

## **Individual, Community, State, and Perceptions of Human Rights and Religious Freedom.**

Robert Hunt

This paper explores Muslim and Christian perceptions of human rights and religious freedom, and the perceptions of each with regard to the beliefs of the other. The focus on perceptions is intended to ground the discussion in the concrete historical reality of Muslim-Christian relations. The focus on Muslims and Christians (as opposed to Islam and Christianity) is intended to stress the fact that human rights and religious freedom have their primary significance not as ethical ideals within a theological system, but as experiences given or withheld in concrete social relationships.

A study based on historical experiences faces the problem of their complex and varied nature. Moreover as time passes the importance of the historical experience for the community is dwarfed by the importance of traditional representations of that experience. For the average Malaysian Muslim in the 20th century scholarly accounts of the beginnings of Islam, or biographies of the prophet, may be less important in forming their view of their history than the Egyptian serials shown on television during Ramadan. This is perhaps the reason that both Christian and Muslim authors have often preferred to discuss ethical theories rather than social realities. However, generalizations about historical patterns of relationship are both possible and legitimate. This is especially true when we consider Muslim and Christian perceptions of human rights. The perceptions of a community, as opposed to an individual, are determined less by personal experiences than by a communally received tradition which is accessible to the historian or sociologist. Similarly as Muslims and Christians form groups and parties they act out their perceptions in a way which is public and which thus can be studied.

This is not to say that Christian and Muslim perceptions are guided only by historical experience. Theological ideals do play a role in determining how people order their perceptions. And these are often different for Christians and Muslims. Yet if there is one lesson which can be learned from the past decades of apologetic regarding human rights from both sides it is that under the pressure to appeal to the widest possible constituency, the ideals articulated on behalf of Islam and Christianity tend to converge. Muslim authors as diverse as Sheikh Showkat Hussain (International Islamic University, Kuala

Lumpur/ABIM), Abdul Rahman I. Doi (Ahmado Bello University, Nigeria), Abu Bakar Hamzah (Al-Arqam, Malaysia), and Fatima Mernissi (University Muhammed V, Morocco) all use the United Nations Charter on Human Rights in their writings as the touchstone with which to compare their understandings of human rights in Islam. Christian groups as diverse as the Methodist Board of Global Ministry and the Christian Federation of Malaysia appeal to the U.N. Charter as a standard of legitimate political demands. One senses that a global ideal has already almost emerged. The sincerity of individual assertions of this ideal can scarcely be tested. Thus it is perhaps better to accept that in an ideal world our perceptions of human rights, and of each other, might very well be different than they are now. Until that world arrives it is more useful to focus on the more significant social and historical roots of our self-understanding; roots which reveal the origins of conflicting views between Christians and Muslims.

## I. Individual, Community, and State in Christianity and Islam

### A. Freedom and the Community and Individual

Central to the divergence of self-understanding are different ideas about what constitutes a free community, for it is within community and society that words like "religion" and "freedom" have their meaning. Muslims have generally asserted that the individual has freedom only in a free community, and that such a community is free when it exists within a society untainted by idolatry, the temptations to violate God's law, or forces which divide the ummah. Traditions familiar to Southeast Asian Muslims tell how Islam was born in an urban and heterogeneous religious society where each individual, family, and tribe had its own gods and where violence between them was rife. Muhammed experienced first hand the violence directed against his personal quest for God. The assertion of ego linked with divine sanction which was the core of Arab tribal and personal religion could not tolerate Muhammed's humbling of the human ego before God or his dismissal of its divine sanction as a fraud. The traditional biographies of the prophet Muhammed tell how he and his followers had to first flee from, then fight against, his kinsmen and other Arab tribes just to win the freedom to pursue Islam without interference. As individuals they could not survive the demand for loyalty to tribal gods. But as yet another tribe they were inevitably caught up in the continual tribal rivalries and warfare. The freedom for authentic religion could come about

only when the clamor of bloodthirsty gods was brought to heel under the supreme reality of the one God. Muhammed and his followers found it necessary to be something more than just another tribe. Thus after years of first oppression then exile to Medina they returned to their homes to purify the social environment of Mekka from idolatry and created a sacred zone in which God's law would be paramount. Shortly after the Prophet's death the variant readings of the Quran, with their potential to divide, were suppressed. Whether in Mekka or Medina Muslim tradition has it that the faithful enjoyed the flower of freedom in a religious environment where Arabs were united, only one God was worshipped, and Muhammed or his companions were masters of society. The golden age of the rightly guided caliphs is idealized as one of religious purity, moral purity, and unity of the ummah.

