

FREEDOM OF CONSCIENCE: FOUNDATION FOR HUMAN RIGHTS, EDUCATION AND LASTING PEACE FROM AN EVANGELICAL PERSPECTIVE

Elisei RUSU, Ph.D.

Timotheus Bible Institute of Bucharest, Romania

Elisei.rusu56@gmail.com

ABSTRACT: Freedom of Conscience: Foundation for Human Rights, Education, and Lasting Peace from an Evangelical Perspective.

In a world increasingly characterized by pluralism, rapid social change, and persistent conflict, the value of freedom of conscience stands as a universal moral and legal imperative. Freedom of conscience, defined as the internal liberty to form beliefs, moral judgments, and ethical values without external coercion, is not only a personal right but also a cornerstone of democratic societies. It underpins the broader architecture of human rights, empowers meaningful and transformative education, and fosters the essential conditions for lasting peace. The interdependence of these pillars, freedom of conscience, human rights, education, and peace, reveals a foundational truth: that peaceful, just, and inclusive societies cannot be realized without a deep and abiding respect for the sanctity of individual conscience.

Keywords: *Bible, Education, Freedom of Conscience, Human Rights, Lasting Peace.*

Introduction

In a rapidly changing and diverse world, freedom of conscience is essential both as a personal right and a foundation of democracy. Defined as the internal liberty to form beliefs without external pressure, it supports human rights, drives transformative education, and creates the conditions necessary for lasting peace. These elements are interconnected, highlighting that just and inclusive societies require respect for individual conscience. In this article, the author first defines freedom of conscience and outlines its main

forms. He then discusses its link to human rights and the importance of education in fostering this freedom. Thirdly, he explores the concepts of freedom and lasting peace from an evangelical perspective. Ultimately, the author discusses the potential consequences of the misuse of freedom of conscience, including social fragmentation, moral relativism, and violence.

Freedom of Conscience: Definition

Freedom of conscience is preserved in numerous international legal instruments and declarations. Article 18 of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights affirms that: "Everyone has the right to freedom of thought, conscience, and religion; this right includes freedom to change his religion or belief, and freedom...to manifest his religion or belief in teaching, practice, worship, and observance."¹ This provision reflects a broader philosophical tradition stretching back to the Enlightenment, where thinkers such as John Locke² and Immanuel Kant³ emphasized the moral autonomy of the individual as a foundation for justice and civil society.

Freedom of conscience differs from, but it is closely related to, freedom of religion and freedom of expression. It includes not only religious beliefs but also secular ethical convictions, political opinions, and personal worldviews. At its core, it affirms the inviolability of the inner person and safeguards against the imposition of belief by authority, whether political, religious, or societal.

Forms of Freedom of Conscience

Freedom of conscience is a broad concept that manifests across many spheres of life. It refers to an individual's right to hold personal beliefs, make moral decisions, and act in accordance with deeply held ethical convictions. Various forms of this right are protected under national constitutions and international human rights law, particularly in Article 18 of the

1 United Nations, *Universal Declaration of Human Rights*, 1948, (para. 1), <https://www.un.org/en/about-us/universal-declaration-of-human-rights>.

2 John Locke, *A Letter Concerning Toleration*, Ed. James H. Tully, Indianapolis: Hackett, 1983.

3 Immanuel Kant, *Groundwork of the Metaphysics of Morals*, trans. Mary Gregor, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996.

International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights (ICCPR).⁴ Some of the most important forms of freedom of conscience are the following:

1. *Freedom of Thought*: This is the absolute right to think freely and form personal beliefs without external interference. It encompasses political, philosophical, spiritual, and ethical convictions, regardless of their religious nature. International law regards this as a non-negotiable right that cannot be limited under any circumstances.

