

RELIGIOUS FREEDOM

*A sermon delivered by Reverend Nathan C. Walker
As part of the Peace is Possible Series at the First Unitarian Church of Philadelphia*

Introduction

Two-time Nobel Peace Prize nominee Joseph Grieboski invited me to attend the *Interparliamentary Conference on Human Rights and Religious Freedom* this last November. Dignitaries from over two-dozen countries were present to debate contemporary issues, to draft statements of conscience, and to affirm the right to freedom of religion and belief. The month prior, Grieboski hosted a dinner in Washington D.C. for a small group of us to speak with representatives from China's State Administration for Religious Affairs and leaders from China's six official religions. In these settings it has become clear to me that religious freedom is one of the most pressing moral issues of our time. I have come to believe that if upheld by sovereign nations, religious freedom can be a foundation for liberty, justice and peace in our world community.

In this context, the intent of my sermon is two fold. I want to understand the nature of international abuses of religious freedom. I want by to classify these abuses so as to make some sense of it all. In doing so my hope is to demonstrate that through religious freedom *peace is possible*. I'll begin by explaining how religious freedom has become a fundamental human right.

Religious Freedom as a Human Right

Throughout human history nation states have sought to legislate uniformed religious practice, believing that if everyone held the same belief then the common religion would stabilize society. Over time, this practice failed, because religious persecution, coercion and colonization perpetuated a culture of violent intolerance. This resulted not only in internal conflicts but resulting in mass migrations. This kind of exodus motivated those who fled to the Americas and whose founders crafted a Constitution¹ that affirmed two core principles related to our discussion: a country that would vow not to Establish a state religion while simultaneously affirm the individual's right to free exercise of religion. As shown in the slides, the United States has since become a nation whose religious diversity is a keystone of democracy. As part of a global community, the religious pluralism in our society has become a modern ideal, intricately connected to the principles of freedom of speech, assembly and press, and has become recognized by the international community as an inalienable human right. According to the *Universal Declaration of Human Rights*, affirmed by the member states of the United Nations in 1948,

“Everyone has the right to freedom of thought, conscience and religion; this right includes freedom to change [one's] religion or belief, and freedom... to manifest [one's] religion or belief in teaching, practice, worship and observance.”²

In 1981 international leaders expanded this principle after working for 20 years³ on the language written into the *United Nations Declaration on the Elimination of All Forms of Intolerance and of Discrimination Based on Religion or Belief*. It states, “Discrimination between human beings on grounds of religion or belief... [is] a violation of... human rights... as an obstacle to friendly

and peaceful relations between nations.”^{4,5} Our first and foremost task this morning is to identify violations of these this human right, starting with a summary of the stories earlier shared with the children.

My Classifications of Abuses in Religious Freedom

Five years ago, the French National Assembly passed a law that to this day forbids, quote, “public school employees and students from wearing conspicuous religious symbols, including the Muslim headscarf, [the Sikh turban]⁶, the Jewish skullcap, and large crosses.” The first problem with such a law is found in the language used, which demonstrates the legislator’s ignorance and insensitivity to religious cultures:

- a *Muslim headscarf* is either called a hijāb that covers a woman’s head and neck whereas the burqua covers the entire female body except for the eyes;
- a *Sikh turban* is called a dastār (Dst-aa-r);
- a *Jewish skullcap* is called a yarmukah (Yam-a-kah);
- and to legalize the size of cross that is worn is to accommodate the Christian majority who may wear small crosses, while permitting Catholic Nuns to wear their habits.

Censorship

This kind of law demonstrates our first classification of abuses in religious freedom called *censorship*. In the United States, clothing is legally considered to be symbolic speech⁷; therefore restricting someone’s religious apparel is restricting one’s free speech. When any country censors the free expression of belief through religious apparel, the state strips individuals from their cultural and spiritual identity. Just ask the 25 million Sikhs about the men who were forced to reveal their hair in drivers-license photos⁸, which is as private as someone being forced to show their genitals in public. The intent of the French government was not to strip citizens of their dignity but to ensure the nation’s security by affirming a secular worldview, based on the belief in the separation of religion and state. What they failed to recognize is that the attempt of freedom *from* religion is a violation of the international human right, freedom *of* religion.

When a state denies someone free expression of belief the state creates a climate where increase religious-based violence is more likely to occur. For example, in response to this law, there were not only increased violence within France but also broad. For example, Iraqi militants held hostage and threatened to kill two French reporters if the ban was not lifted. French authorities did not want to side with the terrorist therefore continued to uphold the ban, which resulted in more violence. Regardless of the violent outcome of this example, it can be argued that it is coercive for a state to threaten its citizens with penalties for wearing religious apparel. *Coercion* is another classification of religious abuses, found in both democratic and theocratic countries that regulate religious education.

