

The Globalization of Religious Freedom: Evolution, Debates and Issues

Mohd Afandi Salleh

Universiti Sultan Zainal Abidin, Malaysia

Abdul Majid Tahir Mohamed

Universiti Sultan Zainal Abidin, Malaysia

Rabiatul Adawiyah Mohd Ariffin

Universiti Sultan Zainal Abidin, Malaysia

DOI Link: <http://dx.doi.org/10.6007/IJARBSS/v7-i7/3163>

Published Date: 27 July 2017

Abstract

The paper explores the globalization of religious freedom as a universal human rights in the 21st century. It discusses the evolution of international religious freedom and depicts the importance of such freedom globally. It emphasizes a broad spectrum of international issues and challenges pertaining to religious freedom. The paper finally contends that the international religious freedom is becoming more important issue in a study of the resurgence of religion in international affairs as it relates to the conflict and understanding of the contemporary global society.

Keywords: International Religious Freedom, Human Rights, Religion in International Relations

Introduction: The Emergence of Religious Freedom as a Universal Human Rights Agenda

The discussion of religious freedom as a universal human right has becoming more salient in the beginning of the 21st century. Cesari (2004) divides human rights into two meanings. The first one refers to demand for social justice in the history. Secondly, it refers to the specific provisions in international instruments including Universal Declaration of Human Rights (UDHR)1948. However, Cesari's classification does not include the globalization that happens to the society nowadays. The document of UDHR has been applied since almost 68 years ago and there are some modifications needed in order to adapt the meaning of human rights in the current situation. Based on the international treaties, the rights embedded are so close to human nature. The treaties depicts the essential characteristics of every human being. Not only that, various international treaties laid down the paradigm of universality of human rights. Therefore, the UDHR and the International Convention of Economic, Social and Cultural Rights are among the examples that demonstrates the overview of rigid form.

On top of that, racial discrimination and violations on fundamental right had been addressed by international community before the early sixties (Lerner, 2000). In fact, the United Nations only notified the violations after the early sixties, because of anti-Semitic outbreaks. The catastrophe of anti-Semitic deterred international community to analyze what happened in the world. What has been said by Lerner was right because when violations happened, any issues relating to the subject matter are fragile and sensitive. Any attempt to solve the problem is not a solution but seems a step to destroy the issue.

Besides that, the United Nations Declaration on the Elimination of All Forms of Intolerance and Discrimination Based on Religion or Belief is also considered as the important document in international setting (Davis, 2002). Since the establishment of the Act, the issue of persecution still remain as a major problem in most part of the world. Davis also believes that the formula by world community for international protection for human rights, including religious rights is the greatest achievement. However it is important to note that the achievement is not really persuasive. Religious freedom has become one of the foundational human rights which is very close to human being (Rieffer-Flanagan,2014). This right evolved over the time and was firstly being enumerated in the UN General Assembly resolution, formally known as the 1948 Universal Declaration of Human Rights. The codification was subsequently highlighted in Article 18 of the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights. The covenant stipulates the rights which include freedom to have or to adopt a religion or belief of his choice and people are free to manifest their religion in worship, observance, practice and teaching. The protection of religious freedom covers protection which common to society. The right is not man-made law but it has been in existence before government and societies, as what had been stipulated by Universal Declaration of Human Rights (UDHR) that “all men are endowed with dignity and conscience”.

The International Religious Freedom Act (IRFA) was signed as law by President Clinton in 1998. Historically, religious freedom had been a less recognised aspect of human right agenda and IRFA was a piece of legislative machinery to secure religious freedom. Focusing on the objective of the Act, it highlights the priority given in American foreign policy. The introductory section of the Act states that religious freedom is a “universal human right and fundamental freedom” and the equivalent quotes from UDHR and ICCPR describing freedom of thought, conscience and religion which are in line with other international frameworks including the Declaration on the Elimination of All Forms of Intolerance and Discrimination Based on Religion or Belief, Helsinki Accords, the United Nations Charter, Fundamental Freedoms and the European Convention for the Protection of Human Rights (Farr & Hoover, 2009 ; Wuerffel, 1998).

