



RELIGIOUS FREEDOM IN WORLD POLITICS: A LINCHPIN FOR GLOBAL PEACE

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Abstract

Religious freedom is a fundamental human right enshrined in numerous international declarations and constitutions. Despite its universal recognition, religious persecution and discrimination persist in various parts of the world, often leading to conflict and instability. This paper explores the intricate relationship between religious freedom and global peace, arguing that fostering religious freedom is crucial for achieving sustainable peace on a global scale. Drawing on historical examples, empirical evidence, and theoretical frameworks, this paper examines how religious freedom promotes tolerance, pluralism, and social cohesion, thereby mitigating intergroup tensions and contributing to peaceful coexistence among diverse communities. Furthermore, it analyzes the role of state actors, international organizations, and civil society in advancing religious freedom agendas. It addresses the challenges and opportunities in promoting this fundamental right in world politics. By elucidating the importance of religious freedom as a linchpin for global peace,

this paper seeks to provide insights for policymakers, scholars, and practitioners to prioritize and advocate for religious freedom in their respective spheres.

Keywords: Religious freedom, Global peace, Tolerance, Pluralism, Interfaith dialogue, Conflict resolution

A. Introduction

This paper aims to shed light on the critical importance of religious freedom in fostering global peace. As John Witte Jr. eloquently states, “Religious freedom is the first freedom, the condition of all other freedoms. It is the linchpin of peace” (J. Jr. Witte, 2003). This paper seeks to substantiate this assertion and provide actionable insights for policymakers, scholars, and practitioners who promote religious freedom and peace worldwide.

Religious freedom, defined as the right to practice one’s religion or belief without interference or persecution, is a cornerstone of democratic societies and a fundamental human right. It is enshrined in international legal instruments, including the Universal Declaration of Human Rights and the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights, which assert that “everyone shall have the right to freedom of thought, conscience, and religion” (article 18). Despite this global consensus, violations of religious freedom remain widespread. From the suppression of Uyghur Muslims in China to the persecution of Christians in the Middle East, religious minorities face significant challenges worldwide. Such violations undermine human dignity and contribute to social unrest and conflict.

This paper explores the critical role of religious freedom in promoting global peace. By examining the intricate relationship between religious liberty and peaceful coexistence, the paper aims to demonstrate that fostering an environment of religious freedom is essential for mitigating intergroup tensions and achieving sustainable peace. It argues that religious freedom encourages tolerance, pluralism, and social cohesion, vital to a stable and harmonious society. The paper delves into how religious freedom can contribute to social stability and peace, considering historical examples that illustrate its impact on conflict resolution. Additionally, it will explore the challenges and opportunities in advancing religious freedom within contemporary global politics.

The scope of this paper encompasses a broad analysis of religious freedom within the context of world politics, including theoretical perspectives, historical case studies, and empirical evidence to understand how religious freedom influences peacebuilding efforts comprehensively. The examination will include the roles of state actors, international organizations, and civil society in advancing religious freedom agendas.

Before addressing these critical questions, this paper will briefly define and discuss a few conceptual terms to provide a foundational understanding of religious freedom and its implications for global peace.

B. Defining Religious Freedom and its the Oretical Perspectives

Religious freedom is a multifaceted concept that encompasses the right of individuals to choose, practice, and

change their religion or belief without coercion or interference. It is rooted in the fundamental human rights of dignity and equality, as highlighted by international documents such as the Universal Declaration of Human Rights and the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights, which underscore its dynamic and evolving nature (Sharma, 2012). This freedom includes the ability to worship publicly or privately, propagate one's faith, and transition between religious or non-religious worldviews (Wood, 1991).