Coercion

Spain, for example, recently required all students in public schools to “take a class on Roman Catholic dogma, taught by church appointees... that include[d] the church’s position on divorce, sex and abortion, as well as basic theology.”⁹ When a state mandates religious education for all children the state denies parents the fundamental human right to “ensure the

religious and moral education of their children in conformity with their own convictions.”¹⁰ How did educators respond? In 2003, the President of 11,000 parents’ associations said, “Our ultimate objective is to take religion out of the public schools completely... We can’t even start to talk about whether or not to ban head scarves while there are still large crucifixes hanging in public schools and there are nuns in habits who teach pupils with state funds.”¹¹

What this advocate does not understand is the difference between the establishment of religion and the free exercise thereof. When the state legislates a religious curriculum it establishes a government-funded religion; however, when a state denies individuals the right to express their beliefs through apparel they violate two rights affirmed by many Western societies: free speech and religious freedom. It can be argued that our Western ideology should not be forced on other societies. However, the struggle to govern religious pluralism is not unique to western democracies; take for instance the modern theocracies of Northern Sudan, Malaysia, Iran & Egypt. All of these countries have Constitutional statements that offer protections for the religious minority, and all of whom are member states of the UN, which have passed four major resolutions in the last 30 years seeking to eliminate all forms of religious intolerance.

In Northern Sudan the state requires all students to study Islam in schools, “regardless of whether they were Muslim, and even if enrolled in a private Christian school.”¹² In Malaysia, the Muslim citizens who sought to covert to another faith were deemed “apostates” and sometimes sent to religious “rehabilitation centers.” This is another kind of *coercion*, denying the individual the human right to the freedom of thought, conscience and religion.

In Iran and Egypt the Islamic Constitutions protect religious minorities and are granted full respect; however, various religious groups have been imprisoned and harassed. This includes requiring Sufi Muslims to sign documents renouncing Sufism; requiring evangelical Christians to carry membership cards; and permitting officially sanctioned anti-Semitic propaganda threatening Jews. The most notable threat to religious freedom is for those in the Baha’i faith, deemed a heretical Islamic group, because their belief in an 18th century Persian nobleman who is considered to be in a line of prophets that included Buddha, Abraham, Jesus and Muhammad. On Thursday, dozens of Muslim villagers attacked the homes of Baha’is by hurling firebombs while screaming “Baha’is are enemies of Allah.”¹³ No protection was or would be offered to these minorities because Iran and Egypt does not recognize Baha’i as an official religion.

These kinds of issues are not limited to theocracies, as well. Take for instance, the socialist republic of China. For the religions not recognized by China there has been “intensified harassment from government authorities in preparation of the 2008 Olympic Games. Municipal authorities in Beijing closed some house churches and canceled the visas of those who were engaging in ‘illegal religious activities.’” The Chinese government has gone as far as requiring nuns and monks to legally denounce the Dalai Lama and those who did not were subject to government violence, the lockdown of monasteries and indoctrinated with “patriotic education” campaigns.

Similarly, in Myanmar (Mee-in-mar) –formerly named Burma– the government “violently suppressed peaceful pro-democracy demonstrations led by Buddhist monks... and destroyed existing places of worship.” China, however, continues to arrest and imprison members of Falun Gong, many of whom are reported to have died after being tortured by the

government.¹⁴ In addition to *censorship* and *coercion* China and Myanmar (Me-in-mar) fall into another category of abuse called *religious-based violence*.

Religious-Based Violence

When a state uses force to regulate religious practice, the state fails to see how their actions are just as discriminatory and violent as those who engage in religious-based terrorism. In both instances, the terrorist and the violent state use force to strip another of their inherent dignity. There are some initial steps we can take to address such violence.

We can begin by recognizing that a critical goal of diplomacy is to understand how terrorists and violent states are motivated, and to determine whether their motivations are based on theology or not. Religion-based terrorism can often stem from poverty, rage, victimhood and a lack of education; in this context, religion becomes the mask to hide the true suffering. Once the true motivations are identified the religion of the terrorist and the belief system of the violent state becomes the balm through which healing can occur.

Imagine if the international community had the skills to collectively empower those religious authorities within that particular religious and cultural tradition to convincingly use theologies that deem terrorism as unjust and heretical. Imagine if the international community empowered leaders within the violent state to use the highest principles of that government to reform the state with the intent of preserving the dignity of all. Imagine a diplomatic strategy based on the understanding that those within the tradition have the power to reform the tradition.

One way we can honor this truth is to equip the United Nations with the multicultural skill-set to work with the authorities and adherents of various religions to perform a powerful diplomatic task. The purpose is to promote dialogue between governmental and religious organizations so as to contain and eventually end all religion-based terrorism and extremism. In this way, we promote religious freedom as an essential human right aware that religious freedom is intricately related to international security. This means we cannot in the name of separation-of-church-and-state dismiss all God-talk in diplomatic affairs; the fact is we cannot separate religion from the state when the very beliefs systems that characterize many nations are inherently theologically based. In order to heal these discriminatory practices we cannot disregard all religious discourse from public affairs; rather we must deeply understand the origins of religious worldviews, to study their cultural and historical context and to integrate that knowledge in our diplomatic strategies.

