

# THE PIVOTAL POSITION OF FREEDOM OF THOUGHT, CONSCIENCE, RELIGION, OR BELIEF: A Human Right, Essential to a Humane and Peaceful World

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## BACKGROUND

The foundational postulate upon which this document is based is that 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.

*Religions for Peace* is a unique multi-religious forum wherein people of deep convictions work together to alleviate the harm caused by violence and expunge violence from human relations. The building of peace desperately needs the commitment of religious leaders 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 world philosophies. The era of religious wars has brought much suffering and death. One can only hope that people of goodwill and human solidarity from all world faiths and beliefs 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.

The following presentation explores the multifaceted dimensions of freedom of religion, or belief, at personal, interpersonal, societal, national, international, and religious levels. Fundamentally, religious liberty, religious freedom or freedom of thought, conscience and religion or belief, according to the international legal nomenclature, is an indispensable tool for developing awareness on the delineation of the parameters of what it means to be human and humane.

While considering freedom of thought, conscience and religion or belief from legal, political, social, and cultural perspectives, our fundamental and non-negotiable thesis is the sacredness of humans, the foundational pillar of religious freedom from a faith-based perspective. That is the spiritual dimension of religious freedom. What determines the locus of this infinite value of every person is human conscience as ground for the need for freedom and self-determination for every human being capable of mature rationality.

It has been stated that “Religious freedom is present in multiple political documents, including international treaties and conventions, and most of the world’s constitutions, as well as the laws of many countries. However, while these legal documents often guarantee religious freedom, they rarely define it. They sometimes list actions which would violate religious freedom but do not explain why some actions rather than others are included in these lists.”

Jonathan Fox. *An Introduction to Religion and Politics: Theory and Practice*. Second Edition (London/ New York: Routledge, 2018), 182 notes that a good example of this phenomenon is the US International Religious Freedom Act of 1998, which makes the pursuit of religious freedom a foreign policy goal of the US, but it never defines the term despite using it 173 times. Nor do the yearly reports on religious freedom produced by the US State department. The meaning is taken for granted. Multiple meanings of religious Liberty.

Religious freedom is part of a cluster of interrelated, interdependent, and indivisible freedoms. It is a compound freedom that is inseparable and central to all other fundamental freedoms. Its pivotal position allows it to provide a normative basis for peaceful coexistence and cooperation. Freedom of thought, conscience and religion or belief is a sign of our humanity, and a symbol of interconnectedness and needed solidarity. It is also an antidote against the trampling of human dignity through the abuses of domination. As such, its purpose is to foster tolerance in the dignity of difference without uniformity of beliefs. Promoting religious freedom is to equip people with the foundation for the respect of every human being.

Religious freedom should foster responsibility based on the imperative of human solidarity. It positions us to see others from a benevolent disposition to embrace their infinite mysterious, unquantifiable and immeasurable value.

*Religions elevate humans to  
the status of sacred.*

## INTRODUCTORY CLARIFICATIONS

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, and among institutions and civil and religious actors as part of acceptance of the reality of coexistence according to the principle of tolerance. Tolerance does not mean agreement with other peoples' moral choices. It does not mean condescension, which would be contrary to the virtue of equality. Majority does not mean superiority. However, tolerance does mean respecting the right of every person to choose according to the dictates of their conscience.

Without this right, creating conditions that force anyone into violating their own conscience is immoral.

The undergirding “anti-value,” disdain, or hatred of other members of the human family, is not commensurate with the United Nations’ aspirational value of peaceful coexistence. Prejudices and discriminations have predictably bad outcomes. They are used to exclude and demonise others, based on constructed differences used as weapons to discriminate. This is the case with racism, tribalism, ethnocentrism, clannism, casteism, classism, and colourism, or other supremacist ideologies.

Religion for peace itself opens an aspiration coming from the depth of every person. We humans are wired to the quest for peace.

