

RELIGIOUS FREEDOM

as practised by founders

of Sikhism, Humanism, Aboriginals, Judaism,
Islam, Hinduism, Buddhism and Christianity



Abstracts of Proceedings
33rd World Religions Conference

Held October 6, 2013
River Run Centre, Guelph, Ontario, Canada

Representatives of
Aboriginal Religions, Buddhism, Christianity, Hinduism,
Humanism, Islam, Judaism and Sikhism.

Organized by the
Ahmadiyya Muslim Jama'at of Canada



Acknowledgments

Our gratitude to the speakers representing various faiths and philosophical traditions, for participating and providing an abstract of their speech on the theme “Religious Freedom as Practised by Founders” for the 33rd World Religions Conference. These abstracts are compiled in this booklet for easy future reference.

In the staging of this conference, we have received support and help from numerous organizations and individuals. In addition to the speakers and guests that attended the event, we acknowledge the contributions of all our partner organizations; The City of Guelph, The City of Waterloo, The City of Cambridge, The University of Waterloo and the Federation of Students, Ahmadiyya Muslim Students Association of UW, Sikh Students Association, Aboriginal Community of K-W, Brahmarishi Mission of Canada, K-W Council of Churches, Church of Saint Michael, Forest Hill United Church, St. Philip’s Lutheran Church, The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, Multi-Faith Resource Team Ecumenical Campus Minister of the University of Guelph, Duff’s Presbyterian Church of Guelph, Waterloo Riverview Dharma Centre, the Society of Ontario Freethinkers, WLU FreeThought Alliance, The Waterloo Record and Guelph Mercury, CTV, CBC Radio, Muslim Television Ahmadiyya (MTA), 570 News Talk Radio, Temple Shalom of Waterloo, Phat Electronics, Callture and the Cross Cultures magazine.

Moreover, we recognize the cooperation and volunteer services of the Conference moderator - Matthew Kang, and the volunteer services of the entire WRC team, WRC Organizing Committee and approximately 120 other volunteers who worked with great enthusiasm for the organization of this conference.

Nabeel A. Rana
Chief Planning and Coordinating Officer
33rd World Religions Conference,
Guelph, Ontario, Canada
October 6, 2013

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Introductory Remarks - 33rd World Religions Conference

In the name of Allah, the Gracious, the Merciful

It is a great pleasure to welcome everyone on behalf of the Ahmadiyya Muslim Jama'at Canada and all our partner organizations to this magnificent celebration of mutual respect and harmony.

Supported by so many faith communities that thrive in Canada, the World Religions Conference has enriched Canadian society by promoting peace, understanding, and tolerance for over 3 decades. This year, for the first time, the event is being organized in the City of Guelph. This conference has now become established in this region as the largest multi-faith event of its type in Canada. Scholars from 8 faiths and philosophies are participating in this conference.

Each year the conference explores a new theme. This year's theme (Religious Freedom as Practiced by Founders) is inspired by the recent inauguration of Canada's "Office of Religious Freedom", recognizing that freedom of religion (including the ability to worship, or not-worship, in peace and security) is a universal human right. The theme is timely, in the wake of the recent killing of innocent worshippers in Pakistan. The conference aims to explore the teachings and practices of the founders of different religious and philosophical traditions, with the hope that such mutual exploration will encourage better understanding in the society and promote harmonious co-existence among the members different faith communities of the world.

The Holy Founder of the Ahmadiyya Muslim Jama'at, Hazrat Mirza Ghulam Ahmad of Qadian, envisioned the format of such conferences over a century ago. Describing the basis of respect for other's faiths and respect for the founders of all religions he wrote:

“.....One of the principles upon which I have been established is the following: God has informed me that of the religions which have spread and are firmly established in the world through Prophets, holding sway over a part of the world and achieving survival and long life, none was false in its origin. Nor was any of those Prophets false Therefore, this principle lays down the foundation of love, peace and harmony, and supports moral values, in that we consider all those prophets true who appeared in the world..... In light of this principle, we honour all religious founders.....”

Tohfa Qaisariyyah (A Gift for the Queen) page 4

I congratulate all the speakers, participants, partner organizations and guests, who are participating in today's event. Respect for each other's faith and respect for all the religious holy figures is the only way to promote peace in this world.

I wish you all a successful and memorable conference.

Sincerely,
Lal Khan Malik
National President
Ahmadiyya Muslim Jama'at Canada
October 6, 2013
Guelph, Ontario, Canada



PRIME MINISTER . PREMIER MINISTRE

I am pleased to extend my warmest greetings to all those attending the 33rd World Religions Conference, organized by Ahmadiyya Muslim Jama'at Canada.

This event — the largest multi-faith conference of its kind in Canada— brings together individuals from a wide range of religious beliefs and philosophical traditions to explore issues of shared concern. Members of faith communities have an integral part to play in promoting tolerance, openness, and understanding toward others. The fact that you have been assembling in a spirit of dialogue and congeniality for more than three decades speaks to your commitment to fostering mutual understanding, respect and acceptance and, thus, to making the world a better place.

I am certain that the theme of this year's conference, "Religious Freedom as Practised by Founders," will stimulate a great deal of enlightening and thought-provoking discussion, and that this event will continue to thrive as an inspiring gathering where ideas can flourish for the common good.

Please accept my best wishes for a most productive meeting.

The Rt. Hon. Stephen Harper, P.C., M.P.

OTTAWA
2013



33rd WORLD RELIGIONS CONFERENCE

October 6, 2013

On behalf of the Government of Ontario, I am honoured to extend warm greetings to everyone attending the 33rd World Religions Conference.

I am delighted that this meeting of faiths is once again being held in Ontario — a province that has built a diverse and harmonious society out of the many cultures that call it home.

Ours is a province that embraces every culture and respects every faith. It allows citizens to express their ideas and cultural identities without fear, practise according to their spiritual convictions and contribute to the common good. Religious freedom is a basic human right — a right we cherish in Ontario.