One sees these ideals, and their association with the Holy Land, at work today. When I ask a young, middle class, professional couple in Kuala Lumpur to describe the significance of the hajj they answered. "Only in Mekka can we really feel free as Muslims. For there is nothing which is haram, no idols, and everyone has a common purpose. There we are at home. Here, as Muslims, we are strangers in our own country." The same sentiments were expressed to me as I was writing this paper by a different family from a similar background who had just returned from performing the umrah. Both of these families regard themselves as religiously and politically liberal, and condemn those whom they regard as "fundamentalists." Yet their attachment to the idea that freedom is best found and expressed in the *dar al-Islam* is deep.

The Christian community has a substantially different understanding of freedom in relation to the religious community. Christian tradition, as embodied in the New Testament epistles, puts a strong emphasis on the individual as both the object of God's love and the subject of true faith. The earliest Christians found in Christ personal freedom from what had become an oppressive tradition, as well as the community--usually a village with a conservative religious hierarchy--in which it was realized. It is small wonder that these first Christians made their way to cities where there was greater freedom from social constraint, and that the second generation was an almost entirely urban phenomenon. In the urban setting Christians gathered in communities which gave both tangible and spiritual support to the individual believer who may have lost that support when he or she left the Jewish community or family. But they found their freedom in relation to society in the relative anonymity of these communities amidst a diverse urban society, not in co-opting or overpowering that society. The story of early Christianity is full of

pleadings for unity, but not of organized compulsion to a single belief system, community structure, or lifestyle. This situation would change when some 300 years later Christianity became identified with the Roman State. In the intervening years an enduring tradition of seeking unity in the Spirit for the support of individual commitment and calling emerged.

While both Islam and Christianity have moved through phases of greater or lesser emphasis on individual conscience their most basic memory of the relation between authentic faith, individual freedom, and social solidarity, differs substantially.

## **B. Freedom and the State**

A second difference rooted in the earliest traditions of both communities relates to the relationship between the state, public religion, and private faith. Christianity grew up at the height of the power of the imperial Roman government. This insured a degree of social stability, and freedom within that stable society, which was in marked contrast to the internal bloodletting of the previous 300 years of Jewish history. However, the Roman state drew a sharp distinction between public religion (*religio*) and private belief (*pietas*). Freedom of the latter was allowed, and various forms flourished in the world of the first Christians. But this was strictly within the confines of conformity to the public religion of the state, something which was inseparable in the Roman mind from the actual power of the state in the midst of the populous. The worship of Roma and the Divinus Julius was in those times the mark of loyalty to the official state ideology, and to the Roman governors was an indispensable ritual of public support. Here Christians found themselves in a dilemma. They could not accept the distinction between *religio* and *pietas*. Out of their Jewish roots they knew the danger of national gods as competitors for loyalty with the one true God. While they could be loyal to Rome in a way, they could not worship the state, or the spirit or ideology of the state, as a god. This inevitably meant that they experienced the power of the Roman state as persecutor of the faithful, since it could not accept their resistance to making public declarations of faith to the state ideology.

The lessons of those first centuries of Christianity were sometimes forgotten, but not lost, when state power came to side with Christianity after Constantine. The first martyrs of the Reformation certainly understood themselves as treading the paths of others who had stood firm in the faith against the power of state religion. Although the Enlightenment would succeed in wedging apart public truth from private faith it could not shatter either the

deep conviction that private faith and public religion were one, and that the coercive power of the state was a danger to both if a danger to either. Thus modern Christians who stand in the inheritance of both Reformation and Enlightenment insist that authentic religion cannot be restricted to the realm of private faith, and neither can it be controlled by the state.

