

Dear Friends,

'Open Door Policies'

A perennial problem which we all face is how to relate to those with whom we profoundly disagree. When Islamic terrorists, for example, attacked the offices of the French satirical magazine *Charlie Hebdo* in January 2015 and killed 12 people, the reason they gave was that the magazine had insulted their religion. But the general public united to condemn the attack and to pledge its support for press freedom. Free speech (even when exercised in a way which some might find offensive and objectionable) was declared to be a fundamental principle of western democracy.

The principle seemed clear until in December 2015, in the wake of a further spate of terrorist attacks, Roger Trump, a Republican candidate for the American presidency, called for a 'total and complete shut-down of Muslims' entering the United States. Suddenly the public seemed rather less sure about the right to free speech, and about a *Charlie Hebdo*-style 'right to offend'. A petition was placed on parliament's official website calling for Trump to be banned from entering the United Kingdom, and within a few days it gathered over 350,000 signatures. To their credit most politicians resisted this call. They strongly disagreed with Trump's views and variously described them as offensive, inflammatory, outrageous and impractical, but they also suggested that debate or dialogue was far better than a dictatorial suppression of views with which one might happen to disagree.

Our leaders were in general prepared on this occasion to uphold freedom of speech as a non-negotiable principle of our society. But then there came the Chinese President Xi Jinping's visit to our country in October. Freedom of expression in China is severely restricted. Anyone who speaks out against the authorities faces harassment, arrest and detention, and torture is widespread. More than 230 lawyers and activists have been targeted and branded as a 'criminal gang' by the Chinese authorities in a widespread crackdown begun in July 2015. Our government seems to have been prepared effectively to ignore these human rights abuses in the interests of promoting closer economic ties with China and securing some major business agreements. The Chinese leader was greeted with a 41-gun salute, driven to Buckingham Palace in a gilded carriage to meet with the Queen, and honoured with a state banquet.

Does our government see the development of economic ties as going hand in hand with dialogue over human rights issues? Perhaps. But if so, why, when the Dalai Lama visited the UK just a few weeks before the Chinese President was due to arrive, was the Tibetan spiritual leader unable to hold his usual meeting with Prince Charles, a well-known supporter and friend? One can only assume that Charles had been pressurised not to do anything to upset President Xi. The Chinese government's desire to suppress the beliefs and aspirations of the Dalai Lama had effectively been met by our own leaders through the subordination of the principle of free speech to economic self-interest.

What would Jesus think about all this? During his earthly ministry he readily mingled with everyone, even those like the tax-collectors and prostitutes whom others shunned. He practiced an open-door policy. Money was never a determining factor in the decisions he made, and it certainly never prevented him from speaking his mind and challenging the rich and powerful when they were abusing others. "What does the Lord require of you? To act justly and to love mercy and to walk humbly with your God." (Micah 6:8)

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