Hosting events such as this represent an opportunity to renew our commitment to religious freedom. It is also a chance to be inspired and enlightened by the wisdom of different religious and philosophical traditions.

I thank the Ahmadiyya Muslim Jama`at for hosting this conference. And I commend all the delegates and speakers at this conference for sharing their knowledge. By engaging in meaningful and respectful discussions, we can strengthen the bonds between our many religious communities.

In doing so, we are laying the groundwork for continued harmony and co-operation in the years to come.

Please accept my best wishes for another memorable and inspirational conference.

Kathleen Wynne
Premier

Religious Freedom as Practised by Founders Sikh Perspective

Balpreet Kaur - Ohio, USA
Sikh Activist and Student Leader
President of the Campus Interfaith Movement

[Inspired Sikh activist and leader. Balpreet is studying International Development and Neuroscience at Ohio State University. Inspired by the universal tenets of love and service in Sikhism, engages in critical interfaith dialogue with college students through Interfaith Youth Core as well as on campus as President of the campus inter-faith movement, Better Together. Actively involved in leadership programs, youth camps, and conferences across the Midwest and on TEDx.]

The best law is Love;
The best service is of labour in love;
The best thought is of the Emancipation of Man;
The best justice from man to man is unselfishness;
The best manners are incessant giving of the self away, and incessant forgiving;
The best ethics is melting away, melting away into love of ideal beauty.
Your surplus belongs to anyone who may need it.

True union is in feeling, in the soul,
Neither in the mind, nor in the body.

The world is an inn on the road of perfection.
Knowledge is not so covetable a property for a true man as a flame in this heart which might
consume the dross of his self.

All friendships take place here in one little point where our souls touch and come in contact with
each other.

Do not try to embrace the whole circumference;
That one shining point is of great reality of things.

Culture of inner self by hearing the voice of the unheard from the Unseen worlds from where
inspiration comes, is true humanity.

It is this compassion for the human spirit that the Sikh Gurus embodied and practiced, and this is the same compassion that our Eternal Guru, Guru Granth Sahib Jee, expounds on in the 1430 pages of divine experience.

The beginning of the Sikh Scriptures is a numeral: one. nOnkaar. One Force. One Divinity. Oneness. This spells out the entirety of the Sikh philosophy that this Universe's most potent reality is Oneness; everything from the smallest atom to the largest galaxy is interconnected and intertwined by a single Truth.

What does this mean for the human race? It is a vision of a world in which the inhabitants are cognizant

of each other's values and beliefs; beyond labels and stereotypes, we connect with each other the basis of that we are all extensions of Divinity. Above all, it means freedom. When we live in recognition and submission to that Oneness, we free ourselves from ego: the sense of separateness, fear and prejudice, the idea of us versus them.

An imperative is formed then to work towards this freedom for not only yourself but the liberation of others from oppression, tyranny, abuse, neglect, segregation. Each person had an obligation to defend the rights of their neighbors.

In the context of history, this notion of absolute freedom was revolutionary. In 15th century India, religious persecution and forced conversions were terrifyingly common. Religious freedom became a lost cause as people were beckoned to turn a blind eye to the suffering of others and worry about their own survival. Compassion had been lost, mercy was nonexistent, and freedom's very image became bondage.

But, Guru Nanak Dev Jee's message was not of ignorance or fragmentation: but of unity and love. Religious freedom was an instinctual human expression.

Avil Alh nUru aupwieAw kudriq ky sB bMdy]
aval aleh noor oupaaeiaa kudharath kae sabh ba(n)dhae ||
First, there is the Divine Light of the Omnipotent Divinity, through which everything was created;
Every being belongs to that Creation.
eyk nUr qy sBu jgu aupijAw kaun Bly ko mMdy]1]
eak noor thae sabh jag oupajiaa koun bhalae ko ma(n)dhae ||1||
From that Divine Light of the One, the whole world has sprung forth; so, who is good/higher or
bad/lower? ||1||

No one path towards self-actualization was the “correct” one because faith and belief were much higher than our human conventions. Faith, to every single person on this Earth, was different. Some have faith in themselves, some to their families, some to humanity. Some have faith in Divinity or humanity. So, by default, everyone should have the freedom to express that in any way they could.

They recognized that the spirit of humanity cannot be put into a confined box of labels, stereotypes, and easily defined as black and white; it was an ocean of diversity that ebbed and flowed as time went on. The greatest strength of humanity lied within its many colors.

The efforts toward this enabling sovereignty took many shapes in Sikh philosophy and history. Guru Nanak Dev Jee, the founder of the Sikh faith, along with his best friend, Bhai Mardhana Jee, a Muslim, ventured out to different parts of the Middle East & Asia donning the clothes of different cultures and adoption multiple languages to engage in critical dialogue with others to understand their perspective and to help facilitate understanding amongst people.

The institution of langar, or the free community meal, eliminates the idea of subordination and dominance between all people and allows community and camaraderie to flow freely from the bonds of caste, race, ethnicity, gender, age, wealth, etc.

There is a story passed down by generations of Sikhs that Guru Gobind Singh Jee accepted Muslims and Hindus into his army against the tyranny of the authoritarian government and unlike today in the US Army, would allow them time and space to complete their prayers.

Furthermore, Sikhs remember their 9th Guru, Guru Teg Bahadur Jee, dying for freedom of conscience and the rights of religious communities like his in the face of the empire's persecution of such minority faiths.

Guru Granth Sahib Jee is the world's first interfaith scripture, contains the writings of Sufis, Hindu Bhagats, seekers with no affiliation, cobblers, former kings, etc. Written in the female voice and overflowing with metaphors of a Lover and her Beloved, Guru Granth Sahib empowered women to grasp and own their spirituality & faith by reminding the world that women are sovereign too.

