

Religious Rights and Threatened Nations

Introduction

Religious rights? What do we mean by this? Are they private or public? How much will they impact on the society that is being asked to respect such rights? How readily can we expect a society to respect these rights even in a global age such as our own?

Let's be clear from the outset that the religious rights we are discussing should include more than being allowed to skulk around believing what one wishes and worshipping privately. It must also include the right to "evangelize, change religion, build up schools and charitable institutions, and participate in the public square," as a recent article noted. [article on "Freedom of Religion"] In other words, religious rights normally include the right to advertise our faith—to turn our church into a public institution with a real voice in the country.

To understand what we're asking, let's look at the matter from the perspective of the country we are asking to honor these rights. We are demanding not just the right to believe what we wish, but the liberty to impose a new institution in the public place. We may not demand that others reverence this institution and look to it for guidance as we may, but its profile still changes the skyline, especially if it is in the shape of a minaret rather than a spire or bell tower. Our claim to religious rights, then, entails a corresponding demand on society to allow its skyline to be altered, even if ever so slightly. We can assert our claims to our rights, but these claims may fall on deaf ears unless society shows a modicum of tolerance for religious diversity.

An additional problem is that when we speak of religious "rights" we are using a terminology and a conceptual scheme that was invented two centuries ago and is still foreign to much of the world today. We are referring to the rights inherent in individuals to act upon their religious beliefs, something that would have been foreign to the thinking of the world at one time and still remains so in large swaths of the globe.

Human Rights Language

In no traditional societies throughout the world can we expect to find any charter of individual rights. This was as true of pre-modern Europe as it is today of much of Asia, Africa, the Pacific and the rest of what used to be called the Third World. In the part of the Pacific in which I work, the very concept of individual rights is regarded with suspicion among most older people, and my guess is that it meets with similar skepticism in other parts of the world.

To understand why this is so, we must recall the more traditional view of human society. The structure of society was usually in the shape of a pyramid with the ruler at the top, nobles below him, and other classes ranked in descending order down to the very base of the pyramid. The god who had created this society entrusted power to its rulers, who were in turn expected to provide for the welfare of their subjects. Society was a given, and the members of a society were thought to have no more right to reshape their society than they had to transform their own nature.

In these traditional societies, static and hierarchical as they were, the person was first and

foremost defined as a social being. "I am because we are" is the motto of one African tribe, but the thought pattern applies equally in countless other places through the world. Emphasis was placed on the individual's contribution to society as a whole, with each person having a fixed position and a set of duties and responsibilities to the community that nurtured him and bestowed an identity. Personal satisfaction was very much a secondary consideration, almost a byproduct of one's social status. The prevailing social ethic in such societies was grounded in the individual's duties to society, rather than in what he might expect to receive from others. To insist on what one was due from others was seen as self-serving and irresponsible; instead, a dutiful member of society would have been mindful of the obligations that were to be paid.

This is not to say that individuals were regarded as mere chattel. Even if individual rights were not named as such, the dignity of individuals was implicitly recognized and protection afforded them. It would have been impossible for societies to have functioned without providing some safeguards for the lives and property of their members. These safeguards were embedded in a code of justice, whether this was expressed in legal terms or not, while the ethic of compassion offered an additional protection for the individual.

As the powerful new modern state rose in Europe, perceptions of society began to change. The state came to be seen no longer as a divine creation but as a product of human forces, a man-made institution to which individuals voluntarily surrendered some of their freedom so as to achieve certain common goals. Why this profound change? Mercantile development and the rise of the modern nation-state were certainly the wellsprings from which the stress on the individual flowed. Of course, the focus on the individual can also be partly attributed to heightened self-awareness that grew out of the Enlightenment. Finally, the recourse to personal rights was in part a reaction to the mighty new state, which appeared to pose a greater threat to the individual than the ancient society ever had.

