What is the biggest threat to religious freedom around the world? Perhaps restrictions on religious dress, such as the banning or requiring of full Islamic dress for women. Or maybe religious hatred, like that which inspires religious riots in India between Hindus and Muslims. Or perhaps it is political, such as the Chinese communist invasion of Tibet and the restrictions they placed on Buddhism.

Before President Obama traveled to India, Indonesia and other Asian countries last week, he received a letter of advice suggesting issues of religious freedom he should raise with those countries' leaders. The letter came from the United States Commission on International Religious Freedom (USCIRF), a little-known commission established by Congress in 1998 to monitor religious freedom around the world and to advise U.S. leaders. What did they identify as threats to religious freedom?

In Indonesia, the USCIRF flagged cross-religious violence and worried that lack of justice against the perpetrators of such violence would lead to further incidents, since the villains would think they could act with impunity. It applauded court sentences against Christian and Muslim perpetrators as a positive step to prevent this. It also flagged a discriminatory law against the Ahmadiyya branch of Islam that banned worship outside of private homes.

For India, the USCIRF noted the country's multi-religious mix (a Hindu majority, with a large Muslim minority, as well as Sikhs and Christians) and the national government's attempt at religious peace. But the commission also noted the continued occasional cross-religious violence that was often poorly contained by local or regional governments.

The USCIRF thus emphasized the problem of religiously motivated violence and the need to develop institutions of civil society to create and maintain conditions for peaceful coexistence.

OK. But what does "institutions of civil society" mean in reality? To over-simplify: The difference between personal belief and religious belief is numbers; an individual's belief is personal while a group of individuals is required to hold a religious belief. And when many people believe the same, they usually want to assemble and express that belief together. That means they need a place to meet, whether it is called a church, a mosque, a synagogue or a temple.

And where in a community would these buildings be built? That is up to that most boring of civil institutions, the planning commission. These commissions -- whether they are called planning commissions, zoning boards, construction permission committees or whatever -- are local committees that determine the location of buildings of public worship, retail shops, industrial factories and so on. They can prevent the free exercise of religion by preventing the erection of a place of worship -- often at great expense to the body of believers involved.

The USCIRF has begun to flag this as a concern. While its publications emphasize violent incidents, they also identify governmental restrictions placed on buildings of worship -- usually carried out by the local equivalent of the planning commission. It is here that questions about sitting, local suitability and congestion are played out.

The convenient point about planning commissions is that religious prejudice can be transformed into debates over traffic, noise and impact on property values. In one small English town, the Christian council members repeatedly refused planning permission to a mosque on the basis of an inadequate exit from the parking lot.

The planning commission is not just a threat abroad, it also plays a role in religious discrimination in the United States. Recently, in Bentonville, Tenn., a mosque was refused permission to build because of the need for a left-turn traffic light.

At least that was the official reason. The real reason is that the 40 families of the congregation were overwhelmed at the hearing by hundreds of boisterous Christians who claimed they did not want Muslims worshipping near them -- even though the mosque was in a rural area. It is not clear how many of the protestors were local residents.

In the end, the planning commission has become a battleground where the members of majority religions try to prevent the building of houses of worship representing minority religions. In Bentonville, it was a mosque. But the same strategy is regularly used to disallow the building of churches of small Christian denominations. Indeed, new church buildings comprise the vast majority of rejected religious buildings. Today, the planning commission may perhaps be the most effective threat to freedom of worship.