

F R E E D O M O F R E L I G I O N
O R B E L I E F

F O R E V E R Y O N E



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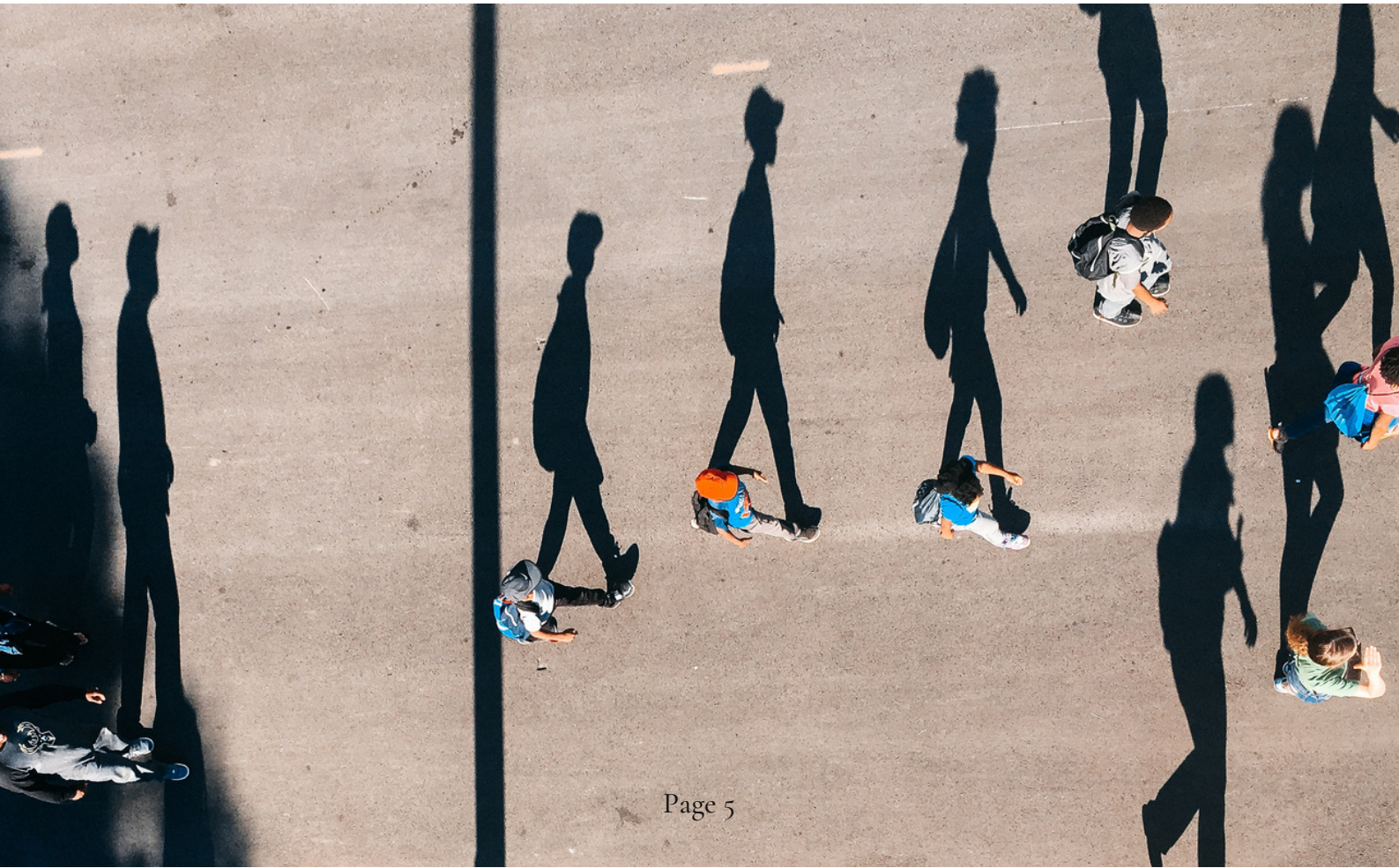
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AUTHOR'S NOTE

The goal of freedom is the peaceful coexistence among people who may have differences in beliefs but have a shared humanity. Promoting freedom of thought, conscience, religion, or belief is an integral component of our work for peace. The building of peace desperately needs the commitment of religious leaders to do our very best to mend human brokenness that has appeared in past religious antagonisms, hostilities, wars, and genocidal crimes against humanity. A deep aspiration of the human family is to witness the eradication of hostility among religions and among world philosophies. The era of religious wars has brought much suffering and death. One can only hope that people of goodwill from all world faiths and beliefs driven by human solidarity will partner to promote life, peace, and justice for all. Freedom of thought, belief, and conscience is a key component to upholding human dignity and the sacredness, not only of holy sites, but of human beings.

