

A Sermon for Religious Liberty Sabbath January 18, 2020

By Ganoune Diop, PhD

Director, Public Affairs and Religious Liberty, General Conference of Seventh-day Adventists
Secretary General, International Religious Liberty Association

Please feel free to use or adapt this sermon for Religious Liberty Sabbath, with appropriate acknowledgement to Dr. Diop and PARL.

Champions of Freedom and Love

This sermon is grounded on two premises. First, the whole Christian faith is predicated or based upon the principle of freedom. The second principle is that Jesus Christ is the model to imitate in everything. A reading of Galatians five reveals to us that the Apostle Paul specified what is core to the Christian faith. He said, and I quote Galatians 5:1, "It was for freedom that Christ set us free." So then, the whole Christian faith is based upon this idea of freedom, of being set free for freedom.

In the Old Testament, in the book of Exodus, we see the God of freedom articulating the 10 commandments, beginning with the idea that he is a God of liberation. And in the New Covenant we see clearly that all aspects of Jesus' ministry are based upon the idea of freedom. Luke chapter four verse 18, Jesus said, "The spirit of the Lord is upon me because he anointed me to preach the gospel to the poor. He has sent me to proclaim release to the captives and recovery of sight to the blind to set free those who are oppressed to proclaim the favorable year of the Lord."

Now this same Jesus further connected true freedom with his own act of deliverance. He said, and I quote John 8:36, "If the Son makes you free you will be free indeed." And this goes to our second principle--that in whatever we do we are imitators of Jesus Christ. So, if religious liberty is important at all it must be because it is important to God.

Now, certainly religious liberty is part of the fundamental freedoms which have gained consensus status in international law and many other settings. However, today in our world there are profound misunderstandings and even confusion regarding what religious liberty really is.

A wide variety of misunderstandings about religious liberty in every country. Some even think that religious freedom means bigotry or anti-LGBTIQ sentiment—that it is really only a justification used by some to discriminate against others who do not embrace their view. But in reality, for us as Seventh-day Adventists, religious liberty is one of the most important gifts entrusted to human beings. In fact, it is one of the best antidotes against dehumanizing others. Religious freedom means not only tolerance, but it means respecting others who believe differently and respecting this dignity of difference. For we are called to respect others, even while disagreeing with their beliefs or worldviews. This is not just tolerance or, at the opposite end of the spectrum, an openness to embracing everybody else's view. It is respecting people in their humanity.

So what is religious liberty? Let me make some brief statements and then expand on them. Religious liberty is a political principle and often a national constitutional provision. It is an international human right actually inscribed in the universal declaration of human rights. Next, religious liberty is actually for us a divine gift which is a prerequisite for all human fellowship and love. Finally, and I want to emphasize this one, religious freedom is actually a divine attribute of God's absolute sovereignty.

Now, unpacking these statements I can say the following. Most certainly religious freedom is a political principle, a legal international provision recognized as article 18 of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights. This article 18 states, and I quote, "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." So, religious freedom is also found as a legal provision in most national constitutions.

So to summarize what this freedom really is: religious freedom is in practice the freedom to profess, to practice, to propagate or promote to one's beliefs, to pass them onto one's children or those entrusted to one's care without of course violating their dignity. So religious freedom or freedom of religion or belief is also freedom from being harmed, freedom from being hurt or injured. One can only genuinely adopt this freedom when one renounces and denounces violence all together for what it does. Because violence violates the integrity of a human being. I'm talking about physical integrity, emotional integrity, intellectual integrity, social and spiritual integrity. Freedom of religion is actually freedom from imposing on other's faith. It is freedom from coercion, from manipulation, from force or deception.

For Seventh-day Adventists, a faith-based organization, our understanding of religious freedom goes even beyond a sociopolitical phenomenon. For us, our understanding of religious freedom is based on our understanding of creation and in particular creation in the image of God. Being created in the image of God actually simply means that human beings are children of God and this is clearly stated in Genesis chapter five verses one to three. Here we are told that Adam and Eve had the son Seth in their own image according to their likeness meaning Seth was actually their son. Human beings, all of us, were created for the purpose of having everlasting fellowship with God in all freedom and love.

