

In Our Hands: . . . International Religious Freedom

An Online Video and Resource Manual

Religious Liberty: A Core Value



Courtesy of the
National Park Service

In Our Hands: Resource Manual

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Introduction

Religious liberty is a core value of American democracy. It is protected by the First Amendment to the United States Constitution and many state constitutions. The First Amendment states that: “Congress shall make no law respecting an establishment of religion or prohibiting the free exercise thereof.” These first sixteen words of the First Amendment are also referred to as the Establishment Clause and the Free Exercise Clause.¹

Although religious liberty was technically guaranteed by the Constitution from the time of the founding of the nation, actual religious freedom, as measured by the treatment of religious minorities, was not effectively

guaranteed in the U.S. until the 1940s, following a pair of Supreme Court decisions.² These decisions obligated all state and local governments to honor the First Amendment’s religion clauses. The 1964 Civil Rights Act then added protection against discrimination on the basis of religion in a number of specific contexts, such as at work, in government services and in housing. In the last half century, American religious diversity has flourished. The people of the United States enjoy unprecedented and ever-growing protection of religious liberty within an increasingly diverse nation.

A Brief Background

At the international level, religious freedom only began to be recognized as an international human right following World War II, with the non-binding Universal Declaration of Human Rights (UDHR). At the end of the war, the world learned in graphic and horrifying detail how six-million European Jews had been killed by the Nazis, solely because of their religious identity. The more than 11-million

victims of the Nazi Holocaust included not only Jews, but also ethnic Poles, Gypsies, homosexuals, and the mentally and physically handicapped. After the extent of the genocide began to be recognized, countries large and small joined together to ensure that this would never happen again. They formed the United Nations (UN) and set to work drafting the UDHR. On December 10, 1948, Eleanor Roose-

¹ For more information, see [The Constitution and Religion in the Classroom](#).

² *Cantwell v. Connecticut*, 310 U.S. 296 (1940), and *Everson v. Board of Education*, 330 U.S. 1 (1947).



Eleanor Roosevelt
December 10, 1948

Article 18, UDHR
“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.”

velt presented this document to the UN. It spelled out the essential and inalienable rights of all persons.

Eleanor Roosevelt, former first lady and recent widow of President Franklin D. Roosevelt, had been a long-time advocate for the rights of workers, women, and the poor and oppressed. President Harry S. Truman sent her to represent the United States at the newly formed United Nations. Her communication and consensus-building skills were quickly recognized, and she was elected chairperson of the UN Commission on Human Rights. She led the committee

to agree upon and draft the provisions for the Universal Declaration of Human Rights. It was subsequently ratified by all the member countries. Eleanor Roosevelt regarded her role in the drafting process as her greatest achievement.

Although the importance of this document may seem diminished by its status as a non-binding declaration, its true significance lies in the fact that it is the first broadly shared expression of the highest standards for the preservation of human rights.*

International Religious Freedom Act, 1998

In 1998, the United States Congress passed the International Religious Freedom Act (IRFA). This document is summarized on page 8 of the manual. The stated goal of this legislation was to enable the United States government to promote religious freedom world wide, because religious liberty is a cherished and long-held ideal of American democracy. It is an ideal that also has deep roots in

numerous countries around the world, but there are still many violations of religious freedom rights. In some places, systemic country-wide violations of this essential human right are taking place at this moment. IRFA strives to bring these violations to light and to make the promotion of international religious liberty part of U.S. foreign policy.

History of the Project

The mission of the First Freedom Center is to advance the fundamental human rights of freedom of religion and freedom of conscience through education. In 2008, the First Freedom Center co-sponsored a series of conferences in honor of the 10th anniversary of the International Religious Freedom Act of 1998. These conferences, or symposia, were convened by the Berkeley Center

for Religion, Peace and World Affairs at Georgetown University and co-sponsored by a broad array of education organizations interested in religious liberty. ([A summary of these proceedings is provided in the report of the Georgetown Symposia on International Religious Freedom Policy.](#)) The First Freedom Center sought to extend this scholarly discussion to a wider audience of non-experts, especially young people.



