

What is Religious Freedom Good For?

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What is religious freedom good for? Despite being enshrined in international law – the UN Declaration of Human Rights, the European Convention on Human Rights, among them, and almost all national constitutions, religious freedom is an endangered right and principle. Not only in the obvious way that the people in this room already know too well – there is no lack of examples of religious persecution today. Just look at how the rise of ISIS in the Iraq-Syrian border became catastrophic for many so-called infidels and apostate Muslims that the group has killed or driven out. Systematic persecution of particular religious communities happens in many other countries and regions as well, such as in the Central African Republic and in Myanmar.

But I want to talk about the not so obvious ways that religious freedom is endangered, in this age where both extreme belief and unbelief coexist. The first is in the way that religious freedom is framed in efforts by Western governments and groups in order to address these tragedies. There is an increasing amount of criticism directed towards the promotion of international religious freedom by Western governments, as well as various nongovernmental organizations. As we have briefly heard from Professor David Little's remarks during the plenary last evening, one main complaint is that foregrounding religion as the main explanatory framework for global conflicts breeds even more sectarianism or creates conflict where there is none. The underlying premise of this complaint is a blind spot caused by the dominant secular worldview of many in the West. We know that there is an increase in terms of the number of people who are irreligious. It's similar domestically and internationally. Western societies such as Canada where we have the Charter of Rights and Freedoms that protects religious freedom, religious accommodation claims are sometimes seen as unfair exemptions. One would normally hear the complaint, Why can't we all just follow the same rules or why can't they just be religious in private? Why is religion special at all?

Internationally, many scholars and even government officials and policymakers also tend to think religion is simply a proxy for other things and nothing else – a rebellion against the lingering colonial presence in the Middle East, for instance or simply lack of jobs or civil order. And that is because religion is less relevant in our own lives generally speaking, this conference notwithstanding. The appeal of ISIS, rightly or wrongly, lies in its religious mission and character. But for many people, it is difficult to comprehend, much less to relate, with religion's resonance and power for believers and especially those who believe this life is not all there is, that there is another world beyond it. But religious freedom presupposes that one is claiming *religious* freedom. If we take these criticisms to their logical conclusion and religion is just a smokescreen or proxy for other values and factors in a conflict, we are left with nothing. What would it mean then to protect religious freedom?

Religious freedom is also endangered in another non-obvious sense. If we accept in principle that other countries have a right to promote human rights and particularly religious freedom, then we also have to look at their justification for doing so. When you look at the platform of many groups advocating for international religious freedom, you're quite hard-pressed to see the reason or rationale behind the advocacy. Is it enough to promote religious freedom because it is enshrined in the UN Declaration of Human Rights or international law? I am not sure it should stop at that. Religious freedom is endangered of being left at the margins, and not taken seriously if we don't make it speak to secular interests. If religious freedom advocacy is undertaken at the exclusion of other important issues, its advocates both governments and non-governmental groups risk religious freedom's own marginalization in the mainstream discourse as something that is only of concern to Christian groups and in a largely secular west, that is a most unfortunate situation to be in.

I have written a book that details the United States' long history of promoting religious liberty abroad in various places, partly out of genuine concern for the plight of religious believers but also in recognition of its own national interest in promoting such. And that concern with religious freedom abroad as well as the institutions that advance that freedom has since been copied by Canada, and other European countries. And for good reason. If it's just the United States doing that, people could easily perceive it as simply trying to impose its own values but having an international coalition address this important challenge gives it more legitimacy. But as all these countries come together to promote religious freedom, we also have to change the way we talk about religious freedom. Governments should take religion and the language of religion seriously, but religion should also take the language of the state seriously. How does religious freedom intersect with other issues relevant to a particular society? Why is it in the interest of a state such as, Pakistan for example, abolish its blasphemy laws? What does that mean? It should be made clear and explicit that the pursuit of religious freedom is done not only because it is a universal human right, or that it's the right thing to do but that it's also in the national interest of states to promote it, and there need not be an either-or choice between the two.