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Next steps on religious freedom office

By Geoffrey Cameron

Now that we have a new minister of foreign affairs, one of the tasks ahead is the elaboration on how religious freedom will feature in Canadian foreign policy.

The commitment of the new government to advance freedom of religion, conscience and belief is a welcome development, and one that promises to build on progress made under previous governments.

In 1998, Lloyd Axworthy announced that addressing religious intolerance would be a thematic priority for DFAIT. In 2004, the Parliamentary Subcommittee on Human Rights and International Development adopted a resolution that urged the Government of Canada "to make the protection and promotion of the right to freedom of religion and belief a central element of its efforts to defend human rights internationally."

The right to believe, practice and share one's religion is a cornerstone of Canada's history and values. Religious liberty was protected as early as the Quebec Act of 1774, which upheld the rights of Roman Catholics resident in Quebec to freely practice their religion. In the Charter of Rights and Freedoms, freedom of conscience and religion is identified as the first of five fundamental freedoms.

The quest for meaning and truth is the essence of what it means to be human. We look for self-understanding, create value systems, and build our communities around these aspirations. Far from being a Western concern, freedom of conscience is a universal value that carries with it the hope of affirming human dignity and creating more just, unified and tolerant societies.

The history of religion includes great moral advances, but also many well-known failings. While the core virtue of religion is its ability to reach to the roots of human motivation, in its extreme forms it has undermined liberties and justified violence. Indeed, the goodness of religion may only be truly realized when the freedom of individual conscience is safeguarded and vigorously defended. Tolerance is needed for spirituality to flourish.

Protecting religious freedom helps to create the public space for diverse views, and it affirms the rights of minorities and atheists. Furthermore, thinking for oneself is not just a fundamental right, but a civic duty in a democratic society. A vibrant democracy relies upon citizens who enjoy freedom of conscience and an independent media that stimulates public discourse.

Canada is stronger for the value placed on religious freedom. Migration is altering the religious landscape of the country, and our dominant culture will evolve with the composition of Canadian society. At home, freedom of conscience and belief reinforces social inclusion and empowerment, and it helps to combat extremist tendencies that arise out of cultural isolation.

Religious freedom is also a value that Canada has promoted vigorously in our foreign policy. The annual Canadian-

sponsored UN human rights resolution on Iran has highlighted concerns about the treatment of Baha'is, Christians, Jews, Sufis, Sunnis and Zoroastrians. Canada has also spoken out in solidarity with oppressed Coptic Christians and Baha'is in Egypt. It is natural for Canada to identify new ways to promote religious freedom abroad.

To help build credibility for the Office for Religious Freedom proposed by Prime Minister Stephen Harper, its policy and programming frameworks would need to be developed transparently.

An interfaith advisory body could be created to provide information, resources and practical experience to the office. Regular reports from the office could be tabled before the Parliamentary Standing Committee on Foreign Affairs and International Development.

The proposal for the office also indicated that it would promote policy coherence on issues of religious freedom between DFAIT, CIDA and Citizenship and Immigration. To be effective in this regard, the office could be accorded a status similar to the Office of the Extractive Sector Corporate Social Responsibility Counsellor, which is staffed by a senior official who shares information and recommendations across government departments.

The Office for Religious Freedom will need to be headed by someone who has built trust within Canada's faith communities, is familiar with the international human rights discourse, and can be an advocate and guide for Canadian foreign policy in support of religious freedom.

This year marks the 30th anniversary of the UN declaration on religious intolerance. It is a propitious year for Canada to seize the occasion to build on our heritage to promote greater freedom and tolerance in the world and at home.

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