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Faith is a Human Right



Pro mundis

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Faith is a Human Right

Thomas Schirmacher

In many countries of the world, people still suffer persecution and discrimination, because they belong to a particular religion. Religious liberty and human rights are very closely related to each other – countries which restrict religious freedom normally transgress against other human rights, as well.

Donato Lama, a Catholic Philippino, had been working in Saudi Arabia for fifteen years, when policemen, searching his home in October 1995, found a photo of him at his devotions. Accused of evangelising, he was arrested and incarcerated without contact to the outside world, fettered and beaten. In December 1996, he was condemned to a year and a half prison and seventy lashes of the whip.

In its biannual statistic for 2000, the Christian organisation Open Doors designated Saudi Arabia the country with the least religious freedom. A 1999 report by the US government on religious liberty says of Saudi Arabia: “Freedom of religion does not exist. Islam is the official religion and all citizens must be Muslims. The Government prohibits the public practice of other religions. Private worship by non-Muslims is permitted. ... Under Shari‘a (Islamic law), upon which the Government bases its jurisprudence, conversion by a Muslim to another religion is considered apostasy. Public apostasy is a crime

punishable by death if the accused does not recant.” (www.state.gov/g/drl/irf) Even if few are actually convicted for converting Moslems – such cases are seldom made public – this law breaks Article 18 of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights (UNO, 1948), which explicitly includes the right to change religion. Christians are particularly threatened by Saudi intolerance towards other religions. The majority of Christians in Saudi Arabia are foreign guestworkers. Catholic and Evangelical Philipinos, especially, are frequently swindled, and imprisoned for months, tortured and deported.

Article 18 of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights (UNO, 1948)

„Everyone has the right to freedom of thought, conscience and religion; this right includes freedom to change his religion or belief, and freedom, either alone or in community with others and in public or private, to manifest his religion or belief in teaching, practice, worship and observance.“

Not only non-Moslems suffer persecution – Islamic groups which do not agree with the Hanbalitic school, such as Shiites and the Islamic sects, are also attacked by the religious police ‚Muttawwa‘. Such persecution of religious groups other than the

state religion occurs in many countries. Another universal trend can be observed in Saudi Arabia, as well. Cases dealing with religious liberty are frequently left up to the secret police instead of being taken to court.

In states which limit religious liberties, other human rights are frequently ignored, as well. There is a close relationship between the two. Millions suffer infringements of their human rights simply because they belong to a certain religious group.

Religious freedom is a fundamental human right. Article 2 of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights condemns discrimination due to race, color, gender, language, political convictions or religion. Article 18 defines the contents of freedom of thought, conscience and religion (see above).

Human rights and religious liberty have a common origin. The first human rights catalogues were composed in France in opposition to a tyrannical church. In the United States, they were drafted primarily by men who had fled religious persecution in Europe. The demand for religious liberty has thus strongly influenced the development of the idea of human rights.

For many years, the issue of religious freedom was overshadowed by the occupation with Communism. Since the fall of the Soviet Union, however, Islamic states which persecute their citizens on religious grounds have attracted attention.

Not only Christians are affected. The Baha'is suffer relentless persecution in many Islamic states. This new religion, which developed out of Shiite Islam, has

been almost eradicated in Iran, the country of its origin. In other countries, such as Egypt, its members are oppressed in every way possible. In Turkmenistan, the Baha'is lost their registration in 1997, because they could no longer exhibit five hundred Turkmenien members, and are no longer allowed to hold worship services. In June 1999, the members of the Baha'i center, Ashgabat, were warned by government officials against distributing religious literature. The Baha'is represent the most heavily persecuted religious group in the world.

In Pakistan, blasphemy against Islam or Mohammed is punishable by death. Due to their beliefs, Christians are always in danger of being accused of blasphemy. In May of this year, the brothers Rasheed and Saleem Masih were condemned to thirtyfive years of prison and high fines, because they are alleged to have spoken of Islam and Mohammed disrespectfully.

The infringement of religious freedom, which takes on many forms, is not always carried out by the State. Religious people are especially opposed to groups different from the dominant faith of their society and governments often tolerate such persecution. India and Pakistan are examples. Ayub Masih has survived two attempts on his life after fanatic Moslems had sworn to kill him. All fourteen Christian families in his home village in Pakistan had to flee and hide. Ayub Masih is less afraid of the government than of Islamic extremists, since two Christians acquitted by the courts have already been murdered.

Countries without a state religion also persecute believers. In China, Christians

have been arrested and condemned to long imprisonment. Members of Charismatic or unorthodox groups are condemned without due course of law to 'reeducation through labor'. In July 2000, the religious group Falun Gong was outlawed. Since then, thousands have been arrested for practicing their faith or for protesting against the prohibition. Many have been condemned to prison for up to eighteen years. At the same time, the government has increased its supervision of other illegal religious groups, including Christian groups not belonging to the two churches officially sanctioned by the State. Outlawed groups include many Evangelical churches and Roman Catholic churches which do not wish to join the independent Chinese Catholic church. According to estimations, there are some sixty million Protestants in home churches and about eight million Roman Catholics in the undergrounds. In Tibet, where the Chinese authorities persecute Buddhists, hundreds of Buddhist nuns and monks are in prison.