Even today most traditional societies are puzzled by this development. Pacific Island groups have no word for "rights" in their indigenous language. The English term has been adopted into the vocabulary, if only as a concession to modern conventions and global expectations. The very term "rights," in the minds of many older islanders, stands for a selfish individualism. It is tantamount to embracing the cause of the single human person over and against the good of the entire society—selfishness versus communitarianism, as it were. In the minds of many, the modern advocacy of rights is one of the most pernicious contagions that the West has unleashed on traditional and proud societies: the misguided emphasis on "me" rather than "us."

A further criticism of "rights" theory often heard in island societies is that it is confrontational rather than conciliatory, reflecting Western legal tradition as it does. The rights of one person, after all, are bound to clash with those of another, resulting in adversarial positions that must be adjudicated. In other words, rights theory more often generates an open confrontation rather than the kind of consensus Pacific island societies characteristically try to achieve. The island alternative to this is making known various parties' needs and trying to meet these through community give-and-take.

We must acknowledge, then, that human rights, including the right of religious freedom, are anything but axiomatic in many parts of the world today. We should not be surprised if our

claims often rankle those in more traditional societies. Our insistence on the right to religious freedom, after all, implies a place for religion in the public forum and space in the public square, as we have noted. Moreover, we are making this request in the form of a demand and using a terminology that is often foreign to those with whom we are conversing. Human rights language, after all, is relatively recent and depends on an atomistic view of the world not universally shared.

Consequently, in the remainder of this presentation I would like to approach the issue not from the perspective of the party claiming religious rights, but from the viewpoint of the society that is called upon to honor these rights. There may well be value in refining our position on religious freedom in a human rights framework, and others will surely be doing this during our conference. But it might also be helpful to explore the question of why some countries are far more receptive to religious freedom than others. Indeed, to understand the resistance to religious tolerance in some parts of the world is the initial step in dealing with it.

Reception of Christianity into Micronesia: A Case Study

Novel religious practices were being introduced into Micronesian island societies long before the first Western missionary appeared on the shores. Despite the pantheon of sky gods (figures such as Anulap and Lukeilang), islanders always had room for additional deities, many of them guardian spirits of lineage groups whose devotion often spread to others on the island and beyond. Reverence for these spirits was symbolized in a shrine—usually in the form of an altar adorned with small offerings—available for any who wished to worship there. The guardian spirits were local figures, generally the spirits of deceased islanders who had, in the eyes of the people, proven their worth through their providential care to kinsmen. Even when Westerners introduced Christianity to the islands, its unfamiliar god and worship ritual met with no firm opposition from the island people. If any religion was able to provide the protection that people looked for, they were willing enough to accept it.

Doctrine and systematic beliefs were never much developed in traditional religious practice; such elements played a minor role in the growth of the religions even up to the present day. Behavioral practices—taboos to be observed and rituals to be followed—were always of considerably more importance. Yet, traditional practices were easily enough modified to conform to Christianity, when that religion was finally brought to the islands. When the Congregationalist pastor of Kosrae, at his first church service, bade his congregation to stand for the final blessing in the presence of the paramount chief of the island, the chief waved off the traditional respect form and readily gave leave for his people, who would have ordinarily been obliged to remain lower than he, to stand and receive the blessing. Menstrual houses in other islands were shut down for good at the insistence of the Catholic priest to allow women to attend church services all year round. Other wide-ranging changes were made to accommodate the moral norms inculcated by the new religion, including monogamy and prohibition of work on the Sabbath.

As Christianity in the form of the Congregational Church became established throughout the islands of eastern Micronesia (Pohnpei, Kosrae, Chuuk, the Marshalls and Kiribati), the religion soon served as a marker for groups who wished to define themselves. On Pohnpei in the late 19th

century when most of the local population was affiliated with the Congregational Church, a rival group soon welcomed the newly arrived Catholics and adopted this religion as a way of staking out a position against the majority. Yet, for all the ways in which Micronesians used the church as a means of defining themselves against rivals, the church primarily served a unifying function. Its membership eventually reached into other islands, even those formerly hostile to one another, and religion became a network (much like the clan was in a more limited way) extending through the entire island work of the people. In other words, by virtue of their church membership islanders could claim “siblings” wherever they went.