2. *Freedom of Religion or Belief*: This includes the right to adopt, change, or renounce a religion or belief, and to worship or abstain from worship freely. It protects private beliefs as well as public expression of religion through worship, rituals, and teaching.⁵ Evangelical Christians, for instance, hold this form of freedom as sacred, viewing religious liberty as essential for spreading the Gospel and living faithfully according to Scripture.⁶

3. *Freedom of Moral and Ethical Conviction*: This protects actions based on non-religious moral reasoning. A person might refuse to participate in war or certain scientific research due to personal ethics. These secular moral standpoints are considered legitimate forms of conscience and are increasingly recognized in pluralistic societies.⁷

4. *Freedom of Political or Ideological Belief*: Individuals have the right to dissent from prevailing political norms or ideologies. This includes protest participation, refusal to support authoritarian regimes, or non-compliance with compulsory patriotic rituals. This form is critical for democratic functioning and civic engagement.⁸

5. *Conscientious Objection*: This is one of the most vivid expressions of conscience. It refers to the refusal to perform actions that conflict with one's beliefs. Common examples include objecting to military service, abor-

4 International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights, United Nations Treaty Series, vol. 999, p. 171, 1966, <https://www.ohchr.org/en/instruments-mechanisms/instruments/international-covenant-civil-and-political-rights>.

5 Heiner Bielefeldt, *Freedom of Religion or Belief: Thematic Reports of the UN Special Rapporteur, 2010-2011*, Leiden: Martinus Nijhoff, 2013, p. 19.

6 R. Albert Mohler, *We Cannot Be Silent*, Nashville, TN: Thomas Nelson, 2015, pp. 65-68.

7 Charles Taylor, *The Ethics of Authenticity*, Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2011, p. 42.

8 John Rawls, *Political Liberalism*, New York, NY: Columbia University Press, 1993, pp. 212-213.

tion procedures, or euthanasia. The European Court of Human Rights has affirmed conscientious objection when based on a serious and sincere belief.⁹ Evangelical Christians have historically supported this right in contexts such as pacifism or in opposition to state mandate that contradicts biblical morality.

6. *Academic and Intellectual Freedom*: Scholars and educators must be free to research, teach, and publish without ideological interference. Academic freedom is vital for scientific progress and moral inquiry and ensures that educational institutions are spaces where conscience is cultivated.¹⁰

7. *Freedom of Expression of Conscience*: This includes the right to express one's beliefs publicly—through speech, writing, protest, or art. While subject to some restrictions (e.g., speech inciting violence), this form of conscience underpins the right to activism and ethical advocacy.¹¹

8. *Freedom in Family and Private Life*: Individuals have the right to raise children, choose life partners, and conduct family life in accordance with their conscience. This includes moral decisions regarding education, cultural practices, and religious upbringing. For Evangelicals, the freedom to instill biblical values in the family unit is viewed as a God-given responsibility and a core tenet of religious liberty.¹²

Recognizing these various forms shows that freedom of conscience has multiple aspects. It is relevant to spiritual, moral, political, intellectual, and private areas. Protecting it relates to individual autonomy as well as the development of a pluralistic and peaceful society.

Freedom of Conscience as the Basis of Human Rights

Freedom of conscience is not merely one human right among many; it is the very precondition for the realization of all other rights.¹³ The ability to

9 Council of Europe, "Resolution 1763 (2010): *The Right to Conscientious Objection in Lawful Medic Care*," 2011, <https://assembly.coe.int>.

10 Martha C. Nussbaum, *Liberty of Conscience*, New York, NY: Basic Books, 2011, p. 92.

11 Amnesty International, Annual Report: *The State of the World's Human Rights*, 2021, <https://www.amnesty.org/en/documents/pol10/3202/2021/en/>.

12 R. Albert Mohler, *We Cannot Be Silent*, Nashville, TN: Thomas Nelson, 2015, pp. 65-68.

13 Ioan-Gheorghe Rotaru, "A look at how the concept of human rights has evolved over time," *Journal for Freedom of Conscience (Jurnalul Libertății de Conștiință)*, Vol. 11 No. 2

form independent beliefs and act upon them without fear is what allows individuals to claim, defend, and expend their rights. When conscience is denied, through censorship, forces indoctrination, or persecution, other rights are inevitably at risk.