The legal framework for religious freedom entails balancing individual rights with the rights of others, emphasizing non-discrimination, neutrality, and respect for pluralism and tolerance. In Indonesia, the Constitution of 1945 guarantees religious freedom through Article 28E, allowing individuals to choose and practice their religion freely, and Article 29(2), which mandates state protection of worship freedom. Despite these protections, challenges like religious intolerance and discrimination persist, prompting the Indonesian government to pursue legal reforms and initiatives promoting interfaith dialogue (Indonesian Constitution of 1945, n.d.; Mu'ti & Burhani, 2019).

Similarly, in the United States, the First Amendment provides robust safeguards for religious freedom, prohibiting the establishment of an official religion and ensuring individuals' rights to free religious exercise. The Religious Freedom Restoration Act (RFRA) of 1993 further enhances these protections by requiring that any government action limiting religious practice must serve a compelling governmental interest in the least restrictive manner possible (Rogers, 2004).

Both countries exemplify how constitutional guarantees protect religious freedoms, though each faces distinct challenges; Indonesia navigates a diverse religious landscape necessitating proactive measures, while the U.S. emphasizes a firm separation of church and state to preserve individual religious practices. Ongoing efforts by state entities and civil society are crucial in addressing these challenges and fostering a culture of religious tolerance and understanding.

Many scholars argue that religious freedom is a universal value. However, it is deeply rooted in and shaped by various philosophical and theological traditions, particularly Protestant and Catholic thought. These traditions have significantly influenced modern liberal constitutionalism and the understanding of conscience as a matter of personal moral integrity and objective moral knowledge (Leigh, 2023). Consequently, the universality of the concept of religious freedom is often questioned, especially by countries with non-Western cultural backgrounds, such as those in the Muslim world.

Religious freedom operates within the framework of liberal pluralism. Liberal pluralism posits that a just society must accommodate a diversity of religious beliefs and practices. Rooted in the works of political philosophers like John Rawls and Isaiah Berlin, this perspective emphasizes the importance of individual freedoms and the need for a framework that allows for the coexistence of different worldviews. According to Rawls, a stable and just society is one where citizens, despite their varying beliefs, can agree on fundamental principles of justice that guarantee basic rights and liberties, including religious freedom (Rawls, 1971).

This perspective argues that religious freedom is essential for personal autonomy and maintaining social harmony by recognizing and respecting individuals' diverse moral and ethical convictions. By ensuring that no single religious group dominates the public sphere, liberal pluralism seeks to prevent conflicts arising from religious hegemony and to promote peaceful coexistence among diverse communities.

Moreover, understanding potential conflicts due to religious freedom can be further explored through Social Identity Theory, developed by Henri Tajfel and John Turner. This theory offers insights into how religious identities shape intergroup relations and potential conflicts. It posits that individuals derive a significant part of their identity from their social groups, including religious affiliations. The emphasis on in-group favouritism and out-group discrimination can lead to tension and conflict, particularly in societies where religious identity is a prominent marker of social division (Tajfel & Turner, 1986). When religious groups perceive threats to their identity or status, tensions can escalate into conflict. However, Social Identity Theory also suggests pathways to peace through strategies that reduce intergroup biases and promote inclusive identities. Initiatives encouraging interfaith dialogue and cooperation can help build a superordinate identity that transcends religious divides, fostering mutual respect and understanding.

Furthermore, peacebuilding and conflict resolution models provide practical frameworks for addressing and mitigating religious conflicts. These models often emphasize the importance of dialogue, reconciliation, and developing inclusive institutions that respect and protect religious

diversity. John Paul Lederach's conflict transformation model highlights the need to address the underlying social and structural causes of conflict, advocating for sustained efforts to build relationships and institutions that promote justice and peace (Lederach, 1997). Lederach argues that peacebuilding requires a long-term commitment to transforming the relationships and social structures perpetuating conflict. This includes promoting religious freedom as a key component of broader human rights and peacebuilding agendas. By ensuring that all religious groups have the freedom to practice their beliefs without fear of persecution, peacebuilding efforts can create an environment conducive to dialogue, trust-building, and sustainable peace.

