

Ignoring Religion Distorts All Human Rights

by Dr. Paul A. Marshall

The "Contents" of the 1994 Harvard Law School *Guide to Human Rights Research* lists rights to housing and food, the rights of refugees, children's rights, women's rights, rights pertaining to sexual orientation, labor rights, development rights, human rights and the environment . . .but nothing at all on religion. Its lists of categories, bibliographies, newsletters, information services, and activist organizations ignores the myriad of religious bodies involved in this work.

This trivializes the plight of hundreds of millions of believers around the world who suffer for their faith. The single largest factor in persecution in the world today is religious belief. Most of this falls on Christians, but Muslims experience some of the most violent repression, usually at the hands of Muslims with a different theology. Smaller groups such as Bahais and Jews have lived in fear for much of this century.

A secular mindset also distorts our grasp of other rights. For most human beings religion is the core of their existence. For good or for ill, it sustains their lives, shapes their ethics, animates their dreams, provides their hopes, and comforts their sufferings. Throughout the world, religion is interwoven with human life and human rights.

Most world conflict is tied to religious history. Chronic armed conflict in the world is currently concentrated on the margins of the traditional religions, especially the boundaries of the Islamic world. The Middle East, the southern Sahara, the Balkans, and the Indian subcontinent are zones of perennial conflict. They are also where the boundaries of Islam, Christianity, Judaism, and Hinduism intersect.

These are not wars about religion in the sense that one side represses and kills the other simply because they have different religious views. Many wars are over colonialism or territorial boundaries. Others coincide with geographical, national, and language divides. The immediate causes are as varied as the forms of human evil.

The point is not so much why people fight but where they fight. Since religion shapes culture and civilization, people on either side of these boundaries have different views of the nature and purpose of human life. Thus, they are more likely to oppose one another. Regardless of the particular issues involved, these are areas where conflict occurs. They are religious fault zones, hence the places where political earthquakes erupt.

Religion also shapes forms of government. In Eastern Europe, authoritarian governments find it easier to hold on in areas where the Orthodox churches, with their long history of submission to the state, have held sway. The new boundaries of Eastern and Western Europe are falling along the old divide between Orthodox and Catholic-Protestant.

A rather more perceptive Harvard scholar, international relations theorist Samuel Huntington, argues that changed attitudes toward freedom within the Roman Catholic Church since the Second Vatican Council have produced a "third wave of democracy," helping depose dictators in much of the world, especially Eastern Europe and Latin America.

In east Asia, the current economic dynamo of the world, economic growth is the strongest in areas rooted in a Confucian ethic. They combine this with authoritarian government. The jury is still out on whether they can continue to do so. However, it is becoming impossible to understand the roots of their development without taking religious factors into account.

The role of religion is key to addressing conflict, persecution, political order, and economic development. It is germane to almost every human rights question. Despite western secular predictions and hopes in the 1960s and 1970s, there is no sign that this influence is diminishing. The trends point in the other direction.

Consequently, anyone who looks to the Harvard *Guide to Human Rights Research* for guidance will get a highly informed and professional outline of a truncated view of the world. Whole areas of human life are excluded. Harvard usually prides itself on setting trends. In this case a western secular myopia leads it askew.

The first genuine national Bill of Rights in the world, the American, begins its First Amendment with guarantees of religious freedom. Even before freedom of speech, freedom of the press, the right to assemble, the right to trial, it establishes the free exercise of religion. It is tragic, even dangerous, that in practice, if not intent, some of its putative heirs ignore this. Any failure to take religion with the utmost seriousness not only endangers explicit religious freedom, but endangers human rights of any kind.

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