

World Religion Day

21 January 2007

Freedom to Believe – celebrating a human right.

“The freedom to hold beliefs of one’s own choosing...makes possible the individual’s search for meaning.”

Thank you for this opportunity to contribute to this important occasion.

I acknowledge the Kurna people, the original custodians of this land on which we now gather.

Secondly, I give *a* Christian response to the theme of religious freedom, but I cannot give *the* Christian response, or in the time available, a *sufficient* Christian response. I will begin with some comments about being a South Australian, my own context, and finish with some Christian Biblical principles.

Recently I was skimming, “Paradise of Dissent”¹, Douglas Pike’s account of the early history of South Australia.

The significant determinant for South Australia was that “free settlers”, not convicts, founded it. Who were these so-called “free” persons and what is their relevance to our topic?

The book opens with these words:

South Australia was settled in 1836 by men (sic) whose professed ideals were civil liberty, social opportunity and equality for all religions. Though each of these ideas was moulded in England, each was a protest against English practice.²

What religious practices were the subject of dissent and protest?

The state gave its civil protection to the church; the church supported the state in its influence over people...not only had it vast property from the state, but tithes and church rates were incorporated in ordinary land titles and in their collection the clergy could if they wished employ the force of law.³

As a result, the “fountain of morality and holiness...(was) muddied by patronage. There was little to distinguish the parson from the squire beyond a white tie.”⁴

Those dissenting from this holy alliance, the monopoly of the Church of England and the Crown, had a hard time of it.

¹ Pike, Douglas Paradise of Dissent: South Australia 1829 -1857. Melbourne University Press. Second Edition 1967

² *ibid* p 3

³ *ibid* p 12

⁴ *ibid* p 12

They were denied full rights of citizenship since conforming to the Church of England was a pre-requisite of any position in society. For example: the births of children of dissenters, not christened in the Church of England, may not be registered without a legal battle; whole families could lose their inheritances. Clergy outside of the Church of England were controlled by a system of licenses and their churches taxed. A dissenter could not be admitted to university. A Catholic priest performing a marriage ceremony involving a Protestant faced a massive fine of 500 Pound, or death if the offence were repeated.

Dissent from the Church of England was a passport to indignity, inferiority and poverty. And poverty had become not a misfortune, but a crime.⁵

Criminals were transported to the east of Australia, but those seeking to escape this religious oppression created the opportunity to choose to immigrate to South Australia. There they could make a new start to create a new society built on a vision of freedom and equality - "civil liberty, social opportunity and equality for all religions".

And in reaction to their experiences in England, the separation of powers of church and state was a cornerstone in the establishment of this vision.

This is our heritage.

This is where "a fair go" comes from. These are the seeds of the "tall poppy" syndrome. These are the origins of our revulsion of anything smacking of dominance – making oneself superior at the expense of another.

Some Christian Biblical principles

One of the most influential figures in shaping the disparate early Christian communities was a converted Jew, Saul of Tarsus, who we know today as St Paul. He travelled throughout Asia-Minor and wrote letters of exhortation and encouragement to the fledgling churches. Some of these letters are included in the Christian Scriptures and because I want to anchor my reflections in one such letter, which he wrote to the church in Galatia, I should provide a brief context.

Galatia today would be part of central Turkey, and its capital city, Ancyra, is today's capital of Turkey, Ankara. Galatia was an oddity in the eastern world. It was originally home of the ancient civilization of the Hittites, but came to be occupied by Gallic Celts in the 3rd century BCE, Gaul being the region of Western Europe of today's France, Belgium and northern Italy. Hence the name Galatia, or "Eastern Gaul."⁶

⁵ ibid pp17 - 22

⁶ <http://www.unrv.com/provinces/galatia.php>

The structuring of their society, and the primacy of law, was important to these Celtic Galatians.⁷

It should therefore not be surprising that St Paul's letter to the Galatian church is a treatise on the relationship between freedom and law because the Galatians had a propensity toward being legalistic.

Towards the end of that letter we find this statement:

You...were called to be free. But do not let this freedom become an excuse for letting your physical desires control you. Instead, let love make you serve one another. For the whole Law is summed up in one commandment: "Love your neighbor as yourself." Galatians 5:13,14

St Paul argues that the life, death and resurrection of Jesus frees us from legalism by focussing on love – Christian freedom is subordinate to love.

What is this love?

It is serving others – “let love make you serve one another”.

Today's gospel of prosperity or ego satisfaction cannot make us free. Only a gospel that directs us out of our selves toward our neighbour gives meaning to freedom. Otherwise, freedom is as St Paul suggests – an excuse for doing our own thing. This, as he later points out, is the law of the jungle, and ends in destruction.

The Beatles might have summed up all of Christian doctrine when they sang, “All You Need is Love”...but I think they had other meanings in mind!

With regard to freedom of belief, the law of love demands Christians protect the right of our neighbour to believe freely – without oppression, without dominance. To love implies we must *actively* protect our neighbour's freedom of belief, not simply tolerate it!

So I come back to our history and heritage as South Australians.

“Civil liberty, social opportunity and equality for all religions” – this is our heritage.

But us Christians must remind ourselves that we are in the majority in Australia, we are in the position of privilege. We must not allow this privilege to corrupt us, but instead, forgo it. The love of Christ, if it has found a place in our hearts, compels us to serve our neighbour:

⁷ The constitution of the Galatian state is described by Strabo: conformably to Gaulish custom, each tribe was divided into cantons, each governed by a chief ('tetrarch') of its own with a judge under him, whose powers were unlimited except in cases of murder, which were tried before a council of 300 drawn from the twelve cantons and meeting at a holy place, twenty miles southwest of Ancyra, which was likely to have been a sacred oak grove, (Wikipedia – “Galatia”)

- to stand with our Muslim friends when unjust insinuations are spread in the media, as they have been these last weeks,
- to open the doors of hospitality to international students, not to exploit them for our own profit,
- to advocate for asylum seekers and those who are powerless,
- to support our indigenous friends, so dis-spirited by our colonisation.
- to replace the love of power with the power of love.

May it be so.

Geoff Boyce
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