



HUMAN RIGHTS COUNCIL

DESCRIPTION OF THE COMMITTEE

In March 2006, the General Assembly voted to create the Human Rights Council, which would replace the much-criticized Commission on Human Rights. The Human Rights Council, like the Commission before it, addresses human rights violations around the world. The Human Rights Council is composed of 47 countries, which are elected by a majority of the General Assembly through a secret ballot. In an effort to remedy the controversy surrounding the Commission on Human Rights, member states of the Council are required to uphold human rights in their own countries and policies. Council members with “gross and systematic violations of human rights” may have their membership suspended. The Council meets at least three times a year.

TOPIC: RELIGIOUS INTOLERANCE

INTRODUCTION

Religion—a set or system of beliefs primarily focused on human origins, divine beings, and/or the deeper meanings of life, based on faith—can play an important role in international cooperation and peace; religious leaders and groups have long been important proponents of global unity. While many nations separate religion from government, others use spiritual beliefs as a basis for peaceful authority. However, religion may also subvert, or undermine, the ideals of peace and justice. It can be used as an excuse for intolerance and discrimination. Religion can also make people a target for discrimination. Around the world, people are frequently persecuted because of their beliefs or religious background.

BACKGROUND

Religious intolerance is a global problem with a long and sad history. In many areas of the world, violent clashes are a result of religious conflicts that are centuries-old. These conflicts can be explained by the role religion plays in personal and cultural development. Because religion defines moral codes and value systems, people often assume that different religions teach values that are incompatible with their own. As a result, groups may conflict over religious views or attitudes regarding life, justice and society.

According to the UN’s **Declaration on the Elimination of All Forms of Intolerance and of Discrimination Based on Religion or Belief**, passed in 1981, intolerance is defined as “any



distinction, exclusion, restriction, or preference based on religion or belief and having as its purpose...impairment of...human rights and fundamental freedoms on an equal basis.”¹ It is important to note that non-state actors (people or groups that do not have political authority) as well as governments are capable of demonstrating religious intolerance.

In many nations, religion plays a strong role in politics. Discrimination can become **institutionalized** in the government—governments may pass discriminatory laws that the people cannot overturn or ignore. When this happens, there is no authority to monitor or stop intolerant acts.

The months immediately following September 11, 2001 saw a sharp surge in religious intolerance aimed against Muslims all over the world. This type of discrimination is a serious concern for the international community. When groups such as Al Qaeda, the militant Islamic organization behind the September 11 attacks, commit violent acts in the name of a religion, there is often backlash against that entire religion or religious culture. Even the US, which is one of the most religiously tolerant nations according to Freedom House,² experienced a dramatic increase in violence against Muslims. Abdelfattah Amor, the Special Rapporteur of the Commission on Human Rights on Freedom of Religion or Belief, warned that unwarranted hatred toward Muslims would make reducing religious intolerance extremely difficult.³

According to Freedom House, an organization that promotes democracy and human rights, approximately 25 percent of the world currently has religious freedom while 39 percent is only “partly free.” This leaves a staggering percent of the globe living “in conditions in which religious freedoms are fundamentally violated.”

Source: www.freedomhouse.org.

The following are case studies that describe religious intolerance around the world:

Georgia

The southeastern European country of Georgia (formerly part of the Soviet Union) has recently been criticized for its widespread religious discrimination. Groups of Orthodox Christians have staged attacks on non-Orthodox faiths such as Jehovah’s Witnesses, Baptists and others. In addition to vandalism and theft, these groups have committed dozens of violent acts. However, government and police response remains low.

Human Rights Watch reported that over 100 physical assaults took place between 2000 and 2002, but only one criminal trial was held. Even during the trial, the defendants continued to persecute non-Orthodox Christians.⁴ The Georgian example demonstrates how government inaction can lead to human rights abuses the same way that **state-sponsored** discrimination does.

However, the situation has improved somewhat in recent years. Following a January 2003 attack by the extremist Vasili Mkalavishvili and his followers, the Movement Against Religious Intolerance in Georgia (MARIG) was created and has proven to be relatively effective.