In Cuba, Evangelical churches are frequently visited by the secret police, who want to prevent evangelistic activities. It is illegal to speak about the faith in public, church buildings may not be built or repaired, private meetings are not allowed. In spite of these difficulties, experts estimate that there are 10.000 home churches in Cuba. The Vietnamese government attacks native Christians in a massive propaganda campaign. A major target is the 150.000 to 300.000 Hmong who were converted in a revival beginning in 1985. The government wants to force these

believers to return to their native religion, since the Vietnamese Constitution of 1992 limits religious liberty to the right to practice one's national religion.

One form of religious limitation is the forced registration of religious groups, such as in Turkmenistan. In its 'Concerns in Europe', Amnesty International reports a wave of police raids on Protestant churches. Adventist and Baptist worship services are interrupted, religious groups are dissolved and clergymen are fined. Officially registered religious groups enjoy liberty, but nonregistered groups face all sorts of chicanery. To obtain registration, a group must overcome several hurdles. One problem is the requirement that the group include at least five hundred adult Turkmenish citizens as members. At the moment, only the Russian Orthodox Church and Sunni Moslems are approved. The Jehovah's Witnesses are also under pressure: a nineteen year old Witness, Kurban Sakirow was condemned to two years in prison in April of 1999, because he refused to serve in the military because of his faith.

Religious persecution does not always originate with the State. Especially in Latin American countries with drug mafias or guerilla armies, local bosses persecute believers. In Peru, Christians who protest against the mafia, the drug business or state terrorism, live in great danger. Seven hundred pastors have been murdered, and no one knows how many laymen have been killed. Many innocent Christians have also been imprisoned as terrorists.

Columbian Christians are also endangered. A liberation army kidnapped 150 participants in a Catholic mass in May of this year. Nineteen of these people have still not been released. Since Protestant free churches are often the only social institutions which refuse to pay protection money or to plant narcotics, the mafia murders their pastors and destroys their churches. Many Christians have fled into the cities, but revival in the endangered areas provides new victims.

Religiously motivated human rights activists and social workers are constantly threatened when they come to the aid of persecuted or discriminated minorities. In July, Amnesty International instituted a program to support Dionisio Vendresen, who has received several threats on his life. He is the regional coordinator of the ecclesiastical organisation 'Commissao Pastoral der Terra' (CPT) in the Brazilian state Paraná. The organisation combats the increasing violence in the region and aids victims of violence in legal matters.

As many Christian organisations are mainly involved with persecuted Christians, they are criticised for neglecting other religions. A debate in the German Parliament over the persecution of Christians degenerated into a dispute on the question of whether dealing with the persecution of Christians meant that members of other religions do not suffer persecution or whether Christians are more important than others. In reality, protection of Christians' rights to religious liberty has always increased the protects of others.

In the United States, the activities of Christian organisations have succeeded in

creating a committee of representative of many religions and human rights organisations, which annually reports on the religious liberty in the whole world. Christian engagement thus serves all religions. The theology of all Christian confessions (with few exceptions) makes religious liberty for all beliefs a fundamental tenet of our faith. Religious persecution concerns not only Christians, but probably half of the victims are Christians.

Critics constantly insist that persecution is due to the intensive missionary work of Evangelicals in the Second and Third Worlds. As long as evangelistic efforts are carried out by persuasion in a peaceful way, they are protected by religious freedom. The World Evangelical Alliance – the international umbrella organisation of Evangelicals – is quite aware that the present increase in persecution against Christians can be explained by the enormous growth of Evangelical churches due to missions in countries in which human rights infringements are common. The number of Chinese Christians has grown to about fifty five million. Religious liberty is inseparable from the right to evangelise. In Germany the law considers the right to the peaceful propagation of one's own faith (the right to missions) as a fundamental element of the right to one's own convictions.

All people world wide, whether religious or not, should join together to achieve religious liberty and human rights for all. Religious liberty cannot be disconnected and should be available to all. Where it is threatened, all suffer.

Über den Autor



Thomas Schirmmacher holds chairs in ethics, world religions and international development in Germany, USA, India and South Africa, is rector of Martin Bucer Theological Seminary and president of Gebende Hände gGmbH (Giving Hands), an internationally active relief organisation, as well as owner of a publishing house and coowner of a consulting company.

He is secretary of the Religious Freedom Commission of the German Evangelical Alliance and member of the same of the World Evangelical Alliance. He has authored several books on religious freedom and human rights. He has authored and edited 46 books and is listed in Marquis' „Who's Who in the World“, in „International Who is Who of Professionals“, in „Who is Who in der Bundesrepublik Deutschland“ and in „International Who's Who in Distance Learning“. He holds the following degrees: M.Th. (STH Basel, Switzerland), Drs.theol. (Theologische Hogeschool, Kampen, Netherlands), Dr.theol. (Missiology, Johannes Calvin Stichting, Kampen, Netherlands), Ph.D. (Cultural Anthropology, Pacific Western University, Los Angeles), Th.D. (Ethics, Whitefield Theological Seminary, Lakeland), D.D. (honorary doctorate, Cranmer Theological House, Shreveport).

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