

Session: The promotion of Freedom of Religion or Belief in the international arena

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Thank you for that kind introduction. It's a great pleasure and honour to be here among such a distinguished group, and I am delighted to be given the opportunity to talk to you about Canada's approach to defending and promoting religious freedom as a core element of our principled foreign policy.

As you know, Canada created the Office of Religious Freedom in February 2013, setting out a mandate for action on behalf of persecuted religious communities, particularly religious minorities, under threat. This incorporates opposing religious hatred directed by one group against another; calling governments to account for restrictions on religious practice; and, promoting abroad a robust pluralism grounded in respect for the inherent dignity of every human being.

What is less commonly known is that the Office is situated within Canada's Department of Foreign Affairs, Trade and Development as one of the bureaux within the International Security and Political Affairs Branch. This has a couple of consequences relevant to our discussion, one of which is that we are co-located in the branch with the Human Rights and Democracy bureau.

So while it is true that Canada has singled out the promotion of religious freedom as a foreign policy priority, we consider that effort to be integral to a broader campaign to promote the full range of human rights abroad. This approach is reflected in the structure of the department.

Accordingly, I would characterize our promotion of religious freedom as an integrated but highlighted approach. We consult and work closely with our colleagues in the Human Rights Bureau, recognizing the natural complementarities between religious freedom and other human rights (freedom of expression, freedom of association, and so on). But we've highlighted religious freedom within Canada's human rights framework which informs our actions internationally. As such we have appointed a dedicated Ambassador and we've created a special Office.

Now, how and why has religious freedom been highlighted in this Canadian approach?

I should start by explaining that we view religious freedom as relating closely to the essential concept of human dignity and by extension its role in shaping an understanding of human rights. Religious belief and religious practice relate directly to how we understand ourselves; how we relate to our fellow human beings; how we relate to and encounter the world in which we live; and, how we relate to God or to a particular philosophy to which we elect to subscribe. Implicit in this is an understanding of human self-determination, or free will, which speaks to the dignity that each of us bears. In this way, we consider the freedom of religion as foundational to the freedom of conscience. It is a freedom to explore, to understand, and to share with others the fundamental questions about who we are, how we should live, and how we relate to one another.

These are profound questions, speaking to what American author and social critic Os Guinness has called "the inescapable necessity of human meaning and belonging". They are questions that go

beyond other forms and subjects of human expression, including literary works, pieces of art, or music. Religious freedom constitutes a special place in the human rights sphere: because it is tied so closely to human dignity.

The Canadian approach to religious freedom is also linked to our understanding of the complementarity between rights and freedoms on the one hand, and responsibilities and duties on the other. This means that we recognize that the right to religious freedom – as well as other fundamental rights - carries with it a number of related duties and responsibilities. Religious believers have the right to worship, to assemble, and to express their faith publicly. But they also have duty to respect the rights of those from other faiths and traditions. The freedom to engage in missionary activity, for example, also implies the duty to respect the boundary between missionary endeavour and forced conversion. Again, free will and human dignity rest here as foundational concepts. On a more fundamental level, however, religious freedom relates to the duty and responsibility of all individuals to live in accordance with their conscience. Canada's Minister for Multiculturalism, the Honourable Jason Kenney, recently remarked that "conscience has rights because it has duties, and its primary duty is to discover the truth about moral action, whether alone or in our common life."

The seminal Second Vatican Council document on religious freedom addresses explicitly the foundational premise of religious freedom of which I speak. *Dignitatus Humanae* illuminates the inter-relationship between human dignity, the human conscience, and the importance of religious freedom. This explanation has certainly helped inform our understanding of religious freedom policy at the Office, so please let me read just a short passage of this key text: "It is in accordance with their dignity as persons - that is, beings endowed with reason and free will [...] that all men should be at once impelled by nature to seek the truth [...]. However, men cannot discharge these obligations in a manner in keeping with their own nature unless they enjoy immunity from external coercion as well as psychological freedom. Therefore the right to religious freedom has its foundation not in the subjective disposition of the person, but in his very nature."

