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Protecting the freedom of religion

SPC2

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Introduction

Religion is defined as “human beings’ relation to that which they regard as holy, sacred, absolute, spiritual, divine, or worthy of special reverence.” The Universal Declaration on Human Rights (UDHR), one of the most internationally recognized declarations of all time, clearly protects the right to religion with its 18th article.

Throughout history, the right to freely practice one’s religion – or to hold none – has always been a cornerstone of human dignity. Despite this, the right to freedom of religion has often found itself being restricted or even denied as a whole. Frequently being, at least in part, a “casus belli” in cases ranging from the present-day Israel-Palestine conflict to the crusades of the past.

Protecting the freedom of religion is not only about safeguarding the rights of an individual, but it also is about promoting peaceful co-existence. When both people and communities feel safe practicing their religion without fear of persecution, societies benefit from greater social harmony and stability.

While governments and international organizations worldwide have made efforts to defend religious freedoms, violations continue to occur, often with devastating consequences. In many parts of the world, religious discrimination remains prominent, with minorities facing violence and intolerance. This highlights the need for stronger protections and global commitment to ensure that religious freedom is upheld universally. Supporting the freedom of religion not only secures the well-being of individuals but also enhances broader societal gains by promoting tolerance, understanding, and respect.

Definition of Key Terms

Casus belli

An event or act used to justify a war

Monotheistic

Relating to the belief that there is only one God

Non-governmental organization

A group that functions independently of any government with the objective of improving social conditions

Polytheistic

Believing in many different gods

Prejudice

An opinion based on nothing but preconceived notions, leading to unfair judgments

Religious discrimination

Treating a person or group of people unfavorably because of their religious beliefs

State-imposed religion

A religion is officially supported or endorsed by a government, which often makes it the only recognized religion. States with imposed religions frequently persecute members of other religious groups.

Stereotype

A widely held but oversimplified and generalized belief or idea about a particular group of people or things. It is often based on limited or inaccurate information.

General Overview

Historical development of religious freedom

Throughout the course of history, the magnitude of freedom of religion has varied massively, ranging from a single, state-imposed religion to states that are open to any religious practice. This highlights the dynamic nature of the issue, which constantly faces new challenges, and how opinions regarding it vary person by person, regardless of whether or not they are of a similar culture and/or upbringing.

One of the earliest cases of a ruler attempting to enforce a new state religion upon his people was the Egyptian pharaoh Akhenaten in the 14th century BC. He attempted to introduce one of the first beliefs that could be considered monotheistic, worshipping the deity "Aten," which was often represented as a sun disc. This "new" religion was unpopular among the Egyptian population and its high priests, who were essentially all part of the more traditional polytheistic ancient Egyptian beliefs. Shortly after Akhenaten's death, all his reforms were undone, demonstrating the inefficacy of forcing a belief system upon a population and showing how it can cause societal unrest by creating friction between a state and its society. This example highlights the importance of protecting religious freedom and how forcing a single belief system disrupts social harmony, whereas respecting different beliefs promotes peace and tolerance.

On the other hand, an example of increased freedom of religion can be found under the reign of Ashoka, emperor of India in the 3rd century BC. Following profound remorse after his successful, yet bloody, conquest of Kalinga, he adopted the Buddhist faith and decided to promote religious tolerance and peace rather than conquest and violence. The support for such freedom of religion can be found in some pillars that came to be known as the “Edicts of Ashoka.” These pillars contained texts regarding the importance of compassion, moral conduct, and respect for all religions. By advocating for freedom of religion, Ashoka’s policies showed that protecting diverse beliefs fosters social stability and unity. His reign illustrates how protecting freedom of religion can reduce tensions and contribute to peaceful co-existence, as opposed to sparking a desire for the conquest of foreign lands and becoming military-powerful.

As can be seen, throughout the course of history, there have constantly been changes in the approach to freedom of religion. From Akhenaten’s failed attempt to introduce monotheism to Ashoka’s embrace of pluralism, these examples reflect the different strategies for approaching religious diversity within societies. While enforcing a single belief system seemed to lead to resistance and instability, embracing religious tolerance showed potential for greater social unity. The historical shifts highlight the complexity and varied impacts of religious policies and emphasize the importance of careful consideration and balancing prior to any actions regarding them.

International commitments

There are plenty of laws regarding the freedom of religion. Some are from international bodies, such as the United Nations (UN), and others are from more regional ones, such as the European Union (EU). These commitments highlight the global recognition of religious freedom as a fundamental human right and set out frameworks for countries to adhere to, although their enforcement often depends on domestic implementation.

