BACKGROUND GUIDE: Religious Intolerance

READ TO DISCOVER:

1. What is religious intolerance?
2. Why is it so important to protect religious rights around the world?
3. Where are religious freedoms are being violated and how can the international community help?

DESCRIPTION OF THE COMMITTEE

In March 2006, the Human Rights Council (HRC) was established to replace the United Nations Commission on Human Rights (UNCHR). Meeting three times annually at the United Nations Headquarters in Geneva, Switzerland, the Human Rights Council is the world's highest body on human rights protection and provides recommendations directly to the United Nations General Assembly when violations of human rights occur.

Composed of 47 countries which are elected by a majority vote of the General Assembly, each member state that holds a seat on the Council is required to respect human rights in its own country and policies or face suspension of its Council membership. The current membership of the Council includes thirteen African member states, thirteen Asian member states, eight Latin American and Caribbean member states and thirteen European and other member states.
INTRODUCTION

Religion, a set of beliefs about the human experience, can play an important role in international cooperation and peace. Religious leaders and groups have been important supporters of global unity for thousands of years. While many nations separate religion from government, others use spiritual beliefs as the base of peaceful authority. However, religion may also undermine the ideals of peace and justice. It can be used as an excuse for intolerance and discrimination. Religion can also make people targets for unfair treatment. Around the world, people are frequently persecuted because of their beliefs or religious background.

BACKGROUND

Religious intolerance is a global problem with a long and sad history. In many areas of the world, centuries-old religious conflicts lead to violent conflict. These conflicts can be explained by the role religion plays in personal and cultural development. Religion is often the source of moral codes and value systems, and people sometimes believe, therefore, that different religions teach values that are against their own. As a result, groups may fight over religious views or attitudes about life, laws, and social interaction.

According to the UN’s Declaration on the Elimination of All Forms of Intolerance and of Discrimination Based on Religion or Belief, passed in 1981, intolerance is defined as “any distinction, exclusion, restriction, or preference based on religion or belief and having as its purpose...impairment of...human rights and fundamental freedoms on an equal basis.” It is important to keep in mind that non-state actors (people or groups that do not have political authority), as well as governments, are capable of demonstrating religious intolerance.

In many countries, religion plays an important part in politics. Discrimination can become institutionalized in the state if governments pass discriminatory laws that the people cannot overturn or ignore. When this happens, there is no authority to monitor or stop intolerant acts.

INTOLERANCE: refusal or unwillingness to respect something different.

DISCRIMINATION: actions taken against people of a certain group.

PERSECUTE: to treat badly, especially because of race, gender or beliefs.

NON-STATE ACTORS: international entities that are not the governments of countries.

INSTITUTIONALIZE: to make an important and stable part of something.

Muslim women in Saudi Arabia.
Source: telegraph.co.uk
Religious intolerance affects people of all faiths and beliefs. Sometimes, different sects of the same religion may persecute each other. In Iran, the government is controlled by Shi’a Muslims who discriminate against minority religious groups, including Sunni Muslims—a different sect of the same overall belief system.

The months immediately following September 11, 2001 saw a sharp increase in religious intolerance aimed against Muslims all over the world. This type of discrimination is a serious concern for the international community. When groups such as Al Qaeda, the militant Islamic organization behind the September 11 attacks, commit violent acts in the name of a religion, there is often backlash against that entire religion or religious culture. Even the US, which is one of the most religiously tolerant nations according to Freedom House, experienced a dramatic increase in violence against Muslims. This has not gone away in the decade since the attacks. During the summer of 2010, plans in New York City to build a religious community center near the site of these attacks made underlying prejudice worse. Americans tried to prevent the building of the “Ground-Zero Mosque,” threatened to burn the Koran, the Islamic sacred text, and acted out against Muslim-Americans all over the country. Even in places where religious freedoms are protected by the government, people may act in discriminatory ways.

Motivations behind Religious Intolerance

Religious intolerance often goes alongside political or social unrest. Often, the violence and discrimination associated with religious intolerance occur when social groups or political groups clash. For example, Sunni Muslims are the minority religion of Iraq, but they controlled much of the government for many years. During this time, Shi’a Muslims, which composed nearly 65 percent of the population, faced active persecution by the Sunnis. This situation created national tension between the two Muslim communities. When Saddam Hussein, the leader of Iraq, was deposed in 2003, this tension erupted in a violent civil war. Currently, Sunni and Shi’a factions are fighting to gain control of the country and the new government.

According to Freedom House, an organization that promotes democracy and human rights, approximately 25 percent of the world currently has religious freedom while 39 percent is only “partly free.” This leaves a staggering percent of the globe living in conditions in which religious freedoms are fundamentally violated.” In 2007 a report was published that points out a “profoundly disturbing deterioration” in the global picture, with conditions getting worse in 38 countries while only about ten are showing improvement.

