



# Religious Liberty and Christian

*Chanchal Gayen*

We live in a world of multiple religions. Some have a large following, and some are small. Irrespective of the number of followers, all want to practice their faith without any disturbances or external interventions. Such a situation only sometimes occurs. Some countries in the world consider themselves religious states. According to Pew Research Center, 27 countries acknowledge Islam as their state religion, and 13 countries consider Christianity or a specific denomination from Christianity the state religion. Many other countries consider them secular. Their definition of secularism may vary from one another. For example, the government can get involved in religious activities in India, whereas France is not involved in any religious business. Some countries like China declare themselves atheists and expect their population not to adhere to religious

Chinese do not practice any religion. People in China contribute to several faith persuasions.

The problem occurs when people do not enjoy the freedom to practice their faith for several reasons. It may be state intervention or disruption by people from other faith persuasions. For example, in Saudi Arabia, non-Muslims are not allowed to practice their faith publicly. All, including the non-Muslims, must follow the religious instructions imposed by the state. Religious liberty is not in practice in Saudi Arabia.

Violation of religious liberty does not happen only in a few specific countries that confess a specific religion as the state religion. It is becoming a global phenomenon. According to a report in The Hindustan Times, in India alone, 3,399 communal or religious violence occurred between 2016 and 2020. A careful

examination of these events will indicate that abuses of religious liberty occur often.

Seventh-day Adventist (SDA) Church members face challenging situations in different countries. The issues vary for permission to abstain from writing examinations on a Sabbath day, working on a Sabbath, or even worshipping on Sabbath. To address the issues about religious liberty, the General Conference of SDA established a religious liberty department in 1901. Later, it was expanded worldwide through church institutions. Should the SDA church be concerned about protecting the religious liberty of its followers only or incorporate those who do not contribute to the faith of SDAs? It should include both. What qualities should one look for in a leader who promotes religious liberty? There are many. Following are a few of them to consider.

## **THE QUALITY OF ACCEPTANCE**

Love is one of the foundational themes in the Bible. In several places in the Bible, we read Jesus instructing his disciple to love each other even to the extent of loving the enemy (Mt 5:44). He identified loving the neighbour as one of the two great commandments (Mt. 22:39). This love leads to accepting not only people within the known circle of influence but beyond, people of other faiths as well. The good Samaritan parable, Jesus' interaction with the Samaritan lady by Jacob's well, etc., are examples of his acceptance of people from another faith persuasion.

The Bible teaches that humans are created in God's image, irrespective of caste, colour, or creed. Just as I am created in the image of God, so also people from other faiths, and therefore, each human being deserves dignity and love. Redd suggests, "The persistence of the image of God after the Fall meant that all humans, even the ardent atheist or the antagonistic apostate, were deserving of the dignity

and Honor of being in the image of God.

How much of that image of God is intact among humanity may be a theological debate. The fact remains that human beings are created in the image of God. The commandment of love and acknowledging that all are created in the image of God should lead to accepting anyone on the same platform and being concerned about the religious liberty of others. Because religious freedom is the fundamental freedom of any individual and a significant identity of a nation, everyone should respect the dignity of humanity. "Roland Hegstad, the Seventh-day Adventist editor of Liberty Magazine, one of the conveners of the historic congress, believes firmly that if religious freedom is put in place, the other freedoms are sure or nearly sure to follow."

Abraham worked with people of other faiths (Gen 12: 10 to 14:24). In his dedicatory prayer (1 Kings 8:41-43), Solomon prayed to the Lord to accept the prayer of the foreigners who did not belong to Israel and bless them. The incorporation of Ruth the Moabite, Rahab from Jericho, and many others exemplify Israel's acceptance. Such illustrations from the Bible are not scarce.

SDA leaders promoting religious liberty should be concerned about the SDA church members and others. People of other faith persuasions may receive acceptance from SDA leaders. Considering them as created in the image of God and obedience to the commandment of loving the neighbour are the foundations for such acceptance. Beach brings out the same thought stating, "Mrs. White enunciates an overriding principle: "Christ recognized no distinction of nationality, rank or creed... Christ came to break down every wall of partition: He came to show that His gift of mercy and love is as unconfined as the air, the light, or the showers of rain that refresh the earth."