Photos courtesy of the Franklin D. Roosevelt Library

*The binding international documents that protect religious freedom are the European Convention for the Protection of Human Rights and Fundamental Freedoms, Art. 9 (1950); United Nations International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights, Art. 18 (1966); United Nations Declaration on the Elimination of All Forms of Intolerance and of Discrimination Based on Religion or Belief (1981). The Helsinki Accords are non binding (1975).

First, the First Freedom Center videotaped a number of informal interviews with symposia presenters. Then, in order to give voice to the perspective of young people on this issue, First Freedom partnered with the Center for Leadership, Government and Global Economics at Douglas Freeman High School in Henrico County, Virginia, to record what high-school students had to say about United States policy on international religious freedom. The voices of the experts and students are presented together on the video. You will hear a wide-reaching, yet critical discussion that is a thoughtful examination of U.S.

international religious freedom policy. Through the video, high-school students will learn about international human rights, U.S. foreign policy, U.S. history, and the wide variety of mechanisms that the United States can use to try to advance its policy goals. This topic has meaning and importance in current events today. In any given week, there are a number of international news stories relating to religious freedom. We invite you to browse First Freedom's biweekly news-clipping bulletin, *Newsclips*, to stay up to date on these stories. You will find it in the right-hand column of the home page at: www.firstfreedom.org.



“All young people today should consider the fundamental dignity of the human person and the rights attendant to that.”

How to Use this Manual and Online Video

This material is primarily intended for use in the classroom. You may choose to view the video chapter by chapter, pausing to discuss between sections, or you may prefer to watch it all the way through without pause. The manual will help to guide discussion and class activities. This examination of international religious freedom policy would be well placed in a class on any of the following topics:

- The founding ideals of American democracy, the Constitution, and the global significance of these principles today;
- The Holocaust and responses to it;
- Eleanor Roosevelt, her life and significance, and her leadership role in the UN;
- The anniversary of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights;
- Genocide;
- International human rights;
- U.S. foreign diplomacy over the last half century;
- Case studies on U.S. relations with China, Vietnam, Sudan, Laos, Uzbekistan or Saudi Arabia; and, of course
- International religious freedom as an aspect of U.S. foreign policy.





“The right to freedom of religion is under renewed and, in some cases, increasing assault in many countries around the world. More than one half of the world's population lives under regimes that severely restrict or prohibit the freedom of their citizens to study, believe, observe, and freely practice the religious faith of their choice. Religious believers and communities suffer both government-sponsored and government-tolerated violations of their rights to religious freedom.”

International Religious Freedom Act, 1998

Part 1: A Fundamental Issue

This chapter of the online video focuses on violations of religious liberty in the world today. Since the passage of the International Religious Freedom Act, the State Department has repeatedly identified countries such as Sudan and China, as Countries of Particular Concern (CPC) for their ongoing violations of the rights of religious minorities.

In Sudan, persecution and abuse of Christians and Animists living in the southern part of the country are blamed on internal ethnic tensions and internal economic and civil unrest. Sudan's government tolerates and perhaps even stokes these tensions. In China, by contrast, most violations are produced by direct government action. China officially recognizes only certain religions; yet, this is no

guarantee even of their freedom. Tibetan Buddhists, Uighur Muslims, Protestant house church members, and Catholics are all recognized but have all suffered routine government-initiated violations of their religious liberty. Like many Communist nations, China's Communist government is wary of religious groups. In some former Communist countries, such as Albania, Atheism was the only permitted “religious” ideology.

A bright-line distinction between ethnic and political persecution is usually not possible. In places like Bosnia and Herzegovina, the persecution of Bosnian Muslims by Socialist and Communist Serbs certainly blurred this line. In that case, religious ideologies and identities were deeply intertwined with regional politics.

Current Conflicts in the World—Research Project

Learn about the issues—Southern Sudan and Tibetan China

1. Write an essay:

- What is the history of religious liberty violations in this region?
- Who are the persecutors? Who are the victims?
- What is the form of the abuse and why is this effective?
- Conclusion: What should the U.S. do to promote religious liberty?