In Micronesia, as throughout the entire Pacific, Christianity was embraced by the people and imprinted deeply on the social landscape. Churches were ubiquitous, civic meetings customarily began and ended with a prayer, and in some island groups Christian piety was engraved on the national seal and motto. Despite the easy blend of church and state (Christianity and island society), Pacific nations never truly depended on their religious belief system for social unity or national identity. Their identity as a people flowed from cultural practices and a common language rather than the binding force of a single religious tradition, however prominent the latter might have become in contemporary island society. This is of critical importance in explaining the religious tolerance of Pacific Island nations.

Christianity over the Years

Let us now review in very broad strokes how Christianity fared when introduced into other places throughout the centuries. The main focus here will be on the host nation’s tolerance for religious diversity.

The Roman Empire, under which Christianity sprang up and grew, owed little of its identity to its religious belief system. Indeed, it was famously ready to incorporate other religions and their deities into mainstream religious practice. It could afford to, if only because the state enjoyed an exalted status and possessed the secular apparatus to support the nation without dependence on religion. The prescribed offering to deities, deities that included the reigning emperors during the early Christian era, provided no more than a convenient excuse to execute Christians for other reasons. It is true that Christians were sometimes regarded as dissidents during this era, but they posed no real threat to the nation any more than their religion, despite its absolutist claims, challenged the fundamental Roman national identity. Persecutions were local and sporadic, especially during the first two centuries.

With the full acceptance of Christianity by Emperor Constantine, the religion spread rapidly throughout Europe and the Near East even as Rome’s secular power was diminishing. The tribal societies of the area generally submitted to Christianity, and the religion became, in good part, the binding force of the area during the early Middle Ages. Perhaps this explains why medieval Europe responded so strongly to the threat that Islam appeared to present during its initial expansion through southern Europe during the eighth and ninth centuries..

From the sixteenth century on, Christianity moved into Asian societies, home of other great world religions such as Buddhism, Taoism and Hinduism. These Asian lands, which themselves experienced religious upheavals from time to time, seemed to have a wide tolerance for religious

diversity. Persecutions occurred at times, of course, most often in response to the fear that Christianity was but the foot in the door for a Western government that posed a military or national threat. Such would have been the case when Japan under Hideyoshi determined to rid itself of Christians in the late sixteenth century. Now and then such persecutions would break out in remarkably tolerant countries such as Vietnam. In the post-war years in China, a nation with a long history of religious tolerance, we witnessed the sudden ban of Christianity after Mao won over the nation for Communism. For a time Christianity came to be seen by Mao and his followers as the enemy of the state, but this attitude has greatly softened in recent years.

Meanwhile, Western societies themselves, long since christianized, were tested for their religious tolerance as the Reformation broke out and denominations proliferated. Throughout this period spates of religious discrimination and violent persecution occurred, often in response to a threat of open conflict and possibly civil war within a kingdom. After King Henry VIII's split from the church in 1534, acknowledgment of Roman Catholicism was regarded as treasonous. Religious persecutions occurred in France during the Reformation, depending on who happened to be ruler the time. But as the nation state strengthened in Europe throughout these years, such displays of intolerance arising from a perceived threat waned greatly. Indeed, it could be argued that religious tolerance was one of the byproducts of the rise of the nation states in Europe.

Much later, of course, a number of nonchristian religions were brought to these countries. There was the usual bias at first, sometimes even accompanied by outbreaks of violence, but the opposition usually passed within a short time. We are witnessing this today, especially when the religious differences are on public display—as when Muslims wear burkhas on the street, even at the beach, and worship occurs on Saturday rather than Sunday. But such intolerance usually has the support of only part of the population and it tends to be short-lived.