Source: www.freedomhouse.org.
Similarly, the power imbalance between Protestant Christians and Catholics in Northern Ireland led to dissent among the Catholic minority. Like most religious clashes, the conflict in Northern Ireland did not only involve religious differences, but had much more to do with economic and political inequality between the two groups.

Because societies are often defined by religion and religious culture, disputes between communities may seem religious even if they are political or economic in nature. Often, when these communities come into conflict, they use religious differences as a way to distance themselves from their enemies. However, many religious communities exist side-by-side peacefully, and many religious societies integrate without conflict. It is important to think carefully about the causes of religious intolerance, and to consider what other factors may contribute to discrimination or violence.

**Separation of Church and State**

Throughout history, many countries had theocratic governments, or governments lead by religious leaders. Today, many governments are based on the principles of one religion, and actively promote that religion among its people. These countries are said to have a state-sponsored religion. Often, these countries are criticized for mistreating people whose religions are different from the state-sponsored faith. Saudi Arabia and Iran, for example, are said to prevent public display of non-Islamic religious symbols and to prohibit public assembly or worship of non-Islamic religious groups.

Even if a country with a state-sponsored religion does not actively persecute other faiths, critics argue that these countries practice implicit intolerance. By promoting only one religion, the government is implying that other religious beliefs are inferior. Allowing for religious freedom is not enough. The government must also protect people of other faiths from discrimination.

Many countries are secular, which means that the government does not promote any religion at all. Members of secular societies believe in the importance of separation of church and state, the division of religious and government institutions. When no religion is promoted, then all religions are allowed to flourish without entitlement or persecution.

However, this is not always the case. Sometimes separation of church and state can be used as excuses for governments to discriminate against certain religious groups.
CRITICAL THINKING:
Secularism is meant to prevent government from interfering with religion, and to prevent religion from affecting government. But could a secular community give rise to religious intolerance? How?

Protection of Religion versus Protection from Religion

Nearly every country in the world recognizes the importance of religious freedom. But what happens when a group claims that persecuting others is an expression of its religious freedom? For example, homosexuality is punished by execution in Saudi Arabia. The Saudi Arabian government argues that homosexuality is a moral crime in Islam, and that punishing homosexuality is a religious act.

Secular governments are also guilty of this. Sometimes separation of church and state can be used as excuses for governments to discriminate against certain religious groups. In France, it is illegal to wear religious symbols in public buildings, because it would be seen as violating the separation of church and state. However, in practice this means that many devout Muslims and Jews are not able to wear head coverings or other traditional garments, and must choose between their own religious beliefs and their jobs or schooling.

It can be difficult for the international community, and for individual governments, to balance freedom of religion and freedom from religious persecution.

CURRENT SITUATION

Religious intolerance affects all religions in many different ways, and looks different depending on where and against whom it is committed. The following are examples that describe religious intolerance around the world:

Georgia

The southeastern European country of Georgia (formerly part of the Soviet Union) has recently been criticized for its widespread religious discrimination. Groups of Orthodox Christians have staged attacks on non-Orthodox faiths such as Jehovah’s Witnesses, Baptists and others. In addition to vandalism and theft, these groups have committed dozens of violent acts. However, government and police response remains low.

Human Rights Watch reported that over 100 physical assaults took place between 2000 and 2002, but only one criminal trial was held. Even during the trial, the defendants continued to persecute non-Orthodox Christians. The Georgian example demonstrates how government inaction can lead to human rights abuses the same way that state-sponsored discrimination does.

CRITICAL THINKING:
How should the international community react when an act of intolerance or violence is defended as “an expression of religion”?
**Indonesia**

Indonesia, the world’s largest Muslim country, has experienced its own violent religious intolerance. In the eastern regions of the nation, ongoing fighting between Christians and Muslims has claimed the lives of over 10,000 people. About half a million refugees have been forced to leave. The “Laskar Jihad,” a group guided by a radical interpretation of Islamic *sharia law*, began a series of church bombings and public assaults on Christians in order to eliminate them from the nation.

The violence gained international attention when a series of bombings in Bali, a resort island in Indonesia, targeted Australian, American and British vacationers. In 2002, blasts killed 202 people. Another bombing in 2005 killed 20 and injured over 100. Some nations point to Al Qaeda, which reportedly had connections with the bombers. Others blame Islamic extremist groups who are unhappy with the government’s tolerance of religious minorities and western influences.

**Afghanistan**

Religious intolerance in Afghanistan was widely known under the rule of the repressive Taliban. The persecution of Shiite Muslims, Hindus, Christians and Jews was extremely violent. In 2001, Taliban leaders required all Hindus to wear badges that would distinguish them as members of the religious minority. This labeling, once used by Nazis to persecute Jews, demonstrated how routine intolerance had become.

The Taliban also began to destroy all religious statues, icons and monuments. Historic works of art were demolished, including the two largest Buddha statues in the world, which were over 1,500 years old. After September 11, 2001, the Taliban regime was overthrown and a new, temporary government was installed. However, this government continues to struggle against warlords and Taliban forces, none of which are committed to lasting religious tolerance.