2. Research resources:

- <http://www.ushmm.org/maps/projects/darfur>; Google Earth -> Layers -> Global Awareness -> USHM The Crisis in Darfur
- <http://sudanproject.ryanspencerreed.com/gallery>
- <http://www.freetibet.org>

3. Classroom discussion:

- How are these cases both similar and different?
- What is different about displacing people from their homes versus trying to control the religious elite?
- [See State Department Reports.](#)

Part 2: Why the U.S. Monitors Religious Freedom

In recent decades, the claim that the United States is a Christian nation has been widely proclaimed and hotly disputed. On the whole, the Christian nation myth is misleading in the discussion of religious liberty because it suggests the false idea that only Christians originally lived in this country. Certainly, the overwhelming majority of the original colonists were Christians; however, Christianity was not everyone's religion. Communities of Jews have lived on American soil for over 350 years. African slaves, brought here against their will, were often forced into Christianity and away from their Animist and/or Muslim beliefs and practices. Many Native Americans converted to Christianity, but others did not.

References to God in the Declaration of Independence are often cited as evidence of the Christian origins of this

Country; but is that what the founders really meant? America's founders did not seek religious liberty only for Christians; instead, they spoke more broadly in the language of the Enlightenment for freedom of conscience for all.



We invite you to use this discussion as an entry point for examining certain primary sources. Please look at [James Madison's Memorial and Remonstrance](#), the [Virginia Statute for Religious Freedom](#), and [George Washington's Letter to the Touro Synagogue](#).

Part 3: When Must the U.S. Speak Up?

Despite the highly persuasive statement that the U.S. should speak up in cases of genocide, like the Holocaust, this has not always been the case. A declaration of genocide has often come long after the killings. Frequently when genocide is occurring, the regime goes to great lengths to make sure that news of the atrocities does not leak out. Such was the case in the genocide effected by the Khmer Rouge in Cambodia. Furthermore, the United States has been reluctant, for political and diplomatic reasons, to

use the term "genocide," as in the situation between Turkey and Armenia. As a result of these factors, there are a number of instances since the end of WWII that the U.S. has stood by while genocide occurred.

But a benign and excusable neglect has not always been the reason why the United States has stood by. Influential voices in the public debate have argued that the United States should not step in. You will hear some of the students in the video asserting this perspective.

"Where the preamble declares that coercion is a departure from the plan of the holy author of our religion, an amendment was proposed, by inserting the word 'Jesus Christ,' so that it should read 'a departure from the plan of Jesus Christ, the holy author of our religion.' The insertion was rejected by a great majority, in proof that they meant to comprehend within the mantle of its protection the Jew and the Gentile, the Christian and Mahometan, the Hindoo and [the] infidel of every denomination."

Thomas Jefferson:
Autobiography, 1821.
ME 1:67





What is Genocide?

In the Convention on the Prevention and Punishment of the Crime of Genocide (*Adopted by Resolution 260 (III) A of the United Nations General Assembly on 9 December 1948*), the United Nations resolved:

In the present Convention, genocide means any of the following acts committed with intent to destroy, in whole or in part, a national, ethnical, racial or religious group, as such:

- (a) Killing members of the group;
- (b) Causing serious bodily or mental harm to members of the group;
- (c) Deliberately inflicting on the group conditions of life calculated to bring about its physical destruction in whole or in part;
- (d) Imposing measures intended to prevent births within the group;
- (e) Forcibly transferring children of the group to another group.

The United States Holocaust Memorial Museum has extensive background information and online activities that ask the question: How will you meet the challenge of genocide?

<http://www.ushmm.org/genocide/>

Part 4: How Religious Freedom Affects Individuals



This chapter asserts that religion and belief are an essential part of identity. This touches on a deeply philosophical question: What is identity? Is it an individual or a group quality?

The topic of identity also relies upon a second important and widely used term in discussions of international religious freedom: freedom of conscience. At an international level, the term “freedom of conscience” is often used because it better encompasses the idea that belief and non-belief are included in freedom of religion.

The individual’s conscience tells him or her what is right or wrong, good and bad. Therefore, conscience includes all moral beliefs and philosophies. Some argue, however, that freedom of religion is not limited to beliefs; it includes actions. Do you think the term “conscience” adequately covers all religious communities and their group activities?