Global Issues of Religious Freedom

Hashemi (2007) distinguishes the issue of religious freedom into two parts; inter religious issues and intra religious issues. The interpretation on inter religious issues mainly discusses the freedom to followers of a religion in connection with other religion. The intra religious groups discusses on freedom of individuals within smaller groups among larger religious community. Therefore, this subsection will focus on inter religious issues.

In number of cases, the study shows violations of religious freedom had happened in the countries that highly restrict apostasy, blasphemy or defamation of religion (Grim, 2012). With respect to apostasy, it is considered as high treason or a cancer because of its ‘harsh’

punishments that threaten country's stability and harmony (Stahnke, 1999). In this sense, the U.S. acted as sole superpower to protect religious freedom in foreign states. The main problem with the U.S. is that they relies too heavily on the apostasy cases but they dismiss certain factors such as the right of religious freedom and the source of Islamic law (Quran). To the U.S., apostasy becomes a subject of infringement of human right. But this is particularly irrelevant because Muslims have tried to explain the reasons that make apostasy forbidden for Muslims. Anyone who is not a Muslim should understand and respect the rules in Islam rather than to engage the gap between Muslims and non-Muslims.

Muslims have been part of the social landscape of the world since the 9th century and the role of Islam took a far more serious turn in 19th century. But however, the U.S. believes that the growing of Islam is one reason that people have not been enjoying the full right of religious freedom. In fact, the recent issues of Boko Haram and Da'esh have made Islam to be seen as most terrible abusers or violators of religious freedom in the world (U.S. Department of State, 2015). Boko Haram and Da'esh claimed lives of many people targeting both Christians and Muslims who opposed to their violent ideology. Not surprisingly, the groups aim to attack churches and mosques and if the areas are not within Da'esh control, the groups continue suicide bombings against Shia Muslims. There was a reported case, a suicide bomber committed the crime towards a crowded marketplace in Diyala, Iraq and almost 115 peoples were killed. As such, Western scholars have commonly argued that Muslims are the worst violators.

The activity of proselytism is controversial. It involves the denominations of religion exemplifies into conflict. Malaysia is the only Muslim country which specifically states in its Constitution the provision relating to restriction on proselytizing (Hashemi, 2007). The state usually protects certain particular religious groups due to compelling reasons suitable for the State. In the U.S., the activity of proselytism is treated as a form of free speech, protected under the First Amendment of the U.S. Constitution (Hunter & Price, 2001). However, international treaties and instruments are usually silent on the issue of proselytism, based on the reason that the danger caused by proselytism is minimal. In fact, it is less focused by international human right organization. It is also argued that the government has not been aggressive enough in measuring the parameter of religious freedom to engage in proselytism (Lindholm, Durham, Jr, & Tahzib-lie, 2013).

As related above, religious persecution is the most serious human rights problem in the world today. The battle to fight against the persecution is among the priority in the U.S. international agenda. All religious faith are victims of persecution everywhere (Bandow, 2015). The fact is it is a serious problem when there are particular groups are attacked and killed just because of what they believe. Christians are always targeted, as the repression that happened in Mosul, Iraq which is the second largest of Iraq city. USCIRF had reported that Islamic State of Iraq and Levant (ISIL) murdered 12 dissenting Sunni clerics, kidnapped Christian priests and nuns and also destroyed ancient houses of worship. In this case, the West always blames Muslims countries and believes death is the norm and relates stoning to death for apostasy as harsh and repressive.

The Debates of the Importance of International Religious Freedom.

Generally, religious freedom is a universal human right and people need religious freedom in their daily lives. According to the Pew Forum on Religion & Public Life (2008), the importance of religion is undeniable even among unaffiliated population. The unaffiliated population include atheist and agnostic people, and it was reported that more than four-in-ten of the

unaffiliated people (41%) think that “religion is at least somewhat important in their lives.” However, it is important to know to what extent people need religious freedom to protect themselves. Nickel (2005) in answering the question, adopted ‘basic liberties approach’ which defines the true scope of religious freedom. Based on the approach, it summarizes gold standard for other fundamental liberties. The approach suggests the description for broad scope of religious freedom to include politics, business, association and movement. It restricts to prioritize religious freedom and in the meantime, resists a narrow-clause bound in construing the freedom. Hence, it indicates people from various background need religious freedom and therefore everyone needs the freedom.