One of the most morally challenging forms of diplomacy ahead of us is to promote interstate and interreligious dialogue. We must train leaders to be candid and yet not polemic about their assertions; they must seek to listen to understand the origins of various religious truth claims. This kind of dialogue cannot be driven by those outside of the religious community in question, nor outside the state in which the conflict occurs; in order for diplomacy to be effective it must derive from those who practice, teach and lead within that context. In partnering with those in the communities, international leaders help to make clear that religious freedom does not mean you can believe in or do anything you want. Freedom of belief is the inalienable right of every person to engage in a *responsible*, a *responsible*, search for truth and meaning.

- The responsibility lies with the individual to integrate spiritual practices that will aid in their understanding of themselves in relation to a global community;
- The responsibility lies with religious authorities to articulate and interpret theological principles in order to build a common good; and
- The responsibility lies with the state to make, apply and administer laws that preserve the inalienable rights of all members of the human family as the foundation for freedom, justice and peace in the world.¹⁵

Societies that cannot manage this kind of moral complexity are societies that die at the hands of dualism – on one hand *prejudice*, the other hand *power*.

Conclusion

One way to release the iron fist of *prejudice* is through *understanding*. Understanding comes from no longer fearing what we do not know. So if ever you wonder why it is socially imperative for us to embrace religious pluralism, it is because we must reach out our hand to those who believe, think and act differently. In doing so we begin to understand others and release the iron fist of *power* by embracing *pluralism*. The more voices heard the less powerful the dominant voice becomes; the more people who give voice to the religious minority the less potent the views of the majority. Let's embrace one of the great gifts of humanity, our religious diversity. If we are to achieve this, if we are to collectively affirm religious freedom as a fundamental human right, our prayers will be answered:

may we heal *censorship* with free expression;

may we heal *coercion* with free agency;

may we heal *violence* with responsibility;

may we heal *prejudice* with understanding;

may we heal *power* with pluralism.

When such healing occurs we will become a beloved world community that knows peace as not a political slogan but as a way of life.

May it be so.

Notes

¹ The First Amendment of the U.S. Constitution reads, “Congress shall make no law respecting an establishment of religion, or prohibiting the free exercise thereof; or abridging the freedom of speech, or of the press; or the right of the people peaceably to assemble, and to petition the government for a redress of grievances.”

² Article 18.

³ Davis, Derek H. (2002) *The evolution of religious freedom as a universal human right: examining the role of the 1981 United Nations Declaration on the Elimination of All Forms of Intolerance and of Discrimination Based on Religion or Belief*, Brigham Young University law Review, 2002-01-01.

⁴ Article 3.

⁵ See also the 1976 *International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights* and the 1993 United Resolutions adopted by the General Assembly entitled *Elimination of All Forms of Religious Intolerance*.

⁶ Not included in original language, but in subsequent publications.

⁷ *Tinker v. Des Moines Independent Community School District*, 393 U.S. 503 (1969).

⁸ “Shingara Mann Singh, 52, a French national, lost as series of appeals in France against the refusal by authorities to issue a new driving license with a photograph of him wearing a [dastār]... Pensioner Ranjit Singh was unable to access health care since 2002 because French authorities would not renew his residence card unless he removed his turban for a photograph,” as reported by Claudia Parsons in New York in the article *Sikhs take turban rights case to United Nations*, published in *The Australian* on December 16, 2008.

⁹ Fuchs, Dale (2003) *New Law Requires Roman Catholicism Classes in Spain’s Schools*, New York Times December 21, 2003.

¹⁰ Article 18 section 4 of the *International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights* passed by the United Nations General Assembly on March 23, 1976.

¹¹ Fuchs, Dale (2003) *New Law Requires Roman Catholicism Classes in Spain’s Schools*, New York Times December 21, 2003.

¹² Part II of the 2008 International Religious Freedom Report under the section titled “Sudan” retrieved from <http://www.state.gov/g/drl/rls/irf/2008/108351.htm>

¹³ Michael, Maggie (2009) *Groups: Fillagers attack homes of Baha’is in Egypt*, Associated Press article in *The Washington Post*, Thursday, April 2, 2009.

¹⁴ Part II of the 2008 International Religious Freedom Report under the section titled “China” retrieved from <http://www.state.gov/g/drl/rls/irf/2008/108351.htm>

¹⁵ Item 4 of the Draft Concluding Document of the *Interparliamentary Conference on Human Rights and Religious Freedom*, page 21.