

RELIGIOUS LIBERTY



2020, PULSES OF GLOBAL CONVERSATIONS:

Window to A Larger World

BY GANOUNE DIOP

The following speech was the Clinton Emmerson Annual Address on February 14, on the occasion of the Charles Elliott Weniger Society for Excellence Forty-Fifth Annual Awards Presentation. Four Seventh-day Adventists who have and are contributing to make a difference in their various areas of expertise and services have been honored. These awards commemorate a life of excellence, that of Charles Elliott Weniger, who distinguished himself as a person of a brilliant mind and a humane humble heart. The speech was offered before America woke up to a grim reality: the current COVID-19 pandemic. The coronavirus crisis reset all the buttons. On the one hand, the flow of human trafficking slowed down, air pollution in cities decreased, the emission of carbon dioxide significantly diminished and is bound to continue to diminish. There is less urban congestion. Most cities in the northern hemisphere are shut down. Travel ban is the new normal until further notice. On the other hand, over one million are currently infected. Thousands are dead in every corner of the globe. The whole of creation is subjected to groaning and suffering and dying. Prior to this upheaval, the challenges underlined in this reflection seemed to have been global priorities. Some will take a back seat, but some of the issues are perennial problems of human beings struggling to be human and humane. A global tour of the issues could still be helpful.

Looking at our world from the perspective of international affairs, 2020 is set to be an eventful year. The first few weeks have demonstrated the accuracy of such a statement. Our world presents multifaceted wounds in nearly every domain of human existence. At the outset, let me specify that the following speech is not an apocalyptic speculation regarding all that is wrong with our world, nor is it a cataclysmic series of predictions of

signs of the times and end-time events. Rather, I would like to submit to your consideration what the international community is focusing on, trying to find solutions to better the living of billions of people around the global home in which parts are more connected than generally assumed. What happens in Tokyo or Los Angeles is not without consequences for the species living in the Amazon. What happened in the Hubei province mobilized scientists from all over the globe.

I. Issues which Attract Public Conversations, Debates, and Polarized Opinions

In the global political world, the United Nations is a significant hub to test the pulse of global conversations and priorities. In 2020, several UN agencies and activities put emphases on important global issues that seem to matter to the international community. Five of them will probably take center stage. A sixth one emerged in recent weeks with the outburst of the coronavirus. The latter seems to mobilize epidemiologists from around the globe. What has taken center stage as 2020 unfolds are the following:

A. Climate Change, Climate Crisis, and Climate Justice

A major issue which will continue to draw global attention and mobilization is variously referred to as climate change, climate crisis, and climate justice. The connections of so-called greenhouse effect, global warming, desertification, rise of ocean level, and poverty

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Dr. Ganoune Diop, director of Public Affairs and Religious Liberty for the worldwide Seventh-day Adventist Church, presents the Clinton Emmerson Annual Weniger Address titled "Window on a Larger World."

with its connections to migrations, have been established beyond reasonable doubt. This issue, however, will continue to stir passionate advocacy but also stubborn denial.

In spite of the lack of consensus at the recent twenty-fifth meeting of the UN climate talks in Madrid, the COP 25, ecosystem restoration has nevertheless become a global priority.

The UN decade on ecosystem restoration will be launched in 2021. It has become a global priority.

The need for urgent climate action seems to mobilize various sectors of civil society, from thousands of scientists to hundreds of thousands of youth activists.

B. Gender Equity and Equality

On another issue, 2020 is considered a pivotal year for the realization of gender equality and the empowerment of all women and girls everywhere. The issue of gender equity and equality will continue to mobilize the human rights' agenda.¹ According to UN Women, the epoch-defining resolutions of the Beijing + 25, arguably the most comprehensive blueprint for advancing women's rights, will be revisited to assess progress and challenges.

The Beijing Declaration and Platform for Action of

1995 has been recognized as the most ambitious road map for the empowerment of women and girls everywhere. In 2020, it will be twenty-five years since the Beijing Platform for Action set strategic objectives and actions for the achievement of gender equality in twelve critical areas of concern.

1. Women and poverty
2. Education and training of women
3. Women and health
4. Violence against women
5. Women and armed conflict
6. Women and the economy
7. Women in power and decision-making
8. Institutional mechanisms
9. Human rights of women
10. Women and the media
11. Women and the environment
12. The girl child

Then came the MDG, especially Goal 3: Promote gender equality and empower women.