No wonder the concept of peace is inextricable from world religions and philosophies. Obviously, the term “Islam,” is inseparable from the path to peace. Christians call Jesus the Prince of Peace. Asian religions such as Buddhism highlight harmlessness as one of its principal virtues the others being wisdom and compassion. They are inseparable from peace. Sanatana Dharma emphasises ahimsa: no injury, no violence.



## 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 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.

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, 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, which is also freedom not to believe or belong to any religion, allows everyone the opportunity to have a voice as 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 peoples' 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.

# RELIGIOUS FREEDOM IN INTERNATIONAL & NATIONAL LAW

Freedom of thought, conscience, religion, or belief is explicitly recognised 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 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.*

At the national level, organisations such as USCIRF highlights 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.”

This insight highlights the fact that freedom of thought, conscience, religion, or belief not only undergirds all the other freedoms, but it is also a compound freedom.

Before expanding on these aspects, it is useful to list the following multifaceted dimensions which are associated with freedom of thought, belief, conscience, choice, association, and assembly:

1. A political principle. At a most basic level, freedom of thought, conscience, religion, or belief undergirds the other political principles such as consent of the governed, limited government, rule of law, democracy, and representative government.
2. A legal provision in international law, enshrined in the UDHR, European Union, African Union agencies, OAS, ASEAN, other international institutions and national constitutions.
3. A compound freedom which presupposes freedom of thought, conscience, belief, and conviction.
4. A human right. The right aspect is often emphasised, but there is more; the human aspect should not be neglected for anthropological, theological, philosophical and existential reasons.
5. 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 symbol of our interconnectedness, because of what we have in common, not just consciousness, but also human conscience.
7. A call to solidarity, respect and tolerance based on the sacredness of every human being.
8. A seal of sacredness. In monotheistic religions, human beings are sacred, created in the image of God, or representatives of the divine, connected to the divine as in Asian religions.
9. 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 dominate and domesticate.
10. It is an expression of the immeasurable value of every human being.

The premise upon which the following reflection is built is that freedom of thought, conscience, religion, or belief is a sign signifying the need to protect human beings from being instrumentalised and dehumanised.

## SCOPE OF RELIGIOUS FREEDOM

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

The *forum internum* is absolute.

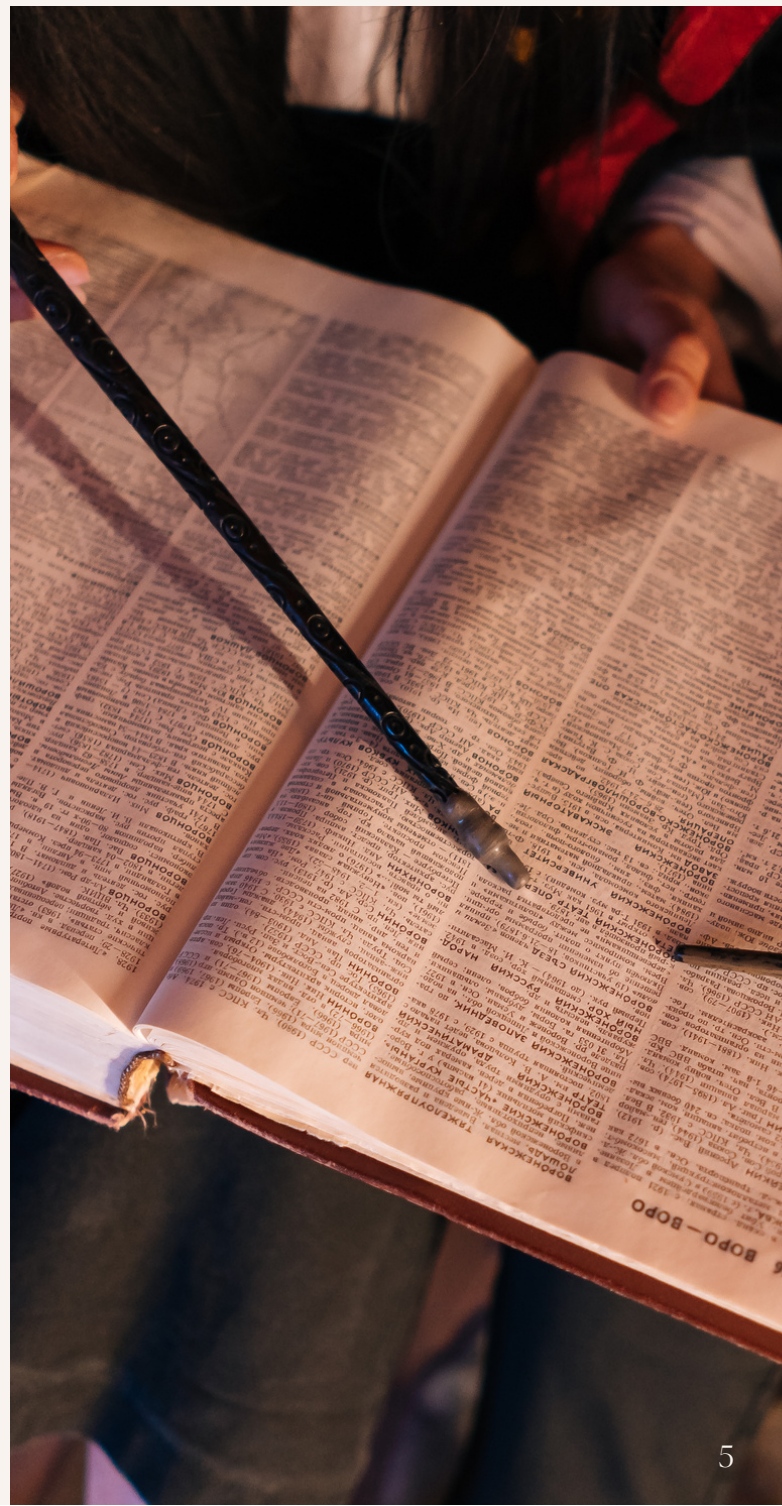
The *forum externum* is relative to circumstances.

