2 EDITORIAL

3 Advancing freedom of religion or belief: Agendas for change
   *Malcolm Evans*

11 Democracy, freedom of religion, and the media
   *Ian Linden*

14 Faith and belief in “The Land of the Holy Spirit”
   *John Harrison*

18 Faith, belief, and the advancement of women’s human rights
   *Navanethem Pillay*

22 A disconnected civil society - where does faith fit in?
   *Andrew Firmin and Olga Kononykhina*

26 La liberté de culte et de croyance, parent pauvre de l’information en France ?
   *Blandine Chelini-Pont*

29 Entre la libertad religiosa y el tutelaje de la moral pública
   *Rolando Pérez*

33 Changing paradigms of ecumenical communication
   *Stephen Brown*

40 Mass media and freedom of religion or belief in Fiji
   *Akuila Yabaki*

43 Christian communication in Sri Lanka
   *Avanka Fernando*

FORUM

48 Radio Namaskar: Catalyst of change in Orissa
   *Daniela Bandelli*

51 The great Georgian/Russian media war
   *Jörg Becker*

57 Prophetic witness in the news and as news
   *Florian Höhne*

IN THE NEXT ISSUE

With plans afoot to review the achievements of the World Summit on the Information Society (WSIS) in 2015, the 2/2012 issue of *Media Development* will ask how much closer the world is to communication for all?
In 2007, the United Nations Human Rights Council approved a resolution on the “Elimination of all forms of intolerance and of discrimination based on religion or belief” (Resolution 6737). It covers any action violating freedom of thought, conscience, religion or belief. Recognizing the overall rise in instances of intolerance and violence directed against members of religious and other communities in various parts of the world, the Resolution refers specifically to the mass media, condemning “any advocacy of religious hatred that constitutes incitement to discrimination, hostility or violence, whether it involves the use of print, audiovisual and electronic media or any other means.”

In 2009 the Pew Research Center’s Forum on Religion & Public Life carried out a study on religious freedom in the world, for which data were gathered from 16 widely available sources of information – governmental and non-governmental – on restrictions and social hostilities involving religion around the world. The results show that about one-third of the countries in the world have high or very high restrictions on religion, and nearly 70% of the world’s population live in countries with heavy restrictions on freedom of religion.

The role played by the mass media in relation to freedom of religion or belief was not part of the Pew Research. However, it is likely that balanced reporting and impartiality are, in many cases, lacking.

Freedom of religion or belief is a principle upheld by Article 18 of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights (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.”

From a rights-based perspective, on the one hand communications professionals and organizations have a public duty to represent religion in an as objective way as possible. On the other hand, States and governments have an obligation to ensure that their own structures do not unduly influence or prevent the free expression of views via the mass media.

Historically, States have often strenuously objected to citizens expressing religious convictions that differ from the body politic, to organizing as communities in order to promote a religion or belief, and to acting in accordance with the dictates of their conscience in cases where domestic legal systems require uniform behaviour irrespective of a divergence of belief.

The kernel of the problem concerning freedom of thought, conscience and religion is not the right itself (the freedom of an inner state of mind), but its outward display and affirmation. These are issues directly related to other human rights and, in this sense, freedom of conscience is evidence that human rights cannot be protected in isolation from each other.

Schisms and bitter struggles within the same faith tradition, or between different faith traditions, are usually founded on theological disputes. But, religious disputes also have political, cultural, and often, as a result, ethnic implications. Until recently it was difficult to divorce Church and State, the two often being synonymous. France has a century-long tradition of separating both, but that has not served to lessen recent tensions in relation to Islam, while Turkey is an example of a “secular State” in which religion still plays a leading role.

In democracies the political, social and cultural apparatus that comprises the State is also served by the public service dimension of the mass media. For example, the current Royal Charter of the British Broadcasting Corporation (BBC) states its public purposes as sustaining citizenship and civil society; promoting education and learning; stimulating creativity and cultural excellence; and representing the United Kingdom, its nations, regions and communities.

The ideal of citizenship is undefined, but since the Sovereign grants the Royal Charter, and is Supreme Governor of the Church of England, and since 26 (Anglican) bishops sit in the House of Lords, it is arguable that British public interest is to some extent conflated with the Anglican Communion with all the potential this has for conflict in a multicultural society. The BBC, of course, makes strenuous efforts to be impartial and balanced in matters of religion, yet there are still legitimate questions to address about potential conflicts of interest.

Much information and knowledge is still dispensed by the mass media. But worldviews and perceptions today are also crucially shaped by social media whose objectivity is questionable. If all social media actors are “citizen journalists”, there is still little professional or ethical oversight of content.

What is clear is that in matters of freedom of religion or belief, communication professionals have a duty to present fair and balanced coverage. Yet the role played by the mass media in relation to freedom of religion or belief remains understudied. Here there is an urgent need for a global media observatory for news coverage of religion, and for the role of mass media and freedom of religion to be one of its first priorities.
Advancing freedom of religion or belief: Agendas for change

Malcolm Evans

It is far easier to speak of the freedom of religion or belief than it is to understand what, exactly, this freedom means; what, if anything, it requires; and of whom it might be required. The meaning to be ascribed to each of the words which comprise that phrase – the words 'freedom', 'religion', 'belief' – is strongly contested. When considered as a phrase, the difficulty of discerning their meaning is multiplied many times more when account is taken of the myriad viewpoints from which such meaning might be sought. Yet there is a near universal consensus that “the freedom of religion or belief” encapsulates an idea of worth, and a goal to be realised. This is despite there not being a consensus on what realising that idea and that goal might actually mean in practice.

So what can be done to further the freedom of religion or belief? In this lecture I wish to focus attention on the manner in which that freedom is currently being engaged with, in order to highlight what I consider to be a singularly significant opportunity to advance the realisation of at least some elements of that freedom.

As an academic public international lawyer, I am concerned with the manner in which the freedom of religion or belief is currently being addressed as a matter of international human rights law. Perhaps I should also add that, although I tend not to draw a great deal on legal and human rights theory, I fully recognise that human rights-thinking is merely one way of approaching the subject, and that many people might have significant difficulties with taking a human rights approach to it. Whilst human rights law most certainly does offer legal protection to the freedom of religion or belief, it does so in a way which many religious believers find difficult to accept – for example, by the way in which it legitimates restrictions on some forms of religious activities in pursuit of other rights, goals or values.

On the other hand, there are many who contest the legitimacy of religion or belief being accorded any special recognition as a human right at all, and who consider that the interests of believers are adequately protected by the more general freedoms of expression, association, family life and others. This has led to a particularly rich “debate” of late on the role of religion in public life, a debate which is set to run and run. We should be glad that it may do so. But such discussions need to be put in a broader factual context.

Whilst debate continues over the rightful place of religion in the public life of a liberal democracy, day in, day out, around the world untold numbers of people continue to face the risk or reality of restriction, hostility, violence or death – on an individual or on a communal basis – because of the beliefs that they hold, or as a result of their real or perceived religious identities. Recent surveys suggest that over 70% of the world’s population live in countries where there are high or very high levels of restrictions on religious freedom.

At one level, there is something quite astonishing at the complacency of the international community when faced with the evidence of such levels of repression. It is almost as if such repression is “only to be expected” or is something which believers “bring upon themselves” by choosing to believe what they believe, or by believing what they believe in that particular place or at that particular time: – in short, that since they are, by and large, the authors of their own misfortune, the remedy for their problems lies within their own hands.

Behind this, however, lies a far deeper and more serious reason for this relative inertia: the entire conceptual apparatus of the “modern” state, and
of the structure of the international community, still remains grounded upon the political settlements arising from the 17th Century Wars of Religion. The idea of one group of states exerting itself against another group of states for the purposes of propagating religion or in order to protect religious believers takes us to a place where we have been, and to which few wish to return. As we know, the easiest way to undermine the legitimacy of any military intervention in the affairs of another state is to label it as a form of “jihad” or “crusade”.

The same holds true of interventions of a more political or diplomatic nature. There is a very fine line between raising legitimate concerns about the treatment of religious believers and being seen as championing the cause of forces antithetical to the interests of the state – not least because it may happen to be true! It is also true that States tend to raise issues of religious freedom largely in respect of, and in response to pressure from, the religious groups which have influence within their own jurisdictions. This adds to the sense of partiality or instrumentality. I shall return to this point later, but for now we just need to acknowledge that there are a whole host of deep-seated reasons why it is not very easy for the international community to respond to the situation faced by many believers. As a result, the reluctance to do so, whilst dispiriting, is not irrational.

Developing the framework of international human rights protection

It is, then, all the more remarkable that there is a potential tool that can be used by the international community to address these issues – this tool being the language of international human rights. Being realistic, I see no other way of making significant and sustainable progress in addressing the practical predicaments of religious believers other than by developing the framework of international human rights protection. This may not seem particularly controversial – but it is. There is, however, more. I think it is not only an option, but it is fast becoming a necessity in order to prevent the further erosion of the position of religious believers in many countries.

This will not be a comfortable message for those who do not like the way in which the application of human rights thinking has generated outcomes in some high profile domestic situations – such as those cases concerning the wearing of religious symbols in the workplace, in schools, in cases concerning attitudes to morality or those concerning issues of sexual orientation). I would, however, respectfully suggest that this may be something which is just going to have to be lived with (or, perhaps more positively, worked on). Without wishing to sound too apocalyptic, there is a lot at stake and, whilst certainly not trivial, matters such as these are not of an order to justify rejecting the contribution which human rights thinking can bring to the protection of religious freedom more generally.

Moreover, like it or not, international human rights law does now provide the framework within which issues concerning the enjoyment of the freedom of religion or belief are being addressed internationally, and this is going to continue for quite some time to come. It will do so well, less well, or badly – but as far as the international community is concerned, the question that counts is whether or not believers are being treated in accordance with international human rights standards.

In the space available, I will consider a number of recent developments which, in my view, suggest that there is both an opportunity and a need for new thinking on how best to proceed in order to advance the freedom of religion or belief within the international arena. Before doing so, there are two more general points which I wish to make.

First, and obviously, the rights of religious believers can and are protected by many other rights in addition to the “freedom of religion or belief”. Examples include the right to life, freedom from torture and inhuman or degrading treatment, the freedom of expression, of association, as well as the more procedurally oriented rights concerning detention, fair trial, the rule of law, etc, etc. These are all very valuable safeguards, and add to the attraction of human rights as a means of addressing the vulnerabilities of religious believers in many societies.

At the same time, there is, in my view, a need for the freedom of religion or belief to be addressed as a human right: directly, and not merely as an adjunct to others. For those who adhere to forms of religion or belief, their beliefs represent foundational elements of their conception of life. A rights-based approach which fails to acknowledge and respect this reality is diminished and is inevitably going to lack legitimacy.
Secondly, when I speak of international human rights law as a “tool”, I am not only referring to its institutional machinery, such as its various Councils, Committees, Rapporteurs, etc, (the strengths and weaknesses of which need not detain us). I am also referring to the power of human rights approaches — when properly mediated through domestic, regional and international political processes — to influence the application of domestic law and administrative practice. Whilst this offers “no quick fix” to the most egregious examples of abuse, it does offer real opportunities for worthwhile incremental development.

The first conclusion to be drawn from what I have said is that if faith communities wish to make a positive contribution to the protection of religious liberty they must be prepared (a) to fully engage with human rights approaches and (b) to fully engage with the relevant domestic, regional and international political processes in an informed and credible way.

The latter — credibility — is the more difficult of these two desiderata, as there is a certain asymmetry to be overcome. It is generally accepted, and expected, that States will work internationally in their own self-interest, and in the interests of their nationals. It is also generally accepted as legitimate for Non-Governmental Organisations to take an instrumental approach, aimed at the realisation of their organisational goals. But when organised Religions seek to act in precisely the same way, it is often seen negatively, and as exemplifying “the problem” with religion, which is that believers are prone to act inappropriately by seeking to influence matters which are “not their business”.

Religious liberty is, however, the business of faith communities: the problem, perhaps, is that they are often seen as being interested only in the rights of their own, and not in the equivalent rights of others — and regrettably this is often the case. Many religious communities and organisations insist that they stand for freedom of religion or belief for all. Yet the number of religious communities and organisations which, as a central part of their work on the freedom of religion or belief, routinely defend the rights of people of other faiths and beliefs is rather small. The predominant interest which faith communities show in the rights of their own is also quickly discerned by diplomats and others with whom religious communities seek to engage on human rights matters.

Whatever the reason for it, there is a barrier here which religious communities need to overcome if they are to be listened to. Unless and until that barrier is overcome, the ability of the international community to engage effectively with the protection of the freedom of religion as a human right will be diminished for the want of those with a key stake in that process — the faith communities themselves — being able to find an effective way of fully engaging with the process. But what is there to engage with?

The forgotten process

The Freedom of Religion or Belief has not fared particularly well as a human right when compared to some other issues. The 1948 Universal Declaration on Human Rights sets out in Article 18 the basic approach which has been followed in most other international, and many other regional, human rights instruments. That approach is based on the idea that religion or belief is essentially a matter of individual choice and that everyone should have the freedom to hold whatever form of belief (religious or otherwise) that they wish.

This “inner freedom” (forum internum) is complemented by the freedom to act in accordance with the beliefs which one holds, this being achieved by recognising the additional right to “manifest” one’s religion or belief in a number of ways — through teaching, worship, observance and practice. The exercise of this right to “manifest” one’s religion or belief may, however, be restricted in order to protect the rights and freedoms of others, always provided that such restrictions are proportionate to the “legitimate aim pursued”. This, then, provides the basic framework within which the debate concerning the contours of the freedom of religion or belief
For all its iconic status, the Universal Declaration was not intended to be a direct source of international legal obligation. The usual pattern of standard setting that has emerged within the UN is for a non-binding Declaration to be adopted by the General Assembly, and then for a legally binding Convention to be drafted and opened for adoption. It was as far back as 1956 that the UN first decided to undertake further work on the freedom of religion or belief, a process that culminated in a Report in 1960 which set out 18 draft “principles”. Then, in 1962 the UN General Assembly decided that Declarations and Conventions should be drafted on the twin topics of racial discrimination and on discrimination based on Religion or Belief.

Whilst the Declaration on Racial Discrimination was adopted in 1963 and the Convention in 1965, progress regarding Religion or Belief took a very different trajectory. Oddly, it was decided to draft a Convention before the Declaration: this process ground to a halt in 1967 and has not been returned to since. In the meanwhile, and belatedly, attention switched back to the idea of drafting a Declaration and this was duly adopted in 1981. This year, 2011, we mark its 30th Anniversary.

So what has happened to the Convention, which would have provided a more detailed, comprehensive and rounded source of legal obligation concerning the freedom of religion or belief? The short answer is, basically, “nothing”. Moreover, for many years now it has been the received wisdom that it would be “premature” to return to this task. This is a view which previously I subscribed to myself – but it is a view which I no longer hold. Why?

The reluctance to return to this topic has largely been driven by the worry that it might result in a lowering of existing standards rather than in the raising of them. The archetypal example of this concern relates to the freedom to change one’s religion or belief (though there are others). The Universal Declaration, and for that matter, the European Convention on Human Rights, expressly provides that the freedom of religion includes the freedom to “change” one’s religion. This is not found in the 1966 International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights which merely speaks of the right to “have or to adopt” a religion of one’s choice. The 1981 Declaration takes a further step backwards, referring only to the right to ‘have’ a religion.

Although it is routinely argued that the right to change one’s religion is inherent in the very concept of the freedom of religion or belief, this is not universally accepted. (If any reminder of this were needed, attempts were made to insert a reference to the right to change one’s religion or belief in the annual Resolution on the Freedom of Religion or Belief when it was being debated within the UN Human Rights Council in March 2011, but with no success.)

At its most basic, the arguments against returning to the drafting of a UN Convention on the Freedom of Religion or Belief all come down to the notion that it would be unwise to run the risk of unsettling the consensus that exists around the existing accepted standards. This argument fails on at least three counts.

First, it fails because the “consensus” is largely absent. There is no consensus. At best, there has been a consensus around the general “approach” found in Article 18 of the UDHR, but only in the most abstract of fashions. Not only has there been “push back” on some elements of Article 18 (for example, the issue of “change” of religion), but there is little consensus over how it is to be applied in practice – as evidenced by the controversies unleashed by decisions of the European Court of Human Rights applying the similarly worded Article 9 of the ECHR on issues such as: bans on headscarves in Universities in Turkey, the appropriateness of forms of religious education in state school curricula; the presence of crucifixes in classrooms – and much else besides.

Moreover, the “thin” consensus around the approach exemplified by Article 18 and Article 9 is itself increasingly fragile as it is based upon the idea of there being a clear public/private divide – but this is fast disappearing into an ever expanding grey zone in which everything is “up for grabs”.

Secondly, it fails – I would argue – on the grounds that the current “consensus” has done little to combat the rising tide of restriction, hostility and violence experienced by many religious believers. The achievements of the current “consensus” position are not so impressive that it would be running too great a risk to open it up to debate.

Thirdly, and most decisively, that debate has already been opened up anyway. But rather than be-
ing conducted in an open and transparent fashion, focused on enhancing the level of protections offered to all those whose freedoms of religion or belief are under threat, it has been done in ways which tend to do more harm than good: these being the “Defamation of Religions” debate and “the Rise of the Phobias”, to which I now turn.

The “Defamation of Religions” debate

It is beyond doubt that the freedom of religion has a collective dimension. However, this does not mean that human rights law should be used – by individuals or by religious bodies – to promote particular religious values, or to protect believers or beliefs from critical or even offensive comment. Nor should it be used to restrain others from behaving in ways which believers deem to be inappropriate. (There are some caveats to this but they need not concern us at the moment). The starting point for human rights law should be the right of the individual believer – alone or in community with others – to hold and to act in accordance with their beliefs. Generally speaking, it is only if the level of adverse comment, criticism or behaviour reaches an intensity which prejudices the ability of a believer to exercise their own freedom of religion or belief that grounds for intervention arise.

Nevertheless, this has not prevented concerted efforts being made within international fora to support the very opposite idea – the idea that States should be entitled to use their legal powers to restrict those who seek to “defame” a religion. The claim is that restrictions should be applied to those who fail to respect the values of the religious system in question. It is on the basis of such approaches that action is taken against those who oppose apostasy or blasphemy laws. It is also on this basis that action is taken against those whose lifestyles and mores do not accord with those espoused by the dominant.

The precise parameters of the idea have always been rather vague, but this has not stopped the UN from adopting a resolution annually since 1999 in support of restrictions on those who “defame religions” (albeit with ever declining majorities). Since the Resolutions were couched in the language of the promotion of tolerance and respect, and combating negative stereotyping of religion, it is easy to see why these resolutions resonated with many. But over time their repressive potential has come to be recognised. As a result, the language used in the Resolutions began to shift away from “defamation of religions” and towards the more widely accepted language associated with “combating incitement to religious hatred”.

In March 2011 it appeared that the “defamation debate” had finally been put to rest when the Organisation of the Islamic Conference (the Organisation which has been co-ordinating the defamation resolutions) failed to put forward a resolution on this topic, but presented and secured the adoption, without a vote, of a snappily entitled resolution on “Combating intolerance, negative stereotyping and stigmatization of, and discrimination, incitement to violence, and violence against[...] persons based on religion or belief”. Inter alia, this Resolution calls on States “To foster religious freedom and pluralism by promoting the ability of members of all religious communities to manifest their religion, and to contribute openly and on an equal footing to the society” (para 6(b)) – but its principal thrust is on the need to tackle incitement to religious hatred.

There is no doubt that this marks a significant change in approach, both practically and conceptually. There is, however, a major difficulty with approaches based on “incitement” and this concerns the point at which one seeks to intervene to prevent it. At one end of the spectrum lies intervention in order to prevent the imminent risk of violence, at the other lies intervention in order to suppress forms of expression or activities which challenge, question or merely run contra to the values of others, and to which they might object.

It is fair to say that the recent UN Resolution HRC/16/18 lies closest to the former rather than the latter end of the spectrum – though traces of the latter are also to be found within it. But it may be that celebration is premature. Less than one month after the Resolution was passed, a quite extraordinary situation emerged within the ad hoc group on “complementary standards”. This is the rather opaque name given to the process that arose out of the Durban Review Conference to consider strengthening action against racial discrimination, by undertaking further standard setting activity.

At its session in April 2011, the newly elected Chair, having first attempted to adopt a “blank” agenda (i.e., so no-one would know in advance
what they had agreed to discuss), was persuaded to identify at least some of the proposed topics in advance – and one of those included in the list of four concerned the parameters of “incitement to religious hatred”, raising concerns in some quarters that the same issues previously pursued from the perspective of “defamation of religion” were about to come back yet again, but in another guise.

There are more examples of such things, but the point I wish to make is simply this: the realisation that “defamation of religions” was more likely to serve as a tool of repression than as a tool of religious freedom resulted in the language of the debate being shifted to the more widely accepted and legitimated language of combating incitement to religious hatred (and who – in principle – is going to object to that idea?) The problem lies in the maleable contours of that concept, and it may well be that all that has happened is that the substance of the issue has just been transferred from one forum to another. In other words, the forces which seek to subvert the freedom of religion and convert it into a means of repression remain alive, well, and focussed.

The question which continually gets lost in these twists and turns is really rather simple, but really rather important: and it is – “Why not start with the idea of the freedom of religion or belief for everyone, rather than focussing on the action to be taken against those who denigrate the beliefs of others?” Tackling those who gratuitously attack religious believers is, of course, an important element of a protective framework – but it can hardly provide its starting point, let alone comprise that framework.

