

Historical Perspective on Religious Freedom

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This forum is occasioned by a submission made to the Papua New Guinea Council of Churches to ask the government to consider restricting non-Christian religions from entering the country. It is recognised that Papua New Guinea is a “Christian country”, by which is meant that Christianity, brought to the country by European missionaries, is followed by a vast majority of the population. I am disinterested, although not uninterested, in this question, for a variety of reasons, but, principally, because it is for Papua New Guineans to decide whether religious freedom, or religious exclusivity, is best for their country. My task, here, is to review past efforts, by a number of states, to limit religious expression for those, who do not represent the majority faith.

Religious freedom, for me, means the opportunity to observe one’s legitimate religious beliefs, anywhere, and at any time, so long as the observance does not infringe on the rights guaranteed to others. It also means that a person of one religious persuasion should never suffer economic, political, or cultural sanctions, or be subjected to physical violence. There have been many instances, even in countries, who constitutions support religious freedom, where intimidation has forced individuals to limit religious expression.

I used the phrase “legitimate religious beliefs” in the paragraph above. The phrase represents a problem, for how is it determined that one belief is legitimate, and another is not? Here, I mean this to be understood in a very narrow sense. I consider illegitimate any “religious” element that is organised around a guiding principle of doing harm, psychologically or physically, to either those within the group or outside. As we shall see, it is perfectly possible for those, who are part of a “legitimate” religion, to act in illegitimate ways. The continuing trials of author Salmon Rushdie, condemned to death by Muslim fundamentalists because they did not like his book, *Satanic Verses*, is just an example. In these instances of “illegitimate religious beliefs”, or of “legitimate” religious believers acting in illegitimate ways, it is the responsibility of authorities to suppress the illegitimate behaviour, to protect the rights of the community at large.

It is not surprising that religion inspires controversy and conflicts. People who follow one religion or another assume that their particular faith offers the certain path to whatever objective they have in mind: heaven, Nirvana, tranquillity of spirit. People seek the Divine to help them resolve, or accept, the uncertainties and miseries that all humans encounter. When a person finds that path, which will provide balm and security, they find it difficult to understand that others find their balm and security in something else. Moreover, with the onset of organised religions, there was often the imperative that true believers must spread the “true” faith to all others. The result has been enormous conflicts, even massively destructive warfare, between the great religions. Hindus chased the followers of the Buddha from India, pagan Romans sometimes tried to rid the Empire of Christians, and Christians have tried, on numerous occasions, to rid Europe and the world of Muslims and Jews, and Muslims, in turn, have tried to keep Christians out of territories they controlled.

The circumstances are further complicated by political interests. In the process of state-building, many leaders have assumed that their task would be made easier if everyone followed the same religion. Thus, King Ferdinand and Queen Isabella, when they were attempting to unify the Spanish peninsula in the late 15th century, decided that their task would be easier if they could force out Muslims and Jews. The result was that hundreds of thousands of Jews and Muslims, who had lived successfully together in Southern Spain for over 700 years, were persecuted. The terror was made all the more severe by Isabella’s absolute certainty that Jews and Muslims were the devil’s advocates. In 1492, the only Muslim city in Western Europe, Granada, fell to the Christian forces of the Spanish monarchy. The consequence of this assault was to remove from Spain people who had made a great cultural and economic contribution. Not even the influx of riches from the Americas over the next century could undo the damage and loss.

The advance of Islam was also motivated by the religious imperative to expand the faith, and by certain geo-political objectives. After centuries of trying, the Muslims finally succeeded in taking the Christian jewel in Asia Minor, Constantinople, in 1453. The city had remained a Christian bastion since the 4th century, when the first Christian Roman Emperor, Constantine, established it as the capital of the Empire.

As all religions must assume that the Divine is on their side, that they are, in fact, performing the will of God, the tenacity and violence, with which the messianic religions attack their enemies, is not at all unexpected. Nor is it surprising that political leaders, throughout the ages, have recognised that they can make this religious fervour work to their advantage.

Conflicts between major religious followings and organisations are often equalled, or surpassed, by divisions and conflicts within a particular religious group. The early Christian church was beset by various disputes, which are now referred to as “heresies”, and which were never fully resolved. I will mention just two of them.

