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RELIGION, LAW AND SOCIAL STABILITY

FROM RELIGIOUS FREEDOMS TO SOCIAL STABILITY: THE ROLES AND RESPONSIBILITIES OF RELIGIOUS COMMUNITIES

A Case Study - The World Sikh Organization of Canada

1. Who Are We

- Human rights advocacy group
- Founded in North America in 1984 to represent the interests of the Sikh diaspora
- Based on the principles and values of Sikhism
- Sikh religion is a monotheistic religion which was started in India in the late 1400's by Guru Nanak, and evolved over a period of 200 years and 10 successive Gurus.
 - Final form of the religion occurred in 1699 with the Sikhs incorporating a visible, identifiable, outward appearance
 - 5 articles of faith: *kesh* - uncut hair (acceptance of the divine will) covered by a turban (humility and gender equality); *kanga* - a wooden comb (used to comb the hair and reminder to cleanse the mind through meditation); *kara* – steel or iron bangle worn on the dominant hand (eternity of God and right conduct); *kirpan* – small sword (spiritual power – mortality and to defend the defenceless); *kachhera* – cotton undergarment (chastity and modesty);
- The religion was founded as a reaction to the social situation and the state of practice of organized religion – ritualistic and divisive
- Oppression of women; caste system; religious warfare
- Equality of gender; equality of human-kind; equality of religion
- All religions are pathways to the same goal – to achieve conscious union with our Divine Source (God/Allah/Waheguru)
- Guru Nanak recognized that the entire world was suffering:
 - What is the disease/malady? Duality – separation between myself and the other ('me' and 'not me')

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- What is the cause of this disease? The delusion that the world is in fragments rather than an interconnected whole
- What is the cure? The realization that we are all part of the whole, and that the world is an extension of myself. This is called Enlightenment.
- How does an enlightened being behave? He/She becomes socially responsible and socially active. For Guru Nanak, that meant taking a stance against gender inequality (the lifting of the veil); eliminating the caste system (*gurdwaras* where all dine together regardless of social status); respecting other religions by incorporating the writings of spiritual leaders of western and eastern faiths, which were consistent with Sikh values;
- The duty of religions to promote conduct aimed at improving the lot of others.
- “Clearing the path before you” – Bhagat Puran Singh

2. WSO - What Do We Do

- Promote and advance human rights and religious freedoms for the Sikhs and all peoples.
- Supreme Court of Canada interventions – *Syndicat Northcrest versus Amselem; Multani*; 2 of the 3 trilogy of cases on religious freedoms in Canada; 2014 *Loyola* case
- *Niqab* ban and the Quebec Charter of Values – submissions to the Quebec National Assembly – Sikhs barred from entry due to kirpan; currently trial in Quebec to determine the Sikhs right to wear the kirpan at the Quebec National Assembly
- The Scottish kilt and graduation
- The hijab and soccer
- The Aboriginal braids in school

3. Why Do We Do It

- the role and responsibility of a faith community
- social stability is improved when we are prepared to step up for the rights of the ‘other’ and see their pain as our own
- for some, it is building hospitals, for others it might be community kitchens, for others it might be religious freedoms – for Sikhs it is all of these things

4. What Impact Have We Had

- Other religious communities are slowly learning that we need to align and not work in silos – unfortunately – our experience is that it is still in its infancy – not enough is happening to protect others religious freedoms

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- Must move beyond interfaith gatherings where we seek to learn about each other, to action where we concern ourselves less with what the other believes, and more with what we have in common