In reality, most of the restrictions placed on the freedom of religion or belief – and, therefore, much of the hostility and violence which believers face – are not the product of anti-religious sentiment within the populous at large. They are a result of the negative stereotyping, antipathy, or down-right hostility displayed by many state systems either to certain forms of religion or belief in particular, or to all forms of religion in general. Calling upon states to address these problems by taking action against those who denigrate religion is all very well, but such an approach fails spectacularly to address the overriding problem, which is how to hold States to account for their own failure to respect and protect the rights of all believers. This, I would suggest, would be very much better place to start – and is at the heart of what human rights commitments under international law are actually all about.

It is very tempting for religious communities to accept the protection and support which a State might offer them, even when that support takes the form of repressing the rights of others – and it can be very difficult to champion the rights of those whose views one might believe to be profoundly wrong. Yet if religious communities are genuinely interested in furthering the freedom of religion or belief, this is exactly what they must do. Faith communities must reject the superficial attractions of claiming or accepting such freedoms for themselves alone, and unhesitatingly support the freedom of religion or belief for all. Unless or until religious communities are prepared to champion for everyone the freedoms that they wish their own followers to enjoy, there is likely to be little opportunity for seriously furthering the freedom of religion or belief at all.

The “Rise of the Phobias”
A second area in which developments have taken place is in the related field of tackling anti-Semitism and Islamaphobia. Both are discernible phenomena which are founded on hatred, prejudice or fear, and both are causes of serious concern. It is right that they be tackled. But how?

There are considerable dangers in tackling the hostility experienced by some religious groups by offering them heightened degrees of legal protection which is not offered to others. Those who consider themselves to be subject to the same disabilities but who are excluded from the scope of protection provided inevitably become aggrieved and this becomes a source of friction – as we know from the troubled history of blasphemy laws both in this country and elsewhere. And do we want to encour-
age a “competitive approach” to victim status? Should we develop concepts of Baha’iophobia or Jehovah’s Witnessophobia, given that in different parts of the world followers of both these faiths experience extremely serious violations of their rights and freedoms?

Yet this has already happened – to some acclaim – as regards Christianity itself. It is true enough that an increasing number of Christians have begun to feel increasingly marginalised within parts of Western Europe, as general societal assumptions concerning the place of Christianity within the order of things has evolved. This has been taking place at a time in which the extent of anti-Christian violence in other parts of the world has been both increasing and become increasingly visible. There has been some conflating of these two separate phenomena – despite their extremely different contexts – and, as a result, there have been an increasing number of calls for action to be taken against “discrimination against Christians”, or “Christianophobia”.

In March 2009 the OSCE organised the first ever round table on “Discrimination against Christians” within an international organisation and the use of such language has now become fairly commonplace in international political fora. Yet it is also noticeable that some of those who have been most vocal in promoting concepts of Islamophobia and Christianophobia and the like are chiefly interested in Western Europe – and have paid less attention to even their co-religionists in places such as Belarus, Central Asia, or the South Caucasus who experience severe violations of the freedom of religion or belief – let alone the plight of others. This suggests that such concepts all too easily lend themselves to special pleading, and takes up time that might be better spent focussing the attention of the international community on the severe violations of the freedom of religion or belief that continue unabated and – largely – unaddressed.

Be that as it may, in it clear that there has been a significant change of approach within international organisations which have been increasingly willing to make statements in support of Christian groups facing hostility, discrimination and violence across the world: Notable recent examples include a resolution of the European Parliament on 21 January 2011 (followed by a broad ranging Conclusion on the Freedom of Religion or Belief by the Council of the European Union on 21 February 2011) and the Resolution of the Parliamentary Assembly of the Council of Europe of 27 January 2011 (which has been followed by further work in its Committee on Legal Affairs and Human Rights).

The OSCE returned to the subject in September 2011, with a special meeting on “Preventing and Responding to Hate Incidents and Crimes and Christians”. After a “wilderness period”, a so-called “Christian agenda” is firmly established on the political map along with Anti-Semitism and Islamophobia.

As I have said, there is, I fear, danger in this approach. Organised religions should not be entering into unhealthy competition with each other in order to gain recognition as a “particularly persecuted category” in order that they are able to gain the attention of the political process. What, for example, would be the threshold of persecution which needs to be crossed? Do we want to encourage a competition for victim status?

Moreover, all this does is magnify the perception that those involved in advancing such concerns – no matter how legitimate they may be – are motivated by preference or partisanship, and this serves only to undermine both the effectiveness and the legitimacy of the views expressed or the action taken in the eyes of those to whom they are addressed. As a result, such approaches can fuel the very hostility which they are intended to address.

Whilst it is of course entirely proper that the particular needs of particular groups are highlighted when it is appropriate to do so, the problem is that – like the defamation debate – “phobia-isation” has become a surrogate for the lack of progress (or the unwillingness to confront) the underlying issue, which is the lack of a real understanding of, and commitment to, the freedom of religion or belief for all.

Future agendas?
Are there signs of positive change? I think there are. It would be wrong of me to end without noting that the UK Foreign Office recently highlighted the freedom of religion or belief as a key human rights concern, a concern further highlighted in the Foreign Secretary’s Easter Message, and others. The European Union is also now taking a keen interest and will be developing its strategies and approaches
in the months to come. There is, then, a great deal of thinking taking place – but it is taking place in disparate and disconnected fora. Not only is this disconnected approach undesirable in its own right, it also makes it very much more difficult for others – including religious communities - to know what is happening and to become involved.

I have already said that I consider it essential that religious communities do find effective ways of contributing to such developments, in a non partisan fashion. Perhaps even more importantly, I believe it to be essential that they try to influence the manner in which the freedom of religion is addressed by the international community – and that they encourage it to be focussed upon what the freedom of religion or belief means, on what it requires, and of whom it is required. Rather than being a celebration of a thing of worth, the approach currently adopted by the international political community remains focussed on restrictions on the rights of others, and is dominated by the language of special pleading, disadvantage, hostility, and hate. This must change.

I have no doubt that freedom of religion or belief is attaining a prominence in international affairs unforeseen and unforeseeable even five, let alone ten years ago. The reasons are distressingly negative – based as it is on increasing levels of repression and violence against believers of many faiths. But there does not seem to be any momentum within the international community to address the issues at the heart of the problem. Instead, the dominant agendas are those I have mentioned – defamation of religions, incitement to religious hatred, combating anti-Semitism, Islamophobia, Christianophobia, Discrimination against Christians, etc, etc. These agendas all run the risk of being self-defeating by being overly self-serving, particularly if they are the only agendas which are being pursued.

Hence there is a pressing need to return to the well-spring from which all else flows, but from which there seems to be a reluctance to draw. This involves developing a more precise understanding of what the freedom of religion as a human right actually entails, and to do so in a coherent and transparent fashion to which all interested parties can contribute. We might then be better placed to develop the means by which it can be realised.

This is an agenda indeed! It will require the willingness to stand back from the advancement of partisan agendas, look beyond immediate concerns for co-religionists and – whilst seeking to address those concerns as best one might – not lose sight of the need to ensure that everyone should to able to enjoy their religion or belief, whatever that might be. This ought to be our entry point – and reconsidering the question of whether we should recommence the process of producing a global legal instrument on the freedom of religion or belief might be a very good place to place to start – rolling back the essentially negative approaches of recent years and championing a more positive vision of what religious freedom has to offer.

What should Christians – and indeed those of other faiths and none – do to further freedom of religion or belief? As people of faith it is up to us to champion the causes of others as well as of ourselves. And we must do this based on a positive understanding of the value of freedom of religion or belief for all, grounded as that is in our own understanding of church, conscience and the common good. For if religious believers will not stand up for the religious freedoms of others, irrespective of their faith, why in heaven’s name should anyone else? ■

Text of the Annual Lambeth Inter Faith Lecture given at Lambeth Palace, London, on 8 June 2011 hosted by the Archbishop of Canterbury, Dr Rowan Williams.

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Democracy, freedom of religion, and the media

Ian Linden

Democracy is a far more tender plant than we think. It requires certain material conditions for it to thrive: a basic level of socio-economic development, the assurance that citizens can sleep easy at night without fear or attack or robbery, guaranteed equal access to justice in courts of law, checks and balances on powerful elites, a press that enables citizens to make political judgements based on accurate and relevant information.

All the characteristics of democracy need a qualification and a caveat. Economic development does not always equate with an increase in democratic rights. You can sleep on a full stomach easy if you toe the line. The media can veer from supine tool of government to irresponsible sensationalism. Not for nothing is the TV station the first stop in a successful military coup. But democracy also requires something much more intangible to be present in the public square, something easily lost: trust.

Once trust goes people fall back into the safer space of ethnic and religious identities and networks, the security of clientship with powerful men or political parties. Genuinely public space then disappears. Yet equality of access to public space, alongside the ability to get rid of corrupt elites in elections with a universal franchise are, arguably, the core, defining features of democracies.

So what if there is no public space? What if elections are a choice between two or more groups of robber barons and warlords waiting to share the spoils of government office. Africa does elections even when it doesn’t do democracy. At its extremes, Somalia and other failed states begin to look like proof positive of Hobbes’ theory of the state. The spectre of violence, armed expressions of gang power, blot out public space. Not even the neighbouring ocean, the global commons, is free of violence.

Public space for people of faith is declining

Democracy is an aspiration. As Ghandi said, it would be a good idea. The world has thankfully many less-than-democratic countries which have that aspiration and are not failed states. They illustrate an enormous variation in their citizens’ access to public space. But according to the latest August 2011 Pew Forum on Religion and Public Life report, overall, access to public space for people of faith has been declining in the last decade. Put in the language of the report, government restrictions on religions have been increasing and social hostility towards other religions has increased alongside these restrictions. In some 25% of countries, government restrictions apply even to prohibition of public worship – which might have been expected to be less than threatening to the state.

Now freedom of religion, article 18 of the Universal Declaration, cannot and should not be set up as a shibboleth of the true democrat, a stand alone. It is, obviously, closely linked to freedom of expression and freedom of assembly. Though a surprisingly large number of people imagine it only demands protection of some private inner place of belief and spirituality. Arguably it is the touchstone of, and challenge to, any trivial interpretation of the meaning of human dignity. The lack of compliance is also an indicator of a more general, slow erosion of a culture of human rights around the world. And it must be a matter of grave concern in its own right.

Some of this erosion is increasingly camouflaged in the language of “tradition” and presented under the heading of protection of – often imaginary – traditional cultural norms. Gender stereotypes masquerading as “natural” roles for women, patriarchal accounts of masculinity, are protected under the seal of religious truth claims. Certain closed approaches to the challenges of historical change in the understanding of human sexuality are shared by people of different faiths and form the basis of an interfaith alliance built to resist the siege of modernity.
There are, of course, a variety of circumstances in which freedom of religion is likely to be violated. The remnants of bureaucratic atheist regimes are a notable locus. Some of the Central Asian Republics, parts of the Caucasus, and the moribund communist fossil of North Korea stand out for unrelenting and indiscriminate repression.

Religious minorities are the most vulnerable in a wide variety of contexts. Sometimes the figures for those oppressed are counter-intuitive. Marginally more Muslims suffer persecution and harassment in North Africa and the Middle East than Christians. The numbers generally reflect population density with, globally, Christians (70% of the world’s victims) ahead of Muslims when it comes to suffering violations of the right to religious freedom.

Governments which formally – or informally – identify with a particular religious community are prone to marginalise others, in some instances persecute and harass them. Social hostility towards Ahmadis and Christians in Pakistan feeds on legislation on blasphemy laws in an unholy religious alliance between state and civil society. The tension is heightened if religion and ethnicity go together, Hindu Tamils in Buddhist Sri Lanka for example.

In the unusual instance of the United Kingdom, the Church of England has played a leading role in promoting the interests of all the faiths while retaining an establishment position. True, other faiths have been excluded from the throne and lack the Church of England’s formal privileged representation in the House of Lords. But no-one loses much sleep about it.

The standard reason given by governments for flagrant breaches of this fundamental human right is “national security” or “public order”. Both usually mean little more than what governments want them to mean for convenience in any particular instance. Obviously terrorists who manipulate religious ideology to promote their goals are a threat to national security and must be rooted out.

However there is no evidence that more general restrictions on religion create social harmony, increase the security of citizens, or result in a more ordered society. There is more evidence to suggest the opposite correlation. Restrictions on religion went up in North Africa before the outbreak of the Arab Spring uprisings as unjust governments tried to counter the threat of dissident citizens reacting to predatory elites who showed scant regard for their human dignity.

There is, though, no doubt that the growth of terrorism in the name of God and the replication of Tamil Tiger suicide bombing by a tiny minority of Muslims has given repressive regimes a perfect pretext to impose restrictions on religious groups. Likewise the wider press coverage of such things as the misuse of blasphemy laws, draconian punishments for apostasy, images of inflamed Muslim mobs egged on by half-educated imams, has created a climate in which religion can readily be portrayed as a menace in need of government restriction.

Media portrayals of religion
The media have played their part in fostering this climate. Attitudes to religion are informed by press coverage of terrorist atrocities and reports of hudud punishments in Iran, Saudi Arabia and Pakistan. But what else can responsible journalists do other than report what are matters of grave national interest? And, of course, “if it bleeds, it leads”. Here, with a vengeance, is the perennial problem of balance: how to capture the elusive news value of the good news stories about religion, how to tell the story of the majority rather than the tiny minority.

Coupled with sex abuse scandals in the Catholic Church and secular strictures on its attitude to abortion and homosexuality, this means that the world’s two most populous religious communities, making up over a third of the world’s population, are largely portrayed as being a menace in the public square.

This is not helpful when there are dangerous ideological distortions and perversions of religion abroad. Death and destruction, the burning of the Holy Qur’an, civil conflict and anything remotely connected to sex are news, especially if religious actors can be tied into the narrative. But in an interconnected world where a butterfly flaps its wings at a Pentecostal Church in Burgerville, Kentucky, people get killed in a small village in Pakistan, there is also a duty to educate, explain and contextualise.

An outburst by the tele-evangelist Pat Robertson after 9/11 saying all Muslims should leave the USA was widely reported in the Indian press and with the question “so what is wrong with Hindus saying Indian Christians should ‘go back’ to the West”. I was in Tripoli after the Danish cartoons were pub-
lished and discovered first hand how the staff in the Catholic Church in Benghazi only narrowly got out alive. Nobody believed Gaddafi had much control over Benghazi, even then, and the social hostility generated by the cartoons was not, as in Iran, promoted by government.

But even in Europe the climate generated by hostile media portrayal of religion means that there is far greater popular acquiescence in attempts to ban the building of mosques and minarets in major cities. A trivialised laïcité that gets in a flurry about hijabs, niqabs and crucifixes becomes a doctrinal secularism puffed up with its own republican importance. Meanwhile there is scant regard for the full implementation of Article 18 of the UN Universal Declaration.

One accompaniment to this is, what at least can sometimes seem like, a correspondingly misguided rush for victim status. Islamophobia vies with anti-Semitism for press attention with Christianophobia hastily coined in a competitive rush for attention and concern. Meanwhile neo-fascist movements feed off the publicity and proliferate.

As Professor Malcolm Evans points out, this represents a potentially dangerous diversion towards sectarian claims from the promotion of the universality of human rights, however seriously individual acts of aggression towards Muslims and Jews, and Christians, and their communal symbols, need to be taken. And after the terrible killings in Oslo, they need to be taken very seriously indeed. The same warnings apply to a focus on “defamation” which singles out particularities of one faith rather than the positive requirement for government to promote freedom of religion and to train their populations in respect and understanding of other faiths.

Freedom to change religion
A good example of this is how to respond to one of the most serious violations of religious freedom, the freedom to change religion. A few Indian states have legislated in favour of such a ban. But the core issue is Dalits removing themselves from Hindu caste structures rather than ceasing to practice Hindu prayer and ritual.

The Islamic concept of apostasy, many Muslim scholars openly acknowledge, has to be understood in the context of a young Muslim community in the seventh century struggling for survival against enemies within and without. To stop being a Muslim under these circumstances was as close as could be imagined to treason, a crime also punishable by death within living memory in “Christian” states. That today Shari’a, the divine path to righteous living, should be interpreted as countenancing killing an apostate Muslim who stops following Islam and adopts another faith seems, and is, monstrous. Disapproval and distress would be readily understandable. Talk of killing is shocking.

But is there a mass movement of Muslim scholars to denounce an incorrect interpretation of this teaching? It has passed most people by. Does it do immense harm to the reputation of Islam in the eyes of non-Muslims? Yes. Is the Press perfectly justified in reporting it with distaste? Yes. Do they explain that there are many Muslim scholars who would contextualise it broadly in the way described above and feature their views? Very infrequently.

Unless coerced, or for convenience, people change their faith because they have learnt about another religion, are taken by it, and are willing to be part of the community that its believers create. What is important to assert here is that the corollary of re-interpreting apostasy is that people of faith have a right to communicate about what they believe. Whether it is called evangelisation, evangelism or more pejoratively proselytism, or simply talking about what they hold dear, this is part of any genuine right to freedom of religion, explicitly so in the UN Declaration.

Changing religion is no doubt sensitive – but the Qur’an is explicit that there should be no coercion in religion and that example and wise, kindly conversation are the key to calling people to Islam. The need is clearly for simple guidelines and codes of conduct not for outlawing the right to expression and communication. The Christian-Muslim Forum in Britain produced such a simple set of guidelines approved by a wide spectrum of religious leaders.

Some 90 countries limit the dissemination of religious literature and religious broadcasting. By mid-2009, 44% of the world’s states limited religious broadcasting. In a few instances, Germany for example, this is to stop hate-speech and notably anti-Semitism. This is almost double the number of those who regulate public display of religious symbols and indicates the importance of communication.
In the face of such pressures, the secular press does have a responsibility for showing solidarity amongst journalists. Religious correspondents are diminishing in number as media outlets cut staff and see anything other than violent forms of religion as marginal. Against this background the appeal for more balanced reporting, for “good news” stories about religion can sound like naive whingeing. I would argue in the context of the struggle for democracy and human rights, it is much more than that.

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Faith and belief in “The Land of the Holy Spirit”

John Harrison

Australia has been called “the most godless place under heaven”.1 But it’s not. In 1606 the Portuguese navigator de Queiros named the land south of New Guinea La Australis del Espíritu Santo (The Southern Land of the Holy Spirit). Traditions of human spirituality are long embedded in the Australian continent: Indigenous Australian traditions of spirituality stretch back 60,000 years or more.

This article reviews the document Freedom of religion and belief in 21st century Australia.2 Commissioned and published in 2011 by Australia’s Human Rights Commission, the report draws on consultations with the leadership and peak organisations of Australia’s religious groupings, with government officials and NGOs in the area of immigration and multicultural affairs, over 2000 public submissions, along with some 12 commissioned specialist papers. These covered secularity, law, global peace, individual and community well being, family and gender, and the specific contexts of gender in Islam, Judaism and Roman Catholicism. A meta-analysis of the submission was also undertaken.

So what is the place of religious belief and practice in a liberal democratic society? What is the legitimate place of religion in the public sphere? And what of the freedom to practice one’s religious beliefs in a democratic society when the practice of those beliefs promotes theocracy, and not democracy?

Defining religion, spirituality and belief
The definitions of religion, spirituality and belief are probably the most valuable aspects of the paper.

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It says:

“Religion can be taken to refer to an organised form of maintaining, promoting, celebrating and applying the consequences of engagement with what is taken to be ultimately defining, environing, totally beyond, totally other, and yet profoundly encountered within life. These activities are usually done by or in association with a group, an organisation and/or a community” (p.9).

The report does engage with secularity, of which it says atheism is but one aspect. Yet the report draws exclusively on one source, Charles Taylor’s *A Secular Age*, for its definitions and says: “Secularity means the turning away from God, the denial of God’s existence and the fall in religious practice. It can imply an aggressive antipathy towards religion” (p.11).

There is a risk in this, for arguably, atheism is also a belief system and there is an extensive philosophical and sociological literature around this. One only has to read the work of the “new atheists” (Hitchens, Dawkins) to see how evangelical they are.

**The landscape of religion in Australia**

The four horsemen of the Apocalypse would outnumber the sociologists studying religion in Australia; and the number of political scientists is less than the Holy Trinity. While the report provides some data, one longs for the interpretative, fine grained analysis of religion found in Putnam and Campbell’s *American Grace*, which truly addresses and explains – in the US context – the same issues addressed in this report.

Up-to-date figures on the religious landscape in Australia will be available shortly, based on the Census of Population and Housing conducted in August 2011. In the last Census, conducted in 2006, some 12 million Australians identified as Christian; 340,000 as Muslim and 418,000 as Buddhist. In the 2006 Census, some 55,000 Australians reported their religion as Jedi, much to the chagrin of the authorities, who tried to prevent a repeat in 2011.

But this is illustrative of an anti-authoritarian ethos embedded in the Australian psyche, which owes much to the nation’s Irish Catholic convict forebears. This attitude was seen in the misbehaviour in Egypt of the (overwhelmingly Anglo) Australian Expeditionary Force in 1915 on their way to death and glory, fighting the (Muslim) Turks at Gallipoli; where some might argue, the nation’s true religious identity was forged.

The Clapham Evangelicals lobbied for a chaplain to attend the First Fleet, largely composed of Irish Catholic convicts, which landed in 1788, but Anglican supremacy in the British colony of NSW was dispensed with relatively quickly, with Governor Richard Bourke’s Church Act in 1836 providing a way past establishmentarianism, but into the sectarianism that was to blight Australia’s Christian communities until well after the Second World War.