When we look at the development of Islam we see something rather different. Mekka knew no state religion, and indeed was not properly a "state" in any modern sense of the word. Instead a welter of gods were available for public worship in what amounted to a mutually agreed "free worship zone". If anything was demanded in Mekkan society it was conformity to the respect for this plurality of gods and tribes. But this, as Muhammed well knew, resulted in the perpetual weakness of the Arabs as well as their near continual tribal conflicts. A society of many gods was a society of many wars. With this knowledge before him it was perhaps inevitable that Muhammed would achieve Arab unity through the destruction of religious polyandry. At the same time he never understood the revelation he received or the religion he preached to be mere private piety. Islam and the Islamic political polity were thus created simultaneously. If later the states under Muslim control failed to conform to even the minimum standards of public law and private piety it did not cause Muslim scholars to question the necessity of the union between political power and religion. Instead it forced them to retreat into ever more idealized views of social and political relations.

The necessity of a strong state for Muslims was only reinforced by the Crusades. Under threat from Christian Europe Muslims found that strong, if often corrupt, rulers were the only protection against the ravages of the then state-religion, Christianity. The subsequent position of Muslims as colonized and of Christians as colonizers only served to reinforce the idea, expressed in Islamic nationalist movements, that authentic religion can be achieved for Muslims only in the context of a Muslim state. The deep fear of anarchy and pluralism as the main enemies of authentic religion has only been strengthened by the Muslim experience of modernity. The terror of its chaotic inner cities, both in the West and littered across its former colonies, seems to erupt in the frenzied disenchantment of the youths who emerge as terrorists from the depths of the city, and the chaos of Western weapons of war brought to bear upon Muslim populations.

When the U.S. military promised to bomb Baghdad back to the stone ages Muslims world-wide knew exactly what this meant. It meant a commitment by

the West to send a Muslim country and civilization back to the time of the *jahillia*, the bitter violent pre-Islamic past in which the Arabs had no civilization, no government, and no peace. Since this action was in support of (if also against) political regimes known for their suppression of Muslim dissenters it was justifiably seen as the ultimate attack on Muslim religious freedom. Coming on the heels of the French backed overthrow of the democratically elected government in Algeria the Muslim world saw clearly that the (presumed to be) Christian West had no love for freedom.

## II. The Colonial Experience

### A. Indonesia

The first direct Muslim experience of Christianity in Southeast Asia came with the arrival of the Portuguese, who sought both trade monopolies and the extension of their long-standing battles against Muslims for religious hegemony. In carrying out these objectives the Portuguese convinced Muslims that Christianity stood for the suppression of the relatively free religious environment in which they had co-existed with Hindus and Buddhists for generations, and in the relatively free flow of trade throughout the archipelago which formed the basis of island S.E. Asia's economy. A practical consequence of Portuguese, and then Dutch, efforts to monopolize trade was that Arab and Gujarati Muslim traders became concentrated in the dwindling number of free ports. Their political influence, and with it religious influence, increased as they came to be allies against the Portuguese and Dutch monopolists. As these Islamicized entrepôt kingdoms became centers of resistance to European colonialism, Islam itself became a symbol of freedom and a rallying flag for those determined to resist the Europeans. Moreover, this Islam was (despite exceptional moments such as the condemnation of the works of Hamzah Fansuri in Aceh and the later Padri wars) relatively open to Hindu, Buddhist, and Animist influences. In particular the local rulers were able to incorporate the panoply of traditional spiritual authorities they had accrued into an Islamic system which also gave them an elevated spiritual status. Thus from the standpoint of small time island traders, and political leaders, Islam was at first synonymous with freedom, both of trade and religion. This did not change markedly even when Muslim rulers began insisting that their allies embrace the faith, since the new faith did not demand that they abandon the spiritual roots of their traditional authority. For an Indonesian raja to become a Muslim sultan meant acquiring spiritual power and political allies at no cost to his authority

with the populous. And the populous itself could embrace a mystical and syncretistic Islam without abandoning their traditional religious practices. For a ruler to submit to Christianity meant abandoning his trade rights, renouncing the spiritual basis of his authority over the people, and submitting to the rule of both local Christian officials and the Pope in Rome.