C. The Linkage of Religious Freedom, Human Rights and Peace

The relationship between religious freedom, human rights, and peace is complex and multifaceted, characterized by both cooperation and tension. Historically, religious traditions have significantly shaped human rights norms, particularly in the Western legal tradition, where religious freedom is considered foundational for protecting other fundamental rights (Jr., J. Witte, 2021). However, religious doctrines often intersect with secular justice concepts, sometimes leading to ethical clashes, as seen in cases like the Presbyterian Church in Taiwan advocating for human rights against oppressive regimes (Rychetská, 2022). This dual role of religion as both a promoter and a challenge to human rights principles is evident across diverse traditions, including Hinduism, Judaism, Christianity, and Islam.

The modern human rights movement has emerged from interreligious encounters, particularly between Judaism and Christianity, highlighting the role of religious pluralism in shaping human rights doctrines (Twiss, 2013). Contemporary legal protections for religious freedom are enshrined in state laws, such as Indonesia's guarantee of freedom of religion within its human rights framework (Basuni & Budianto, 2021). The European Union engages religious actors in human rights dialogues, acknowledging their contributions to issues like migration and social justice. Despite positive interactions, challenges persist, especially in regions like post-communist Central and Eastern Europe, which are marked by complex historical and cultural contexts (de Kadt, 2017).

Different religious traditions have developed unique conceptions of human rights that both align with and diverge from modern liberal theories, reflecting their respective principles (Kondratieva, 2020). Article 18 of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights underscores the importance of religious freedom within the broader human rights framework. Thus, while deeply interconnected, the relationship between religious freedom and human rights requires ongoing negotiation of values, principles, and practices to understand both domains fully.

Linkage of Religious Freedom and Peace

Extensive research has shown that religious freedom and peace are closely intertwined and supported by extensive research. Religious freedom plays a crucial role in fostering peace by preventing violence

and conflict that often arise in its absence. Nilay Saiya argues that suppressing religious expression, rather than allowing its free practice, can fuel extremism and violence, highlighting the moral and strategic imperative of safeguarding religious freedom (Saiya, 2018). Daniel Philpott emphasizes integrating religious freedom into peacebuilding efforts by governments and non-governmental organizations (Philpott, 2013). Instruments like the Universal Declaration of Human Rights were designed to advance global peace by promoting human rights, including religious freedom (Little, 2016).

However, challenges persist, including religious terrorism and global repression of religious expression, which complicate the relationship between religious freedom and peace. Brian J. Grim's research indicates that stringent government restrictions on religion correlate with higher levels of social hostilities and violence, emphasizing the role of religious freedom in fostering social and economic stability (Grim et al., 2014). Religious leaders contribute significantly to peacebuilding through conflict mediation and advocacy for human rights (Sandal, 2022). Scholars like Silvio Ferrari and Fabio Petito argue that promoting religious freedom alongside inter-religious dialogue can effectively combat intolerance and promote a peaceful socio-political environment (Ferrari & Petito, 2013).

Carl Wellman contends that while human rights, including religious freedom, may present challenges to peace, their universal respect ultimately enhances internal and international stability (Wellman, 2012).

Hongwei Yang explores the nuanced relationships between religion and peace, highlighting how different religious perspectives may promote peace or conflict based on fundamental pluralism (Hongwei, 2022). Nur Uysal emphasizes the potential of religious traditions and leaders to foster understanding and reconciliation amid conflicts often attributed to religion (Uysal, 2016). These perspectives underscore the intricate yet crucial linkages between religious freedom and peace, advocating for their protection and promotion as pathways to global peace and stability.

