

Advanced UNESCO Background Guide

Committee: UNESCO

Topic: Religious Toleration in a Divided World

Bureau Introductions

Chair: Grace R.

Hi, delegates! My name is Grace, and I am so excited to be your committee chair for RAMUN! I'm a senior, and this is my second year in Model UN. Throughout my time in MUN, I've debated topics like the ethics of deep sea exploration and the Somali Civil War, and I've loved exploring global issues from different perspectives. Religious toleration is an especially crucial topic to discuss in today's world, and I look forward to seeing how you approach the challenges and opportunities it presents.

Model UN is all about diplomacy, creativity, and collaboration, so I encourage you to step outside of your comfort zone and engage with your fellow delegates to develop meaningful solutions! Whether this is your first conference or your tenth, I know you all have something valuable to contribute.

I wish you the best of luck in your research, and I cannot wait to hear your incredible ideas at the conference. I know you will all do amazingly! If you have any questions, don't hesitate to reach out. See you soon!

Vice Chair: Calista P.

Hi, delegates! I'm Calista, a senior at Rosary Academy. I am your committee vice chair for Rosary's first conference! It's my second year in MUN, and my favorite experience has been my very first conference where I learned so much about being confident to voice my opinion, discussing a solution with other delegates, and coming up with a solution together. Other than MUN, I am part of Rosary's basketball team, Rosary's track & field team, part of peer assistance

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leadership, campus ministry, and actively manage a club that is based on serving the dear neighbor. I'm looking forward to reading all your papers and having constructive and creative discussions in committee. Good luck!

Please submit a PDF of your position paper to raunesco@gmail.com by 11:59 p.m. on Wednesday, April 2. Click [here](#) for RAMUN's scoring policies.

Background

Throughout all of antiquity, religious toleration has been a consistently debated topic. Whether it be the persecution of Christians, which began all the way back in the 1st century CE, or the Spanish Inquisition, which targeted Jews and Muslims over a 356-year period beginning in the 15th century, a plethora of religious groups have been persecuted. The United Nations Educational, Scientific, and Cultural Organization (UNESCO) has taken action to combat religious persecution and to inspire religious toleration on a global scale.

Religious toleration in itself is the acceptance of other religions and beliefs and the practice of allowing people to think and practice them. The concept can be applied in a social context—allowing and encouraging diversity of thought—and/or a political context—government either not endorsing a particular religion or doing so but allowing for the practice of other religions under its rule. The importance of toleration cannot be understated: as UNESCO states, “it would be suicidal for society to say nothing at all about the cardinal virtue of listening to others and respecting their views, beliefs and customs.” It is needed now more than ever, with, for example, multiple wars occurring in the Middle East and an increase in Christian persecution to 1 in 7 Christians worldwide. As our world grows increasingly divided, we become increasingly more in need of tolerance in all forms.

Though it may seem as though religious tolerance is practiced everywhere, religious restriction has actually increased in the past decade. There has been an increase in laws restricting religious freedom and governmental favoring of a certain religious group over another in the Americas, Asia-Pacific, Europe, Middle East-North Africa, and sub-Saharan Africa. And despite an overall lessening of political persecution of religion—though, as previously mentioned,

it has steeply increased in the past years—there has been a significant increase in social harassment and violence. Currently, religious restriction is generally highest in the Middle East and some parts of Asia.

Religious persecution has wide-reaching, long-lasting impacts on both the religious group and the individual. Persecution encompasses all sorts of things—discrimination, harassment, violence, prejudice, etc.—and can lead to physical, psychological, and spiritual trauma. It fails to respect the fundamental human right each individual has to a freedom of expression, and it can fuel pre-existing social unrest. It stretches to all corners of the globe—increases in anti-Muslim policies in India and Burma, intense religious monitoring in China, the existence (as of 2019) of only four legally practiced religions in Eritrea, etc.—and will take all corners of the globe to come together to stop.

Though it seems dreary, there is hope. Practices of religious tolerance are being fostered all around the globe: for example, the UNESCO Chair for Religious Pluralism and Peace allows for vital research for religious studies to be done globally, and various workshops have taken place around the world providing education on religious literacy and tolerance.

UN Involvement

UNESCO is a specialized agency of the United Nations created to encourage collaboration, education, and peace. Over the years, the branch has addressed a wide variety of topics, such as world heritage sites, education, cultural heritage, and international cooperation.

UNESCO has taken significant actions to increase tolerance in an increasingly divided world. They established the International Day for Tolerance in 1996. One of the key arguments regarding the establishment of this celebration is the idea that tolerance is not merely

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indifference or “tolerance” in itself: it is an active appreciation of diversity of thought, culture, belief, lifestyle, etc.

In 2005, UNESCO published a report from the conference “Teaching for Tolerance, Respect, and Recognition in Relation with Religion or Belief” that it hosted with the Oslo Coalition on Freedom of Religion and Belief. This project specifically focuses on providing resources for education on religious tolerance and freedom, encouraging governments and educational institutions around the world to integrate the practice into national curricula.

