The numbers of those affected by religious issues alone compel the prioritisation of religious rights. It is estimated that over 75% of the population of the world claim adherence to a religion. Yet it is also estimated that 2.6 billion people are denied freedom of religion and that there are over 1 million religious prisoners and 159,000 Christian martyrs a year, a figure which is expected to rise to 210,000 by the year 2025.

Yet the cry of the victims often goes unheard or unheeded. The complexity and sensitivity of the subject-matter frequently result in the issue being sidelined or completely sidestepped. The comparative responses of the international community to the phenomena of racial and religious discrimination demonstrate this paralysing fear of addressing issues pertaining to religion. Although the two problems were initially jointly prioritised at the United Nations, they were subsequently separated due to factors predominantly unrelated to their relative importance.

Whilst there are a convention, treaty body, Special Rapporteur, day, week, three decades and now a forthcoming World Conference dedicated to racial discrimination, there are no such mechanisms in place for religious discrimination, which is dealt with only by a Special Rapporteur.

In addition to the compelling need to ease the suffering of victims of abuses, there are other strategic reasons why the right of freedom of religion must no longer be allowed to remain in the penumbra of human rights discourse. It is crucial that religious liberty must come to be recognised as critical both in terms of its intrinsic importance and in its significance in cultivating conditions necessary for peace and the enjoyment of all human rights.

The fundamental importance of the right to religious freedom is due in part to the fact that religion often forms the foundations of an individual’s and a people’s sense of identity, perspective and outlook on life. The very personal nature of the right qualifies it for special attention. If the state will not respect the most intimate beliefs of individuals, it will be unlikely to accord respect to other less personal rights. Religious liberty is therefore valuable as a litmus test for the well being of human rights generally.

Religion is also significant as the major inspiration for the belief in the existence of an inherent dignity in mankind and spring from the concept of doing good to one’s neighbour. The existence of religious life in a country can be an important factor in providing the motivation and conditions necessary for the realisation of civil and political rights, the provision of many of the social, economic and cultural rights and the understanding of responsibility and stewardship required for environmental and developmental rights.

The protection of religion can also be important in establishing or protecting peace, democracy and justice as religious institutions or leaders are often at the forefront of the struggle against oppression. Where they have no freedom to speak out the flame of hope for a just and democratic society dims or even dies. The position of the Catholic Church in East Timor is an example of how important the role of religious bodies can be in such situations.

Beyond being a voice for the people, religious groups and individuals are often the only or the best mediators in situations of conflict and tension. Examples of the unique role religious
communities can play in this respect include those seen in South Africa, Rhodesia/Zimbabwe, the Philippines, El Salvador, Guatemala and East Germany.7

It is increasingly important to address the issue of religious intolerance now due to the changing nature of conflict in the world today. As Professor Samuel Huntington has pronounced, with the demise of the Cold War there has been a shift in the causes of confrontation and the intra-civilizational clash of political ideas is now being replaced by an inter-civilizational clash of culture and religion.8

Analysis of the major conflicts taking place today has shown that the failure to accommodate religious and ethnic differences is one of the primary catalysts for violence. The religious elements in the tragic conflicts in the former Yugoslavia, Sudan, the Middle East, Algeria, Sri Lanka and Northern Ireland, amongst many others, demonstrate the importance of this factor.

The global resurgence in religion in the late twentieth century and the increasingly crucial role that religion is expected to play in international affairs in the future, together with the increase of religious and cultural strife, further advance the argument that the issue of religious freedom should be prioritised in human rights discourse and international relations.

Accordingly greater priority and resources to the issue of religious freedom will help to protect individuals from intolerance and human rights abuses and prevent the violence, displacement and war that lie in their wake. The adoption of measures to address the issue with both foresight and determination will help to prevent both immeasurable suffering and loss of life and the wasteful employment of resources in solving problems arising from prior inadvertence in this key area.

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### Notes

5. ibid.

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### Reports

| Paths to Equity: Cultural, Linguistic, and Racial Diversity in Canadian Early Childhood Education | Judith Bernhard, Marie Louise Lefebvre et al. (1995) | $18.95 |
| Somali Refugees in Toronto: A Profile | Edward Opoku-Dapaah (1995) | $12.95 |
| Adaptation of Ghanaian Refugees in Toronto | Edward Opoku-Dapaah (1993) | $12.50 |

### Occasional Papers

| Fading Hopes: Struggles for Survival Among Cambodians Repatriated from Thai Refugee Camps | Janet McLellan (1996) | $13.95 |

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