Furthermore, the November 2003 elections coincided with a drop in violence, and led to a government which eventually arrested and punished Mkalavishvili for his crimes. Thus, while the situation is far from resolved, the case in Georgia provides some hope that countries and their governments can reform.⁵

Indonesia

Indonesia, the world's largest Muslim country, has experienced its own brand of violent religious intolerance. In the eastern regions of the nation, ongoing fighting between Christians and Muslims has claimed the lives of over 10,000 people. Approximately half a million refugees have been forced to leave.⁶ The "Laskar Jihad," a group guided by a radical interpretation of Islamic **sharia law**,* began a series of church bombings and public assaults on Christians in order to eliminate them from the nation.

The violence garnered international attention when a series of bombings in Bali, a resort island in Indonesia, targeted Australian, American and British vacationers. In 2002, blasts killed 202 people. Another bombing in 2005 killed 20 and injured over 100. Some nations point to Al Qaeda, which reportedly had connections with the bombers. Others blame Islamic extremist groups who are dissatisfied with the government's tolerance of religious minorities and western influences.

"China's government, through a series of Party policies and government regulations, including the March 1, 2005 'Regulations on Religious Affairs,' sharply curtails both freedom of religious belief and the freedom to express one's belief. Religious activities that are banned include publishing and distributing texts, selecting leaders, raising funds and managing finances, organizing training, inviting guests, independently scheduling meetings and choosing venues, and communicating freely with other organizations. In China today, all such activities are subject to regulatory state interference and even imprisonment and severe mistreatment of offending believers and practitioners."

Source: Human Rights News, <http://hrw.org/english/docs/2005/07/25/china11426.htm>.

Afghanistan

Religious intolerance in Afghanistan was widely documented under the rule of the repressive Taliban. The persecution of Shiite Muslims, Hindus, Christians and Jews was extremely violent. In 2001, Taliban leaders required all Hindus to wear badges that would distinguish them as members of the religious minority.⁷ This tactic, once used by Nazis to persecute Jews, demonstrated how routine intolerance had become.

The Taliban also began to destroy all religious statues, icons and monuments. Historic works of art were demolished, including the two largest Buddha statues in the world, which were over

* *Sharia Law*: For a comprehensive, general description and explanation of sharia law, delegates may begin their research with an excerpt from H.A.R. Gibbs's "The Shari'a," which can be found at <http://answering-islam.org/Books/Gibb/sharia.htm>



1,500 years old.⁸ After September 11, 2001, the Taliban regime was overthrown and a new, temporary government was installed. However, this government continues to struggle against warlords and Taliban forces, none of whom are committed to lasting religious tolerance.

Even the government has demonstrated religious intolerance. Afghanistan Chief Justice Fazul Hadi Shinwari said in 2002: “The Islamic government, according to sharia, is bound to punish those who get involved in anti-Islamic activities. We can punish them for propagating other religions—such as threaten them, expel them, and as a last resort, execute them.”⁹

Furthermore, because the religious intolerance that characterized the Taliban government was so pervasive, many citizens of Afghanistan exhibit similar feelings because that is all they’ve known. This became more evident recently when Afghanistan saw a number of violent civilian protests in response to a series of Danish cartoons depicting the prophet Muhammad. While the government is making progress, and the new constitution guarantees that “followers of other religions are free to exercise their faith and perform their religious rites within the limits of the provisions of law,” it still maintains Islam as the “religion of the state” and prejudices and intolerance are still quite prevalent in the government and society.¹⁰

Motivations Behind Religious Intolerance

Religious intolerance often coincides with political or social unrest. Often, the violence and discrimination associated with religious intolerance occur when social groups or political groups clash. For example, Sunni Muslims are the majority religion of Iraq, but they controlled much of the government for many years. During this time, Shi’a Muslims, which composed nearly 65 percent of the population,¹¹ faced active persecution by the Sunnis. This situation created national tension between the two Muslim communities. When Saddam Hussein, the leader of Iraq, was deposed in 2003, this tension erupted in a violent civil war. Currently, Sunni and Shi’a factions are fighting to gain control of the new Iraqi government.