D. Religious Freedom: Historical Context and Global Trends

Religious freedom has historically been entangled with conflicts, reflecting a complex interplay of social, political, and cultural dynamics. In the United States, the First Amendment played a pivotal role in preventing religious conflicts by ensuring laws wouldn't establish or inhibit religious practices (Fults, 2018). However, history shows religious freedom has often acted as a double-edged sword, both easing and exacerbating conflicts. In Muslim-majority nations, inter-religious violence has been linked not only to Islamic fundamentalism but also to alliances between religious minorities and authoritarian regimes, sparking unrest during regime changes (Arifianto, 2013). Over time, the concept of religious freedom has evolved from segregating religious groups to fostering peaceful coexistence under a shared framework (Evans, 2004).

Intellectually, Western Christian writings laid the groundwork for liberty and human dignity, influencing subsequent legal protections (Matz, 2019). In El Salvador, the Catholic Church's role in the 1970s conflict, informed by liberation theology, exemplifies how religious discourse shapes societal values, contributing to both conflict and societal equity (Benjamín & Martínez, 2018). Historical disputes, like those between Protestants and Catholics post-Reformation, underscore enduring religious tensions and the quest for coexistence (John, 2004).

Contrary to the "Clash of Civilizations" theory, post-Cold War global politics have shown that states with different religions frequently engage in treaties, suggesting more cooperative inter-religious relations (Denemark et al., 2023). The perceived conflict between science and religion, typified by cases like Galileo and Darwin, remains a narrative challenged by contemporary scholarship advocating a nuanced view of their relationship (Colin, 2003). Today, religious-based intolerance persists, fostering discrimination and violence, notably in practices of the Islamic State and the broader Muslim world, highlighting ongoing hurdles to achieving genuine religious freedom and harmony (Religion, Human Rights and International Law, 2007).

Global Trends in Religious Freedom

Empirical evidence underscores significant global trends in religious freedom, revealing a diverse landscape of practices and policies. According to the Pew Research Center, approximately 83% of the global population lives in countries with high or very high restrictions on

religious freedom (Pew Research Center, 2019). These restrictions range from government-imposed constraints to social hostilities involving religion, illustrating a pervasive issue affecting millions worldwide (Samirah Majumdar, 2020)

In countries such as China, Iran, and Saudi Arabia, stringent limitations on religious practices are prevalent, often targeting minority faiths. China's government exercises strict control over religious activities, with reports of surveillance, detentions, and re-education camps for Uighur Muslims and other religious minorities (Human Rights Watch (Organization), 2021) Similarly, Iran imposes severe restrictions on religious practices, particularly targeting Baha'is, Christians, and other non-Shia Muslims, with apostasy and proselytizing punishable by death (U.S. Commission on International Religious Freedom, 2020). Saudi Arabia enforces rigorous religious laws that severely restrict the practices of Shiites, Christians, and other non-Muslim groups, further curtailing religious freedom (U.S. Department of State, 2021).

Conversely, nations like Canada and the Netherlands maintain relatively low restrictions on religious freedom, showcasing a commitment to upholding religious liberty. Canada, with its multicultural policies and Charter of Rights and Freedoms, protects individuals' rights to practice their religion freely (*Government of Canada*, 2022). The country supports a pluralistic society where diverse religious communities coexist and thrive. Similarly, the Netherlands has a long history of religious tolerance. It is known for its secular governance, ensuring that religious groups

are free to practice their faith without state interference (*Government of Canada, 2022*). The Dutch constitution guarantees freedom of religion, and the government actively promotes interfaith dialogue and understanding (*Government of Canada, 2022*).

This disparity highlights the global challenge of ensuring religious freedom in the face of varying political, cultural, and societal contexts. In countries with high restrictions, governments often use religion as a tool for political control, marginalizing minority groups and stifling dissent. These practices violate fundamental human rights and contribute to social tensions and conflicts. In contrast, countries with low restrictions on religious freedom demonstrate that protecting this fundamental right can lead to a more harmonious and inclusive society.

