

REPORT

Study Day on the Office of Religious Freedom Commission on Justice and Peace, The Canadian Council of Churches

Host: Ottawa Diocese – Anglican Church of Canada
Date: October 1, 2012
Chair: John Siebert
Recorder: Peter Noteboom

Context

The study day was organized in response to a request at the Commission on Justice and Peace meeting in May 2012 to discuss the pending government opening of the Office of Religious Freedom (ORF) in the Department of Foreign Affairs and International Trade (DFAIT). The ORF was in the Conservative Party's election platform in 2011. Considerable background work appears to have been done at DFAIT in advance of the launch the ORF, but no date for its opening has been announced.

Although any insights resulting from this study day may be late in influencing the setup of the ORF, the ecumenical community should be ready to at least respond to the ORF based on our long history of human rights and social justice work, which includes advancing religious freedom.

This report provides a summary of the discussion on 1 Oct and some modest next steps in response to the opening of the ORF.

Round the Table

The study day opened with introductions by participants (see the list at the end of the report) and general comments about current and past work to advance religious freedom and on the establishment of the ORF.



The ORF holds the potential to advance good work, but we are in a wait-and-see mode.

The ORF will be liaising with other government agencies too including the refugee board and CIDA.

The Canadian churches participated in the East-West discussion of religious freedom during and following the Cold War with the World Council of Churches, the European and USA churches. The conversation on religious freedom, and issues about the role of religion in human rights advancement and security policy, changed after 9/11.

The human security agenda in Canada in the late 1990s brought together human rights and freedom from conflict. There were regular roundtables on the topic, also related to child soldiers. There was a special Rapporteur on Freedom of Religion who we worked closely with. There were also occasions when religious freedom issues were addressed via DFAIT.



The ecumenical coalition work of human rights organizations (ICCHRLA, CAWG, ICCAF) didn't frame their work around religious freedom directly. Religious freedom was advanced within the context of civil and political rights such as being free from being shot and tortured. The churches have often discerned together to decide what their framing agenda is in different parts of the world. In an earlier period trade agreements have been key, such as the US-Canada Free Trade Agreement and NAFTA. These various human rights concerns have, and will continue to, intersect.

For KAIROS the issue of religious freedom has not been an organizing thematic per se. KAIROS takes its lead from how partners in the Global South frame the issues. There is concern about how the Canadian government intends to use the ORF.

The discussion naturally delineated between religious freedom and the opening of the ORF. There are entry points where religious freedom is relevant to current work. Within the Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples there are also references to religious freedom. In Canada, the main entry point has been conscientious objection.

Religious freedom has been framed as an underlying cause of injustice and calling attention to those. Rights of religious minority communities have also been an important component of the

World Council of Churches Commission on International Affairs. They received reports from 26 countries during a recent study process on religious freedom.

The Canadian Council of Churches has also sent letters on specific country cases related to religious freedom in recent years, including Pakistan, Egypt, Armenia, and India.

We have typically been concerned with broader definitions of human rights and democracy but we are presented now, through the creation of the ORF, with a narrower focus on religious freedom. As an ecumenical community we are in a more reactive mode at a time when the capacity of churches to act is much diminished, both individually and collectively. We have a government driving a narrower agenda that may be based on domestic electoral calculations.

The ORF may still be being shaped, including the architecture, the parameters, the choice of ambassador and resource people, and the setting of an international network; but the policy priority setting and the development of instruments are not public at this time and there are few consultation processes outside those being proposed and controlled by the Minister.

Most likely there has been a high degree of polling by the government on the ORF. The launch of the ORF may already be packaged and ready to go at any time.

Opportunities

Human rights organizations in Canada, including KAIROS, meet regularly with the Department of Foreign Affairs in relation to the UN Human Rights Council. This may be a table where we could engage further on the issue of religious freedom. There is a regular resolution sponsored by Canada on intolerance and blasphemy at the Human Rights Council, which has an inherent tension with commitments to freedom of expression.



How are we working in this field now? One of the issues to be aware of is using religious freedom as a defensive shield to protect something we value instead of focusing on what makes religious freedom successful in different countries.

There are many tensions and contradictions between various human rights. How do we work through these dilemmas, and can we share that advice and be helpful players where this involves religious freedom?

Faith leaders need to be aware of these issues in Canada. For example, the discussion of polygamy and protection of young girls can come into conflict with asserted religious freedoms. Can we equip religious leaders to constructively contribute to the dialogue on these conflicts? Are there times when religious leaders need to step up and talk about the abuse of religious freedom?

Religious leaders need a platform to engage with the ORF. To date there have been a number of invitation only events that a few CCC member church leaders are invited to. These included conversations about the authority of the ambassador, and links with CIDA. It is clear that the ORF does not have a domestic focus, only an international focus. It seems this government is interested only in selective engagement with civil society on the ORF.

One of the questions raised about the ORF is whether it will be pre-occupied with persecution of Christians, Bahai's in Iran, and Jewish people, but ignore the concerns of Muslims and people from Eastern religions. The disposition of the multi-faith community toward the ORF is varied. Many support its creation. There are Muslim organizations that have been critical or voiced cautions, such as how much the ORF focuses on the persecution of Christians. The Centre for Pluralism (Agha Khan) is interested.

Opposition parties appear to be beginning to do some research and soliciting information. Who is it doing the research with the opposition parties? The Office of Tom Mulcair, NDP, is doing some of this work. We will also check with the Leader's office of the Liberal Party of Canada. Could we get this topic on the Parliamentary Committee, then get on the witness list?



Further Questions

What would we propose to the government for appropriate programming for the ORF and other government departments and agencies to advance religious freedom?

With whom and where might this discussion take place on a regular basis?