Freedom of thought, conscience, religion, or belief or belief in its *forum internum* can be positioned as a deterrent, a resilient resistance against the instrumentalisation of human beings.

Instrumentalisation, 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.

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).



# THE PIVOTAL POSITION OF RELIGIOUS FREEDOM

While not postulating a hierarchy of importance among fundamental freedoms, the pivotal position of freedom of thought, conscience, religion, or belief is justified for various reasons.

Freedom of thought, conscience, religion, or belief, more widely designated as religious freedom, is a pivotal part of a cluster of freedoms in the human rights nomenclature and instruments. At the United Nations and in the international human rights community, it is an accepted fact that all human rights are interrelated, interdependent and indivisible. This presupposition was affirmed in the 1993 Vienna Declaration (United Nations, n.d.).

This interrelatedness is also true when it comes to the relationship between various freedoms. Freedom of thought, freedom of conscience, freedom of choice, freedom of expression, and freedom of association and assembly are all incontrovertibly connected.

The centrality of religious freedom has been eloquently explained by Thomas Farr of the Religious Freedom Institute,

*“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 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” (Farr and Tierney 2012, para. 24).*

In a significant way, religious freedom is the prerequisite for and the guarantor of all other freedoms.

There is still more to religious freedom.

## THE SACREDNESS OF HUMAN CONSCIENCE

Recognition of 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.

The inalienable right to self-determination, and therefore on freedom of conscience as it relates to freedom of choice should be the prerogative of every person.

No human being should control the mind and will of another. Human beings are unique and should not submit or merge their personality into that of another person.

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

They are also in harmony with the content of international documents such as the UDHR, the ICCPR and several other regional agreements and national constitutions.

Freedom of thought, conscience, and belief is inseparably connected to the human condition.

From a Christian perspective, God's given dignity to all human beings should preclude the instrumentalisation 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 in 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 being authorised 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 marginalisation, as lying at the heart of all human rationality and relational endeavours.

## A COMPOUND CENTREPIECE FREEDOM

Religious liberty by virtue of its interrelatedness, interdependency, and indivisibility with other fundamental freedoms, is a compound freedom. It also plays the function of a centrepiece freedom.

