



Moderator: Rev. James T. Hurd

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Address to the 135th meeting of the Synod by Hon. David Kilgour, retired Member of Parliament for southeast Edmonton 1979-2006, Friday October 16, 2009 (used with permission)

MINIMIZING PERSECUTION OF SPIRITUAL COMMUNITIES INTERNATIONALLY By Hon. David Kilgour

What can be done to reduce the persecution of spiritual communities internationally? First, all must stand together. Pastor Martin Niemoller made this point best about the Nazis: "...Then they came for the Jews, and I did not speak out—because I was not a Jew; Then they came for me—and there was no one left to speak out for me."

The link between religious intolerance and political instability/violence is explained by Geoffrey Johnston: "Those countries that do not actively protect religious minorities or prosecute the perpetrators of religiously-motivated violence are ultimately undermining their own security. A climate of impunity tends to embolden militants, who eventually turn against the state, using violence to advance their agenda. Pakistan and Nigeria are prime examples of governments that have allowed extremist groups to attack religious minority communities before they themselves became the targets of terror strikes."

One estimate of the number of people who died prematurely for their faith between 1900 and 2000 is a dismaying 169 million, including: 70 million Muslims; 35 million Christians; 11 million Hindus; 9 million Jews; 4 million Buddhists; 2 million Sikhs and 1 million Baha'is.

Freedom of religion

In Canada, our Charter of Rights and Freedoms guarantees freedom of conscience and religion. This freedom to worship, or not to worship, is part of Canada's appeal. It is a universal value; most nations have signed agreements committing them to respect individual freedom of thought, conscience and belief. In too many, their nationals continue to suffer for practising their faiths.

Most of the persecution during the 1900s and early years of the present century was committed by regimes which detested all religions. Here are three sharply differing situations:

China

One of many cases to come out of China is that of Brother Yun. His experiences are set out in his autobiography, *The Heavenly Man*, published in 2002. He and the book have impacted many, including those who attended more than one thousand meetings he has held in various parts of the world.

Another Christian, Gao Zhisheng, has been persecuted mostly because of standing up for another spiritual community, Falun Gong (some of whose own horrifying experiences over ten years can be accessed at www.david-kilgour.com). Gao is a Nobel Peace Prize nominee. In 2001, he was named

one of China's top ten lawyers. As a lawyer, he donated a third of his time to victims of human rights violations, representing miners, evicted tenants and others.

First his permit to practise law was removed. This was followed by an attempt on his life, having police attack his wife and 14-year-old daughter. In 2006, he was sentenced to three years in prison for. Much worse happened there. The Canadian Friends of Gao wrote Prime Minister Harper earlier this year asking him to intervene for his release: "(I)nstead of honouring the obligations prescribed in the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, of which China is a signatory, blatant human rights violations persist. Having courageously sought justice for vulnerable groups such as the poor, the disabled, and the persecuted, Gao's story is a light shining in the darkness, and a reminder that all of us must stand up for what we believe and affirm. "

Sudan

In Sudan, the regime has probably slaughtered more than 400,000 African Darfuris and expelled six times as many -- an estimated 2.5 million, after having killed an estimated two million and expelled even more in the predominantly Christian and animist South Sudan. Tears of the Desert is Dr. Halima Bashir's horrifying account of her years as a medical doctor in a Darfur village.

It's a genocide against African Muslims, and earlier in the South against Christians and animists. Eric Reeves notes there are currently about 3.5 million people affected by the conflict, with about 10,000 dying per month from unnatural causes. The pleas of Mia Farrow and others to protect the people of Darfur are deeply compelling.

India

Marc Gopin wrote some years ago about then increasing attacks by Hindu militants on Christians in India. Fortunately, the numerous educational and other works done by Christians in India over generations, along with the commitment of most Indians to religious pluralism, normally makes it hard to sustain persecution against faith communities. The most dangerous friction in India is between Hindu and Muslim.

The experiences in Orissa were hopefully terrible exceptions. The Religious Liberty Commission of the World Evangelical Alliance issued a report this year just prior to India's national elections. Several Canadian MPs picked up on the report and wrote to the national government. The Supreme Court in rule of law and democratic India ruled that the national government was responsible for maintaining peace in Orissa and could not allow the state and local governments to ignore the illegal local persecution. It is vital that more of us speak up about violations of spiritual freedoms wherever they occur.

What Can We do?

If spiritual communities stand shoulder-to-shoulder when anyone in our own or another is being persecuted anywhere, lives can be saved. For example, in the '90s hundreds of persons of many faiths demonstrated at Edmonton city hall concerning the persecution of Muslims in Bosnia. Later, many of us did the same at the legislative assembly over the persecution of Christians in Pakistan. Thousands of Canadian soldiers did join the NATO peacemakers that eventually went into the Balkans.

It is only through mutual respect that we can build a better world which all peoples, religions and cultures can genuinely call their own. In the new century, moreover, only if faith communities

cooperate will peace be feasible. His Holiness the Dalai Lama called for a century of compassion in Vancouver recently (www.david-kilgour.com) in front of 16,000 student leaders.

Worse Than War

Daniel Goldhagen's new book, *Worse than War*, has a full chapter of suggestions on what all of us can do, including:

1 - Develop an anti-eliminationist discourse. "Mass murder and eliminationist politics are humanity's human scourge,... more murderous than wars...Yet on the nightly local (U.S.) news mass annihilation receives far less attention-in absolute terms-than house fires.

2 - Referring to mass murderers by their real names, for example, "Serbian mass murderer Milos Milosevic" instead of "former president Milosevic" or "Sudanese mass murderer al-Bashir" instead of "President al-Bashir of Sudan". Some tyrants might be deterred from acts of mass murder if they knew they would forever be known by such titles.

3 - "The countries perpetuating mass murder... or tempted to do so, are overwhelmingly poor and weak... Many could easily be stopped with a little military power and probably with other available, easily employable means...(This)... would radically change potential perpetrators' cost-benefit calculus, heavily tilting the scales toward noneliminationist political options." In my own view, external force should only be used as a last resort as, for example, in Bosnia.

Canada's concept of Responsibility to Protect (R2P) was intended to apply in situations where governments are killing their own people. The UN Security Council has diluted the notion by giving a veto on the use of peacemakers to its members having permanent vetoes. Some of the five clearly do not agree with what R2P is attempting to achieve.

Finally, Karen Armstrong's latest book on religion, *The Case for God*. Let me quote only from the end of it: "The point of religion (is) to live intensely and richly here and now. Truly religious people are ambitious. They want lives overflowing with significance...Instead of being crushed and embittered by the sorrow of life, they (seek) to retain their peace and serenity in the midst of their pain...They (try) to honour the ineffable mystery they (sense) in each human being and create societies that protected and welcomed the stranger, the alien, the poor, and the oppressed. Of course, they often (fail), sometimes abysmally. But overall they (find) that the disciplines of religion (help) them to do all this..." . Is this reality not partly why spiritual communities are vital to the well-being of nations everywhere?