

# A REPORT ON DR TIMOTHY SHAH'S OCRPL LECTURE ON RELIGIOUS LIBERTY

## **The roots of Religious liberty**

What is a secure basis for religious liberty? According to President Macron in France, following the terrorist murders, such liberty is rooted in liberal notions of the rights of man as expressed following the “Enlightenment” in the French Revolution, liberty, equality and fraternity. He said:

“The history of our country involves the construction of the *res publica* as being removed from religion. .... We created our laws, which stemmed from the ideas of the Enlightenment; ....and in our laws, our principles, our rights, individual freedoms are enshrined; religious freedom....the freedom of thought and the freedom of expression.”

## **Liberalism and Religious Liberty**

Dr Timothy Shah challenged the notion that religious liberty required the evangelism of western liberalism in a public lecture for the Oxford Centre for Religion and Public Life on November 17. He argued that arguments for Religious Liberty predated the enlightenment by millennia and could be found in many cultures. He argued “If religious liberty enjoys a pre-liberal existence, then liberalism cannot be its necessary precondition. And if liberalism is not religious liberty’s necessary precondition, then advocates of religious liberty do not have to be — and perhaps should not be — evangelists of liberalism.”

For many, religious liberty means making the world safe for liberalism. But Dr Shah argued that those seeking religious liberty, or advocating for it, in non-western countries should not become evangelists for western liberalism or base their arguments on the western language of individual rights but seek the understanding of religious liberty in their own religious cultures.

The problem is with two of the foundation principles of western liberalism: that the state can and should be free of any confessional identity and that the individual should be as in ‘the state of nature’, independent of any external religious, cultural or other force or pressure. The ideal human therefore is the totally autonomous individual, with the inherent right to be entirely free to make their own decisions about their identity and commitments. This pictures human beings as coming from nowhere, springing up apparently like mushrooms in a field overnight. They must therefore be free of all constraints except those authored from themselves. These two principles are ideological constructs of the nature of human beings and of their society. They are not required for the understanding or practice of religious liberty. In the end such militant secularism restricts religious freedom, is morally relative and undermines traditional

values. It gives rise to a liberal priestly class who give shape to lives without shape, put themselves in the place of God and limit the freedom of others.

### **The good of religion and religious liberty**

Arguments for religious liberty in indigenous cultures at root are that the nature of religious piety is non-coercive: forced piety is false piety. Religion is a core component of what is good and 'the good' precedes notions of 'a right'. Religious liberty requires an understanding of the nature of religion in which a "God" looks for voluntary, uncoerced worship and an understanding of the nature of the good to which religion makes a contribution. Religious liberty helps people practice their traditional faith and explore religious truth. Christian monotheism is not contrary to religious liberty since the God of the Bible seeks people to willingly worship him without exercising any power over them. This is particularly seen in the life of Jesus Christ, who divested himself of any divine power in order to draw people of their own choice to himself.

Evangelism and seeking to convert people is not contrary to religious liberty either, for trying to engage someone about the truth of religion is an exercise of their religious freedom, by giving them an opportunity to expand their options. Such activity should be neither coercive or fraudulent, but regrettably in some cases such methods have been used.