

THE ESSEX HALL LECTURE 1991

*FREEDOM NOW:
THE CHALLENGE FOR LIBERAL
RELIGIOUS COMMUNITIES*



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FREEDOM NOW: THE CHALLENGE FOR LIBERAL RELIGIOUS COMMUNITIES

Robert Traer

In December of 1990, a year after the revolution in Romania, I was standing in the pulpit of the First Unitarian Church in Cluj (known as Kolozsvár to the Hungarian minority in Transylvania). János Erdő, professor at the Theological College, stood by my side, reading a translation of my sermon into Hungarian. I gave thanks for the faith of the people gathered there in worship, and I spoke of the resolution passed by the 1990 General Assembly of the International Association for Religious Freedom (IARF) in support of their human right to religious freedom. Two days before I had presented that resolution to the Secretary of the Ministry on Religions in Bucharest and told him that members of the IARF would be writing to him to urge constitutional protection for religious freedom in Romania and the return of church properties which were confiscated by the Communist government.

Just a little more than a year ago these activities would have led to my arrest. Professor Erdő and many others paid the high price of imprisonment in Romania for challenging the authority of the Communist regime over the life of the church. For over forty years the people were persecuted, but now I was a guest in their homes and was able to preach freely in the pulpits of Transylvania. How grateful the people were for their new freedom! And how thankful we should be for the opportunities now in Eastern Europe and elsewhere in the world.

However, if the sun has come out, there are still dark clouds in the sky. The enemies of religious freedom are many and powerful. Reactionary political movements threaten new democratic governments. Fundamentalism is rampant within all the world's religious traditions. And liberal religious communities are declining in number of participants and in prestige.

Moreover, freedom itself often seems to undermine the religious communities that

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support it. In Kolozsvár I learned that more than 10% of the members of the second Unitarian church I preached in had left the country in 1990. The leaders of the Unitarian Church in Romania see emigration of their people to Hungary and the West as a great threat to their church and to their life as a minority community in Romania. Therefore, they have asked the IARF to send money for the construction and repair of church buildings, rather than food and clothing, and to limit support for refugees in Hungary and elsewhere to medical supplies, in order to avoid encouraging people to leave Romania. As Jenei Dezső, the lay president in Kolozsvár, said to me: "We can suffer personal deprivation together, but if we cannot strengthen our church, we will lose our community."

The experience of the churches in Romania is well known elsewhere. The cry of "Freedom Now" which marked the civil rights struggle in the United States a generation ago was supported by the spiritual strength of the Black Christian churches. However, greater freedom for Black individuals in the United States has done little to increase the freedom of the Black community, and many Black individuals who have "gotten ahead" no longer choose to participate in the very communities which made their freedom possible. Similarly, liberal religious communities throughout the Western world find their members exercising their freedom by leaving their community of faith to join another which suits them better or to live out their principles without "compromising them" by participation in any religious community.

Therefore, those of us who wish to stand up for freedom now must understand clearly what freedom now means. If freedom is a way of attaining greater human dignity, it cannot mean simply being free from legal or authoritarian constraint, but must have some positive content as well. To help clarify our thinking I want to return to our religious heritage for a bit, and then share with you some ideas gleaned from Japanese IARF members. I also want to describe what freedom has come to mean in international law in the last forty years, since the founding of the United Nations. Finally, I will suggest some guidelines for those who wish to stand up for freedom now, guidelines which I hope will be helpful to members of liberal religious communities.

RELIGIOUS FREEDOM

In traditional religious communities there was little support for what we think of as individual freedom. The covenant between God and ancient Israel described in the Hebrew scriptures represents the submission of the people to the law of Moses, which was understood to be God's will but which required priests to administer and interpret it. The prophets at times emphasized the spirit of the law as opposed to its letter, and Jeremiah proclaimed that God had written the law in the hearts of the

people. However, there was no thought that individuals were free to interpret the law in their own way. The law was clear, either to the priest or the prophet, and the people were called not to freedom but to obedience.

In the early Christian community Paul argued that salvation was not the result of keeping the law of Moses, but was a gift of Christ by the grace of God. Thus faith in Christ meant freedom from the tenets of the law. However, this did not mean the freedom to do whatever one wanted, but the freedom to do God's will. Thus we can explain Paul's comments on obeying the magistrates and those in authority. For Paul, freedom was not a matter of being free from legal and social restrictions, but of being free in one's heart and mind to serve Jesus the Christ. This is not contradictory to the notion of freedom in the Hebrew scriptures, but emphasizes the authority of Christ rather than that of the law (or the priests or prophets who interpret it). One is free "in Christ", as Paul puts it; that is, free to do the will of God.