The argument is supported by Haarscher (2002) while discussing religious freedom in the context. Overall, he suggested that religious freedom should not be dependent upon any particular economic, political or cultural context. If there is any specific reference to be made upon their appropriateness to the particular norms, group or community, human will easily lose their critical content. This shows peoples need religious freedom and the freedom should be applied to everyone regardless of their background.

Grim & Finke (2010) in similar vein demonstrated the intention of James Madison when he wrote the First Amendment. It was emphasized he was fully aware that the religious groups and their followers needed protection from both the state and dominant religion. In this context, the protection of government in protecting religious freedom is undeniably important. Hence, in this regard, the writers explain that the government and the official religion in the country play an important role in order to safeguard religious freedom. The religious groups need religious freedom as well as their followers and Grim and Finke ultimately put focus on religious group and their followers in describing who needs religious freedom. Based on the above-mentioned opinion, Nickel (2005) tends to control the true scope of religious freedom and at the same time, rejects the narrow scope and prioritization on religious freedom. While Haarscher believes religious freedom should be generalized towards every people irrespective of their political, economic and cultural background. Despite that, Grim & Finke (2010) took a different view by limiting the scope only to religious groups and their followers. However, this view is quite inaccurate. Everyone needs religious freedom as it is a fundamental human right. However, the approach in construing religious freedom will give different answers on who needs religious freedom.

In fact, the importance of religion affects the process of modernization, in which it declines together with the modernization process, like what has happened in today’s world. Thomas (2005) explains the saliency of religion in social and political life and its relation with modernization and economic. The Iranian Revolution was one of the example as a response of the process of modernization. In a similar vein, religion is something that should not be tolerated (Flood, 2012). He further states some might argue that “religion is absurd to modern ears but it continues to hold great power over billions of people who cannot simply be dismissed as irrational or deluded” (p. 2).

The European history shows that Americans had struggled for freedom and the element of religion was the most compelling reason for them to join the survival. It was stressed by President Franklin D. Roosevelt in his speech to the Congress on January 6, 1941 in which he highlighted the importance of religious freedom (Parmly, 2001).

Nevertheless, Hertzke (2012) in articulating the importance of religion, explains the critics charged for the role played by religion. He states “religion can use their freedom to influence state authorities and seize unfair prerogatives”(p. 116). Hertzke (2012) and Stepan (2000) have quite a similar approach in classifying the importance of religion, particularly state

authorities and political institutions. Despite of Western concept of religion as a private matter, both of researchers believe that religion is an element in a country that influences both civil and political society. The citizen have their own social demand for them to advance their lives. Stepan (2012) further explains definition relating the use of violence in civil and political society. As long as there is no element of violation towards other citizens, all the group's rights are protected. However, he has developed an interesting thesis pertaining to the relationship between religion and the states. The 'Twin Tolerations' describe tolerations between two sides; the religion and the state. The first consideration concerns religious citizens towards the states while the second toleration describes the state towards the religious citizens. It is interesting to understand the twin toleration that being introduced by Stepan (2012). The first toleration highlights the concept of "Only God, not man, can make laws." It requires the power of government officials to legislate the country but at the same time they do not deny religious claims of the society. Secondly, toleration pertaining the state towards religious citizens.

In addition to that, the establishment of the right of religious freedom can be seen as among the nonderogable rights contained in Article 4 of the ICCPR. The right is formed to clarify a situation that freedom of conscience, religion, and belief is intended to be regarded as among the most sacred or most fundamental of the universally recognized human rights (Little, 2001).