However, challenges remain even in countries with generally high levels of religious freedom. In Europe, for instance, the rise of secularism and debates over the public display of religious symbols have led to tensions and legal battles. France's *laïcité* (secularism) policy, which bans conspicuous religious symbols in public schools and institutions, has sparked controversy and accusations of discrimination against Muslim women who wear hijabs (Audrey Pettit, 2023). In the United States, issues such as the balance between religious freedom and anti-discrimination laws continue to provoke debate, particularly in cases involving religious exemptions and the rights of LGBTQ+ individuals (U.S. Supreme Court., 2021).

The global trends in religious freedom also reflect broader geopolitical dynamics. In regions experiencing political instability, economic hardship, or social upheaval, religious minorities often become scapegoats, facing increased persecution and violence. The Middle East and North Africa, for example, have seen significant declines in religious freedom due to ongoing conflicts and the rise of extremist groups. The aftermath of the Arab Spring led to power vacuums and increased sectarian violence, particularly targeting Christian minorities in countries like Iraq and Syria (*United Nations Human Rights Council, 2020*).

Moreover, the role of international organizations and human rights advocacy groups is crucial in addressing these challenges. Organizations such as the United Nations, Human Rights Watch, and Amnesty International work to monitor, report, and advocate for the protection of religious freedom globally. Their efforts include documenting abuses, supporting persecuted communities, and pressuring governments to uphold international human rights standards (*United Nations, 2021*).

E. How does Religious Freedom Influence Peacebuilding Efforts?

Religious freedom plays a pivotal role in peacebuilding efforts by providing a foundation for inclusive and sustainable conflict resolution. The presence of religious freedom allows for the expression of diverse religious identities, which can be harnessed as a resource for peace rather than a

source of conflict. For instance, religious freedom enables religious leaders and organizations to act as credible peace brokers, leveraging their respected community positions to promote reconciliation and forgiveness (Glazier, 2018). This freedom also facilitates the engagement of religious actors in international diplomacy, challenging the traditional secularist paradigm that often views religion solely as a cause of conflict (Rosen, 2022).

Moreover, religious freedom is critical in contexts where political manipulation of religious identities exacerbates conflicts, as seen in post-Saddam Iraq, where interfaith dialogue programs have been essential in reframing conflicts and promoting peace (Mohammed, 2013). The ability to freely practice and express religious beliefs also contributes to the emotional and spiritual support necessary for long-term peacebuilding, as religious individuals and organizations provide essential services such as mediation and mobilization for peace initiatives (Haynes, 2022).

Furthermore, religious freedom is intrinsically linked to the broader goals of democracy and human rights, which are essential for effective peacebuilding. Integrating religious freedom into peacebuilding methodologies ensures that all voices are heard and respected, thereby enhancing the overall effectiveness of these efforts (Philpott, 2013a). Religious leaders, who often hold significant influence and trust within their communities, can leverage their positions to advocate for peace and human rights, serving as thinkers and doers in peacebuilding (Sandal, 2022b). A notable example is Nahdlatul Ulama, the world's largest Muslim organization, which initiated a gathering of international religious leaders

during the G20 meeting in Indonesia in 2022, demonstrating the crucial role religious organizations play in fostering global peace and cooperation

Additionally, the process of rereading sacred texts and religious doctrines to create inclusive and peaceful meanings, known as the hermeneutics of peace, is facilitated by an environment of religious freedom, as demonstrated in conflict-torn societies in Southeast Asia (Antoni, 2014). This process motivates religious adherents to engage in peacebuilding and allows them to draw upon diverse societal resources, including feminism and nationalism, to support their efforts. Religious actors' historical and ongoing contributions to peacebuilding, from the anticolonial struggles to contemporary conflicts, underscore the importance of religious freedom in enabling these efforts (Dragovic, 2022).

Finally, the recognition of religion's dual potential as both a force for peace and a weapon of war highlights the need for policies that promote religious freedom while mitigating the risks of religious extremism (Uysal, 2016). In summary, religious freedom is a critical enabler of peacebuilding, providing the conditions for religious actors to contribute effectively to conflict resolution and promote lasting peace (Paul Lederach, 2022).

