

Concluding Reflections at Symposium on  
Religious Rights in a Pluralistic World

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At the beginning of this conference, Heiner Bielefeldt challenged us to “be provoked.” He talked of ways that freedom of religion or belief is a provocation to states, to religious communities and to the West. And of course it was a challenge to each of us, to be provoked. But in what sense? If one studies the use of the word ‘provoked’ in the Bible, there are many passages in which people (and even God) was provoked to anger. Sometimes people are provoked to fear. I have come to believe that many of the worst violations of religious freedom rights in particular and human rights more generally grow out of situations where people are provoked to anger or to fear. They then react in ways motivated by self-defense or defense of others or defense of nation or community. But too often their response causes even greater anger and fear, even greater polarization, and too often this results in discrimination, violence, crime, and even genocide.

I was struck this morning in looking up passages using this word by two other reactions. A passage from the epistle to the Hebrews says, “let us consider one another to provoke unto love and good works.” Hebrews 10:24. One of my hopes is that you can take time now, even in the time between this session and dinner, to write down some things that you have felt prompted to do as a result of

this conference. We need to be provoked not to anger or fear, but to responsibility, as Jan Figel encouraged us this morning, to sensitive and caring action, to stand not only for our own communities, but to stand with others outside our circle, to hear their cry, and to respond with sensitivity, caring, and help that goes beyond Hollywood and superficial answers, to the forging of deep and lasting solutions.

I have been struck by many images during this conference, but one in particular caught my attention. It was an image from Simon McCrossan's presentation in the first plenary. I am haunted to some extent by his opening image from Tolkien. "The world has changed. I can feel it in the water, earth and air." But he invoked another image that better explains what is at stake. He said, "We have a cut-flower culture." The idea is that flowers, cut from their roots, will wither. There is the initial beauty, the fragile bloom, but without roots, it will wither. And the world will change.

I have often pointed to freedom of religion as the grandparent of human rights, but a grandparent that is increasingly forgotten, and more, a grandparent that is neglected at our peril. Because in many ways freedom of religion (and I include here reference to freedom of non-religious convictions) is foundational. As I have said on several other occasions, it is foundational in at least four respects: It is **historically foundational** because so many other rights emerged as additional supports for or expansions of legal protections originally provided in the

name of religious freedom. It is **philosophically foundational** because it protects the comprehensive belief systems and world views in which our other ideas are rooted and from which they derive their meaning. It is **institutionally foundational** because it protects and fosters the institutions that engender the vision, the motivation and moral support that translate religious and moral ideals into personal and communal practice. It often overlaps with other rights, such as freedom of expression, freedom of association, rights to non-discrimination, rights to protection of an intimate or private sphere, and so forth, but its sum is greater than any of these individual parts. Finally, it is **empirically foundational**. It is a principle of tremendous social leverage. There is now extensive empirical evidence that a country's performance in protecting religious freedom correlates not only with protection of other key rights, such as freedom of speech and non-discrimination, but also with other social goods that are vital to sustainable human development in the fullest and richest sense. Freedom of religion or belief is not only a criterion of justice; it is central to life lived abundantly.

Over thirty years ago, I attended the World Conference of Human Rights held in Vienna in June of 1993. On June 25, the 171 attending states adopted by consensus the Vienna Declaration and Programme of Action. One of the provisions of that document has become a kind of mantra in international human rights circles: "All human rights are universal, indivisible and interdependent and

interrelated. The international community must treat human rights globally in a fair and equal manner, on the same footing, and with the same emphasis.” This is an important reminder that one needs to remember and take seriously the broad array of rights. But some are more foundational, more central, and if they are neglected, the center will not hold, and the initial bloom of human rights will wither, like cut flowers. Probably my most vivid memory of the World Conference of Human Rights was a session at which former U.S. President Jimmy Carter had been invited to speak. There is probably no president of the United States who has been more committed to human rights than Jimmy Carter. The United States signed the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights during his administration, and he has been remarkably effective in his post-presidential years in promoting human rights world-wide. But at the session where he was supposed to speak, demonstrators shouted him down and refused to stop shouting, so that in the end he could not speak. My point in telling this sad tale is that sometimes, people being provoked by something or other (I was never quite sure what the impetus for this demonstration was), may end up abusing rights rather than finding solutions.

