

# WHY IS FREEDOM OF RELIGION RATHER IGNORED BY MEDIA AND AMONG THE PUBLIC AND WHAT SHOULD BE DONE?

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In a cartoon in a recent Private Eye Magazine a father says to his child: “Let’s pray for peace in the Middle East”. The child replies: “But isn’t the whole thing caused by religion?”

The child in the cartoon articulates what many in the media dare not address: The issues that the world faces today often have their roots and origins in inter-religious conflict and oppression.

So why do much of the media and public ignore that?

Let’s take three situations where **issues of religious freedom have been ignored in news reports.**

In Pakistan, in August 21 churches and 700 homes of poor Christians in Jaranwala were attacked and burnt. Not a word appeared about this in the western media. Why? the Moderator Bishop of the Church of Pakistan recently told me that the 60,000 attackers had been ordered not to kill anyone in order to keep reports out of the media. There were no deaths, so no media coverage. The police stated that the attacks were the outcome of a foreign conspiracy.

In Northern Nigeria where I am privileged to hold a canonry, violence against Christians by Muslims has been going on for years. But the western media assigns these attacks to conflicts between farmers and herdsmen over land due to climate change.

Or let’s go back to 9/11. The attacks that were constructed in the press as a failure of US foreign policy were in fact clearly articulated by their perpetrators as a holy war on the infidels. Blaming the errors of US foreign policy was easier than contemplating the possibility that we were confronted with a religious war according to Ayaan Hirsi Ali, a former Muslim.

Why is freedom of religion so marginalised in the press? I would argue that it is because it is marginalised in society.

1. **Fear of fundamentalism.** Religion is associated in people's minds with intransigent fundamentalism. So there is no arguing with religious people. One lot are as bad as the other. This is how a senior Indian Christian leader with extensive experience of the west explains it.
2. **Fear of manipulation.** People have become suspicious of the process by which psychological ruses are used to dupe people by suggesting that victims are facing great difficulties. This is to push the public to feel guilty and provide help. So stories are created of deprivation that suggest that people are helpless victims trying valiantly to survive against great odds. Most westerners feel the guilt that comes from their co-religionists being in a far worse situation than them, and can fail to see through the story that is being constructed. Sadly some western leaders use those situations for their own ends. The people who are really exploited are the ordinary donors to whom these stories are sold.
3. People also see **religious liberty being weaponised** in the struggles between different groups. So how can anyone trust those arguing for their religious liberty. This is the sad conclusion of a religious freedom scholar and advocate.
4. In many cases **governments have great influence over the media** and do not want certain issues covered that may not be in their interest. For example, if Muslims are criticized for their blasphemy laws it could affect the supply and price of oil from Saudi Arabia and elsewhere. Senior Christian leaders from India, Kenya and Nigeria suggested this to me.
5. **People do not care about religion.** The media is meant to reflect society. Western society has forgotten God. Secular states and people do not understand religion. If society does not have a frame of reference to understand religion, then framing stories about religion is a tough sell. So they look for geo-political explanations. This is how a scholar deeply involved in issues of freedom of religion sees things.
6. We also face **cancel-culture**. Matthew Parris, the Times columnist has noted that 'in these cancel culture days it's becoming impossible to speak about a controversy without being thought to take one side or the other'. This is embedded in the language of .....phobia, which is a misuse of a term which means an irrational fear. So in the UK at the moment there is a debate about what is taught to children about sexual practices at primary school. Parents who object to what they count as inappropriate for young children have been silenced. They do not have religious liberty. Disagreement is not an irrational fear but a well grounded reason for not agreeing. Such language called 'hate-speech' is being exported to the Global South under the guise of 'rights' in a wave of western neo-colonialism by agencies such as the United Nations.

7. From the above reasons we can see why in some cases the media ignores the issue because **it isn't something that sells newspapers**, which is at its most basic what they are trying to do.
8. **A Press Officer's perspective.** Few national journalists have contact with a local church to see how relevant church and faith life can be to individuals. With zero backgrounds in religion, they would need to find a great deal of information given the complex background of religions. Such small percentage of people are Christians in the UK, and they do not see any relevance of Christian faith in today's society, except things Christians are against. Many Christian organisations focus on their own public relations to their own networks. Therefore journalists see many religious stories as a PR pitch.
9. A further reason is that religion has been replaced by individualism. **People have replaced religion with personal identity** as the god before whom everything and everyone else must bow. Such people see religion as the biggest threat to the so-called identities that they do care about – i.e. their sexual, psycho-social and ethnic identities. And religions are a threat because the West has embraced the philosophy of the enlightenment, the complete autonomy of the individual to construct their own identity. For example, religious texts from a number of traditions stress the fundamental reality of man-woman marriage, whether in monogamy or polygamy. To deny this and practice anything else is, for some cultures, a death warrant on the future of their family and community since they will have no children.

We should heed what the Apostle Paul, a Jewish Christian from the Middle East and a Roman Citizen wrote in his letter to Christians in Galatia in what is now Turkey: "There is neither Jew nor Gentile, neither slave nor free, nor is there male and female, for you are all one in Christ Jesus." The Christian faith provides an explanation of human life that unifies people, beyond the mere acceptance of their diversity which is currently being elevated and leads to division.

We should also note the argument that it is the role of the church, not governments, to advocate for religious freedom. And in doing so, the church is to face the reality that it will suffer for righteousness.

It could be claimed that to find true reporting of issues of religious freedom we need to turn to the websites of 'campaigning' organisations and social media. These of course lack the normal controls applied to the public prints. But if the public prints do not serve the public interest in this area, then truth must out.

There are good examples where **freedom of religion has been addressed well in Comment Pages**. A Times commentator, a former Muslim, noted that "Freedom of conscience and speech is perhaps the greatest benefit of Western civilisation. It does not come naturally to man. It is the product of centuries of debate within Jewish and

Christian communities. These debates advanced science and reason, diminished cruelty, suppressed superstitions, and built institutions to order and protect life, while guaranteeing freedom to as many people as possible.”

**To close**, why does the western media and public ignore religious freedom? Their elites have rejected Christianity in the public space because it goes against autonomous individualism and the untrammelled construction of personal identity, and because governments do not want to criticise those with whom they have significant trading arrangements.

**What should we do?:**

- Foster community and team playing over individualism.
- Teach people that disagreement is not hate speech.
- See respect for truth as an important component of public life.
- Education should teach people to engage with and evaluate different understandings of the world, particularly those with which you may not agree.
- We need to counter ‘cancel-culture’.
- Every local church leader to actively engage with their local newspaper and local radio station.
- Church leaders and Christian organisations need to cultivate relations with local, regional and national press.
- And we need to set out the implications and application of religious truth to all areas of life, public and private.