The gospels of the Christian Bible have different emphases, but all portray Jesus calling the people to faith. This faith is not a set of beliefs, for nowhere does Jesus set forth a series of propositions which define what faith means. Rather he speaks in parables about the Kingdom of God and illustrates what faith means by his own life and death. In a word, faith is trusting in God. This is the truth that will set us free. Individuals as well as groups can have this trust, for Jesus calls individuals out of their families and communities into a new community of disciples. Faith is thus a way of freeing oneself from the Law and its institutions, but it requires that one become a disciple of Jesus—a follower of his teachings. Again freedom comes to those who submit to the true teacher or teachings. And so, we read in Matthew's gospel, that Jesus came to fulfil the law not to condemn it.

We see then that, within our Western heritage, freedom understood religiously involves submitting to the right authority, not rejecting all external authority. With the Protestant reformation we find the notion of individual conscience lifted up above the teachings of the tradition, or some reformed version of them, but the notion of conscience is located in a congregational form of decision-making. It is still the gathered church that represents faith, not merely the individuals that constitute it. Freedom is still a matter of doing the truth, not merely doing what one wants.

What are we to make of this heritage today? If one assumes that human beings are simply evolving, then the historical record is but a summary of inferior behaviour and beliefs. I would suggest, however, that we not take such a limited view of our ancestors, but see instead that they were responding to their experience even as we are responding to ours. Our ancestors rejected some forms of institutional authority because they were oppressive, but embraced other forms which seemed to be more liberating or true. Today we support individual freedom

because we have experienced the limitations of institutionalized authority and collective behaviour. However, if we see that individual freedom is weakening our liberal communities of faith, we too may look for ways to strengthen them.

In our religious heritage, freedom has generally been understood to be the result of faith in God and participation in a religious community that was itself faithful to God. If at times our ancestors erred in exercising the authority of the community, and in limiting individual expression, they succeeded in preserving a tradition which continually has fostered reform movements led by individuals who felt so strongly about their faith that they risked their lives for the sake of the truth.

THE JAPANESE EXPERIENCE

The Japanese experience, of course, is quite different from ours. Shinto tradition has few doctrines and essentially no scripture. It is a tradition of ceremonial practice rooted in an understanding of the living nature of all reality. The rituals are a way of relating to this living reality, of bringing oneself into harmony with its rhythms, of tuning oneself to the music which is all around us and in us, but which is often obscured by our intellectual and emotional striving.

Worship in the Shinto tradition has been a part of the IARF experience for many years now. Yukitaka Yamamoto, the 96th Chief Priest of Tsubaki Grand Shrine near Nagoya, has served on the Council of the IARF for many years and has presided over purification ceremonies at several of the IARF triennial Congresses.(1) Such a ritual involves bowing before a wooden staff with streams of paper attached to its top, laying boughs of pine before it, clapping the hands, and having the priest chant and wave the staff with the streamers back and forth before the audience.

The purification ceremony may be understood as a ritualized invocation. It is a prayer, in the form of actions, which is intended to bring the participants in a program or event into right relationship with the divine reality, with nature, and with each other. It anticipates the conflicts which will ensue in any gathering of persons, as each strives to present his or her feelings or point of view. By inviting us to bow before a representation of the reality which is greater than us all, and by invoking a spirit through the waving of the staff to bind us all together in a harmonious purpose which reflects the fundamental unity of all creation, the Shinto priest seeks to free us from our self-centred concerns so that we may contribute to the life of our community and thus to all life.

Without this understanding one might easily conclude that such a ritual involved worshipping an idol or is contrary to the dignity of a rational person. However, in

a time when Western culture has lost its sense of harmony with nature, we might well be more sympathetic to rituals such as the Shinto purification ceremony, which for generations have helped the Japanese remember that they are part of a reality greater than their own making.

Within the Japanese tradition there is little concern for individual freedom, if this is understood as one's right to separate himself or herself from the community. Persons are understood as members of families and communities. Susumu Akahoski, a Japanese psychiatrist, argues that the Japanese mentality is group oriented (and the Western mentality individualistic) because of different child-raising patterns in the two cultures.(2) Whatever the cause of this difference, one might conclude that "freedom" in the Western religious sense of doing the truth or in the Japanese Shinto sense of being in harmony with nature has something to do with a balance between the individual and communal aspects of life.