In many societies, violations of conscience have been linked to gross human rights abuses. For example, in communist Romania, political prisoners during the authoritarian regime were often detained for crimes of thought: criticizing the government, advocating for reform, or practicing a prohibited faith. In such contexts, the repression of conscience goes hand in hand with the breakdown of legal protection and the erosion of democracy.

Conversely, societies that respect freedom of conscience tend to exhibit stronger protections for civil liberties, minority rights, and democratic participation. Sen¹⁴ argues that freedom, both political and personal, is an essential driver of development and justice. When individuals are empowered to act in accordance with their deeply held convictions, they become agents of accountability, ethical reform, and social progress. Thus, freedom of conscience is not only a human right but also a safeguard of the entire human rights framework.

The Role of Education in Cultivating Freedom of Conscience

From the author's perspective, education is a primary means through which freedom of conscience is understood and exercised across generations. A rights-based education aims to promote skills such as critical thinking, moral reasoning, and ethical responsibility, supporting the development of individual conscience. UNESCO (2015) suggests that education should extend beyond transmitting knowledge to include the promotion of "global citizenship, tolerance, and respect for diversity".¹⁵ In this view, education may encourage individuals to reflect on their beliefs, question norms, and engage with those who hold different values.

Educational institutions can play varying roles in relationships to freedom of conscience. In some contexts, students are expected to adhere to state ideologies, religious doctrines, or patriotic practices, which may con-

(2023), pp.825-874. DOI: <https://doi.org/10.5281/zenodo.10557901>.

14 Amartya Sen, *Development as Freedom*, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1999, p. 5.

15 UNESCO, *Global Citizenship Education: Topics and Learning Objectives*, 2015, p. 10, <https://unesdoc.unesco.org/ark:/48223/pf0000232993>.

flict with personal convictions.¹⁶ In other contexts, inclusive education policies facilitate a diversity of beliefs and foster intercultural understanding. However, in this context, education policies should be balanced and honest; otherwise, some groups would suffer, and others would be advantaged (e.g., the tensions in American campuses). The difference between these approaches illustrates broader dynamics between education and liberty: when conscience is acknowledged, education may support empowerment; when it is not, education can function as an instrument of conformity.

Freedom of Conscience and the Pursuit of Lasting Peace

Peace is commonly understood as the absence of war or violent conflict. Nevertheless, as Galtung posits, authentic peace, referred as “positive peace,” requires the presence of justice, equality, and a respect for human dignity.¹⁷ Freedom of conscience plays an integral role in achieving this comprehensive form of peace. In multicultural and multi-religious societies, sustaining peace relies on the capacity of individuals and groups to coexist with mutual respect despite significant differences. Freedom of conscience enables such coexistence by fostering dialogue over dogma and persuasion over coercion. It supports nonviolent advocacy, ethical dissent, and peaceful protest, each of which is central to democratic peacebuilding.¹⁸

Historical instances illustrate that suppressing freedom of conscience has often resulted in extended conflict and social fragmentation. Examples include the religious wars of Europe, apartheid in South Africa, and ideological purges of the 20th century, all demonstrating the damaging consequences of restricting individual thought and belief. Conversely, peace and reconciliation movements, such as Gandhi’s satyagraha and Martin Luther King Jr.’s civil rights efforts, have drawn their legitimacy from the moral force of conscience.

One can also discuss comfort and peace in the absence of freedom of conscience, but this clearly contradicts the true values of humankind. Liviu

16 Human Rights Watch, *Education Under Attack: The Global Impact of Attacks on Education*, 2020, <https://www.hrw.org/>.

17 Johan Galtung, “Violence, Peace, and Peace Research,” *Journal of Peace Research* 6, no. 3, 1969, pp.167-191, <https://doi.org/10.1177/002234336900600301>.