Today, almost 90 percent of Americans say that religion is at least "somewhat important" in their lives (U.S. Religious Landscape Survey: Religious Beliefs and Practices, 2008, p. 22). The American model of religious liberty and its thriving religious culture are defining attributes of the United States. In a speech in Cairo on June 4, 2009, President Barack Obama recognized the importance of engaging economically and politically influential sectors of societies, including religious communities. This follows efforts by the Clinton and Bush administrations to begin raising the profile of religious engagement. As Samuel Huntington noted in one work, "If religion is unimportant, it can be tolerated. If it is important, governments will insist on controlling it, regulating it, suppressing or prohibiting it, or manipulating it to their own advantage." That context helps explain the reason why persecution happened in so many parts of the around world today. Furthermore, he asserts about religious freedom as a central to the abilities of peoples to live together. Besides, it is pivotal for religious freedom to engage with women's right, development and innovation (Appleby, Cizik, & Wright, 2010).

Blackwell (2003) contends what is more interesting about religious freedom. Clearly, in the absence of religious freedom, people exist only as political or economic entities, not as free human beings. It is reasonable to argue that religious freedom is the first of all human rights for it implies the dignity and sacredness of human conscience.

Another importance of religious freedom is it can "create a climate of fear and suspicion that weakens social cohesion and alienates citizens from their leaders" (State Department Indicates Freedom of Religion is a Diplomatic Priority for President Obama, 2012). These notion is central to the idea of national progress. The growing of religious freedom concerns over national progress brought the attention beyond the religion of Islam and gives impact to civil, economic and political progress.

The Nexus between Religious Freedom, Democracy and National Security

The element of religious freedom in a country is important especially within religious societies. Without religious freedom, a country will face difficult obstacles to stand as a stable and democratic country and to solve religious extremism (Farr, 2011).

The elements of religious freedom, democracy and national security are interrelated to each other. According to Perry (2010), the assertion on democracy is when the right is embedded as fundamental right under the legal system. The writer describes how democracy can be applied towards the society. It must be noted that every person has his or her own inherent dignity and the rights are inviolable. The moral claim of the society is crucial on the part of the government to fulfill the need of human beings. Therefore, if it is embedded in the legal system, the fundamental liberties is recognized and protected as a legal claim.

Stepan (2000) in defining democracy believes that “democracy is a system of conflict regulation that allows open competition over the values and goals that citizen want to advance”(p. 4). The definition is derived from the perspective of comparative politics and Stepan is a specialist in political institution and democratization. Stepan comes out with three questions in construing the meaning of democracy and among all three questions, there are another one most important question need to be scrutinized, whether the world religious systems is compatible with democracy. On the other hand, it discusses the boundaries and limitation that govern in order to achieve democracy. It is interesting to answer the third questions and relates them with religion and national security. The third question discuss the influence of religious tradition, for example Islam, considered as an impediment to democracy system in a country. The practice of a religion and the right of religious freedom should not be an obstacle for a country to have a democracy system. Indeed, religious freedom is part of democracy system and need to be respected in order to ensure the national security.

Furthermore, the relation between issue of religious freedom (particularly religious persecution) and national security is robust. Before the implementation of IRFA, the American government and strategic community seems to ignore the presence of this correlation. Simultaneously, after the introduction of IRFA, the result of religious freedom was progressive. However, the former director, Thomas Farr in giving his opinion, believes that religious-freedom policy and international religious freedom policy have been totally ignored. People in U.S. especially in State Department were annoyed with the existence of the matter of international religious freedom. In fact, national security community did not take the issue seriously as a policy issue. Most importantly, the bureaucratic margin of the international religious freedom continues to be at lowest stage at Foggy Bottom (Inboden, 2012).

In describing the philosophical foundation of religious freedom, Soriano (2013) divides it into two parts; liberal and anti-liberal. Liberal tradition is based on the autonomy of the individual conscience. In a constitutional democracy, the preference towards a particular religion by government is not allowed. Generally it highlights the concept of less government approach. This approach prioritize the dignity of human being and the citizen has the right to choose his beliefs. In fact, the belief of liberal puts the right to choose as one of the fundamental right. Anti-liberal, based on Soriano is more government and less human liberty. It concerns the rules determined by the state and it prefers to restrict the right of citizen to choose religion. This kind of approach seems to penalize the citizen who disagree with the state. The interpretation of anti-liberal confine the scope of religious freedom to only for the state and not to the citizen.