One of the most widely recognized international agreements is the Universal Declaration of Human Rights (UDHR), proclaimed by the UN on the 10th of December 1948. It sets a common standard for essential human rights that all member states should protect. Among these, in Article 18, comes the “right to freedom of thought, conscience and religion” for everyone. Further, the UDHR is often considered the foundation and has paved the way for seventy other human rights treaties. Among these is the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights (ICCPR), which, as opposed to the UDHR, is legally binding to all its signatories. Yet again, Article 18 expands on what

was previously said in the UDHR and even explicitly prohibits “coercion which would impair his freedom to have or to adopt a religion or belief of his choice.”

Regional frameworks also complement these international efforts. For example, the European Convention on Human Rights (ECHR)’s Article 9 protects the right to teach, practice, and observe one’s own religion. The European Court of Human Rights (ECHR as well, but for the sake of clarity, this acronym will not be used) has played an essential role in setting precedents regarding the interpretation of the Convention to ensure that states respect and uphold these freedoms. The court has ruled in numerous cases involving religious discrimination, restrictions on worship, and the rights of religious minorities, significantly contributing to the standards of freedom of religion in Europe.

The case of “Lautsi v. Italy” is a notable example of how these regional frameworks act to protect the freedom of religion. In this case, a parent challenged the presence of crucifixes inside Italian public school classrooms, claiming that it was a violation of the ECHR’s Article 9. At first, the European Court of Human Rights ruled in favor of Lautsi, stating that crucifixes should not be displayed inside public school classrooms and sparking uproar in Italy and other countries. However, following an appeal, the court overturned the previous ruling, with the reasoning that it was “an essentially passive symbol” that could not have “indoctrinated” students. This case highlights the delicate balance between protecting freedom of religion in increasingly diverse nations and societal norms, which in this case was the fact that Italy is a predominantly Catholic country.

Challenges to religious freedom

Despite often being an essential component to becoming a just and peaceful society, freedom of religion still faces many challenges that limit it. This can range from government restrictions, social tensions, interfaith conflict, and security concerns, among other things. Understanding these challenges is crucial for developing strategies that really do promote religious tolerance and respect for other beliefs.

Of the previously listed issues, one of the most prevalent is government restrictions. These restrictions can come in many forms, sometimes limiting the practice of such religions, other times outright persecuting adherents of a certain belief. These regulations are often justified by national security concerns, public order, or a desire to maintain a unified national identity. Further examples of laws imposed by governments can be the prohibition of converting from one religion to another or banning the ability of some religions to gather or spread their beliefs. These actions limit an

individual's ability to freely practice their faith, suppressing religious expression and sometimes even resulting in imprisonment or violence.

In Iran, religious freedom finds itself being rather limited due to government-imposed restrictions. The Baha'i community, one of Iran's largest religious minorities, is a primary target of systematic persecution. Authorities have conducted arbitrary arrests, destruction and confiscation of their properties, and even enforced disappearances. Further, Christian converts, Gonabadi dervishes, and atheists have been arrested under vague charges such as threatening national security and espionage. This systematic discrimination highlights the Iranian government's misuse of laws in an attempt to suppress religions different from the state-approved ones. These actions not only infringe on human rights but also undermine social cohesion by isolating different groups simply based on their faith.

Timeline of Key Events

Date	Event
14 th century B.C.	Akhenaten attempts to introduce one of the earliest versions of monotheism
3 rd century B.C.	Emperor Ashoka promotes religious tolerance with his edicts
10 th of December, 1948	The Universal Declaration of Human Rights (UDHR) is adopted by the General Assembly
4 th of November, 1950	European Convention on Human Rights (ECHR) was signed in Rome, Italy
1959	European Court of Human Rights is set up
16 th of December, 1966	The International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights (ICCPR) is adopted
2011	The European Court of Human Rights finds no violation committed by the Italian government regarding the presence of crucifixes inside school classes

Major Parties Involved

Amnesty International

Amnesty International is a non-governmental organization (NGO) dedicated to promoting human rights across the globe. Amnesty International works to ensure that people's freedom of religion is protected.

The group is heavily involved in advocating for the protection of religious freedom across the world through research, awareness campaigns, and lobbying with governments, organizations, and policymakers. The organization leads investigations and documents human rights abuses, such as ones against the freedom of religion, and it raises awareness through reports and by hosting campaigns.

