

# THE PIVOTAL POSITION OF FREEDOM OF RELIGION OR BELIEF: A HUMAN RIGHT, ESSENTIAL TO A PEACEFUL AND HUMANE WORLD

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# AGENDA

Introduction

Religious Freedom in International and National Law

Scopes of Religious Freedom

Pivotal Position of Religious Freedom

The Sacredness of Human Conscience

A Compound Centerpiece Freedom

Implications

Freedom of religion or belief and Violence

What if religious freedom was embraced?

A faith-based perspective

Conclusion



The Crisis of Freedom

Trivialization of Freedom

Instrumentalization of the concept  
of Freedom.

"No matter what you advocate  
you must sell it in the language of  
freedom."

A slogan: "Freedom summers,  
freedom schools, freedom  
riders...."



## STATEMENT OF CONTENT & SUMMARY OF THE PRESENTATION

- The goal of freedom is peace, a peaceful coexistence among people who may have differences in beliefs, but profound, common humanity.
- The building of peace desperately needs the commitment of religious leaders to mend human brokenness that has appeared in the past religious antagonisms, hostilities, wars, and genocidal crimes against humanity.

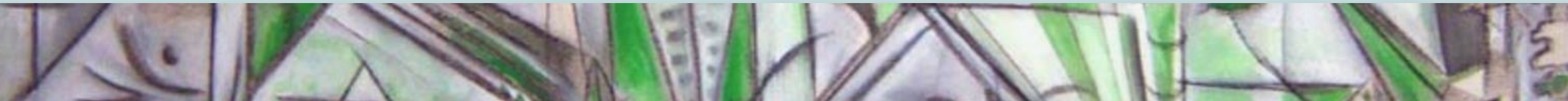
- One can only hope that people of good will and human solidarity from all world faiths and beliefs would partner to promote life, peace, and justice for all.
- Freedom of religion or belief is a sign of our humanity, and a symbol of interconnectedness and needed solidarity.
- Promoting religious freedom is to equip people with the foundation for the respect of every human being.
- Religions elevate humans to the status of sacred.



# INTRODUCTORY CLARIFICATIONS

The coexistence of individuals and groups of different faiths, beliefs, and allegiances in the public space requires acceptance of the dignity of difference, tolerance, and accommodations.

- **Accommodations** can be negotiated with states, among institutions and civil and religious actors.
- **Tolerance** does not mean agreement with other people's moral choices. However, tolerance does mean respecting the right of every person to choose according to the dictates of their conscience.



# INTRODUCTORY CLARIFICATIONS

“Anti-value,” disdain, or hatred for other members of the human family is not equivalent to the aspirational value of peaceful coexistence.

> **Prejudices and discriminations** have predictably bad outcomes.

They are used to exclude and demonize others based on constructed differences. These differences are then used as weapons to discriminate

(racism, tribalism, ethnocentrism, clannism, casteism, classism, colorism, or other supremacist ideologies).



# INTRODUCTORY CLARIFICATIONS

The concept of peace is inseparable  
from world religions and philosophies:

## Islam

The term "Islam" is inseparable from the offer of a **path**  
to peace

## Christians

Jesus = "the **prince of peace** who gives peace"

## Buddhists

Highlight **harmlessness** as one of its principal virtue  
other than wisdom and compassion.

Concept of *ahimsa* = no injury, no violence





A vertical illustration on the left side of the slide shows the heads and shoulders of four people of different ethnicities and ages. At the top is a person with dark skin wearing a blue hijab. Below them is a person with light skin and dark hair. To the right is a person with dark skin and long dark hair. At the bottom is a person with light skin and curly brown hair. They are all looking towards the right.

# A WORKING DEFINITION

## Religious Freedom

The right to profess, practice, and propagate one's beliefs without coercion, intimidation, or manipulation.

Includes the right to wear symbols, display them in public spaces. Also, to possess or own property devoted to religious or philosophical matters.

- The right to build institutions as expressions of one's deeply held convictions.

## Religious Liberty

Is the right to build sacred spaces designed to promote one's convictions, worldview, and values.

- The right to perform rites and rituals to signify one's beliefs. Also, to celebrate and/or set aside sacred times to express exclusive allegiance to God.

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# A WORKING DEFINITION

## Freedom of religion or beliefs

Means freedom from restrictions of one's rights.

- Freedom from being persecuted, threatened, coerced, 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 one's conscience. As such it is inseparable from freedom of conscience.



# RELIGIOUS FREEDOM IN INTERNATIONAL AND NATIONAL LAW

Religious freedom is explicitly recognized in international law.

## 1. Article 18 in the Universal Declaration of Human rights (UDHR):

“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.”





