

## Conference

*Religious Freedom and Integral Human Development:*

*A New Global Platform to Change the Conversation*

Rome, 5 June 2024

### **The Promotion of Religious Freedom and Integral Human Development:**

#### **The view of the Holy See**

Excellencies,

Distinguished Guests,

Ladies and Gentleman,

I would like to express my gratitude to the organisers of today's conference for extending an invitation to me to present the perspective of the Holy on the promotion of religious freedom and integral human development.

The Second Vatican Council committed the Catholic Church to the promotion of religious freedom. The Declaration *Dignitatis Humanae*, explains the right of the person and of communities to social and civil freedom in religious matters. In order for this freedom, willed by God and inscribed in human nature, to be exercised, no obstacle should be placed in its way, since “the truth cannot be imposed except by virtue of its own truth”.<sup>1</sup> The dignity of the person and the very nature of the quest for God require that all men and women should be free from every constraint in the area of religion.

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<sup>1</sup> Second Vatican Ecumenical Council, Declaration *Dignitatis Humane*, 1.

It is beyond doubt that the right of religious freedom, in both historical and logical terms, occupies the primacy among the rights of freedom.

Historically, following the Protestant Reformation, which resulted in the dissolution of Europe's religious unity and the emergence of numerous sovereign States, confessionalism was regarded as a fundamental and irreplaceable element in maintaining the political community's cohesion. The principle "*Cuius regio, eius religio*" (which translates as "whose realm, whose religion") was first sanctioned in 1555 by the Peace of Augsburg and then confirmed in 1648 by the Peace of Westphalia. This principle came to consecrate the obligation of citizens to follow the religion of their sovereign, and it also came to legitimise the policy of repression of religious minorities by the political power. Consequently, the assertion of the right to freedom of conscience was followed by claims to other freedoms.

However, it can be argued that religious freedom also has a primogeniture in a logical sense. This is because, upon closer inspection, the rights of freedom that have been gradually consecrated in the transformations of States in a democratic sense are nothing but specifications of religious freedom, since it encompasses freedom of thought, freedom of association, freedom of assembly and so on. Freedom of religion can be considered a prism through which all freedoms can be viewed.

It might be said that there is a close connection between human rights and freedom of religion. While this is not the only aspect of human rights, it is arguably the most fundamental. It is the right to freedom of conscience that provides the foundation for all other human rights. By allowing individuals to exercise their conscience without interference, it places a limit on the authority of the State. This, in turn, ensures that fundamental rights are not violated. It is

therefore clear that the violation of the right to religious freedom has the effect of undermining not just one right, but the entire category of human rights.

It is important to note that, despite the existence of precedents and primacies in this area, religious freedom in its individual, collective and institutional dimensions is currently facing significant challenges. It is a matter of concern that, according to some estimates, almost 4.9 billion people live in countries with serious or very serious violations of religious freedom. At least seven out of every ten citizens in the world are currently prevented or harmed in the exercise of their rights in matters of conscience. It is noteworthy that Christians are the most vulnerable in this regard. Over 365 million Christians (approximately one in seven) face high levels of persecution for their faith. Attacks on churches and Christian properties have increased significantly in 2023, with more Christians than ever before reporting violent attacks.<sup>2</sup>

These figures are noteworthy, particularly when one considers that even a single violation of a human right is of an unprecedented gravity. It is thus worrying that the number of people persecuted on account of their religious beliefs is on the rise, in contrast to the general trend observed for other human rights violations. There are a number of factors contributing to the unexpected and significant increase in the number intolerance, discrimination or even persecution on the basis of the person's religious beliefs.

First, religious fundamentalism, which is not limited to Islam. It is often mixed with forms of nationalism, which are gradually making explosive realities that were once immune to religious intolerance. The phenomenon does not only stem from public violence, from the non-democratic nature of the state system, but also from the growing violence of private groups expressing religious cultures and beliefs.

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<sup>2</sup> <https://www.opendoors.org/en-US/persecution/persecution-trends/>



These can also arise for political and economic reasons. In this sense, the violence to which Catholics - bishops, priests, lay people - are subjected in various realities is unique, because the Church opposes the spread of an economy of plunder, which favours the widening gap between the (few) rich and the multitude of poor, and manipulates and destroys the environment.

Another source is sovereignism, which, in the name of preserving national identities, not infrequently leads to more or less explicit forms of intolerance towards religious minorities. This raises, among other things, the delicate question of the legitimate limits that are, or can be, placed on the exercise of a right that must be balanced with others in a democratic society.

There is also an intolerance that shows its sinister face in the opulent countries of the northern hemisphere, in the West, which prides itself on its achievements in the recognition and protection of human rights. This is a paradoxical situation because, on the one hand, these countries pride themselves on being the “exporters” of human rights, sometimes even of what they erroneously call “rights”: think of the struggles for the universalisation of abortion as a right or, more generally, of so-called reproductive rights; think also of the demands on the subject of gender. On the other hand, they neglect the first of the rights in question, religious freedom.