Religious freedom then is the gift of God for the purpose of love to flourish. Without this freedom love is impossible because love cannot be forced. For we human beings are not only children of God—which is very important—but, according to the same reality of being created in the image of God, human beings are actually temples of God, temples of the Holy Spirit, in the words of the Apostle Paul. Now, this in turn means that human beings are sacred, more important than buildings or sacred objects, be they cathedrals, churches, temples, synagogue, mosques. Why is that so? This is where human conscience plays a pivotal role. Conscience, human conscience, is the inviolable sacred space in every person. No human being's conscience should be violated.

Actually, according to the same principle of religious freedom, no human being should be coerced, forced, or manipulated into believing against the dictates of their conscience. Similarly, and this point is important, no religious organization should be placed under the umbrella of another organization that decides or has a say on its beliefs and practice. This is the reason why Seventh-day Adventists cannot join organizations that have a central authority, which would effectively usurp the conscience of the church.

This is a nonnegotiable principle included in the church's constitution. The Seventh-day Adventist church can never merge with another church or lose its identity. We will always keep our distinct identity, mission and message and that, also, is part of religious freedom. Of course, we still favor inter-church and inter-religious relations as spaces for mutual testimony and witness. Being salt and light includes the necessity of mingling with others.

So, then this indicates the best we offer to the world when it comes to religious freedom. This freedom is not only just about legal provisions, although those are important, of course. But our more important contribution is our theology

(our understanding of who God is), our anthropology (meaning our understanding of who we are as human beings), and of course our understanding of salvation as a restoration of God's image in us.

So then, to embrace religious freedom is to show circumspection towards the inner sanctum or human conscience—that is, the sacred space in the innermost chambers of every person. We understand that to believe and live according to the revelation of religious freedom is to let God be God. This means, also, that we respect the mysterious relationship between God and other human beings created in God's image. We respect others because God created them. We respect others because God has a special direct-access relationship to people's conscience.

But it's not just about respect. It is interesting that in Galatians chapter five the Apostle Paul begins by saying, "It is for freedom that Christ set us free." But then the Apostle Paul continues expanding of what that means and that means to open ourselves to the Holy Spirit. Freedom cannot exist without the Holy Spirit. And this is extremely important because in the same

chapter the Apostle Paul invites Christians who are now free to leave according to the Holy Spirit. And then he specified that the fruit of the Holy Spirit is love—he begins with that—and also joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, gentleness, faithfulness, and self-control. So, he started with freedom at the beginning of the chapter and he continues with the fruit of the Spirit, the first of which is love.

So the goal of religious freedom is love and this is a distinctly Christian insight. The goal of religious freedom is love and everlasting fellowship in love. God created human beings free for what purpose? Because again love cannot be forced. God gave us the freedom to choose so that we may choose God or even turn against God. This is precious because freedom is a prerequisite to love.

So why do we champion religious freedom? We do so because God champions religious freedom. Christ championed religious freedom and the Apostle Paul insists it is for freedom that we were set free. But Jesus reminded us the heart of the covenant of the Torah is to love God with all our heart, with all our soul, with all our strength, and to love our neighbor as ourselves.

So then, the goal of this liberation is love. The message of the Bible is clear about this. Therefore, religious freedom is not a tool to oppress people, but rather it is a prerequisite to love. It is a sign reminding us that people are sacred. It reminds us to be careful in how we deal with others for they belong to God. It reminds us that there is a sacred path between God and every person that meets through their conscience. Let's not violate that space. We can try to persuade others peacefully; that is what I call peaceful persuasion and testimony. Yes, we have a distinct message to share but it is not to be shared by trampling people's dignity or insulting them. Rather we can respectfully share what we believe is God's absolute will for every human being. And, of course, when we love other people, we respect them.

And so, it is clear that there is more to religious freedom than meets the eye.

###