

## Script: Freedom of Religion or Belief - an introduction

This is the first of a set of 8 presentations looking at what the human right to freedom of thought, conscience, religion or belief involves, and if and when it may be limited. In this brief introduction, we're going to start by thinking about who or what is protected by human rights, and what rights the freedom of religion or belief gives us.

I'd like to begin by asking you a question! Which religions are protected by the human right to freedom of religion or belief?

Do you think it's the major world religions?

Or is it all religions, including small or unusual religions?

Or perhaps it's all religions and all kinds of beliefs?

Actually, it was a trick question. I asked you which religions are protected.

People often assume that freedom of religion or belief protects religions and beliefs, but actually it doesn't! Just like all other human rights, freedom of religion or belief protects people, not religions or beliefs in themselves.

Freedom of religion or belief protects people who identify with, believe in or practice old religions, new religions, religions that are traditional in a country and religions that are not traditional in that country. It also protects people with serious non-religious beliefs about fundamental questions, like atheists, humanists and pacifists. No matter what country they live in.

Freedom of religion or belief even protects people who don't care about religion or belief at all.

In other words, freedom of religion or belief protects everyone! So what protections or rights do we have? To find that out we need to look at international human rights declarations and conventions. The two most important are:

Article 18 of the United Nations Universal Declaration of Human Rights and

Article 18 of the United Nations International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights

While UN declarations state political intentions, UN covenants and conventions are legally binding. Let's look at the text of the Covenant on Civil and Political Rights.

## **Article 18**

1. Everyone shall have the right to freedom of thought, conscience and religion. This right shall include freedom to have or to adopt a religion or belief of his choice, and freedom, either individually or in community with others and in public or private, to manifest his religion or belief in worship, observance, practice and teaching.

2. No one shall be subject to coercion which would impair his freedom to have or to adopt a religion or belief of his choice.

3. Freedom to manifest one's religion or beliefs may be subject only to such limitations as are prescribed by law and are necessary to protect public safety, order, health, or morals or the fundamental rights and freedoms of others.

4. The States Parties to the present Covenant undertake to have respect for the liberty of parents and, when applicable, legal guardians to ensure the religious and moral education of their children in conformity with their own convictions.

So what does it mean in practice for the people protected? What rights do we have? I'd like to introduce seven topics that highlight the rights provided by international law in relation to religion and belief:

The first two form the heart of the right to freedom of religion or belief:

- The freedom to have, choose, change or leave a religion or belief and
- the freedom to practice or manifest a religion or belief.
- On top of these we have the right to protection from coercion and
- from discrimination in matters of religion or belief,
- rights for parents and for children concerning religion and belief,
- and the right to conscientious objection.

Another key element of freedom of religion or belief is the rules about if and when the rights provided may be limited.

On the website you'll find a film on each of these topics, with an in depth look at what the right means in practice.

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