This perception was only slightly altered by the advent, and then dominance, of Dutch colonialism. The Dutch tried to establish trade monopolies. These monopolies directly undercut the economic basis of the authority of the local rulers, and indirectly undermined and in some places virtually destroyed the fabric of social relations. This could not help but create antagonism towards the Dutch by both religious and political leaders, particularly when they were one and the same. And as the Dutch destroyed existing political structures and their underlying relationships they paved the way for new leaders and new basis for political loyalty. That these were Islamic is no surprise. Nor is it surprising that the Dutch, afraid of these rivals, should be drawn into the direct suppression of an increasingly self-conscious Islamic movements. The drawn out wars against Aceh, and the Padri wars of the late 19th century, are simply the two most outstanding examples of a widespread phenomenon of Dutch efforts to suppress politically dangerous movements associated with Islam.

It was in the aftermath of these costly wars that the Dutch authorities engaged Snouk Hurgronje to both study the situation in the Netherlands East Indies, and Sumatra in particular, to help formulate a new policy in relation to Islamic movements. Hurgronje's work is sufficiently familiar that it doesn't need review here. Its significance for Muslim perceptions of Christians and religious freedom was in the policy changes which followed. Hurgronje drew attention to the link between Islamic revivalism and incipient nationalist movements, and the tension between Islamic revivalism and customary law and authority structures. This resulted in a policy which intentionally suppressed or marginalized Islamic leaders involved in reform while strengthening more malleable traditional social leaders and the less threatening *adat* of which they were guardians. Discouraging Indonesians from making their pilgrimage to Mekka was only the most visible way in which the Dutch suppressed forms of religious freedom of Muslims which it was feared would strengthen nationalist sentiments. In the same late 19th century and early 20th century period there was a dramatic upsurge in Christian missions, with the coming of German missions, Christian Missionary Alliance, and later American Methodists. After Hurgronje the Dutch policy, previously neutral or even antagonistic to

missionary activity, became increasingly (if not always) pro-Christian.

In the environment created by these Dutch policies the first indigenous political movements targeted at independence emerged. Many of these were motivated by a desire to reform Islam among its adherents and give it the place in shaping society which was assumed to be its right as the dominant religion of the emerging nation. In the actual process of independence the aims of Muslim political organizations were sometimes compromised for the sake of political unity in a very diverse religious context. At other times they were simply smothered by more powerful political forces. As a result, as Nieuwenhuijze notes, the term *kemerdekaan agama* meant, to the average Indonesian Muslim in the 1950's,

“freedom for religion; -that is for Islam. To what purpose? To achieve in Indonesia what it should do according to the orthodox tradition and what thus far it failed to achieve: the Muslim community in the full, Islamic sense of the word.” (Nieuwenhuijze, p. 82, 1958)

Here we find a coming together of the key problems in a Muslim understanding of freedom of religion, one historical and the other theological. Out of both theology and history Indonesian, and Malaysian, Muslims have understood “religious freedom” to mean freedom for religion (Islam) to be fulfilled in society and for the state to find its perfection in that fulfillment. Christians, influenced by Enlightenment ideals, have tended to see “religious freedom” to mean freedom from state interference in religious belief, practice, and anything related to these, with freedom for Christians to fully engage in the transformation of the state toward Christian ideals. Thus, those things which Christians expect in the name of religious freedom (from the separation of state and religious interests to the right to evangelize) are precisely the things which many Muslims regard as an attack on the freedom of an Islamic state to establish Islam.

