in 1997. It then became a quinquennial event: Manila, 2002; Cape Town, 2007; Punta Cana, Dominican Republic, 2012; and Hollywood, Florida, in 2017. With 900 attendees in Punta Cana and about six hundred in Cape Town and Hollywood, this event became the main and the largest international religious liberty congress.

Starting in 1977, regional IRLA congresses were organized on the five continents. Among them: the Religious Liberty Conference in New Delhi in 1986 and 1999, the All African Religious Liberty congresses, the Inter-American Religious Liberty congresses, the South American Religious Liberty congresses, and the Asian Religious Liberty congress. More than forty international congresses and symposiums were held from 1996 to 2015. In 1998 the IRLA launched its journal *Fides et Libertas*, and a year later its annual Meeting of the IRLA Board of Experts, attended by academic experts from European, American, and later African universities. It became a major think tank on religious liberty, its influence extending beyond the Seventh-day Adventist Church, and it produced several major international statements and guiding principles on religious freedom and proselytism, security, education, and religious symbols.<sup>32</sup> The IRLA Meeting of Experts has been hosted by famous universities around the world, including Harvard (2016). Starting in 2003 the IRLA produced a TV show called *Global Faith and Freedom*, broadcast weekly by Hope Channel.<sup>33</sup>

In 2001 the IRLA launched the Washington Coalition, which gathered the U.S. Ambassador-at-Large for International Religious Freedom, the director of the Office of Religious Freedom of the U.S. State Department, the director of the U.S. Commission on Religious Freedom, and religious liberty experts in the U.S. Capital.<sup>34</sup> Then in cooperation with *Liberty* magazine and the NARLA, it started the annual Religious Liberty Dinner Award in 2003, which was held annually until the COVID-19 pandemic. The guest speakers have included top-level US political leaders like Senators Hillary Clinton, John McCain, and John Kerry. This event has become one of the key annual events for religious freedom in Washington. Every year, ambassadors, religious leaders, government members, and religious-freedom experts attend.<sup>35</sup>

Having an active international program with representatives in countries where religious freedom is challenged, the IRLA has hosted a number of officials and ambassadors and welcomed international delegations at its office in Silver Springs, Maryland. After several years of good relations with the United Nations, the IRLA was granted Special Consultative Status by the UN Economic and Social Council (ECOSOC) on May 1, 2003. Since then IRLA has had a representative in the United Nations Human Rights Council and assemblies. “It is able to make written and oral statements at such UN sessions as the Commission on Human Rights....”<sup>36</sup> The IRLA shares an office with the General Conference at the UN Headquarters in New York.

In 1997, after the fourth IRLA World Congress in Rio de Janeiro, the IRLA cooperated with the Seventh-day Adventist Church to hold a post-congress large gathering. It was called the Festival of Religious Freedom. It became a popular public event with concerts, symposiums, and official visits. Festivals of Religious Freedom

were subsequently held on five continents each one attended by thousands of people. The IRLA and its partner associations were directly involved in the two first World Festivals in Lima, Peru, in 2009 and Sao Paulo, Brazil, in 2013 where about 45,000 and 30,000 attended, respectively. In less than 20 years, more than two hundred fifty thousand people gathered in 35 countries, attending 40 festivals. Up to date, they were the largest religious liberty gatherings ever recorded.<sup>37</sup>

## Recognition

The activities of the IRLA since its beginning were recognized outside of the Adventist denomination by important honors and awards. In 1955 Charles Longacre received the Medal of the Freedom Foundation at Valley Forge. Bert Beach was honored many times. In 1998, for example, he received the Knights Cross of the Order of Merit of the Republic of Poland, given by the Polish president. On December 15, 2004, by a decree signed by the Romanian President Ion Iliescu, John Graz was granted the high distinction of the national medal "For Merit" with the rank of commander. On January 13, 2011, Graz received the 2011 National First Freedom Award from the First Freedom Center in Richmond,<sup>38</sup> Virginia; on October 10, 2013, the 2013 International Religious Liberty Award in Washington, D.C. given by the International Center for Law and Religions Studies and the J. Reuben Clark Law Society; and in 2015 the Medal of the Congress of the Republic of Peru. Ganoune Diop (IRLA secretary-general since 2015) was honored with the 2017 Thomas L. Kane Religious Freedom Award by the Ruben Clark Law Society.

Beach, Graz, and Diop received Honoris Causa doctorates and other recognitions. Further recognition was the appointment in 2009, by President George W. Bush, of James Standish, the IRLA associate secretary general, as executive director of the U.S. Commission on International Religious Freedom.

## Media Coverage

From 1996 to 2015 the *Adventist News Network* reported about seven hundred news items on religious freedom and among them 270 mentioned the IRLA.

