

## **A Sermon for Religious Liberty Sabbath January 19, 2019**

By Ganoune Diop, PhD

Director, Public Affairs and Religious Liberty, General Conference of Seventh-day Adventists  
Secretary General, International Religious Liberty Association

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### **A Faith-Based Perspective on a Fundamental Human Right: The Pivotal Position of Religious Freedom**

Religious freedom or freedom of religion or belief is recognized as a universal human right by the international community. It is inscribed as article 18 in the Universal Declaration of Human Rights. It was ratified on December 10, 1948. Religious liberty, the right to believe according to the dictates of one's conscience, is also inscribed in several international documents, declarations, covenants, conventions, and charters of international and regional organizations such as the Organization of American States (OAS), the African commission on Human and Peoples' Rights, the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN),<sup>1</sup> several other organizations and explicitly in more than 150 national constitutions.

At national constitution level, religious freedom is mentioned as part of a cluster of freedoms and rights with which it entertains synergetic relationships. They are, in fact, inseparable. These rights complete each other to such a degree they should not be opposed or set in antagonistic relationships. Freedom of religion or belief cannot be confined to a conflict of rights, it transcends such categorizations. It not only undergirds all fundamental freedoms, but it is also

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<sup>1</sup> Religious freedom advocates further organize international and regional forums to promote religious freedom. FORUM-ASIA, for example, with the Asian Forum for Human Rights and Development organizes the Southeast Asia Freedom of Religion or Belief Conference (SEA FoRB).

pivotal to their viability and legitimacy. In fact, civil rights are grounded in the importance of human conscience as an inner sanctum for decisions, choices, convictions, and beliefs.

In the following, I would like to highlight a distinctly faith-based perspective which I hope will further enrich and motivate our commitment to this fundamental freedom, without which no other freedom really matters.

From a faith-based perspective, the roots of religious freedom are in God. Conversations, debates, provisions and legislations of freedom bills are found in Greco-Roman philosophies, the European Enlightenment, the British Philosophers, the French Revolution or the American experiment. Freedom is an attribute of God. In God, it is inseparable from God's moral or ethical attributes. Embracing religious freedom is a way of being conscious of and participating in the mystery of God and how God relates to the people He created in his image. God's benevolence towards people becomes the model for how we relate to every person.

There is something mysterious and noble in every human being. People call it differently: human spirit, conscience, soul. This mystery should inspire circumspection, humility, and respect of all human beings.

Religious freedom when believed and embraced is part of a benevolent disposition towards every person we meet. It becomes an integral part of a lifestyle characterized by a humility before this mystery of personhood.

A foundational perspective about religious freedom is the fact that each and every human being one encounters is in a unique mysterious relationship with the Creator. This relationship is sacred and intimate. Each one of the relationships humans experience with the Creator may be at various stages but they are each nonetheless infinitely valuable and precious. The revelation according to which "God is love" and that God profoundly loves the world make us pause in awe before God's intimate connection with every human person.

Each one of this kind of relationships is unique, special and not duplicable. It is irreducible to our categorizations. It always escapes our comprehension. It should therefore not be desecrated by disruptive intrusions by anyone. Otherwise, it would thus violate a unique sacred space more important than temples, cathedrals, churches, mosques, synagogues or shrines.

Moreover, in relating to other people, prejudices should be deliberately avoided. Judging, criticizing, putting people into boxes, cataloging them, disrespecting their persons, insulting their dignity are all part of conscious or unconscious but nevertheless trivial

destruction of the most valuable treasure in life. This treasure is human beings themselves: children, youth, adults, elderly people, all members of the human family.

To believe in the importance of religious freedom then means respecting others, being mindful of God's priority over each person's life, and thus honoring this mysterious relationship.

Embracing religious freedom is a way of considering that people are sacred. The sanctity of life takes its root in this conviction of the sacredness of every person.

This means that genuinely embracing religious freedom implies giving up usurping peoples' prerogatives by making decision on their behalf. It means giving each person the right to form his or her own opinions about reality, present and ultimate things.

To embrace freedom of religion or belief is to allow people to be free to choose what to believe and what not to believe and to act on those beliefs accordingly.

This means that to embrace religious freedom leads us to give up usurping God's prerogatives. It also means resisting appropriating to oneself responsibilities that belong to governments, such as the responsibility to administer retributions to wrongdoers.

Religious liberty places us on another kind of trajectory. It is part of a resolve to respect life, to promote life, to allow life to flourish. It means marveling before the mystery of others, any other, all others. Life is more than what can be perceived through phenomena.

