



Reports

Thomas K. Johnson

Religious Frustration: Terror at a Catholic School

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International Institute
for Religious Freedom



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**Internationales Institut für Religionsfreiheit
Institut International pour la Liberté Religieuse
Instituto Internacional para la Libertad Religiosa**

The International Institute for Religious Freedom (IIRF) was founded in 2007 with the mission to promote religious freedom for all faiths from an academic perspective. The IIRF aspires to be an authoritative voice on religious freedom. We provide reliable and unbiased data on religious freedom – beyond anecdotal evidence – to strengthen academic research on the topic and to inform public policy at all levels. Our research results are disseminated through the International Journal for Religious Freedom and other publications. A particular emphasis of the IIRF is to encourage the study of religious freedom in university institutions through its inclusion in educational curricula and by supporting postgraduate students with research projects.

The IIRF has a global presence with academic and advocacy partners on all continents. We perform original research and in collaboration with our partners. The IIRF is also a “meeting place” for all scholars that take an interest in religious freedom.

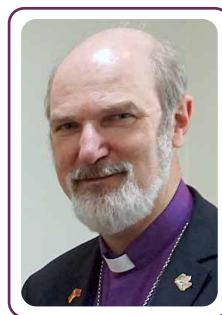
We understand Freedom of Religion and Belief (FoRB) as a fundamental and interdependent human right as described in Article 18 of the Universal Declaration on Human Rights. In line with CCPR General Comment No. 22, we view FoRB as a broad and multidimensional concept that needs to be protected for all faiths in all spheres of society.



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Thomas K. Johnson

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ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Rev. Dr. Thomas K. Johnson serves as Special Envoy to the Vatican and Special Envoy for engaging Humanitarian Islam at the World Evangelical Alliance (WEA), which represents over 600 million Protestants in 143 countries world-wide. A widely published author on theology, ethics, and human rights, Professor Johnson also serves as senior theological advisor to the WEA and is co-chair of the Humanitarian Islam/WEA Joint Working Group. Among his recent books is *Humanitarian Islam, Evangelical Christianity, and the Clash of Civilizations: A New Partnership for Peace and Religious Freedom*, published by the World Evangelical Alliance Theological Commission.

Once again there was a horrendous attack on a Christian school, this time a Roman Catholic school in Minneapolis, during a Mass to celebrate a return to school. As in some other mass murders there was a clear religious motivation. It seems the shooter was deeply jealous of the peace with God experienced at the school. There are many steps that can be taken to reduce the frequency of such attacks. Considering the ultimate sources of this violence empower those steps.

Adam lay with his wife Eve, and she became pregnant and gave birth to Cain. She said, "With the help of the Lord I have brought forth a man." Later she gave birth to his brother Abel.

Now Abel kept flocks, and Cain worked the soil. In the course of time Cain brought some of the fruits of the soil as an offering to the Lord. But Abel brought fat portions from some of the firstborn of his flock. The Lord looked with favor on Abel and his offering, but on Cain and his offering he did not look with favor. So Cain was very angry, and his face was downcast.

Then the Lord said to Cain, "Why are you angry? Why is your face downcast? If you do what is right, will you not be accepted? But if you do not do what is right, sin is crouching at your door; it desires to have you, but you must master it."

Now Cain said to his brother Abel, "Let's go out to the field." And while they were in the field, Cain attacked his brother Abel and killed him. (Genesis 4:1–8)

This early account of a murder has stimulated commentators for centuries. Much of that discussion must be left for another time. It is valuable for our discussion to notice that from very early times in human history people were making a clear distinction between killing a person and killing an animal (in this case for religious worship), in spite of the obvious physical similarities between humans and animals and the similarity in the process of killing humans and animals. It is probably more valuable to notice that this early murder of a man was an expression of anger at God. Cain was angry at God because God had not accepted his sacrifice; it was very difficult for Cain to directly attack God, but it was not so difficult to attack someone who was a mirror image of God and who seemed to be a friend of God. The background of this earliest murder was *religious frustration*: hostility toward God that gets misdirected toward people. This is a key to understanding human rights problems, as well as some steps toward their management.

It is easy for the observer to notice that various types of religious frustration contribute to different types of human rights abuses. Frequently an entire people group has been persecuted because of its beliefs, whether that people group is Jewish, Christian, Hindu, Muslim, or whatever. The presence of an articulated religious system makes a people into a distinct target for people who have all sorts of hostilities and frustrations. Think of these persecuted people as being represented by Abel; their number is massive. The persecution of a religious group is rarely purely religious. Such persecutions are often mixed with ethnic hatred, economic envy, personal grudges, nationalistic zeal, and a range

of other dark motives. The people committing the crimes are often broadly frustrated with life. And the well-identified religious community, religious institution, or religious leader becomes the target for violence or discrimination. Frustration with life turns into aggression toward a person or group who might be close to God. Those represented by Abel are murdered too often.