What the Sikh Gurus wanted and envisioned was humanity to feel the divine spark of Love and that Love manifested itself in their actions and deeds of empathy. And, while we may call them founders, they called themselves learners as well.

As a Sikh, their lives are a constant reminder that I should not only be fighting for the religious freedom of others, but against all of the divisions that hinder me from seeing that humanity is truly One because in that vision, is complete and utter freedom.

Religious Freedom as Practised by Founders Humanist (Atheist and Agnostic) Perspective

Doug Thomas - Elmira, Ontario
Retired Teacher, Canadian Historical Fiction Novelist
President, Society of Ontario Freethinkers

[A life-long Agnostic, Doug has been an active Humanist since 2002. As President of The Society of Ontario Freethinkers, and Secular Connexion Séculaire, he advocates consistently for Humanist rights and separation of church and state. This year, Doug was nominated for the J.S. Woodsworth Award for Human Rights and Equity. He is a published historical fiction novelist, edits Canadian Freethinker E-zine, and contributes regularly to Huffington Post.]

The Founders

The founders of Humanism are quite different from the founders of religion in at least two major ways: first, they are not regarded as super-human or divine, and second, they all move away from religion and advocate for freedom of thought and freedom from religion.

To start, deciding whom the founders are, is a difficult. One local Humanist pointed out to me that Humanism keeps being re-founded with each generation. One can go back to Thales, a Greek philosopher, circa 625 BCE, who confronted the official Mythos concept that the gods gave human beings all their knowledge by pointing out that human beings are capable of learning things on their own. He was persecuted for this and thus started a long-standing tradition.

One can also talk about Epicurus, Democritus, and many other philosophers through the ages who struggled to achieve freedom from religion, often paying with their lives. Men such as Erasmus of Rotterdam escaped excommunication only by renouncing their ideas before church courts. Erasmus had the temerity to suggest that the Roman Church should look for outside corroborative historical evidence for the events depicted in the Gospels.

Later, men like Thomas Huxley, who defined the agnostic philosophy and coined its name in 1869, braved censure for their ideas while they sought freedom from religion. By Huxley's time that censure took the form of social exclusion rather than burning at the stake—a practice that the Church seems to have abandoned sometime in the 17th century.

The history of Humanism in Canada begins with the immigration of Charles Watt and his wife, Kate Eunice, in 1883. They addressed resident Humanists and secularists, advocating for freedom from religion, but did not really start a movement since to do so would have resulted in considerable censure.

Humanism, as a movement, does not start in Canada until the middle of the twentieth century when Doctors Ernest Poser, Maria Jutta Cahn, and R. K. Mishra started the Humanist Fellowship of Montréal under the patronage of Lord Bertrand Russell and Dr. Brock Chisholm, a Canadian non-believer and the first director of the World Health Organization. This Fellowship did not survive and was replaced by the Humanist Association of Canada in 1968 by Dr. Henry Morgentaler and Dr. Robert Buckman. This association was founded on the premise that we can be good without god and that freedom from religion was a fundamental right.

Freedom From Religion

Now there are Humanist organizations across Canada, including The Society of Ontario Freethinkers and Secular Connexion Séculaire. These are distinct from church organizations in that each seems to be focused on a different aspect of establishing freedom from religion as a fundamental right of non-believers.

The legal breakthrough for this came in the Supreme Court of Canada's decision in the Big M Drug vs. Regina in 1984. The court, in overturning New Brunswick's Lord's Day Act, noted that clauses 2a and 2b of the Charter of Rights and Freedoms protect the right to freedom from religion just as much as they protect the right to freedom of religion.

Nevertheless, religiously motivated public officials still resist granting this freedom. In a recent decision, the Ontario Human Rights Tribunal decided that Humanist, René Chouinard had just as much right to distribute Humanist literature to school children as did the Gideon's Society to distribute Bibles in spite of the Niagara District School Board's to allow the distribution of religious texts but not the Humanist one.

One Secular Connexion Séculaire's members is awaiting a hearing before the same tribunal regarding the imposition of religion on attendees at Peterborough City Council meetings through the continued recitation of The Lord's Prayer at public meetings. Interestingly, the council refused to take the path of mediation and insisted on a tribunal hearing before our member could make the same decision. This reveals an intent to impose religion rather than a simple lack of understanding.

The practice of freedom of religion is no problem for us non-believers. We do not oppose religions, nor do we attack religious institutions when they do what they should be doing, practising their religion without attempting to limit our right to freedom from religion.

We have no problem with seeing nativity scenes on church lawns as we walk down public sidewalks, or seeing people wearing personal symbols of belief, even while working as public servants. Surely the small cross that Carey Price wore on his goalie's helmet did not improve his goals against average and I doubt that it caused much distraction for his opponents.

What we do not understand is that religious people feel that they have the right to challenge our philosophy in ways they would never challenge other religion when we present it in public. As participants in the Multicultural Festival, the Non-Violence Festival, and the Word on the Street Festival we are often confronted by people who seem to think that they have (if you will excuse the expression) a God-given right to insult us with stereotypical, misinformation often delivered bombastically. Yes, such confrontations sometimes happen even at this conference, hosted by a faith group whose philosophy emphasizes tolerance and respect.

We are not here to challenge your religious views; rather we are here to increase your understanding of our philosophy—being good without god(s).

Now, we are freethinkers and while I sometimes find it necessary to remind some of our members that freethinking means freedom of thought, not freedom from thought, we hold reason to be the strongest way to develop ethics and to understand the universe around us. As a result of that

freethinking, lively discussions occur among us on such topics as the Charter of Québec Culture. Some of us can see justification for controlling the presence of religious symbols among public servants, while others of us find problems with that approach to secularism.

However, we are united in our conviction that democracy, through the ballot box and through the court system will prevail.