When individuals, people or governments embrace religious liberty they let life flow. They do not attempt to restrict peoples' beliefs. They resist the temptation to regulate peoples' beliefs or to impose on others why, what, how to believe or not believe.

A basic understanding of religious freedom includes therefore renunciation of violence in all its forms and expressions: coercion, manipulation, deception and instrumentalization of people.

Moreover, freedom of religion or belief means freedom from being harmed, hurt, or humiliated because one person or a group believes differently.

Religious liberty is freedom from being persecuted, abused, violated in one's dignity. It is freedom from being killed or martyred.

It is freedom from having one's property confiscated. It is freedom from being prevented from building a property to express one's faith and allegiance, rites and harmless rituals.

Violence against people desecrates people's integrity and dignity. Violence against people is sacrilegious, in the etymological sense of the "stealing of what belongs to God." Human beings belong to God. This is the crime of stealing what is consecrated to God.

Religious liberty is a constant reminder of not subjecting human beings to suffering. To inflict pain on human beings created in the image of God is profanation of their sanctity. No inflicting of pain! No injury!

Religious Freedom, in the end, is letting God be God, and let God do the work of convicting people about the truth through God, the Holy Spirit. This, only God can do in the secret innermost chambers of one's conscience.

### **Rights and righteousness: a uniquely faith-based perspective**

Religious Freedom is a human right but rights best flourish in the context of righteousness. Justice is best served when it surpasses and transcends itself and enters in the realm of righteousness. It always goes "the extra mile." Righteousness goes beyond mere justice. Fulfilling righteousness is core to new covenant ethics. Therefore, it makes sense that Jesus focused most on righteousness in remarkable ways. His whole first discourse, known as the Sermon on the Mount, is framed to show the necessity of righteousness beyond justice to enter God's kingdom (see Matthew 5:20).

Beyond the confines of the Christian faith, there are signs and signposts of a religious reality connected to the idea of righteousness in other world faiths. The highest spiritual value in Islam is Taqwa (Constant consciousness of the Uniqueness, Oneness, and Greatness of God). The whole Qur'an is predicated upon the idea of being a guidance to the Muttaq'in, that is a Muslim who has Taqwa, one who is a true believer a "Mumin."

What is known as Hinduism is in fact called Sanatana Dharma translated as the way of righteousness or the religion of righteousness. For Sikhs, dharma means the path of righteousness.

Most people, then, in the human family value the supreme virtue of righteousness.

The obtainment of this righteousness is in the fact the genuine vocation of the whole Christian faith.

The heart of the Christian faith, as well, is the gift of the righteousness of Jesus Christ. Jesus is believed to be the embodiment of the righteousness of God. This righteousness finds its most tangible demonstration in love, especially the love even for enemies. The path to this righteousness is in fact freedom. Freedom understood in this perspective is a prerequisite to the goal of joining God in God's love for those He created in his image. Understandably, then, the prerequisite of this righteousness is freedom. Freedom is also the prerequisite to genuine covenant of love.

### **Freedom, righteousness and love**

The Christian faith is entirely predicated upon the idea of freedom, says the Apostle Paul in Galatians 5:1. However, freedom is not an end in itself. It is oriented toward the gift of love the Holy Spirit pours out in the heart of the believer. In the same context, the Apostle insists that the whole law is fulfilled in the famous declaration: "You shall love your neighbor as yourself." Then, he specified that the fruit of the Spirit is love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, gentleness, faithfulness, self-control (Gal. 5:22).

It is the Holy Spirit who fulfills the goal of the law in the lives of those who experience God's freedom. This freedom is aimed at creating a space for love of God and love of neighbor. This love stems from the being of God.

The whole edifice of this vision of the Christian faith is informed by the revelation of the mystery and holiness of the triune God who is love, and the mystery and sanctity of every human being. The depth of God's love for humans He created in his image is also a mystery. How could God so love the world that Jesus came to a planet which has become an enemy occupied territory, to identify with, suffer and die for those he loves so profoundly? But a mystery is not something one cannot know anything about. It is something one cannot know everything about. God will always transcend all we know about God. This is because we are finite human beings trying to think about the infinity of God. This mystery however is an invitation to enter into and experience the same fellowship of love.

The secret of this revealed mystery is played out in how we relate to one another as human beings. We were told in the first covenant that what God requires of everyone is the following: "to do justice, to love kindness and to walk humbly with God" (Micah 6:8).