**The Constitution**

Section 116 of the Federal Constitution of 1901 precludes the state from making any law to establish religion, although the states did federate, “humbly relying on the blessing of Almighty God”. However, these sentiments did not produce in Australia the sort of “one nation under God” civil religion we see in the United States. Nor does the discourse around national identity invoke notions of “God and country” in spite of the nation’s formative myths drawing on armed conflicts, such as the landing at Gallipoli in 1915, and the war against Japan between 1941 and 1945.

Contemporary Australia is widely lauded as a multicultural society; its multi-faith character is not as obvious. Christianity is the predominant faith tradition, and many of the diverse cultures represented in Australia come from both Christian and other faith traditions.

There is diversity within the diversity. The Lebanese community is both Christian and Muslim; the Indonesian community likewise, as indeed are the Egyptians: Coptic, Catholic, Orthodox and Muslim. Among Australian Muslims are those from the Middle East, South Asia, south-east Asian countries, such as Indonesia and Malaysia. Many Vietnamese Australians, who came as refugees after 1975 are Buddhist. The Pacific Islands diaspora in Australia is culturally diverse, but overwhelmingly Christian.

Australia’s largest non-Christian community in the 19th century, the Chinese arrived from 1851 onwards, lured by the gold rushes. Tens of thousands of Chinese miners are today commemorated by memorials in distant rural communities like Atherton.
and Clermont, in Queensland.

Perceptions of Islam in Australia have been strongly influenced by external events, and by the odd imam in western Sydney going off message, but no more odd than a Pentecostal preacher going off script in a suburban megachurch—both discussed below. The origins of Islam in Australia go back as far as the Afghan cameleers who traversed the outback in the 19th century long before the advent of trains and trucks. Islam attracted much more attention in the research than did other faith traditions, because of the high profile of Islam and the negative portrayal of Islam in the media (p. 73).

Contestations
There have been, in recent years, two instances, specifically related to Islam, which have tested the boundaries of religious toleration, and arguably promoted the commissioning of this report.

A Melbourne pastor Danny Nalliah, an immigrant from Sri Lanka affiliated with the largest Australian pentecostal denomination, the Assemblies of God, was brought before the Victorian Civil and Administrative Tribunal (VCAT), by the Islamic Council of Victoria (ICV) over what it alleged were acts of religious vilification in contravention of s 8 of the Racial and Religious Tolerance Act 2001 (Vic). The Tribunal’s original decision in favour of the ICV was overturned on appeal, and the case was eventually resolved by mediation in June 2007. In a public statement released by the Tribunal, the parties affirmed:

“...the rights of each other, their communities, and all persons, to adhere to and express their own religious beliefs and to conduct their lives consistently with those beliefs; and the rights of each other, their communities and all persons, within the limits provided for by law, to robustly debate religion, including the right to criticise the religious belief of another, in a free, open and democratic society.”

Ironically, for a case involving freedom of religious expression, the Tribunal’s statement noted, that “some of the terms of that agreement are confidential.”

In 2006 Egyptian-born Sunni Sheik Taj Din Hilali, imam of the Lebanese mosque at Lakemba in Sydney, “blamed immodestly dressed women who don’t wear Islamic headdress for being preyed on by men and likened them to abandoned ‘meat’ that attracts voracious animals”, according to The Australian newspaper (26 Oct 2009).

Speaking in Arabic during Ramadan, Sheik Hilali’s sermon was reported by an Arabic speaking journalist and caused an immediate public outcry—from within the Muslim community, and from equal rights and anti-discrimination advocates. Hilali, who had been appointed as Mufti of Australia by the Australian Federation of Islamic Councils in 1988, was forced to retract, and in 2007, stood down from his position as Australia’s pre-eminent Muslim leader.

Arguably the greatest progress towards religious toleration in Australia came not with the influx of immigrants from faith traditions other than Christian, but from the heroic and historic Mabo (1992) and Wik court cases which recognised indigenous entitlement to land. The legal recognition that land and spirituality are inextricably mixed for indigenous Australians could almost be said to be Australia’s own Edict of Nantes.

State aid and legislative exceptions
Most of the discussion in the report centres around how notions of freedom of belief and belief can be given expression through legislation, and more to the point does legislative intervention inhibit or enhance freedom of religion and belief? To argue prima facie that increased regulation enhances freedom is, in my experience as a journalist, a contestable proposition.

The report says:

“A strongly expressed concern was the sense of an eroding freedom of speech, where people felt their ability to criticise was threatened by fear of offending others, or by anti-discrimination legislation. It was argued that the ability to criticise religion honestly, sincerely and in the pursuit of truth was imperative, and that Australia was experiencing an insidious inhibition of freedom of speech” (p. 34).

Ignoring momentarily the proposition that one
person’s truth is another’s falsehood, this position was put consistently by stakeholders from all faith communities.

The non-government education sector, and the non-government health and welfare institutions, are by and large run by mainstream Christian church bodies. Approximately 20% of Australian children attend schools run by the Roman Catholic Church, while another 14% attend “independent” schools, many of which are run by non-Catholic denominations, including the burgeoning low fee separatist Christian schools who reject the secularity of the state education system. This sector now also includes some 31 Islamic schools. The non-state system has argued that it should be exempt from anti-discrimination legislation (with respect to the employment of staff) in order to protect their institutions’ distinctive belief system and ethos. The report said:

“Faith schools were considered differently to other faith-based services such as hospitals, shelters, aged care facilities, and employment agencies, because they involve the rearing of children in the faith” (p.39).

But there is some cogency in the counter argument in some submissions that if faith based organisations wished to retain their distinctive ethos through the employment of like-minded people – essentially discriminating against those who did not share their faith perspective – then this is permissible, except that such organisations should not accept any government funding for their services and activities. The receipt of taxpayer funds imposes a mutual obligation to comply with state employment and anti-discrimination laws.

There was a further counterpoint that to require non-discriminatory practices was, in and of itself, discrimination against, and a denial of freedom of belief for, those who held contrary views on gender and more controversially, sexuality.

Other issues
The report also addressed a grab bag of issues such as national security, sexuality, media, gender, euthanasia, abortion, creationism. Public debates about the beginning and end of life, and its origins, attract far less attention in Australia than they do in the United States. Only Protestant fundamentalists are focused on creationism; principally Catholics (with some conservative Protestant support) are engaged in the abortion debate.

In the national and state (provincial) legislatures, there tend to be conscience votes on such issues, given that they cross political party alignments. There are as many moral conservatives among the social democratic party (the Australian Labor Party), as there are libertarians in the conservative party (the Liberal Party).

Media
The section on media is disappointing, to say the least. The panel did not contain anyone with scholarly expertise in understanding the media, nor did they commission any specialist analysis on the media, nor did they refer to the extensive international scholarly literature on religion and the media. The complexity of all the issues, says the report is “driven by the internal diversity of religious groups and voices, as well as by media coverage,” (p.83).

There is, of course, as is frequently the case, little or no evidence provided about media effects, no reported consultation with media people, organisations and institutions, and none of the specialist papers commission for the report are by media experts, and the bibliography is distinguished by the failure to even mention the word “media”. Yet the assertions is made that media coverage is complicit in the failures identified by the report.

Conclusion
The report’s findings identify education as a “critical need”. It also canvasses the role of religious leaders, the media and government in promoting freedom of religion and belief. The findings address the vexed question of the role of legislation in promoting religious tolerance. Its most definitive findings are: that there is “an enormous breadth and range of voices the complexity of debate the shifting nature of contexts, and the accommodation of opposing voices”. There is thus, it says, “a pressing need for education about religion... to reduce ignorance and fear while promoting intergroup respect”. It acknowledges, “a current of anti-Muslim discourse that suggests an entrenched hostility often related to overseas events” (p.83).
“The commission”, it says, “needs to foster a discussion about the place of religious rights alongside other rights, allowing for the view to be heard as religious rights absolute, and then to allow that view to be tempered by other views” (p.83).

However, for all its shortcomings, that such a report could be commissioned by a statutory agency in a country once called “the most godless place under heaven”, while not a miracle, is at least a sign of a maturity in public understanding and debate about the central place of religion in the hearts and minds of the majority of Australians.

Notes

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**Faith, belief, and the advancement of women’s human rights**

*Navanethem Pillay*

*This topic is very pertinent in light of the events which have taken place in recent months in the Middle East and North Africa and it is not surprising that women have played a key role in the protest movements in those regions. Wearing jeans, headscarves or the full hijab, with secular or religious views, they were at the forefront of the demonstrations. They claimed public space and public attention. They demanded change. They knew that they were likely to suffer most from a perpetuation of the status quo.*

The courage and determination of women in the Middle East and North Africa should be a source of inspiration for all of us, women and men striving to achieve full respect for human rights in general, and the rights of girls and women in particular. Their struggle also shows that there has always been a global women’s movement, with many names and many faces. We must support these women now, so that the space they have claimed and gained through those protests remains wide open for them and other groups at risk.

We must guard against the reassertion of discriminatory practices and intolerance during the period of uncertainty which will be inevitable during the political transition. It is important to learn from past experiences of political reform, including in countries emerging from conflict, and ensure that women’s rights are not set aside as something to be dealt with after political reforms are won.

The protest movements and the responses they
generated have highlighted the transformative power of globalization both in its positive and negative aspects. It can be a strong force for the creation of cultural understanding, but it can also inspire intolerant propaganda. It can be an engine to equalize opportunities for wealth, but it can also deepen economic disparities.

All of us struggle to grasp the full implications of globalization as we seek to assert our own identities, our historical heritage, our concept of progress while adapting to the increasingly interconnected world. All too often those who are identified as not sharing a community’s history, traditions and values, or who challenge stereotypical or traditional roles are perceived as threats to the stability of that community’s belief system and customs.

Promoting and defending human rights

Yet no society, regardless of its geographic location or level of economic development, can be said to be represented by a single and comprehensive set of shared values. Traditions, beliefs and values change over time, and are viewed and interpreted differently within societies. There are traditions of hate, just as there are traditions of tolerance; traditions of repression, just as there are traditions of liberation; and traditions of deprivation and exclusion, just as there are traditions of social justice.

These contrasts can be found in the histories of all countries and of many systems of belief. Our task is to be squarely and unequivocally on the side of those in every society who promote and defend human rights, to stand with those who believe in human dignity and equality. And yes, in compassion as well.

In this context, I commend groups and individuals that seek common ground between the universality of human rights and religious beliefs. One such a group is The Elders, a small council of retired leaders, brought together by Nelson Mandela, and which counts President Carter amongst its members. Two years ago they issued a statement on equality for women and girls calling on religious and traditional leaders to “change all discriminatory practices within their own religions and traditions.”

The movement Musawah, or “Equality,” led by Muslim women, strives — and does so publicly — to integrate Islamic teachings, universal human rights and national constitutional guarantees of equality and justice. Their approach is pragmatic and law-based, and they seek to foster a constructive discussion platform where, and I quote them, “religion is no longer an obstacle to equality for women, but a source of liberation.”

The dignity of all, regardless of sex or background, is fundamental to all faiths and cultures. It is also the basis of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights. Of course there will always be some who would deny the universality of our rights and seek to use arguments of tradition and culture to oppose them. To them I say, speak to my staff who work in every corner of the globe defending human rights. Ask them if any single woman, man or child has ever stood up to demand the right to be tortured, summarily executed, raped, mutilated, kept prisoner within the family home, starved or denied education, medical care, in the name of their culture and values.

As a woman of colour who struggled against apartheid, I recall that, while ours was a movement that cut across the many cultures and traditions of South Africa, the thread that most bound us together was precisely that of the common values of human rights, the universal principles enshrined in the Universal Declaration, and translated into binding form by human rights treaties. For us, the UN was a source of encouragement and support, particularly in the aftermath of the Sharpeville massacre.

Indeed, the first United Nations human rights treaty, the 1965 International Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Racial Discrimination, particularly condemned racial segregation and apartheid. The first UN mandatory arms embargo was imposed by the Security Council in 1977 to express condemnation for the practices of the apartheid regime.

A year later, the first World Conference against Racism reiterated this stance. In the following decades, the United Nations has continued to advocate against the inhumanity of that system, promoting anti-apartheid initiatives by governments and civil society.

Empowering women to recognize and claim their rights

Freedom of thought, conscience and religion is a fundamental human right set out in articles 18 of
the Universal Declaration and the International Covenant of Civil and Political Rights. It can be limited only under restricted conditions, but like any other human right it cannot be used to justify the violation of other fundamental human rights. This includes the right to enjoy all human rights without discrimination. The struggle against discrimination permeates all aspects of United Nations activities, and a central facet of this has been the promotion of women’s equality.

The Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women – ratified by or acceded to by 186 States, but unfortunately only signed by the United States (in 1980 under the Carter Administration) – is a legally binding roadmap to transform gender relations within States, communities and families. It has inspired the creation of civil society internationally and nationally and empowered individual women to recognize and claim their rights.

The work of its oversight body, the Committee on the Elimination of Discrimination against Women, has fostered constitutional, legislative and policy change in many States, particularly in relation to violence against women and girls that was frequently justified on the basis of religious or cultural practices.

The United Nations independent human rights experts have also been instrumental in fostering change and promoting protection. In 1986, the United Nations Commission on Human Rights appointed a special rapporteur to examine incidents in all parts of the world that were inconsistent with the provisions of the 1981 declaration on the elimination of all forms of intolerance and of discrimination based on religion or belief and recommend remedial measures for such situations.

Each of the four rapporteurs who have held this mandate have paid close attention to the nexus between freedom of belief and the enjoyment by women of their human rights. They have drawn attention to harmful practices which they consider to be mainly attributable to cultural interpretations of religious precepts, or which may even conflict with religion. Special rapporteurs have recommended the enactment of legislation to eliminate discriminatory or harmful practices and the repealing of laws that infringe on the rights of women. They have called for the penalization of those who perform these practices.

Moreover, these independent experts have made clear that, disturbingly, some of these practices are championed by religious leaders, States or communities, and are very difficult to challenge. They have also noted that women are largely excluded from the decision-making processes of most religions. Their voices are all too often absent from dialogue among and between faiths and beliefs.

Scholars and experts have noted that a clear separation between the State and the religious authorities helps to equalize the playing field for women by shifting the focus from the protection of some rights to the protection of all rights for all, those who are religious-oriented and those whose views are secular; the religious majority and the religious minorities; the pious and the agnostic.

The working group on discrimination against women in law and practice, recently established by the Human Rights Council, will also be well-placed to address ways to ensure that the human rights to non-discrimination on the basis of sex and freedom of religion, conscience and belief can be enjoyed fully. For its part, my Office strives to translate the framework of the human rights’ vision of equal rights and non-discrimination into a daily reality in the lives of all women.

We focus on the promotion and protection of all women’s human rights, including their economic, social and cultural rights which are also a means of securing women’s participation in all aspects of governance. We work to combat sexual violence in particular where it is condoned either explicitly or implicitly by the State, and to ensure that its victims receive justice.

This is not only a moral imperative, but also a legal obligation without which communal welfare is compromised. I am confident that the creation of UN Women will bring more coherence, energy and
ideas to the UN system on the implementation of the human rights of women.

**Accelerating implementation and enforcement of women’s rights**
With the Committee on the Elimination of Discrimination against Women (CEDAW) and the jurisprudence it spurred, the normative framework to ensure equality for women in international law is firmly in place. Fifteen years ago, States undertook to eliminate discrimination in the context of the Fourth World Conference on Women in Beijing. Yet tangible improvements in the daily lives of millions of women lag well behind stated commitments and intentions.

We need to accelerate implementation and enforcement of women’s rights by countering gender-based discrimination and violence which persist both in the public and private spheres, during peace as well as in conflict or transition periods. These are manifestations of the historically unequal power relations between women and men perpetuated by traditional and customary practices that accord women a lower status in the family, the workplace, and in society at large.

Men and women, boys and girls must be educated about women’s human rights and everyone’s responsibility to respect the rights of others. This should include recognition of women’s right to control their bodies and their sexuality, as well as having equal access to inheritance, property, education and social security.

As observed in the Beijing Platform, religion, thought, conscience and belief may, and can, contribute to fulfilling women’s aspirations. However, the document notes, “it is acknowledged that any form of extremism may have a negative impact on women and can lead to violence and discrimination.” The Platform calls on Governments to take steps so that tradition and religion and their expressions are not a basis for discrimination against girls.

Let us recall that religions and their institutions are meant to give believers a home, an identity to be proud of, a sense of belonging to a community of peers in faith, a point of destination and a platform for one’s spiritual quests. Religions are, can, and have been empowering experiences in all cultures and in all countries.

Empowerment is predicated on the removal of discriminatory laws and harmful practices that hold women back, frustrate their resourcefulness, and curtail their access to a fair share of the common wealth. Empowerment requires their active participation in public life, their freedom of expression, association and movement. Empowerment demands firm communal commitments to defeating fear, want and exclusion.

Empowerment must be ultimately locked into national policies fostering self-help and solidarity. In this context, absorbing international standards into domestic law and enforcing them is of paramount importance. Targeted national action plans are also crucial.

Justice mechanisms have been creatively and effectively used to ensure accountability in dire situations when governments, in both poor and rich countries, have failed to guarantee women’s enjoyment of their human rights, or where women’s complaints were stonewalled by bureaucratic inertia and prejudice.

The promotion and exercise of tolerance, the ability to keep our hearts and minds open to the reasoning of others are the true litmus tests to gauge whether our commitment to the full and interdependent set of human rights and to human dignity is truly genuine and not just expedient rhetoric.

**Statement by Ms. Navanethem Pillay, United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights, at the Forum on Faith, Belief, and the Advancement of Women’s Human Rights, Atlanta, Georgia, USA, 4 April 2011.**
A disconnected civil society – where does faith fit in?

Andrew Firmin and Olga Kononykhina

If we regard civil society as associational life outside the state, market and the private realm of the family, then faith-based associations must be seen as one of civil society’s oldest and most enduring forms. Yet there remain challenges in making connections between faith-based civil society and other forms of civil society, which suggests that there are synergies and possibilities for empowering citizen action yet to be realised.

The three year Civil Society Index (CSI) project coordinated by CIVICUS: World Alliance for Citizen Participation interviewed over 30,000 members of the public, over 4,000 CSO representatives and over 1,000 experts on civil society in 38 countries to build up a comprehensive picture of the contemporary strengths, challenges and priorities of civil society. The CSI findings offer an opportunity to understand key facets of civil society such as its organisational and institutional health, the external environment which shapes the conditions in which civil society functions, and the levels of people’s participation in various forms of civil society.

As part of this picture of civil society, the CSI findings, set out in CIVICUS’ 2011 report, Bridging the Gaps, draw attention to the vital role faith plays in associational life in many different contexts. For example, one of the questions the CSI seeks to uncover is the level of public trust in different institutions, as an indicator of the extent of social capital, one of the building blocks of an enabling environment for civil society. Civil society in a broad sense has far higher levels of people’s trust than other institutions in the public sphere, such as presidents, prime ministers, parliaments, businesses, the media and law enforcement agencies. And in general, when support for civil society is disaggregated, in almost all countries it is faith institutions, groups, structures and leaders that emerge as enjoying the highest level of public trust.

Of course, this tends to reflect high levels of identification with, and involvement in, faiths and faith structures, but even one in five people who do not associate themselves with any faith denominations still express trust in faith institutions. The CSI findings also show that in countries with lowest levels of formal civic engagement in general, which includes low levels of engagement in the activities of faith organisations, the level of confidence in faith institutions still remains higher than in other institutions.

This trust in faith institutions and leaders is clearly an asset, and one that, we believe, has been insufficiently capitalised upon by other types of civil society formations which seek to mobilise and work with citizens. This is important because the picture, Bridging the Gaps concludes, is of a multiply disconnected civil society facing multiple challenges. One of the major challenges many CSOs face is low levels of participation in their organisations and activities, as expressed through membership and volunteering. CSOs, particularly CSOs that exist to attempt some kind of policy change or advance the shared interests of their members in the political sphere, have particularly low rates of membership and volunteering.

Our research reveals that people are much more comfortable and more likely to participate in non-formal rather than organised spaces, in places shared by family and friends, and in forms of association that are more oriented around associating for its own sake than around advancing any specific goal. People are also much more inclined to commit voluntary effort for activities that benefit their immediate communities. Naturally this participation often happens within faith structures.

This suggests there is a need to understand better the multiple motivations, sources and locations of participation, and to move away from simplistic notions of civil society that essentially see the sphere as consisting of organised groups pursuing
shared interests through the platform of formalised organisations. A better understanding of the diverse motivations of people’s participation implies respecting the terms on which people choose to participate and associate.

**Counterbalancing the power of the state**

The question this entails for those who seek to support and strengthen civil society is how these often disregarded locations of latency can be quietly, sensitively supported to strengthen the associational sphere and the counterbalances to the power of the state.

Recent years have perhaps seen a rise in rhetoric that pays lip service to the notion of including faith communities, particularly faith-based organisations, as part of civil society, but in practice most connections between faith structures and other key components of civil society, such as CSOs that defend human rights and engage in advocacy for policy change, remain poor.

For example, CIVICUS’ research into patterns of volunteering in CSOs in Africa show that faith organisations play a central or at least major role as locations of volunteering in different countries, but the volunteering in faith organisations tends to be centred around charitable activities, with missed potential for adding value to environmental movements, for example, given that there are many people involved in faith organisations who are also sympathetic to environmental causes.²

Further, in countries which are exercising suppression of politically-oriented civil society, such as CSOs that seek to defend human rights and frontline human rights defenders, or CSOs that seek to ensure that elections are free and fair – in short, CSOs which seek to play one of the classical roles of civil society of acting as a watchdog and holding governments to account – faith spaces may offer safer spaces for dissent to continue in less targetable forms.