Consistent with our live and let live philosophy, we see Open Secularism as the way to preserve freedom of religion and to enhance freedom from religion. This concept, as I have said many times, centres on the idea that public institutions, our schools, our courts, our council chambers, our legislative assemblies and our parliament, should be free of religious symbols, religious policies and, yes, the religious clauses that exist in our current legislation.

For example, clause 264 of the Ontario Education Act, with its admonition that teachers must teach the tenets of Christianity, is a glaring example of such legislation. Fortunately, Ontario teachers have the professional fortitude and wisdom to ignore that clause and to teach positive moral values that are acceptable all Ontarians. They do so through example as much as through lessons. To remove this clause would be to support them in their efforts.

We are, then, unexpected defenders of freedom of religion. We are also seekers of true freedom from religion. We intend to continue the reasoned pursuit of that freedom through positive social and legal action.

Religious Freedom as Practised by Founders Aboriginal Spiritual Perspective

Rev. Kathryn Gorman-Lovelady, Tiny, Ontario
Aboriginal Spiritual Teacher
Chair North-Central Region Committee of the Ontario Multifaith Council.

[A well-known Aboriginal Spiritual Teacher and Speaker. Kathryn is a psychology alumnus of the University of Guelph. Post-graduate work includes theology, and traditional healing. Licensed minister, Elder, shaman and Moderator of Wolfe Island Métis Interfaith Church. Kathryn is of First Nations heritage and presently the chair of the north-central region committee of the Ontario Multifaith Council. As a textile artist, runs a studio in Tiny, Ontario.]

Historical Perspectives:

- Aboriginal people have existed on this continent from somewhere between 12,000 to 50,000 years depending upon the archaeological source...
- There is no one founder, or group of original founders of our spiritual practices. Our cultures evolved with the migration patterns throughout North America. We evolved culturally-based spiritual traditions rather than “religions”;
- Ceremonies were conducted by shaman, medicine people, healers, dream interpreters and elders or chiefs.
- We evolved collective consensual process versus hierarchical management of ceremony and state..
- We call this continent “Turtle Island”. Anthropologists suggest there were at least 600 tribes prior to contact with outside races. Diseases and slavery ravaged our populations dramatically; despite that, there are over 50 aboriginal language groups across Canada today.

Contemporary societal Issues:

- The Canadian Constitution identifies 3 distinct aboriginal peoples in Canada: First Nations, Inuit, and Métis, with Métis people considered indigenous to Canada since their culture evolved here.
- Aboriginal people are powerful advocates for the land and all the beings of this earth, so it's not surprising that our spiritual journey reflects the knowledge of our ancestors. One constant spiritual symbol defining us is the circle.
- There is a judiciary panel called “The Truth and Reconciliation Commission”. It was given a five-year mandate which wraps up in July, 2014. The commission is investigating the horrors Canadian aboriginal people faced during 120+ years of attempted cultural genocide implemented by the government and various churches in the form of residential schools. This was done by forcibly taking children from their homes - in some cases for years on end. Sexual abuse, starvation, humiliation and outright torture was meant to get 'the Indian' out of these children. There was the “Big Scoop” of the 1960s where an inordinate number of aboriginal children were removed from their families and placed in non-aboriginal homes. Spiritual traditions of First Nations, Inuit and Métis were made illegal. Thus it's been difficult to maintain the intergenerational spiritual practices of our communities. It's meant that many aboriginal people in Canada - and whole communities - are disenfranchised from culture, language and traditional worship. A gulf of despair was created leading to drug abuse, alcohol addiction and suicide. Our leaders know this must stop. The Truth and Reconciliation Commission gives a voice to those who were hurt and asks how we might help them heal.
- Aboriginal youth between the ages of 15 and 29 comprise the largest, fastest-growing population in

Canada. There are strong movements to return openly and publicly to the spiritual practices which historically defined us. Having recently worked in the correctional system I can tell you that aboriginal inmates are disproportionately represented in prison populations by a factor of ten times in Ontario. This statistic varies across the country depending upon the total aboriginal population in a particular province. One of government's positive moves is hiring aboriginal leaders and liaisons for the prison system to help re-teach spiritual and cultural traditions. These liaisons work with inmates and communities to help reintegrate aboriginal inmates returning home.

- Many First Nations reserves have their own social workers, traditional healers and agencies to help children stay within family groups on their home reserve.

- Aboriginal self-government and recent political movements like “Idle No More” exist because our Elders and leaders move to stop the lateral violence that aboriginal people and communities foist against each other in the fight for government dollars. It's all part of the healing we recognize is needed, if the attempts at cultural and spiritual genocide are to be thwarted.

Current Spiritual Practices:

- Powwows are venues for aboriginal people to gather and celebrate culture and spiritual traditions. Good food, a little competitive dancing, and socializing are all part of powwows, but it's the intergenerational passage of spiritual traditions that calls us to the sacred fire.

- Many of us smudge on a daily basis; we drum, dance, participate in sweatlodge rituals, grow medicine wheel gardens and share stories that have survived for millennia.

- In the North they once again practice “shaking tent”; in the West there is a return to the practice of potlatch, racing of war canoes, and even the highly-charged precedent to have spiritual objects surrendered by museums and returned to First Nations communities. Here in southern Ontario we now openly speak of Midewiwin and in Eastern Canada the people are defining themselves legally.

- Despite our language and cultural differences, from a cosmological point of view, aboriginal people in Canada have very similar spiritual beliefs. We consider spirit exists in everything - the land, water, trees, animals, plants, even stones! We believe all these things have a medicine (which really means a teaching) to help us grow, mature and get through the day-to-day journey of life.

- We believe there is no separation from the Creator – thus there is no need for an intermediary or Saviour. There is no need for a spiritual “hierarchy” in communities.

- Many aboriginal communities embrace Christian beliefs and blend them with native spiritual and cultural traditions.

- I will share the story of migrating Canada Geese and how it relates to our thoughts on good leadership – both spiritually and politically.