In order to recognize religious freedom, everyone has his or her own right to enjoy religious freedom. Religious freedom is considered as fundamental human right that people over the world ought to enjoy and this has been highlighted in UDHR. However, even though the freedom is universally recognized but many people claim that they cannot properly exercise the right (Marshall, 2010).

No country in this world has a genuine democracy if the country does not recognize and protect the right for religious freedom (Perry, 2009). According to Denis McDonough, the then deputy national security adviser to President Obama, freedom of religion is an essential element to have a stable democracy. If a country guarantees religious freedom, the country can perform better in terms of its development and prosperity (IIP Digital, 2012).

Pew Research Center (2006) has suggested that the element of religious freedom plays a salient role in national security issue. It is because the issue involves the war on Islamist terrorism and the effort in encouraging stable and peaceful government particularly in Middle East and elsewhere. Meanwhile, Smith (2002) explains the relation between religious freedom, democracy and national security. Religious freedom is not a problem but a solution and people should not sacrifice the values that we all cherish in protecting democracy. Smith describes the action as a “totalitarian instinct” that renders religious freedom as excessive demands for security.

In sum, Grim (2008) suggests that religious freedom is important in order to promote stability and uphold democracy. It is also argued that religious freedom is a universal aspiration and more than an American pet.

Religious Freedom; Rights or Duties

Apart from examining the study on the definition and scope of religious freedom, it is equally important to determine religious freedom, whether it is a rights or a duty. Both rights and duty carry different definitions and consequences towards religious freedom. Most studies mainly highlight religious freedom as “the right of religious freedom” instead of “duty of religious freedom”. Even if we refer to the dictionaries, the definition of both words are totally different.

The language of rights is unavoidable in contemporary political discourse (Nussbaum, 1997). The moral resonance that contains in the language does not concern with theoretical and conceptual clarity as it has been preferred. Whereas the concept of the word ‘right’ highlighted by Nussbaum does not relate with religious freedom.

Hertzke (2012) argues that religious freedom is a duty to fulfill obligation. He relates religious freedom with freedom of conscience that involves sacred duties. Overall, it is interesting when it involves duty and right but the implication between them are slightly different. ‘Duty’ is rigid and requires the citizen to strictly comply with the rules whereas the ‘right’ is more lenient and the citizen has the right to not follow the rules. Besides, the recognition of the right enables the citizen to exercise his freedom regardless of the flaw of the law. Adding to that, it opens room for citizen to develop flexibility pertaining to fundamental rights.

To quote Huntington (2000) civilisations are different according to language, culture, tradition and religion. It essentially explains that every civilisation views the relation between right and duty differently because they have different angle, based on their culture, tradition and as well as religion. Therefore, one civilisation may view religious freedom as a duty and another one may view it as a right. No one has the right answer as to what constitutes religious freedom; whether it is a right or a duty. But when Huntington explains that difference does not necessarily means conflict and violence, it is interesting to note that what happens in today’s world is because people do not appreciate the differences between civilisations. Furthermore, they should respect religious freedom, and do not focus on whether religious freedom is a duty or not. As long as they respect each other, the violence will be lessen and religious freedom will be fully enjoyed.

Conclusion

The article examines the evolution, background and issues and debates of religious freedom globally. It attempts to show that international religious freedom is interrelated with democracy and international security. Thus, the issues of religious freedom are topics that should be highlighted in the fields of international affairs and international law. Finally, the paper contends that it is important to understand that in many cases, lack of religious freedom could contribute to conflict and possibly give negative impacts to the international society.

Acknowledgement

Corresponding Author

Mohd Afandi Salleh,
University Sultan Zainal Abidin, Malaysia, afandi@unisza.my

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