

Script: Freedom of Religion or Belief: the right to have or change your religion or beliefs

The first core dimension of freedom of religion or belief is the right to freely have, keep, change or leave your religion or belief. This is about your personal convictions, and is known as the internal dimension of freedom of religion or belief. The right to have or change your religion or beliefs is an absolute right, which means that according to international law, this right may never be limited. Whether you are a Christian, Muslim, Bahai, Yezidi or atheist, whether you live in Singapore, Sweden or Sudan, whether there is peace or war, regardless of what religious or political leaders say - you and every other person have the right to keep and cherish your beliefs, or to change them, or be a non-believer.

Of course many people are denied this absolute right and punished or attacked for their religion or beliefs, by governments, by family members or by groups in their community.

Some governments ban particular religions or beliefs. Falun gong is a form of Buddhist belief and practice that is banned in China. Falun gong practitioners have suffered imprisonment, torture, forced labour and re-education aimed at forcing them to abandon their beliefs.

In Eritrea, there are only four state-recognised religions and people who belong to un-recognised religions, such as Pentecostal Christians and Jehovah's Witnesses, have been harshly punished in different ways.

A more subtle example of violations of the right to have a religion or belief is hate crimes where victims of violence are targeted because of their religious identity or beliefs. They are attacked because they have a particular religion or belief.

In France, hate crimes such as assault, harassment or criminal damage towards Muslims rose by 250% in 2015, with 336 incidents recorded. And the level of hate crimes towards the Jewish community remained high with 715 hate crimes reported.

In parts of rural Mexico, protestant Christians have been subject to violence or driven from their land by community leaders who wish to preserve traditional and Catholic Christian religiosity.

In many countries, religious identity, national identity and the identity of the state are closely intertwined. In such circumstances, religious minorities and people who leave the majority religion, including atheists, may be seen as disloyal to the nation, or even as a threat to national security.

The absolute right to leave a religion or belief is often disregarded.

Indonesia has freedom of religion laws, although these laws only protect people with certain religions: Islam, Catholic and Protestant Christianity, Buddhism, Confucianism and Hinduism. Atheism is not protected. At the age of 30, Alex Aan who has a Muslim background served a 2½ year jail sentence and faced a fine of \$11,000 US dollars for writing “God doesn’t exist”, and starting an atheist page on Facebook.

Aan was charged with having disseminated information aimed at religious hatred or hostility, having spread a blasphemous message on the internet, and having called for others to embrace atheism. Aan was beaten by angry mobs and rejected by his community, despite having posted a public apology on his Facebook page.

In Iran, converts to Christianity from Islam can face harsh punishment, particularly if they are involved in unregistered house churches. In July 2017, four converts were sentenced to 10 years imprisonment charged with “acting against national security”. Three of them have previously been sentenced to 80 lashes for drinking communion wine, as the government still regards them as Muslims, and it is illegal for Muslims in Iran to drink alcohol.

Often political and religious leaders use their interpretation of sacred texts or religious law traditions to justify bans on and punishments for leaving the majority religion, or for belonging to certain groups. Punishments can include the death penalty, imprisonment, loss of employment or the annulment of marriage and loss of child custody. A number of countries with Muslim majorities including Saudi Arabia and Pakistan have such legal limitations on the right to leave Islam. However this is far from inevitable. For example, in Sierra Leone Muslims form around 70% of the population and Christians 20%, and whilst religion is very public, it’s not politicized and conversions in both directions are commonplace.

These kinds of problems are not limited to countries with Muslim majorities. In parts of the Central African Republic, so called Anti-Balaka militias have used death threats to force members of the Muslim minority to become Christians. And several states in India have legislation restricting the right to change religion, for example requiring people who convert to seek permission from government agencies.

And governments aren’t the only ones who violate the right. In India there have also been serious outbreaks of violence in which Hindu nationalist groups have attacked Christian and Muslim communities, at times including conversions under the threat of violence. In some cases, people displaced by the violence have been required to convert before being allowed to return to their homes.

Neither are religious people the only ones to face problems. People who criticize religious ideas, or the relationship between religion and the state, can face great danger. In recent years, several bloggers in Bangladesh have been murdered by extremist groups for criticizing religious ideas and practices, and the state. Sadly, the Bangladeshi government's attempts to stop these violent extremist groups have not yet succeeded. Some governments fail to condemn attacks upon people who criticize religious ideas. This silence sends a message that violence is justified and acceptable.

The freedom to change religion or belief is very controversial at the international level. In fact, each time the member nations of the United Nations have agreed a new convention or declaration the right to change religion has been expressed more weakly.

But even if the language gets weaker, the UN human rights committee, whose job is to advise countries on how to interpret the covenant on civil and political rights, has stated that “the freedom to ‘have or to adopt’ a religion or belief necessarily entails the freedom to choose a religion or belief, including the right to replace one's current religion or belief with another or to adopt atheistic views, as well as the right to retain one's religion or belief.”

To summarise – the right to have or change your religion or belief is absolute. It may not be limited under any circumstances. None the less, some governments limit the right and there are many cases in which families or groups in society punish people in different ways for having or changing their religion or beliefs.

You can find more information about the right to have or to change religion or belief, including texts of human rights documents that refer to it, in the training materials on the website.

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