# RELIGIOUS FREEDOM IN INTERNATIONAL AND NATIONAL LAW

## 2. Article 18 in the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights:

- "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 which 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"





# RELIGIOUS FREEDOM IN INTERNATIONAL AND NATIONAL LAW

The multifaceted dimensions of freedom of thought, belief, conscience, choice, association, and assembly:

1. A political principle
2. A legal provision
3. A compound freedom
4. A human right
5. A sign of our humanity
6. A symbol of our interconnectedness
7. A call to solidarity and respect
8. A seal of sacredness
9. A moral imperative
10. An expression of the immeasurable value of every human being







# TWO SCOPES OF RELIGIOUS FREEDOM:

## *2. Forum Externum*

Is relative to circumstances

As a person's right to manifest or to externally display one's religion or belief, can be legally subjected to limitations. Thus, it is not absolute.

The International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights Article, 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).

## *1. Forum Internum*

Is absolute

Can be positioned as a deterrent, a resilient resistance against the instrumentalization of human beings.



# THE PIVOTAL POSITION OF RELIGIOUS FREEDOM

- Religious Freedom is **part of a cluster of freedoms** in the human rights nomenclature
- All human rights are interrelated, interdependent, and indivisible (1993 Vienna Convention)
- Interrelatedness is also true in the relations between the various freedoms within religious freedoms

"Religious freedom is the sine qua none of living freely. You may allow me to vote, own property, and associate freely in the public square in every other way. But if you do not permit me to speak and to act on those beliefs about the ultimate reality that define who I am on this earth, the other freedoms mean little. In a very real sense, then, all human freedoms depend on the freedom of religion."

- Thomas Farr, Religious Freedom Institute.



# THE SACREDNESS OF HUMAN CONSCIENCE

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 with that of another. He is not to look to any human being as the source of healing. His dependence must be on God. In the dignity of his God-given manhood, he is to be controlled by God Himself, not by any human intelligence.”

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])





# A COMPOUND CENTERPIECE FREEDOM

- Religious liberty under its interrelatedness, interdependency, and indivisibility with other fundamental freedoms, is a compound freedom. It also plays the function of centerpiece freedom.
- Among these are freedom of thought and of choice, including the right to change religious or philosophical affiliations, based on freedom of conscience, expression, association, and assembly.



# A COMPOUND CENTERPIECE FREEDOM

“The logic is the fact that religious freedom is compound liberty, that is, there are other liberties bound within it. Allowing the freedom of religion entails allowing the freedom of speech, the freedom of assembly, and the liberty of conscience. If a regime accepts religious freedom, a multiplier effect naturally develops and pressures the regime toward further reforms. As such religious liberty limits government (it is a ‘liberty’ after all) by protecting society from the state. Social pluralism can develop because religious minorities are protected.”

(Hitchen as quoted by Carter 2017).



# IMPLICATIONS:

- When genuinely embraced, religious freedom becomes an antidote against states or governments' abuses of power.
- It is also an antidote against ecclesiastical abuses of power
- Freedom of religion or belief is a deterrent against indulging injustices at interpersonal, societal, governmental, national, and international and religious levels..
- This deterrent must translate into legal provisions and protections.

# FREEDOM OF RELIGION OR BELIEF AND VIOLENCE



- Violence is antithetical to freedom.
- Freedom of religion or belief is freedom from violence, freedom from being harmed, hurt, or inflicted pain. It is also freedom from being discriminated against, criminalized, persecuted, humiliated or killed because one believes differently.
- The physical, mental, emotional, social, or spiritual human integrity must not be violated or abused.

# FREEDOM OF RELIGION OR BELIEF AND VIOLENCE



- **Key:** This freedom of conscience also implies that **human beings are sacred and more important than holy places**. Violence desecrates this unique space every human being is.
- The root cause of Jesus' refusal of violence was the affirmation of life.
- 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: "No compulsion in religion."

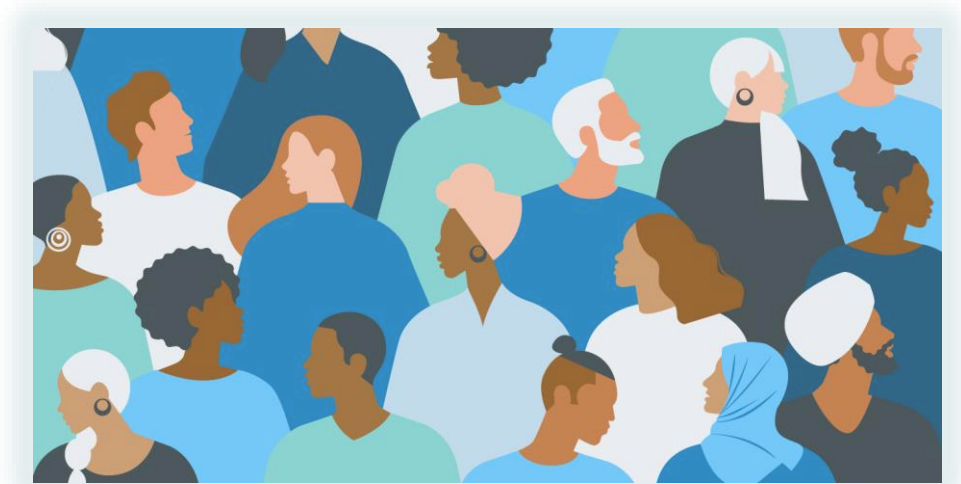
# WHAT IF RELIGION FREEDOM WAS EMBRACED?