To walk humbly is based upon the acknowledgment of the greatness of God and of the mysterious relationship he entertains with humans He created in his image. This means then that it is imperative to be mindful that in dealing with others, we are indirectly dealing with God

who stands for others. This, in fact, is connected to another central biblical insight: namely, the deep solidarity God entertains with humans He created in his image.

In the new covenant, we are told in no uncertain terms that we cannot love God, whom we do not see, if we do not love our brothers and sisters in humanity we see.

As Jesus insists in the so-called Sermon on the Mount, righteousness from God's perspective, means loving even our enemies. Ultimately, righteousness consists in loving our brothers and sisters in humanity as a reflection of the love of God for the whole human family he wants to save and to spend an eternity with in the fellowship of love.

### **Freedom to love**

Freedom is an attribute of God. It is also an entitlement from God. Freedom is a gift of God for love to be possible. It is an act of the Son to liberate those entangled in the grip of death and grace them with life eternal of love. It is the presence of the Holy Spirit who pours out the love of God into our hearts and makes our character imbued with all the fruit of the Holy Spirit: love, joy, peace, patience, goodness, kindness, gentleness, faithfulness, and self-control.

It is then God's presence in people through God's Holy Spirit that makes us consider every person as holy ground. Human conscience in itself invites us to be circumspect, courteous with others, discreet and gentle in our dealings with any other; to be respectful, valuing God's ultimate interest in, love for, constant vigilance and investment in every human being. God is looking for every opportunity to attract people back to his triune fellowship of love. This is what we are partnering for and with God, in embracing freedom of conscience, freedom of religion or belief, religious freedom or freedom to be irreligious. Love does not force its way in people. It always invites in peaceful persuasion.

### **Conclusions and perspectives**

From a faith-based perspective, which is what more deeply justifies our commitment to the value of freedom, righteousness, and love, there is more to religious freedom than meets the eye.

What motivates our advocacy for religious freedom has a more enduring perspective.

1. Freedom of religion or belief is a universal value. It is part of a cluster of values the international community has identified as necessary for human flourishing, peaceful coexistence and societal prosperity.

2. Not only is religious freedom at the intersection of cherished values but it undergirds all the fundamental freedoms at the core of a dignified human existence.
3. Freedom of religion or belief is recognized as a universal human right which is expressed in article 18 of the Universal Declaration of Human Right (UDHR) adopted by the International community, on December 10, 1948.
4. Religious liberty is a legal provision inscribed in most national constitutions.
5. The roots of religious freedom go deeper than Greco-Roman philosophies, the European Enlightenment, the British Philosophers, the French Revolution or the American experiment.
6. From a faith-based perspective, religious liberty stems from the freedom of God. It is a divine attribute or virtue. Freedom is a fruit of the Spirit of God, argues the Apostle Paul.
7. Since human beings are created in the image of God, religious freedom, grounded on freedom of conscience, is part of the image of God. It is a reflection of God's character. It is destined therefore to become part of the lifestyle of people who embrace the values God cherishes.
8. Religious freedom calls for the respect of every human being, by virtue of the freedom of choice and of conscience, which are inseparable from what it means to be human. Humans live beneath their God-given dignity when deprived of this fundamental characteristic of not only human rights, but of the intrinsic dignity attached to being human in the first place.
9. In light of the root cause of the gift of freedom, religious freedom is ultimately justified by the reality of God's covenant of love. Love cannot be forced. It is the condition *sine qua non* for a covenant to be genuine. Without freedom of thought and of choice and of conscience, of association and assembly, a covenant cannot be genuine. This is the main reason why God who is love, has created freedom for humans to choose to fellowship with God in love. The whole history of salvation, in other words of freedom, is to reintroduce love in human hearts. God is Love. His Holy Spirit pours God's love into our heart. This is the greatest victory over hatred, injustices, discrimination, suffering, and death. Insightfully, Jesus calls "righteousness" the freedom to love, which extends even to the love of enemies. Love is the goal of freedom.

10. Our advocacy and promotion of religious freedom is grounded on the conviction according to which humans are sacred. Every person is sacred by virtue of human conscience. People more than temples, cathedrals, mosques or synagogues are inviolable sacred spaces.

Religious freedom is not only part of a humanizing mission for the whole human family, it is also a signpost indicating the sanctity of human life. Moreover, sanctification cannot be conceived without freedom. Sanctification is freedom, freedom from all that separates us from God. Religious liberty or freedom of religion or belief is indeed a gift of God, from God's very being, for us to choose life and for life to flourish in love.

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