Amnesty International also exerts pressure on governments and other organizations to hold those who are found guilty of religious persecution. Through their reports and global campaigns, awareness about religious freedom violations rises, and so does advocacy for legislative change. Additionally, the organization provides support to any victims of abuse by offering legal assistance or helping them find asylum. Their collaboration with other NGOs and international organizations leads to them having a critical role in shaping global efforts to protect religious freedom.

European Court of Human Rights

The European Court of Human Rights is an international court established in 1959. The Council of Europe defines its work as “ruling on individual or State applications alleging violations of the civil and political rights set out in the European Convention on Human Rights,” meaning that it plays an important role in interpreting various laws regarding human rights, including the freedom of religion.

The court has addressed many cases involving religious discrimination, restrictions on worship, and the rights of religious minorities. It also helps safeguard the balance between individual rights and preserving the diverse cultures and traditions throughout Europe. Its decisions are essential in advancing human rights standards across Europe.

United Nations (UN)

The UN plays a key role in protecting religious freedom around the world as it serves as a global platform for dialogue and cooperation between countries on human rights abuses. Its efforts in safeguarding freedom of religion are not only based on declarations but also on treaties and resolutions that call for accountability in case of violations of such freedoms.

The foundation of the UN's commitment to religious freedom comes from the Universal Declaration of Human Rights (UDHR) in 1948. Article 18 of the UDHR aims to guarantee the freedom of thought, conscience, and religion, which puts into perspective the global scope of these rights. This declaration is a crucial document that sets international standards and has served as the basis of other human rights documents.

Further, UN bodies such as the UN Human Rights Council (HRC) and the Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights (OHCHR) are actively engaged in monitoring the situation regarding the freedom of religion across the world and assist states to better align their laws and policies with international standards. The Human Rights Council also frequently calls for peer reviews of state practices and engages in dialogue to hold governments accountable for their treatment of minorities.

Possible Solutions

International Council for the Protection of Religious Freedom (ICPRF)

The ICPRF would act as a specialized international organization that exclusively focuses on defending the right to freely practice one's own religion. It would act as an independent entity, receiving an annual budget from the United Nations itself, thus preventing any bias from any state/organization by not having any affiliation with them. As a main objective, it would document newly found abuses and monitor previously known violations, reporting them with minimal risk of foreign influence, giving an idea of the true conditions of a situation. Further, it would work with both global and regional governments, such as the United Nations, the European Union, and the African Union, to attempt to reach agreements, possibly even by acting as a lobbying party with local politicians. In addition to their reporting, the budget should also allow funding to intervene in critical situations where immediate action is required for the well-being of those affected. This money could be used to provide legal, financial, or diplomatic assistance to individuals or religious communities who are facing persecution.

Promoting religious freedom through trade relationships

While such an approach has likely never been attempted in the past, it could have potential as an effective method to safeguard freedom of religion. It would consist of integrating clauses regarding religious freedom into trade agreements and requiring certain requirements to be met to ensure the possibility of a deal, either at a discount or just as a whole. These trade deals could require countries to uphold certain standards regarding the liberties of worshipping among the general population. Better deals like these could create incentives for governments to finally act on

issues that they previously deemed to be of low priority due to the adverse effects of otherwise worse trade benefits. Further, such a framework could keep itself in check without much need for foreign assistance due to the population of a country holding its government accountable for any potential inaction.

Educational campaigns on religious tolerance

Organizing educational campaigns that emphasize religious tolerance and understanding is another way to encourage religious tolerance. By teaching people, especially the younger generations, about the value of respecting religious diversity, societies can develop into an environment where people of different faiths feel valued, safe, and respected.

Both national and international initiatives to enhance awareness of religious diversity can play a key role in reducing societal prejudice, increasing empathy, and minimizing risks of persecution based on differences in religions. Schools and universities could consider sparing some time to incorporate lessons regarding religious differences and the negative consequences of intolerance into their curricula. Additionally, workshops, dialogues, and interfaith exchanges could be held to develop understanding between different religious groups and possibly even play a role in challenging stereotypes, dismantling misconceptions between faiths, and highlighting shared values among religions.

Campaigns could be implemented to encourage positive representations of other religions and discourage hate speech. Celebrities, influencers, and other public figures could use their platform to raise awareness about freedom of religion. Over time, these efforts could change public perception of different faiths and lay the groundwork for a society that protects religious freedom.

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