

How religion can contribute to human rights and social justice

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My remarks today are refracted through lenses of conflict studies and international human rights. A third lens is more challenging to disclose publicly: I view the world through a lens of Christian faith. In the context of this forum on the role of religion in human rights and social justice, I would like to utilize these three lenses to offer some ideas about how to build peaceful cultures of respect and justice here at UVic.

I have been involved in churches all my life, and I have seen good, bad and downright ugly expressions of Christianity. The news maxim “if it bleeds it leads” is certainly true of Christianity – there is a lot more news about violence and controversy than there is about quiet good works. Two-thirds of Canada’s population self-identifies as “Christian,” but only 30% regularly attend church.² Among under-35s the number is 14%.³ Canada’s second most popular religion is “none” – at 24%. Among the church-attending minority, Christianity is far from monolithic, so I need to start with disclaimers: First, I can offer only one partial perspective on Christianity. Second, I have no qualifications or entitlement to offer ideas for those with other beliefs.

Let me start by listing several internationally protected rights guaranteed by the *Universal Declaration of Human Rights* and international human rights treaty law. These rights are to be enjoyed equally by everyone without distinction:

- the rights to liberty and life;
- freedom from unfair prosecution, imprisonment or torture;
- freedom from sexual assault, abuse or exploitation;
- the right to a standard of living adequate for health and well-being of individuals and their families, including food and housing;
- the right to education;
- freedoms of thought, conscience, opinion, expression, and peaceful assembly;
- the right to freedom of religion or belief, including the right to manifest religion or belief individually or in groups; this right may be subjected only to narrow limitations defined by law and necessary to protect public safety or the fundamental rights and freedoms of others.

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² Pew Research, Canada’s Changing Religious Landscape, 2013, <http://www.pewforum.org/2013/06/27/canadas-changing-religious-landscape/>; Aaron Hutchins, What Canadians really believe, *Macleans*, 26 March 2015, <http://www.macleans.ca/society/life/what-canadians-really-believe/>.

³ Canadian Centre for Justice Statistics Profile Series. Religious Groups in Canada, Statistics Canada 2001, <http://www.statcan.gc.ca/pub/85f0033m/85f0033m2001007-eng.pdf>.

One justifiable limitation on the freedoms of religion, belief or expression is the prohibition of incitement or promotion of hatred toward any identifiable group.⁴ But there is no such thing as a right not to be offended or upset by other people's opinions. As one UN Special Rapporteur has pointed out, the "crucial elements of freedom of religion or belief... [include] the freedom to search, choose, change, reach out, communicate, convert, and peacefully provoke in the field of religion or belief."⁵ I emphasise that the right to peaceful provocation does not extend to discriminatory or other harassment or violence, which are legitimately prohibited.

The principle non-discriminatory equality is found in many religious traditions in the form of the Golden Rule: Treat others as you would like to be treated. Jesus taught that God loves the world – including all of humankind -- and that accordingly, God's overall message to people is to return love to God, and to love our neighbours as ourselves. Jesus even said "love your enemy." In my understanding of Christian teaching, the Christian stance towards others -- even those who try to harm us is radical – it is not hostility but kindness.

What I take from this is that I am called to consider all other people to be just as worthy of respect as I am. No matter what, your entitlements are as important as mine. This teaching is difficult, because it requires profound and continual transformation of my mindset to give as much importance to your entitlements, your wellbeing, and your families and friends, as I give to mine.

The bible speaks clearly against racialized or economic discrimination or injustice. And contemporary interpretations of the bible make it clear (to me at least) that Jesus fully accepts and includes women on the same footing as men. But anyone who reads the news knows that a small but vocal minority in North America, who self-identify as Christians, have been actively promoting or inciting hatred against identifiable groups based on religious, racialized or gender identity. Incitement of discriminatory hatred or violence is to be rejected categorically. But short of such crimes and other human rights violations, international human rights norms insist on recognition of people's freedoms of thought, conscience, expression, religion and the manifestation of religion.

Many religious groups and churches struggle with intense internal, and in some cases external, controversies over historic teachings about roles of women, reproductive choice, and same-sex expression of sexuality. Whatever we believe about these matters it is important to emphasise that the internationally protected right to manifest religion or belief includes the right to peaceful expression of dissent, including in the public square.

A second principle, and one that may help with intense controversy, is the biblical principle of non-condemning lovingkindness. This principle springs from the character of God and the ministry of Jesus. According to historic teaching, the purpose of Jesus ministry, death and resurrection is not to condemn, but to overcome condemnation and to reconcile all of creation – including all people -- to the God of love. Non-condemnation, lovingkindness and hospitality⁶ are integral to the concept of God's grace (or graciousness) which Christians are meant to imitate. On our campuses, the principle of lovingkindness

⁴ Criminal Code of Canada, Section 219, <http://laws-lois.justice.gc.ca/eng/acts/C-46/section-319.html>

⁵ Heiner Bielefeldt, "Misperceptions of Freedom of Religion or Belief," *Human Rights Quarterly* 35(1)(2013): 33-68, <http://muse.jhu.edu.ezproxy.library.uvic.ca/article/497782>

⁶ Henri J. M. Nouwen, *Reaching Out: The Three Movements of the Spiritual Life* (Garden City, NY: Image Books, 1986).

precludes racialized, religiously-based, gender-based or sexualized violence and any kind of harassment including doxing, trolling, sneering or other incivility on social media.

A third principle relates to power. Jesus teaches his followers not to dominate others but to be servants to everyone. But as many rightly point out, churches have historically participated actively in cultures of domination and persecution instead of renouncing and challenging them. This has led to catastrophic results for colonized peoples as well as to anti-Semitism, Islamophobia and other persecutions, including even genocide.

Since the report of Canada's Truth and Reconciliation Commission that exposed Canada's genocidal atrocities against indigenous children, "reconciliation" has become a watchword. Scholarly research coincides with Christian teaching that authentic reconciliation requires truthful acknowledgement and reparations for past injustices. Some Christians are exploring the ancient practice of prophetic truth-telling and lamentation as we examine how we continue to persist in, benefit from, and deny our part (and that of our ancestors) in the historic oppression of other peoples, egged on by those who wrongly believe in white European superiority.

Bringing this back to our campus, my perception is that instead of engaging in hospitable kindness, some of us Christians are sometimes prone to use hostile bully tactics in demanding our entitlements to proclaim what we hold to be good and true. How do we practice non-judgemental loving-kindness for everyone, including for those who manifest beliefs we find offensive? The Christian faith does not ask its adherents for silence or moral relativism. And it is important to request – and sometimes insist -- on protection of the right to manifest our religion or belief. But we may wish to examine any tendency towards hostility, including "shock and awe" tactics,⁷ in light of the principles I have mentioned. Caring for others calls for careful listening and for straightforward, non-condemnatory lovingkindness as we express dissent and seek dialogue. Christians acknowledge the difficulty of this and say this can be accomplished only by cultivating faith through consistent spiritual practice.

I hope there will be opportunities to discuss how we can work together to build respect and inclusion of everyone on our campus while at the same time respecting everybody's right to the freedom of sincere manifestation of religion or belief including the right to dissent and even peaceful but kindly provocation of one another about our beliefs and practices.

⁷ "There is a difference between having a discussion on pro life and hanging banners about pro life and trying to emotionally traumatize people. There is a difference between shock and awe and actually promoting a discussion. "Graphic Posters and Grossed-out Protestors at the U of A's Abortion Showdown," *Vice*, 4 March 2015, https://www.vice.com/en_ca/article/dpk5my/fear-and-loathing-with-albertas-anti-abortionists-624.