18 John Rawls, *Political Liberalism*, New York, NY: Columbia University Press, 1993, pp. 212-213.

Ursache addresses this in his article, citing the “Grand Inquisitor” chapter of *The Brothers Karamazov* as an example. In this chapter, Christ’s return is perceived as a threat by the Church, which hands Him over to the Inquisitor. The Inquisitor argues that humans do not genuinely seek freedom, but rather prefer security and material comfort, thereby avoiding the responsibility of choice and living solely for the present.¹⁹

Peace and the Bible

As an Evangelical Christian, the author refers to the Bible as the source of information about lasting peace. In the Bible, peace is not merely the absence of conflict but a holistic condition of harmony, justice, and right relationship with God and others. In the Old Testament, the Hebrew word for peace, *shalom*, conveys a rich and comprehensive meaning. It encompasses physical well-being, prosperity, social justice, and spiritual fulfillment. Peace is portrayed as a divine blessing that results from obedience to God’s commandments and covenantal faithfulness. For example, in Isaiah 32:17, the prophet describes peace as the fruit of righteousness: “The fruit of righteousness will be peace; the effect of righteousness will be quietness and confidence forever.” Additionally, the prophetic vision of the Messianic age includes global peace and justice, where nations “will beat their swords into plowshares and their spears into pruning hooks.”²⁰

In the New Testament, peace is closely associated with the Person and work of Jesus Christ. He is referred to as the “Prince of Peace” (Isaiah 9:6, quoted in Luke 2:14), and his teachings emphasize reconciliation, forgiveness, and peacemaking. In the Sermon on the Mount, Jesus declares, “Blessed are the peacemakers, for they will be called sons of God.”²¹ The Greek word for peace, εἰρηνικός (*eirēnikos*),²² means harmony, tranquility, and absence of worry. Peace in the New Testament is both an inner reality, rooted in the reconciliation between humanity and God, and an outward

19 Liviu Ursache, ‘Omul si libertatea de alegere’, in *Libertate si Moralitate—reperere ale demnitatii umane*, ed. Ioan- Gheorghe Rotaru, Stefan Mateas, Cluj-Napoca: Editura Napoca Star, 2015, p. 80.

20 Isaiah 2:4, the NIV Bible, Wheaton, IL: Tyndale House Publishers, 1991.

21 Matthew 5:9, the NIV Bible.

22 James Swanson, *Dictionary of Biblical Languages with Semantic Domains: Greek (New Testament)* (Oak Harbor: Logos Research Systems, Inc., 1997).

ethic that governs interpersonal and social relationships. Dr. Ieremia Rusu presents three dimensions of peace in the Bible: „**peace with God** – the reconciliation of man with God; [...] **the peace of God** – which is the inner, spiritual tranquility of man, which does not depend on external circumstances; [...] **peace with fellow people** – which refers to both relationships between people and relationships between communities, starting from the intimate framework of the family, to peace between nations.”²³ The Apostle Paul speaks frequently of peace as the fruit of the Spirit²⁴ and urges believers to “make every effort to do what leads to peace and to mutual edification.”²⁵

Both Testaments affirm that peace is not only a divine gift but a human responsibility. In the evangelical theological framework, freedom of conscience becomes essential, as it enables individuals to respond freely to God, pursue justice, and live ethically in community. The biblical vision of peace, grounded in a personal relationship with Christ and in moral integrity, aligns closely with contemporary understanding of peace and underscores the spiritual dimension of human rights and social harmony.

Warning: The Misuse of Freedom of Conscience

Although freedom of conscience is a fundamental human right, its misuse has repeatedly produced social fragmentation, moral relativism, and even violence. At its heart, misuse occurs when the individual’s moral autonomy is elevated above truth, love, and the rights of others. This distortion has several manifestations.

First, some invoke freedom of conscience as a justification for harm or discrimination, claiming moral or religious grounds for actions that violate the dignity and equality of other persons.²⁶ In such cases, the right to conscience is weaponized, transforming a safeguard of liberty into a tool of oppression. Second, conscience can be absolutized, treated as infallible and beyond correction. When moral reasoning is severed from divine revela-

23 Ieremia Rusu, „Pacea și drepturile omului”, In *Jurnalul Libertății de Conștiință*, Vol. 10, Nr. 3, 2022, Editions IARSIC, Les Arcs, France, pp. 417-430.