- Finally I will share the prophecy of the 8th fire...

Conclusions:

I am pleased to say within the respective nations there is healing. Our spiritual integrity is in a constant flow of renewal like the phoenix rising from ashes. We aren't a people of the past - dead cultures belong in museums - we evolve continuously. The constant we bring with us is a love of the land, nature, water, Grandmother Moon, Grandfather Sun, the stars and the circle. Astrophysicists tell us `from the stars we were born to the stars we shall return`. It is important to keep looking up, and forward, reviving the spiritual ways of our ancestors.

Religious Freedom as Practised by Founders Jewish Perspective

Rabbi Dow Marmur
President Jewish Synagogue, Toronto
Executive Director World Union for Progressive Judaism

[A Jewish scholar and an advocate of interfaith relations, Rabbi Marmur is the President of Jewish Synagogue, Toronto. Born in Poland, and graduated from Leo Baeck College, London. Served 2 congregations in Britain, Senior Rabbi of Holy Blossom, Toronto. Executive Director of the World Union for Progressive Judaism, Jerusalem. Recipient of Poland's Order of Merit, and Ohev Yisrael Award. Authored 6 books and a regular columnist in the Toronto Star.]

Judaism doesn't have a founder like Christianity and Islam. The nearest equivalents might be Abraham and Moses.

There are references in the Hebrew Bible that suggest that both stressed freedom of religion.

However, Judaism as a whole is imbued with a sense of religious freedom, because it only claims that Judaism is the only religion for the Jewish people.

Though conversion to Judaism is possible, it's assumed that other religions must be free to practise their faiths as long as it doesn't do harm to others. Judaism is not a missionary religion.

There's even a benediction in Judaism in praise of non-Jewish sages.

This is the theological basis for the Jewish commitment to interfaith work.

Religious Freedom as Practised by Founders Islamic Perspective

Mubarak A. Nazir - Toronto
Senior Vice President and Missionary Incharge
Ahmadiyya Muslim Jama`at Canada

[Prolific speaker. Mubarak is the Senior Vice President and Missionary Incharge of the Ahmadiyya Muslim Jama`at Canada. Regularly appears on broadcast media, and has lectured at numerous forums explaining contemporary Islamic issues. A graduate with a scientific background. After dedicating his life, served as Missionary both in Africa and Canada. Principal of various Ahmadiyya Islamic Schools in Africa and most recently of the Ahmadiyya Institute in Canada.]

I am here today to discuss how the founder of Islam – Prophet Muhammad (peace be upon him) – defended religious freedom. Any action by a so-called Muslim today that goes against the practice and teachings of Prophet Muhammad should be deemed un-Islamic.

One of the greatest examples of Prophet Muhammad's defence of equal rights for all can be found in the farewell sermon which he delivered near the end of his life in which he said:

You are all brothers and are all equal. None of you can claim any privilege or any superiority over any other. An Arab is not to be preferred to a non-Arab, nor is a non-Arab to be preferred to an Arab; nor is a white man to be preferred to a coloured one, or a coloured one to a white, except on the basis of righteousness. (Islām and Human Rights, Page 36)

At another occasion, he declared:

الْمُسْلِمُ مَنْ سَلِمَ النَّاسُ مِنْ لِسَانِهِ وَ يَدِهِ

Meaning, “A Muslim is such a person from whose tongue and hands all people are safe”. Here, he specifically used the word “Nās” (Arabic) which refers to people of all different faiths or no faith. He has categorically stated that a Muslim should not be someone who harms anybody in any way. Similarly, he said:

الْمُؤْمِنُ مَنْ أَمَنَهُ النَّاسُ عَلَىٰ دِمَائِهِمْ وَأَمْوَالِهِمْ

Meaning, “A true believer is one from whom the life and property of all people is safe”. In other words, a believer should be a proponent of peace, not bloodshed.

When it comes to religious freedom, he is told by God to declare, “Say: This is the truth from your Lord. If someone wishes to believe, that is up to him, and if someone wishes to disbelieve, that is also up to him”. (Holy Qur'an, 18:30). Also:

لَا إِكْرَاهَ فِي الدِّينِ قِتًا

“There should be no compulsion in religion”. (Holy Qur'an, 2:257).

All these statements prove that Islam teaches us to practise freedom of religion. This was also practised by Prophet Muhammad and there are numerous examples of this.

For instance, in 628 A.D., Muhammad wrote a letter to the monks of St. Catherine Monastery which is known as the Charter of Privileges to Christians. It is a demonstration of how Muhammad defended religious freedom, and an extract from this Charter reads as follows:

This is a message from Muhammad ibn Abdullah, as a covenant to those who adopt Christianity, near and far, we are with them. Verily I, the servants, the helpers, and my followers defend them, because Christians are my citizens; and by Allah! I hold out against anything that displeases them. No compulsion is to be on them. Neither are their judges to be removed from their jobs nor their monks from their monasteries. No one is to destroy a house of their religion, to damage it, or to carry anything from it to the Muslims' houses. Should anyone take any of these, he would spoil God's covenant and disobey His Prophet... Their churches are to be respected. They are neither to be prevented from repairing them nor the sacredness of their covenants. No one of the nation (Muslims) is to disobey the covenant till the Last Day (end of the world).[1]

This is an incredible example of how Muhammad defended Christian rights and their freedom to adhere to their preferred faith. And this monastery still exists today and a copy of this letter still rests in a library at the monastery.

