

BUILDING A WORLD SAFE FOR RELIGIOUS DIVERSITY

Notes for David Kilgour at a prayer breakfast

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Ottawa

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.

Jesus also said, “... love your enemies...” (Matthew 5.44). In this context, I thought I might speak a little about the persecution of Christians today. I read somewhere quite recently that about 80 percent of the persons harassed or persecuted today around the world for their religion are Christians.

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, by self-identified Christians, many Edmonton residents of Christian and other faiths-and no faith-protested at city hall about the appalling treatment our Muslim brothers and sisters in Bosnia. Later, some of the same persons 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, Mao and some less-known mass murderers persecuted all religions.

Happily, there are free countries of many faith backgrounds today. Paul Marshall, author of many books on religion and politics, notes that Latin America has become one of the most religiously free regions in the world. The nations of Central/Eastern 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 almost 200 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.

In my opinion, donor governments and international charities should use the billions of dollars in aid they give 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 is 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 by permitting the harassment of minorities.

Human dignity is ultimately indivisible. 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.

Freedom of Religious Expression

As you'll all know from his fairly recent visit to Ottawa sponsored in part by MP David Anderson, Os Guinness, author of *The Global Public Square*, is an eloquent voice for religious freedom, or 'soul freedom' as he terms it, because he includes the rights of secularists as well as those of us of faith. He sees this freedom as key to the maintenance of an open public square in which all can live with civility and harmony. Part of that liberty is the right to change one's faith, but only yesterday some of us heard that many governments in the Middle East have made it illegal to convert to Christianity. On the bright side, such laws do seem to be uniting Christians of all denominations in the region.

Paul Marshall, who has done much for the same cause, notes that deep differences are seldom addressed other than in a shallow way. He praises Guinness and *Public Square* highly.

This brings me to Benedict Rogers of the UK and his work with Christian Solidarity Worldwide (csw- website - <http://www.csw.org.uk/about.htm> - and highlights of our annual report: <http://www.csw.org.uk/annualreport.htm>).

Rogers seems never to sleep. I told him I wanted to mention CSW and him to you, so he sent links to it. He also sent an article from the U.K. Catholic Herald, <http://magazine.catholicherald.co.uk/#!edition/uk.co.catholicherald.magazine.issue.ch20151225/article/page-95601>, and an extract from my book - <http://yangon.coconuts.co/2015/12/26/personal-history-my-friendship-burmese-priest-and-unexpected-religious-journey>. Also an interview: <http://aleteia.org/2016/04/07/how-a-human-rights-advocate-became-a-catholic/>

Conclusion

From all this, numerous lessons appear to follow. Steven Spielberg, the film director, spoke to the Harvard commencement last spring and essentially invited the graduates to confront the world's villains. Putting it another way, perhaps more Christians should seek to be like Daniel, Hananiah, Mishael and Azariah in the Book of Daniel. The four remained completely faithful to the Lord even when it meant risking their lives.

Thank you.