## **THE DESIRE TO LEARN**

World Religions class was offered during the first semester of my theological studies. I used to believe that being a disciple of Christ was not essential for me to know other religions. They are all from the devil. My teacher helped me to understand that by studying other faiths, we learn about them and may learn a few good things from them. It also helps in a meaningful dialogue with people from other faith persuasions.

Years later, I developed a friendship with a Muslim brother. He had watched a repairing business not far from the University campus I was working in India. Once I went to his shop to give my watch for repairs. That was the time for his evening worship. I offered to return some other time to collect it. Another man came to ask for his urgent services and offered to pay him extra for the work. The Muslim man refused to work, stating that attending the worship was much more important than earning a few extra rupees. I learned a lesson of devotion and commitment to follow the commandment of the Lord.

Missiologists often use Paul's interaction with the Athenians (Acts 17) to illustrate cross-cultural communication. Paul successfully communicated because he was aware of Athenians' faith and practices. He quoted Cretan philosopher Epimenides and Cilician Stoic Philosopher Aratus in his speech. Comprehensive knowledge of others' faith and practice helps to understand the behavior of those people. This is significant to comprehend their claim for religious liberty and their support or objection to our demand for it. Such knowledge is helpful to engage in a meaningful dialogue with people of other faith persuasions.

## **GROUNDING IN FAITH**

People fear syncretism in interfaith learning and dialogue. Beach states, "Let us be aware that in today's syncretistic climate, the syncretistic approach to religion and interfaith relations is more dangerous than a head-on collision with atheism because the former appears to offer an attractive global dimension of faith and human relations.

In the name of contextualization or ecumenism, syncretism is a possibility. This can be prevented by being grounded in the faith. The source for the SDA church's teaching is the Bible. God has revealed some unique truths from His book to the Church. Other Christian denominations do not enjoy such privileges. On the contrary, sometimes, the SDA church is criticized for her teaching.

Years ago, Votaw reminded the church, "Seventh-day Adventists often speak of 'the truth.'" It is significant indeed that the messenger of the Lord linked religious liberty and truth together. It must have been to call particular attention to the necessity, in the closing days of the work of God, for us to have a clear understanding of the principles of religious liberty and put forth earnest endeavor to save our heritage of liberty."

Religious liberty is an integrated ministry of the SDA church. An Adventist leader in religious liberty must have a firm hold on the church teachings and the concept of religious liberty and blend them together.

## **A MAN OF PRAYER**

Working in the field of religious liberty is a challenging task. It calls for serious interaction with people of a different faith. Sometimes the interaction may turn into conflict, though not desirable. Prayer is the most

significant tool to deal with such situations. Bible carries ample such illustrations. I will mention only two.

Acts 12:1-11 records that King Herod arrested Peter to please the Jews. Jews did not appreciate the messages of the Apostles. Peter's religious liberty was in question. While Peter was spending the night in prison, the church was praying for him (Acts 12:5). The Bible tells us that a miracle happened, and the angels of the Lord released Peter from prison.

Paul and Silas were ministering in Philippi (Acts 16). While they were ministering, Paul drove out a demon from a slave girl. The owner of the girl lost his income coming through the girl. He motivated a riot in the city against Paul and Silas. As an ultimate result, the Apostles were sent to prison. Imprisoned Apostles were praying and singing to the Lord (Vs. 25), and a miracle happened.

## CONCLUSION

Religious liberty is the call of the hour. SDA church is aware of this call and established the department to address the issues related to religious liberty. It is a remarkable ministry of the church and the community. Prayerful, loving, unprejudiced, and knowledgeable leaders can make a difference in the ministry. I close with a quote from Mrs. E. G. White, "The banner of truth and religious liberty held aloft by the founders of the gospel church and by God's witnesses during the centuries that have passed since then, has, in this last conflict, been committed to our hands. The responsibility for this great gift rests with those whom God has blessed with a knowledge of His word."