All these teachings are based on justice as the Holy Qur'an strongly declares:

يَا أَيُّهَا الَّذِينَ آمَنُوا كُونُوا قَوِّمِينَ لِلَّهِ
شُهَدَاءَ بِالْقِسْطِ ۗ وَلَا يَجْرِمَنَّكُمْ شَنَاٰنُ
قَوْمٍ عَلٰٓى اَلَّا تَعْدِلُوْا ۗ اِعْدِلُوْا ۗ هُوَ
اَقْرَبُ لِلتَّقْوٰى ۗ وَاتَّقُوا اللّٰهَ ۗ اِنَّ اللّٰهَ
خَبِيْرٌۢ بِمَا تَعْمَلُوْنَ ۙ

[5:9] O ye who believe! be steadfast in the cause of Allah, bearing witness in equity; and let not a people's enmity incite you to act otherwise than with justice. Be always just, that is nearer to righteousness. And fear Allah. Surely, Allah is aware of what you do.

Prophet Muhammad also showed great respect for people of other faiths. Once a funeral procession passed by him and he stood up as a mark of respect. His companions told him that it was the funeral procession of a Jew. He said to them:

اَللّٰبِسَتْ نَفْسًا

“Was he not human?” [2]

Similarly, during one battle, one of the leaders of the pagans of Mecca died and they offered a large sum of money to take possession of his dead body, but Prophet Muhammad refused to take the money and respectfully returned the body to the Quraish. He had also given a general instruction based on the teachings of the Qur'ān that no one is allowed to force an enemy soldier to accept Islām. He even said that if an idolater seeks protection from a Muslim, he should be provided that protection (Holy Qur'ān, 9:6). When he became the ruler of Medina, he gave full rights to the Jewish residents of the city, and he taught that all places of worship should be protected.

Due to these efforts of Prophet Muhammad to propagate religious freedom, he has received much praise even from non-Muslim writers. For instance, Ruth Cranston writes in her book World Faiths:

Thirteen hundred years before the Atlantic Charter incorporated freedom of religion and freedom of fear, Muhammad made treaties with the Jewish and Christian Tribes he had conquered and gave them freedom of religious worship and local self-government. In many Muslim invaded countries there has been conspicuously fair and just treatment of the non-Muslim population.

It should now be clear that any action committed by a Muslim nowadays which goes against these teachings should not be considered concurrent with Islamic teachings. Being members of the Ahmadiyya Muslim Community, we are Muslims who believe in the latter-day Messiah, Hazrat Mirzā Ghulām Ahmad (peace be upon him). He has stated that he has come to remove some of the misunderstandings and misinterpretations that have unfortunately developed among the other Muslims. Discussing one such misunderstanding, he says:

Islam is such a religion that does not need the support of the sword for its propagation. Rather, the inherent excellences of its teachings, its truth, enlightenment, reasoning, arguments, and the active assistance of God the Exalted, the signs, and His personal attention are such matters that always drive its progress and propagation... The message of Islam does not need any compulsion for its propagation... (Malfoozat, Vol. 3, pp.176-177)

Similarly, he writes:

Is it not shameful that a complete stranger should be unjustly killed while occupied in his daily affairs, thus widowing his wife, making his children orphans, and turning his house into a funeral parlour? Which hadith or verse of the Holy Qur'ān authorizes such behaviour? Is there any maulavi who can respond? Foolish people hear the word jihad, and make it an excuse for the fulfilment of their own selfish desires. Or perhaps it is sheer madness that inclines them towards bloodshed. [3]

Based on these teachings of the Messiah, the motto of the Ahmadiyya Muslim Community is Love for All Hatred for None.

[1] www.cyberstan.org/islamic/charter1.html

[2] Sahīh Bukharī, Kitābul Janā'iz, Bāb man qāma lijanāzati yahūdī

[3] Ibid., page 14 – 15

Religious Freedom as Practised by Founders Hindu Perspective

Swami Haripriya Parivrajika
Preacher at Brahmarishi Mission of Canada

[Disciple of H.H. Brahmrishi Shri Vishvatma Bawra Ji Maharaj, Haripriya completed M.A. in psychology from Rijks University of Leiden, Holland. In India did spiritual practices, studied Sanskrit, Yoga, Upanishad and other scriptures and since 2001 a preacher at Brahmarishi Mission of Canada. Teaches Yoga, Sanskrit and delivers discourses at various places including Universities in Canada, India and Europe. Organizes and conducts Yoga Camps and courses for children and adults.]

Hinduism, the oldest of all religions, is not founded by any prophet. No date can be fixed for Hinduism. Hinduism is not born of the teachings of particular prophets. It is not based on a set of dogmas preached by a particular set of teachers. It is free from religious fanaticism.

The actual name for Hinduism is *Sanatana-Dharma*, it is also known as *Vaidik-Dharma*. "Dharma" is derived from the Sanskrit root verb "Dhri" which means "to hold together". It has a wider meaning than the word "religion". Religion literally means that which leads one to God. There is no equivalent word for Dharma either in English or in any other language. In this sense, Hinduism is not a religion; it's a "*Dharma*". "*Sanatana*" means eternal and in simple terms "*Dharma*" means code of good conduct, i.e. doing the right thing, in thought, word and deed. In other words we can define *Sanatana-Dharma* as the eternal law of Righteousness, which binds society together with mutual love, harmony and respect. *Sanatana-Dharma* is a way of life, which is open for everyone regardless of any cast, creed, color, gender or religion one belongs to.

Hinduism allows absolute freedom to the rational mind of man. It never demands any undue restriction upon the freedom of human reason, the freedom of thought, feeling and will of man. It allows the widest freedom in matters of faith and worship. Hinduism is a religion of freedom. It allows absolute freedom to the human reason and heart with regard to questions such as nature of God, soul, creation, form of worship and the goal of life. Hinduism does not lie in the acceptance of any particular doctrine or in the observance of some particular rituals or form of worship. It does not force anybody to accept particular dogmas or forms of worship. It allows everybody to reflect, investigate, enquire and cogitate. Hence, all sorts of religious faiths, various forms of worship or spiritual practices, and diverse kinds of rituals and customs, have found their honorable places side by side within Hinduism and are cultured and developed in harmonious relationship with one another.