## B. Malaysia

The colonial experience in Malaysia diverged from that of Indonesia after 1800 and the firm establishment of a British presence in Penang, Singapore, Melaka, and eventually the Federated Malay States. British policy in general did not insist on trade monopolies and supported the power of traditional rulers, including their role as Islamic leaders, that is until they could gradually be displaced by British administrative structures. In contrast to Indonesian ports

Singapore in the 19th century was a center of both pilgrim traffic and Muslim religious teaching. The British were, however, concerned about the rise of nationalist movements or forms of Muslim extremism. With the advantage of Dutch experience and Hurgronje's insights they were able to use the Malay sultans, in both their passivity and their traditional role as religious heads of the Muslim community, to quell such movements indirectly. What was more important in forming Malay attitudes toward religious freedom in a colonial context was the continual erosion of the social and religious solidarity of the Malays as Muslims with urbanization and the influx of non-Muslim immigrants. The British did not allow Muslim sentiments, or Malay *adat*, to hinder efficient administration and economic exploitation of the peninsula. The crisis which these changes created, in tandem with the Malay recognition that these changes existed in various forms throughout the Muslim world, gave rise to sustained debate and a blossoming of Islamic reform and political movements in the early 20th century. These movements often disagreed on exactly how Islam would be reformed. They were agreed that colonialism would have to end and an independent society, an Islamic society, would have to be formed for Islam to reach its potential in Malaysia. Such sentiments were strengthened after W.W.II and the British proposal for a Malayan Union. In fact the Malay political parties were sufficiently adamant on this point that in the delicate negotiations between the British and various political parties it was finally agreed that Islam be the official religion of Malaya, even though only half its population was Muslim at the time.

The post-war history of Malaysian independence impressed two things on the Malay Muslims. The first was the need for political unity. It was precisely that unity which allowed Malay political parties to scuttle the Malayan Union plan and insist on a plan of Federation which would give Malays greater political influence. The difficulty of obtaining a firmer basis for Islam in the new state, in the face of non-Muslim and British opposition, also made it clear how precarious Malay Muslim interests could be in the political balance of the new Federation. The freedom to realize Malay ambitions, including ambitions for a greater role for Islam in society, could come only with Malay political dominance. Secondly, it was clear that Malay political unity could be achieved most readily by appealing to the symbolic unifying power of Islam, and the desire of many if not most Muslims to see its tenants realized in society. Some program of “Islamization” would be crucial to the political future of both major Malay parties. The relation between political power for Malay interests and Islamization was clear. One could not be maintained without the other being



advanced. As long as Malays perceive that their religious freedom, meaning their freedom to pursue Islamic aims, is linked with their political dominance then the issue is not whether to have Islamization, but rather how to define it.

### III. The Christian Experience of Freedom in Southeast Asia

If the Christian experience of colonialism had been the mirror of the Muslim experience then the issue between Christians and Muslims might be clearer. But in fact just as colonialism did not always suppress Islam, so it did not always encourage or give full latitude to Christians pursuing their own religious aims. These aims, however, were different from those of Muslims. First, Christians in Indonesia and Malaysia, being part of a newly forming community, were not initially in search of internal reform in the face of modernity, and thus did not feel the impact of western culture so immediately as a threat to their religious life. Secondly, after the beginning of the 19th century Christian missionaries in both Indonesia and Malaysia felt they had full rights to insist on shaping colonial society according to Christian values, since the colonizing countries were officially Christian. When they did not enjoy these rights, or when they failed in their goals, they saw it as a failure of proper colonial administration, not a failure of the entire social contract. Thirdly, and most importantly, the key concern of Christians was missionary outreach and evangelism rather than internal reform and solidarity. Thus, the freedom which they most sought was freedom to evangelize, win converts, and then live without fear of recrimination from the non-Christian communities which surrounded them. Colonial authorities in both British Malaya and Dutch Indonesia were reluctant to grant this freedom. They knew that Muslims were sensitive to the activities of Christian missionaries and evangelists, and preferred the religious status quo to the potential for conflict in a large evangelistic movement among Muslims. Thus despite the appearance of having a favoured status many Christians felt constrained even under a nominally Christian colonial government, and traced that constraint directly to Muslim sensitivities. For them religious freedom would mean the kind of freedom they were told was characteristic of independent nations in the West.