The consensus and adoption of the text "Transforming Our World: The 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development Goals," including seventeen universal sustainable goals, were hailed as an event that

made history.² This was nothing short of a miracle, if I may say, because of almost unsurmountable hurdles to overcome. In 2015, the SDG's were born.

Though all SDGs are interconnected, of particular interest for this workshop and for the following symposium planned for a later date in 2021, are SDG 5 and 10. Respectively,

- Achieve gender equality and empower all women and girls.
- Reduce inequality within and among countries.

There are of course targets attached to each sustainable development goal. This is very well known.³

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The global challenge of the realization of gender equality and women's rights will continue to generate deep debates and divisions as to the scope of these rights, including among religious traditions. Nevertheless, this topic has been sealed as a priority and as an incontrovertible part of not only the previous millennium's development goals, but also the current agreed sustainable development goals: goals 5 and 10 in particular.

C. Elections and the Question of Democracy vs. Populism

At national levels, the elections in the US promise to impact several interrelated issues, not only regarding domestic and national internal affairs but also pertaining to foreign policies, international affairs, and the intersections of public policy and morality.

D. Global Persecution of Christians

A gloomy reality has drawn more attention: the rise of persecution of Christians. This global phenomenon most definitely will continue to be part of conversations and plans of action. It has also been instrumentalized

and politicized to the extent that some governments have seized the opportunity to champion the cause of persecutions of Christians in the Middle East for example, to advance their own political agenda.

E. Religious Liberty and Civil Rights

During the current pandemic, government prohibitions on gathering in churches have triggered complaints that the government has no right to restrict people's freedom of religion, especially freedom of assembly. This is misinformed. Suffice it to say that there are two aspects inherent to freedom of religion or belief according to international law: the *forum internum*

and the *forum externum*. The *forum internum* should never be violated.

It is a person's right to form, to hold, and to change beliefs and convictions. This should have absolute protection. However, the *forum externum*, a person's right to manifest or to outwardly display one's religion or belief can be

legally subjected to limitations. This aspect of religious freedom is not absolute.

The International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights Article 18 (3), specifies: "Restrictions on the freedom to manifest religion or belief only if limitations are prescribed by law and are necessary to protect public safety, order, health or morals, or the fundamental rights and freedoms of others." [ICCPR Art. 18 (3)]. In the current pandemic therefore, it is a matter of public health and safety to limit freedom of assembly.

Prior to the current pandemic, a surprising turn has occurred in the domain of religious liberty. In the current global context, the framing of rights is at times done in competition with one another. The misunderstanding of religious freedom, also called freedom of religion or belief, is part of the global landscape. Consequently, religious freedom is unfortunately positioned against other civil rights. Because of the accusation that religious freedom has become a tool for discrimination it has become urgent to revisit the very nature of freedom of religion or belief and contribute to helping the global community recapture the centrality of this fundamental freedom. The Seventh-day Adventist church can play a pivotal role as it has

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consistently done since its beginnings and its charting of the first international religious liberty association in 1893.

What is the meaning, significance, and scope of religious freedom, also called by the international community “freedom of religion or belief”? What is appealing about this particular good that people dedicate their lives to promote it? Despite the fact that more than five billion people do not enjoy this freedom, and despite the fact that its universality is challenged in academic circles, its importance cannot be underestimated.

Religious liberty or “freedom of religion or belief” is part of the repertoire of the international community, used in legal, political, cultural, existential, and international relations contexts. It is positioned as Article 18 of the international human rights barometer, “the universal declaration of human rights.”

Along with civil rights, religious freedom is recognized as a constitutional provision designed to secure the prerogative of every citizen. In the United States, to underline its primacy among fundamental freedoms, many experts call it the first freedom. In fact, it undergirds all other freedoms. It presupposes freedom of thought, of conscience, and of choice. It is key to self-determination. Religious freedom translates into freedom of association, of assembly and worship.

But there is more to religious freedom than meets the eye. From a faith-based perspective, religious freedom is a sign, a symbol, and even a seal of a covenant or a possible social contract to signify how human beings should relate to one another—that is, with respect, deference, and even reverence before the mystery of life. It is a sign according to which we should relate to any other human being with care, caution, without fear, and most certainly without violence.

Religious liberty is freedom from being harmed, hurt, humiliated, discriminated against, or criminalized and subjugated to any form of violence. This freedom from violence should help us reimagine what life would be if it

were fully embraced. The outcome would be peace and security. But there is still more to freedom of religion. It is more than a rediscovery during the Renaissance or an insight from the Enlightenment era.

