

MISSIONS: A HUMAN RIGHT OR AN INFRINGEMENT OF HUMAN RIGHTS?

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The group of Shelter Now workers in Afghanistan imprisoned by the Taliban for some months have been accused of missionary activity. As a matter of fact, they would probably not have been able to stay in the country so long if they had really been evangelising, but under the Moslem Taliban the simple fact that someone is a known Christian automatically means that he is evangelising and thus deserves the death penalty.

Just as frightening is the partiality of the media. Let's just assume that we could prove that these people were indeed distributing Christian literature to people who owed them their lives. The media would denounce them! And the major churches would also be incensed – as their lack of support for the Shelter Now aid workers clearly shows.

But let us assume that the accused were not evangelical aid workers, but members of Green Peace, who were pointing out – in an exceptional local project – environmental problems. What if journalists were threatened because they were looking at things that the Taliban wanted to hide. Both could be assured of media support, and the media would be appealing vehemently to their human rights.

Missions is a human right with two justifications. For one, it is derived from the right to freedom of opinion and the right to free expression of that opinion, as guaranteed by the German Constitution and the 1948 General Declaration of Human Rights of the United Nations missions is nothing more than an expression of opinion and of public religious practice. Religious groups have the same civil right as political parties, conservation movements, advertisement and the media to present their view of things and to persuade others of their ideas.

In German law and in universal human rights standards, peaceful missionary activity is part of religious liberty. The attorney Gabriele Martina Liegmann suggests this definition: "The religious liberty of confession concerns primarily the categories of speech and proclamation of the contents of one's faith, and thus assures the right to express the individual's religious beliefs in public. ... The liberty of confession includes the right to evangelise, including advertisement for one's own faith and the proselytising of others from other faiths."¹

¹Gabriele Martina Liegmann. *Eingriffe in die Religionsfreiheit als asylverhebeliche Rechtsgutverletzung religiös Verfolgter*. Nomos: Baden-Baden, 1993. p. 99

Article 7, Paragraph d of the “Declaration on the Elimination of All Forms of Intolerance and of Discrimination Based on Religion or Belief”² states that religious liberty includes the right to compose, to publish and to distribute literature. Why are childrens Bibles, which the Taliban consider proof of missionary activity, an exception? And, by the way, the Bibles the Afghan government showed on television were in English – which are completely useless for evangelisation in Afghanistan!

Changing one’s religion, the goal of missions, also belongs to the inalienable human rights. Article 18 of the General Declaration of Human Rights of the United Nations of 1948 guarantees: "Everyone has the right to freedom of thought, conscience and religion; this right includes freedom to change his religion or belief, and freedom, either alone or in community with others and in public or private, to manifest his religion or belief in teaching, practice, worship and observance."

The freedom to practice one’s faith does not only mean prayer in the closet, but the public proclamation and promulgation one’s beliefs. Religious liberty is not only a ‘negative’ right limited to forbidding forceful coercion to confession of a religion or membership in a religious group or a world view. It is a ‘positive’ right, as our constitutional literature emphasises, a right based on the religious neutrality of the state, who is to preserve the right of its citizens to assert their religious and philosophical views in public life as much as possible. The secular state is thus neutral but not indifferent to religious matters, as Paul Mikat, using a comment by former judge of the German Federal Constitutional Court, Roman Herzog: “The fundamental right to religious liberty respects man’s need for the orientation of a world view. From this idea, Herzog derived the significant conclusion that the legal recognition of man’s need for religious and philosophical orientation prevents a free democratic state from being indifferent or opposed to churches and religious groups, for their most important function is to satisfy these basic anthropological needs as essentials. Note that this ‘positive’ religious liberty is not only valid in an individual sense, but also in a corporate sense – for religious groups and their public possibilities – as the corresponding decisions of the Federal Supreme Court demonstrate. Religious liberty is the right to public proclamation, to social activities and to unobstructed missions.”³

Of course, missionaries may not use force. In Afganistan, however, it where not Shelter Now who where using coercion but the Taliban, which forces its brand of Islam on hundred of thousands of Moslems.

Now, if we want to be consistent, anyone opposed to Christian missions must also forbid all Christian worship, as some Islamic states do, for all worship services are an invitation to accept the grace of God. Opponents of evangelisation should object to Christian child raising and youth work – as the Communists in Russia knew too well.

I acknowledge that missions have been misued to legitimise violence and suppression. Both Christians and Moslems have been guilty of crusades and of colonialism, but the problem in these cases is not the public proclamation of faith but the suppression of human rights. The issue is coercion, not missions.

Certainly, Christians should be considerate of the customs and local conditions of the countries they visit, but it is equally important not to feel guilty, when we invite people to find

²G. A. Res 36/55, 36 U. N. GAOR Supp. (No. 51) at 171, U. N. Doc. A/36/684 (1981), www1.umn.edu/humanrts/instate/d4deidrb.htm (26.11.2001), German version: Menschenrechte: Dokumente und Deklarationen. Bundeszentrale für politische Bildung: Bonn, 1999³. pp. 126-130

³Gottfried Küenzlen. "Pluralismus, Toleranz und Wahrheit: Der liberale Verfassungsstaat und die 'Sekten'". Materialdienst (der EZW) 63 (2000) 2: 35-46, p. 37

peace with God. When this human right is trampled on, other human rights will soon suffer, as well.