The moral authority of faith leaders usually means governments are more reluctant to crack down on them as compared to the leaders of human rights CSOs. Although important counter examples need to be acknowledged, faith leaders more rarely find themselves in jail or on trial for treason. Under repressive governments, any spaces where people gather have potential to be dangerous to dictators.

It is here in particular that the trust in faith structures and leaders, along with the regularity of association, are assets.

Faith structures and spaces played a role in the wave of protest that spanned the world in 2011 as economic crises brought more people into poverty and insecurity, and threw light on increasing inequality and the injustices of many states’ responses, which targeted the poor rather than the rich and met protest with heavy-handed policing. Debate about inequality, poverty and the wasted potential of the young, educated unemployed has naturally struck a chord with many people of faith, whose beliefs may motivate them to try to ameliorate such conditions.

The protests of 2011 were partly shaped by new possibilities of communication, where social and mobile media enabled self-organisation, creativity and solidarity, and spread dissent as a viral brand. But in the Arab Spring, while much has rightly been written about the new online civic space that enabled the rapid mobilisation and propagation of dissent, we need also to reflect on the role played by a very old technology – the space for association provided by the mosque and the often political role of the Friday sermon – and the ways in which these combined at key moments.

Egypt, for example, experienced very strict government religious control, with the Muslim Brotherhood, an influential Islamic organisation, long formally banned under the Mubarak regime. Egypt’s recent election has proved that the party has widespread support. Whatever one’s view of the politics of the Muslim Brotherhood, its political support suggests that many people consider it a legitimate vehicle for the expression of their aspirations, and as such it must be engaged with and taken seriously as an associational and political actor.

In London, meanwhile, it seems apposite that the local camp of the global Occupy movement made its home on the doorstep of St Paul’s cathedral, sparking once again the age old debate of God vs. Mammon and forcing people in the Anglican Church to make choices between the instinctive sympathy of many with the protest and concern over the protection of ceremonial spaces. Recent protests in response to the flawed election in Russia also showed a dual response by organised religion. While in general representatives in the Russian Or-
thodox Church called for a peaceful resolution, some church representatives were also prepared to bless the army called in to suppress the protests.3

While taking account of these complexities, we also need to be aware of, and build broader coalitions to act on, human rights abuses that take faith identity lines. Heiner Bielefeldt, appointed in 2010 as the UN Special Rapporteur on Freedom of Religion or Belief, stated recently that the most shocking experience he came across almost daily in discharging his duties was that of the “extreme degree of hatred” and intolerance.4

And according to the recent Pew Forum Report about Rising Restriction of Religion:

“Alliances between faith-based organisations and other forms of civil society are needed to resist persecution that takes faith identity lines.”

“Adherents of the world’s two largest religious groups, Christian and Muslims, who together comprise more than half of the global population, were harassed or intimidated in the largest number of countries. Over the three year period studied [2006-2009], governmental or social harassment of Christians was reported in a total of 130 countries (66%), while harassment targeting Muslims was reported in 117 countries (59%). Buddhists and Hindus – who together account for roughly one-fifths of the world’s population – faces harassment or intimidations in fewer places; harassment of Hindus was reported in 27 countries (14%) and harassment of Buddhists in 16 (8%).”5

Western governments have been also complicit in turning a blind eye to the torture of civil society activists in Eurasia under the pretext of security and defence against Islamist terrorism, while part of the fall out of the stalled revolution in Egypt and the tightening control of the military junta saw Coptic Christians meet their end under the wheels of army tanks. These are examples of moments when alliances between faith-based organisations and other forms of civil society are needed to resist persecution that takes faith identity lines.

Clash of civil society formations
Complexities inevitably arise when CSOs that are secular, or indeed CSOs which would not necessarily even engage with the question of faith sufficiently to define themselves as secular, come into contact with faith-based civil society formations. Faith leaders have been in the forefront of political and social change, for example, in the liberation theology movements of 1980s Latin America, which also offers chilling examples of faith activists sometimes paying the ultimate price for their work. And while lately many faith leaders have been visible in the campaign for climate justice, this is not to overlook the issue that many faith spaces and groupings are socially conservative and serve to inculcate socially conservative values. Obvious recent fault lines occur over issues such as sexuality, the status of women and the response to HIV/AIDS. Cooperation can often involve the messy business of shelving areas of agreement and focussing on points of consensus and intersection.

CIVICUS believes that the key international human rights texts must provide a clear normative framework for cooperation. The foundational documents here are the Universal Declaration of Human Rights and the two Convenants on Civil and Political Rights and Economic, Social and Cultural Rights, which together form a body of international law on human rights. Religious freedom has to be an indivisible part of human rights. If faith provides a space for association, and if association is part of what gives meaning and fulfilment to our lives, then restrictions on our ability to practise faiths are also restrictions on our freedom of association and our pursuit of happiness.

Religious freedom is of course one of the more difficult rights within this framework, when it butts up against other rights such as freedom of expression and gender equality. There are difficult conversations to be had here. There is a need for complementary learning processes between secular administrative systems and the plurality of religious communities. Bielefeldt, in his recent press conference, highlighted the importance of the state in providing equal opportunities for different religious
denominations to be heard, and in giving space to minorities.

Part of the solution, as CIVICUS sees it, both to addressing disconnect, and to opening conversations around difficult matters of faiths, is to invest in broad, mutually respectful and loose coalitions around shared interests and campaigns. One example of a campaign that involved church networks in global northern countries in a significant way was the Jubilee debt campaign, which successfully mobilised advocacy on developing country debt through church goers.

CIVICUS itself seeks to become a broader alliance of civil society as a whole, encompassing individual activists, bloggers, protestors, trade unionists, artists and people of faith, as well as NGOs, organised around defending, enlarging and improving the effectiveness of civic space, both because human association is an essential asset in its own right, but also because an enhanced associational sphere is our surest way of realising human rights, development that works: people’s participation in the making of the decisions that affect their lives and social justice.

It’s essential too that these are not just coalitions of leaders, but of people. Very often attempts to reach out to faith involve invitations to men in robes to take part in meetings. Interfaith dialogue itself is too often a dialogue of leaders, who because they are part of the same internationally travelling and invited elite, tend to find meetings of minds quite easy. But that doesn’t get us very far if these leaders are unrepresentative of, or out of touch with, their respective flocks. We need to reach beyond the leaders to connect citizens. That is also the philosophy behind CIVICUS’ progression towards a devolved alliance model and away from a more centralised secretariat one.

For cooperation to work and coalitions to endure we need communication that is effective, inclusive, respectful, nuanced and creative, that takes account of the diversity of interests and worldviews in different actors in coalitions. We need to communicate the diversity of civil society as one of its strongest assets, and to communicate the value of ways of working which are discursive, open ended and imprecise. Discussion, dialogue and consensus building must be understood as key civil society values. The way the various protest movements of 2011 have managed to communicate themselves, to get across the diversity of their demands, and even, in the case of the Occupy movement, to communicate a lack of clarity on specific demands as a directly democratic virtue, offers some signposts.

The question of joint working is perhaps more about how to work together than about what to work on. The potentials and priorities of faith organisations need to be better understood by other civil society actors, and stronger cooperation encouraged between groups with a variety of values and beliefs. Critical moments offer opportunities to form coalitions, if those who support the civil society sector have the subtlety and foresight to support them. The present time surely offers enough critical moments around which to combine.

Notes
1. For more details see Bridging the Gaps, CIVICUS, 2011.
2. For more details see Volunteerism in Africa, CIVICUS, 2011.

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La liberté de culte et de croyance, parent pauvre de l’information en France ?

Blandine Chelini-Pont


Quelques années et une loi plus tard, cette fois-ci sur le voile intégral interdit dans l’espace public, Eva Joly s’est exprimée sur « l’ouverture » souhaitable des jours fériés français, lors de la Nuit de l’égalité, organisée au Bataclan de Paris. Sa remarque a été rapportée par les médias, mais n’a pas été vraiment commentée. L’absence même de commentaires en dit long sur la manière dont en France les médias appréhendent la liberté de culte et de croyance.

A vrai dire, ils ne l’appréhendent pas. Ils ne prennent pas les questions religieuses à partir de cet angle là. La liberté religieuse est-elle respectée dans les faits, est-elle prise en compte, pourquoi, pour tel groupe, telle personne, à tel endroit est-elle plus difficile à être appliquée? Ce n’est pas un sujet qui importe et qui intéresse. Il faut être américain ou scandinave pour penser la liberté religieuse comme un sujet d’information. Ce serait même une démarche bizarre que de se poser la question de cette manière quand on est Français.

A la décharge de nos médias, une certitude domine: la France est un pays où chacun a la religion qu’il veut et jamais personne n’est empêché de pratiquer, même s’il décidait de se mettre tout nu sur une pierre philosophale -en pleine nature si possible! afin de réciter ses mantras.

Penser que cela n’est pas vrai, dire et écrire que cela n’est pas vrai, est immédiatement soupçonnable de parti pris, le parti pris de la petite secte intéressée à prospérer sur la crédulité et sur le porte-monnaie du quidam, ou alors le parti pris du groupe radical qui s’indigne haut et fort que les mosquées soient surveillées par le renseignement policier. Dans les deux cas, ce sont des gens peu recommandables qui se plaignent, et ils sont de « mauvaise foi ».

L’autre certitude est que la vraie foi est discrète et de l’ordre de l’intimité familiale. De même que les Français n’aiment pas l’étalage ostensible des richesses, ils n’aiment pas l’étalage ostensible de la foi, ni les gens qui parlent de Dieu sans qu’on ne leur ait rien demandé et qui dépensent de l’argent pour recruter des fidèles dans les rues. C’est une attitude anti-laïque. Les prosélites qui font du porte à porte, qui distribuent des tracts, qui vous invitent à des réunions d’information, ceux-là enfreignent le code du comportement convenable et provoquent la désapprobation.

Avec une telle culture, il n’est pas étonnant que les médias soient intéressés –ils ne le font pas exprès, c’est comme un réflexe qui s’impose à eux parce qu’ils y trouvent leurs lecteurs- à raconter les problèmes que posent les gens qui croient sans discrétion. En particulier les problèmes que posent les musulmans –ça c’est un sujet qui intéresse- tous ces musulmans « ostensibles » qui dérangent la vue et font remonter des profondeurs tapies dans les tournores et l’usage codifié des pronoms de la
langue française, une vieille rengaine du « eux contre nous », ramenée dans les cales de la guerre coloniale.

Il faut lire ce roman formidable, prix Goncourt 2011, d’Alexis Jenni : *l’art français de la guerre*. Il raconte comment la France hoquette inconsciemment la fin de son passé impérial. Dans l’indigestion de son amnésie, le passé ricoche encore et encore dans les attitudes sociales des uns et des autres, la méfiance réciproque et la sourde détestation. Notre pays est revêtu d’oripeaux, décousus à la fois par le silence du passé et par la crise économique. Il s’est transformé en communautés et milieux qui s’ignorent le plus souvent, séparés par la couleur de peau associée à la différence religieuse, la position sociale et le cantonnement géographique. Et l’opprobre guette celui qui ne reste pas à sa place, assignée par la répartition de l’histoire.

Se plaindre d’un sort prédéfini ou inégal reste une malséance et le signe de ses mauvaises intentions. Que dire si certaines ont en plus l’idée de se promener entièrement voilées dans le pays pionnier de l’égalité des femmes! C’est le comble de l’insupportable.

Les musulmans sont un « gros » sujet, de difficultés et d’inquiétude, et cela ne date pas d’hier. Quand on fait un tour sur *Factiva*, moteur de recherche médiatique des principaux titres de la presse française et anglo-saxonne, en rentrant sur dix ans les occurrences protestantisme/catholicisme/judaïsme/islam avec l’occurrence France, le résultat est spectaculaire. Quelques 14200 articles sur l’islam, contre 2500 articles sur le catholicisme, 2100 sur le judaïsme et 1100 sur le protestantisme, toutes Eglises confondues. L’islam semble à l’exact inverse du protestantisme, c’est dire être à la fois une religion surmédiatisée et une religion surestimée comme un problème.

**Faute d’empathie**

En même temps, nos médias cherchent à ne pas être anti-musulmans, ils ne veulent pas paraître trop partiaux et par exemple, tout en multipliant les reportages sur les chrétiens d’Orient plutôt mal en point, ils n’en feront pas trop sur les chrétiens d’Egypte, ni sur la situation dramatique des chrétiens d’Irak. On en parle, on en parle certes, mais pas trop fort, sans désigner les responsables ni chercher à savoir qui ils sont. Tout en déplorant les attentats au Nigeria à Noël, on ne va pas insister sur le fait qu’ils sont commis contre des Eglises chrétiennes.

Certes, les médias français n’ont pas grande empathie envers les musulmans - surtout les médias féminins qui se battent frontalement contre la situation inégalitaire des femmes dans les pays musulmans et ont tous défendu les lois anti-voiles – mais ils n’aiment pas non plus considérer les chrétiens comme des victimes dans certains pays. De sorte que, de la même manière que la liberté religieuse ne les intéresse pas en France, la liberté religieuse comme liberté inappliquée dans d’autres pays, ne les intéresse pas davantage, alors qu’il y en aurait tant à dire sur la question.

Les médias sont également unanimes à s’inquiéter de la croissance des « sectes », dont la mauvaise presse régulière s’alimente des avertissements et rapports publics, trouvant un nouveau souffle avec les groupes « chamaniques », après avoir trouvé pâture parmi les groupes ésotériques, les groupes thérapeutiques et j’en passe... Face à ces sectes, nos médias démontrent tantôt l’inertie des autorités tantôt la qualité de leur contrôle et en appellent toujours à la vigilance collective. Depuis peu, les mêmes sont un peu plus bienveillants avec le catholicisme. C’est récent. Avant, ils en parlaient rarement, c’était un sujet dépassé, et ils en parlaient avec critique, pour déplorer son influence néfaste dans la lutte contre le sida ou son opposition bornée à la liberté d’avorter.

Maintenant les médias recommencent à lui trouver des qualités. L’Eglise catholique est traitée comme une vieille dame honorable, qui a survécu au désert spirituel des années 1970. Et elle est tellement plus distinguée et discrète que tous les nouveaux venus, remuants et mal dégrossis. On se souvient que le pays était catholique avant la République. On se souvient qu’il s’agissait de la religion patrimoniale. Les sondages suivent. De 60% de déclarés catholiques d’appartenance il y a dix ans et après trente ans de baisse régulière, les déclarés catholiques sont repassés à 70% après 2007. Apprentis ne veut pas dire pratiquants, mais quand même.
Reste une passion française bien partagée par les médias, c’est l’intérêt général pour l’influence politique prête à l’Eglise catholique - Sarkozy au Vatican, Sarkozy à Vézelay, Sarkozy au Puy en Velay, Sarkozy à Domrémy qui honore Jeanne d’Arc - la couverture a été maximale. Bien sûr nos médias nous expliquent que le Président en campagne cherche à conserver son électorat catholique tenté par une petite virée centriste et que de son côté l’Eglise catholique aimerait tirer le meilleur parti de la laïcité positive. Certains critiquent vertement l’atteinte à l’esprit de la laïcité française, mais, quand même, on apprécie, plus qu’on ne s’en offusque, le côté « catholicité publique » du pays, assumé par le Président.

Enfin, hormis l’adoration incontestée des médias pour le dalaï-lama, jamais atteint par la moindre critique ni non plus que les formes et la présence du bouddhisme dans le pays, les médias français ne sont pas intéressés par les protestantismes, à moins que les Églises de cette famille ne soient néo-évangéliques et pentecôtistes, avec de curieuses pratiques invocatoires, et en mission dans les terres mal définies des banlieues. Là encore, nous aurons des reportages qui s’affolent de leur succès ou qui s’en félicitent – discrètement-, quand ils arrivent à convertir des musulmans, exploit des exploits, surtout quand ce sont d’ex-musulmans convertis eux-mêmes qui évangélisent, grâce au soutien d’Églises américaines.

Quant aux Églises noires d’expression africaine ou antillaise, avec leur ferveur chantante et danse, même si elles sont évangéliques nouveau genre et qu’elles transforment l’invocatoire en divinatoire, elles n’effraient pas encore… Le danger commence à être formulé ça et là que le vieux protestantisme national, historique, libéral et laïque, puisse être remplacé par les émules des cousins d’Amérique, riches, conservateurs, manichéens et sans gêne… Pour le reste, le protestantisme est dix fois moins représenté que l’islam dans l’information écrite. Sur la totalité des articles recensés sur Factiva, le protestantisme ne représente que 7% des sujets religieux. Le protestantisme reste pour l’instant une religion sans problème et donc sans intérêt…

Je force le trait bien sûr, mais il me semble bien que c’est ainsi : les religions intéressent les médias de mon pays quand elles sont problématiques, c’est-à-dire quand elles ne cadrent pas avec la France rêvée du politiquement correct. L’Eglise est contre l’avortement et le mariage homosexuel, mais comment est-ce encore possible? Les Tunisiens votent pour les islamistes, même ceux qui vivent chez nous, mais rendez-vous compte! Les Français reflètent leurs médias qui les reflètent. Ils souffrent de la babéliisation de leurs origines, une babéliisation fantasmatique mais qui les éffiloche. Ils souffrent de ne plus être uniformes sous les principes vénérés de la République. Ils ne voient pas leur diversité comme une richesse mais comme un signe de décadence.

Pas tous, pas partout là encore. Et il existe bien une presse et des sites d’informations confessionnels qui sont florissants, variés, vivants et qui montrent un autre monde sous la couche de la déchirure. Un monde où les familles continuent à irriguer la société, où l’éducation et le souci de l’autre sont une préoccupation majeure, où les associations caritatives font un travail formidable de fraternité sociale, où les associations humanitaires ne cessent de recruter des volontaires. Il existe une autre image de la France, sous la France exaspérée et divisée. Il existe un autre pays.

Mais nos médias ne le voient pas toujours. Ils fixent l’horizon de la laïcité comme un idéal en danger de mutation et de disparition, à l’image de la peur collective de mes compatriotes d’un irrémédiable déclin. ■

Entre la libertad religiosa y el tutelaje de la moral pública

Rolando Pérez

El 2010, el Congreso Peruano aprobó la Ley 29635 referida a la Libertad Religiosa, la cual dispuso el reconocimiento por parte del Estado de todas las confesiones religiosas, en igualdad de condiciones y con goce de los mismos derechos, obligaciones y beneficios. La norma garanta así el derecho fundamental de toda persona a la libertad de religión, reconocida y amparada por la Constitución Política del Perú y los tratados internacionales ratificados por el Estado Peruano. Asegura, además, el pleno respeto a las expresiones religiosas de los pueblos andinos, amazónicos y afroperuanos, así como su derecho a ejercerlas de manera individual o colectiva.

Esta Ley volvió no sólo a colocar en la agenda pública el papel de las iglesias en la construcción de la democracia, sino que puso, nuevamente, en cuestión el carácter laico del Estado peruano. Sectores influyentes del catolicismo y el evangélico –que sostienen su actuación pública sobre la base de la perspectiva de la “confesionalización del Estado”– han encontrado en esta ley una puerta abierta para legitimar no sólo sus intencionalidades proselitistas sino también sus cosmovisiones políticas y teológicas en la línea del tutelaje de la moral pública. Por el contrario, diversos líderes de opinión han advertido que la referida ley, en vez de promover la igualdad de derechos, acentúa la discriminación de las menores religiosas.

Sin embargo, más allá de las disposiciones legales, es importante poner atención sobre las lógicas religiosas y políticas, así como en los imaginarios culturales que subyacen en la actuación pública de los grupos religiosos, en el rol de los actores políticos y en la construcción de los discursos desde los medios de comunicación frente a un contexto donde se necesita afirmar la instauración de una sociedad que respete la pluralidad religiosa y reconozca el derecho a las creencias.

Las neo-expresiones de la “confesionalización” del Estado

Históricamente la Iglesia Católica ha recibido un trato preferencial por parte del Estado peruano (tanto en el campo educativo, así como en el otorgamiento de beneficios tributarios, facilidades de inmigración extendidas a sus clérigos y otros beneficios, de conformidad con el Acuerdo suscrito entre el Vaticano y el Estado en el año 1980). Esta preferencia ha sido una de las barreras que ha impedido la afirmación de una cultura de la igualdad religiosa y el reconocimiento a la libertad de conciencia.

En la otra vereda, alrededor del debate en torno a la Ley de Libertad Religiosa ha sido interesante observar que las cruzadas por la legitimidad cultural y política emprendidas por sectores no católicos, especialmente evangélicos y adventistas, se centraron no precisamente en la lucha por la des-confesionalización del Estado, sino por la adquisición de los mismos privilegios de poder que históricamente gozan los actores que se mueven alrededor de la oficialidad católica.

Precisamente, los grupos conservadores católicos y no católicos volvieron a encontrarse, alrededor del debate que ha ocasionado la Ley de libertad religiosa, para legitimar a través de la norma legal la repartición de las cuotas de poder y legitimidad confesional en las esferas estatales. Bajo esta cosmovisión, los “negociadores” evangélicos aceptaron que la ley ratificara el viejo concordato entre el Estado peruano y el Vaticano a condición del reconocimiento legal de dos de los seminarios evangélicos del país.

La anuencia de los sectores políticos que administran el poder desde el Estado, en el sentido de legitimar la cultura del privilegio que sostienen estas cruzadas, ocurre porque los gobernantes encuentran en estos sectores religiosos a los perfectos
legitimadores espirituales o pastorales de sus políticas autoritarias. Desde la vereda religiosa o eclesial, este matrimonio se afirma no sólo en la búsqueda de legitimidad política y cultural, sino también en la mesiánica ansiedad por “vigilar” la moral pública desde los códigos religiosos.