In the 4th century, the Roman Emperor Constantine became so alarmed over a division in the Christian following that he called Christian leaders together at Nicaea to adjudicate the matter. The conflict arose over whether Christians should believe in the Trinity. A major North African bishop, whose name was Arius, proposed that there should be a clear separation of God the Father and Jesus of Nazareth. The Father and Son were not the same. Arius’ followers were called Arians, and they were very successful in spreading his ideas. The Council of Nicaea (325) very narrowly upheld the view that the Father and Son were of the same substance, and then produced the Nicene Creed, which all Christians were to recite. The followers of Arius were denounced as heretics, and forbidden to preach their anti-Trinity beliefs. Nonetheless, Arian missionaries continued their efforts, and many Germanic peoples were converted to Arian Christianity.

Still concerning the Arians, in the 6th century, the Popes became so outraged by their Germanic leader, Theodoric, that they agreed to an alliance with the Byzantine Emperor, Justinian, to force the Ostragoths (as these Germans were known) from the Italian peninsula. Justinian was head of the Eastern Christian church, and was considered a rival to the papacy in Rome, but, on this occasion, the two Christian leaders agreed to cooperate. The result was a war that lasted three decades, and devastated the Italian population and countryside. Justinian was not able to complete the campaign, which was part of his dream to reunite the old Roman Empire.

The other major dispute in early Christendom also dated back to the 4th century, and centred on the issue of the purity of priests. A Christian bishop,

Donatus, formed the opinion that all priests should be without sin, if they were to administer the sacraments. Eventually, he gained a number of followers (known as Donatists), who tried to convince other church leaders to insist that all priests lead a sinless life. When this effort failed, they attempted to create a new priesthood of supposedly pure men. Although Donatism, like Arianism, was declared a heresy, it remained a problem for the Christian church for many centuries.

Islam also experienced serious internal divisions in its early history, some of which still plague the faithful to this day. The major conflict arose over the issue of successors to Muhammed. The largest faction, known as Sunnites, accepted the historical succession, but another faction, known as Shi'ites, believed that Muhammed Ali, son-in-law of the Great Prophet Muhammed, had been murdered to exclude him and his line from the succession. The Shi'ites, therefore, rejected orthodox historical Islam. Over time, the Shi'ites became a major opposition within Islam, and, through the centuries, the conflict violently divided Muslims. In Iraq today, the ruling Sunnite king has carried out a campaign against the Shi'ites. In Iran, where political authority rests with the majority Shi'ites, Sunnite Muslims are treated badly.

In modern times, the 16th-century Western European Reformation in the Christian church led to many violent confrontations. Civil wars in France and German Europe in the 16th century, each with a religious and a political component, had serious consequences. In France, Roman Catholics and Protestants were taught from an early age to hate each other, a situation very similar to what exists in Northern Ireland today. Protestants eventually were permitted to establish what amounted to "a state within a state" in France, but this lasted only for a century.

The 17th century is replete with many attempts to limit religious freedom. The most catastrophic of the religious conflicts in the 17th century was the 30 years' war (1618-1648). This was political, at one level, and religious, at another. The struggle was instigated by a desire on the part of Protestant leaders in Central Europe to break the political stranglehold of the Catholic Habsburg family, who controlled Spain, Austria, and many areas in German Europe. That the war was substantially political is clear from the fact that the King of France (Louis XIII), who was advised by a Catholic Cardinal, sent his army into battle against the Catholic Habsburgs. But religious intolerance

was still a major contributor to the great damage and loss of life that occurred. The great majority of those involved in the combat assumed that they were engaged in a holy war, and fought accordingly. The atrocities accumulated on both sides. By the time the fighting stopped, more than 25 per cent of the population of Europe was dead, and hundreds of towns and villages destroyed. The Treaty of Westphalia (1648) effectively divided Central Europe into Roman Catholic and Protestant zones, to be decided by the ruling authorities. There were over 300 separate Germanic states at the time, and Protestants, who lived in a Protestant territory, were forced to find shelter in a Catholic state. The 30 years' war proved that no Christian denomination would ever have exclusive control in Europe again, but it also proved that Christians could oppress each other with the same zeal they had shown in attacking Jews and Muslims on earlier occasions.