Religious freedom is not just a right, a legal or legislative provision to promote and protect. There is something about religious freedom which transcends the realm of legislative provisions. It is not just something to be voted by lawmakers. It goes beyond that. Its roots are deeper than social arrangements.

From a faith-based perspective, religious freedom is primarily a divine attribute. And since, from this perspective, humans are created in the image of God, humans reflect divine attributes (a theologian would specify communicable attributes). Religious freedom is part of the image of God the Creator. This divine attribute is therefore reflected in humans.

It is, moreover, the root and tangible expression of human dignity. Human conscience, the locus of moral decision, corroborates this dignity. To deprive humans of religious freedom is to dismiss their conscience and trample on their dignity. Everyone ought to be respected on the basis of human conscience, the inner sanctuary in every person.

Freedom of belief or conscience, and of conviction, is therefore primordially an intrinsic attribute of every human being. It is connected to what it means to be human. In other words, it is a sign of our humanity.

Nelson Mandela eloquently stated, “To deny any person their human rights is to challenge their very humanity.” So, to deny any person or any institution their religious freedom is to deny their humanity or institutional existence.

II. The Synergy behind the Mobilization to Solve World Problems

The mobilization of nations to create international organizations to build bridges, and not continue to wage

wars, was a significant incentive and driver for Christian churches, for example, to begin talking to one another, to stop irrational animosity and wars, and to open the possibility to partner to do good for society.

A brief reminder of key religious and geopolitical events and conflicts may be helpful to understand where we are today globally on our human collective experience.

The Thirty Years' War, fought in Europe between 1618 and 1648, brought a staggering number of eight million deaths. It resulted in the Treaty of Westphalia, an event seen as the beginning of the European nation states as we know them. The principle of *cuius regio eius religio* ["whose realm, his religion"] was a good step forward, though it was not the ideal arrangement for religious freedom.

Identifying major world treaties can be a good entry point to understand the geo-political and global religious issues.

The First World War resulted in sixteen million deaths. Nations were faced with a choice: continuing to wage wars and self-destruction of the human family or build bridges for peaceful coexistence. The Treaty of Versailles marked a new era in international relations. The creation of the League of Nations to mediate, arbitrate, and solve problems before they escalate into open conflicts and wars was a major step forward towards peaceful coexistence.

Peace did not last long. World War II came with its staggering number of sixty million deaths; after which the UN was created and the UDHR (The Universal Declaration of Human Rights) was ratified on December 10, 1948.

The root cause undergirding the various international problems is the issue of violence: People in our world are addicted to violence.

Even the quest for power and prestige, privilege and position above others can be motivated by the almost irresistible drive to dominate, to subjugate, and therefore to harm. That has become the dark side of human nature. To violate other people's integrity, whether physical, mental, emotional, social, or spiritual is to injure their God-given dignity.

Historically, our world has been the theatre of incalculable violence, not just political, such as the *munera* during the Roman empire, but also religious. Mass violence as in genocides, but also personal, domestic, verbal, and non-spoken violence, mute coercion meant to create fear and pressure. It is a form of oppression.

At personal and collective levels, religious people are often tempted to use verbal violence in the name of prophecy. We knew from the Apostle Paul that prophecy without love is nothing. Prophecy is at time weaponized, used to cover violence. The message of the Prince of peace has been turned into violence, hate speech, discrimination, and criminalization of others.

Taking metaphors of beasts as real metonymy, to refer to others as part of a web of evil, assimilating those who believe differently with threats is beyond decency. To believe in the conspiracy theories of the resurgence of inquisitions, persecutions, and demonization of Roman Catholics, presuming that they have already received the mark of the beast, is mistaken. According to Ellen White, "the mark of the beast" will be affixed during the last act



Photo Credit: Erno Müller

This year's recipients for the Charles Weniger Award included (from left to right) Ganoune Diop, director of Public Affairs and Religious Liberty for the worldwide Seventh-day Adventist Church; Reinder Bruinsma, retired pastor, educator, author, and church administrator; Andrea Luxton, president of Andrews University; and Richard Hart, president of Loma Linda University.

of the drama of the great controversy, when a Sunday Law will be imposed or forced upon all the inhabitants of the world. Bringing the future into the present, as relates to people as enemies, cancels the relevance of the gospel.