En ese sentido, queda claro que el implícito consenso entre los sectores conservadores del catolicismo y evangelicalismo se sostiene, por un lado, en aquella visión de la ciudadanía y la cultura democrática que se resiste a convivir con la pluralidad y a eliminar el tutelaje religioso en la esfera pública. Pero, por otro lado, se afirma en aquella visión de un Estado que antepone la santificación de los privilegios a la promoción de los derechos, la equidad y la justicia.

Este proyecto regulador pone, sin duda, en cuestión la construcción de la democracia, porque la filosofía confesionalista crea nuevas condiciones para mantener la antigua coexistencia utilitaria entre la religión y el poder político y, también, legitima el tradicional matrimonio entre una iglesia dominante y un Estado que usa la religión para lograr la “bendición” de todas sus políticas, aun de aquellas que colisionan con el Estado de derecho.

Sin embargo, es aún más relevante reflexionar sobre lo que diversos analistas han señalado, en el sentido de que el proyecto de Estado confesional desnaturaliza la esencia de la democracia y debilita el proceso ciudadano sobre el cual se intenta construir una sociedad verdaderamente inclusiva y sin privilegios, donde se respete el derecho a pensar y creer libremente. Y es que en el fondo el proyecto confesionalista, si bien acepta (a regañadientes) la existencia de “otros”, diferentes, no establece como un valor democrático el respeto a la diferencia.

Entre el “discurso oficial” y la folklorización del factor religioso

El discurso mediático sobre la actuación de los sectores vinculados a las comunidades de fe, iglesias o movimientos religiosos es representado y re-significado desde dos lógicas: El tratamiento mediático del hecho religioso está marcado por la lógica del “discurso oficial” que se construye desde las esferas del poder político. En este sentido, determinados rituales religiosos se asumen como parte de la construcción de una identidad cultural colectiva consensuada. Por ejemplo, los medios de comunicación dieron cuenta del reconocimiento que hizo el gobierno peruano a la tradicional procesión católica del Señor de los Milagros, declarándolo – mediante Decreto Supremo – Patrón de la Espiritualidad Católica. El propio Presidente Alan García (ahora ex presidente) promulgó la referida ley portando un hábito de color morado y cargando el anda de la imagen durante su recorrido en las inmediaciones de Palacio de Gobierno.

Esta puesta en escena del referido ritual que podría verse como un reconocimiento a las tradiciones culturales ancestrales del país revela implícitamente el inequitativo reconocimiento del vasto y complejo campo religioso existente en el Perú. Este hecho no sólo da cuenta del uso político de las ritualidades religiosas, sino también de la complicidad entre los sectores religiosos y políticos que detentan el poder por afirmar un Estado que se resiste a incorporar la cultura de la laicidad en el marco de la democracia.

En otra esfera religiosa, es interesante observar no sólo la legitimidad política, sino también la cobertura mediática que han adquirido los denominados “Te Deums evangélicos”. Sin embargo, este hecho que aparece como una aparente apertura hacia un sector no católico (históricamente marginado por los actores mediáticos y excluido por los agentes políticos) ha creado una suerte de espejismo respecto al discurso y las prácticas políticas y mediáticas. Muchos de los líderes evangélicos han asumido la presencia de las autoridades políticas en estos rituales públicos mediatizados como un reconocimiento a la historia y presencia de la comunidad evangélica en el país.

Sin embargo, la obsesión por competir con el poder político y simbólico del catolicismo, conlleva implícitamente a la reproducción de la confesionalización del Estado desde la otra vereda. Esta expresión es legitimada por los medios masivos más por el lado del personaje o los personajes políticos que por la apertura de espacios y reconocimiento a la libertad religiosa. Es decir, esta “legitimidad mediática” obvia la discusión respecto al reconocimiento a las otras minorías religiosas.

Es cierto que el empoderamiento mediático y político que han logrado muchos de los grupos evangélicos da cuenta que asistimos a una cada vez más creciente desprivatización del campo religioso (Casanova, 1994), lo cual supone el quebrar que los grupos o movimientos religiosos hacen respecto
al papel marginal y privatizado que les adscribían ciertas teorías clásicas de la modernidad y de la secularización. Pero al mismo tiempo es importante advertir que la lógica – desde la cual muchos de estos grupos buscan apropiarse de la esfera pública – vuelve a reproducir, como mencionamos antes, la perspectiva “confesionalista” de la apropiación de lo público, porque detrás de las cruzadas que emprenden para ser reconocidos y salir de la marginalidad subyace una clara “agenda reconstruccionalista”.

Una lectura desde esta perspectiva lleva a observar que no sólo las coincidencias respecto a las opciones morales, sino la posibilidad de otorgarse legitimidad mutua (política y religiosamente) subyacen en la gestación de estas nuevas “alianzas” católico-evangélicas, que viene de la mano con una particular manera de entender la democracia, el rol del Estado y el propio rol ético de las iglesias.

La aproximación de los medios hacia los grupos religiosos no oficiales está marcada por la lógica de la “folklorización” de los actores. Las iglesias o grupos no católicos se constituyen en sujetos de noticia cuando aparecen en hechos calificados, por el lente periodístico, como pintorescos o folklóricos. Muchos de estos grupos (eclesiásticos o para-eclesiásticos), en el ámbito local, están desarrollando esfuerzos significativos a favor del desarrollo de sus comunidades. Sin embargo, desde el lente mediático, la noticia más importante respecto a esos grupos no son precisamente estos hechos, sino aquellos que implican el escándalo (si un pastor fue encontrado cometiendo un “pecado sexual”), la espectacularización (conversión religiosa de una figura pública) la politización folklórica de la religión (incursión política aventurera de algún líder evangélico).

El encuentro mediático de los legitimadores políticos y religiosos

En el contexto de las contiendas electorales recientes, los medios han dado cuenta nuevamente del modo como los “reguladores políticos y religiosos” de la moral pública vuelven a converger al momento de la discusión sobre el tipo de sociedad, de Estado y de cultura democrática que se espera en el escenario de una nueva gestión gubernamental.

Precisamente, en el último proceso electoral peruano fue interesante apreciar al propio cardenal de la iglesia católica, así como a líderes representativos de influentes denominaciones evangélicas jugando una suerte de rol de “legitimadores espirituales” de determinados actores o corrientes políticas coincidentes con sus proyectos teocráticos del poder político. Confluieron en esta ocasión no sólo los líderes que entraron a competir por una curul en la contienda electoral, sino también otros actores que asumieron el rol de consejeros pastorales de autoridades y funcionarios públicos, asesores políticos, animadores mediáticos.

Un caso particularmente emblemático es del pastor Rodolfo Gonzales, principal líder de la agrupación religiosa conocida como el “Movimiento Misionero Mundial”. Gonzales cuenta con una extensa red radial y televisiva en Lima y el interior del Perú. La congregación de Gonzales se constituyó en un referente religioso importante no sólo para sus propios feligreses, sino también para aquellos sectores políticos que necesitan de la legitimidad de las iglesias para afirmarse en el poder.

Tal como en el caso de otros monopolios mediáticos avalados desde las esferas del poder político, lo que aquí, al parecer, ocurre es que el Estado le otorga a este grupo el acceso al espectro radioeléctrico, pero no por ser un proyecto comunicacional orientado a contribuir a los valores ciudadanos, sino porque su estrategia proselitista puede constituirse en un factor importante para sostener determinadas políticas del gobierno de turno.

Precisamente, como correspondencia a este acuerdo religioso-político, la iglesia del pastor Gonzales jugó un rol político clave en la última contienda electoral, emprendiendo a través de su canal de televisión una intensa “cruzada moral” a favor de aquellos grupos políticos afines a su concepción fundamentalista de la religión y la política. En la campaña electoral, desde su púlpito mediático, Gonzales desplegó una masiva campaña para legitimar el proyecto fujimorista, liderado por la hija del expresidente Alberto Fujimori, condenado por su vinculación con actos de corrupción y la implementación de políticas de violación de los derechos humanos durante su gobierno.

En este caso se observa que los sectores religiosos, especialmente aquellos que buscan apropiarse de la esfera pública con un fuerte énfasis mesiánico – desde la perspectiva de la “protesta religiosa confesional” (Young, 2002) – están cada vez más insertados en los espacios mediáticos y en los circu-
los del poder político oficial, con estrategias comunicacionales renovadas y construcciones discursivas secularizadas.

En ese sentido, no sólo las coincidencias respecto a las opciones morales, sino la posibilidad de otorgarse legitimidad mutua (política y religiosamente) subyacen en la gestación de estas nuevas “alianzas” político-religiosas. Son precisamente estos matrimonios los que imposibilitan no sólo la construcción de una sociedad caracterizada por la valoración de la pluralidad religiosa y el respeto a las inclusiones de las minorías, sino también la instauración de un Estado verdaderamente laico.

Un apunte final
En un contexto como el peruano, marcado por las fragilidades y fragmentaciones del sistema democrático y el quehacer ciudadano, se necesitan construir espacios públicos que animen y propicien el debate sobre las lógicas desde los cuales se sostienen los discursos y prácticas respecto a la libertad y la igualdad religiosa. Se seguirán abonando y construyendo calzos de cultivo para los proyectos fundamentalistas y autoritarios. Se alimentará la cultura del tutelaje religioso de la moral pública y la confesionalización del Estado.

Es interesante observar que esta contemporánea cosmovisión religiosa del tutelaje cultural y político ocurre en un contexto en el cual persisten – aún en América Latina – rezagos de aquel fundamentalismo y autoritarismo político, construido históricamente por una influente orden castrense-clerical. A través de ésta se asume, por un lado, que los ciudadanos y ciudadanas no son capaces de hacerse cargo por sí mismos de sus intereses y por consiguiente necesitan ser tutelados. Por otro lado, esta lógica alimenta una particular forma de entender la práctica política, mediante el cual se remplaza la búsqueda del bien común por la sociedad de privilegios y el consenso ciudadano por el orden social predestinado (Nugent, 2010).

Los medios tienen aquí un rol pedagógico clave para construir puentes de diálogo, de modo que – como sostiene Habermas – se logre, por un lado, que los ciudadanos religiosos y los secularizados puedan sostener procesos de aprendizaje que les capacite para comportarse de una manera autorreflexivamente ilustrada en la esfera público-política (Habermas, 2006). Y por otro lado, se necesita trabajar a nivel de la esfera pública para lograr que concurran todas las voces, las oficiales y no oficiales, las secular y religiosa, las mayorías y minorías.

Es importante que desde los medios se contribuya a eliminar los vestigios de intolerancia religiosa, y a evitar que, en nombre de las luchas por el reconocimiento de las minorías, se utilice la religión para legitimar determinados proyectos políticos y sostener viejos tutelajes que mina la democracia y caricaturiza la acción ciudadana. Desde esta perspectiva, el espíritu laico – como diría Nolberto Bobbio (1999) – no es en sí mismo una nueva cultura, sino la condición para la convivencia de todas las posibles culturas.

Nota
1. El reconstruccionismo es una concepción teológica por el cual se asume que los gestores de la fe tienen un imperativo moral o un mandato cultural [mestiño] para extender su dominio religioso sobre todas las estructuras de la sociedad (Pottenger, 2007).

Referencias
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Changing paradigms of ecumenical communication

Stephen Brown

The process of communication between individuals and institutions was central to the formation of the World Council of Churches in 1948. Yet communication is often taken for granted, being understood as a tool to advance the organizational objectives of ecumenical organizations. Only on occasions has the ecumenical movement in its organized expressions engaged in intentional reflection on the theological, societal and ecumenical challenges posed by communication.

Two exceptions are the statements that emerged from the World Council of Churches assemblies in 1968 in Uppsala (“The Church and the Media of Mass Communication”) and in 1983 in Vancouver (“ Communicating Credibly”). To this may also be added the more tentative moves around the Harare assembly in 1998 to articulate an understanding of communication as part of an “ecumenical space”. Yet the understanding of communication differed markedly between these gatherings. This shift in perspective, it will be argued, is linked to changing paradigms for social change and theological and ecumenical reflection that were themselves the product of economic and political transformation.

From Uppsala to Vancouver

Uppsala in 1968 marked the first time a WCC assembly formally dealt with communication as an issue in its own right. Describing itself as a “call for involvement”, a statement on “The Church and the Media of Mass Communication” urged churches “to abandon their traditional suspicion of the media and to accept or seek a firm partnership with those people who are creating, producing, using and evaluating the modern communication systems.” Although it acknowledged that media could “enrich or inhibit life”, the statement set out a largely optimistic perspective on mass communication, identified for the most part with radio and television.

Mass media were the “agora and town meeting of technological society”, providing “some of the bone structure for a responsible world society”. At the same time, “a smaller world is not necessarily a more peaceful world”, and “[p]owerful minorities can pervert the media for limited or selfish purposes”. Christians, the statement underlined, “are invited to unmask all pseudo-communication which divides rather than unites, points to ourselves rather than others, sows enmity rather than reconciles, imprisons rather than liberates”.

Still, taken as a whole, the Uppsala statement remained a call for churches to take seriously mass communication and to respect the professionalism of its practitioners. Christians “often have to learn through the communications media how isolated they have been from the modern world and from the living God who is active there”, it stated. “Modern means of communication powerfully stimulate man’s coming of age. This need not frighten us. What is frightening is that so few are willing to see the media’s power and to fight for their proper use.”

The statement that emerged from the Vancouver assembly in 1983, “in contrast to the earlier Uppsala statement, was sharply critical of the various mass media and their impact on modern society.” Mass media, it stated, “have a pervasive and often dominant role”. In many affluent countries the media “distort and diminish the life of the world, by packaging it as entertainment, or simply as propaganda. This is partly due to the limits inherent in the media themselves, partly because a communication industry or a government or a powerful group want us to perceive life and the world in their own image, for commercial or political reasons”. There is “much that is positive about public media … [the attempt] to be accessible to all, the need to be open and accountable to the whole community, the redemptive glimpses present in secular programmes, the fact that mass media take our human needs
for recreation and celebration more seriously than many churches”.

At the same time, the statement pointed to “the uneven distribution of media growth and the control of those media by a few powerful countries and transnational corporations” and that “[m]ost ordinary men and women are excluded, except as objects of the media”. While the Uppsala statement had underlined the need for churches to respect the professionalism of media practitioners, the Vancouver statement asserted that the mass media has, “accepted the fact that only those with political and economic power, or those who possess professional skills, have the right to disseminate information, ideas, images and experiences”.

The new electronic media, it asserted, “will enlarge and confirm the global domination of a few countries and make it almost irreversible” and “widen the gap between the information-poor and information-rich both within and between individual nations”. Furthermore, it noted the largely ignored demands of “many countries, especially in the South”, to call for a “new world information and communication order, so that they can assert their own values, affirm their own culture and determine their own priorities”.

Changing paradigms of development and communication
Underlying this shift in ecumenical communication paradigms, it is argued here, is what Carlsson has called a shift from a “modernization” to a “dependence” paradigm of development:

“Whereas the modernization school saw the problems of developing countries as the result of characteristics inherent in the history of the territories concerned, the dependence paradigm pointed to underdevelopment as the result of capitalism and its expressions, colonialism and imperialism.”

This change in perspective was, in turn, the result of geopolitical shifts. The 1960s marked the culmination of the decolonization process that began after the Second World War, with the notion of “modernization” signifying the need to hasten the evolution of these newly independent nations towards a modern society. In the 1970s, however, the newly independent countries of what was then called the Third World began to make their collective voice heard in international fora, particularly the United Nations system, with demands for a reform of international relations.

These demands found their expression in the call for a New International Economic Order (NIEO). This was closely linked to the “dependency” perspective on development, which argued that “external forces are of singular importance to the economic activities within the dependent states. These external forces include multinational corporations, international commodity markets, foreign assistance, communications, and any other means by which the advanced industrialized countries can represent their economic interests abroad”. Behind the debates on development paradigms lay also the Cold War and the competition between East and West for influence over and within the countries of the Third World.

These distinct development paradigms had also implications for the place of mass communication. The modernization paradigm allocated a central role to communication in facilitating or hindering “progress towards a modern, as opposed to a traditional society. In the dependence paradigm, it is rather a question of media imperialism”. This is the background against which the call for a New International Economic Order was coupled with demands articulated by the Non Aligned Movement for a new international information order, in which UNESCO, the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization, became the theatre of debate.

Such demands contributed to the creation of the MacBride Commission (named after its chair, Sean MacBride) by UNESCO and whose final report in 1980 was titled, “Many Voices, One World”:

“For the first time ever, a UNESCO document plainly stated that a few transnational companies controlled the international information system and that their control posed a threat to the cultural integrity and national dependency of many countries.”

This dominance is seen as the result of the post-war emphasis on the “free-flow of information”. The report criticized the commercialization of in-

Media Development 1/2012
formation, and the role played by advertising, while underlining the social function of information and the need to democratize the flow of communication. This call for a New World Information and Communication Order would be at the centre of debates in UNESCO and elsewhere during the 1980s, while being strongly contested by the Western nations with claims that its recommendations would limit the freedom of expression of the press and mass media.\textsuperscript{11}

Here parallels to the shift in perspective of ecumenical communications can be seen. The Uppsala statement on mass communication mirrored the development imperative of the modernization perspective, with its statement that the “communications revolution … accelerates the pace and magnifies the scale of technological change”.\textsuperscript{12} While the Vancouver statement stopped short of formerly endorsing NWICO, it drew an explicit parallel between the issues raised in the statement and the call for a new world information and communication order.\textsuperscript{13}

That a paradigm shift in secular discourse on development and communication is mirrored by a similar shift within the ecumenical movement, and particularly the World Council of Churches, should not surprise. The WCC in the 1960s experienced what has been described as a process of globalization stimulated by such things as the membership of churches from newly independent nations in the global South, many of which had been intimately linked with the struggle for independence and now with nation building.\textsuperscript{14} This shift was epitomised by the replacement of the notion of the “responsible society” as a guiding socio-ethical principle for the WCC by that of the “just, participatory and sustainable society” (JPSS).\textsuperscript{15}

The responsible society had emerged at the WCC’s founding assembly in Amsterdam in 1948 as “an attempt to keep in balance the demands of freedom and justice within the framework of democratic order … [b]ut increasingly its roots in the tradition of Western liberal democracy were being challenged”.\textsuperscript{16} JPSS, for its part, was intended to take into account “both the need for a new international economic order and the concern for self-reliant and participatory forms for development”.\textsuperscript{17}

With the collapse of communism in Eastern Europe and the Soviet Union at the beginning of the 1990s, the development paradigm shifted again. Rivalry between East and West was replaced by claims that ideology had come to an end. The paradigm of “dependence” was replaced by that of “globalization”. For Hoedemaker, this concept “refers to the fact that across the globe people and nations find themselves interconnected by political, economic and technological structures”.\textsuperscript{18} The notion of “[s]tructural injustice – the focus of attention in previous decades – is no longer mainly localized in the asymmetrical relationship between the Western and the non-Western world; the divide itself has been globalized”.

At the same time, globalization is tied up with a normative perspective that suggests universal “salvation” while obscuring “a growing dichotomy between rich and poor, between global uniformity and local pluriformity”. This was marked also by a shift in communication paradigms. At the same time as East Germany was engulfed by protests that led to the opening of the Berlin Wall and the end of communist rule, UNESCO’s general conference in 1989 marked the demise of NWICO with the introduction of the concept of “communication in the service of humanity”.\textsuperscript{19}

The emerging paradigm of the Information Society reflected the role played in the globalization process by information and communication technologies (ICTs). This was an “essentially Western, capitalist model of an international communication order” where the explosion of globalization, deregulation and the rise of neo-liberalism have all contributed to a utopian mercantile vision of information and communication, in which ICTs pave the way for a grand and generous information society, generating wealth and good things for all to consume, distributing its benefits across all sectors of society”.\textsuperscript{20} The notion of the Information Society came to public attention in 1995 at the Group of Seven ministerial meeting in Brussels, before being picked up by the International Telecommunications Union with its decision to organize World Summit on the Information Society (Geneva 2003 and Tunis 2005).\textsuperscript{21}

This decision has been described as being “marked by an almost surrealist fetishization of technology which one observer likened to calling a world conference to talk about wine and asking the bottlers to set the agenda”.\textsuperscript{22} The involvement of civil society organizations
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**Media Development** 1/2012
within the preparation and at WSIS itself, however, led to “at least minimal lip service” being given to “such basic notions as freedom of expression, cultural diversity, media pluralism and the centrality of communication as ‘a fundamental social process, a basic human need and the foundation of all social organization’”.23

The global shifts led also to a new ecumenical paradigm. In place of the search for a “just, participatory and sustainable society” (later followed by the “conciliar process for justice, peace and the integrity of creation”), came an emphasis on the need to develop a “Common Understanding and Vision” (CUV) for the World Council of Churches. Originally set in train at the WCC central committee meeting in Moscow in 1989, this process took on added importance with the increasing dissonance between the WCC’s Orthodox and other member churches in the 1990s as Orthodoxy experienced something of a renewal in Eastern Europe and the former Soviet Union.