With the coming of independence the experience of Christian communities in Indonesia and Malaysia diverged in important respects. In Indonesia the process by which Christians, non-Muslims, and "liberal" Muslims participated in the political process which led from the Jakarta Charter to Pancasila was and is public. It represented the beginning of a political order which for all its

shortcomings has kept discussions of religious freedom in a religiously plural society a matter of public discourse. That discourse takes place in a generally shared commitment to nationalism, and in an environment in which many Muslims are as committed to a religiously open state as are non-Muslims. In Indonesia it is not, as far as this author knows, considered unpatriotic or an offense to the state to support Pancasila over against the Jakarta Charter. On the other hand Islamic movements in Indonesia are not as controlled an element of Indonesian life as they are in Malaysia. Movements as large as the Nahdatul Ulama and Muhammadiyah have great influence but no clear political agenda in relation to human rights and religious freedom. In such an atmosphere concerns over human rights and religious freedom seem to be more focused on the idiosyncratic way in which laws are applied, unpredictable local administration, and on the uncertainty of the future in the face of a politically significant and unpredictable Islamic resurgence.

The Christian experience in Malaysia is different. Christian leaders were not prominent in the events leading to independence. Moreover they came from ethnic groups which were reluctant to embrace the initial Malayan Federation plan since it would have disenfranchised large parts of their constituency. Even when these issues were resolved and the Alliance of UMNO, the Malayan Chinese Association, and Malayan Indian Congress was formed, in the actual process of writing the constitution the work of Christians to influence the Reid Commission with regard to religious freedom was kept secret. Moreover it was conducted with British representatives rather than local political leaders. When this intervention failed to secure what Christians wanted local religious leaders did not make public their dissatisfaction or participate in public debate on the issue for fear of antagonizing the Malays. The aftermath of the 1969 riots a decade later confirmed that Malay/Muslim sensitivities would be the controlling factor in limiting not just evangelistic outreach, but all public discourse on religious freedom.

The rise of Muhammed Mahathir as a political leader, and his Islamization policies, caught the Christian community (at least in West Malaysia) in an unusually exposed position. Because of increasing social divisions, and a lack of command of the national language (and with it a lack of willingness to follow the Malay press) many members of the Christian community felt out of touch with developments within the Malay Muslim community. This coincided with new rules and policies which made it difficult to obtain land for church buildings and grave sites, limited Christian activities in nominally Christian schools, and in a variety of other ways seemed to

specifically restrict Christian activities. And these changes have taken place concurrently with the New Economic Policy, under which Christians felt a constriction of economic and educational possibilities because they belonged to non-Malay ethnic groups. Christians have thus felt a general erosion of their freedoms and place in society, but have difficulty in distinguishing the role being played by Islamization in relation to other factors. Thus, for example, when Christians cannot acquire or convert a piece of property it is never clear whether it is because a government officer is inefficient, corrupt, has personal religious prejudices against Christians, is carrying out a politically motivated plan to appease local officials, or is carrying out a national policy of Islamization. Adding to this confusion is the fact that the government has never made precisely clear the implications of Islamization for the specific religious freedoms asked by Christians. Thus there exists in Malaysia the odd contrast of massive Christian street parades being possible in the Federal capital, while a church of only two or three dozen members cannot get a permit to meet privately for Sunday worship in an isolated shophouse. Whatever "Islamization" actually means to the Mahathir administration the practical effect of his government has been an emphasis on economic goals, greatly strengthened executive power, and a search for unified Malay/Muslim political support of his vision of Malaysia as a developed country. None of these particularly favor religious freedom of the kind which Christians seek, but neither do they necessarily threaten it.

#### IV. Summary

The common history of Muslims and Christians in Southeast Asia has not necessarily led to a common understanding of the political processes and social structures necessary to guarantee religious freedom. Muslims, although they are politically dominant in Indonesia and Malaysia, still feel that the integrity of their religious and social life is deeply challenged by modernity, especially when it takes the form of the omnipresent coercive power of a Western electronic media which includes televangelists' appeals right alongside liquor and underwear commercials. In many ways they are still seeking freedom from these forces while they find a new sense of community and identity congruent with the modern urban experience. Most Christians, conversely, feel that they have wrestled with and overcome the problems of modernity. They are ready to embark on God's mission of evangelism and social reform, and resent restrictions on what is clearly a divinely ordained task. Yet at the same time

they are acutely aware of the coercive force of state-sponsored Islam, and seek protection of their family and community solidarity in the face of it.