There are also those religiously frustrated people represented by Cain. Their religion or religion substitute (such as Communism, National Socialism, and various other political ideologies) makes some people or the entire movement hostile toward others and may also provide some explanation why another group of people should be hindered or destroyed. These religions or religious/political ideologies have within their doctrine and ethics certain ideas, claims, examples, or principles that explain why all other people or certain other people should be repressed, expelled, or killed. Sometimes the despised or second-class humans are identified by race, sometimes by religion, or sometimes by social class. These religions and ideologies can be grouped together as giving organized expression to internal religious frustrations, similar to those of Cain. Their religion has not provided peace with God, with themselves, or with other people. The observable results are gruesome.

It is for good reason that freedom of religion is described as the “first freedom” or the “mother of human rights.” The society that has learned how to protect a very extensive freedom of religion is also learning how to manage its own religious frustrations which are the root cause of many other abuses of human rights. And once those religious frustrations are largely managed, it is much easier to take steps to protect the full range of human rights. Biblical realism about human nature lets us see that protecting the freedom of religion will often also lead to the practical protection of a wide range of other human rights and the flourishing of society very broadly. Of course, real freedom of religion is both individual and collective; this means both individuals and whole communities must be allowed to give full expression to their faith.¹

Having a deep religious need is close to the center of what makes us human; if God created us in the reflection or image of his heart and mind, it is only natural that one of our deepest drives or instincts will be for a relationship with God. When Augustine prayed, “Our hearts are restless until they find their rest in you,” he was not only confessing his own desire for God.² He was describing a central element of what makes us human. Even though he did not believe in God, philosopher Ludwig Feuerbach claimed that what makes people human is the fact that they are religious. “Religion has its basis in the essential difference between

¹ Real freedom of religion includes such matters as freedom of speech that arise from a person’s or a community’s basic beliefs, e.g., freedom to educate one’s children in light of one’s faith, freedom to gather with fellow believers, freedom to own or rent suitable buildings or facilities for such activities. Real freedom of religion contains within it real freedom of speech, freedom of the press, freedom of assembly, freedom to travel, and freedom of education.

² This is the opening line in the famous Confessions of Saint Augustine (354–430), bishop of Hippo, which is in today’s Algeria. This valuable book is available in various English translations and in many other languages.

man and the brute—the brutes have no religion.” (“Brute” meant animal).³ Protecting religious freedom is very close to protecting the mystery of humanness.

We need protection from each other and from powerful institutions because humans have an inherited tendency to destroy each other. That tendency to destroy is tied to religious frustration; it often arises out of a dysfunctional religion and/or it may be directed at people insofar as they are identified by their religion. Understanding that the sources of human rights abuses are very closely connected to religious persecution gives us significant direction in knowing a first step that needs to be taken to reduce human rights abuses. That first step will often be for a society to allow people real and substantial freedom of religion.⁴ And on an individual level, we need to address our own religious frustration, our own alienation from God.

³ Ludwig Feuerbach (1804-1872) was a German atheist philosopher of religion. Some of his ideas were later adopted by Karl Marx and by Sigmund Freud, making him one of the important sources of modern European atheism. Very ironically, some of his central ideas were in his book *The Essence of Christianity*, which is an attack on Christian belief. The quotation is the opening statement of this book, which is available in various editions and languages; it is also included in many anthologies of Western philosophy.

⁴ In Europe and North America, it is common to hear that anyone with a clear set of beliefs will want to force other people to accept those beliefs, even if violence or force is required to impose those beliefs. Therefore, it is claimed, skepticism or the denial of ultimate truth is needed for peace in the world. Ironically, in this manner skeptics and nihilists attempt to coerce others to accept their beliefs. We Christians insist that God is the One who convinces people of the truth of the gospel by means of his Word and Spirit, so that we renounce any use of force, violence, or coercion to convince people of the truth of the gospel. We trust the testimony of the Holy Spirit to the truth in Christ, while we joyfully limit ourselves to peaceful persuasion.

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Address

International Institute for Religious Freedom
P. O. Box 780068
Orlando, Florida 32878
United States of America

Friedrichstr. 38
2nd Floor
53111 Bonn
Germany

International Director: Dr. Dennis P. Petri (V.i.S.d.P.)
Research Director: Prof. Dr. Christof Sauer
Executive Editor of the IJRF: Prof. Dr. Janet Epp Buckingham
President: Prof. Dr. Dr. Thomas Schirrmacher

Contact: info@iirf.global

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