In 1995 the new elected IRLA secretary-general John Graz aimed to have 100 national and international partners. According to 2015 reports, partners' associations affiliated to the IRLA existed in about eighty countries.<sup>39</sup> Among them the most active have been the AIDLR, the Russian Religious Liberty Association, and the ABLIRC in Brazil that since its beginning has hosted 144 forums on religious liberty in the State of Sao Paulo.<sup>40</sup>

## Summary

In 1893 the IRLA succeeded the NRLA in opposing the Sunday legislation in a more open way than the church could do. At the beginning of the 20th century when the danger to religious liberty in the United States seemed

to disappear for a while, it lost its visibility. The main activities were done on behalf of the Religious Liberty Department. But the name IRLA never disappeared totally. It came back in 1946/47 and was revived in 1975 with support by the Public Affairs and Religious Liberty Department. A period of great public international events started in 1977 with the first IRLA World Congress and reached its climax in the two decades after 1997.<sup>41</sup> The IRLA became more visible as an association at the United Nations, at Washington, D.C., and in many international conferences. Its officials and experts visited countries, met government officials, and hosted ambassadors, foreign delegations, and religious leaders at its world headquarters; it held large events on five continents in cooperation with the Public Affairs and Religious Liberty Department of the Seventh-day Adventist Church, and its name became familiar for the world Adventist family, even as it acted in situations where an association with expertise could act more effectually than the Church itself.

## Contribution

The mission of the IRLA has been since its beginning in 1893 to promote, defend, and protect religious freedom everywhere and for all. In inviting all those who share its mission, the IRLA has become one of the most recognized agents for religious liberty, including beyond the Adventist Church, which makes it more effective when acting on behalf of church members.

## Leaders

A. T. Jones, 1901; A. Moon, 1901-1904; K. C. Russel, 1904-1912; W. W. Prescott, 1912-1913; C. S. Longacre, 1913-1941; C. S. Longacre 1936-1941; H. H. Votaw, 1941-1950; A. W. Johnson, 1950-1958; J. A. Buckwalter, 1958-1959; M. E. Loewen, 1959-1975; W. A. Adams, 1975-1980; B. B. Beach, 1980-1995; J. Graz, 1995-2015; G. Diop, 2015- .

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13. "California Defeats Proposed Barbers' Sunday Law," *Liberty*, vol. 26, no 1, 1931, 4, 23.
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15. Loius K. Dickson, "Separation of Church and State Essential to Complete Freedom of Religion," *Liberty*, vol. 54, no 1, 1959, 18.
16. *Liberty*, vol. 53, no 4, 1958, 2, 3. 1888 was neither the date of organization of the NRLA nor the IRLA.
17. *GCC*, October 26, 1960, 701, 702.
18. *GCC*, October 18, 1963, 432.
19. From 1985 to 1991, *Liberty* is presented again as a publication of the SDA Church and the International Religious Liberty Association. See, *Liberty*, vol. 80, no 1, 1985, 31.
20. Roland R. Hegstad, "From the Editor's Desk," *Liberty*, vol. 59, no 1, January-February 1964, 4. Roland R. Hegstad, the *Liberty* editor, explains the change and why *Liberty* will focus on North America.
21. Memorandum Announcement, October 11, 2001. *North American Religious Liberty Association (NARLA) Annual Meeting - November 1, 2001*, Silver Spring, Maryland.
22. *Liberty*, Vol. 66, no 1, January-February 1971, 34.
23. Nussbaum had a long career and built his successful ministry on relations with influential non-Adventists. In November 1946 during the General Conference Annual Council meeting, he received an exceptional recognition from the Church leadership: "That we hereby express to Dr. Nussbaum our heartfelt gratitude for the generous service he has rendered to the cause of God in the past." *58th GCC*, November 25, 1946, 313.
24. Document, *Home and Foreign OFFICERS' MEETING*, May 30, 1946, 6435.
25. Bert B. Beach was the secretary of the Conference of Secretaries of the Christian World Communions (CSCWC) for 32 years. Graz succeeded him and served for 12 years. In 2014 Graz announced his retirement, and Ganoune Diop was elected his successor.
26. *169th GCC*, October 13, 1947, 708.
27. *GCC* 1975, 37.
28. *GCC*, 402.
29. *GCC*, October 19, 1976, 323.
30. A. T. Jones, 1901; A. Moon, 1901-1904; K. C. Russel, 1904-1912; W. W. Prescott, 1912-1913; C. S. Longacre, 1913-1941; C. S. Longacre 1936-1941; H. H. Votaw, 1941-1950; A. W. Johnson, 1950-1958; J. A. Buckwalter, 1958-1959; M. E. Loewen, 1959-1975; W. A. Adams, 1975-1980; B. B. Beach, 1980-1995; J. Graz, 1995-2015; G. Diop, 2015- .

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32. The main statements were shared with several religious organizations, churches, the government, and the United Nations. Among the shared documents were *Guiding Principles for the Responsible Dissemination of Religion or Belief*, January 29, 2000; *Recommendations on Freedom of Religion or Belief in Education*, May 17-21, 2001; and *Guiding Principles and Recommendations on Security and Religious Freedom*, June 11, 2003. See the IRLA site [www.irla.org](http://www.irla.org).
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36. ANN staff, "United Nations: New International Status for Religious Liberty Group," *ANN*, May 5, 2003, <https://adventist.news/news/united-nations-new-international-status-for-religious-liberty-group>.
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38. "Honoring Freedom," *Liberty*, May-June 2011, 16-19. <https://www.libertymagazine.org/article/honoring-freedom>.
39. <https://www.irla.org/>.
40. Flyer, *144o Forum Paulista de Libertade Religiosa e Cidadania*, 2018. As sources of information on the IRLA activities it would be useful to read: The IRLA Secretary General Letter, The Board of Directors Minutes, and the IRLA Legal Meetings.
41. See, "Part Four: Report of IRLA Activities," *Fides et Libertas*, 2008-2009, 123-144. <https://www.irla.org/fides-2008.pdf>.

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