Religious freedom means also accepting, respecting and including those who do not believe in God. Hinduism does not condemn those who deny God as the creator and ruler of the world, who do not accept the existence of an eternal soul and the state of Moksha or state of liberation. Hinduism does not consider the upholders of such views unfit to be recognized as pious and honorable members of the Hindu religious society. Attaining salvation without God is also an accepted path in Hinduism. The Sankhya philosophy of Hinduism does not believe in God or Creator. The universe is described as having the unchangeable immortal Transcendental Self or Consciousness called Purusha, and Nature or Eternal Energy called Prakriti.

The religious hospitality of Hinduism is very famous. Hinduism is extremely universal and liberal. This

is the fundamental feature of Hinduism. Hinduism pays respects to all religions. It does not dishonor any other religion. It accepts and honors truth—wherever it may come from. There are considerable numbers of the followers of other religions in India. And yet, the Hindus live in perfect harmony, peace and friendship with all of them. Their tolerance and fellow-feeling towards the followers of other religions are remarkable.

Hinduism accepts and respects truths from all religions. And Hinduism says that people of all religions worship the same God – the God that manifests in the universe and beyond, and in nature. The one God in everything that we know about, and in everything that is un-knowable. So, whether we call God as Brahman, or Allah, or Jesus, or Nirankaar, or Supreme Being, they all refer to the one unknowable, omnipresent, omnipotent, omniscient, timeless, unbounded manifestation we call God. In the Rig Veda it is said: "**Ekam Sat Vipraah Bahudaa Vadanti**", There is but only One Truth, even though the Sages know it by different names.

Religious freedom is also taught in our scriptures. In none of the teachings or aphorisms in the scriptures you will find the word Hindu used. All the teachings are referred to human beings, which mean that these are open for everyone to practice and follow. There is also freedom given for any path one wants to follow.

After explaining both the path of righteousness or good actions and the path of evil or bad actions with their respective outcomes, Lord Krishna is not forcing Arjuna to choose for a particular path. At the end in the eighteenth chapter Shloka 63, He tells to Arjuna,

Thus has this wisdom, more secret than secrecy itself, been imparted to you by Me. Fully pondering it, do as you like.

Arjuna represents the mankind and in this Shloka it is very clear that mankind has been given the full opportunity and freedom of reason, thought, feeling, will and choice.

One of the propagators of the Sanatana Dharma, Swami Ramananda, had declared widely, *Jaat Paat pooche na koi, Hari ko bhaje so Hari ka boi*, which means that anybody who worships God can achieve Salvation regardless of any cast, creed, color, gender or religion they belong to. In India and all over the world you will therefore find saints from different casts, creeds and in both genders.

The Sanatana Dharma or Hinduism doesn't believe in conversion. It offers all kinds of different spiritual practices and forms of worship for all sorts of people to suit their temperaments, capacities, tastes, stages of spiritual development and conditions of life. People of all other religions are free to follow any of the practices Hinduism provides with respect and conservation of their own religion.

The Sanatana Dharma has its fundament in science and logic. One of the logic reasoning behind the religious freedom is that *there is no such time, there was no such time and there will be not such a time* that the physical, mental and intellectual capacity of each individual is, was or will be the same. Thus compelling everyone to choose and practice the same is equal to injustice. Hence everyone has the right to make their own choices according to their own capacities and abilities.

The Hindu perspective of religious freedom we can summarize with these following words: tolerance, mutual respect, acceptance, individual rights, and responsible conduct.

Religious Freedom as Practised by Founders Buddhist Perspective

Venerable Jue Qian
Fo Guang Shan Temple of Toronto

[Chinese Buddhist Nun and Dharma teacher, Jue was ordained as a nun in Taiwan, Fo Guang Shan Temple. Holds a Master's Degree in Business from Australia, and a Master's Degree in Chinese Buddhism from Tsung Lin University. As the member of Fo Guang Shan Temple of Toronto and the person in-charge of the Waterloo Buddha's Light Centre, teaches Buddhism Dharma and meditation workshops in temples, high schools, colleges and universities.]

Everyone has a desire for freedom; everybody has the right to seek for happiness, security and freedom. However, what is freedom? Look at the situation around us, do we really have freedom? Can human being able to obtain complete freedom in this world? According to the Buddhist Sutra, “We have the seed of disharmony within ourselves and there are also external causes of disharmony. These external causes and conditions affect one another.” Hence, if we are searching freedom from the external causes and condition, and if we do not bother to purify our mind, it is impossible for us to achieve freedom.

Buddhism never prevents anyone to learn from other religious teachings. In fact, the Buddha encourages His disciples and followers to learn about other religions and to compare his teachings with other religious teachings. The Buddha claimed that, if the other religions have reasonable and rational teaching, his disciples and followers are free to know and respect such teachings. There are religions that prevent their members to interact with other religions, however, in Buddhism, we encourage the members to know more about others in order for them to have an opportunity to examine and strengthen their faith. Buddhist is never in darkness, they are aware of things around them and they make a judgement and decisions on what belief are more suitable to them.

According to the Buddha, everybody has their own free choice, this include choice of belief. Religion is not a law, but a disciplinary code that all of us should understand and follow. This disciplinary code is a natural law, not a divine law that set by somebody to judge and control others.

Some religions require their members to fully obey the teachings and never questions. Buddha never asked the members to obey his teachings, in fact, he wants his disciples and followers not to just simply accept anything that is told, but rather experience it themselves. According to Kalama Sutta – Anguttara Nikaya of the Tripitaka, this is what the Buddha said,

'Do not accept anything based upon mere reports, traditions or hearsay,

Nor upon the authority of religious texts,

Nor upon mere reasons and arguments,

Nor upon one's own inference,

Nor upon anything which appears to be true,

Nor upon one's own speculative opinion,

Nor upon another's seeming ability,

Nor upon the consideration: 'This is our Teacher.'