The CUV process was also an attempt to deal with the phenomenon of globalization. Its final statement describes the “emergence over the last decades of transnational and increasingly world-wide structures of communication, finance and economy” as “a serious threat to the integrity of the ecumenical movement, whose organizational forms represent a distinctly different model of relationships, based on solidarity and sharing, mutual accountability and empowerment”. Here, ecumenical structures are called “to reassess themselves in the light of the challenge to manifest a form and quality of global community characterized by inclusiveness and reconciliation”.24

This reassessment, according to Konrad Raiser, then WCC general secretary, implies the creation of an “ecumenical space” as an alternative to the dominant form of globalization. Although there was no statement on communication that emerged from the Harare assembly, the assembly itself (through its organization with self-organized spaces for civil society and church delegates) could be “considered as a communication event”, a form of ecumenical space, Raiser asserted, within which there is “a self-reliant form of communication which focuses on connecting different life stories rather than on controversies”.25 While the WCC would still need to rely on professional communicators and the public media, “It has become increasingly clear ... that the interests and criteria, especially of the secular media, do not necessarily correspond to the communication needs of the WCC”.26

Ecumenical communication is seen here not in terms of technologies of mass communication (as at Uppsala), nor in terms of the place of communication in an unjust world (as at Vancouver), but as a process within the ecumenical movement itself to generate an alternative to the “increasingly worldwide structures of communication, finance and economy”. Here there are parallels to the statements in the WSIS Declaration that communication is a “social process, a basic human need and the foundation of all social organization”.27

Since the Harare assembly and the WSIS meeting there have been again significant shifts in international paradigms. The global balance of power is changing, away from Western Europe and North America. In a perspective of “post-globalization” the contradictions of globalized structures, particularly of finance, are becoming increasingly apparent. And whereas in the early 1990s structures of electronic communication were seen as macro-processes underpinning global financial and economic structures, the emergence of social media and networking raises issues of communication and activism, access, and control not only at the macro- but also at the micro-level.28

The role of the ecumenical movement, too, is changing, increasingly being seen within the framework of the more general interaction of religions, both nationally and internationally.29 In 2013, the World Council of Churches will hold its 10th assembly in Busan, Korea. The challenge is to use this opportunity for renewed ecumenical reflection on communication.

Notes
1. This article is based on a lecture on “Ecumenical Communication from NWICO to WSIS”, 11 August 2011, at the Summer School on “Communication and Religion”, jointly organized by the Institute of Christian Communication of the Friedrich Alexander University of Erlangen-Nuremberg, Germany, the Ecumenical Institute Bossey of the World Council of Churches (WCC), and the World Association for Christian Communication (WACC).
3. As with the Uppsala statement, the statement that emerged
from the Vancouver assembly resulted from a process begun several years earlier. A consultation in Versailles in 1981 brought together representatives of the WCC, the Lutheran World Federation, the World Association for Christian Communication and several Roman Catholic agencies resulting in a discussion paper circulated to 400 churches, agencies, individuals and media institutes. Under the title, “The Search for Credible Christian Communication”, the paper was intended to provide the backdrop for discussions at Vancouver on communication. It pointed to the injustice of the international order where mass communication tools are owned and wielded by powerful nations or commercial interests. The text of the Versailles statement can be found in The Ecumenical Review, Vol. 34, No. 1, pp.5-7, January 1982. This issue of The Ecumenical Review also contains papers presented at and as reflections on the Versailles meeting. For a comprehensive survey of the discussions that led to the Uppsala and Vancouver statements, see Larry Jorgenson, “The WCC and communication: a survey of the discussion so far”, no date or place of publication, available in the WCC library, Br 280.427.


5. This and the quotations that follow from the report of issue group 8 to the Vancouver assembly: “Communicating Credibly” in David Gill (ed.) (1983), Gathered for Life: Official Report, VI Assembly World Council of Churches, Vancouver, Canada, 24 July – 10 August 1983, Geneva: World Council of Churches, pp.103-110. Unlike the Uppsala statement, which was adopted by the assembly, the report of issue group 8 was “approved in substance” after criticism was expressed that the document was too negative in its assessment of the media.


9. Here it is important to note, however, that the “right to communicate” adopted at the UNESCO general conference of 1974 had its origins in a proposal introduced by Sweden, picking up the term coined in 1969 by Jean d’Arcy. Ibid, p.9.


accessed 28.11.2011)
26. Ibid.

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**Historical Justice and Memory**

An interdisciplinary conference

14-17 February 2012, Melbourne, Australia

The past few years have seen a plethora of case studies about attempts, by governments and by civil society, to come to terms with past injustice. Scholars have explored the work of truth commissions, the effects of apologies, debates over reparations, and trials of individual perpetrators, to name but four key themes. At the same time, there has been a burgeoning of studies about how past injustice is memorialised and remembered (or forgotten).

This conference provides a unique opportunity to link these two areas of research and to ask questions such as: To what extent is historical justice predicated on particular memories, on particular forms of remembering or on the forgetting of a particular past? How do apologies or truth commissions, for example, shape social memories of past injustice?

The conference will be the first gathering of the Historical Justice and Memory Research Network, which was set up in late 2010. The conference will be held in tandem with an emerging scholars workshop for PhD students which will take place from 11 to 13 February 2012.


Enquiries to: historicaljustice@swin.edu.au
Mass media and freedom of religion or belief in Fiji

Akuila Yabaki

During the 19th and early 20th centuries, Fiji and other Pacific island countries received significant numbers of Christian missionaries, and the overwhelming majority of ethnic Fijians today are Christians. Indo-Fijians, by contrast, have largely retained the Hindu and Muslim faiths their ancestors brought with them from the Indian sub-continent. Such a historical legacy has created a mosaic of cultural affinities in which, as the following article shows, religion plays a key role.

Indo-Fijians were introduced to Fiji in 1879 under an indenture system to work primarily as labourers on sugar plantations. British paternalistic colonial and imperialistic policies aimed at resource exploitation and reluctant to actively involve the ethnic population prompted their search for supply of cheap labour offshore near and far.

Near, as in our neighbouring Melanesians via the Sandalwood trade and Blackbirding experience, the Banabans who were relocated from their phosphate rich island and the Tuvaluans formerly of the Gilbert and Ellice Islands sent to Fiji away from the WWII Japanese threat.

Far, meaning Indians from South India who were lured by promises of wealth and opportunity. When the outside help and the relocated arrived they were quarantined off on islands or placed in working barracks assigned to specific tasks without the same freedoms and rights as the colonial masters let alone the indigenous population. It followed that those who held political power for much of the colonial period sought to establish a society divided along ethnic lines.

Fiji achieved political independence in 1970 and amidst the political changes that have occurred in the post-colonial period the Fiji Constitution affirms religious diversity, guarantees freedom of religion as a human right, and prohibits unfair discrimination on the ground of opinions or beliefs. However, these impressive legal statements do not always reflect the realities in daily life. Religion in Fiji largely coincides with ethnicity. This is especially true of Hinduism and Islam. And one of the forms in which racism manifests itself is through intolerance or disrespect for religions primarily practiced by the members of other ethnic groups.

Politics and religion
Ignorance leads to fear and fear leads to distrust, racial violence and instability! That has been the root cause of the political upheavals Fiji has endured over the last 30 years as racial and religious intolerance reared its ugly head and led to racial violence. Politics in Fiji since the first military ethno-nationalist coup in 1987 – when a largely indigenous Fijian army abrogated the Constitution and declared itself ultimate authority in the land – became more complex.

Both in the 1987 and 2000 coups, people were mobilized and manipulated and their passion and simplicity of beliefs was directed towards racial and religious hatred and bigotry. These events were reported widely and covered extensively by both local and international news agencies and remain a topic for discussion and debate through various social media sites.

Indo-Fijians are largely seen as worshippers of false gods, idols and evil spirits whilst Methodist fundamentalist factions look to the revival of the concept of the Christian State. The issue of national identity is not addressed because once Fiji becomes a Christian State, the Lotu (the church) will be one of the ingredients in what makes up a national identity.

Christians as a group itself in Fiji were divided under the various denominations and even by waves of historical evangelism. There was the Roman Catholic and the London Missionary Society and the Wesleyan of the Protestant group including the Seventh Day Adventists, Brethren and the
Anglicans came in the earlier wave. The American wave of Evangelism, in addition to the Latter Day Saints have since added to the mix.

**Culture and media**

Following the military coup of 1987 there were attempts to control the media through intimidation and other means and the abuse of the media to promote selective viewpoints. To a certain extent this abuse or misuse of the media may not have totally disappeared.

The media in 2000 played a major role in recording the gradual tide of ethno-nationalism which started immediately after the election of Mahendra Chaudhry’s Labor government in 1999. Newspapers, radio and television reflected the mood of the iTaukei as they were spurred on by disaffected politicians.

At the same time the media projected Labor’s stubborn refusal to change its stand. This was to be seen by commentators in the media (in particular the *Fiji Times*). It is safe to say that the ugly reflection of Fiji’s society as portrayed by the media gave the people and their leaders ample time to avoid the unfortunate and illegal take-over of Parliament by George Speight, a group of nationalists and the army’s 1st Meridian squadron and remains today a group of shadowy supporters. This in turn led to the removal of Ratu Sir Kamisese as President, the prorogation of Parliament and ultimately, the end of Chaudhry’s premiership.

However, the expressions of religious intolerance have become more common in Fiji since the 1987 coups. There have been reports of attacks on places of worship and the desecration of holy books and statues of deities in both rural and urban areas.

Freedom of religion and belief is one every government must encourage and protect, but it is also something that political masterminds have manipulated on the election trail and used as a tool to divide the nation along ethnic lines.

**Increased sacrilege**

During the political upheavals, media outlets chose to print and broadcast hate speech by nationalists, radical leaders and politicians, allowing them an avenue to influence vulnerable societies and instilling in them fear and racial hatred. When racial and anti-religious slurs were echoed from the pulpit and printed and broadcast widely, there were increased incidences of sacrilege in Fiji. Crime statistics show that between 2001 and 2007 Hindu temples were targeted with 68% and Christian churches 25%.

These events have been the subject of several human rights documentaries, books, articles, publications, theses and opinions and have prompted the need for increased advocacy for mutual understanding and respect in Fiji’s multi religious society.

In recent years, it was alleged that the then Police Commissioner was curtailing religious freedom and imposing policies based on Christian beliefs among all other ethnic groups in the Fiji Police Force causing dissent and agitation among the general public and serving officers alike. Public church gatherings of the Force and policies imposed on compulsory attendance and participation in Church activities blatantly disregarded the freedom of religion of other ethnic groups.

There was also some concern that the use of police facilities for Christian services during work hours resulted in coercion within the police force to convert to Christianity. There were reports that Hindu and Muslim police officers joined the commissioner’s church for fear of being denied promotion or losing their jobs.

If the situation had not been reported and debated widely through all media, there may not have been changes and the rights of individuals would continue to be violated before such widespread concern forced the government to implement changes in the hierarchy of the Police Force.

In their eagerness to out-do competition, media agencies often do not consider the implications of printing or broadcasting news which tends to incite people and create confusion and the misconception of belonging to a superior religion, which is now an issue still being dealt with by civic educators in all Fijian communities.

But the horrifying images also enabled people to see for the first time the reality of the underlying tensions between the two major races in Fiji. The images of “black Friday” in May, 2000 shocked everyone as they witnessed scenes of racially motivated attacks, looting and the subsequent burning in Suva City and brought to the fore the need for education on mutual respect and understanding among the various races in the country.

Situations are often exacerbated by partisan de-
bate in the media. One instance was the much debated fundraiser or "soli" of the Methodist Church of Fiji which has always been portrayed in a negative light by the media due to the fact that heads of congregations used the scriptures to oblige families to contribute a significant portion of their hard earned wages towards the Church.

Of course, when large sums of money are concerned and when questions arise about families’ welfare, news agencies are quick to jump onto the bandwagon. Reports often cast a negative light on the Methodist Church and its leaders and led to several actions taken against the Methodist Church and its Executives since the December 2006 military takeover.

Political affiliations aside, there have never been positive reports emerging from how the Methodist Church fundraising has helped members of the congregation improve their standard of living and led to provisions of water supply and electricity in the villages or how some of the money is channelled to provide education to their children.

A recent US Government report stated that the Fiji government generally respected religious freedom in practice. However the report also states that there was a decline in the status of respect for religious freedom by the government during the reporting period as a result of a ban on the annual conference of the Methodist Church and meetings of its 52 divisions, as well as the criminal prosecution of 27 members of the Church Standing Committee who resolved to go ahead with the 2009 conference despite the ban by the Bainimarama government.

The harassment of Methodists appeared to stem from the military’s disapproval of links between some church leaders and political parties critical of the military. Portrayed in the media as victims, focus shifted from ensuring that the Church stuck to its core principles and refrained from engaging in politics to one where the rights of the Church were being breached by the decisions and actions of the current regime.

**Human rights and faith**

On the other hand crises have a way of teaching new lessons if we care to take them seriously. There is need for the churches to understand that human rights work is an expression of faith-based activities and to include dialogue between cultures and other faiths. That way churches and other faiths will realize it’s not enough just to pray to God or even enough to get on well with our immediate community; it is also incumbent on us as citizens to join hands with other men and women of good will to impact society and to influence public policies.

Following the 1987 coup some religious leaders in Fiji felt that the world religions represented in the country could become a resource for reconciliation and rebuilding bridges across the divide. After their public statement Interfaith Search Fiji was established with the realization that there was a need to build respect and understanding between people of different religious traditions present in Fiji.

In early 2011, Executives of the largest Hindu organization in Fiji, the “Shri Sanatan Dharam Prathinidhi Sabha”, took action to curtail freedom of religion by banning members of a selected congregation from entering a temple. Media reports of the incident prompted calls from the Citizens’ Constitutional Forum (CCF) for the Hindu Organization to retract its decision as it breached the rights of the affected members. It was through discussion and debate on the issue through the media and social network sites that the parties concerned reach an amicable solution.

The mass media also had a major impact on people’s attitudes in Fiji towards Islam. The repeated screening of the falling of the twin towers of the World Trade Center on 11 September 2001 and scenes of radical Muslims shouting slogans and hate speech against the Christian world, fuelled the situation and generated a stereotypical view of Muslims in the country. Muslim women felt abused in the streets and Muslim citizens reported that they felt victimized and their freedom of religion put under the public microscope.

Now, with social media, not much is kept out of the public domain. Private discussions and com-
ments find their way onto blog sites and social networking sites which are often picked up and twisted into other versions leading to even more discontent and negativity. The “coconut wireless” as we call it in Fiji, has far more reach than any other form of medium with often hundreds of versions of a piece of information.

Civil society organizations are working towards addressing the issues which have led to breaches of freedom of religion and belief. Those responsible for the media must play an integral part to eradicate negative currents between the various religions in the country by being mindful of the sensitivities and the need for education on religious tolerance.

CCF which began in 1993 is the only NGO in Fiji that was created directly in response to the 1987 first military take-over, especially to address issues such as racism, understanding about the constitution, democracy and human rights. We, therefore, affirm our commitment to securing a more transparent and accountable process of government in the belief that to perfect democratic governance in Fiji, “we, the people, must be free to see, to hear, and to speak on the affairs of our country.”

The CCF thrives to allay these fears and concerns through its dedicated education team, who travel into the far reaches of the Naitasiri, Tailevu and Ra provinces, on the main island of Viti Levu, to conduct education programs on good governance, multiculturalism and citizenship. The province of Naitasiri was subject to a recent baseline survey conducted by CCF and there are startling responses from participants on their attitude towards other races and religions which remain a cause for concern.

CCF is seeking to address a lack of understanding by some segments of Fiji’s population that Freedom of Religion and Belief is essential for peace and harmony in the world. ■

Notes

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Christian communication in Sri Lanka

Avanka Fernando

In a world where communication is in its heyday and communication networks are burgeoning, it is a challenge to consider the topic of Christian communication in the Sri Lankan context. In a country recovering from a 30 year old ethnic conflict, one takes the role of the media seriously. This is because the media play an important part in creating informed or uninformed service users. G.K Chesterton in his pithy media definition states the media exists to inform people that “Lord Jones is Dead”, to people who never knew that Lord Jones was alive. Furthermore, the mandate of public broadcasting is for media to inform, educate and entertain.

The word communication defined in the Oxford Dictionary has origins in late Middle English and is derived from the verb communicare which means “to share”. It implies exchanging information using a medium of speaking or writing. Social contact in the form of verbal and non-verbal communication is also implied. Especially in some cultures, the unspoken word and not the spoken word, silence, memory, dreams, body language are significant in contrast to explicit verbal communication. Especially in cultures like Sri Lanka, expressed or verbal communication is not as significant as in other cultures.

Communicating Christianity credibly in multicultural, multi-religious, multi-ethnic Sri Lanka is challenging as it requires working within a heterogeneous context. This heterogeneity precipitated a 30 year ethnic conflict. This article briefly discusses communication and its development in Sri Lanka,
communication of religious belief in Sri Lanka, opportunities for Christian communication and ways forward for Christian communication within the Sri Lankan context.

**Communication in the Sri Lankan context**
Communication in Sri Lanka is diverse. According to Peiris (1997) print media exist in three languages: Sinhala, Tamil, and English. Electronic media exist in the form of radio and television and alternative forms of media like posters and handbills. In contemporary times, new media in the form of the internet, YouTube and short message services (SMS) are used in Sri Lanka. An article on media in Sri Lanka (Wikipedia, 2011) states Sri Lankan media are divided on linguistic and ethnic lines. Furthermore, media in Sri Lanka are based on political affiliation. Peiris states increased newspaper use occurred after 1948, the post independence era.

Peiris (1997: 84) reports that radio was introduced to Sri Lanka in 1923. TV was initially introduced in 1979 by ITN (Independent Television Network) and the government soon imposed control over ITN and then launched Rupavahini, a more far reaching channel. Then private sector organizations launched operations and introduced channels resulting in a diversity of opinions and interests. Wikipedia (2011) states that after the growth of the Sri Lankan economy, many satellite TV channels were introduced. The use of the internet is a growing force within Sri Lanka and many newspapers have online editions. News updates and SMS updates to one’s phone are accessible to those who activate this function.

**Communication of religious belief in Sri Lanka**
If one uses the definition of communication, to share, then we realize religious communication does not only happen through the mass media. In Sri Lanka, religious communication is not always a manifest function. Religious communication takes the form of verbal and non-verbal communication.

One of the main ways of communication is religious symbolism. Religious places of worship, images and pictures communicate religion in Sri Lanka. This takes the form of images in modes of transport like public buses, three wheelers e.g. the space in buses where the religious affiliation of the bus driver is expressed. This could be in the form of images, e.g. the Buddha or gods and goddesses like Lakshmi, Kataragama or Mother Mary and Jesus. Sometimes there is an altar where images and flowers are placed. Furthermore, behind the driver’s seat there is a glass pane on which religious pictures are displayed, i.e. of Buddha or Jesus or at times a goddess like Lakshmi.

On the back of the bus there are often quotations, “This is the Land of the Gautama Buddha” symbolizing religious loyalties. Religious symbolism is seen in the demarcation of religious space. One of the most important signifiers for a church or temple or kovil is religious symbols erected in the religious space e.g. cross, religious deities. Therefore, religious symbolism carries great significance in Sri Lanka.

Religious ceremonies are an important mode of communication in Sri Lanka. Processions and festivals of temples, churches, devales are important occasions for religious communication. For example the Dalada Perahera (procession) in Kandy, the Kataragama Perahera celebrating the union of god Kataragama with his consort Valli Amma, festivals celebrated by the Catholic Church, i.e. Madu, the Vel procession of Hindu devotees are celebrated with much pomp and pageantry. Many individuals (local and foreign) attend these processions and candy floss, toys, ice cream and pinwheels are sold in a carnival type environment. Therefore, these are occasions of celebration and communication within a multicultural context.

Religious pilgrimages are notable modes of communication. For example the pilgrimage to Adam’s Peak is significant. Pilgrims to Sri Pada (Adam’s Peak) communicate with each other and the different phases of Victor Turner’s communitas are reached when climbing the mountain. Communitas is an intense community spirit and this feeling of great social equality, solidarity, and togetherness is experienced (Turner: 1969) giving expression to a multicultural spirit of harmony.

Religious calls to worship are imperative in religious communication in Sri Lanka. The Islam call to worship Allah, piritib chanting from Buddhist temples, kovil and church bells are significant in daily worship. Although there are rules about sound emission in Sri Lanka, these calls to worship are allowed within demarcated religious spaces. However, if one were to have a religious rally in a
public place with loud speakers, a sound permit and police permit must be obtained.

Religious days are of great significance in Sri Lanka. For example of 29 holidays in Sri Lanka in the year 2011, 24 are religious holidays or holidays in lieu of religious days (http://www.qppstudio.net). There are separate time slots given in the media for these religious days. In addition, religious days are celebrated with fervour by all segments of the population and contribute to social interaction among religions. For example a Muslim employee brings wattalappan for his office, or a Hindu housewife would share pongal with her neighbours for Thai Pongal. Therefore, religious days play an important role in the multicultural, multi-religious context in Sri Lanka.

Religious programmes are given prominence both in the print media, electronic media and other forms of media. From newspapers titled Budhusarana (Shelter of the Buddha) to cable channels ranging from “The Buddhist”, “God TV”, Swarga TV, manifest religious communication is given space. In addition, time slots are allocated to organizations and institutions on state owned networks and can be bought on private networks.

**Freedom of religion or belief in Sri Lanka**

According to Peiris (1997: 87) to a certain extent there is control of the media. Mass communication is vulnerable to political control exercised through direct means by licensing and registration procedures and through indirect means in the restrictions posed on import of input. In the recent past, press freedom has been a major concern in Sri Lanka. According to Coomaraswamy (1994: 205) this was due to the ethnic conflict and the insurrection (1988-90) which created a climate of fear and sometimes terror. She further states (1994: 205) that though Sri Lanka retains the characteristics of a liberal representative democracy, many democratic freedoms were curtailed because of a “national security consciousness”.

**Religious freedom in Sri Lanka**

Sri Lanka is a multi religious country and Sri Lanka was ranked the 3rd most religious country in the world by a 2008 Gallup poll, with 99% of Sri Lankans saying religion is an important part of their daily life (Wikipedia, 2011). Although Sri Lanka is a country where Buddhism is given a special place in the constitution, other religions also have opportunities for religious communication. Communication of religion and belief in Sri Lanka does not have the unlimited opportunities as in other countries but the potential for communication is unmistakable. However, one must consider the positive and negative aspects for religious communication.