24 Galatians 5:22, the NIV Bible.

25 Romans 14:19, The NIV Bible.

26 Paul T. McCartney, *The Limits of Conscience: Human Rights and Religious Liberty*, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2017, pp.88-89.

tion and communal discernment, individuals may fall into subjective moral relativism, declaring that “what is right for me” is unquestionable.²⁷

Third, there is the temptation to use conscience as a means of evading civic and legal responsibilities.²⁸ While legitimate conscientious objection has a rightful place in democratic societies, it must be distinguished from self-serving refusals that endanger public welfare. Fourth, political or ideological actors have often instrumentalized the idea of conscience to rally supporters, concealing partisan agendas under the moral legitimacy of “conscience issues.”²⁹

Theological reflection sees conscience as a God-given moral sense, but the evangelical perspective notes that conscience can be limited. Paul referred to “weak”³⁰ or “seared”³¹ consciences, showing that moral judgment may become impaired.³² Thus, Christian theology insists that conscience must be continually informed by Scripture, shaped by the Holy Spirit, and tested within the community of faith.³³ Dr. Murza brings into the equation the will of God, “Surely the fundamental human right to make choices based on conscience should be left free or as free as possible. On the part of a Christian faithful to God and conscious that every choice must correspond to God’s will, there should be no social danger about the choices made. But in the face of a social construct in which one can always speak of trust, the provision of clear lines of demarcation should help to manifest those good and beautiful choices and discourage those that are bad or toxic for society.”³⁴ Without these safeguards, freedom of conscience—meant to promote human dignity—can instead become a pretext for injustice, fragmentation, and spiritual deception.

27 Oliver O’Donovan, *Resurrection and Moral Order: An Outline for Evangelical Ethics*, Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1994, p. 112.

28 John Finnis, *Natural Law and Natural Rights*, Oxford: Clarendon Press, 2011, pp. 221-22.

29 Os Guinness, *The Global Public Square: Religious Freedom and the Making of a World Safe for Diversity*, Downers Grove, IL: IVP Academic, 2013, p. 134.

30 1 Corinthians 8:7, the NIV Bible.

31 1 Timothy 4:2, the NIV Bible.

32 J.I. Packer, *A Quest for Godliness: The Puritan Vision of the Christian Life*, Wheaton, IL.: Crossway 1990, pp.179-80.

33 *Ibidem*.

34 Otniel Murza, „Libertatea de exprimare și acțiune ca parte a naturii umane în relațiile cu Dumnezeu și cu semenii,” in *Jurnalul Libertății de Conștiință*, Les Arcs, Editions IARSIC, Vol. 9, Nr. 1, 2021, pp. 300-315, here p. 312.

Conclusion

Freedom of conscience is not a luxury for stable societies; it is the very condition upon which stability, justice, and peace are built. It is a right that transcends culture, religion, and ideology, affirming the common humanity of all people. When protected by strong human rights frameworks and nurtured through the right education, freedom of conscience enables individuals to become ethical agents, defenders of liberty, and builders of peace.

As the world faces growing challenges—polarization, authoritarianism, and global conflict—the defense of freedom of conscience becomes more urgent than ever. Upholding this principle is not merely a matter of protecting individual liberty; it is a strategy for creating a more peaceful, just, and sustainable future for all. As Christians, we are called to be peacemakers, not only peacekeepers. As a final warning, it is important to recognize that freedom of conscience may be subject to misuse. Individuals are advised to remain mindful of this risk and conduct themselves with integrity, respect for truth, and consideration for the rights of others.

