Lia Milousis

September 14th, 2014

Redefining Freedom:

Why Removing Religious Freedom Will Destroy Human Rights in Canada

On April 17th, 1982, the Canadian Charter of Rights and Freedoms was established, setting the standard for what human rights should be upheld by the government. Included in that cataclysmic document was the freedom of religion and conscience, which ensured that every Canadian citizen had the protected choice and ability to believe and have faith, whether in God, science, the sun, inner peace, Allah, Mother Nature, or nothing at all. Even before 1982, the fundamental idea that humans should be free to choose their own belief system or worldview had been interwoven within Canadian history and culture; the Canadian Charter of Rights and Freedoms merely solidified the concept that the freedom of religion and conscience cannot be separated from other human rights. The freedom of religion and conscience must continue to be protected and respected in Canada; failure to do so will result in the oppression and persecution of all Canadians by stripping them of further freedoms and inevitably leading to a human rights violation as atrocious as those seen in history.

 “Religion” is most often defined as “the belief in and worship of a superhuman controlling power”. However, the dictionary also defines religion as “a particular system of faith and worship” or “a pursuit or interest to which someone ascribes supreme importance”. Because of the first definition, the term “religion” is most often associated with well-known institutions like Buddhism, Catholicism, Islam, and Christianity. However, the Canadian freedom of religion and conscience does more than protect well-known religious groups and keep them peacefully co-existing; it protects Canadian individualism, a Canadian citizen’s right to subscribe to a certain belief system without having to hide or justify themselves. Organized religion is the most common and visible form of this freedom, however each Canadian exercises their right to develop their own beliefs and worldviews every day. Taking this into consideration, it becomes clear that those who hold atheistic or agnostic worldviews are as religious as those who hold Christian or Hindu worldviews, since each party listed above subscribes to a certain belief system, despite defying our pre-conceived notions of what traditional religion looks like. Because of this, the removal of freedom of religion and conscience from the Canadian Charter of Rights and Freedoms would do more than simply promote a secular worldview. It would ultimately be the Canadian government imposing secularism on every Canadian citizen.

 In light of the recent shift in Canadian society towards a secular worldview, some may consider it impractical to continue protecting freedom of religion and conscience if less and less people care about having their religious freedoms protected. However, the freedom of religion and conscience is not in any way isolated or disconnected from the other rights and freedoms that Canadian citizens rely on. The Canadian Charter of Rights and Freedoms works like a spider’s web in that every right is interconnected. This means that the freedom of religion and conscience are connected to the freedom of peaceful assembly, the freedom of thought, belief, opinion, and expression, and the freedom of speech. The attempted removal of the freedom of religion and conscience would result in the unraveling of Canada’s complex network of human rights, since every decision made by humanity stems from the worldview that they subscribe to. If the freedom of religion and conscience is removed from the Canadian Charter of Rights and Freedoms, not only will that automatically force every Canadian citizen to subscribe to the government’s secular worldview, but it will subsequently require that every assembly, thought, belief, opinion, expression, and exercise of speech be in alignment with that secularized belief system. Ultimately, the freedom of religion and conscience is the foundation for every other freedom; without it, all these other freedoms are compromised.

History has repeatedly shown that, when a government enforces one worldview on its citizens, human rights violations of epidemic proportions are inevitable. The atrocities that occurred in the Soviet Union during the rule of Stalin are one such example. The persecution of religious groups was the focus of numerous campaigns in the Soviet Union, campaigns that atheist and communist leader Joseph Stalin took to new levels. According to the International Business Times, “In his book, ‘Unnatural Deaths in the U.S.S.R.: 1928-1954,’ I.G. Dyadkin estimated that the USSR suffered 56 to 62 million ‘unnatural deaths’ during that period, with 34 to 49 million directly linked to Stalin” (International Business Times). This deadly example was repeated when Hitler took power of Germany before World War II. Nazi leader Adolph Hitler, who grew up in the Catholic church but later came to hate Christianity and Jews in particular, sought to force his image of the ideal German on the rest of German society. Because Hitler did not believe in the freedom of religion, he was able to justify the persecution of Jews and other minority groups. While the death toll has been estimated to be over 6 million, historians like Geoffrey Megargee now believe that the number of lives lost during the Holocaust is closer to 20 million (Business Insider).

While some may be tempted to dismiss these events as “isolated incidents of the past”, modern day figures show that religious persecution is still rampant in our “tolerant” world. According to the U.S. Department of State *International Religious Freedom Report of 2013*, “an estimated 1,200 to 3,000 individuals remain imprisoned for their religious beliefs” in Eritrea, and “approximately 10,000 to 12,000 people reportedly remain imprisoned on vague charges of religious extremism due to their religious beliefs or practice” in Uzbekistan (International Religious Freedom Report 2013). Furthermore, clashes “between Hindu and Muslim communities [in] late August and mid-September led to the deaths of 65 persons, 68 persons injured, and an estimated 40,000-50,000 displaced” in India, and, after the civil war in Syria, “the number of Christians dwindled to as few as 1,000 from approximately 160,000 prior to the conflict” (International Religious Freedom Report 2013). Clearly, the lack of religious freedom in these countries has resulted in the persecution and repression of religious minorities. This oppression has not only stripped hundreds of thousands of religious individuals of their basic human rights, but it has also caused a deterioration in the framework of each country by creating a power struggle between social and political entities. This historical pattern will be repeated once again should the Canadian government decide to impose its worldview on every Canadian citizen.

Coexistence is a difficult ideal to attain, fragile and difficult to preserve. Whether it is the slaughtering of Christians in Ancient Rome or the persecution of the Falun Gong in modern-day China, coexistence is not innate in human nature and must be aided by the legal protection of religious rights and freedoms. No matter how secular a nation becomes, every human must be given the ability to freely choose what he or she believes. Even if every Canadian citizen chooses to adopt a secular worldview, Canada must maintain its stance regarding the protection and preservation of religious freedom. If the government fails to do this and removes the freedom of religion and conscience from the Canadian Charter of Rights and Freedoms, Canada will begin to walk the unimaginable path of government oppression, religious persecution, and widespread violence.

Religion is not what is truly at stake. In asking the question, “Is it important to preserve freedom of religion and conscience in Canada’s increasingly secularized society”, what is really being asked is, “Should the Canadian government be given the power to decide which belief system – in this case, secularism – must be followed be every Canadian citizen”. If we answer with a resounding “no”, both the religious scientist and the agnostic university student will be empowered to live in peaceful coexistence. But if we answer “yes” or fail to take a stand by remaining silent, then human rights and freedoms as we know them will be completely redefined, and we may not recognize the world that is birthed out of such repression.