O 1

What is FoRB?



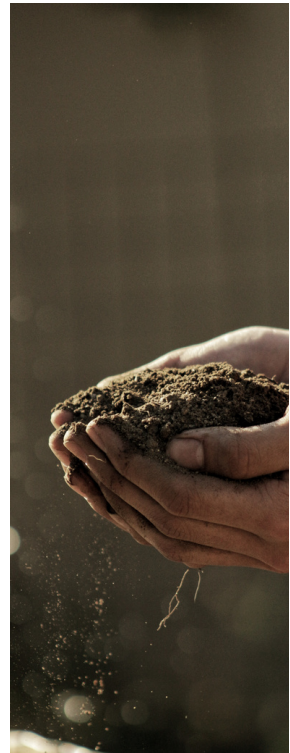
A WORKING DEFINITION

At the outset, it is fitting to specify that religious freedom can be defined as the right to profess, practice, and propagate one's beliefs without coercion, intimidation, or manipulation.

Freedom of thought, conscience, religion, or belief means freedom from restrictions of one's rights. It is freedom from being violated in one's physical, intellectual, emotional, and spiritual integrity. It is freedom from being persecuted, threatened, coerced, humiliated, or harmed. It is freedom from being forced to remain in a given religion, ideology, worldview, or cultural allegiance. In other words, it is freedom from being forced to do something that is against one's deeply held convictions or against one's conscience. As such it is inseparable from freedom of conscience.

Freedom of thought, conscience, religion, or belief includes the right to wear symbols, and to display them in the public space. It is also the right to possess or to own property devoted to religious or philosophical matters. Consequently, freedom of thought, conscience, religion, or belief is the right to build institutions as expressions of one's deeply held convictions.

Religious liberty is therefore the right to build sacred spaces designed to promote one's convictions, worldview, and values. It is thus the right to perform rites and rituals to signify one's beliefs. It is the right to celebrate and/or to set aside sacred times to express exclusive allegiance to God: a day when all is submitted to God's sovereignty: one's time, reflections, and activities or rest as in Judaism.



There is more to religious
freedom than meets the eye

Freedom of thought, conscience, religion, or belief, which is also the freedom not to believe or belong to any religion, allows everyone the opportunity to have a voice as an expression of one's conscience. From a socio-political perspective, it gives everyone the right to be an influence in political processes and policymaking without succumbing to the temptation to translate personal beliefs into national or universal policies to impose on all.

Freedom of thought, conscience, religion, or belief is every person's right, and it is the prerogative to share one's beliefs and hopes without coercing, deceiving, or manipulating others.

There is therefore a responsibility attached to freedom of thought, conscience, religion, or belief in the fact of being human and humane, respectful of other people, and being circumspect before the mystery of other people's personhood. This should lead to the decision 'to not use, or abuse' any human being. Moreover, in this perspective, solidarity with all human beings is indeed a moral imperative.

There is more to religious freedom than meets the eyes.



FORB IN INTERNATIONAL AND NATIONAL LAW



I. INTERNATIONAL LAW

Freedom of thought, conscience, religion, or belief is explicitly recognized in international law through the UN Charter, the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights, the Helsinki Accords, the Declaration on the Elimination of All Forms of Intolerance and Discrimination based on Religion or Belief, and the European Convention for the Protection of Human Rights and Fundamental Freedoms, the African commission on human and people's rights and in many more institutions working policies.

The two most famous declarations about religious freedom are Article 18 in the Universal Declaration of Human rights (UDHR) and Article 18 in the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights. Article 18 of the UDHR states that “Everyone has the right to freedom of thought, conscience, and religion; this right includes freedom to change his religion or belief, and freedom, either alone or in community with others and in public or private, to manifest his religion or belief in teaching, practice, worship, and observance.”