This is often due to a clear ideological factor, namely the secularism of the State and public institutions, which is in fact based on secularism. Here, the neutrality of the public apparatus in relation to the free choice of citizens in religious matters is replaced by an ideology intolerant of other beliefs, which are consequently marginalised to the point of disappearing from the public agora.

The absence of any reference to religious freedom in the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development is indicative of the reluctance of the international community to acknowledge the religious dimension in the lives of individuals.

The document fails to address this issue of in the context development. In this document, religion is regarded as a mere attribute among the numerous characteristics that define the human person.

However, as Pope Francis said that the “the simplest and best measure and indicator of the implementation of the new Agenda for development will be effective, practical and immediate access, on the part of all, to essential material and spiritual goods: housing, dignified and properly remunerated employment, adequate food and drinking water; religious freedom and, more generally, spiritual freedom and education.”<sup>3</sup>

The 2030 Agenda is somehow incomplete because it addresses only part of human flourishing, leaving out the spiritual dimension. Indeed, development, as Pope Paul VI wrote “cannot be limited to mere economic growth. In order to be authentic, it must be integral, that is, it has to promote the good of every man and of the whole man.”<sup>4</sup>

It is clear, then, that integral human development is a process by which the individual attains well-being while contributing to the common good. It is a long-term, dynamic process based on human dignity and right relationships. This includes each person’s relationship with God, self, others and the whole of creation. Advancing integral human development means working with a variety of actors to transform the way societies live, heal and structure their relationships. The advancement of integral human development depends on the active engagement of individuals within a just and peaceful society that respects the sacredness of life and the dignity of every person.

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<sup>3</sup> Pope Francis, Address to the United Nations General Assembly, 25 September 2015.

<sup>4</sup> Paul VI, *Popolorum Progressio*, 14



Religious freedom plays a decisive role in achieving integral human development. Indeed, religious freedom, founded on the dignity of the human person and on the Christological revelation, does not do anything other than provide the matrix of an idea that modernity has defended vigorously. It must be clear, however, that religious freedom is a question of natural law, on which any theological reflection is based, and that both lead to an anthropological understanding of the question at hand.

It is evident that the relationship between religion and society is undergoing a significant transformation. On the one hand, the religious dimension of the human experience has been marginalised. On the other hand, forms of fundamentalism are gaining traction, advocating for the re-emergence of religion in the public sphere, sometimes with elements of fanaticism. In this context, there is a pressing need for an anthropological and political integration between the individual and the collective dimensions of religious freedom.

It is, however, necessary to point out that on the one hand, the absolute ethical-religious indifference of the State has the effect of weakening civil society, and on the other hand, there is a risk of regression of law into a theocratic one. The State is not merely the mere guarantor of subjective desires nor an indifferent and neutral observer of people's free behaviour in the context of social life. In this second scenario, the State would paradoxically assume the form of a "secularist imitation" of the theocratic conception of religion, which determines the orthodoxy and heresy of freedom in the name of a political-salvific vision of the ideal society. The absolutism and relativism of this liberal morality are in conflict with illiberal exclusionary effects in the public sphere, which are perceived to be the consequence of the State's pretended neutrality.

The State should therefore exercise a detached neutrality and grant religious groups and all individuals an equal right to the public manifestation of

their religious convictions. The aim of the State must always be to pursue the common good. This does not mean that the State is competent in religious matters, but rather that it recognises and promotes the humanising action of religious groups without undue interference in dogmatic or internal organisational matters.

At the foundation of religious freedom is the capacity of the human person to realize themselves in their relationship with the spiritual interiority. There must be an emphasis on conscience, which every person has a duty to follow. Conversely, no one can force a person to act against their conscience, especially in religious matters. Civil authorities have the “obligation to respect and enforce this fundamental right within the just limits of the common good.”<sup>5</sup>

This demonstrates that religious freedom is not to be equated with the arbitrariness of a conscience devoid of an objective and transcendent reference. The issue is not merely a matter of legal interpretation; rather, it concerns the truth of the human person, which the Church believes it can safeguard as a precious gift received in revelation. Furthermore, this is not to be understood as an attempt to impose said truth on all, but rather as an endeavour to demonstrate it.

The defence of religious freedom can be understood as the defence of the truth of the human person in the face of constraints that might be imposed by fundamentalist religious groups or totalitarian States, as well as a neutrality of the State that is understood as indifference to the contribution that religious persons or groups can make to the construction of social life. Those who are able to enjoy religious freedom will also be able to achieve their own integral development, and will be agents of development in the wider society.

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<sup>5</sup> International Theological Commission, *Religious freedom for the good of all theological approaches and contemporary challenges*, 40.