Similarly, the power imbalance between Protestant Christians and Catholics in Northern Ireland led to dissent among the Catholic minority. Like most religious clashes, the conflict in Northern Ireland did not just involve religious differences. The conflict had much more to do with economic and political inequality between the two groups.

Because societies are often bound by religion and religious culture, disputes between communities may seem like religious disputes, even if they are really political or economic in nature. And often, when these communities come into conflict, they use religious differences as a way to distance themselves from their enemies.

But many religious communities exist side-by-side peacefully, and many religious societies integrate without conflict. It is important to think carefully about the causes behind religious intolerance, and to consider what other factors may contribute to the discrimination or violence.

CRITICAL THINKING

Many religions teach love, peace and forgiveness. Why might such religions give rise to intolerance? How might other factors influence discrimination and intolerance?



Separation of Church and State

Throughout history, many countries had **theocratic governments**, or governments lead by religious leaders. Today, many governments are based on the principles of one religion, and actively promote that religion among its people. These countries are said to have a state-sponsored religion. Often, these countries are criticized for mistreating people whose religions are different from the state-sponsored faith. Saudi Arabia and Iran, for example, are said to prevent public display of non-Islamic religious symbols and to prohibit public assembly or worship of non-Islamic religious groups.

Even if a country with a state-sponsored religion does not actively persecute other faiths, critics argue that these countries practice **implicit** intolerance. By promoting only one religion, the government is implying that other religious beliefs are inferior. Allowing for religious freedom is not enough. The government must also protect people of other faiths from discrimination.

Many countries are **secular**, which means that the government does not promote any religion at all. Members of secular societies believe in the importance of **separation of church and state**, the division of religious and government institutions. When no religion is promoted, then all religions are allowed to flourish without entitlement or persecution.

CRITICAL THINKING

Secularism is meant to prevent government from interfering with religion, and to prevent religion from affecting government. But could a secular community give rise to religious intolerance? How?

Protection of Religion vs. Protection from Religion

Nearly every country in the world recognizes the importance of religious freedom. But what happens when a group claims that persecuting others is an expression of its religious freedom? For example, homosexuality is punished by execution in Saudi Arabia. The Saudi Arabian government argues that homosexuality is a moral crime in Islam, and that punishing homosexuality is a religious act.

It can be difficult for the international community, and for individual governments, to balance freedom of religion and freedom from religious persecution.

CRITICAL THINKING

How should the international community react when an act of intolerance or violence is defended as “an expression of religion”?



PAST INTERNATIONAL ACTION

The basic principles of religious tolerance and respect for human rights are outlined in two essential documents: the *Universal Declaration of Human Rights* and the *International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights*. Both establish that freedom of thought, conscience and religion are human rights that must be upheld for all people. In addition, these declarations state that no one should be coerced or pressured to change their religious beliefs.*

In 1981, the General Assembly (GA) passed resolution 36/55, the *Declaration on the Elimination of All Forms of Intolerance and of Discrimination Based on Religion or Belief*. This document explains the basic religious rights of all people and called upon states to “take effective measures to prevent and eliminate discrimination on the grounds of religion or belief.”¹² This resolution urges each member state to create legal guidelines for protecting religious freedom.

In 1993, the GA also passed resolution 48/128 entitled *Elimination of All Forms of Religious Intolerance*.¹³ This document created a new position in the UN called the Special Rapporteur of the Commission on Human Rights on Freedom of Religion or Belief. The Rapporteur’s duties are to:

1. Monitor religious intolerance internationally;
2. Examine cases where government actions violate the 1981 declaration; and
3. Help to educate the world about human rights violations in the name of religion.