A Classroom Game about Identity

When we think about religion, we sometimes think of it only in terms of an **individual's** relations to his or her transcendent beliefs, when, in fact, religious identity is also about **group** or **community identity**. Especially in the case of religious persecution, an entire group or community of people who share a religious identity is most often singled out. This classroom exercise is intended to underscore that identity in both individual and communal.



Directions

Prepare and distribute index cards to each student. One side should read, "I am a: _____(over)." The other side is left blank for students to write on.

Tell the students that this is an anonymous game. They are not to offer names or nicknames, only impersonal adjectives and nouns to describe themselves. In 10 words or less, ask the students to write down their answers to the question on the card, as though they were describing themselves to a newspaper reporter. You may offer examples, such as: student, club member, inquisitive, rebellious, etc.

Collect the cards and sort them by group after class. One group may contain descriptions of people who see themselves mostly in individual terms and as different from others; others may place themselves within a group (i.e., religion, team member, etc.) and emphasis shared qualities.

The next day, tell students about the different types of identity that you discovered when you sorted the cards. Give examples. Ask the students if they think religion is a part of individual identity and/or group identity. Discuss.

Part 5: Making the Policy Work

IRFA is not a call for military action against all violators, although many people assume that whenever the United States officially sanctions a country, war is the ultimate action in a sequence of events. In fact, IRFA lists a wide array of enforcement techniques and provides suggestions for promoting religious liberty. They include media and public awareness, economic and aid restrictions and public censure.

The act also speaks of promoting religious liberty through diplomacy. The Ambassador-at-Large for International Religious Freedom is responsible for many of these diplomatic visits, and the Commission on International Religious Freedom also visits foreign leaders. Please discuss: What do you think is more effective in international relations—promotion or punishment (i.e., the "carrot or the stick")?

“Are we to light a candle or curse the darkness?” asks Robert Seiple, the first U.S. Ambassador-at-Large for International Religious Freedom. According to Seiple, the International Religious Freedom Act is best implemented through the promotion of religious liberty.



Part 6: Stewards of the Future

This chapter raises the question: How can students help? How would you:

- Educate yourself and your peers?
- Write to newspapers, congressmen/women, government officials, non-government organizations (NGOs)?
- Raise money?
- Appreciate freedoms in the United States?
- Set an example for religious liberty for the world?

As you evaluate and investigate the International Religious Freedom Act, ask yourself if the act has worked to: (1) expose problems; (2) reduce persecution; and (3) increase concern about religious liberty?

- Have there been limited successes in countries such as Vietnam and Laos?
- Has the behavior of long-time CPCs changed as a result of this designation? (Examine Sudan, China, Turkmenistan and Saudi Arabia.)
- Have there been more news articles about religious liberty abuses because of the International Religious Freedom Act?
- How should we balance other foreign policy interests and broad human rights concerns with religious freedom rights?

Appendix-Summary of the Act

International Religious Freedom Act of 1998

http://www.uscirf.gov/index.php?option=com_content&task=view&id=349&Itemid=45

Why (is this act important)

- Religious freedom is a core value in the United States.
- “Freedom of religious belief and practice is a universal human right and fundamental freedom” which can be found in many important international accords.
- “More than one half of the world's population lives under regimes that severely restrict or prohibit the freedom of their citizens to study, believe, observe, and freely practice the religious faith of their choice.”
- Vast persecution—many have suffered and even died because of their religious beliefs.
- Before the act, it was a neglected issue. Many government officials avoided the subject of religion because it was too “sticky.”

What (is the goal of the act)

- “To condemn violations of religious freedom, and to promote, and to assist other governments in the promotion of, the fundamental right to freedom of religion.”
- With this act, the United States is shining the light on religious freedom throughout the world.

How (is it implemented)

- International Religious Freedom Office—State Department
- Ambassador-at-Large for International Religious Freedom
- Annual Report: Profiles the state of religious freedom in every nation of the world (besides the United States) and identifies “Countries of Particular Concern” in which violations of religious freedom are particularly heinous.
- United States Commission on International Religious Freedom - Report to Congress
- State Department Reports: <http://www.uscirf.gov/images/book%20with%20cover%20for%20web.pdf>