

The Role of Foreign Christian Organizations in Asia today (part 2)

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ABSTRACT: *The author discusses the role that Foreign Christian Organizations (FCOs) play in Asia. He begins with the global context of Christianity within which FCOs currently work. After reviewing history of FCOs in Asia, he examines the working relationships of national governments and FCOs, both in theory and in practice. He suggests, in the conclusion, that both parties must work harder to find the time and space for honest dialogue and mutual understanding. They should find ways to build enough trust in the relationship to withstand the stress of the distance that now stands between them.*

The Idea of Religious Plurality

It is not hard to see how the early Church's status as a persecuted minority shaped early Christian ideas about the separation of Church and State. While this gave way to the union of Church and State for the next 1000 years of Christendom it reemerged in the Protestant churches of the 16th century. The idea reached its fullest expression in Anabaptist churches and lives on today in the descendents of the Anabaptists and among many of the Christian minority churches around the world.

With the increased acceptance of the concept of the separation of Church and State the idea of religious plurality was almost a foregone conclusion. If the State can protect one religion then, logically, one can ask if it can't protect another one? Of course religious plurality eventually demands religious tolerance. The idea of religious tolerance in a religiously plural environment however did not evolve out of enlightened and compassionate minds. We forget that western governments and church authorities persecuted religious minorities with energy from the 11th to the 16th century. After that early Protestants were not tolerant of each other any more than they were tolerant of the Catholic Church. Religious toleration was largely forced on Europe by the devastation of religious wars. Toleration was a way of

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ending the bloodshed even while each side felt it was only a matter of time before their theological view would win the day in society at large.¹ This is important to remember when we begin to discuss the issue of church and state and religious toleration in non-western nations. Just as religious plurality and toleration did not happen overnight in the West we can expect that it will not happen overnight in the rest of the world.

FCOs often assume that the concept and rightness of the separation of church and state and religious plurality are givens. They are not only new concepts for many nations, they are almost impossible to implement right now in some places. One only needs to look at the rise of Hindu nationalism in India and Islamic nationalism in Iran to understand this. Even within the United States the extent of the separation of Church and State and toleration for religious plurality is a hotly debated topic. The general rule of thumb is that communities that emphasize the group over the individual tend to make little distinction between religious and national identity. There is a strong connection between the empowerment of the individual and the concepts of separation of Church and State and the toleration of religious plurality.²

The issue is not a black and white one. While many agree that religion should at least provide the political process with a moral compass of some kind there is serious debate as to which religious standard of morals will be used and to what extent. The reality is that all nations are and will continue to wrestle with the tension between Church and State and what degree of religious tolerance is acceptable. What we do know is that globalization is not going to disappear or be reversed and this process is empowering the individual worldwide. With the empowerment of the individual we can expect social demands for the separation of Church and State and the toleration of religious plurality.

Related to the issue of religious plurality is that issue of freedom of expression. The raising of the issue of freedom of expression takes us back to the context of our global world and the discomfort we feel as foreign religions and ideologies set up camp in our communities. Many governments find the growth of Christianity in Asia troubling and argue for limits on the freedom FCOs have to proselytize their religious faith. Law and religion scholar, John Witte says the following regarding this situation.

The problem of proselytism is one of the great ironies of the democratic revolution of the modern world... On the one hand, the modern human rights revolution has helped to catalyze a great awakening of religion around the

world... On the other hand,...the human rights revolution has brought on something of a new war for souls between indigenous and foreign religious groups... Local religious groups resent the participation in the marketplace of religious ideas that democracy inflicts. They resent the massive expansion of religious pluralism that democracy encourages. [And,] [t]hey resent the extravagant forms of religious speech, press, and assembly that democracy protects.³

Articles 18 and 19 of the *Universal Declaration of Human Rights* (1948) calls for religious freedom, including the right to convert to a new religion and “to seek, receive and impart information and ideas through any media.” This declaration notwithstanding, there have been many cases in which FCOs and local Christians have misused their freedom.⁴ FCOs are often unaware of the stress that these relatively new declarations of human rights put on nations that have long emphasized community well being over individual rights. Our dialogue regarding the extent to which an individual can exercise the right to freely express ideas and how this right may negatively impact local values in some communities would be helped if we became more aware of the different starting places from which we each approach the subject. While the tension of freedom and community responsibility will never be completely resolved we can move forward if we can agree that both are values that cannot be left behind.