Finally, the General Assembly passed resolution A/C.3/53/L.32 in 1998 on *Human Rights Questions, including Alternative Approaches for Improving the Effective Enjoyment of Human Rights and Fundamental Freedoms*. Here, the GA encouraged states to apply international human rights standards to their own legal systems, and states were encouraged to teach their police and government leaders tolerance issues. The destruction of religious artifacts was also condemned.¹⁴

A number of international conferences on religious intolerance have also taken place. In September of 2001, the international community met in Durban, South Africa for the *World Conference against Racism, Racial Discrimination, Xenophobia and Related Intolerance*. The declaration written at that meeting dealt with racism in many forms, but included sections on religious intolerance. The document identified several causes for discrimination such as the lasting effects of colonialism, poverty and underdevelopment.¹⁵

The international community took another important step in 2005 with the adoption of resolution 59/199 (also titled “Elimination of all forms of religious intolerance”). This resolution is the product, and proof, of significant advancements made in this area over the last few years for a number of reasons. First, it was drafted jointly by member of the European Union, the Organization of the Islamic Conference, and Israel. Additionally, it named specifically the problems of Anti-Semitism, Islamophobia, and Christianophobia, and directly called for their

* Delegates may read the complete *Universal Declaration of Human Rights* at www.un.org/Overview/rights.html and the *International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights* at www1.umn.edu/humanrts/instree/b3ccpr.htm.



abolition. Finally, it passed with a vote of 186 to none, showing a strong sense of support and unity from the world.¹⁶

RECOMMENDATIONS FOR FORMULATING A RESOLUTION

Delegates should recommend ways to prevent future conflicts based on religious intolerance. Delegates can:

- Discuss ways to end state-sponsored religious discrimination;
- Suggest methods to protect religious minorities, particularly from extremist groups and oppressive governments;
- Determine how to protect religious expression and practice, while also ensuring that religion is not used as an excuse for human rights abuses; and
- Create new monitoring systems to identify violent and intolerant groups, or plan to intervene in conflicts between opposing religious groups (through conferences or summits).

QUESTIONS TO CONSIDER

1. What are the predominant religions in your country? How are minority religions treated?
2. What do human rights monitoring groups (for example, Human Rights Watch, Freedom House and Amnesty International) say about your country's religious tolerance?
3. Does your country separate religion from government?
4. According to your country, what are the worst cases of religious intolerance occurring in the world today?
5. What treaties has your government signed or ratified regarding religious intolerance?
6. What programs can your country suggest to help build respect for religion around the world? How can the UN help stop state-sponsored religious intolerance? Should some countries be pressured to change their government if their policies are too restrictive?

TERMS AND CONCEPTS

Declaration on the Elimination of All Forms of Intolerance and of Discrimination Based on Religion or Belief: a declaration passed by the UN General Assembly in 1981, which declared that all people have the right to freedom of religion. It calls upon all states to protect religious freedom and to prevent discrimination based on religion.

Institutionalize: to become part of an institution. When discrimination is sanctioned and promoted by the government, it becomes a policy of the government institution; it is “institutionalized.”

State-sponsored: the description of a policy, action or behavior that is promoted or facilitated by the government. State-sponsored discrimination can be discrimination that is encouraged by the government, or discrimination that occurs with the consent of the government. State-sponsored religion is a religion that is supported government.

Sharia law: the religious guidelines of Islam. Sharia covers worship, dress and behavior. It is interpreted differently by different sects of Islam. Radically interpreted sharia law is sometimes very restrictive, and has been controversial in the international community. Sharia is enforced by some religious governments, such as Saudi Arabia.

Theocratic government: a government ruled by a religious authority.

Implicit: implied or understood, but not directly expressed.

Secular: the idea that religion should not play a role in public affairs or government.

Separation of church and state: the idea that religion and government should not influence each other.

Elimination of All Forms of Religious Intolerance: a resolution passed by the UN General Assembly in 1993, establishing a Special Rapporteur of the Commission on Human Rights, to focus on protecting the freedom of religion and belief, and to monitor religious intolerance.