In my time as Ambassador, I have seen first-hand the effectiveness of this understanding of religious freedom. Whether it is in engaging Muslims, Buddhists, Christians, or atheists, people resonate with the belief in the inherent dignity of the human person. And they understand the vital link between that dignity and its expression through religious practice and belief.

At the same time, the promotion of religious freedom as part of a human rights agenda allows us to engage effectively with NGOs, multilateral bodies, and other organizations which are conceived in and understood through the experience of Western liberalism and secular democracy, typically with little or no reference to religious belief despite religious faith being the lived reality for roughly 80% of the world's population.

Having the ability to engage with institutions of governance and the quilt of modern civil society organisations along with faith communities is, to my mind, a great advantage of having the Office of Religious Freedom integrated within a broader human rights agenda. It allows us to interact effectively with religious groups, while existing and operating within the secular liberal democratic sphere.

The perspective of secular society of religious freedom and the place of religion in the public sphere is an important one I would like to touch on. Too often in Canada – and elsewhere in the Western world I’m sure – we see evidence of a prevailing attitude that religion is something that belongs exclusively to the private sphere. One can argue that this is a consequence of a particular strand of thinking emerging from the Enlightenment and is also reflective of an increased attention to religious and other forms of pluralism in our own society. Also it is combined with a good-natured interest in avoiding offence. Yet, embracing this dominant view has often led to a misperception that it is inappropriate for public officials to talk about religion, or for governments to engage with religious groups or on topics that pertain to religious identity.

This is problematic, especially in matters of international public policy and diplomacy. For as we all know, the now well-entrenched secularism of much of the West is not mirrored in other countries. On the contrary, in the eyes of many we are in the midst of a global resurgence in religion.

It is therefore imperative, if we are to be effective diplomatically, that we learn to navigate a more consciously religious world. To fail in this effort is to risk the development of a serious diplomatic blind spot.

Engagement by the Office of Religious Freedom is helping to address that blind spot in Canada. Our understanding of political and human rights-related developments around the world is increasingly informed by engagement with domestic religious groups and diaspora communities. For example, the Office has met with representatives from the Falun Dafa Association and from the Tibetan Buddhist community to help inform our engagement with China. As another example, we’ve consulted with religious minority communities on the present crisis of severe religious persecution at the hands of so-called ISIL in Iraq. The Chaldeo-Assyrian, Armenian, and Syriac churches in Canada, as well as representatives from the Yezidi, Shi’a and Sunni Muslim communities, have been invaluable in informing our thinking and perception of the scale, location, and extent of the humanitarian crisis underway.

In this way, engagement by the Office is helping to build a renewed trust between religious organizations and government. I think it’s fair to say that there exists a perception within religious circles that government – at least Western government – is at best indifferent and at worst hostile to their beliefs and institutions. The establishment of an Office of Religious Freedom has helped, I sincerely hope, to debunk that myth.

This is most relevant, I believe, for the Muslim community. By now we have all seen how the condemnation of ‘infidel’ government is used as a key plank in the extremist ideology calling young Muslims to jihad. By engaging directly with Muslim groups, and by championing the cause of religious freedom on the basis of a common understanding of human dignity, we have helped undermine that narrative. Thus, while we work to promote religious freedom internationally, our efforts also support peaceful coexistence and pluralism domestically.

In closing, I would say that there are very positive indications about the effectiveness of Canada’s integrated but highlighted approach to religious freedom and human rights. Our focus on human dignity, and on the interrelationship between rights and responsibilities, has facilitated our engagement with religious groups. It has helped us address a misguided reticence to talking about religion in the public sphere, and helped promote a wider religious literacy within our foreign policy.

I am confident that – should this approach take hold in the governments of our friends and allies around the world – we will do ourselves a great service in the promotion of freedom, democracy, the rule of law, and human rights around the world.

Thank you all for your attention.