The Carter story is not about religious freedom, but it is representative of a growing challenge that religious rights will face in a pluralistic world. Early on, it was problems of religious persecution that gave rise to other rights. Milton’s

*Areopagitica*, the classic argument in favor of freedom of speech and press, was written in no small part because Milton had suffered censorship of his religious writings. Minority rights were in significant ways about protecting religious groups. Concern for equality early on was about concerns of religious discrimination. Arguments against racial inequality could build on the shoulders of arguments against religious inequality. But today, we are seeing patterns of human rights advocates giving lip service to religious freedom, but casting it aside and not even noticing that religious discrimination is involved in giving priority to other rights. It is not that the other rights are not important, but that fostering the blooming of other rights should not be accompanied by cutting off protection of religious freedom rights.

So again, we should be provoked, but it will be better if we are provoked in the sense of being stimulated and perhaps “provoked unto love and good works.” This can take several forms. We need to be provoked to engage in dialogue that is genuine and deep. Dialogue between elites is not meaningful if it is not carried to the level of grassroots and neighborhoods. Also, we cannot be satisfied with forms of interaction that have the form of dialogue but lack its substance. Too often I have seen dialogues in which the dialogue partners discuss some other group whose activities they don’t like, but who are not invited to the discussion. These are dialogues in form, but not in substance. We need to be provoked to dialogue

that is more than monologue, and that ultimately takes on the form of shared actions. We need to focus as much if not more on diapraxis.

We need to be provoked to step out of our own circles and to pay attention to the needs of others. Three weeks ago I was at a conference at Windsor castle. We met with a group of Yazidi leaders who were pleading for help. One of the things I was provoked to do then was to make a commitment that I would speak about their plight on upcoming occasions. So I want to make good on that commitment today. We heard about the plight of this ancient religious group that is one of many tragic victims of the genocide being perpetrated in the Middle East. We were given the millennium long history of pogroms against Yazidis, of which the current catastrophe is part of a recurring cycle. I think all of us sitting there thought of our feelings leaving the various Holocaust Museums of this world, and saying to ourselves, being deeply provoked, “Never again,” and then sitting listening to the Yazidis, saying to ourselves, “Not again. Surely not again.” One of the striking features of the conference on Yazidis is the analysis they provided of how what they are suffering has been replicated again and again, in every major genocide. It is not just the savage killing that recurs, but the abuse of women, the selling of them into slavery, trafficking, as well as torture and the sending of human beings into blackness from which some never recover, choosing suicide rather than continued life in the blackness. We are facing a refugee crisis of

proportions that exceed in scale and magnitude anything we have seen for decades.

We need to be able to step out of our circles to respond.

We need to be provoked into finding ways to meet the crisis that is being experienced as a deluge, swamping institutions with hopelessly inadequate resources. We need to find ways to expedite asylum claims, and to do so without discriminating against religious claims. We need to find ways of responding that don't lead, as Heiner Bielefeldt said this morning, to either fatalism or cynicism. We need to look deeply at our institutions with the added focus of critical lenses. I think, for example, of the insights provided by Sahar Aziz's analysis of how treatment of Muslims in America is fitting into a recurring pattern of racism. We need to take a tough and deepened look at ourselves. But we need to be careful in developing such insights that we do not undermine the legitimacy of best efforts by imperfect human beings to find the best solutions they can see. We need to assimilate critique of our institutions, while understanding also how far we have come, and how we can apply what we have learned in moving toward a better future. We need to understand that being provoked is a first step, but it doesn't carry with it automatic answers. Often, the best we can hope for is partial answers worked out with people of deeply differing beliefs, and we need to treasure those times of shared striving.

For the past few days, we have had a chance to spend time with others sensitive to the importance of human rights, and to the foundational and central character of freedom of religion or belief. Our hope is that we have strengthened our sense of how vital religious rights are in a pluralistic world. I hope we have been reminded that when we hear the mantra that “All human rights are universal, indivisible and interdependent and interrelated,” we will remember that this is particularly true for freedom of religion or belief. Forgetting this right as we try to implement others. Human dignity has a deep spiritual dimension, and we cannot hope to protect dignity fully if we forget that profound dimension. Having the opportunity to join with you for the intense hours of the last few days has enabled us to learn much, to establish ties that we hope will last, and to expand our experience of the treasure of shared striving.