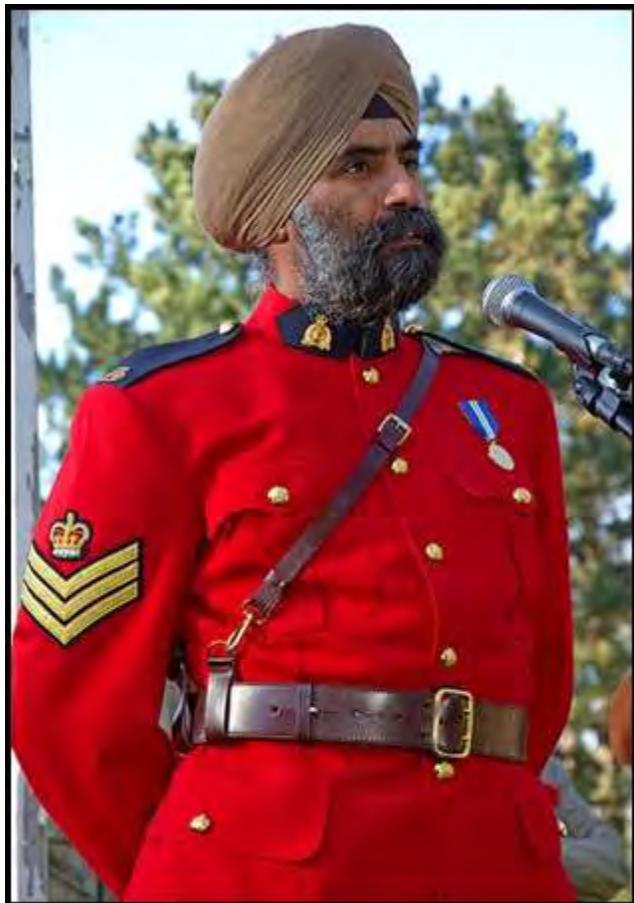


Freedom of Religion and Interfaith Practice

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PART I

Interfaith can be understood as work designed to advance harmony among religions and religious believers. But religion and religious life do not happen in a vacuum. It can be related to your little league, say if your big game is on Saturday and your star pitcher is an observant Jew. It can be related to police work, say if you are trying to decide if Canadian Royal Mounted Police should wear turbans or not. In short religion and interfaith ultimately can be connected to every last bit of life, none too small or seemingly too unrelated to religion.



Beyond this, certain social and political arenas are especially close to interfaith work. One such area is Freedom of Religion, or Religious Freedom.

People sometimes think that any area dealing with multi-religious complexity is all just one big cause to champion. Religious Freedom and interfaith are often confused or lumped together. But, even though these are closely related, they are not the same thing. In fact they are very different.

Interfaith is far more purely a religious and spiritually oriented enterprise. It is unlikely if not impossible that someone can be a skilled and effective interfaith activist who is not positively disposed, even enthusiastic about the fact of religion in the human experience.

Religious Freedom, on the other hand, while oriented precisely toward the fact of religion in human life, is far more closely related to political skills, wisdom, and effectiveness. One does not have to like religion to be an effective champion of religious freedom.

Freedom of religion or Freedom of belief is a principle that supports the freedom of an individual or community, in public or private, to manifest religion or belief in teaching, practice, worship, and observance; the concept is generally recognized also to include the freedom to change religion or not to follow any religion. The freedom to leave or discontinue membership in a religion or religious group—in religious terms called “apostasy”— is also a fundamental part of religious freedom, covered by Article 18 of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights.

Currently a very dominant dimension of *US foreign policy is oriented around Religious Freedom.*

The Office of International Religious Freedom has the mission of promoting religious freedom as a core objective of U.S. foreign policy. The office is headed by the Ambassador-at-Large for International Religious Freedom.



As Religious Freedom this is most essentially a political concern (that just happens to deal with rights as they relate to religion) it is frequently the case that the great geniuses and powerhouses in the field are positively flat footed in terms of true religious intuition and sensitivity. One frequently tastes this curious anomaly in religious freedom gatherings, in which the experts speaking to authentically religious people, struggle to exude spirituality, when in fact *they often are political plain and simple.*

PART II

Freedom of religion primarily is in the purview politics and lawyers (as are all rights issues), but there is an extent to which interfaith skills and wisdom are vital and requisite to guiding the otherwise independent and free standing issues and concerns importantly addressed by freedom of religion activists.

Whether or not citizens in a country enjoy the human rights to freedom of religion guaranteed by *two far-reaching UN resolutions, (36-55 and 48-28)* depends on whether those in power abide by international laws outlined in these resolutions. The fate of citizens lies in the hands of people with power and their conformance to law. Questions include issues of human rights and enforcement, even across the bounds of national sovereignty. For this reason politics, money, military, and power are key elements at play in religious freedom concerns. Activists who champion these human rights often are spiritually obtuse or aloof. They may well have no interest in nor command of religion or spiritual practice. The seas in which they swim are of power and coercion. This can be the case equally for the “good guys” and the “bad guys.”



With that said however, there *is* an interfaith element in this world of rights that easily is overlooked. It stems from the fact. people are religious and related to religion regardless of what they do. You can be a tyrant, a congressman, a cop, a UN dignitary, a lawyer or a judge. Regardless of what you are and what you do, you might very well also be a “Muslim,” a “Buddhist,” or a “Jain.” Or perhaps you might hate religion and religious people. And even that is a religious posture.

For this reason there might be a country in which Christians have no rights, NOT because the president or the legislators have guns and armies, but because the president and the legislators might be some form of bad or perverted “Muslims.” The opposite also could be true. There might be some country where Muslims have no rights, not because the powers are just plain evil tyrants who oppress their citizens, but precisely because the “leaders” hold some odd, perverse version of being “Christian.”

Thus, in this unexpected way, we find that what we thought was a political, military, and legislative problem, turns out to be just another sad form of religious hatred, bigotry, and ignorance. Lo and behold, the people then who turn out most truly and most deeply appropriate to champion these human rights turn out to be interfaith activists, people who seek to dissolve religious hatred.



It does not matter if you are dealing with a tyrant, a thug, a police chief, or an over-educated Harvard lawyer. If the problem is that the person’s own religious biases, hatreds, and ignorance are leading to the abuse of human rights, then the mission lies with the peacemaker who’s skills, wisdom, and effectiveness lie in helping people toward interfaith enlightenment.