What is the role of Parliament and opposition parties in defining and supporting the ORF?

What do we as an ecumenical community bring to this discussion?

Is there work we want to do together around questions of religious freedom?

Where and how would we build a platform for this?

Are there places where we could advance ideas and proposals through the media on the ORF and religious freedom? Could this be a topic for Cross-country Checkup with Rex Murphy on CBC radio? Or the Tapestry program on CBC radio??

Do we need to provide some leadership through, for example, a discussion paper or a resource guide?

How do we engage our experience with partners in the Global South on religious freedom issues?

Does any specific Canadian ecumenical organization or staff person have a defined mandate to work on this? The answer appears to be, No.



Tentative Proposals

The study day was organized to share perspectives on the ORF, but the participants were self-selected in response to a general invitation and collectively they were not a decision making body or mandated to undertake actions. Discussion did take place, however, on where or how the ecumenical community could engage on the ORF and the issue of religious freedom.

It could be timely to come up with a serious statement from the ecumenical community on religious freedom.

The CCC could serve as a point of gathering for interested ecumenical organizations or individuals to continue considering the ORF.

At the same time, KAIROS is the primary ecumenical point of human rights work so we'd want to be careful and intentional about the religious freedom-related work in relation to KAIROS' human rights work.

Maybe the emerging group of the Canadian interfaith conversation could take up some further stage of the work.

What about other CCC bodies: Commission on Justice and Peace, Commission on Faith and Witness, Christian Interfaith Reference Group?

The work of the UN Special Rapporteur is also quite good. The US experience is also instructive. Implementation has been difficult. The US office has not been strong about space for religions that do not recognize same sex relationships, while Minister Baird has been strong on that question.



A letter could be sent from the General Secretary of the CCC to Minister Baird that welcomes the establishment of the ORF and suggests a broader consultation platform be established? Media... Karen Hamilton would be the likely media spokesperson, briefed with the information from this meeting and the letter content. We might also specifically remind the government about the representative nature of The CCC.

We could develop a set of principles that would guide our ecumenical work on religious freedom. Having done our own homework, we could then approach the ORF to discuss some

guidelines for its work.

Work could be done on compiling a history of our Canadian ecumenical work on religious freedom. None of us around the table have a specific mandate or time to do this background work. Could we get someone to take on such a piece of work, such as an intern? It could include a section on policy implications. What about recently retired John Foster? Lawrence will contact John Foster to check with him about interest and availability.



When the ORF is launched it will be critical to be there. We could welcome, cooperate, and offer to work with the ORF. A plea that as we present our position to the government or otherwise, that we not appear or be seen to oppose the notion that the ORF might not have a positive effect or be seen to oppose their intervention in support of particular religious communities around the world. We can broaden the perspective, and need to build capacity around this issue as time goes on.

Summary

First, we need a report that captures the discussion today.

Second, we need to tell our own story: document what we have done in the area of religious freedom, with partners overseas, the aboriginal community, and so on.

Third, we can respond ecumenically through The CCC and the General Secretary when the office is announced with the name of the ambassador.

Fourth, we can also play the role of being a clearinghouse for information. We can collect resources from academics and authors who are working in this area, including Nathan Funk, Scott Kline who are on the Project Ploughshares Board.

We are not yet at the place where we have the will to set up a Working Group on Religious Freedom. We also don't have 3-4 people who are ready to lead for the larger group. If there were, then there would be more work to do in consultation and bringing different work together.

Action Items

What actions will be taken coming out of this meeting?

1. Peter will prepare a draft report of today's meeting and circulate it.
2. We will use this informal group list as a clearinghouse for information sharing.
3. Other groups of the CCC will be invited to consider taking up this issue.
4. The General Secretary of The Canadian Council of Churches will send a letter when the ORF is launched. The draft will be circulated on a short timeline when the announcement is made. Regarding the media, Karen Hamilton would likely serve as the media spokesperson.
5. Telling our stories, documenting what has already been done in this area: Lawrence Cumming will connect with John Foster to see if he would be willing.
6. Writing set of basic principles... when and where will that work happen? Kathy Vandergrift, John Siebert, Gail Allan, Keith Helmuth (subject to consent) and perhaps the drafter of the CCCB Pastoral Letter on Conscience could do some preliminary work.
7. This report will go to the Commission on Justice and Peace to indicate what happened, and to respond to proposed action items, including hiring a writer/researcher to collect stories and advance the work.

Maybe the ORF is the catalyst the Holy Spirit is using to get us to work on this together...



Thanks and Gratitude

Thanks to John Siebert at Project Ploughshares for promoting the study day.
Thanks to the Anglican Diocese of Ottawa for hosting us.

List of Participants

John Siebert - Project Ploughshares
Laurette Glasgow - Special Advisor for Government Relations, Anglican Church of Canada
David Selzer - Ottawa Diocese, Anglican Church of Canada
John Lewis - KAIROS: Canadian Ecumenical Justice Initiatives
Colin Justin Grimmond - Orthodox Church of America and Orthodox Peace Fellowship
Gail Allan - United Church of Canada
Kathy Vandergrift -Christian Reformed Church in North America
Norine Gullens - Evangelical Lutheran Church in Canada
Michael Maidment - The Salvation Army
Lawrence Cumming - Project Ploughshares Board, United Church of Canada
Joe Gunn – Citizens for Public Justice
Carol Dixon - Religious Society of Friends
Dawne Smith - Religious Society of Friends
Fr. Cyprian Hutcheon - Orthodox Church of America
Peter Noteboom - The Canadian Council of Churches
Jenn Wiebe - Mennonite Central Committee Canada
Willard Metzger - Mennonite Church Canada