In 2009, UNESCO hosted the Ministry of Endowments and Religious Affairs in Oman in Paris, France, which produced an exhibition promoting interfaith dialogue and peaceful coexistence. Similarly, they’ve taken action regarding other specific religions such as their 2014 public statement regarding the vandalism of mosques in Tripoli, Libya.

The UNESCO Initiative on Heritage of Religious Interest works on preserving sacred religious sites around the world that are representative of the globe’s various cultures and traditions. The Initiative promotes the idea that religious diversity is essential to “conveying, expressing, and sustaining spiritual identity, meaning and purpose to human life, considering that these offer significant opportunities in a fast developing and globalizing world, as well as presenting serious challenges.”

These are only some of the multitudinous actions that UNESCO has taken regarding religious tolerance and tolerance overall. Ultimately, this branch of the UN is expressly dedicated to ensuring the equality and fair treatment of all religious groups.

Regional Groups of Member States

Africa: Africa is one of the most highly religious places on earth, with around 95% of its population identifying as belonging to a certain religion. Although Africa's reputation as devout and morally conservative might emit the impression that they are not highly tolerant of other religions, this is actually not the case; many studies show that religious tolerance in all regions of Africa is actually quite high. Among 34 nations surveyed in early 2024, 30 had 70% tolerance, meaning these individuals would "like" or "not care" if they lived next-door to someone of another religion. Sierra Leone is one of the most highly tolerant African nations; 77% of its population identify as Muslim and 22% as Christian. While most Africans in other nations devoutly practice their own religion yet encourage the practice of other religions, many favor the idea of making the Bible or sharia law over the pre-existing law of the land.

Asia-Pacific Group: The Asia-Pacific region is the most religiously diverse area in the world; thus, religious tolerance greatly varies throughout it. Singapore in particular is a large proponent of religious tolerance and acceptance, with many of its inhabitants practicing a type of pluralistic religion; for example, many Singaporean Buddhists worship Jesus Christ. However, Singaporean law bans Jehovah's Witnesses from practicing their religion. The politics in South Asia have threatened religious freedom greatly; for example, there has been much violence and intimidation against Muslims in India and widespread violence against religious minorities in Pakistan. Many members of religious communities in countries such as Afghanistan, India, and Sri Lanka have reported experiencing some sort of discrimination or persecution based on their

faith. Ultimately, the Asia-Pacific group cannot be grouped into any one view on religious tolerance and freedom. Each nation has a very individual approach to the idea.

Eastern Europe Group: The Eastern Europe nations are much less religiously tolerant than their Western counterparts; an average of only 30% of each nation's population would willingly accept Muslims as members of their family, and an only slightly higher percentage would accept Jews. Additionally, these nations view religious identity as highly important to their national identity. Religious diversity is not high, and nearly half of the population of each nation views their religion as superior to others. However, this cannot be attributed to all nations: Hungary, for example, includes in their Constitution the ideal of recognizing the separation of church and state and the autonomy of different religious groups. Hungary not only tolerates but also has laws protecting the operations of various religious groups.

Latin America and Caribbean Group: Latin America is a deeply Catholic region whose attacks on religious freedom and tolerance take form in a different way than others: many nations have laws restricting the operations of religious authority in the public sphere. Despite 80% of Mexico's population identifying as Catholics, Mexican priests are subject to deep discrimination and harassment at the hands of the transnational drug cartels operating within the country; since 1990, dozens of priests have been killed for preaching against the drug cartel operations. Indigenous religious practices are under particular threat in Latin America. There is a lack of ancestral land recognition, increased dispossession by appropriation, and forced conversion. Seven individuals were killed in Colombia for practicing indigenous religion; eighteen Chilean

attempts to vandalize indigenous religious property occurred; and 624 indigenous were displaced from their homes in Mexico.

Western and Other Groups: Most Western groups have constitutional protections for freedom of religion: for example, the United States Constitution lists freedom of religion as a right in its Article I. In the European Union, the European Convention on Human Rights guarantees freedom of religion and belief. In Canada, religious pluralism is highly emphasized. However, there are countries where religious freedom is threatened. For example, the French Constitution guarantees freedom of religion, but in 2004, French law banned the use of “conspicuous” religious symbols in public schools, including wearing a hijab, which many Muslims protested. Overall, the majority of Western nations support religious freedom and actively practice and protect religious tolerance; however, as in all groups, there are exceptions.

Questions to Consider

1. What groups are most threatened by the lack of global religious tolerance?
2. How specifically are these groups threatened? What kind of discrimination tactics are utilized most?
3. How does the increased division in the world—military conflict, decreased international cooperation, civil conflict—decrease religious tolerance? Why is religion affected?
4. How can religious tolerance increase in areas where one religion is largely dominant?
5. What are ways that the importance of religious tolerance can be instilled early?

6. Is education an effective method of spreading tolerance? What specifically would be taught, and why would this matter?
7. How can laws protect religious freedom while maintaining secularism in countries where secularism is important?
8. Would laws alone be enough? Why or why not? If not, what more can be done?
9. Why is religious freedom still not always granted when the modern world is so religiously diverse?

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