

Transcript

Sacred and secular

Barry Bussey

Barry Bussey:

My name is Barry Bussey. And I'm originally from Newfoundland, Canada, but I currently live in Ontario. And I'm the vice president for legal affairs for the Canadian Council of Christian Charities. So our work just involves in providing background, legal information, and guidance to charities throughout Canada.

Interviewer:

And do you find religious freedom issues arise often in that context?

Barry Bussey:

Oh, yes, indeed. In fact, right now, we're involved in a number of issues where Christian charities, charities in general, but in particular-- I should say, religious charities in general-- struggle trying to deal with a very secular culture, that they're trying to find their way, trying to be able to continue in their work. The challenge is that there are a lot of exemptions that are giving in the law and in society at large with respect to religion and to religious groups. And that is being challenged as society more and more is questioning why, the whole thing about religion.

Interviewer:

So why is it that the law protects religion? And what is unique about religion?

Barry Bussey:

It's interesting, and it is a very important question as to understand why religion is protected in the law. I mean, like what is it? What is unique about religion that the law would protect? And it is something that culturally, historically, we've understood.

It was just kind of like we have idioms in our language that are religious. The Good Samaritan or you're a Good Samaritan. And most people have absolutely no idea who the Samaritan is, from what country they belong to, or anything, but that's because it was so ingrained in us that we understood it.

And religion has been that way. And so that's why we saw religion historically as a means of providing structure and social stability. If the family is together because of religious belief

and so forth. And then, if the family is good, then the town is good and so for society as a whole works.

We're living in a time where that has been forgotten-- the whole idea of religion. Why religion? And so the struggle now is trying to articulate exactly why. Being able to teach the young people today or just the people who are questioning today as to why religion is important.

And I think that's a big role and an important role for a lot of academic study right now. A lot of academics in the literature right now are questioning that. Some, for example, Brian Leiter out of University of Chicago suggests that religion, there's no moral reason as to why religion ought to be protected. Others are saying that religion is redundant. You can have freedom of press, freedom of expression, freedom of association, and that would protect religion.

So we see this coming out in a number of areas where institutions are being questioned that were never questioned before. For example, right now, in Canada, there's a university, a private Christian university in the province of British Columbia that wants to have a law school. Now, as part of their culture, part of their understanding, they have their students sign a community covenant. And the community covenant, in part, has a list of all kinds of things and what they expect-- honesty, integrity, and so forth. And also, it deals with sexual relations, and in particular, it states that the students who come to this school will hold true to the sacred union of one man and one woman.

Now, that has caused considerable controversy now where the law societies are being challenged. In fact, the various groups are arguing that law society should not, in fact, give this school approval so that their graduates would be able to practice law under various law societies. Now, that is something that historically would be unheard of, the idea that a Christian law school would be denied the approval because of its definition of marriage. And so there's a real lack of diversity there. And a sense of-- I would suggest, a lot of intolerance for that school to be able to carry out its work.

And so now, we're in a situation where we've got two law societies in Canada that have now decided that the Trinity Western University Law School is not an approved law school. And so as a result, those students will not be able to practice law there in those two provinces. They will be able to go to another province that has approved it, and then they will be able to go through the process, the articling process. And then, if they want to go to these other provinces, they will have to go through a whole process to see if they will be accepted.

So the point of that is, is that religion was once seen as something that it was a given. It is no longer a given. And this is a perfect example of where it's not a given.

And so what is important for academics at this point is to be able to say, OK, what is unique about religion? We can look at religion from a historical basis. We can see that historically when we got religious freedom, we got freedom of expression, freedom of association, and so forth.

But there's also other areas. I mean you've got just the whole respect and understanding for human rights came from a historical understanding that just because I don't agree with your position that I'm not going to imprison you, I'm not going to do any harm to you, the whole concept of tolerance, and so forth, which then led us into our society to give us basic human rights. That has been lost in our ability to see, I guess, the importance of religion.

And so as we go forward, it'll be very important for us to make sure that we can put together an argument, not only an argument, but an understanding. And I think it's going to be important to put together a narrative so that the stories of individuals who religion is very important for them, that they will be able to tell their story in a way that's going to be convincing and say, hey, you know what? We all are on the same real estate. We got to live together. We got to do the best we can to do that. And we may not agree, but at least we can respect one another.