In some ways the DAWN program of the churches in Malaysia well represents the conflict of perceptions between Muslims and Christians. In "Discipling a Whole Nation" many Christians feel that they are forging ahead into a new era of world evangelism and mission after a long period of being dominated by theological liberalism and spiritual indifference. They want the religious freedom to express this newfound commitment to the Gospel. Yet they face, in addition to any laws specifically forbidding evangelization among Muslims, land acquisition and use laws which severely limit access to any type of property for non-Muslim religious purposes, restrictions on printing, publishing, and distribution of Christian materials, and on holding public meetings and rallies. Looked at from the Muslim perspective this internationally organized program, specifically aimed at making "Christian" nations, can scarcely be seen as anything other than an extension of a long pattern of Western religious imperialism, this time carried out by local proxies.

#### V. Prospects

For both Indonesians and Malaysians the colonial experience most clearly demonstrated that the practical basis of human rights and religious freedom was political power. When they did not have political power they effectively found that they had no rights. Unfortunately the distortion of the political process, especially through the state control of the mass media, hides the truth about political sentiment from the public and creates fears that if the majority were really allowed a free voice and free hand things might be much worse. In this environment Christians perceive their human rights and religious freedoms to be eroding, yet often feel powerless to challenge the situation for fear that something much worse might arise.

In this author's view the only way to gain the courage to risk engaging openly in an open political process is to overcome the fears created by a distorted political environment with knowledge and new relationships. The past is an excellent place to learn why we have become what we have become. It is a poor place to discover what we may come to be. If fear binds us to negative perceptions of our neighbors' commitment to human rights and our religious freedom, and makes us suspicious of trusting democratic political processes, then no law or constitutional guarantees can help us. Only when we feel that we as Christians can understand and respect how our Muslim neighbors think

and feel will we be comfortable with them as partners in a democratic society. And conversely only when we put aside the defense of our own rights to demonstrate our commitment to allow democracy to be the vehicle for fulfilling Muslim aspirations can we expect that our own commitment to human rights will be honored.

Christians need to realize and fully articulate the reality that a commitment to freedom of religious belief and conscience is not the equivalent to a distinction between religion as a private matter and social contracts as a public matter. To the contrary, Christians insist on freedom from state control precisely so that they can fully engage in the transformation of the state towards God's ideal as free full partners a democratic social contract. For Christians the right and obligation to enter into public debate on government policy is an infinitely more precious freedom than the ability to acquire property for church buildings. At the same time it seems from reading modern Muslim writers that there are Muslims who understand that precisely this freedom to engage in the transformation of the state as free members of a democratic society should not be sacrificed for the sake of state financed mosques and the state enforcement of exoteric piety. The challenge is to join with these Muslims to show that Islam flowers most freely when it is not bound by the coercive power of any state, including an Islamic state. And should it be that in our own time Islam continues to be regarded, in distinction from Christianity, as a political ideology, then Christians will need to master the presuppositions and language of Islamic political ideology so that they can engage, with these Muslims, in the political processes which lead to change. The fundamental human right in relation to any state is the right of every citizen to fully participate in the political process. But that right, regardless of any constitutional guarantees, exists only when it is exercised.

In both Indonesia and Malaysia groups of Christians continue to take the time and energy to be politically and socially engaged with Muslim leaders despite frequent frustration with the results of this engagement. And there are signs that government leaders, and important Muslim groups, are recognizing the value of consultative processes even when dealing with minority groups which do not have obvious political significance. If differing experiences, as much as revelations, have given differing perceptions of the relationship between piety, authentic religion, and the power of the state, then perhaps facing together a common experience of building a prosperous free society in a hostile and exploitative international environment might begin to create an atmosphere in which Christians and Muslims learn that their common commitment to freedom is sufficient reason to jointly contribute to the political process of nation-building.

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