

The Importance of Prioritizing The Issue of Religious Freedom

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Abstract

This article explores the nature of the right to freedom of religion as well as the nature and the extent of growing religious intolerance in the world today. The need to prevent religion based violence and displacement that occupy the contemporary international politics, this article seeks to push this concern further.

Résumé

Cet article examine la nature du droit à la liberté religieuse, ainsi que la nature et l'étendue de l'intolérance religieuse grandissante dans le monde d'aujourd'hui. L'article tente de faire monter d'un cran notre niveau de préoccupation quant à la nécessité d'empêcher que ne se produisent la violence religieuse et les déplacements de populations - préoccupations qui retiennent l'attention de la politique internationale contemporaine.

The desire to enjoy the right of religious freedom has proven itself to be one of the most potent, contagious and influential forces ever known throughout history.¹ Yet the enjoyment of religious freedom has also proven to be one of the most elusive and fragile of all human rights through the centuries.²

It is a striking fact that, despite the bloody history of religious intolerance, there have been more Christian martyrs in this century alone than in the previous nineteen combined.³ Believers around the world continue to face the most severe forms of persecution and to suffer death, torture, maiming, rape, assault, detention, enslavement, forced labour and a

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host of other human rights abuses and forms of discrimination simply for holding their religious beliefs.

The numbers of those affected by religious issues alone compel the prioritisation of religious rights. It is estimated that over 75% of the population of the world claim adherence to a religion.⁴ Yet it is also estimated that 2.6 billion people are denied freedom of religion and that there are over 1 million religious prisoners and 159,000 Christian martyrs a year, a figure which is expected to rise to 210,000 by the year 2025.⁵

Yet the cry of the victims often goes unheard or unheeded. The complexity and sensitivity of the subject-matter frequently result in the issue being sidelined or completely sidestepped. The comparative responses of the international community to the phenomena of racial and religious discrimination demonstrate this paralysing fear of addressing issues pertaining to religion. Although the two problems were initially jointly prioritised at the United Nations, they were subsequently separated due to factors predominantly unrelated to their relative importance.⁶ Whilst there are a convention, treaty body, Special Rapporteur, day, week, three decades and now a forthcoming World Conference dedicated to racial discrimination, there are no such mechanisms in place for religious discrimination, which is dealt with only by a Special Rapporteur.

In addition to the compelling need to ease the suffering of victims of abuses, there are other strategic reasons why the right of freedom of religion must no longer be allowed to remain in the penumbra of human rights discourse. It is crucial that religious liberty must come to be recognised as critical both in terms of its intrinsic importance and in its significance in cultivating conditions neces-

sary for peace and the enjoyment of all human rights.

The fundamental importance of the right to religious freedom is due in part to the fact that religion often forms the foundations of an individual's and a people's sense of identity, perspective and outlook on life. The very personal nature of the right qualifies it for special attention. If the state will not respect the most intimate beliefs of individuals, it will be unlikely to accord respect to other less personal rights. Religious liberty is therefore valuable as a litmus test for the well being of human rights generally.

Religion is also significant as the major inspiration for the belief in the existence of an inherent dignity in mankind and spring from the concept of doing good to one's neighbour. The existence of religious life in a country can be an important factor in providing the motivation and conditions necessary for the realisation of civil and political rights, the provision of many of the social, economic and cultural rights and the understanding of responsibility and stewardship required for environmental and developmental rights.

The protection of religion can also be important in establishing or protecting peace, democracy and justice as religious institutions or leaders are often at the forefront of the struggle against oppression. Where they have no freedom to speak out the flame of hope for a just and democratic society dims or even dies. The position of the Catholic Church in East Timor is an example of how important the role of religious bodies can be in such situations.

Beyond being a voice for the people, religious groups and individuals are often the only or the best mediators in situations of conflict and tension. Examples of the unique role religious



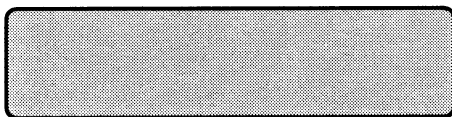
communities can play in this respect include those seen in South Africa, Rhodesia/Zimbabwe, the Philippines, El Salvador, Guatemala and East Germany.⁷

It is increasingly important to address the issue of religious intolerance now due to the changing nature of conflict in the world today. As Professor Samuel Huntington has propounded, with the demise of the Cold War there has been a shift in the causes of confrontation and the intra-civilisational clash of political ideas is now being replaced by an inter-civilisational clash of culture and religion.⁸

Analysis of the major conflicts taking place today has shown that the failure to accommodate religious and ethnic differences is one of the primary catalysts for violence. The religious elements in the tragic conflicts in the former Yugoslavia, Sudan, the Middle East, Algeria, Sri Lanka and Northern Ireland, amongst many others, demonstrate the importance of this factor.

The global resurgence in religion in the late twentieth century and the increasingly crucial role that religion is expected to play in international affairs in the future, together with the increase of religious and cultural strife, further advance the argument that the issue of religious freedom should be prioritised in human rights discourse and international relations.

Accordingly greater priority and resources to the issue of religious freedom will help to protect individuals from intolerance and human rights abuses and prevent the violence, displacement and war that lie in their wake. The adoption of measures to address the issue with both foresight and determination will help to prevent both immeasurable suffering and loss of life and the wasteful employment of resources in solving problems arising from prior inadvertence in this key area. ■



Notes

1. Arcot Krishnaswami, Study of Discrimination in the Matter of Religious Rights and Practices, United Nations document E/CN.4/Sub.2/200/Rev.1.
2. See Littel, cited in Buzzard & Thelen, The Protection of Religious Liberty in International Law (1987), p.5.
3. James and Marti Hefley, By Their Blood: Christian Martyrs of the Twentieth Century (Grand Rapids, Baker Book House, 1996).
4. Figures taken from David B. Barrett, ed., World Christian Encyclopaedia: A Com-

parative Study of Churches and Religions in the Modern World AD 1900–2000 (Oxford, Oxford University Press, 1982).

5. *ibid.*
6. See Natan Lerner, Religious Rights Under the United Nations, in van der Vyver and Witte, eds., Religious Rights in Global Perspective: Legal Perspectives (The Hague, Martinus Nijhoff, 1996).
7. Douglas M. Johnston, Jr., Religion, The Missing Dimension of Statecraft (Oxford, Oxford University Press, 1994).
8. Samuel P. Huntington, The Clash of Civilizations and the Remaking of World Order (New York, Simon & Schuster, 1996). □

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