In the Japanese context it seems very likely that more individual freedom may prove truly liberating, not only for individuals but also for the society. In the Western context it also seems possible that a greater sense of participation in community, and thus a greater emphasis on responsibility and service, may also prove to be liberating. Put bluntly, we will not achieve an ecological lifestyle, a life in harmony with nature, without accepting certain constraints on our freedom.

In Rissho Kosei-kai, a Japanese lay Buddhist movement which is also a member of IARF, the Lotus Sutra with its Buddhist vision of harmony with the world has been brought into the everyday life of Japanese people. Members of Rissho Kosei-kai chant from the Lotus Sutra daily, and join in group discussions to understand how its precepts might be practiced in their lives in a modern secularized society. The President of Rissho Kosei-kai, Nikkyo Niwano, teaches that true freedom comes in the service of others and that this spirit of service is grounded in gratitude. Thus the rituals of Rissho Kosei-kai are ways of expressing gratitude to Buddha and of orienting individuals to service. President Niwano believes that the message of Buddhism and Western spirituality is fundamentally the same.(3) Whether we agree or not, we might well ponder what our Western tradition now has to offer in religious rituals and community life, which will renew our relationship with the earth.

Of course, rituals such as the Shinto purification ceremony or the chanting of Buddhist sutras may not be necessary for a transformation of our destructive cultural lifestyle, but I suspect that rational argument alone will not suffice. Religious practice has always been a way of imaging the truth about life and shaping human behaviour accordingly. How in our rituals will we confess our failure to care for the creation entrusted to us? How will we portray in the language of liturgy, in actions as well as words, the freedom which will come from giving up some of our

freedom for the sake of the life of our communities and our world?

HUMAN RIGHTS LAW

In the language of law there has been a revolution in the last forty years in the understanding of the individual's relationship to his or her community. Before World War II international law was the law of states. Individuals were not protected by international law, but only by the law of their own society. In the last forty years formulations of group and people's rights as well as notions of individual rights have come under the protection of international human rights law. Under the U.N. Charter, international covenants, and customary international law, it is now the law of the earth that people have fundamental human rights which include both protection from governmental interference and claims on governmental action.

When the Universal Declaration of Human Rights was passed without dissenting vote by the newly constituted United Nations in 1948 most of the emphasis was on protecting the individual from coercive action by government. However, when the peoples of the Southern hemispheres began to assert themselves, as new nations freed from the colonizers of the North, international human rights law began to reflect their more communal concerns.

President Roosevelt had presented the challenge at the end of the war when he articulated a vision of four freedoms: freedom of speech, freedom of belief, freedom from fear, and freedom from want. For there to be freedom from want, governments would have to take positive action, not merely refrain from interfering in the lives of their citizens. In the International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights governments are held responsible for actions necessary to provide their people with food, shelter, health care and other conditions necessary for human dignity. Freedom is thus understood as a certain quality of life, not just as the right of individuals to do as they please without governmental interference.

This issue is reflected in the first article of both the International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights and the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights. This article asserts the right of self-determination for the peoples of the world. Thus we see that in contemporary international law both individual rights and people's rights are affirmed. The judgment of whether the one or the other is to be enforced, if there is a conflict of interests, is left to a case by case determination.

Some international lawyers and theorists rail against this conceptual "confusion" and argue that only individual human rights can be substantiated by logic and consistent practice. Yet it is clear that the emphasis on individual rights has undermined family

and kinship traditions, which for centuries allowed communities to maintain their culture, but at the same time has not led to reformed societies that in fact protect individual rights. Instead of traditional forms of governance, new elite groups and their Western financiers now decide for the people what is best.

It is interesting to note that the modern view of human rights, as the social conditions for human dignity, has support within all the religious traditions of the world. The Universal Declaration of Human Rights is affirmed by leaders within Christian, Jewish, Unitarian, Muslim, Hindu, and Buddhist traditions. And human rights activists around the world are given support by religious communities. Religious leaders who support human rights see the importance of both individual rights and group rights. They understand that freedom involves both choice and community, both the individual right of conscience and the communal right of self-determination. These are not contradictory but complementary elements of freedom, understood as the social structures necessary for human dignity.(4)

GUIDELINES FOR ADVOCACY

What then, as liberal religious people, is our challenge? What would it mean for us to proclaim "Freedom Now"? What is our experience telling us about our present situation, and how can we draw on the wisdom of our ancestors in responding now in faith to our present challenge? What can we learn from the experience of our Japanese friends? And what do the recent developments in international law suggest?