Article 18 in the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights states the following:

1. Everyone shall have the right to freedom of thought, conscience, and religion. This right shall include freedom to have or to adopt a religion or belief of his choice, and freedom, either individually or in community with others and in public or private, to manifest his religion or belief in worship, observance, practice, and teaching.
2. No one shall be subject to coercion that would impair his freedom to have or to adopt a religion or belief of his choice.
3. Freedom to manifest one's religion or beliefs may be subject only to such limitations as are prescribed by law and are necessary to protect public safety, order, health, or morals or the fundamental rights and freedoms of others.

2. NATIONAL LAW

At the national level, organizations such as USCIRF highlight the expansive nature of freedom of religion, drawing attention to the fact that “inherent in religious freedom is the right to believe or not believe as one’s conscience leads, and live out one’s beliefs openly, peacefully, and without fear. Freedom of religion or belief is an expansive right that includes the freedoms of thought, conscience, expression, association, and assembly.”[1]

At the government's level, religious liberty is enshrined in most national constitutions. Even though there are discrepancies between the ideal in legislation and the reality of citizens in many countries. For example when blasphemy laws are used as weapons of persecution.



[1] See *A Right for All: Freedom of Religion or Belief in ASEAN* (Association of Southeast Asian Nations) by Tina L. Mufford, Senior Policy Analyst, East Asia, and Pacific. United States Commission on International Religious Freedom.



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Freedom of Religion or Belief is in Everyone's Interest



A SOCIAL CONTRACT

FoRB is similar to a social contract, according to which every citizen is protected under the law.

In this perspective, FoRB translates into an imperative to respect other people's personhood, rights, and prerogatives as equal citizens.

FoRB requires the respect for other people's voices and choices, as long as they are not harmful to others.



THE SCOPE OF RELIGIOUS FREEDOM

Experts distinguish the following two aspects of Religious Freedom: *forum internum* and *forum externum*.

I. FORUM INTERNUM

The forum internum is absolute. The forum externum is relative to circumstances. Freedom of thought, conscience, religion, or belief in its forum internum can be positioned as a deterrent, a resilient resistance against the instrumentalization of human beings. Instrumentalization, in this context, refers to the violation of human dignity in using people as means to an end, thereby treating them as objects and as disposable.

I. FORUM EXTERNUM

The forum externum, a person's right to manifest or to externally 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, which has been ratified by 173 countries since its first introduction in 1966, specifies that "freedom to manifest one's religion or beliefs may be subject only to such limitations as are prescribed by law and are necessary to protect public safety, order, health or morals, or the fundamental rights and freedoms of others (UN General Assembly 1066, Art. 18).

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Why is FoRB
so Important?





THE MULTIFACETED DIMENSIONS OF RELIGIOUS FREEDOM

1 A POLITICAL PRINCIPLE

At a most basic level, freedom of thought, conscience, religion, or belief undergirds other political principles such as consent of the governed, limited government, rule of law, democracy, and representative government.

2 A LEGAL PROVISION

It is a legal provision in international law, enshrined in the UDHR, European Union, African Union agencies, OAS, ASEAN, other international institutions, and also national constitutions.

3 A COMPOUND FREEDOM

It is a compound freedom that presupposes freedom of thought, conscience, belief, and conviction. It translates into freedom of choice, association, and assembly.

4 A HUMAN RIGHT

The right aspect is often emphasized, but there is more; the human aspect should not be neglected for anthropological, theological, philosophical and existential reasons.

5 A SIGN OF HUMANITY

Freedom of thought, conscience, religion, or belief is a sign of our humanity not only because of our rationality but also because of our sense of moral and ethical responsibilities.

6 A BOND OF INTERCONNECTEDNESS

It is a symbol of our interconnectedness, because of what we have in common, not just consciousness, but also human conscience.

7 A CALL TO SOLIDARITY

It is a call to solidarity, respect, and tolerance based on the sacredness of every human being. All human beings are connected by virtue of human conscience.

8 A SEAL OF SACREDNESS

It is a seal of sacredness. In monotheistic religions, human beings are sacred, created in the image of God, or representatives of the divine. In Asian religions, humans are connected to the divine.

9 A MORAL IMPERATIVE

Freedom of thought, conscience, religion, or belief is in fact a moral imperative. It is a deterrent against authoritarianism or totalitarianism, against the trampling of human dignity, against the reduction of human beings to domains to dominate and domesticate.

10 A SYMBOL OF HUMANS' INFINITE VALUE

It is an expression of the inestimable value of every human being.

