

Should States be Concerned with Religious Freedom?

Religion is one of the most important characteristics of human life. More than 5.8 billion people around the world consider themselves religiously affiliated.¹ Religion serves as a basis for everything from answers on creation to how an individual should structure their daily life. It is critical in establishing the moral, ethical, and legal foundations spanning from the level of a single person, all the way to states and societies as a whole. Yet, this fundamental human enterprise has been, and will always be under attack. According to a recent study on religious freedom by the Cato Institute, 26 countries have been found to actively engage in religious persecution, while 36 countries practice religious discrimination.² These countries account for over half of the total world population. That is a staggering statistic, that unfortunately looks to only be getting worse in the future. That is why I firmly believe that the governments of sovereign states should concern themselves with religious freedom in other states.

Religious freedom is an unalienable human right. The United Nations has affirmed and enshrined this notion in the Universal Declaration of Human Rights (UDHR). Article 18 of the declaration states:

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.³

¹ NW, Washington, and inquiries, "The Global Religious Landscape."

² "The Perilous State of Religious Freedom Worldwide."

³ Nations, "Universal Declaration of Human Rights."

Religion operates within the confines of the most significant, personal, and sacred aspects of human life. It facilitates purpose, worth, identity, and dignity for billions of people around the world. Any attempt to restrict or stifle these notions, is a blatant violation of personal liberty, choice, and expression. And when you consider what religion means and does for a person, a lack of religious freedom is an affront to the very humanity of an individual.

Furthermore, religion extends far beyond personal ramifications. It does not exist in some vacuum. As Hurd demonstrates, those of us in the “West” have become conditioned to see a strict secular-non secular divide⁴. The widely accepted narrative is that religion only resides at home and church. Yet Hurd shows that this perspective is far from the truth for the West, just as it is not the reality for the rest of the world. Prothero would be in very much agreement with Hurd. He states that “religion has always been intertwined in politics, economics, society, culture, art, and technology”.⁵ It is completely inseparable from any other aspect of life. The things that quite literally make a society a society, are dominated by religious beliefs for billions of people. A lack of religious freedom will not simply just affect the intimate personal aspects of religion, but for those affected it will directly correlate to a lack of overall political, social, and economic freedom.

Religious freedom is paramount in the creation of a free, equal, and fair society. It is an unassailable human right, no different than freedom of speech, expression, or assembly. As dictated explicitly in the UDHR, these rights are inherent and universal. By simply being human these rights are granted to you, regardless of whatever a specific person, government, or organization may say.

⁴ Hurd, *The Politics of Secularism in International Relations*.

⁵ Prothero, *Religion Matters*.

If the UDHR and this relatively new concept of universal human rights are to have any credence, sovereign nations should not only just be concerned with the religious freedom of other states, but they should be actively involved in its protection and proliferation.

The establishment of the United Nations post WW2 ushered in a new era with the goal of challenging the Westphalian order of traditional sovereignty in attempt to create a better and more just world.⁶ In this new system, states would have to acknowledge an entity higher than themselves that could potentially supersede their sovereignty against their will. This was, and still is quite a controversial notion. Nevertheless, the world has adapted at least somewhat to this different prospective on sovereignty. One of the key tenets, revolves around the idea of the international community having a responsibility to concern themselves with the conduct of other states in order to maintain peace and the standard of universal rights set forth by the UN back in 1948. This concept has come to fruition in many different forms. There have been international courts and tribunals, humanitarian and peacekeeping interventions, political and economic censure, and even military action. From attempting to prevent genocide, to ensuring free and fair trade, each and every one of these international actions have been motivated by a desire to protect this theory of universal rights, enshrining them as a tangible norm in the international order.

Without a doubt there is sufficient precedent for states to concern themselves with religious freedom in other states. The concept of sovereignty has evolved over the last century. It does not give states *cart blanche* anymore to violate human rights without international repercussions. And since religious freedom is such an important human right, the international

⁶ Carlson and Owens, *The Sacred and the Sovereign*.

community has not simply just a responsibility to be concerned, but an obligation to protect, promote, and enforce religious freedom all over the world without exception.

However, the key is to do so in a proper fashion. The positive effects brought by universal human rights and the institutions and states that administer them are not without fault. For example, liberalism, the underlying geopolitical paradigm of this new order, is dominated by “raced and racist” ideas.⁷ The UN and its UDHR has subterranean elements of colonialism, racism, and ethnocentrism inherently built into them. Moreover, when you consider just how important religion is to both individuals and states, international attempts to promote religious freedom can be seen as an attack on existing religious belief, or advocacy for other religions. This endeavor must be undertaken with a gentle touch. Yet, it can, and must be undertaken. Elizabeth Prodromou offers a look at what real effective action could look like.⁸ The United States Commission on International Religious Freedom sets a great example for proper international concern for religious freedom. All nations should embrace a similar sentiment and look to get actively involved in promoting and protecting religious freedom across the globe. Religious freedom is such an important ideal that needs to be fully realized for every person and state throughout the world. This era of universal human rights has the capability to lead our world into a new age, where respect, dignity, and love for one another supersedes any other human pursuit. Yet the road ahead is long and perilous. There is much work to do.

⁷ Loken, “Why Race Matters in International Relations.”

⁸ “Harvard International Review -- Protecting Religious Freedom Abroad | USCIRF.”

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