Lessons for National Governments

There are at three suggestions that I would like to offer national governments from this discussion. First, it is important to realize that it is not accurate anymore to see FCOs as merely representing a western religion and western culture. The data on global Christianity shows us that Christianity is increasingly a religion of the nations of the southern hemisphere and most of these nations are developing two-thirds world nations. Increasingly, non-western Christians are playing important roles in FCOs around the world. National leaders must resist the urge to fear the political motives of FCOs. FCOs do not necessarily represent the political views and geo-political agendas of western governments. FCOs are at least as critical of western governments and their role in the nations they work in as they are supportive of them. This is because many of the personnel working for FCOs are non-western Christians themselves and because western Christian FCO staff generally view their governments through the critical lens of the Christian ethic to love their neighbor. FCOs do not come to a nation with political agendas. They come with community

and religious agendas shaped by a vision of society in which each of us is called to seek the welfare of our neighbor.

Second, while FCOs have various views on the relationship between Church and State they all live and work in the tension between the Biblical command to respect local earthly authorities and to obey the teachings of the Bible. Their instincts are to be respectful and positive contributors to society to the extent that their allegiance to Jesus allows them. Given a context of social justice, FCOs can be excellent partners with national leaders and structures in the pursuit of peace, justice and national prosperity.

Third, the ethic of Jesus which teaches Christians to seek the welfare of others will at times bring them into conflict with the representatives of oppressive social structures whether they be governments, multi-national companies, brothels, or factories that enslave child laborers. But this confrontation does not have obtaining political power as a goal. FCOs are generally very reluctant to express any political views but they have and will engage political structures that do not promote the welfare of the people they serve. In this sense FCO personnel can have a helpful seasoning effect on any society.

Fourth, the ethic of Jesus would also have Christians be sensitive and adaptive to local cultures. National governments have the right to raise the issue of contextualization with FCOs in terms of the methods FCOs use to do their work and the way in which they communicate their faith. There is obviously a need for a lot of dialogue in this area. In my experience FCO personnel do not work nearly as hard as they should to contextualize their work and their religious message. I encourage national leaders to push FCOs to adapt themselves to the local laws and cultural values of the nation. Remind them that it is the Christian thing to do.

Lessons for FCOs

I offer FCOs the following suggestions from this discussion. First, FCOs must become more self aware of their assumptions of how concepts like the separation of church and state, the toleration of religious plurality and even human rights reflect a worldview of individualism. This is a worldview that many government leaders do not share in the same way. We must become more culturally aware. Cross-cultural communication begins with increased self-awareness. This is uncomfortable and time-consuming work that must be done. When FCOs engage local government leaders they are very often speaking to people with little experience with or trust in the ideas of the separation of Church and State and tolerance of religious diversity.

We need to find a way to discuss our experience with these concepts and learn from each other. Our actions as guests in other countries should respectfully keep this difference of worldview and experience in mind.

Second, FCOs can help to stimulate discussions with local church leaders about their understanding of Church and State. We can encourage these churches to make a greater effort to engage the larger society in order for their Christian community to be understood and seen in a more positive light. We Christians should be open and clear about our intentions in the countries we serve and resist the tendency to operate independently and in isolation. All Christians should be models of showing respect and honor to national leaders and policies to the extent that our allegiance to Jesus and His ethic allow us.

Third, expatriate FCOs must be sure that their work is indeed empowering local people and making genuine and positive contributions to the nations they serve in. Too many times FCOs are content with establishing programs and roles that empower themselves within the local context and this is not lost on local government leaders. When I asked people in the nation I worked in why they thought Christians had come to work in their country they replied that it was because they needed a job. The ethic of Jesus to seek the welfare of others should critique this tendency and cause us to work in ways that build local leaders and establish local programs that are designed in partnership with local leaders. It will also seek to implement programs that have from the start a keen sense of local ownership of program activities and goals.

I asked an experienced friend who had worked for an FCO for many years what the key was to the transfer of the ownership of a program from expatriate staff to local leaders. He answered this way, "The transfer of ownership is a myth. If a program does not start with local leadership and ownership it will never be theirs." FCO personnel generally have skilled and knowledgeable people who can be of great assistance but they do their best work when they empower others to lead and guide social programs. In this global world FCO leadership will best be modeled by FCO personnel who know how to contribute by partnering in ways that result in local people leading and the FCO following. FCOs would do well to begin each program with a clear set of indicators that will let them know when their role is finished. As Hans Kung has already reminded us, we Christians are pilgrims who are not allowed to set up camp and begin establishing our own earthly kingdoms.

Fourth, the ethic of Jesus compels FCOs to do this work of translating God's message of grace and His life of service relevantly and respectfully into each cultural context. But if we are serious about serving in this way then FCO staff will continue to be good neighbors even when these neighbors reject our religious views. While we will all benefit from the effort to cultivate a world in which the free and safe exchange of ideas grows common, Christian service cannot simply be a means to the conversion of others to our religious faith. We must clearly distinguish between faithful Christian witness which should be done in ways that conjure up the image of "a guide – or even a friend – extending an invitation, or providing companionship and counsel on a journey"⁵ and proselytism.

