Poppy Dykes

**What is the most coherent argument in favour of religious freedom?**

While restrictions on religious liberty have been considered violations of human rights since the earliest civilisations (Cyrus the Great’s policy of permitting religious freedom throughout the Achaemenid Empire is documented on the Cyrus Cylinder[[1]](#endnote-1)) the extent to which religious expression can be tolerated is a much-contested issue. In basic terms, religious freedom can be defined as the ability of people of all faiths or none to openly profess and practice their beliefs, form religious associations, and be exempt from certain civil laws on religious grounds. This ability is felt to be so essential that it is (in at least some capacity) a human right in the majority of the world's nations. In this essay, I will explore three of the many reasons why this is the case and identify which of these is the most rational. The arguments for religious freedom I will discuss are: that no one has a right to interfere with the religion of another if no harm is being caused by these beliefs; that it is the only way to guarantee peace in a religiously diverse society; that the use of force to impose or restrict belief is ineffective and harmful. To support my evaluation of these reasons, I will be referring to both religious (such as John Locke’s Second Treatise and Letter on Toleration) and non-religious texts (such as Roger Finke’s paper, Origins and Consequences of Religious Restrictions: A Global Overview). Instead of comparing the subjective merits of these arguments, I will be judging them on their logic, clarity and consistency, concluding that religious freedom is a necessary condition for peace.

It is well understood that much like political or philosophical beliefs, religion is a private matter. This means that neither a government nor another individual should interfere with any part of its belief, expression or practice. From a secularist perspective, this is because it would be a violation of civil rights to do so. In Christian thought, the reason is, as John Locke puts it in his Second Treatise and Letter on Toleration, that “the care of souls is not committed to the civil magistrate, any more than to other men. It is not committed unto him, I say, by God; because it appears not that God has ever given any such authority to one man over another as to compel anyone to his religion.”[[2]](#endnote-2)

The obvious exception to this rule is when an individual carries out an action required of their religion (or that they perceive is a requirement of their religion due to their interpretation of scripture) that directly harms others. This is explained by John Stewart Mill in his essay “On Liberty” as the harm principle: “the only purpose for which power can be rightfully exercised over any member of a civilised community, against his will, is to prevent harm to others.”[[3]](#endnote-3) An example of this limitation in the past 20 years is the 2005 legal case of R (Williamson and others) v Secretary of State for Education and Employment and others. The case involved a group of British parents and teachers who tried unsuccessfully to overturn the ban on corporal punishment in schools using Article 9 of the UK Human Rights Act 1998 (Freedom of Thought, Conscience and Religion). “They believed that part of the duty of education in the Christian context was for teachers to assume the parental role and administer physical punishment to misbehaving children. The House of Lords rejected the case because the parents’ rights under Article 9 were restricted by the need to protect children from the harmful effects that corporal punishment might cause”[[4]](#endnote-4). This case illustrates that there are reasonable restrictions in place to protect other human rights which take precedence over that of religious freedom. It can therefore be argued that it is unnecessary to further limit people’s right to practise and profess religion in the fear that their religious justifications for unacceptable behaviour will go unchecked.

Interestingly, the rules are different when it comes to taking care of oneself; the following line of Mill’s essay states “His [referring to any member of the civilised community] own good, either physical or moral, is not a sufficient warrant.”[[5]](#endnote-5) This theory can be seen in action in the UK Government’s decision to overturn the rule on turbans in the workplace: “Turban-wearing Sikhs will now [as of October 2015] have the right to choose not to wear head protection and will be exempt from legal requirements to wear a safety helmet in all workplaces.”[[6]](#endnote-6) Exemptions like these are important as they allow people of faith autonomy, trusting that people can make an informed judgement when it comes to risks to personal safety.

Following this “no-harm” argument, it can be easily concluded that any gratuitous sanctions on religious practice would be in breach of personal privacy and that they cause needless upset which is tantamount to harassment. This idea is particularly strong as it can be applied in a non-religious context i.e., it is unethical to interfere with someone’s activities simply because they do not align with one’s own beliefs.

Another encouragement for allowing religious liberty is that it appears to lead to more peaceful living conditions. In his address to an interfaith conference held in São Paulo, Brazil in 2015, Mormon Elder D. Todd Christofferson stated: “Religious freedom is the cornerstone of peace in a world with many competing philosophies. It gives us all space to determine for ourselves what we think and believe—to follow the truth that God speaks to our hearts. It allows diverse beliefs to coexist, protects the vulnerable, and helps us negotiate our conflicts.”[[7]](#endnote-7) His words have some statistical proof: a 2014 report from the Institute for Economics and Peace using data from the GPI (Global Peace Index) found that “countries with greater religious freedoms are generally more peaceful, whereas countries with less religious freedom are generally less peaceful.”[[8]](#endnote-8) The reasons for this correlation are complex. One explanation is that, according to the report, government restrictions on religion are closely correlated with levels of religious hostility (defined as acts of aggression or violence towards particular religious beliefs or practices.) Another possibility is that religious restrictions prevent adequate social contact between different religious groups, which would overwise serve to reduce conflict. As Roger Finke explains in “Origins and Consequences of Religious Restrictions: A Global Overview”[[9]](#endnote-9), restrictions violate the conditions outlined by social contact theory (equal status, support by authorities, shared goals, and interdependence between groups) under which inter-group relations must occur to promote peace and tolerance between those groups. It can be inferred, then, that religious freedom improves the quality of inter-faith relations, creating an environment in which members of different religions can listen to, understand and respect each other as equals. In short, creating an environment of peace.