Its primacy is also a distinctive feature of this freedom. This aspect has been widely recognised (e.g., McConnell 1990).

Among these are freedom of thought, of choice, including the right to change religious or philosophical affiliations, based on freedom of conscience, of expression, of association and of assembly.

According to Farr and colleagues, religious freedom is the prerequisite for, and the guarantor of all other freedoms (Farr, Winston and Tierney 2012).

Nathan Hitchen adds the following: "The logic is the fact that religious freedom is a 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 towards 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

As a compound freedom, freedom of thought, conscience, religion, or belief presumes all other fundamental freedoms. Its usefulness in reference to peaceful relations between people of different beliefs cannot be underestimated. Without this freedom, all other freedoms lose their foundation. The former UN Special Rapporteur on Freedom of Religion or Belief developed this point in his report to the 28th Session of the United Nations when he discussed how religious freedom provides a normative basis for coexistence and cooperation “of people belonging to most different religions or beliefs and obliges the State to provide an inclusive framework. Furthermore, freedom of religion or belief assures that different communities and sub-communities will receive protection” (Bielfeldt 2014, 10).

When genuinely embraced, religious freedom becomes an antidote not only against the trampling of human dignity by other humans, but also by states or governments’ abuses of power as well. Overall, freedom of religion or belief is indeed a deterrent against indulging injustices at interpersonal, societal, governmental, national, and international levels. This deterrent must translate into legal provisions and protections. They are necessary in every society. In the context of religion for peace, it is a core virtue.

Furthermore, the philosophical, theological, anthropological, and ethical foundations of freedom of thought, conscience, religion, or belief are useful to boost motivations and mobilisations to show solidarity with the whole human family. It must be elevated to the status of righteousness. Several religions insist on righteousness as being the most significant spiritual and existential disposition and lifestyle.

## FREEDOM OF THOUGHT, CONSCIENCE, RELIGION, OR BELIEF & VIOLENCE

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, hurt, and freedom from being inflicted with pain. It is freedom from being discriminated against, criminalised, 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 this unique space every human being is in.

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, 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 delegitimised, but it 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 HAD BEEN EMBRACED?

Religious freedom 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.

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, their dignity would have precluded such violations and treatment.

How can we advocate for, promote and protect human rights while not fully embracing the full humanity of every human being?

How can we advocate for human rights focusing only on the rights aspects and not on the human aspect? That is the full humanity and the full unstratified dignity of every person?

These kinds of cognitive dissonance, existential contradictions and ambiguous relational modus operandi bring hypocrisy, duplicity, and triviality in human relations that are always supposed to be sacred.

The deepest foundation of human dignity resides in the sacrality of the every human person. The expression human dignity itself is profusely employed nowadays but rarely delineated as to its nature and scope. When a concept is philosophically rendered imprecise or porous it becomes susceptible to being instrumentalised to serve any kind of ideological propaganda.

For at its core human dignity is for all and therefore cancels stratification and hierarchical organisations of humans into superior and inferior, structures and systems.

*If religious freedom were embraced?*

*There would be no subjugation of a human being to another human being.*

*There would be no instrumentalisation of a person as a means to an end.*

*We would always be mindful that every person's humanity is inseparably connected to that person's conscience, that person's inner sanctuary.*

*Human conscience would thus be inviolable. Space will always be given for others to be and to participate in the political processes to flourish in democracies.*

*There would be no slavery, no human trafficking, no child exploitation, or child labor. Peaceful coexistence and peaceful persuasion would be the norm not the exception. No violence against human beings would be indulged.*

## WHAT IF RELIGIOUS FREEDOM HAD BEEN EMBRACED?

In the religious sphere, world religions and world philosophies 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 Muslims 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, humiliated, and no one would have been ostracised because they believed differently. On the other hand, the right to be different would not have been used to force societies to legitimise personal choices not consonant with other people's beliefs. Freedom of belief should not be used to force a belief on others.

