

8.3 Religious freedom

Religious freedom in the UK

The *Universal Declaration of Human Rights* states that everyone should have the right to **freedom of religion** or belief. In the UK, the Human Rights Act guarantees the protection of this right. Each person has the freedom to choose to belong to any religion they wish, or to have no religious belief at all. They also have **freedom of religious expression** – the right to practise and express their faith however they want to. For example, Buddhists, Christians, Hindus, Jews, Muslims and Sikhs in the UK are allowed to worship as they choose. Organisations like the Inter Faith Network for the UK work to promote good relations, understanding and cooperation between people of different faiths.

Buddhist attitudes towards religious freedom

The Buddha often talked to people who had met other religious teachers with different ideas. Sometimes these people asked the Buddha how they should decide whose teachings to follow. He encouraged them to listen to him and others with respect, and then decide which teachings did, in their own experience, lead to greater happiness and wellbeing.



▲ In Tibet, Buddhists may be persecuted and even jailed for expressing their religious beliefs

Very few Buddhist traditions try to persuade others that they should become Buddhists.

The Buddha's teachings are his description of reality as he saw it, and a series of suggestions for the kind of life which leads to greater happiness and a profound understanding of reality. It is entirely up to the individual whether they wish to follow this. Buddhism teaches that if a Buddhist breaks one of the precepts then nobody will punish them, but they will

Objectives

- Understand freedom of religion as a basic human right.
- Examine Buddhist teachings and attitudes about freedom of religion.

Key terms

- **freedom of religion:** the right to believe or practise whatever religion one chooses
- **freedom of religious expression:** the right to worship, preach and practise one's faith in whatever way one chooses

Discussion activity

Discuss the following statement with a partner or in a small group: 'People should have the freedom to say whatever they want about religion.'

“ I always say that every person on this earth has the freedom to practise or not practise religion. It is all right to do either. ”

Tenzin Gyatso
(the Dalai Lama)

experience the consequences of their actions, just like anyone else. In Buddhism there is no God to be held accountable to. This means there is quite a lot of freedom within Buddhism to decide how to practise the faith.

Religious freedom in Buddhist countries

In traditionally Buddhist countries in Asia, the culture and law may be strongly influenced by Buddhism, but individuals are free to practise Buddhism with as much or as little commitment as they like. Buddhism is a path of personal transformation, rooted in the wish to end suffering by developing wisdom and compassion, so it is not possible to force someone to be Buddhist.



▲ A Buddhist and a Muslim walk together through the city of Yangon in Myanmar, to show their disapproval of the violence between the two religions

However, there are places in some Buddhist countries where it is not easy to be Hindu or Muslim. In recent years many Buddhists around the world have been shocked by the violence and hatred shown by a small number of Buddhists towards religious or ethnic minorities in countries including Thailand, Myanmar, Sri Lanka and Bhutan. For example, in Myanmar in 2013, there were a series of violent riots and clashes where both Muslims and Buddhists were killed. The reasons for such violence are complex, but are usually rooted in disputes over land, as well as a fear of foreigners.

Concerned by the violence, a number of respected Buddhist leaders (including Thich Nhat Hanh) wrote an open letter to their 'brother and sister Buddhists in Myanmar', asking them to remember Buddhist teachings, and to act compassionately towards everyone in Myanmar:

“ Buddhist teaching is based on the precepts of refraining from killing and causing harm. Buddhist teaching is based on compassion and mutual care. Buddhist teaching offers respect to all, regardless of class, caste, race or creed.

It is only through mutual respect, harmony and tolerance that Myanmar can become a modern great nation benefiting all her people and a shining example to the world. ”

Activities

- 1 What did the Buddha say to people who couldn't decide whether to follow Buddhism or another religion?
- 2 Why are so many Buddhists shocked by the violent behaviour of some Buddhists in Myanmar?

Contrasting beliefs

Like Buddhism, Christianity teaches that freedom of religious expression is a fundamental human right. Most Christians believe that Jesus taught about the importance of tolerance and freedom of religion. They also believe that God gave people the free will to choose whether to follow Christianity, another religion or no religion.

Find out more about Christian teachings on freedom of religious expression. Do Christian beliefs agree or contrast with Buddhist beliefs on this issue?

★ Study tip

Learn about the difficulties for religious minorities in Myanmar or another country, so you can use it as an example when discussing religious freedom.