The discussion above suggests that Religious freedom influences peacebuilding efforts in several critical ways:

1. Promoting Social Cohesion: When individuals and communities are free to practice their religion without fear of persecution, it fosters a sense of belonging and social cohesion. This reduces tensions leading to

conflict as people from different religious backgrounds learn to coexist peacefully.

2. **Facilitating Interfaith Dialogue:** Religious freedom encourages dialogue and understanding among different religious groups. Promoting respect for diverse beliefs and practices creates opportunities for collaboration and reconciliation, which is essential for resolving conflicts rooted in religious differences.
3. **Protecting Human Rights:** Religious freedom is intertwined with broader human rights protections. Upholding this freedom ensures that individuals can express their beliefs freely, contributing to a more just and equitable society. This protection extends to religious minorities who may be vulnerable to discrimination or persecution.
4. **Building Trust and Stability:** Governments that respect religious freedom demonstrate commitment to democratic principles and the rule of law. This builds trust with citizens and religious communities, fostering a stable environment conducive to economic development and social progress.
5. **Engaging International Cooperation:** Religious freedom agendas are advanced through international organizations and diplomatic efforts. These platforms facilitate cooperation among countries to promote religious tolerance and combat religious persecution globally.
6. **Empowering Civil Society:** Civil society organizations play a crucial role in advocating for religious freedom and monitoring violations. They support affected

communities and contribute to policy discussions to improve legal protections and promote tolerance.

Overall, religious freedom is a fundamental human right and a cornerstone of peacebuilding efforts. State actors, international organizations, and civil society can contribute significantly to global peace and stability by protecting this freedom and addressing its challenges.

E. Conclusion

Religious freedom significantly influences peacebuilding efforts by creating an environment where diverse religious identities can coexist and contribute positively to societal harmony. Throughout history and in contemporary contexts, the ability to freely practice and express religious beliefs has proven essential in fostering inclusive and sustainable conflict resolution. By enabling religious leaders and organizations to act as credible peace brokers and advocates for human rights, religious freedom transforms religion from a potential source of conflict into a powerful resource for peace.

The examination of various case studies, including the role of the Catholic Church in El Salvador, the interfaith dialogue programs in post-Saddam Iraq, and the initiatives led by Nahdlatul Ulama during the G20 meeting in Indonesia, highlights how religious actors leverage their influence to promote reconciliation, forgiveness, and societal equity. These examples demonstrate the practical applications of religious freedom in peacebuilding, where religious leaders utilize their respective positions within communities to mediate conflicts and mobilize peace initiatives.

Moreover, religious freedom supports the broader goals of democracy and human rights, which are integral to effective peacebuilding. Religious freedom enhances the inclusivity and effectiveness of peacebuilding methodologies by ensuring that all voices are heard and respected. It facilitates the engagement of religious actors in international diplomacy. It encourages the reinterpretation of sacred texts to promote peace and inclusivity, as seen in conflict-torn societies in Southeast Asia.

The persistence of religious-based intolerance and violence underscores the ongoing challenges to achieving genuine religious freedom and harmony. However, the recognition of religion's dual potential as both a force for peace and a weapon of war highlights the necessity of policies that promote religious freedom while mitigating the risks of religious extremism. International organizations and human rights advocacy groups play a crucial role in monitoring, reporting, and advocating for the protection of religious freedom globally.

In conclusion, religious freedom is a critical enabler of peacebuilding. It provides the necessary conditions for religious actors to contribute effectively to conflict resolution and the promotion of lasting peace. By fostering an environment where diverse religious identities can be expressed and respected, religious freedom not only supports the goals of democracy and human rights but also enhances the overall effectiveness of peacebuilding efforts, contributing to a more harmonious and inclusive global society.

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