In terms of religious freedom, there is the question of unprecedented imposition of recognition and affirmation. It is not just about finding a baker who would bake a cake for a gay marriage, it is about the right to have all bakers or any baker to bake a cake even against their conscience. This is going beyond the boundaries of freedom to that of coercion. There must be room for accommodations and exemptions without denying others their right to life, liberty, and existential goals.

To promote religious freedom is to contribute to building better societies based on respect, honour, and humility before the mystery of every person. There is always more to a human being than meets the eye, hence the need to demonstrate humility before the other and create space for others to be themselves.

Religious freedom is a freedom after all. But there is more to this freedom.

## A FAITH-BASED PERSPECTIVE

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 characterises 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 instrumentalised 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 before the mystery of every person whose inner world is rich of beauty and hidden treasures but also traumas and possible injuries that make life difficult for many. Every human story is complex. No one should function as prosecutor, jury, and judge, distributing sentences against others based on the fact that they are different, or that they 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 towards every person one meets.

It becomes an integral part of a lifestyle characterised 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 realisation, but nonetheless irreducible to any categorisation. 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, criticising, putting people into boxes, cataloguing them, and disrespecting the sanctity of their life are part of the global and the private, and personal destruction of the most valuable treasure in life, human beings: children, youth, adults, elderly people, all members of the human family.

## CONCLUSIONS & 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 an ideology. It is a sign of the 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.

To protect people's persons requires respecting their conscience.

The condition sine qua none, the precondition, the necessary prerequisite for freedom of thought, conscience, religion or belief, is the humility before the mystery of every human being and the deep respect to be always demonstrated under all circumstances, directed towards every person we meet.

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 humanising mandate entrusted to each one as we witness to one another a common origin and destiny.

The importance of religious liberty is ultimately connected to saving lives, expressing human solidarity in affirming the human dignity of every person.

*Our common calling is to respect, value, and honour  
the life and dignity of every person.*



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## Religious Freedom and the International Community

Three of the most significant international treaties and conventions related to religious freedom are:

- Universal Declaration of Human Rights (1948)

The Universal Declaration of Human Rights (UDHR) is a milestone document in the history of human rights. Drafted by representatives with different legal and cultural backgrounds from all regions of the world, the Declaration was proclaimed by the United Nations General Assembly in Paris on 10 December 1948 as a common standard of achievements for all peoples and all nations. It sets out, for the first time, fundamental human rights to be universally protected.

*Article 18 is perhaps the most well-known international statement on religious freedom:*

*"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 26 refers to education to "promote understanding, tolerance and friendship among nations, racial or religious groups."*

- International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights (1966)

This is a multilateral treaty adopted by the United Nations General Assembly on 16 December 1966. It commits its parties to respect the civil and political rights of individuals, including the right to life, freedom of religion, freedom of speech, freedom of assembly, electoral rights and rights to due process and a fair trial.

- Declaration on the Elimination of All Forms of Intolerance and of Discrimination Based on Religion or Belief (1981)

This landmark United Nations resolution was passed in 1981. It includes declarations on the topics of religious intolerance, freedom of religion, and discrimination on the basis of religion or belief.

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He regularly trains leaders in capacity building in reference to peace, justice, and human rights: the pillars of the United Nations. In the ecumenical world and interfaith partnerships, Dr. Diop participated as advisor to the Public Issues Committee at the WCC General Assembly in Busan, Korea. He was also invited as advisor to the work of the reference Policy Committee of the Central Committee of the WCC.

Dr. Diop was granted a doctorate *Honoris Causa* for his work in helping promote a culture of human rights grounded on human dignity. In 2017, he was the recipient of the Thomas Kane Religious Freedom Award, from the well-known J. Rueben Clark Law Society in Philadelphia, United States of America. In 2019, he received the Award of Excellence: Ambassador for Liberty and Peace – Jean Nussbaum & Eleanor Roosevelt at the United Nations in Geneva. In 2020, Dr. Diop was one of four recipients of the Charles Elliott Weniger Society for Excellence Award of Excellence, Loma Linda University.