'But, when you know for yourselves the certain things are unwholesome and bad: tending to harm yourself of others, reject them.

'And when you know for yourselves that certain things are wholesome and good: conducive to the spiritual welfare of yourself as well as others, accept and follow them.'

The Buddha advised those who indicated their wish to follow Him, not to be hasty in accepting His Teachings. He advised them to consider carefully His Teaching and to determine for themselves whether it was practical or not for them to follow. Buddhists know that only through man's understanding and practice will they come nearer to the goal taught by the Buddha.

Some religions require their members to influence others and embrace their religion for material gain. Buddhist goal in practice is to share and introduce their experience with others on how to liberate from suffering and the circle of birth and death. Buddhist never tries to influence others, nor do they try to use poverty, sickness, illiteracy and ignorance in order to increase the number of Buddhist population.

How do we achieve Religious Freedom, according to the founder of Fo Guang Shan Temple, Venerable Master Hsin Yun, he indicated a few points in his talk on “The Propagation of Buddhism: Unity for Peace”. He said, “Peace can be search with Respect. Peace without respect cannot last. If we want permanent peace, then we should respect each other. “If we wish to achieve Religious Freedom, we need to respect others beliefs. Everybody in this world is different; in terms of languages, traditions, culture, perspectives and beliefs. When we understand and respect these differences, conflict will cease and freedom will arise.

The second point, “Peace can Be Achieved Through Compassionate Action.” If we put ourselves in the position of others, and view others as our own self, the act of compassion will cease all disagreement. As according to the Mahayana Parinirvana Sutra, “Compassion puts end to craving; Love puts end to anger.” Conflict will not arise if we have compassion to others; include the people that are different from us.

The third point, “Peace Can Be Promoted Through A Sense of Equality”. According to the Buddha, “All Sentient beings possess the Buddha nature.” Which mean that all of us have the nature of Goodness like the Buddha. We might be different in many ways, but the pure mind deep inside all of us is always there. Everybody has their right to have their own belief, but this belief should reveal their true nature of Goodness and Kindness.

The Buddha encourages rationalism, democracy and practical, ethical conduct in religion. His teachings are on human dignity. He taught his disciple to practice the middle path, as according to Brahma Jala Sutta, the Buddha says, 'If anyone were to speak ill of me, my teachings and my disciples, do not be upset or disturbed, for this kind of reaction will only cause you harm. On the other hand, if anyone were to speak well of me, my teachings and my disciples, do not be over-joyed and excited, for this kind of reaction will only be an obstacle in forming a correct judgment. If you are elated, you cannot judge whether the qualities praised are real and actually found in us.'

Buddhism has always supported the progress of mankind and freedom. Buddhist believes that the more they understand about other religions, the more they understand Buddhism and strengthen the faith in their belief. Thus, Buddhist always supports the advancement of knowledge and freedom for humanity in every sphere of life.

Religious Freedom as Practised by Founders Christian Perspective

Dr. Don Posterski - Toronto
Former Professor Christianity and Culture at McMaster
Director of Faith and Development

[Renown presenter. Don Posterski completed his tenure with World Vision International as the Director of "Faith and Development." Former professor in Christianity and Culture at McMaster University, Don has written several books interpreting gospel and culture. Most recent publication is "Jesus on Justice: Living with compassion and conviction." A frequent conference speaker, his global experience required him to interface with the complex dynamics of other world religions.]

Introduction

We religious people need to stick together

We religious people need to stick with our commitments
We need to take permission... to be true to ourselves

We religious people need to make space for each other
We need to give permission... for others to be true to themselves

When we live this way -- we walk the road to religious freedom...

For Christians -- the God of creation set the stage when the God of history proclaimed to Joshua:
"Choose you this day... whom you shall serve..."

The invitation to choose... the option to embrace the God of creation or to risk going elsewhere with one's loyalty is the freedom that Christians believe is extended to all humanity – including you and me.

One of Jesus' parables elaborates on how to express our freedom of choice...
Matthew 7:24–29 (NRSV)

"Everyone then who hears these words of mine and acts on them will be like a wise man who built his house on rock. 25 The rain fell, the floods came, and the winds blew and beat on that house, but it did not fall, because it had been founded on rock. 26 And everyone who hears these words of mine and does not act on them will be like a foolish man who built his house on sand. 27 The rain fell, and the floods came, and the winds blew and beat against that house, and it fell—and great was its fall!"

A. Everyone chooses to build their life – out of something

Wise people... God focused people... build on rock
Unwise... foolish people... build on sand
There are no non-believers. If you breath... you believe something

B. Everyone faces storms

The wise... the unwise

At times – life beats us up... **situations where we have no choice**

The winds howl, thunder crashes, rains rage and storms destroy

Other storms are part of huge systems... people are victims

Like being caught in a tornado

Our compassion cannot let us pass by the systemic storm clouds of poverty in our world... And Jesus' mission is our Christian mission... to fight for the marginalized and advocate for the vulnerable... to walk with people in their storms

C. Some building materials are better than others

All building materials are not equal

Christians hold strong beliefs

Beliefs can be building blocks

Building blocks for living good and right lives

Building blocks for contributing to the well being of others

Beliefs can be transformed into forces that access our personal and social FREEDOM TO FLOURISH...

Free to flourish when we are **released** from what cripples us

Free to flourish when we are **enabled** to be our best selves

As we live together with our differences... when we get it right we are **neither permissive with ourselves nor judgmental of others**

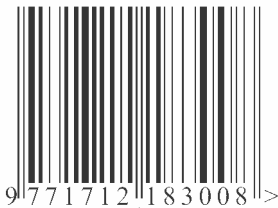
When we live this way -- we walk the road to religious freedom...

and in our fractured world struggling to deal with diversity...

Maybe... just maybe... we can gift the world with ways to live well -- while at the same time creating personal and cultural space for others.

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