O 4

A Faith-Based
Perspective



SEVENTH-DAY ADVENTIST CONTRIBUTIONS

From a faith-based perspective, especially for those who believe in a divine being, freedom of thought, conscience, religion, or belief is primarily understood as a divine attribute. Only a being totally autonomous, dependent on nothing outside of oneself, can claim absolute freedom. Nonetheless, the idea of creation in the image of God leaves room for reflecting divine communicable attributes such as freedom. In this perspective, religious freedom is best understood as part of the image of God. It is deeply connected to the issue of free will. The justification for the importance of free will and freedom of choice is the fact that there can be no genuine covenant without the freedom to choose to enter into a relationship. Love cannot be forced. God gives us a choice. We have not been created as robots, programmed machines who will automatically do things expected under certain circumstances.

Today, in our world, there is a growing awareness for building a space where a consensus is reached regarding the importance of all human beings. There is a growing awareness of the preciousness of human life, the mystery of human life, and the incontrovertible imperative of factoring in the human dignity of every person.

Still, "an urgent need exists for more conceptual clarity concerning freedom of thought, conscience, religion, or belief, not only in order to defend this right against inimical attacks from outside, but also to strengthen the consensus about the significance of freedom of religion or belief within the human rights community itself." (Heiner Bielefeldt (2013, 35).

This is obviously true and relevant for religious communities as well as for civil society.



The unique importance of human conscience, the inner-sacred space which characterizes every human being, binding our very existence and relations with others on ethical and moral principles and values needs more affirmation. Without such affirmation and protection, people are vulnerable to being instrumentalized and downgraded to being objects to be used and abused.

Freedom of thought, conscience, religion, or belief functions as a sign and an ever-present reminder of the need to relate to every person with respect and courteous circumspection. The inner world of every person is a mystery. Rich in beauty and hidden treasures, but also traumas and possible injuries that make life difficult for many. Every human story is complex. Therefore, no one should function as a prosecutor, jury, or judge, distributing sentences against others based on the fact that others are different or do not fit into our system of references and preferences.

Acceptance of other people's right to exist in the dignity of difference requires a pause in each person, a relinquishing of the self-appointed indecency to judge others without knowing their stories and hearing from them on their own terms.

Religious freedom, when believed and embraced as part of one's lifestyle, is part of a benevolent disposition toward every person one meets.

It becomes an integral part of a lifestyle characterized by a humble attitude before the mystery of the other. Every human being one meets has a unique mysterious connection with the creator. This relationship is sacred and intimate. It may be at various stages of realization, but irreducible to any categorization. It should therefore never be desecrated by disruptive intrusions by anyone.

This unique sacred space that conscience is, is irreplaceable and irreproducible. It should not be violated. Judging, criticizing, putting people into boxes, cataloging them, and disrespecting the sanctity of their life are part of the global and private, and personal destruction of the most valuable treasure in life, human beings: children, youth, adults, elderly people, all members of the human family.

THE SACREDNESS OF HUMAN CONSCIENCE

Recognizing the sacredness of human conscience is central to resisting the subjugation of one's being to another.

To promote religious freedom is certainly aimed at developing a global culture of respect for rights, but its purpose is also to create a resistance movement against the domination of a human being by another.

In a Christian context, author and Seventh-day Adventist leader, Ellen G. White, insisted on the inalienable prerogative of self-determination, and therefore on freedom of conscience as it relates to freedom of choice.

"It is not God's purpose that any human being should yield his mind and will to the control of another, becoming a passive instrument in his hands. No one is to merge his individuality in that of another. He is not to look to any human being as the source of healing. His dependence must be in God. In the dignity of his God-given manhood, he is to be controlled by God Himself, not by any human intelligence."

White, 2006 (1909), 241.

Speaking at a time when gender-inclusive language was not the norm, Ellen G. White also linked religious freedom to the human condition.

"No man [sic] is to think that he is the owner of the minds and capabilities of his brethren. He is not to think the others must submit to his dictation. He is liable to err, liable to make mistakes, as every man is. He is not to try to control matters in accordance with his ideas."

Ellen G. White 2013 [1894-1907]

These insights are consonant with Immanuel Kant's famous 'categorical imperative' articulated in his theory of morality where he emphasizes that human beings should not be used as mere means to an end (Kant 1996 [1797]).