Summary

You should now be able to explain Buddhist attitudes towards freedom of religion and religious expression.

8.3 Religious freedom

Freedom of religion

Article 18 of The Universal Declaration of Human Rights says:

“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.”

The Universal Declaration of Human Rights

In Britain today, the official state religion is Christianity, and the Anglican Church is the established (official) church in England. No one can be forced to join the Church. The government protects **freedom of religious expression**, that is the right of individuals to worship in whatever way they choose, or not at all, and laws forbid the persecution of members of other faiths or non-believers. Believers are free to evangelise providing that they do not preach hatred and intolerance.

Historically, Britain has not always shown such tolerance. During Elizabeth I's reign, the Act of Uniformity meant that people who regularly failed to attend their local church could be fined twelve pence and, if they failed to pay this, they risked having their property confiscated or even being put in prison. Twelve pence is the equivalent of £11 today.

A separate Church of England was created by an Act of Parliament in 1534 when Henry VIII wished to break with the Catholic Church. When Henry's daughter, Mary became queen she restored the Catholic faith as the official faith of England. Those who objected to this faced being burned as heretics, and in all 280 people died in this way. On becoming queen, Elizabeth I, who was not a Catholic, broke with the Catholic Church again and those who showed their support for the Pope now risked persecution.

During the eighteenth century a number of different churches developed that, although Christian, did not conform to the beliefs of the Church of England. In some places, differing religious views have led to conflict, such as in Northern Ireland. Historically, conflict has arisen from differing religious beliefs, although these have often been the result of a range of other factors too. In the Middle Ages Crusades were organised by Christian kings to recapture the



▲ In Britain today the reigning monarch is head of the Church of England

Objective

- Explore issues of freedom of religion and belief, including religious expression.

Key terms

- **freedom of religion:** the right to believe or practise whatever religion one chooses
- **freedom of religious expression:** the right to worship, preach and practise one's faith in whatever way one chooses

city of Jerusalem from Muslim control. In the twentieth and twenty-first centuries Christians have been persecuted by communist governments and by dictators, for example in North Korea. Christians have also experienced persecution in countries where they are a minority, for example in the Middle East and in Pakistan.



▲ The 'Hands Across the Divide' in Derry, Northern Ireland, represents the differing religious and political views that have caused conflict for many years in the country, and encourages tolerance and harmony between the two sides

Discussion activity

With a partner, in a small group or as a class, discuss whether you agree with the following:

'People should have the freedom to say whatever they want about religion.'

Religious teachings on freedom of religion

Christian teaching encourages tolerance and harmony. The gospel writer Mark recorded how the disciples saw a man who did not belong to their group driving out demons in Jesus' name, "Do not stop him," Jesus said. "For no one who does a miracle in my name can in the next moment say anything bad about me, for whoever is not against us is for us." (Mark 9:39–40). When Christian denominations fight each other, they are not following what the Bible says. Ephesians 4:2 says, 'Be completely humble and gentle; be patient, bearing with one another in love.' Romans 12:18 says, 'If it is possible, as far as it depends on you, live at peace with everyone.'

“I urge you, brothers and sisters, to watch out for those who cause divisions and put obstacles in your way that are contrary to the teaching you have learned. Keep away from them.”

Romans 16:17 [NIV]

No religion teaches religious intolerance. Religious freedom is encouraged by religions for different reasons. Islam teaches that religious freedom is part of God's design, and freedom of belief is taught in the Qur'an. Christians believe that Jesus taught religious freedom. The freedom to believe and worship, in public or private, to change religion or not follow any religion is regarded by most Christians as a fundamental human right.

Contrasting beliefs

Use the Internet or the library to find out what another religion says about allowing freedom of religious expression. In what ways do they contrast with Christian beliefs?

Activities

- 1 Give three examples of how different Christian denominations have shown intolerance to one another.
- 2 Why do you think that some Christians in the past fought against Christians of a different denomination?
- 3 Give three examples from the Bible that encourage tolerance and harmony, and show how this is achieved in Britain today.
- 4 Which is the established church in England?
- 5 What does Article 18 of the UDHR say about religious freedom?

★ Study tip

It would be helpful to be able to quote Christian teachings about tolerance and freedom of choice, and try to refer to a contrasting belief on the freedom of religious expression from another religion.

Summary

You should now be able to explain why it is important to have freedom of religion and freedom of religious expression.