

“Love Your Enemies”
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The words of Jesus, “Love one another as I have loved you”, link explicitly love of God and love of neighbour. The two great commandments, found in both the New Testament and the Torah, complement each other. Similar thoughts are found in the holy books of probably all other spiritual communities, certainly including Tibetan Buddhism.



The Dalai Lama and Richard Gere

Consider, for example, something His Holiness, the Dalai Lama, said to about 7000 admirers at the Ottawa civic centre yesterday. The much-loved Nobel Laureate and honorary Canadian citizen stressed that inner happiness comes from doing acts of compassion to enemies. He mentioned a fellow monk who had been imprisoned for years and abused in a Tibetan prison by the Chinese party-state. When finally freed and reaching the Dalai Lama, he told His Holiness that he was deeply troubled because he felt himself in danger of losing compassion towards his oppressors. Jesus also said, “... love your enemies...” (Matthew 5.44).

In this context, and bearing in mind BBC news reports today that Christians have been killed over the weekend in both Kano, Nigeria, and Nairobi, Kenya, I thought I might speak to you about the persecution of Christians today. The topic was discussed last week

before a packed hall at the synagogue of Rabbi Reuven Bulka in Ottawa.

Like many others in diverse spiritual communities, I've long advocated that adherents of all faiths should defend each other when one is under attack. During the terrible siege of Sarajevo in the '90's, for example, many Edmontonians of Christian and other-and no-faiths protested at city hall about the appalling treatment our Muslim brothers and sisters in Bosnia. Later, many of the same diverse group gathered to protest the treatment of Christians in Pakistan. As you know, an attack on one faith community often becomes an attack on all of them. Hitler, Stalin and Mao persecuted all religions.

There are free countries of many faith backgrounds today. Paul Marshall, author of books on religion and politics, says Latin America has become one of the most religiously free regions in the world. The nations of Central Europe have in recent years been largely free from religious persecution, as have many in Africa, and several in Asia.

Pew Research

A 2011 Pew Forum study on Religion and Public Life (<http://www.pewforum.org/>) estimated that Christians today constitute about 2.1 billion persons. Approximately one-tenth of them are being persecuted in varying degrees by governments or fellow citizens in 131 of the world's independent countries. Another estimate is that approximately 105,000 Christians are murdered yearly because of their faith. In other words, about one Christian is killed every five minutes somewhere on earth.

Open Doors, a Christian organization, issues an annual listing of the worst-offender countries. Here are a few examples:

Saudi Arabia

Saudi Arabia, home to more than one million Christian foreign workers, bans churches and private acts of Christian prayer. The monarchy permits its religious police to raid private Christian services and to bring participants up on charges of blasphemy.

Concurrently, author David Aikman notes, there is a “steady drumbeat of anti-Christian propagandizing by Saudi media outlets.”

Iran

There is rightly much international concern for Baha’i’s in Iran because they have no legal rights and many have been murdered by the regime. Aikman reports that Iran is probably second only to China in having the fastest-growing Christian house-church community. Dozens have been arrested and jailed for attempting to worship. The regime has recently sentenced a convert to Christianity to death. (The victim, Yousef Nadarkhani, is a pastor of a group, some of whom are converts. Because of the country’s Orwellian penal code, those who seek to leave Islam face the real prospect of death.)

China

The repression of Tibetan Buddhists, Falun Gong and Uighur Muslims in China has gained worldwide attention.

The Beijing party-state has also made an unsuccessful effort to bring the burgeoning Christian population to heel. The State Administration for Religious Affairs (SARA), which controls all religions in China, manages the Three-Self Patriotic Movement (TSPM) for Protestants and the “Catholic Patriotic Association”, which does not recognize the Pope. The number of Christians attending state-approved churches totals 20-30 million. The remaining estimated 50-75 million Christians belong to unregistered ‘house churches’.

Sudan

Governments in north Sudan have tormented Christian and animist minorities in the south for decades, culminating in the racially-motivated genocide in Darfur that began in 2003. Although Sudan’s president has been indicted by the International Criminal Court, and in spite of the elation that greeted the semi-independence he granted to South Sudan in July 2011, the violence has not ended. Christians in the South Kordofan region are today enduring aerial bombardments, targeted killings, kidnappings of children, and other atrocities. U.N.

reports indicate that 53,000 - 75,000 civilians have been driven from their homes in recent months (See, for example, the opinion piece by Eric Reeves:

<https://mail.google.com/mail/u/0/?shva=1#inbox/136df3d41191e1fa>).

Pakistan

Christians living in Pakistan comprise about 1.6 percent of the estimated 170 million population. They live in constant fear of the country's blasphemy laws, which carry the death penalty and are still used against religious minorities. In 2010, Asia Bibi, a Christian mother of five, was sentenced to death for allegedly insulting the Prophet Muhammad. When Punjab Gov. Salman Taseer explored ways of freeing her, he was murdered. On March 2, 2011, Pakistan's federal minorities minister, Shahbaz Bhatti, was gunned down. A Christian, Bhatti had predicted his death for months while defending his Christian faith and religious freedom.



Minister Bhatti in Ottawa approx one month before his death

Conclusion

In my opinion, the West should use the billions of dollars in aid it gives to offending governments as leverage to stop the persecution of minorities, including spiritual ones.

While the world continues to grapple with the issue of persecution of Christians and other faiths, democratic governments must protect our own religious minorities effectively, including those viewed with suspicion by some, and ensure that all can worship, live and work without fear. Author Ayaan Hirsi Ali observes, "the protection of the freedom of conscience and speech . distinguishes free societies from

(those that are) unfree...” Presidential candidate John Kennedy made a similar point in 1960: “An attack on one religion is an attack on all.”

That’s why it’s prudent to ban the incitement of hatred against identifiable religious and other communities at home, as Canada’s Parliament did years ago in our Criminal Code. Governments which don’t do so often find that the violent groups attacking others eventually turn on the very governments who sought to curry political favour with them by permitting the harassment of minorities.

Human dignity is ultimately indivisible today. It’s through mutual respect that we can build a world in which all peoples, religions and cultures can genuinely feel at home. Harmony and peace can occur in this century only if spiritual communities co-operate.

His Holiness, the Dalai Lama has long called for a new century of compassion based on equality for all faiths, cultures and peoples. He said similar things during his visit to Ottawa these past few days.

I should indicate that the suppression of Tibetan Buddhism and culture by China’s Communist party has worsened in recent years to the point that about two dozen men and women have opted for self-immolation and most have perished in doing so. It took only one act of self-immolation in Tunisia to spark the Arab Spring, but all these deaths have left Beijing unwilling to lift the oppression in Tibet.

In short, all of us in faith communities must begin to help each other effectively around the world.

Thank you.

References:

Aikman, David. (2012). The Worldwide Attack on Christians. *Commentary*, 133 (2), 37-41. [Commentary_Aikman_2012.pdf](#),

Ali, Ayaan Hirsi. (2012). Christophobia. *Newsweek*, 159(7), 28-35.

Marshall, Paul. (2007). Patterns of Religious Freedom: A Global View. *Insights on Law & Society*, 7(3), 4-23.

A report, *Sixty Years of Chinese Misrule*, by the International Campaign for Tibet, was released yesterday in Ottawa at the Sixth World Parliamentarians Convention on Tibet 30, attended by legislators from 30 countries. You can access it at: www.savetibet.org