One of the positive reasons for this potential is the deeply religious nature of the country. In contrast to secular countries, the religious nature of Sri Lanka makes it open to any communication of a religious nature. Another exciting fact is the prevalence of diverse modes of communication and a high rate of literacy. As the literacy rate in Sri Lanka is well above 80%, the media are an effective means of communication. Another positive factor is that the current government is emphasizing increasing Information and Communication Technology (ICT) competence and establishing internet cafes in each village. Therefore, the potential for religious communication even through new media is identified.

The regulatory framework for the press in Sri Lanka creates a democratic framework for communication but the problem as in many contexts is implementation. The regulatory framework for the Sri Lankan press is, firstly, that Sri Lanka is a signatory of the International Covenant of Civil and Political Rights (ICCPR) in 1996 (Coomaraswamy; 213). Article 19 of the ICCPR declares the right to freedom of expression. The constitution of Sri Lanka (1978) guarantees freedom of speech and expression as expressed in Article 14 (1) (a). It is interesting to note that in the controversial Sri Lanka Press Council Law No. 5 of 1973, profanity against religious deities, saints and founders of any religion is prohibited [Sri Lanka Press Council Law No 5 of 1973, Section 15 (2) (a)].

There are also opportunities for Christian communication given by state and private owned media organizations. Non-governmental organizations are also pivotal in Christian communication. In an interview with the communication unit of the National Christian Council of Sri Lanka (NCCSL), it was stated that opportunities given to the Christian population are immense (Rosath: 29/11/2011). The main opportunities for communication were through radio and television. Government owned TV channels Rupavahini and ITN are the main
vehicles of communication and there are radio programmes on SLBC (Sri Lanka Broadcasting Corporation). These were the Christian half-hour, Thought for the day, English Sunday service, programmes on Vidula Children’s Radio Services and special Sunday meditations.

These radio programmes are conducted in all three media and held every other week with the Catholic programmes on the alternate week. In addition, there are special programmes like “Synagogue” for the Colombo district, and provincial programmes in the Kandy, South, Rajarata areas. Special programmes are also conducted during Christmas and Easter, and the NCCSL is given 30 radio slots (10 per language, ranging from 15 minutes to half an hour) during these special periods. On TV, there is a Sinhala programme (Sudasuna) every last Sunday of the month.

On private TV channels, Christian programmes are fewer as this is paid time, e.g. the Indian evangelist Dinakaran has a weekly programme, the Back to the Bible broadcasts. However, during the last few years, private TV channels have increased their awareness of Christian activity and introduced programmes like “The Spirit of Christmas” (MTV) and grant timeslots daily even during primetime news bulletins for Christian and Catholic leaders. Cable TV is also popular in Sri Lanka and many people watch the international channel God TV. Furthermore, a trilingual TV channel named Swarga TV was recently initiated on cable and will air programmes on local TV during certain time slots.

Back to the Bible, Sri Lanka, also started a successful venture called MoBible which brings daily Bible messages to one’s phone. In addition, there are magazines, newspapers in the print media run by different Christian and Catholic organizations, e.g. the Catholic Messenger, the Direction magazine. Therefore, religious communication in Sri Lanka is at a positive juncture, using all methods of communication, but it must be used carefully.

Negative influences that have curtailed religious freedom include the threat of the Anti Conversion Bill. Although this Bill has not been passed there are attempts to push it through. In the event this controversial bill is passed, religious communication could be severely limited. Another factor in relation to Christian communication is the politicization and the unfair representation in the media. Whenever there is an address by the President of the State, invariably it is the Christian half-hour or Christian programme that is disrupted (Rosath: 2011). Furthermore, as Sri Lanka is a state where Buddhism is given prominence, this is reflected in the unequal representation given to Christian communication.

Other factors in relation to communication are attempts of political leaders to win religious parties to their side. This is done through censorship of certain films and methods of religious communication. For example the Public Performances Board prohibited the public screening of the film The Da Vinci Code on the premise that it was damaging to the Christian community. The censorship of this film was perceived by many to respond to religious loyalties. This also proved the political influence on religious media (Free Media Movement: 2006).

Media are also used negatively to exacerbate religious disunity. For example, misuse of certain religious media material at a healing rally and inaccurate reporting in 2009, aggravated religious violence against Christian churches. Therefore, biased reporting and certain incidents being given negative publicity can cause unrest among the population. This was seen in fear psychosis about “fundamentalist” groups and stimulated majoritarian Buddhist factions to create unrest.

The role of Christian Communication in Sri Lanka

An important principle in Christian communication is its contextual nature. In Sri Lanka, Christianity is perceived as a missionary religion and a foreign infusion into local culture. Therefore, Christian communication should not blindly adopt new concepts alien to local culture. Christian communication should be through indigenous means, e.g. traditional festivals, folk songs, folk dances etc. The media present Western style programmes during times like Christmas and Easter, but it is crucial that local festivals are utilized, e.g. Sinhala & Tamil New Year, harvest festivals for Christian communication. This would be one way of identifying the Christian community with mainstream society rather than assimilating with a Western culture.

The incarnation of Jesus who comes to where we are, presents the need for identifying with a distinct culture. Therefore, culture should be valued. Globalization sweeps away local cultures, the value of individuals, local places and people. Communica-
tion from a Christian perspective should value local people and places so human beings are not helpless pawns in the globalization game but are valued within their distinctive cultures. Christian communication should also generate creativity. New media should be utilized to engaged people critically.

At present Facebook, the popular social network is being used by many youth, and such methods should be used to engage youth and the elderly population to interact critically and creatively within Christian communication. In addition, popular media like teledrama series (soap operas), films, reality shows are not exploited creatively to depict Christian values.

Based on WACC’s own principles of communication, Christian communication should create community. It should strive to dissolve disparities within society. There should be focus on methods of non-verbal communication important in villages. For example, communication may mean erecting crosses in rural churches and religious places. Therefore, all methods of communication should be respected and used to establish community. The media often focus on the rich and the powerful, emphasizing “stars”. The focus of Christian communication should be not on those in the limelight. Jesus is one who takes sides with the poor, marginalized and segments of society not considered trendy.

“*The media often focus on the rich and the powerful, emphasizing ‘stars’. The focus of Christian communication should be not on those in the limelight. Jesus is one who takes sides with the poor, marginalized and segments of society not considered trendy.*”

are part of its prophetic voice. In Sri Lanka, the lack of a united voice by the Christian Church is evident. Therefore, it is necessary for Christian communication to challenge the contemporary context.

The harvest for religious communicators is ripe and opportunities are immense. Although one sometimes wonders if there is freedom of religious expression, it is clear there is potential for Christian communication in Sri Lanka. However, it still remains for the Christian church to utilize that potential and make a significant contribution to religious communication in Sri Lanka. Therefore, the challenge before us, especially in a post-war situation is to communicate Christianity credibly.

**References**


Avanka Fernando is a freelance Sociologist and is currently pursuing her M.Phil in Sociology at the University of Colombo, Sri Lanka. She also works with the Youth Department of the Methodist Church, Sri Lanka, and enjoys travelling to work with young people island wide. Her interests are in alleviating urban poverty, social networks and Christian mission through communication.
Radio Namaskar: Catalyst of change in Orissa

Daniela Bandelli

Radio Namaskar serves disadvantaged citizens, who are usually unheard in the public sphere, to get improved access to information, develop awareness of their “right to know” and start to speak out on local governance issues. As a result, they mobilize to ensure that their entitlements are met and that public services are delivered properly.

Radio Namaskar (RN) (http://www.radionamaskar.org/) is the first Community Radio (CR) in Orissa and broadcasts from the tourist destination of Konark, in the Puri District. With the support of UNESCO, which provided the transmitter, it went on air in February 2010, after a three-year process to obtain its licence. It is run by Young India, an award-winning NGO established in 1989 by a group of young educated volunteers committed to community-based development.

Local governance, along with food security, gender equality, peace and human rights are its core areas of intervention. Young India’s approach to community communication is activism-based and Radio Namaskar is conceived as a tool to build a participatory, peaceful, equalitarian and eco-friendly society. Enabling people to access information and participate in democracy, as well as strengthen their talents and knowledge on local culture and resources, are stated as priorities of the CR project.

From the outset, the NGO sought collaboration among its former volunteers and held a series of orientation meetings in villages across the Districts to promote the radio initiative and encourage people’s cooperation. A core radio team of eight reporters was established, plus four more programme advisors. 5 out of 8 reporters are women between the ages of 17 and 27, younger than their male colleagues.

Four hours per day were broadcast initially, later increased to the current six. Programmes are 30 minutes long and include information about health and welfare schemes, gender and women’s rights, local events and culture, interactive sessions with farmers and villagers, letters and phone-calls from listeners, youth-based programmes conveying career information, sport and volunteerism and interviews with local leaders, activists and other locally prominent people.

Seventy-two listener groups meet on a weekly basis and, through their leaders, are consulted once a month on programme production. Radio Namaskar also interacts with about 300 Self-help Groups, networks with schools, activists and professionals.

The area covered includes 500 villages across the Puri District with potential 250,000 listeners. RN’s primary target is people from the Scheduled Castes, who live in very poor conditions and are the most disadvantaged in terms of distribution of land. Most of the population earn their living largely from agriculture, which is frequently affected by drought, flood and cyclones.

Lack of knowledge about the local governance, Panchayats system (village, block and district level assemblies) and available government development schemes as well as a low awareness of rights and weak participation in decision-making are major issues that Young India identifies as crucial problems to be addressed. Such shortcomings affect women to an even greater extent than men. Women are also those who are more discriminated against in access to education and information.

A participatory survey conducted in Puri communities by Young India, prior to the establishment of the station, showed that the following aspects need to be addressed: lack of unity and faith in the local administration and Panchayat representatives; the influence of the caste system and religion in politics; women’s low participation in decision-making process, poor understanding on gender issues and unequal status within the
family; shortage of drinking water, deforestation and an erosion of knowledge of herbal medicines and practice; lack of health facilities; increasingly consumerist attitudes; alcohol consumption; exploitation by community leaders and political representatives and the migration of rural youth due to unemployment.

**Passion for information**

In order to initiate the process that the Brazilian pedagogue Paulo Freire termed “conscientization”, also called empowerment, getting relevant information is the first requirement. Through the acquisition of new knowledge, people start to reflect on injustices and the possibility of taking action to free themselves from a condition of deprivation.

The concept, as simple as it is powerful, can be observed in Kunanga, a rural village near Konark, where in March 2011 I had the opportunity to conduct a focus group with poor women, most of them from Scheduled Castes. They listen to Radio Namaskar every day and meet in their listener group once a week to discuss the more pressing issues and suggest inputs for radio programmes. Showing passionate enthusiasm in getting information of any sort, they expressed a strong awareness of their right to access information as well as their right to speak out and demand that institutions provide them with the services and entitlements that are theirs by right.

When I asked them the most important thing Radio Namaskar has given them so far, one of interviewees answered straightforwardly, “We have been giving a lot of information.” When I then asked what had changed in their life since CR started, another respondent said, “We now know that we have some rights, including the right to know.”

Newly-acquired pieces of knowledge they emphasized included the illegality of dowry, the possibility of making their concerns heard to the National Commission for Women and the right to get economic support provided by law to people below the poverty line. They also expressed the need to receive further information about women rights, government schemes and public services, access to education, the condition of roads and electrical infrastructure.

Such awareness of the importance of information has been brought about by a campaign promoted by Young India since 2005, when the Government of India enacted the Right to Information Act. This law states that all citizens have the right to access information that is under the control of public authorities, which in turn must ensure its wide dissemination and easy access to it. Therefore, the campaign encourages poor people to actively use this historic law and to take a stand against corruption, by addressing enquiries to local, state and federal institutions. As a result, citizens from all over Orissa have so far submitted more than 700 enquiries related to social services to the various administrative offices.

**From knowledge to action: Role of radio**

Access to information is the very first step of the empowerment process, whose objective is to achieve changes in individual life, families, community and society as a whole. Such changes can be about attitude, confidence, skills, economic resources, contact networks, relations with institutions, life projects, power positions within a group, social and political engagement, solidarity, and so on. Therefore, I would say that people are not energized just because they are getting new knowledge, rather their enthusiasm is about what they can do with such knowledge: to move towards the horizon of a better life where there is a possibility to see that their rights are eventually respected, their demands fulfilled and their living condition improved. To achieve these goals, getting relevant messages from the community radio is not enough. Rather, action is needed and thus encouraged by the radio team itself.

The CR acts as a catalyst and facilitator of action by organizing interviews with key stakeholders and providing unskilled people with advice on how to enter into dialogue with institutions, participate in public schemes and submit applications. Listener groups’ leaders do not only collect inputs and feedback about programmes, but also undertake advocacy activities by writing letters of complaint to newspapers on behalf of illiterate villagers.
Listeners, on the other hand, do not look at the CR as a simple medium, but as a group of skilled people who can help them in improving life conditions. Rojalini Pradhan, field reporter, said that when she visits a village, women provide a warm welcome, not even calling her by her name but “Hi, Radio Namaskar.” She also said that women know that as soon as they let her know about their problems, she would immediately go and talk with people who are involved, for example with teachers when problems occur at schools. She said, “In that way many issues have been solved so far. People are aware that Radio Namaskar has done a lot for them.”

Success stories

Radio Namaskar has had considerable impact on the life of women in Kunanga, who have been encouraged to take further action. A group of them, with the help of radio volunteers, petitioned the State Chief Minister, and eventually received, the Below Poverty Line Card to which they are entitled. Also, a 93-year old woman presented a Right To Information enquiry about her outstanding pension: an action that enabled her to get 44 months of instalments paid back.

Another success story, involving several villages in the Gop Block, comes from the information campaign on the Mahatma Gandhi National Rural Employment Guarantee Act (MGNREGA), which ensures 100 days of waged employment in a year to rural households. Since citizens of this area were not aware of this opportunity, Radio Namaskar started a radio programme to promote the scheme and offered assistance in the application process. Soon after, 123 applications were submitted.

Probably the example that most conveys the CR role of a catalyst to action is the following. Radio Namaskar broadcast some programmes and jingles informing its listeners about the right to receive proper services at Anganwadi centres (public facilities dedicated to mother-and-child care) as provided for under the Integrated Child Development Scheme (ICDS). Afterwards, a group of listeners went to the radio and denounced irregularities in the quantity of dal (lentils) provided. A debate with citizens and public officers was initiated and later on, a group of women from Kunanga reported that the quality of food was very low. They brought a sample of dal to the studio and the radio management committee’s Chair sent it to the Prime Minister of India and to the Chief Minister of Orissa.

A quality analysis report found the sample was insect-infested and not suitable for human consumption. Following Radio Namaskar’s early mobilisation, the issue was also covered heavily in the local press where cases of corruption among local government officials were reported. The tangible results are that more than 50 centres have started to supply the right quantity of dal and a committee composed of local mothers is now in charge of purchasing the dal to be distributed to their children directly from local farmers.

Radio Namaskar engages not only in facilitating change at a community level but also by addressing specific problems in individual lives. This was the case of a mother whose request to enrol her daughter in school was refused because she had failed to provide her daughter’s birth certificate and the father’s name. Soon after Radio Namaskar broadcast the story, the child was accepted into class.

Who owns social change?

From the cases outlined, two principal aspects emerge. The first is that access to relevant information, together with an awareness of the right to know, are the driving forces of a process of change. The second point is that CR’s function goes far beyond being an information tool and a participative communication space for “voiceless” groups. By providing concrete and active support to individual and collective actions, CR’s role overlaps with community mobilisation. Therefore, “conscientization” appears not to be a totally spontaneous process of reflection and action. Rather, it seems to be boosted by a group of skilled activists whose aim is to empower underprivileged people by improving power relationships between them and local institutions.

Communication for Social Change is defined as a
process of dialogue “through which people themselves define who they are, what they need and how to get what they need in order to improve their own lives.” If we look at Radio Namaskar, who owns such a process – the community or the radio? To what extent do the powerless depend for their own empowerment on the skills, abilities and networks deployed by the radio team and to what extent are they developing sufficient capabilities to engage autonomously in a fight for their rights?

After one year of broadcasting, it is too early to answer. What I would conclude is that a process of change is in place: people have started to reflect on what their rights are, on the importance of information in their own lives, on the obligations of transparency and accountability that institutions have in providing regular quality services of a given standard. They are energized with regard to the possibility of improving their living condition and receiving what they are entitled to.

On the other hand, a potential peril exists: that listeners’ expectations are raised too high with regard to what the CR can do for them, whilst the envisioned results might not be entirely realized. Strengthening grass-roots participation throughout the whole “conscientization” process, from information and content development to the mobilisation of action, would enable the spread of awareness about the feasibility of change and maintain a balance between hopes and actual progress.

Notes

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The great Georgian/Russian media war

Jörg Becker

The August 2008 war between Russia and Georgia altered the geopolitical situation in the Caucasus and impacted a broad range of security issues in Eurasia. Since then, there has not been any visible progress in Georgia-Russia relations, which has resulted in further polarization of public perceptions between all sides involved in the conflict. However, as the following article shows, there is more to public perception than meets the eye. Public relations spin plays a covert and sinister role.

Franco-American writer Jonathan Littell has published not just a bestseller, “The Kindly Ones”, but also a work of non-fiction about his trip to the Caucasus in August 2008. In it, readers will find, among other things the following extended passage:

“Conflicting versions [on the Caucasus war in August 2008], each reflecting very real political interests, are backed up by a very complex, more or less sophisticated PR apparatus – something once called propaganda. On the Russian side, the methods remained somewhat primitive: since the Kremlin almost entirely controls the press, the public has few alternatives to the official version of events; for foreign observers, this does not seem very convincing, as little so as the original accusation of ‘genocide’. On the Georgian side, by contrast, the very latest methods are in use. For instance, the government has commissioned a Belgian PR company, Aspect Consulting, to ensure its viewpoint gets conveyed to the outside world. Company founder Patrick Worms, whom the Russian media have christened ‘the Belgian master of black PR’, has set up a working party in
every major European capital and daily issues a flood of information and window dressing aimed at making the official version more credible. He appears to personally believe the material he is putting about.

‘Out here there is no need to transform shit into gold.’ One of his larger projects, implemented together with Giga Bokeria [Georgia’s Deputy Foreign Minister], was an official chronology of events, distributed to foreign journalists and diplomats in Tiflis at the end of August. However, in this so-called timetable of aggression, the following is simply stated without any kind of proof being furnished: ‘On August 7 some 150 tanks and military vehicles belonging to the regular Russian army moved into the Roki tunnel and advanced against Tskhinvali.’ Patrick Worms provided a number of journalists with a draft of this document where he comments on the text suggested by Bokeria. At this point his notes dated August 21 ask: ‘When exactly? And how do we know this? And since when have we known it? Before they entered the Roki tunnel or since they have left it? This is the crucial point and everything that we say or do depends on it!’ Good questions that remain unanswered in the final version.”

Something that the writer recounts in this passage, almost as an aside, can also be researched using scholarly means, even if conditions are somewhat difficult because PR agencies tend to avoid light like the plague.

PR agencies working for the Georgian government

In 2008 alone, the Georgian government under Mikheil Saakashvili spent a figure running into over USD ten million on media manipulation, advertising and public relations in an effort to present a suitable image as a young democracy with a Western orientation to NATO, the United States and Western Europe. In 2008, lobbying and PR for Saakashvili was distributed between three Western pros: Orion Strategies, Squire-Sanders Public Advocacy – both domiciled in Washington – and Aspect Consulting in Brussels, London and Tiflis.

The Orion Group was in the hands of lobbyist Randy Scheunemann, previously foreign affairs adviser to John McCain, Republican candidate for the US presidency, and at Squire-Sanders the man in charge was Patrick O’Donnell, one-time legal adviser to ex-presidents Nixon and Ford.

However, until recently, the Georgian government’s most important PR partner was the Aspect agency. German PR specialist Patrick Worms, who previously worked in the EU commission’s PR department under former commissioner Margot Wallström, and English PR specialist James Hunt are the founders and senior partners of Aspect Consulting, a company based in Brussels, London and Paris, and with a payroll of some 40 staffers. As the company itself states on its website, Aspect believes that “communications is the most important key to business and organizational success.”

One area that Aspect specializes in is political communication and crisis management: “80 percent of crisis management consists of preparation and planning. The Aspect team develops systems and processes to prepare for operational and attitudinal crises. We offer outside assistance and ensure that robust systems are in place when crises occur. We also manage the worst case scenario, should it occur.” Aspect’s commercial customers include McDonald’s Europe, Kraft Foods, Akzo Nobel, the German arm of Linde AG, Pepsico, Unilever and Kellogg’s – at the same time, the company refuses to be drawn on its political customers.

Of the two Aspect founders, James Hunt is known in the trade as the “mastermind”, having been responsible for a number of coups on the international media scene. During the Brent Spar crisis in 1995, he successfully helped oil giant Shell; during the BSE crisis he succeeded in rescuing McDonald’s from negative headlines; and in later crises he skillfully erased from public consciousness any objections voiced by opponents of genetically manipulated seeds.

Aspect was active in Tiflis as of November 2007, using its 50 Georgian employees to boost Georgia’s profile in the West on behalf of the Georgian president and the Georgian government, thus paving the way in the media for the country’s desired
accession to the EU and to NATO. Insiders estimate that Aspect has received a sum of USD 750,000 for this undertaking.