## REFERENCES

[1]<https://www.pewresearch.org/religion/2017/10/03/many-countries-favor-specific-religions-officially-or-unofficially/>

[2]<https://www.hindustantimes.com/india-news/around-3-400-communal-riots-took-place-from-2016-2020-centre-101648611989880.html>

[3]<https://www.ministrymagazine.org/archive/2014/03/defending-basic-rights-a-conversation-with-public-affairs-and-religious-liberty-leaders>

[4][https://www.academia.edu/43129938/Redd\\_Earth\\_Is\\_The\\_Lords\\_A\\_Biblical\\_Theology\\_of\\_Religious\\_Liberty](https://www.academia.edu/43129938/Redd_Earth_Is_The_Lords_A_Biblical_Theology_of_Religious_Liberty), p.29)

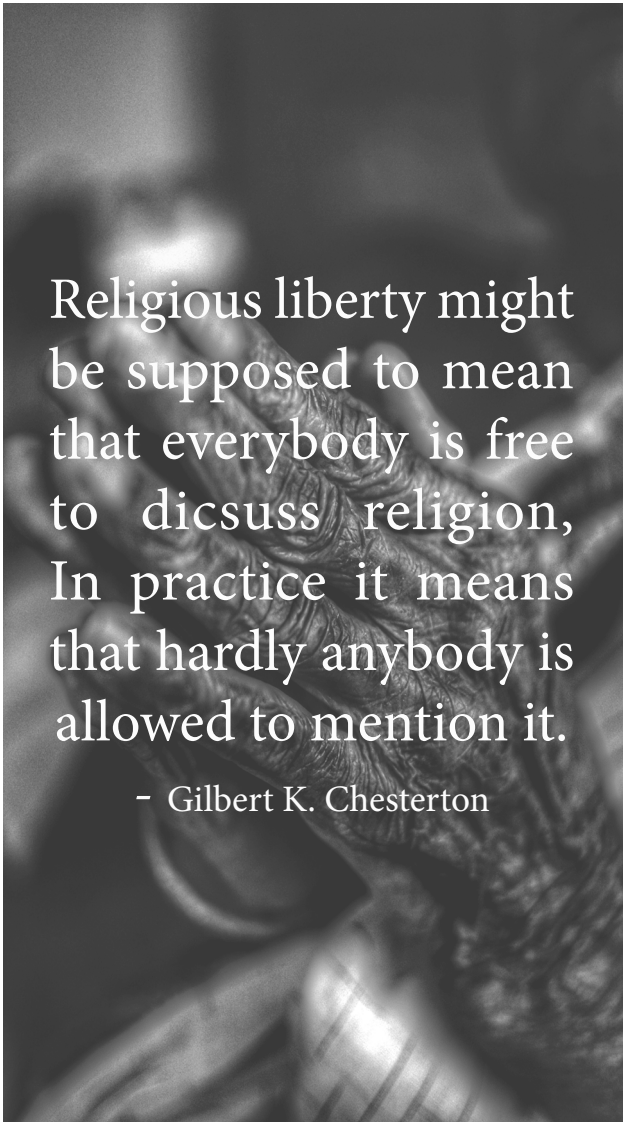
[5]<https://www.ministrymagazine.org/archive/1977/05/is-religious-freedom-the-basic-freedom-of-all-freedoms>

[6]White, Ellen. Testimonies for the Church (Nampa, Idaho' Pacific Press Pub. Assn, 1948), 9:190, (<https://www.ministrymagazine.org/archive/2002/12/evangelism-and-interfaith-relations>)

[7]Bert B. Beach. Ministry. (<https://www.ministrymagazine.org/archive/2002/12/evangelism-and-interfaith-relations>)

[8] (<https://www.ministrymagazine.org/archive/1943/11/religious-liberty-work-evangelistic>)

[9]White, E. G Gospel Workers, Page 389.



Religious liberty might be supposed to mean that everybody is free to discuss religion, In practice it means that hardly anybody is allowed to mention it.

- Gilbert K. Chesterton