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# One of the Strangest Friendships in Washington

Jan. 29, 2023

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It might be the strangest friendship in Washington.

He's a well-known Christian conservative who speaks out against gay marriage and abortion. She's a former civil rights lawyer who has spent much of her career fighting to desegregate schools and protect transgender kids from bullying.

Given their résumés, one might think that Tony Perkins, the president of the Family Research Council, and Anurima Bhargava, who worked in President Barack Obama's Justice Department, would be adversaries — if they ever crossed paths at all. Yet, over the past five years, they have managed to forge a bond that transcends politics and proves that you don't have to agree on values here at home to promote basic human rights abroad.

They met in 2018, when they were both appointed to serve on the nine-member U.S. Commission on International Religious Freedom, a quasi-governmental body of unpaid volunteers that investigates religious persecution abroad. Mr. Perkins was appointed by Mitch McConnell; Ms. Bhargava by Nancy Pelosi. On the commission, they spoke up for the rights of Yazidis in Syria, Baha'is in Iran and Muslims in India. Even after their terms expired in 2022, they kept in touch.

“Wrong things bother her,” Mr. Perkins told me. “And wrong things bother me.”

He knew that they had become real friends, he said, when he started worrying about her and including her in his prayers. He felt that she respected his religious faith, even if she didn't share it. "I can be candid with her," he told me. "She knows my motivations."

What does it mean when a Hindu from the South Side of Chicago joins forces with an evangelical Christian from Louisiana to fight for the rights of religious minorities abroad? Maybe it means that we're all human, and when we lean into that common humanity, good can come of it. Mr. Perkins, Ms. Bhargava and their fellow commissioners pushed for the release of people imprisoned for their beliefs, including a Quranist Muslim in Egypt, an Ahmadi Muslim in Pakistan and a Christian pastor in Turkey.

I first learned about their unusual friendship on Jan. 7, 2021, the day after the attack on the Capitol. I've known Ms. Bhargava since college — she was my roommate. I called her to process the shock of what had just happened. The country felt like it was coming apart at the seams. One thing that gave her hope, she told me, was "an email from Tony."

"Tony who?" I asked.

She explained who he was and told me that he had just written her to let her know that he opposed the lawlessness that had unfolded at the Capitol. He wanted to distance himself from the hateful statements that others were spewing and tell her what her friendship had meant to him.

"Based upon our religious backgrounds we have different worldviews," he wrote. "That said, I respect you and I want you to know that when I am often addressing issues (totally unrelated to USCIRF) which we differ on, I often think of you wanting to state my views in a way that would not be offensive to you because of that respect and friendship."

He'd treated her with respect from the first moment she met him, Ms. Bhargava told me. He made an effort to learn how to pronounce her name, even as another Republican commissioner refused to do so. They sat next to each other at a dinner retreat in North Carolina and started chatting. He'd once worked in a prison and had witnessed injustices there. His daughter was interested in becoming a lawyer. He asked her advice. ✕

The friendship made her realize that "respect and trust don't require agreement," she said.

As they got to know each other better, he told her not to believe everything written about him. In an age of political tribalism, so much gets distorted. She decided not to follow him on social media and rarely brought up topics, like abortion, where they would not find common ground. In 2020, they traveled together on a commission trip to Sudan. It was a hopeful time in the country, when protesters successfully pushed a military dictator from

power. The new government repealed the apostasy law and banned flogging for blasphemy. Mr. Perkins and Ms. Bhargava celebrated the good news in the commission's annual report.

Eventually, Ms. Bhargava invited Mr. Perkins on a trip that had nothing to do with the commission — to the Texas border to learn about the problems faced by migrant children who had been held there. He went to learn more, he told me, but mostly because she'd asked him to go. After he got back, he contacted the Trump White House to talk about “the humanitarian situation” at the border, he told me.

Their bond is all the more remarkable for the fact that his appointment to the commission in 2018 sparked outrage in some circles. The Hindu American Foundation argued that he couldn't be an objective protector of religious freedom overseas because of “hateful stances against non-Christians” at home. It cited a comment he made in 2007 saying that it was not appropriate for a Hindu chaplain to deliver a prayer in the Senate because it ran against the grain of the monotheistic Judeo-Christian values upon which the United States had been founded.

Rabbi Jack Moline, the former president of the Interfaith Alliance, argued that Mr. Perkins pushes a “twisted definition” of religious liberty that privileges Christianity above other religions. The Southern Poverty Law Center, which considers the Family Research Council a “hate group” because of its depiction of homosexuality as perversion, called his appointment “deeply disturbing.”

But on the commission, Mr. Perkins set a tone of bipartisan cooperation. One of his first acts was to make sure that Tenzin Dorjee, a Buddhist from Tibet appointed by Nancy Pelosi, was unanimously elected chairman. He repeatedly added his voice to calls for raising the embarrassingly low cap that the Trump administration had set for refugee admissions and signed off on a fact sheet that called out countries that use Shariah law to justify executing people in same-sex relationships.

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“Tony and I had a long conversation about ‘What should we say?’” Ms. Bhargava recalled.



His name also appears on a commission report that recommended sanctions against a leader in Chechnya for using religion as an excuse to torture lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender and intersex people.

When the American left and the right work together to protect vulnerable minorities abroad, they are harder to rebuff. “That's strength,” Knox Thames, a former State Department official who has also worked as a policy director at the commission, told me.

Mr. Thames co-wrote a recent report about how promoting religious freedom abroad can help safeguard our national security. It recommends that advocates form “coalitions of the vulnerable” with the L.G.B.T.Q. community to stand up for persecuted minorities abroad. It turns out that we don’t have to agree on whether Christian bakers must bake cakes for gay weddings to unanimously condemn the law that calls for homosexuals to be stoned to death in Brunei or the burning of Rohingya villages in Myanmar or the rape of Yazidi girls in Iraq.

Such coalitions are extremely fragile. Some evangelicals fear that the commission will have to modify its mission to include human rights abuses committed in the name of religion, especially against members of the L.G.B.T.Q. community. Evangelicals oppose such a change, in part because it would shift religion from victim to perpetrator. Whatever happens, I hope the commission doesn’t become yet another front in the U.S. culture wars.

For the moment, the commission, which will celebrate its 25th anniversary in October, is proving that it can be a rare bipartisan success, despite the division “religious freedom” can spark here at home. Thanks, in part, to efforts by Ms. Bhargava and Mr. Perkins, it has largely overcome the partisan infighting that plagued its early years. Christians helped push through the confirmation of President Biden’s ambassador at large for international religious freedom — Rashad Hussain, a Muslim — at a time when other ambassadorships were held up. This year’s international religious freedom summit, which opens on Jan. 31, lists both Samantha Power, President Biden’s U.S.A.I.D. administrator, and Newt Gingrich as speakers.

Mr. Perkins will be there, too. His friendship with Ms. Bhargava hasn’t changed his core beliefs, he told me. He still fights for Bible-believing Christians, whom he views as under attack in the West. But he has changed how he expresses himself. In an age when others write over-the-top tweets just to outrage their political opponents, he chooses his words more carefully and imagines his good friend is listening.

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