From a Christian perspective, God's given dignity to all human beings should preclude the instrumentalization of subjects created in the image of God. The heart of the New Covenant of direct access to God, all people being priests is a valuable insight into this issue.

Freedom of thought, conscience, religion, or belief functions as a common-sense reminder of the foundational dignity of every person, and the elevation of every human being to be authorized to approach the divine without a mediator.

Freedom of thought, conscience, religion, or belief repositions the inalienable right to think and deliberate according to the dictates of one's own conscience, free from marginalization, as lying at the heart of all human rationality and relational endeavors.



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FoRB and
Renunciation
of Violence

THE INTEGRITY OF THE HUMAN PERSON

Violence is antithetical to freedom.

In the context of this reflection, it is fitting to highlight the fact that freedom of thought, conscience, religion, or belief is in fact freedom from violence, freedom from being harmed, or hurt, and freedom from being inflicted with pain. It is freedom from being discriminated against, criminalized, persecuted, or killed because one believes differently

The integrity of the human person whether physical, mental, emotional, social, or spiritual must not be violated or abused.

Key: This freedom of conscience also implies that the sacredness of human beings is more important than that of holy places. Violence desecrates the unique space every human being is.

One of the fundamental claimed contributions of the Christian faith is the fact that one of the overarching goals of Jesus's incarnation was to bring life, and more importantly, life in abundance. This advent of life is not compatible with negations of life, the violence of all kinds, of which the ultimate form is killing.

The root cause of Jesus's refusal of violence was the affirmation of life. Taking life, killing, and violence itself was not only delegitimized but was also considered wrong.

The insistence of Islam on the necessity of justice is an eloquent testament to the importance of the very concept of rights. Religious freedom is a right according to the statement that there is "no compulsion in religion."



WHAT IF RELIGIOUS FREEDOM WERE EMBRACED?

Religious liberty or freedom of thought, conscience, religion, or belief has been difficult to embrace because of the implications on how we live and relate to others it requires.

If religious freedom had been embraced, there would have been no genocides if this freedom had been embraced, no conquest, no subjugation of people, no domination and domestication of other people, no human trafficking, and no slavery, contemporary or ancient. There would have been no territorial annexations depriving people, groups, and individuals of their space of living.

There would have been no coercion of the indigenous peoples of the Americas and abductions of their children into forced inculturation and assimilation. Their humanity and their dignity would have precluded such violations and mistreatments.

In the religious sphere, world religions would have used the power of witness and peaceful persuasion to share their convictions. There would have been no coercion, forced conversions, or intimidation not to convert. Christians would have uplifted Christ instead of promoting forced conversions and military dominance to subjugate indigenous populations. Missions would have exclusively been commissions to witness to the Prince of Peace and his call for reconciliation with God and with one another.

Islam would have spread unhindered, based on Muslim's witness without coercion as the Qur'an explicitly states. "No coercion in matters of faith."

States would not have used anti-blasphemy laws and anti-conversions laws to reprimand, repress, persecute, imprison and murder dissenting voices.

The dignity of difference would have been celebrated as long as no one was harmed, hurt, or humiliated, and no one would have been ostracized because they believed differently. On the other hand, the right to be different would not have been used to force societies to legitimize personal choices not consonant with other people's beliefs. Freedom of belief should not be used to force a belief on others.

To promote religious freedom is to contribute to building better societies based on respect, honor, and humility before the mystery of every person.

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Conclusions and
Perspectives

From philosophical, theological, and existential perspectives, one of the signified aspects of religious freedom is that it is a reminder that human beings are sacred. Even more sacred than objects and places, be they holy places, or national or international monuments.

Consequently, to promote and protect religious freedom is not just to promote an idea or to protect a concept or ideology. It is a sign of respect due to every person. It is an affirmation of the dignity of every person. It is an invitation to participate in the restoration of the dignity of every person.

Freedom of belief or conscience and of conviction is therefore primordially an intrinsic attribute of every human being. It is a sign of our humanity. To take it away is to suppress someone's very humanity.

A genuine understanding of religious freedom includes renunciation of violence in all its forms and expressions against human beings.

To promote religious freedom is to participate in making the world more human and humane. It is to contribute to a better humanity. It is part of a humanizing mandate entrusted to each one as we witness to one another a common origin and destiny.

Our common calling is to respect, value, and honor the dignity of every person.



THANK YOU

Ganoune Diop, Ph.D.

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