*To "proselytize" is to proclaim one's message in a certain way, a way that is thought to threaten or insult the freedom of the hearer, and perhaps also the dignity of the proselytizer's message. Thus, "proselytism" has been defined as "evangelistic malpractice," as "counter-witness," and as an "offense against the authentic nature of religion."*⁶

Christians will always welcome any person who desires to follow the teachings of Christ but our service to the communities we work in must be free of religious strong-arming.

We must also be as good at listening as we are at sharing religious points of view. Christians stand to learn a great deal from the non-Christian religious communities that we work in. If St. Augustine was correct in teaching the Church to regard all truth as God's truth then we should eagerly listen for it in Christian as well as non-Christian voices. The Church must never be above learning from others and in this regard we would do well to remember Robert Frost's admonition statement that education "is the ability to listen to almost anything without losing your temper or your self-confidence."

Conclusion

National governments and FCOs may not always reach agreement on the issues addressed in this paper but we can move towards more effective working relationships. Both parties must work harder to find the time and space for honest dialogue and mutual understanding. We cannot fully respect one another until we more fully understand what motivates each side. Sharing these motivations will require that we find ways to build enough trust in our relationship to withstand the stress of the distance that now stands between us. I conclude with a statement from former Associate Justice Louis Brandeis who served on the United States Supreme

Court from 1916 to 1939 which he made regarding the importance of freedom of expression.

*... it is hazardous to discourage thought, hope, and imagination; that fear breeds repression; that repression breeds hate; that hate menaces stable government... the path of safety lies in the opportunity to discuss freely supposed grievances and proposed remedies[.]*⁷

Reference:

¹. Jamal Malik and Helmet Reifield. *Religious Pluralism in South Asia and Europe* (Oxford University Press, 2005), Pp. 25-30.

². See Mary Douglas' discussion of high group societies in her book, *Purity and Danger: An Analysis of Pollution and Taboo* (New York: Routledge, 1966), p. 3 and Stephen Bailey, "Contextual Conversion: An Anthropological Perspective." Robert A. Seiple, Dennis R. Hoover and Matthew J.O. Scott eds., *Evangelism and the Persecuted Church* (forthcoming from Baylor University Press, 2007).

³. Quoted in Richard Garnett, "Changing Minds: Proselytism, Religious Freedom, and the First Amendment" *Notre Dame Law School: Legal Studies Research Paper No. 05-07* (University of Notre Dame Law School, May, 2005), P. 4.

⁴. "Universal Declaration of Human Rights" adopted by General Assembly Resolution 217 A on December 10, 1948. <http://www.unhchr.ch/udhr/index.htm>. See also the "International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights," Article 19, which reads as follows: 1. Everyone shall have the right to hold opinions without interference. 2. Everyone shall have the right to freedom of expression; this right shall include freedom to seek, receive and impart information and ideas of all kinds, regardless of frontiers, either orally, in writing or in print, in the form of art, or through any other media of his choice. 3. The exercise of the rights provided for in paragraph 2 of this article carries with it special duties and responsibilities. It may therefore be subject to certain restrictions, but these shall only be such as are provided by law and are necessary: a) For respect of the rights or reputations of others; b) For the protection of national security or of public order (ordre public), or of public health or morals (http://www.unhchr.ch/html/menu3/b/a_ccpr.htm). Compare these with Articles 18 and 19 of the "Universal Declaration of Human Rights by the World's Religions" drafted by the Faculty of Religious Studies at McGill University as an alternative to the UN's "Universal Declaration on Human Rights." <http://www.worldsreligionsafter911.com/pdf/UDHRWR.pdf> (accessed August 13, 2007).

⁵. Richard Garnett, "Changing Minds: Proselytism, Religious Freedom, and the First Amendment" *Notre Dame Law School: Legal Studies Research Paper No. 05-07* (University of Notre Dame Law School, May, 2005), p. 15.

⁶. Richard Garnett, "Changing Minds: Proselytism, Religious Freedom, and the First Amendment" *Notre Dame Law School: Legal Studies Research Paper No. 05-07* (University of Notre Dame Law School, May, 2005), p. 16.

⁷. Quoted in Richard Garnett, "Changing Minds: Proselytism, Religious Freedom, and the First Amendment" *Notre Dame Law School: Legal Studies Research Paper No. 05-07* (University of Notre Dame Law School, May, 2005), p. 9.