I believe that all this experience suggests the need for a balance between individual freedom and the right of communities to shape the lives of their members. In reaction to an over-emphasis on the rights of communities, liberals of the past fought for the right of the individual. And in much of the world this is still what the struggle is all about, as Amnesty International reminds us continually in its appeal for prisoners of conscience. However, at least in some parts of the world, and in particular in our own communities, I believe the balance is distorted in the other direction. Support for religious freedom, in what we might call secularized society, needs to affirm the rights of the community, and not only the rights of the individual over against it.

Thus our first guideline for advocacy may be simply stated: We must support both communal and individual rights, and not merely individual rights. To return to the example of the Unitarian churches in Romania, they seek not merely constitutional protection for individuals but the return of the church properties taken from them under Communist rule, access to the state schools in order to give religious instruction to their children, the right to have their children educated in their native

language, and support from the state for their ministers. The Lutheran, Reformed and Catholic churches in Romania have joined with the Unitarian Church in advocating for these freedoms.

One might take a principled position in favour of the right of conscience and in opposition to any state aid for religion, as the Baptists and Jehovah's Witnesses in Romania do. However, if in fact the survival of the communities of faith in Romania will require some state aid, then one might well agree with most of the church leaders in Romania that religious freedom there now means not only the freedom for individuals to join the church of their choice or believe as they think best, but also certain kinds of support by the state for the minority church institutions.

As I indicated in the opening of my talk, the IARF has been asked to use its funds for the construction and repair of Unitarian churches in Romania, not to provide relief to poor and suffering individuals there. My initial reaction to this request was negative; I was aware that certain aspects of Unitarian church life in Romania are inconsistent with the convictions of some of the liberal members of the IARF, and I thought it best that funds collected from non-Unitarian groups be used to support general relief rather than the recovery of the Unitarian church. However, when I realized that assisting individuals would undermine the life of the church, and thus weaken its ability to help its individual members, I began to see that religious freedom is best served by aiding the recovery of the church community.

In our own society, this guideline means supporting the right of religious communities to practice their own tradition in their own way, so long as fundamental human rights are not denied. This means supporting religious freedom for communities that do not share our liberal values, in the same way that we support the right of free speech even for those with views we think are wrong. Of course, this does not mean allowing anything in the name of freedom. Even as free speech is subject to considerations of public welfare, so the freedom afforded religious communities is not absolute. The modern right of religious freedom must be understood in the context of other fundamental human rights. Conflicts between the practices of a community and the aspirations of its individual members or the laws of a society should be resolved through local mediation or legal adjudication.

Such an understanding of the limitations which religious freedom might impose on our sensibilities leads us to the second guideline for advocacy: We must accept that freedom is not possible without personal sacrifice. That is, freedom is not just individual opportunity, but an ordering of society which facilitates other freedoms in addition to individual opportunity. A free society not only protects the individual from the state, but also protects the minority from the majority and the weak from the strong. To have such a free society the state may need to take away opportunities

from those who have more, in order to increase opportunities for those who have less. It may have to provide benefits for the poor or the elderly or the young that are not available for all, or offer opportunities to minority groups not available to the majority which enable the minority groups as well as their individual members to participate more fully in the society.

Examples are easy to come by. Legislation and funding for low-income groups of people, affirmative action where there has been a history of discrimination against a group, bilingual education where there are significant numbers of minority students, religious education which covers the major traditions of a community and not just its historical Christian tradition, special education for the disadvantaged and disabled, and so on. These are threads in the fabric of a free society. Such a society not only offers opportunities to its members but requires personal sacrifice, for some will have to pay more taxes and some may find their own opportunities more limited because of the protection of the human group rights of others.

The truth is hard but inescapable—freedom is found in serving others and not in just serving ourselves. Freedom as individual opportunity is sheer selfishness, even if one generalizes this principle for all people. All the religious traditions agree that it is in serving others that one discovers salvation or liberation, the freedom of the soul.

