



Written by [Steve Byas](#) on February 22, 2017

## Woman Chess Player Makes Move for Religious Liberty

In 1920, George Truett, pastor of Dallas' First Baptist Church, preached a message on the steps of the U.S. Capitol to a crowd of about 15,000. It was a message calling for religious liberty.

"It is the natural and fundamental and indefeasible right of every human being to worship God or not, according to the dictates of his conscience, and, as long as he does not infringe upon the rights of others, he is to be held accountable alone to God for all religious beliefs and practices."



Lest anyone misconstrue his words as a call for mere toleration, Truett added, "Toleration is a matter of expediency, while liberty is a matter of principle. Toleration is a gift from man, while liberty is a gift from God.... God wants free worshipers and no other kind."

Governments, however, have been much more likely to infringe upon that liberty, instead of protecting every person's religious liberty as is their proper role. In many Muslim countries, women are required by law to don the hijab (headscarves) in public, while in some other places, such as France, the hijab is banned.

One would suspect that Truett, whose descendants own the highly successful Chick-fil-A restaurants, would have disapproved of either position, but would commend the action taken by Nazi (her first name, which means "gentle," and is pronounced Nah-Zee, not the shortened form of National Socialist, the party of Hitler) Paikidze-Barnes, the reigning U.S. women's chess champion.

The World Women's Chess Championship is being held in Tehran, Iran, but Paikidze is not there, because the theocratic Iranian government has made it a requirement that all participants (Muslim or non-Muslim) in the tournament wear the hijab.

She announced her decision in an Instagram post. "Some consider a hijab part of culture. But, I know that a lot of Iranian women are bravely protesting this forced law daily and risking a lot by doing so. That's why I will NOT wear a hijab and support women's oppression." She was unsuccessful in getting the World Chess Federation (FIDE) to move the championship out of Iran. However, Iran was the only nation to submit a bid to host the event.

A spokesman for FIDE said that they were not requiring participants to wear a hijab, but they do require players to "respect local traditions, customs, laws and religions *at all times* and be aware of your actions to ensure that do not offend." (Emphasis added.)

Ironically, the game of chess is believed to have originated in the Persian Empire (basically Iran) in the sixth century. The familiar "check," which announces an attack on the opposing king, is a variation of the Persian word for king — shah. The actual capture of the opposing king is "checkmate," or *shah-mate*, which translates roughly as "the king is helpless."

One would expect that feminists and their allies in the media to be supportive of Paikidze's courageous



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stand for women's rights, if they cannot support the concept of religious liberty, but she has received very little encouragement from either. In fact, Azadeh Moaveni, writing in an op-ed for the *New York Times*, was quite critical of her, writing, "This kind of protest — outsiders who think they know best — is exactly the opposite of what most Iranian women want, and is at the heart of what's worst about policing how Muslim women dress." (Liberty is not something that should be up to what "most" want, but rather what an individual wants).

How exactly forcing women — especially non-Muslim women such as Paikidze, who are not even Iranians — to wear a headscarf as part of a religious practice they do not believe in, is somehow "policing how Muslim women dress" is not stated. But "policing" in Iran is done by the Iranian government, which actually patrols the streets to ensure that all women wear the hijab.

Mitra Hejazipour, a woman grandmaster, and the 2015 Asian women's champion, also disagreed with Paikidze's decision to opt out of the tournament in Iran, rather than wear the hijab. Hejazipour told the *Guardian* that Paikidze's "boycott" would be detrimental to Iranian female chess players. "This is going to be the biggest sporting event women in Iran have ever seen; we haven't been able to host any world championship in other sporting fields for women in the past," Hejazipour said. "It's not right to call for a boycott. These games are important for women in Iran."

Paikidze responded, "I am not anti-Islam or any other religion. I stand for freedom of religion and choice. I'm protesting FIDE's decision not because of Iran's religion or people, but for the government's laws that are restricting my rights."

Born in 1993 in Russia, Paikidze's father, a mechanical engineer, taught her how to play chess when she was four years old. They moved to Tbilisi, the capital of Georgia, where she attended elementary school. Chess was part of the curriculum, which soon became her favorite class. Her chess teacher believed she had exceptional talent, and recommended she consider a professional chess career.

At age nine, she won her first international tournament, taking the title of European youth chess champion (in the category for girls under ten). Russian grandmaster Vladimir Belov began coaching her when she was 14, and she achieved the title of woman grandmaster in 2010, and finally, international master (which includes males, as well) in 2012.

Over the years, Paikidze won multiple tournaments and championships, before moving to the United States to attend the University of Maryland, which had a well-known powerful college chess team. Soon, she changed her FIDE affiliation to the United States, and married American engineer Greg Barnes. They make their home in Las Vegas, and Paikidze makes her living as a chess professional.

Passing on the world women's championship tournament in Iran is a financial sacrifice for her, as she could have won \$100,000. But that would have required her to follow others' religious beliefs, not her own. "I will NOT wear a hijab and support women's oppression," she explained, "even if it means missing one of the most important competitions of my career."

She added, "By participating, I would be forced to submit to forms of oppression designed specifically for women. It sets the wrong example, particularly for young girls interested in chess." She insisted that her decision is not intended as an insult to the people of Iran. "I have received the most support and gratitude from the people of Iran, who are facing this situation every day."

When government proceeds to infringe upon religious liberty, by forcing a person to wear something for religious reasons, when they do not wish to do so; or to write words on a cake antithetical to their religious beliefs; or to require Catholic nuns to pay for contraceptives in contradiction to their religious



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liberty; then that government has acted in an opposite way from what is the proper role of government. When George Truett said he was for “absolute liberty” in religion back in 1920, most Americans would have nodded in agreement. It was a principle enshrined in our founding documents, and enunciated by the founder of Rhode Island colony, Roger Williams, when he said, “Forced worship stinks in God’s nostrils.” Were it so today, the country’s inhabitants would be better off.



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