

INTERFAITH INSIGHT

Religious persecution is wrong, everywhere

The Rev. Richard Killmer

The Rev. Richard Killmer writes in this week's Interfaith Insight from years of experience in church administration and faith-based social action. He is an ordained Presbyterian minister who was one of the founders of the interfaith effort Shoulder to Shoulder, which brought together Christian and Jewish organizations to work against anti-Muslim bigotry. Following an active career in church leadership, he now lives in East Grand Rapids and works with the Office of Social Justice for the Christian Reformed Church on environmental concerns. I am pleased to share his reflections on this important issue: ending religious persecution wherever it occurs, and his report on progress that is being made in many parts of the world.

— Douglas Kindschi, director of the Kaufman Interfaith Institute

Ending persecution and bigotry is just the first step in developing understanding, acceptance and friendship across religious communities.

I remember sitting in the office of my friend, Mohamed Elsanousi, of the Islamic Society of North America, on a hot day in August 2010, talking about recent incidents of anti-Muslim bigotry. A pastor in Florida was threatening to burn the Quran, and plans to build an Islamic Center in Manhattan across from ground zero were met with significant angry opposition.

We asked ourselves about what we could do to respond to the growing phenomenon of Islamophobia. We decided to ask the



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heads of Christian denominations and Jewish organizations to come to Washington in September to issue a statement, to begin to develop common strategies and to hold a news conference to announce that anti-Muslim bigotry was contrary to both faiths and to a nation that promised religious freedom.

That day in September inspired the creation of Shoulder to Shoulder: Standing with American Muslims; Upholding American Values. The Washington-based organization has grown rapidly and is engaged in many communities throughout the nation.

As we did our work, we received pushback, including the sentiment that Muslims persecute Christians and Jews. Why should we treat Muslims well?

It certainly has been true that the rights of Christians and other religions have not always been protected by Muslim-majority nations, just as Muslims and Jews in the U.S. have faced intolerance and bigotry. It should be said that attacks in Muslim nations often are carried out by independent terrorist groups, as dangerous to those governments and other Muslims as they are to Christians and Jews. Similarly, hate groups in the U.S. pose threats to the welfare of Muslims.

Imagine my pleasure when on Jan. 25-27, 2016, Muslim leaders from many countries met in Marrakesh, Morocco, to determine

how to guarantee the rights of religious minorities in Muslim majority countries. Muslim scholars, jurists, religious leaders and government officials approved the historic Marrakesh Declaration on safeguarding the rights of religious minorities in Muslim nations. Several Muslim majority nations have codified the goals of the Marrakesh Declaration.

The declaration was motivated by the increased violence and persecution faced by religious minorities across the Muslim world, particularly Christians and Jews in the Middle East.

On the eve of the National Prayer Breakfast in February, more than 400 Muslim, Christian and Jewish clergy and scholars came together in Washington as an Alliance of Virtue conference to declare that they will protect and defend religious minorities in their countries. American faith leaders, including more than 50 evangelical pastors, pledged to engage their congregations in fighting anti-Muslim bigotry. Muslim leaders from across the world pledged to protect Christians and Jews in their countries.

The Alliance of Virtue conference developed the Washington Declaration. The conference, hosted by the Forum for Promoting Peace, included Shia and Sunni Muslims, evangelical, Jewish, Catholic and mainline Protestant clergy, including myself, from the United States, Europe and the Middle East. The Washington Declaration affirms and expands on the Marrakesh Declaration.

Freedom of religion is important to Americans and is guaranteed by the Constitution. No one should be prohibited from worship-

ing as they wish. It is wrong that people in any nation of the world are prohibited from worshipping and living out faith as they choose.

"Today, there are unfortunate circumstances for religious minorities in Muslim majority countries," said Shaykh Bin Bayyah, president of the Forum for Promoting Peace. "For this reason, we put forth a new contract with old roots that will respect Christians and Jews under which they can enjoy the freedom to practice their faiths."

The Marrakesh and Washington declarations draw on traditional Islamic law asserting Islam requires the protection and full citizenship rights of religious minorities in Muslim nations. Organizers of the Alliance of Virtue hope to encourage Muslim nations to continue to adopt the Marrakesh declaration as formal Islamic law. It calls for the "full protection for the rights and liberties of all religious groups in a civilized manner that eschews coercion, bias and arrogance."

The conference went a long way to encourage Muslim nations to ensure they protect the rights of religious minorities, including Christians and Jews. There has already been success with Muslim nations such as Tunisia, including such guarantees in its new constitution. It can be done. At the same time, it is important to welcome Muslims in our country, ensuring that they do not face anti-Muslim bigotry, a concern that Mohamed and I had on that hot day in Washington in 2010.

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