In Romania I spoke with several theological students who are studying for the ministry. Aware that many of their peers are leaving the country to seek freedom elsewhere, I shared with them what a young woman in Hungary told me. She fled Romania to avoid persecution and is now free; yet she is unhappy, because she feels cut off from her community and guilty about leaving. I asked them to consider whether they might not find the freedom they seek by staying and serving their people, as ministers of the church. We, too, might find our freedom in service, rather than in individual expressions of belief. By serving the church, and others who need our help, by making personal sacrifices, we might find ourselves liberated from our worries and our sense of helplessness, freed by the Spirit of God which is given to those who seek it.

The freedom found in service leads to a third guideline for advocacy today: We need to support the renewal of tradition, not its rejection. Religious life is a way of remembering the past, of relating our life to the lives of those who have gone before, of locating ourselves in the mysterious flow of life that was before us and will continue after us. To reject tradition, because it is staid or limiting, is to cut ourselves off from the flow of life. Rather we must seek to renew the spirit of tradition, to draw fresh water out of the deep wells of the past, to renew the insights of our ancestors in the rituals of our time.

This is the task in all our churches today. It is not a matter of making everything modern, nor of accommodating everyone's desires. Renewal is not something that can be simply planned or thought out, but requires a spirit of trust and openness to a journey of faith. Our tradition is our map, faded and torn though it is. Our challenge is to be guided by the experience of those who have gone before us, even though much of what we see around us seems very different. Humbly then we need to come together in prayer and worship, to submit our minds to the longings of our hearts, to open ourselves to the movement of the Spirit which is calling the churches to renewal.

Again in Romania I saw this happening. In Sighisoara (Segesvár) I visited with Rev. Ferenc Nagy, a seventy-three year old minister who has pastored his church for over fifty years. He took me into his education building, where some forty children between the ages of five and ten sang carols for me and joined in a prayer together, all from memory. He had arranged the carols, using traditional words and popular folk tunes. His voice was no longer strong, but as he led the children in singing I knew that this church would continue, that the tradition of faith and service which marks the life of liberal religious communities would be remembered by these children, that in this congregation the seeds of freedom had been sown in fertile soil.

CONCLUSION

Let us then be thankful for all the gifts of life. Let us be thankful for the earth, for the land and its harvests, for all who work the land and labour so that we might live as we do. Let us be thankful for the freedom that we have known and for the struggle of those who came before us so that we might enjoy what they were denied. Let us be thankful for the religious communities which have nurtured and sustained us and have, through their worship and witness, shown the way to more humane and generous ways of living. Let us be thankful that we now are able to support these communities, that we are able to worship as we see fit, and that we are free to support religious freedom for others.

In this spirit of gratitude, let us give, freely, as we have received. Let us give of our wealth, let us share our bounty. Let us give of our time and our talents. Let us support our churches and our religious traditions by seeking to live up to their highest aspirations and by challenging others to join us in this adventure of faith. Let us renew our religious life and support the renewal of the churches of our friends, so that the Spirit of love and truth may not be silenced in our world but might continue to be proclaimed in song and sermon and silence, everywhere.

Finally, let us open our hearts, so that we might open our minds. Let us take up

daily prayer as a liberating discipline, let us turn with excitement and anticipation to the study of scripture and the wisdom of the religious traditions, let us with joy enter into worship. For now is the time for renewal, now is the time to remember that which has been lost, now is the time to restore the harmony of life, now is the time to rediscover freedom in faith.

NOTES

1 See Yukitaka Yamamoto, *KAMI NO MICHI: THE WAY OF THE KAMI* (Stockton, California: Tsubaki America Publications Department, 1987) for a fascinating account of Rev. Yamamoto's life and understanding of Shinto.

2 See Susumu Akahoshi, "Japanese and Western Religiosity," in Kenneth J. Dale, *CIRCLE OF HARMONY* (South Pasadena, California: William Carey Library, 1975), 170-187.

3 Rev. Nikkyo Niwano is the author of many books on Risho Kosei-kai and the Lotus Sutra, all of which are available from the Kosei Publishing Company in Tokyo, Japan.

4 See Robert Traer, *FAITH IN HUMAN RIGHTS: SUPPORT IN RELIGIOUS TRADITIONS FOR A GLOBAL STRUGGLE* (Washington, D.C.: Georgetown University Press, 1990) for a discussion of international human rights law and the way it is understood and affirmed by leaders of the religious traditions of the world.

1991 Essex Hall Lecture



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