Even the government has demonstrated religious intolerance. Afghanistan Chief Justice Fazul Hadi Shinwari said in 2002: “The Islamic government, according to sharia, is bound to punish those who get involved in anti-Islamic activities. We can punish them for propagating other religions—such as threaten them, expel them, and as a last resort, execute them.” International military forces in the country continue to struggle to help the religious situation.

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* Sharia Law: For a comprehensive, general description and explanation of sharia law, delegates may begin their research with an excerpt from H.A.R. Gibbs’s “The Shari’a,” which can be found at [http://answering-islam.org.uk/Books/Gibb/sharia.htm](http://answering-islam.org.uk/Books/Gibb/sharia.htm)
INTERNATIONAL ACTION

The basic principles of religious tolerance and respect for human rights are outlined in two essential documents: the *Universal Declaration of Human Rights* and the *International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights*. Both establish that freedom of thought, conscience and religion are human rights that must be upheld for all people. In addition, these declarations state that no one should be coerced or pressured to change their religious beliefs.

In 1981, the General Assembly (GA) passed resolution 36/55, the *Declaration on the Elimination of All Forms of Intolerance and of Discrimination Based on Religion or Belief*. This document explains the basic religious rights of all people and called upon states to “take effective measures to prevent and eliminate discrimination on the grounds of religion or belief.”9 This resolution urges each member state to create legal guidelines for protecting religious freedom.

Finally, the General Assembly passed resolution A/C.3/53/L.32 in 1998 on *Human Rights Questions, including Alternative Approaches for Improving the Effective Enjoyment of Human Rights and Fundamental Freedoms*. Here, the GA encouraged states to apply international human rights standards to their own legal systems, and states were encouraged to teach their police and government leaders tolerance issues. The destruction of religious artifacts was also condemned.10

A number of international conferences on religious intolerance have also taken place. In September of 2001, the international community met in Durbin, South Africa for the *World Conference against Racism, Racial Discrimination, Xenophobia and Related Intolerance*. The declaration written at that meeting dealt with racism in many forms, but included sections on religious intolerance. The document identified several causes for discrimination such as the lasting effects of colonialism, poverty and underdevelopment.11 In 2004 the Intergovernmental Working Group was established by the Commission on Human Rights resolution 2002/68 and began work alongside the Economic and Social Council.
RECOMMENDATIONS FOR CREATING A RESOLUTION

Delegates should recommend ways to prevent future conflicts based on religious intolerance.

Delegates should:

- Discuss ways to end state-sponsored religious discrimination;
- Suggest methods to protect religious minorities, particularly from extremist groups and oppressive governments;
- Determine how to protect religious expression and practice, while also ensuring that religion is not used as an excuse for human rights abuses; and
- Create new monitoring systems to identify violent and intolerant groups, or plan to intervene in conflicts between opposing religious groups (through conferences or summits).

Questions to Consider:

1. What are the most common religions in your country? How are minority religions treated?
2. What do human rights monitoring groups (for example, Human Rights Watch, Freedom House and Amnesty International) say about your country’s religious tolerance?
3. Does your country separate religion from government?
4. According to your country, what are the worst cases of religious intolerance in the world today?
5. What treaties has your government signed or ratified regarding religious intolerance?
6. What programs can your country suggest to help build respect for religion around the world? How can the UN help stop state-sponsored religious intolerance? Should some countries be pressured to change their government if their policies are too restrictive?
This is the main website for the United Nations Human Rights Council, which will give you excellent information on the council and how it works.

- **Human Rights Council:** [http://www2.ohchr.org/english/bodies/hrcouncil/index.htm](http://www2.ohchr.org/english/bodies/hrcouncil/index.htm)

The World Factbook by the United States Central Intelligence Agency will provide you with basic information about your country and hundreds of other countries around the world.


Similar to the CIA World Factbook, the British Broadcasting Company Country Profiles will also give you a historical, political, and economic background on your country and other UN member states.

- **BBC Country Profiles:** [http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/country_profiles/default.stm](http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/country_profiles/default.stm)

The Center for Religious Freedom at the Hudson Institute provides current information, statistics, articles and other information about religious freedoms around the world.

- **Center for Religious Freedom:** [http://crf.hudson.org](http://crf.hudson.org)

Human Rights Watch is a well known non-governmental organization that works to report about the state of religious freedom around the world.

- **Human Rights Watch, Religious Freedom:** [http://www.hrw.org/doc/?t=religion](http://www.hrw.org/doc/?t=religion)

This is the full text of the *Universal Declaration of Human Rights*, upon which religious freedom around the world is based.

- **Universal Declaration Human Rights:** [www.un.org/Overview/rights.html](http://www.un.org/Overview/rights.html)

Two of the major UN resolutions on the topic can be found below.

REFERENCES

9 “Declaration on the Elimination of All Forms of Intolerance and of Discrimination Based on Religion or Belief,” A/RES/36/55