England was not directly involved in the 30 years' war, but religious freedom was under heavy attack during the early 17th century. Those who did not follow the Church of England, created by King Henry VIII in 1533, were under constant pressure. Then, King Charles I (1625-1649) and the Archbishop of Canterbury, William Laud, began to violently abuse non-Anglican Protestant (dissenters) in England, and the Archbishop of Canterbury, William Laud, began to violently abuse non-Anglican Protestants (dissenters) in England and Scotland. Many fled to the American continent.

Later, in 1672, Parliament passed the Test Act, which required that all holders of high office prove that they had taken communion in an Anglican church at least once in the 12 months prior to their appointment. The Test Act remained law, though it was seldom enforced, until 1828. In 1685, King James II tried to restore the supremacy of Roman Catholicism in England. He hoped to force all non-Catholics from office, and to replace them with those who followed the one "true Christian church". The opposition to James II was so great that he was driven out in the Glorious Revolution of 1688, to be replaced by the Protestant rulers, William and Mary of Holland. In 1701, the Act of Settlement decreed that all future crowned heads in England must be Protestant.

During the entire period under discussion here, Christians continued to harass Jews nearly everywhere. Martin Luther venomously attacked Jews for not converting to Christianity, and Roman Catholic authorities maintained that

Jews had been responsible for the crucifixion of Jesus. Christians were, therefore, encouraged to view Jews as agents of the devil. King Edward I of England banned Jews from the country in the 1290s, and it was not until the middle of the 17th century that the Puritan leader, Oliver Cromwell, decided to reverse that policy. While Jews were allowed to enter England for the first time in over 350 years, they did not gain political rights for another 200 years. Although he had led the revolutionary forces against King Charles I in the 1640s, Cromwell himself had a very limited notion of religious freedom. His massacre of several thousand Irish Catholics had a great deal to do with creating the bitterness, which many Irish Catholics still feel toward England.

In France, King Louis XIV declared that Protestants no longer had the right to worship (1685), and hundreds of thousands left the country. They took with them much of the economic vitality that the king desperately needed. The effect of Louis XIV's order was much the same as that which occurred in Spain, when Queen Isabella drove out the Jews and Muslims.

It might be expected that those Christians, who experienced religious oppression in Europe, and then moved to the "new world" of North America, would have a more generous attitude toward freedom of religion. Alas, it was not often the case. In the American colonies, only Pennsylvania and Rhode Island were religiously open from the beginning. In the Southern colonies, Anglicans wanted to keep out all "tainted" religions, and, in most areas of New England, the Puritan immigrants had the same attitude. In general, the European colonists showed little regard for the religious beliefs of the American Indians. Over time, with more and more immigrants coming to North America, it was impossible for the colonies to remain religiously exclusive, and, by the early 19th century, all attempts to restrict religious observance were given up.

The 18th-century Enlightenment, with its severe criticism of religious fervour and intolerance, helped to sustain a period, where there was a more liberal attitude toward persons of different Christian beliefs. Christians still, however, rejected all other religions, and were particularly relentless in verbal, and sometimes physical, attacks on Jews. This was especially true in German Europe.

The 20th century has seen many attempts to limit religious freedom, and usually these efforts have been influenced by political and ethnic interests. Eastern Orthodox Christians and Roman Catholic Christians never fully accepted each other in South-eastern Europe. In 1992, with the power of the Soviet Union no longer in existence to maintain order, Croats (Roman Catholics) and Serbs (Eastern Orthodox) turned their mutual distrust and hatred into warfare. At the same time, both Christian elements attacked the substantial Muslim population within the old state of Yugoslavia. In the former Soviet Union, the Christians of Armenia, and the Muslims of Azerbaijan, have been fighting since Mikhail Gorbachev began to relax Soviet control in the late 1980s.

Catholics and Protestants continue to oppress each other in Northern Ireland. So much so, that the city of Belfast is now divided into separate Protestant and Catholic zones. A person's religious preference immediately establishes that person as either a friend or an enemy.

The historical evidence is clear. Attempts to limit religious freedom, and to oppress specific religions or groups within a religion, nearly always end in misery for all concerned. The constitution of Papua New Guinea provides a guarantee that the state is open to all legitimate religions. It is an enlightened provision, and, from a historian's perspective, it is a provision that should never be changed. It also seems to me that any country that is predominantly Christian is bound by the unequivocal teaching of Jesus of Nazareth to love and respect all other persons. "Those who hear My words, but do not believe, I judge them not" (John 12:47).

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