Finally, the use of force to impose or restrict religious beliefs, in the form of societal pressure, legislature, or persecution, is harmful to the wellbeing of individuals who are subject to it. As Zheng Wu & Christoph M. Schimmele highlight in their 2019 essay, “Perceived religious discrimination and mental health”[[10]](#endnote-10), religious discrimination is a form of stress which can have negative effects on the mental health of those who experience it, leading to psychological distress, depression, anxiety and declines in self-esteem (Dion 2002; Pascoe and Smart Richman 2009; Williams and Mohammed 2009). Feelings of discrimination involve the perception that one’s well-being is under threat, which can be a direct cause of psychological distress (Dion 2002). Discrimination against religious groups (which can be an effect of limited religious freedom at government level) can limit access to societal resources, such as housing, education, and employment (Krieger 2000; Schmitt et al. 2014; Williams and Mohammed 2009). Unfair access to these resources can raise their chances of psychological impairment by exposing them to stress factors such as poverty and unemployment (Mirowsky and Ross 2003). This confirms the direct harm that can result from religious groups being made to feel that they are not free to practise their beliefs for fear of facing prejudice. Laws such as the Equality Act 2010 in the UK promote religious freedom by protecting people from discrimination because of their religious beliefs and giving them a way to put an end to it (by filing a complaint against an employer, for example).

A 2017 report by the Pew Research Centre[[11]](#endnote-11) found that 30% of countries with an official state religion afford additional privileges to that religion and create a harsh environment for other religions. Whilst adherence to these countries’ state religion is not compulsory, members of other religions sometimes suffer from heavy governmental restrictions. For instance, in Iran, the only non-Muslim religions whose members are allowed to worship are Christianity, Zoroastrianism, and Judaism. However, public religious expression, persuasion, or conversion by these groups is punishable by death. According to the report: “non-recognized religious groups, like Baha’i, are not free to practice their religion, and even the recognized groups’ activities are closely monitored.” Additionally, there are four states whose official religion is mandatory for all citizens: Comoros, Maldives, Mauritania, and Saudi Arabia. In Saudi Arabia, conversion from Islam (the official state religion) is legally punishable by death under the crime of apostasy. All citizens are required by law to follow Islam, and the public worship of other faiths is prohibited. The Saudi Arabian government does not always respect the right of non-Muslim citizens to worship in private, as there have been raids of non-Muslim religious meetings, following which the participants were detained or deported. Arguably, the existence of such meetings in countries hostile to their beliefs proves that religion is an irrepressible force of the mind that cannot be successfully controlled by anyone except the individual. Any attempt to convert people to a certain faith using force or fear is not only a vain pursuit but stands as an obstacle to true belief. As John Locke argues in another passage of his Second Treatise and Letter on Toleration[[12]](#endnote-12) from a religious point of view, the practice of outwardly conforming to beliefs one does not think are true can only stand in the way of salvation. Following this line of thought, enforced belief is spiritually (as well as psychologically) harmful.

As stated in my introduction, religious freedom has been a major subject of contention from the beginning of civilisation, though one which has been inexplicably under-researched. Though the issue may seem less relevant than other aspects in the field of global relations (particularly to non-religious organisations), I would argue that religious liberty for all is an essential condition for peaceful relations between inevitably diverse religious groups. The conclusion that can be drawn from the information here presented is that humanity can adopt two approaches to religious freedom in the strive for peace: force everyone into one religion or allow religious plurality to go on undisturbed by restrictions. I have, however, outlined the various logistical and moral issues that surround the former option, leaving only the possibility of acceptance, toleration, and liberty.

**Bibliography**

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3. ii Mill, John Stuart. On liberty and other essays. Oxford University Press, USA, 1998. [↑](#endnote-ref-3)
4. iv The Human Rights: Human Lives A Handbook for public authorities (2014) [↑](#endnote-ref-4)
5. See 3 [↑](#endnote-ref-5)
6. https://www.gov.uk/government/news/government-overturns-turban-workplace-rule [↑](#endnote-ref-6)
7. Kokkinakis v. Greece, 3/1992/348/421 (May 25, 1993), para. 31; Nolan and K. v. Russia, 2512/04 (Feb. 12, 2009), para. 61; see also Serif v. Greece, 38178/97 (Dec. 14, 1999), para. 49; European Convention on Human Rights, Article 9. [↑](#endnote-ref-7)
8. Silvestri, S, Mayall, J. (2015). The Role of Religion in Conflict and Peacebuilding. [↑](#endnote-ref-8)
9. Finke R. Origins and Consequences of Religious Restrictions: A Global Overview. Sociol Relig. 2013;74(3):297-313. doi:10.1093/socrel/srt011 [↑](#endnote-ref-9)
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11. Pew Research Center, July 15, 2019, “A Closer Look at How Religious Restrictions Have Risen Around the World” [↑](#endnote-ref-11)
12. See 2 [↑](#endnote-ref-12)