References:

- *** *The Bible*, New International Version (1991). Wheaton, IL: Tyndale House Publishers.
- BIELEFELDT, H. (2013). *Freedom of religion or belief: Thematic reports of the UN Special Rapporteur, 2010–2011*. Martinus Nijhoff Publishers.
- FINNIS, John (2011). *Natural Law and Natural Rights*. Oxford, U.K.: Clarendon Press.
- GALTUNG, J. (1969). "Violence, Peace, and Peace Research." *Journal of Peace Research*, 6(3), 167–191. <https://doi.org/10.1177/002234336900600301>
- GUINNESS, Os (2013). *The Global Public Square: Religious Freedom and the Making of a World Safe for Diversity*. Downers Grove, IL: IVP Academic.
- KANT, I. (1996). *Groundwork of the metaphysics of morals* (M. Gregor, Trans.). Cambridge, U.K.: Cambridge University Press. (Original work published 1785)
- LOCKE, J. (1983). *A letter concerning toleration* (J. H. Tully, Ed.). Indianapolis, IN: Hackett Publishing Company. (Original work published 1689)

- ✦ MCCARTNEY, Paul T. (2017). *The Limits of Conscience: Human Rights and Religious Liberty*. Oxford, U.K.: Oxford University Press.
- ✦ MOHLER, R. A. (2015). *We cannot be silent: Speaking truth to a culture redefining sex, marriage, and the very meaning of right and wrong*. Charlotte, NC: Thomas Nelson.
- ✦ MURZA, O. (2021). „Libertatea de exprimare și acțiune ca parte a naturii umane în relațiile cu Dumnezeu și cu semenii.” In *Jurnalul Libertății de Conștiință*, Les Arcs, Editions IARSIC, Vol. 9, Nr. 1.
- ✦ NUSSBAUM, M. C. (2011). *Liberty of conscience: In defense of America's tradition of religious equality*. New York, NY: Basic Books.
- ✦ O'DONOVAN, Oliver (1994). *Resurrection and Moral Order: An Outline for Evangelical Ethics*. Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans.
- ✦ PACKER, J.I. (1990). *A Quest for Godliness: The Puritan Vision of the Christian Life*. Wheaton, IL: Crossway.
- ✦ RAWLS, J. (1993). *Political liberalism*. New York, NY: Columbia University Press.
- ✦ ROTARU, Ioan-Gheorghe (2023). “A look at how the concept of human rights has evolved over time”. *Journal for Freedom of Conscience (Jurnalul Libertății de Conștiință)*, Vol. 11, No. 2, pp.825-874. DOI: <https://doi.org/10.5281/zenodo.10557901>.
- ✦ RUSU, I. (2022). „Pacea și drepturile omului”. In *Jurnalul Libertății de Conștiință*, Vol. 10, Nr. 3, Editions IARSIC, Les Arcs, France, pp. 417-430.
- ✦ SEN, A. (1999). *Development as freedom*. Oxford, UK: Oxford University Press.
- ✦ SWANSON, James (1997). *Dictionary of Biblical Languages with Semantic Domains: Greek (New Testament)*. Oak Harbor: Logos Research Systems, Inc.
- ✦ TAYLOR, C. (2011). *The ethics of authenticity*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.
- ✦ UNESCO. (2015). *Global citizenship education: Topics and learning objectives*. <https://unesdoc.unesco.org/ark:/48223/pf0000232993>
- ✦ USACHE, Liviu (2015). “Omul și libertatea de alegere”, in *Libertate și Moralitate—reper ale demnității umane*, ed. Ioan-Gheorghe Rotaru, Stefan Mateas, Editura Napoca Star, Cluj- Napoca, p.80.

International legal instruments:

- ✦ Amnesty International. (2021). *Annual report: The state of the world's human rights*. <https://www.amnesty.org/en/documents/pol10/3202/2021/en/>
- ✦ Council of Europe. (2011). *Resolution 1763 (2010): The right to conscientious objection in lawful medical care*. <https://assembly.coe.int>
- ✦ Human Rights Watch. (2020). *Education under attack: The global impact of attacks on education*. <https://www.hrw.org/>
- ✦ International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights. (1966). *United Nations Treaty Series, Vol. 999*, p. 171. <https://www.ohchr.org/en/instruments-mechanisms/instruments/international-covenant-civil-and-political-rights>
- ✦ United Nations. (1948). *Universal Declaration of Human Rights*. <https://www.un.org/en/about-us/universal-declaration-of-human-rights>