SOURCES FOR RESEARCH

Center for Religious Freedom, Freedom House www.freedomhouse.org/religion

Special Rapporteur of the Commission on Human Rights on Freedom of Religion or Belief
www.ohchr.org/english/issues/religion

Human Rights Watch: Religious Freedom <http://hrw.org/doc/?t=religion>

“Declaration on the Elimination of All Forms of Intolerance and of Discrimination Based on Religion or Belief,” A/RES/36/55 www.un.org/documents/ga/res/36/a36r055.htm

“Elimination of all forms of religious intolerance,” A/RES/48/128, December 1993,
www.un.org/documents/ga/res/48/a48r128.htm



REFERENCES

- ¹ “Declaration on the Elimination of All Forms of Intolerance and of Discrimination Based on Religion or Belief,” A/RES/36/55, 25 November 1981, www.un.org/documents/ga/res/36/a36r055.htm
- ² Paul Marshall, *Religious Freedom in the World: A Global Report on Freedom and Persecution*, (Washington, D.C.: Center for Religious Freedom, Freedom House, 2002).
- ³ Abdelfattah Amor, “Report of the Special Rapporteur for Freedom of Religion and Belief,” *United Nations General Assembly, 3rd Committee: Social, Humanitarian, and Cultural* (New York: United Nations, 5 November 2002).
- ⁴ “On the Occasion of the OSCE Human Dimension Implementation Meeting, Warsaw,” Human Rights Watch Statement: Freedom of Religion, 2002, http://hrw.org/press/2002/09/ose_religion0912.htm, “Religious Freedom in Uzbekistan, Turkmenistan, and Georgia: Letter to the United States Commission on International Religious Freedom,” 2003, <http://hrw.org/english/docs/2004/02/09/turkme7324.htm>
- ⁵ “Georgia—Human Rights Overview,” Human Rights Watch, <http://hrw.org/english/docs/2005/01/13/georgi9903.htm>.
- ⁶ Paul Marshall, “Terror's Not New to Indonesia,” *The New York Post*, 15 October 2002, www.freedomhouse.org/religion/country/indonesia/Terror%27s%20Not%20New%20to%20Indonesia.htm
- ⁷ “Taleban to mark Afghan Hindus” CNN, May 2001, <http://archives.cnn.com/2001/WORLD/asiapcf/central/05/22/afghanistan.hindu>
- ⁸ “Afghan Taliban Begin Destruction of Ancient Buddha Statues” Agence France Presse, March 2001, www.commondreams.org/headlines01/0301-04.htm
- ⁹ Nina Shea, “Sharia in Kabul? A theological iron curtain is descending across Afghanistan,” *Center for Religious Freedom*, Freedom House, 28 October 2002, www.freedomhouse.org/religion/country/afghanistan/Sharia%20in%20Kabul.htm
- ¹⁰ “International Religious Freedom Report 2006—Afghanistan” US Department of State, <http://www.state.gov/g/drl/rls/irf/2006/71437.htm>.
- ¹¹ Iraq, CIA Factbook, www.cia.gov/cia/publications/factbook/geos/iz.html
- ¹² “Declaration on the Elimination of All Forms of Intolerance and of Discrimination Based on Religion or Belief,” A/RES/36/55
- ¹³ “Elimination of all forms of religious intolerance,” A/RES/48/128, December 1993, www.un.org/documents/ga/res/48/a48r128.htm
- ¹⁴ “Human rights questions, including alternative approaches for improving the effective enjoyment of human rights and fundamental freedoms,” Resolution A/C.3/53/L.32, November 1998, www.hri.ca/fortherecord1998/documentation/genassembly/a-c3-53-132.htm
- ¹⁵ “World Conference against Racism, Racial Discrimination, Xenophobia and Related Intolerance: Declaration,” Office of the UN High Commissioner on Human Rights, www.unhchr.ch/html/racism
- ¹⁶ Namrita Talwar, “Unlearning Intolerance,” UN Chronicle Online Edition, <http://www.un.org/Pubs/chronicle/2005/issue1/0105p30.html>