On the night of 7 August 2008, when Georgian troops and tanks were already invading South Ossetia and killing the sleeping population, the Georgian government demonstrated what Aspect calls “robust crisis management”. On the morning of 8 August 2008, Georgian Prime Minister Lado Gurgenidze organized a well-attended investors’ meeting with 50 leading US bankers. Here, Aspect struck a chord that was to successfully permeate the world’s media over the coming days of the war: “The cruel Russian bear is cruelly crushing a small democratic state!”

And President Mikheil Saakashvili was able to repeat exactly that message many times in a large number of interviews with CNN and the BBC, even finding time on 11 August 2008 (in other words, in the middle of the war) to pen an article of his own for the Wall Street Journal that took as its title “The war in Georgia is a war for the West.”

On Sunday 10 August 2008, Aspect sent 20 press releases to all the important Western media – a total of 70 during the five days of the war. The language of those releases was clear and unequivocal. “Russia is continuing to attack the civilian population,” “intensive” bombing of the capital Tiflis, European “energy supply” endangered by Russian bombs close to pipelines, Russian blockade of a “humanitarian ship carrying wheat”, “occupation of Georgia”. Indeed, Saakashvili informed the International Criminal Court in the Hague of the danger of “ethnic cleansing”.

Admittedly, Aspect reports that Russian jets were “intensively” bombing the capital Tiflis and that Russian troops had captured Gori were downright lies and yet the language of the press releases consisted of exactly the same words and terms that Western media were familiar with from the Balkan wars – civilian victims, humanitarian, occupation, ethnic cleansing – words preparing the population for a “humanitarian intervention” by NATO.

At the end of hostilities James Hunt said in an interview with specialist magazine PR Week: “There are agencies that are working for Russia. I don’t understand how people can feel comfortable with that kind of client. I think I was just on the side of the angels. With the journalists we quite simply appealed to their sense of right and wrong.”

The actual war in August 2008 is now long over and in September 2009 an investigative committee commissioned by the EU, the so-called Independent International Fact-Finding Mission on the Conflict in Georgia headed by Swiss diplomat Heidi Tagliavini, established clearly and without doubt on page 19 of the first volume of the report:

“Open hostilities began with a major Georgian military operation against the town of Tskhinvali and the surrounding area in the night from August 7 to 8, 2008. The operation began with a massive Georgian artillery attack.”

Up until now, these two sentences have not been mentioned in any of the Georgian mass media and even if the actual war is long over the media war between Georgia and Russia continues unabated.

**Media manipulation in Georgia**

On the title page of its issue dated November 12-18, 2009, an English-language magazine published in Tiflis, the “Weekly Georgian Journal”, shows a young Russian soldier guarding four Georgian youths who had crossed the border from Georgia to South Ossetia at the beginning of November and who had been held there illegally ever since. However, readers could hardly believe their eyes. The Russian’s uniform jacket quite clearly sported a swastika! What on earth? A swastika on a Russian uniform?

Quite obviously it was a photo montage once again using the media firmly to condemn the Russians as part of the evil empire. Incidentally, in the age of digital image manipulation, this was rather a pathetic fake – somebody had quite clearly resorted to scissors and glue.

No one seeing and analyzing this image would be surprised. After all, there is no such thing as independent media in Georgia. Instead, to cite one example, on 7 November 2007 special service units from Saakashvili’s government stormed the broadcasting studio of the oppositional TV channel “Imeti” (Hope) and seized control of the ma-
chinery. As a consequence, since 2007 in its place there been “Sakartvelo” (Georgia), a state military TV station, broadcasting martial war films aimed at educating the population in taking a patriotic and militaristic stance and functioning very much like the official government youth camps where some 100,000 Georgian youths were trained in authoritarian behavior and the cult of leadership from 2004 to 2010.

On the state-controlled TV Channel 1, from time to time during the children’s programs, children of kindergarten age are presented who then surround Georgia’s borders with soldiers and deploy ships on Georgia’s west bank on the Black Sea. Just as there are no independent media in Georgia, there is no independent opposition because, for example, the large, prolonged demonstrations against Saakashvili on the streets of Tiflis in spring 2009 were infiltrated by the Georgian mafia.

**Feature Film: 5 Days of War**

In this context, the first thing that should be mentioned is the film *5 Days of War* by the Finnish-American director Renny Harlin, of Filmstudio Rexmedia in Los Angeles, which was to be premiered in late August 2011. It goes without saying that the film portrays the Russians as wild beasts and, needless to say, Saakashvili is again celebrated, erroneously, as victim and victor, regardless of historical truth. What is more, the Motion Picture Rating organisation gave this film an R rating, for strong bloody war violence and atrocities and for pervasive bad language.

Who funded this multi-million film, starring Cuban-US-American Hollywood actor Andy Garcia as Saakashvili? It seems certain that the Georgian National Film Centre initially helped with the screenplay and also provided other emergence assistance. It is also certain that one of the film’s co-producers is parliamentary deputy Papuna Davitaia. If you ask Rexmedia whether the Georgian government paid for the film, they strictly deny this, indicating that the film is being financed in a completely normal way, namely, by “private equity capital, pre-sales and bank financing”.

Who is actually behind the “private equity capital” remains an open question – in principal it could be both the Georgian state and the International Republican Institute, in which the US-American Georgia lobbyist Randy Scheunemann has a post and a vote. Experts assume that the film will be a flop, as it has drawn little media attention so far and the Internet homepage “Movie Database” has already published the first negative reviews.

**First Caucasian TV – Eutelsat Dispute**

In January 2010, the Russian-language television station First Caucasian, based in Georgia, accused the Russian company Gazprom Media of blocking its broadcasts into Russia by buying out the spectrum on the French-operated television satellite Eutelsat. The Georgian side accused Russia of “propaganda” and putting pressure on Eutelsat, while Russia maintained that the Eutelsat decision was of a purely commercial nature.

The incident was widely reported in the Western media. The actual conflict proceeded as follows (the most relevant media reports are included in brackets):

- Georgia TV ‘blocked by Russia’ (BBC, 1 February 2010)
- Georgia Russian-language TV channel has troubled start (BBC, 2 February 2010)
- Georgian TV Channel Says Russian Company Elbowed It Off the Air (*The New York Times*, 2 February 2010)
- First Caucasian TV takes Eutelsat to court (AFP, 4 February 2010)
- A Clear Signal From Eutelsat (WSJE, 4 February 2010)
- Kremlin’s reach – Letter to the Editor (*The Times*, 4 February 2010)
- Georgian TV channel loses French ‘censorship’ case (BBC, 14 July 2010)
- Russian-language Georgian TV to start broadcasting (BBC, 25 January 2011).

What is more, in July 2010 Georgia lost its case against Eutelsat in front of a French court because no contract existed with Georgia.
Belarus – Russia media relations in 2010: The Godfather documentaries

Over the summer of 2010, Russian and Belarusian television channels broadcast a series of documentaries and interviews critical of the other country’s political leadership. Russia’s NTV aired two documentaries portraying Belarusian President Lukashenko as the country’s “Godfather”, while Belarusian state television broadcast an interview with Georgian President Sakaashvili criticising Russia’s political elite.

The documentaries and interviews were closely followed by Western media, which tended to comment that the two former Soviet Republics were in the midst of a media-relations war (the most relevant media reports are included below in brackets:

- Belarus and Georgia get together for a few pot-shots at Russia (The Guardian, 22 July 2010)
- It takes one to know one: A media war of words breaks out between two supposed allies (The Economist, 22 July 2010)
- Russia aims to topple the “last dictator in Europe” (The Independent, 23 July 2010)

Michael Schwirtz, correspondent of the New York Times, wrote the following in the above-mentioned article of 31 July 2010:

“Belarus’s government-controlled First Channel also aired an interview with Georgia’s president, Mikheil Saakashvili, who has been vilified by Russia’s leaders – and who has been the target of unflattering Russian documentaries himself. In the interview, Mr. Saakashvili called the Lukashenko documentary hypocritical, noting the prevalence of political killings in Russia. ‘This has the smell of a propaganda war,’ Mr. Saakashvili said. Responding to the interview, Boris Gryzlov, Russia’s Parliament speaker, called Mr. Saakashvili an ‘outlaw’ and suggested that there would be consequences for Belarus. ‘Anyone who gives Saakashvili the opportunity to feel like a president, including in another country, is making a decision that could affect relations with Russia,’ he said.”

Conclusion and outlook

The Georgian-Russian Media War is still not over. On 20 May 2011 the Italian newspaper Corriere della Sera wrote: “Russia and Georgia still at war. First Ossetia, then the cinema.” The problem about the Georgian-Russian war is not so much that, when it comes to decisions in international politics, first, a media war is more important than a real war, and second, that media war is still on. What is more important and far-reaching are the following connections:

1. While the Brussels PR Agency Aspect Consulting was working for Georgia, another Brussels PR Agency was working for Russia, namely, the Europe Section of Gplus. In other words, many of the conflicts portrayed in the media had nothing to do with the real conflict, but were part of a socially constructed conflict between two competing PR agencies struggling for media attention. In the context of the Tibet-China Olympics reporting in 2008, I have already pointed to this rivalry between two western PR agencies Saatchi & Saatchi (for Tibet, against China) and Hill & Knowlton (for China).

2. In all important international conflicts, what primarily interests the PR agencies involved in the social construction is to place their messages in the US media so as to influence the actions of the US government and the US deputies in the Senate and House of Representatives in the interests of the clients who are paying the agencies. These US-American components deserve more attention than they have been given so far.

3. In most western countries for some time now there have been more full-time PR specialists than full-time journalists. In his classic work The Structural Change of the Public Sphere, exactly 50 years ago Jürgen Habermas warned about the consequences of the public domain of journalism being replaced by a public domain paid for by PR clients. Meantime this change has come about as can be seen in the dominance of the PR industry over journalism.

4. Whereas in the past, a critical communications
theory always regarded the press as a manipulative instrument (however nuanced or simple the formation of the theory was: complex in Adorno and, as a model of a consensus factory, extremely simple in Chomsky), currently the press has largely abdicated that social function to the PR industry. Although one may grant that if the press clings together, it will swing together; yet things are increasingly more adverse for the press, and, in the meantime, it has become a victim of PR manipulation. 

5. Formerly, content analyses of many old themes, so popular in traditional communications research, were always mere ideology when they did no more than quantitatively assess so and so many words and subordinate them into some statistical calculations. As long as such analyses did not integrate the conditions under which those words were produced into the semantic analysis of said words, they were – to paraphrase Adorno – nothing more than a duplication of ideology.

Given the current dominance of PR over journalism, such content analyses are a tripling of ideology.

Paper written for the “Political Economy Section” at the International Association for Media and Communication Research’s international conference in Istanbul, Turkey, July 13-17, 2011.

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Part One
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Part Two
http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=FluZgoWiSSM&feature=related

Part Three
http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=1IYeHSlwY5Q&feature=related

“The Godfather-2” documentary
Part One
http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=_r9oCv_Y1ao

Part Two
http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=BA0VnSvkfo4&feature=related

Part Three
http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=n76uiJ7Uwdq&feature=related

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Prophetic witness in the news and as news

Florian Höhne

Reality as constructed by modern mass media is full of prophetic speech. Journalists are interpreting the news of the day and try to present an ordered and meaningful version of what happens. Experts and activists in the news are predicting the economic, political and ecological catastrophes of tomorrow to make people change their present behaviour or way of thinking. Intellectuals lament the decay of morality in various fields of life. And some even refer explicitly to God and His will.

From a Christian standpoint, this could be seen as something like prophetic speech: interpreting the present (political) situation, naming future catastrophes as consequences of present misbehaviour, the call for change and repentance – that is what prophets of the Old Testament did too. If prophetic speech is so popular in media reality, the Christian theologian is inclined to ask: Could the publics generated by mass media be a forum in which the prophetic witness of Christians receives attention? And what would this prophetic witness look and sound like under the conditions of mass media?

I think about these questions and the role of prophecy from the perspective of Public Theology. In the last decades, the term “Public Theology” has become popular as a name for reflection on the public meaning of Christian theology in various contexts. What role does prophetic speech play for Public Theology and its praxis of contributing Christian orientations to public discourse? This question is being discussed at present (see Bedford-Strohm, deVilliers forthcoming).

On the one hand, the adequacy of prophetic speech appears problematic in this reflection: If Public Theology stresses the participation in public discourse with rational arguments and the search for constructive solutions and concrete improvement, the role of the prophet’s angry “No” becomes questionable. On the other hand, Public Theology is hardly thinkable without prophetic witness, because one can see the prophetic speech of biblical times as an important example of how orientations from religious traditions were made relevant to state and society – see for instance Amos’ social critique (Am 2, 6-16).

When church historian Martin E. Marty used the term “Public Theologian” in its present meaning as one of the first theologians in the US in the early 1970s, he narrowly connected it with the prophetic mode of religion. (Marty, 1974: 148) Harvard-Public-Theologian Ronald F. Thiemann also requires the churches’ contributions to “take on the more prophetic role of becoming ‘connected critics’ within their own society” (Thiemann, 2009: 111) Thiemann’s work on the “public theologian as ‘connected critic’” (Ibid.) helped me to find some features of what can be seen as adequate prophecy in the sphere of Public Theology. Each is normative insofar as it implies temptations for Christians who speak prophetically in public discourses.

(i) Interestingly, for Marty and for Thiemann the term “prophetic” is used to emphasise the critical role of religion rather than the comforting one – though the latter could be part of the Old Testament prophet’s role too (Isaiah, 40:1). “Prophetic” has come to mean “critical”. The prophet points to distortions in society and criticises injustice, exploitation, and oppression. Prophecy is in danger of avoiding this conflict. The attempt to be constructive and to participate in discourse could – if misunderstood – domesticate the prophet.

(ii) The prophet is also connected to the community he criticises. This is what Thiemann emphasises using Michael Walzer’s notion of the “connected critic”. The prophet Amos preached to the people he was part of. Public Theologians as connected critics “are those who are fully engaged in the very enterprises they criticize, yet alienated by the deceptions and shortcomings of their own com-
munity” (Thiemann, 2009: 112f). In my view, this does not mean that the prophet who screams an angry “No” against injustice has to have a ready-made solution for how to make things more just. But the “No” has to be spoken out of deep care for the community and future betterment. Prophecy is in danger of losing the connection to the society it criticises. Prophets are tempted to see themselves as no longer part of what is criticised, which makes them sarcastic and self-righteous: The “No” for a better future has become perverted into the No of nihilism. That ends any discussion, whereas prophetic speech should open discourse (Bedford-Strohm, 2011: 312).

(3) Thirdly, according to Thiemann, prophetic criticism has to be contextual and specific: The prophet does not criticise social injustice in general, but in a particular context at a particular time (Thiemann, 2009: 116). Prophecy is in danger of talking about abstract generalities. Accusing structures of injustice, forces of evil and decay in society, does not yet name concrete problems.

One dimension of the church’s public witness
To be sure: I do not want to downplay the role of prophetic speech. The spontaneous “No” in the face of injustice and oppression has to have its space in the public witness of Christians. In the context of Public Theology, prophetic witness has to be one dimension of the church’s public witness. It has to be one, but one among others. Public Theologian Heinrich Bedford-Strohm has named four: pastoral dimension, discursive dimension, dimension of political advice, and prophetic dimension (Bedford-Strohm, 2011: 311f). Prophetic speech as one contextual option among others must not obscure the issue: Is the truth spoken to power really heard? Is it of any help to those in need? It is these questions that let me ask: How can prophetic speech be heard in publics generated by modern mass media?

At first glance, the chances seem to be good. Prophetic speech seems to meet many criteria of relevance for media-attention. After Walter Lippmann had used the term “news values” in 1922, it was peace-researchers Johan Galtung and Mari Holmboe Ruge who introduced the term “news factors” in 1965 and described twelve concrete factors. While there has been intense discussion on what precisely news factors are and whether they can be retrieved empirically, the basic idea remains striking: that features of an event or of a report of an event make it more likely that this event is reported on. (For this field of research see Maier, 2010).

Many of the factors sound plausible: cultural proximity, personalisation, relevance, unexpectedness, negativism or conflict for example are said to make a report more likely to be part of media reality. According to this, prophetic speech as understood above should be newsworthy: Prophetic speech refers to shared social reality and is therefore close to reader’s lives (proximity and relevance). But it also brings something new and unexpected, a new perspective on things, which meets the factor of “unexpectedness”. Prophetic critique will especially have to do with conflict: It opposes injustice and oppression. As a truth-claim spoken to power it refers to the powerful: to elite nations and persons.

Of course, there are also factors that can inhibit the publication of prophetic speech in the media: Censorship by the state in less democratic nations might prohibit those acts of criticism. Economic interests of publishing houses can strip journalists of what they need to produce stories on political issues: time to do research for instance. By giving entertainment more space, there will be less space for reports on political issues. There might be some journalists who are prejudiced towards the church and, therefore, hesitate to make a prophetic voice public. Despite this, as I hope to have shown, prophetic speech has many features that make it particularly interesting for journalists. The named news factors are not hostile towards the prophet as understood here.

This also means that, if the prophetic witness of the church does not get media attention and if this is not due to censorship, prejudice, an overemphasis of entertainment or something like that, then this lack of media attention might be due to the inadequacy of the prophetic speech. Prophetic speech that succumbs to the above mentioned temptations loses the features that make it attractive for reporting. Prophets who avoid conflict do
not say unexpected things full of tension. Prophets who lose connection with society lose cultural proximity and relevance. Those who just utter abstract generalities are not attractive for journalists in search for concrete stories.

**Prophetic speech, prophetic performance and prophetic reporting**

If it is true, that free media are all but hostile to publicising prophetic witness, one will have to ask: What shape can prophetic witness take? Let me name three ways of how this can happen: prophetic speaking, prophetic performing and prophetic reporting.

(1) Talking of prophetic witness the first thing that might come into mind is direct prophetic speaking. A religious person, a Christian or a church-representative, speaks out publicly. For example, in 2010 the chairperson of the Council of the Evangelical Church in Germany (EKD), Margot Käßmann, criticised the war in Afghanistan, saying, “Nothing is good in Afghanistan”. That initiated a new public debate on this war. One can interpret her critique as an act of prophetic speaking: As a Christian, she spoke publicly about what she held to be true and pointed to violence. Her sermon was widely reported together with the subsequent debate.

Direct prophetic speech entails a certain danger when it is used very often by one and the same person. If someone speaks the prophetic “No” very often, they become known for that position. The “No” is no longer unexpected, discomforting, challenging or even heard because it has just become what one normally expects of this or that Christian. Direct prophecy has to be kept meaningful for particular and serious situations, rather than rendered meaningless by inflationary use.

(2) A second form of prophetic witness is symbolic performance – something already done by the prophets in the Old Testament. Isaiah, for example, walked naked for three years to warn Egypt and Ethiopia against Assyria (the king of Assyria led people away to captivity naked). In the early 1990s, many people in Germany gathered for candle-lit demonstrations to protest against xenophobia. This can be seen as public prophetic performance too. People point to injustice and oppression by what they do. Those performances can attract huge media-attention and initiate a public debate or raise public awareness about a problem. This form of witness also highlights the fact that the public prophet always also preaches through what he does and not only through what he says – even if not intended.

(3) In this article, special emphasis is given to the third form of prophetic critique, because it avoids many of the above mentioned dangers of prophecy. Prophetic critique does not only take the form of a statement, a commentary, or a moral evaluation. It can also take the shape of a news report or documentation telling a story that has not been publicly told before.

Prophetic critique, then, lies not in the opinion uttered, but in the choice of topic, perspective, and presentation. A report that gives voice to someone suffering without any evaluation or judgement can be seen as an act of prophecy: Prophetic witness not as appeal, but as naming soberly what goes wrong.

**Manipulation vs. objectivity**

One might object that this is not neutral and objective reporting anymore but rather manipulative. This objection indeed names a danger of indirect prophecy that is to be avoided. It really can be manipulative if it does not tell the whole story and omits important quotes and figures to make its point.

As long as this is not the case, one can emphasise that all news reporting rests on selection. Some things become news – others do not. This was the basic insight of news-value-research which claimed that selection is oriented by certain news factors. Why should this choice not also be oriented by ethical responsibility and hope for betterment, as is the case with prophetic reports?

One example for this could be the documentary “Tod in Gibraltar” for which the Swedish author and director Joakim Demmer was honoured with the Geisendörfer Award of the Protestant Church in 2004. The movie is about the refugees who try to get into Europe crossing the Gibraltar Straits. Many
of them drown, others are captured by the police and taken back. The camera makes the viewer a witness of this tragedy. This enables viewers to discover their his opinions and maybe their voices of protest.

Christian communities can do and do already many things to cultivate “prophetic” journalism. They award a prize for such reports. They can also take part in the education of journalists by offering seminars that strengthen ethical responsibility and explore possibilities of responsible reporting. To name a last example, they can do this kind of journalism themselves as journalists or in media outlets owned or supported by the church.

In the 1960s, in the debate on how to adapt preaching in the media to the conditions of media communication, a similar idea was developed, namely the idea of proclamation as information (see for example Bahr, 1968: 114–129). This is applicable to prophetic witness too: Prophetic witness then means making reality speak, revealing structures of oppression, letting victims be heard. This can be a credible public voice against injustice that also empowers others to raise their voices on this issue.

This form of prophecy avoids the dangers of moralism because it refrains from moral judgment but enables the reader and listener to form their own opinions. This form of prophecy is also more open to revealing ambiguities than a strict “No” might be. In telling stories of injustice, for instance, it might become obvious how the victim is not always only a victim but a human, how the evil-doer has been a victim too, and how structures of oppression play their part.

Together with prophetic speaking and performing, it is prophetic reporting especially that can play, actually plays, and should play an important role in the public media of Christian prophetic witness.

References

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