

Canada's Office of Religious Freedom (ORF) Instituted under a Cloak of Secrecy

By [Global Research](#)

Global Research, October 18, 2011

[The Canadian Charger](#) 18 October 2011

Region: [Canada](#)

Theme: [Religion](#)

For reasons known only to government officials, the Harper government's Office of Religious Freedom (ORF) - which is supposed to be a central plank of Canadian foreign policy - is being instituted under a cloak of secrecy.

This includes government officials in closed door consultations with religious groups and academics, as well as Foreign Affairs Minister John Baird spending half a day with representatives of the Baha'i and Christian faiths, among others, as well as some religious scholars. This raises the question: what's the real purpose of ORF?

Recently, on the CBC radio program The House, national reporter Louise Elliot attempted to find some answers.

First of all, it may not be a coincidence that the Baha'i community is a focus of the government initiative because, since its founding in the mid-1800's, there were reports that its members have faced torture and execution in Iran - an arch-enemy of right-wing government in North America.

Notwithstanding, many Baha'i are enthusiastic about the government's initiative. Susanne Tamas, director of government relations for the Baha'i Community of Canada, and one of several people invited to a special closed door consultation with Mr. Baird, welcomed the ORF with open arms. "We think it's a wonderful thing for the world that there be some learning done," she said.

After claims that Christians are being driven out of Iraq by Al Qaeda, and Copts are being assaulted and killed in Egypt, Mr. Baird told the UN general assembly he's pleased that his government is making religious freedom a priority.

While government insiders have said that the government plans to model the ORF office after the U.S Office of International Religious Freedom - which along with the parallel office of the Commission of International Religious Freedom, are housed within the US State Department. The U.S ORF was established in the late 1990's, after the passage of the Freedom from Religious Persecution Act. Conservative House Leader Peter Van Loan insisted Canada will have a different approach to its ORF.

"In fact our whole approach to religion and religious freedom is exactly the opposite of the United States. In the United States there's a clear separation of church and state. Our constitution actually established things like rights for Catholic schools, for Protestant schools; for example, those kinds of rights were proactively reflected in our constitution, so

we have a different approach.”

However, critics of the government’s plan are concerned that the ORF may actually be promoting a hierarchy of human rights, with Christianity taking precedence over other religions. Harper himself is an evangelical Christian who fully supports Israel as a state for Jews only getting ready for the second coming of Christ.

Academics wonder if the ORF will ever study the systematic discrimination of Muslim and Christian natives of Palestine in the Jewish state itself or in the Occupied West Bank, Arab East Jerusalem or Gaza.

Tellingly, even U.S. officials cautioned against such an approach. When the Conservative announced their plans for the Office of Religious Freedom, during last spring’s election campaign, The U.S. Commission on International Religious Freedom said: “Don’t make the same mistakes that we did. This office really should be multifaith, multireligious, representing the many communities that are out there experiencing religious persecution; and if it only focuses on one religion it won’t work.”

Prof. Arvind Sharma, who teaches religious studies at McGill University and recently published a book entitled *The Problem of Hyping Religious Freedom*, is not only concerned that ORF will be used by missionary religions – especially Christian missions, but it will be interpreted by them as giving them the right to proselytize.

“I agree that the right to change one’s religion is a part of religious freedom, but I don’t agree that my right to change my religion is symmetrical with somebody else’s right to ask me to change my religion,” Prof. Sharma said.

He cited several examples of aid groups tying their assistance to religious conversion; for example, in Indonesia during the tsunami, or Iraq during the Gulf War.

He added that western promotion of religious freedom has actually led to a backlash in several countries and he hopes the Harper’s government will consider the many ways the term religious freedom has been misused, as it sets out on this rocky road.

Meanwhile, Janice Buckingham, head of a satellite campus of Trinity Western University in Ottawa, with many years experience at the Evangelical Fellowship of Canada, raising awareness of religious persecution, said that countries like Germany have signalled they will pursue religious freedom by focusing on the issue of conversion in Muslim countries, something she said would be a huge mistake for Canada. However, she insists that Canada will still have to take a tough stand – particularly in countries like Afghanistan and Libya.

“We would not find it acceptable that our Canadian forces have lost their lives; Canadians have lost their lives to promote freedom and democracy in these countries, and then to accept some kind of form of government that is going to undermine and turn their backs on that kind of freedom and just democracy for some people in the country.”

While she may be right that Canadians will find this unacceptable, the decade in Afghanistan has shown that there is no military solution to these problems; and it remains to be seen just how far the Conservative government will actually go in promoting religious freedom around the world and how effective its efforts will be in the longer term.

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