A mission to help people fall in love with Jesus can be turned into a proof that the Adventist message is irrelevant for educated people, learned ones, and higher classes in society.

The name Seventh-day Adventist has two components and two possible pitfalls when its essence is forgotten. The seventh day is an expression of the good news; before being a commandment it was a gift of God, who modeled what God expected from those created in His image. The Sabbath was offered for the purpose of celebrating creation of God's image and the gift of life and fellowship in love. It can be turned and confined into a test, confusing a God who is love with earthly monarchs jealous and nervous about losing their prerogatives and privileges.

Likewise, the word Adventist is part of the good news. It is called the Blessed Hope. It is the announcement of the healing of all the wounds of human existence. There will be no more sorrow, sickness, suffering, death, conflicts, hurt, harm, pain. Peace and harmony will finally become universal realities. This can also be turned into a morbid focus on end-time disasters, signs of the times, persecutions, suffering, and natural catastrophes. These are not the everlasting good news. They are not the liberation of creation which suffers. They are not the healing of our world.

At Jesus' Second Coming, there will be universal reconciliation, no more climate crises, no longer gender inequity, inequality, and injustice, no more tribalism, ethnocentrism, or racism. No more populist propaganda based on fake news, no more persecution of Christians or

of any minority or majority, no more trampling of any person's dignity or freedom, or freedom to believe.

To commit to covenants according to the dictates of one's conscience will become universal again in a new world where there will be no more violence—only peace and fellowship in love.

Afterword

The current pandemic has most certainly taken center stage. The responses and collaborations of the international community are remarkable. People of other denominations and of other faiths and philosophies are mobilized in amazing fashion. This is also happening in a larger world in which God stirs the minds, hearts, and hands of humans who selflessly dedicate their best in solidarity to other human beings by virtue of their humanity.

For those interested in consulting a repository of resources regarding faith-based responses to COVID-19 you may look at the following link:

https://docs.google.com/document/d/1_sOJqwSM8XPI0nr1BITVFFkKtu9ykPeLS9NkcDLoyZc/edit?usp=sharing.

Endnotes

1. On the website of UN Women, we read the following: "The twenty-fifth anniversary of the Fourth World Conference on Women and adoption of the Beijing Declaration and Platform for Action (1995). A five-year milestone will be reached towards achieving the Sustainable Development Goals of the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development. 2020 is therefore a pivotal year for the accelerated realization of gender equality and the empowerment of all women and girls, everywhere."

2. "In September 2015 the United Nations made history. After months of negotiations, all 193 member states formally adopted 'Transforming Our World: The 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development,' including seventeen universal sustainable development goals (SDGs). ... Yet three years earlier, no one thought

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The annual vesper program at Loma Linda University connects past Charles Weinger Award recipients and supporters of the society to encourage the pursuit of excellence in all Adventist church members.

that a set of universal sustainable development goals could be negotiated using a broad-based, consultative process that involved not only UN member states but also representatives from civil society; the private sector; UN agencies, programs, and funds; and other nonstate actors. At a point in history when many were questioning the future of UN multilateralism—multiple countries working together on a given issue—and member states were increasingly failing to reach consensus on key decisions, the outcome of these negotiations was not only considered to be a major accomplishment but also gave both the United Nations and multilateralism a new lease on life.”

3. 5.1 End all forms of discrimination against all women and girls everywhere.

5.2 Eliminate all forms of violence against all women and girls in the public and private spheres, including trafficking and sexual and other types of exploitation.

5.3 Eliminate all harmful practices, such as child, early and forced marriage and female genital mutilation.

5.4 Recognize and value unpaid care and domestic work through the provision of public services, infrastructure and social protection policies and the promotion of shared responsibility within the household and the family as nationally appropriate.

5.5 Ensure women’s full and effective participation and equal opportunities for leadership at all levels of decision-making in political, economic and public life.

5.6 Ensure universal access to sexual and reproductive health and reproductive rights as agreed in accordance with the Programme of Action of the International Conference on Population and Development and the Beijing Platform for Action and the outcome documents of their review conferences.

5.a Undertake reforms to give women equal rights to economic resources, as well as access to ownership and control over land and other forms of property, financial services, inheritance and natural resources, in accordance to national laws.

5.b Enhance the use of enabling technology, in particular information and communication technology, to promote the empowerment of women.

5.c Adopt and strengthen sound policies and enforceable legislation for the promotion of gender equality and the empowerment of all women and girls at all levels.

4. See Note 1.



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