



GLOBAL PLURALISM

NATURAL HUMAN RIGHTS: RELIGIOUS FREEDOM

INTRODUCTION: In 17th and 18th century Europe, a revolution of ideas called the Enlightenment occurred. One of the concepts to emerge from this period was the idea of the natural rights of man. The concept was most forcefully articulated by a Frenchman, Jean-Jacques Rousseau (1712-1778), but had its roots in the philosophy of a Scot, John Locke (1632-1704). This theory asserted that in his natural state, man had the right to life, liberty, and property. Locke argued that it was government's responsibility to protect these rights. However, this doctrine differed radically from traditional Christian understanding of the human person as fundamentally sinful and, therefore, not possessing any natural rights.

One of the freedoms understood to be a natural right of man—freedom of religion—was first legislated in the Virginia Statute for Religious Freedom. The Statute was written by Thomas Jefferson and championed into law by James Madison. Despite its acceptance by the intellectuals who had been influenced by concepts of the Enlightenment period, the supporters of this doctrine were not numerous enough to single-handedly pass this legislation. They needed the support of others to enact the law.

This support ultimately came from an unlikely ally—the religiously committed, deeply pious members of the Great Awakening, who saw the guarantee of religious freedom as a means for doing away with the oppression of an established church. They also believed that it would allow ordinary citizens to make informed choices about the religion that they would espouse. These Christians were influential both in the Virginia debates and at the Constitutional Convention.

The adoption of legal codes affirming the universal rights of man has spread from country to country in the modern era. In fact, international declarations of human rights draw directly upon this Enlightenment tradition in affirming at the global level many human rights that were once called only the natural rights of man. What was once characterized as a purely western intellectual movement has become a global and international practical reality over the course of the last two centuries.

Many abuses of the right to freedom of religion still exist today. The U.S. State Department closely monitors this problem through the Office of International Religious Freedom which publishes an annual report on religious persecution and discrimination worldwide, recommends and implements policies in respective regions or countries, and develops programs to promote religious freedom.

Objective: How did an abstract idea about the natural rights of man become a political reality? What were the different motivations of the people who came to support this ideal? Why is the principle of religious freedom not yet a worldwide political reality?

Learning Objectives: After completing this lesson, the students will be able to:

- Analyze philosophical and legal doctrines to identify common principles within them;
- Trace the emergence of the right to religious freedom from a philosophical idea to a political and constitutional reality and, ultimately, to an international human-rights policy; and
- Understand how people of very different viewpoints can identify a shared underlying principle to forge a coalition to enact legislation.

Exercise 1

Topic: Analyze how interest groups can unite to build alliances and pass legislation in the historical example of the passage of the Virginia Statute for Religious Freedom.

Assignment: Read the summary of Thomas Jefferson’s correspondence with the Danbury Baptists (refer to Appendix).

Procedure:

- A. Break the students into partner teams—Baptists and Jeffersonians.
- B. Ask each team to answer and discuss the following questions with their partners:
 1. Jeffersonians
 - a. Why is Jefferson writing this letter?
 - b. What is his attitude toward religion?
 - c. Why does he think that the Baptists will agree with him?
 - d. What tensions in the coalition do you foresee?
 2. Baptists
 - a. What is established as the common ground of agreement?
 - b. Do you fully agree with all of these principles?
 - c. In what respect do you agree?
 3. Everyone
 - a. Do you foresee any tensions in the Baptist/Jeffersonian alliance?
 - b. If so, what are they?
 - c. What are the fundamental differences that produce these tensions?

Note: This alliance is sometimes referred to as the agreement between the Deists (Jefferson and Madison) and Pietists (Baptists and other Christians of the Great Awakening).

Exercise 2 – Internet Exercise

Assignment: Translate this historic example into a present-day scenario, where identifying and respecting the human right to freedom of religion can contribute to peace in a diverse, global setting.

Procedure:

- A. **Class Text** – Read aloud or have volunteers read the following from the Geneva Convention Resolution on Human Rights (1948).

PROLOGUE:

Now, therefore the General Assembly proclaims this Universal Declaration of Human Rights as a common standard of achievement for all peoples and all nations, to the end that every individual and every organ of society, keeping this Declaration constantly in mind, shall strive by teaching and education to promote respect for these rights and freedoms and by progressive measures, national and international, to secure their universal and effective recognition and observance, both among the peoples of Member States themselves and among the peoples of territories under their jurisdiction.

ARTICLE 18.

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.

- B. **Case Study** (Select One)

1. Option #1 – Afghanistan
 - a. Provide the report issued by the State Department on religious freedom in Afghanistan to the class. It is available online at <http://www.uscifr.gov/reports-and-briefs/annual-report.html>, which is the site for the State Department Commission on International Religious Freedom.
 - b. Ask students to work with a partner and to identify the parties of the Christians, Hindus, Shiite Muslims, Sunni Muslims, and Taliban by noting:
 - What proportion of the population belongs to each?
 - What is the position on religious freedom for each?
 - What motives, other than religious freedom, might be influential in the outcome of this position?
 - How would a legally enforceable provision protecting the individual's right to religious freedom contribute to a peaceful society?
 - What other rights might also be necessary to achieve this goal in Afghanistan?

OR

2. Option #2 – China
 - a. Provide the report issued by the State Department on religious freedom in China, Hong Kong, Macau and Tibet to the class at: <http://www.uscirf.gov/reports-and-briefs/annual-report.html>.
 - b. Ask students to work with a partner and to identify the parties of Buddhists, Christians, Falun Gong, Muslims, Taoists and Tibetans, as they consider the following questions:
 - Are the members of each religious group free to exercise their religion?
 - If so, are they all equally free?
 - Is there an official, state-sanctioned religion?
 - Is there such a thing as a *limited* right to freedom in China?
 - What motives, other than religious ones, seem to play a role in the Chinese government's attitude toward religion?

For more in-depth study and materials on international religious freedom, visit: <http://firstfreedom.org/education/international.html>.