Many nations, especially the US and countries in Western Europe, have always considered themselves open markets for religious systems; and well they could since their identity depended more on a strong polity founded on a common language and a shared set of values than a religious system as such. In this open market the stock values of various beliefs would invariably fluctuate as people shifted from one belief system to another.

When Religion Matters Most

In contrast to societies that exhibited a generally high tolerance for religious diversity stands the early Hebrew people. Once nomadic tribes subject to their own leaders, the Jews in the Old Testament saw themselves as called by God to become a single people. They derived their very identity and their meaning as a people from the covenant that bound them with one another and with their God. Anything that threatened their religious belief system was to be shunned, as we know from the denunciations of the prophets and the abundant instances of what were believed to be punishment for infidelities. There was little room for religious tolerance in such a situation as theirs since the worship of Yahweh according to Jewish law under the covenant was central to the identity of the Jewish people and marked them as a nation. Any serious challenge to their religion was liable to rip apart the only bonds that held this people together.

Islamic nations today, especially in North Africa, might offer the closest comparison to the

ancient Hebrews. Their origin, too, came from nomadic tribes who, even after they settled down, lacked the strong sociopolitical linkages apart from their religious ties to make them a single people. Strong leaders may arise and assume power over such nations from time to time, but at the end of their rule the vacuum at the national level reappears. These nations lack the civic institutions needed to found a secular government. In nations such as these, the common religion may be the only thread that holds people together. Witness the importance of Sharia Law in these countries compared with more established nations with a predominantly Islamic population such as Pakistan, Turkey or Jordan. It's hardly surprising that in such places foreign religions should be regarded as a threat to the very identity of the people.

In the broad sweep, we might conclude that religious freedom is severely restricted or denied outright in those lands in which a common religious belief system constitutes the main force that links its people together and undergirds their identity as a people. These are nations with otherwise weak links between sub-groups and factions, nations that do not have other binding ties strong enough to keep them together. For this reason they are dependent on religion as the glue to keep them unified. They are theocracies not just in the sense that the leaders hold religious office, but because the sense of national identity and cohesion that flows from this identity is religious in nature. Many of the societies would be termed "failed states"—not because they are economically deprived, but because they lack the buy-in from their members.

Conclusion

Some societies, as we have seen, have been historically more receptive than others to outside religions. This was almost universally true of Pacific Island nations, while many of the Asian societies have been equally tolerant of different religious traditions. Even the absolutist claims of a new religion (such as Christianity, for instance) have not proved an impediment to the general principle of tolerance of religious diversity.

When the religion makes a forced entry into a land—when religious banners fly at the head of an invading army—whatever tolerance might have been practiced is suspended, of course, as opposing forces fight for much more than their religion. Even if religion might be the rallying call, the contest is really for all they hold dear. During the Crusades and the Islamic jihads carried on in the Middle Ages, such was the case. But such religious wars were the exception rather than the rule.

When statism in the form of a strong national identity is absent in a land that might call itself a nation, competing religious traditions pose the greatest challenge to a people's identity. This was certainly true of the Hebrews, prior to the establishment of the kingdom, when the only bonds that held them together as a single people was their religious faith and the celebration of its history.

Much the same is true in parts of today's world. The greatest challenge to the kind of religious tolerance that is encapsulated in what we call religious freedom is presented by those who lack a strong sense of national identity, perhaps even a fully functional national government. At the head of the list are what we might call failed states—failed not because they deny their people economic opportunities, but because they have never established the sense of nationhood that is

so vital in today's world.

If this is indeed the case, then the religious intolerance can be corrected only when the population, often divided into something akin to tribes even today, is prepared to surrender part of its regional interests to a national government. This is an argument for a secular state, no matter how religious a country's people may be. Note that this is not a call to embrace liberal democracy, only a functioning government of some form that is strong enough to cultivate a national identity independent of religious affiliation. Until this happens, claims to religious rights will go unheeded in the very places that they are most needed.

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