- There would be no genocides, no conquest, no subjugation of people, no domination and domestication of other people, and their reduction into domains, no human trafficking, and no slavery, contemporary or ancient.
- There would be no territorial annexations depriving people groups and individuals of their space of living.
- No coercion of Native Americans and abduction of their children into forced interculturalization and assimilation.
- World religions would use the power of witnesses and peaceful persuasion to share their convictions, rather than slander and demeaning of other peoples' dignity.



# WHAT IF RELIGION FREEDOM WAS EMBRACED?

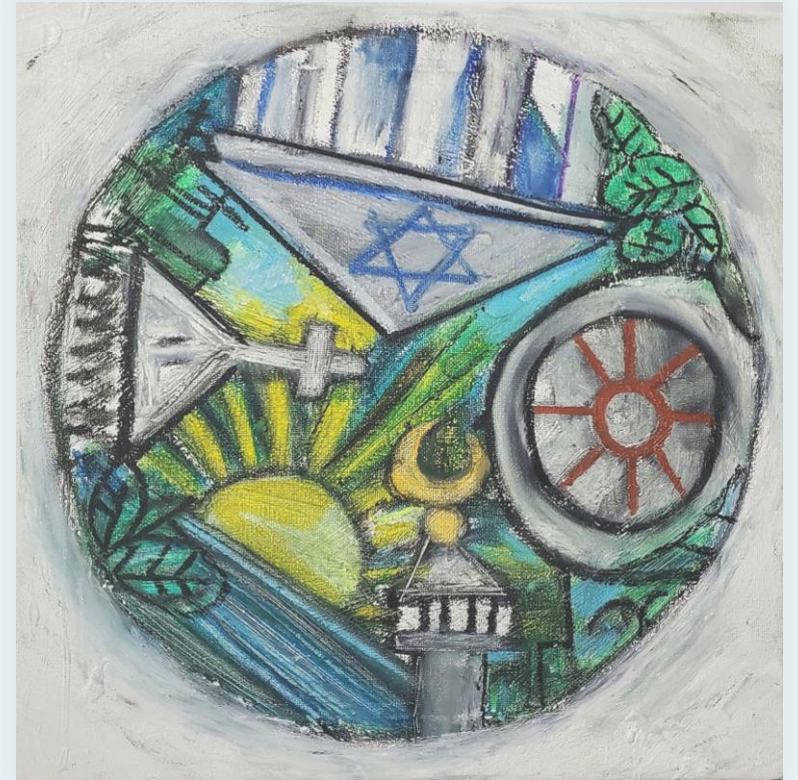
- No coercion, no forced conversions, or intimidation not to convert.
- Christians would uplift Christ instead of forced conversions and military dominance to subjugate indigenous populations. The mission would have exclusively been commissioned to witness to the prince of peace and his call for reconciliation with God and with one another.
- To promote religious freedom is to contribute to building better societies based on respect, honor, and humility before the mystery of every person.
- States would not use anti-blasphemy and anti-conversion laws.
- The dignity of difference would be celebrated as long as no one is harmed, hurt, humiliated, or ostracized because they believe differently.





# A FAITH-BASED PERSPECTIVE

- Freedom of conscience is best understood as part of the image of God, deeply connected to the issue of free will.
- There can be no genuine covenant without freedom to choose to enter a relationship. Love cannot be forced. God gives us a choice.
- Growing awareness of the preciousness of human life.
- Still an urgent need to strengthen the consensus about the significance of freedom of religion or belief within the human rights community itself. It is also relevant in the context of religious institutions and communities.



# CONCLUSIONS AND PERSPECTIVES

- Religious freedom is a reminder that human beings are sacred. More than holy places or objects.
- Promoting religious freedom not only promotes an idea or protects a concept, more importantly, it is a sign of respect due to every person; an affirmation of dignity to all, and an invitation to participate in the restoration of the dignity of every person.
- To promote religious freedom is to participate in making the world more human and humane.

ULTIMATELY, LOVE IS THE GOAL OF FREEDOM  
GOD GAVE THE GIFT OF FREEDOM SO THAT LOVE  
MAY BE POSSIBLE





# THANK YOU

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