

# Religious Tolerance as a Foundation for Peace

In the last 20 years, the search for certainties in ethnic identity and religious belief has contributed to militancy and conflict, as evidenced in the coups of 1987 and 2000 in Fiji. But religion as a value is important in people's lives as it binds them together and provides them with a philosophy on how to live.

Mahatma Gandhi saw democracy and violence as irreconcilable and he said: "can ill go together". Democracy, he felt, cannot be defended by violent means; the true democrat is he who with pure non-violent means defends his liberty and, therefore his country's and the whole of humankind; religion can be the basis for positive change in society but this will only happen if the values proclaimed and witnessed in the different faiths are reconcilable.

Freedom of Religion and Belief is a fundamental right and is proclaimed in the 1948 Universal Declaration of Human Rights, Article 18: "Everyone has the right to Freedom of thought,

conscience and religion". This right includes freedom to change one's religion or belief. The politically motivated move to regard Christianity as the "official" religion in Fiji has led to a lack of respect and tolerance; there is a need to recognise and respect minority faiths. Alongside Hindu temples and Muslim mosques, we see Sikh gurudwara dotted all over the country. Likewise, around the world, many ancient traditional religions continue to exist, despite fears of becoming extinct due to the popularity of major religions.

In the relationship between state and religion, there needs to be separation. State here means a nation with its corporate capacity and organised civil government. Like each state, each religion in Fiji has its own manner of governance specific to its own belief system.

Cherishing our own religion should help us understand how others value their different religions. In order to overcome difficulties, society needs to nurture multicultural

values of social justice, dialogue, tolerance and to appreciate the fact that understanding ourselves and what we are is not complete unless we have an appreciation of others. We should accord the same respect that we want for our own belief, to other people's beliefs.

Those that profess to have no religion doubled in numbers between 1986 to 1996 (Fiji census results). To an extent, this represents new found freedom in a multi-faith and a multicultural society. Freedom is enjoyed equally by all and protected by law.

In order for Freedom of Religion and Belief to be realised, not only must the state not interfere with affairs of religion, but also dominant religious groups such as the Methodists in Fiji, must exercise tolerance and modesty in a religious landscape which is highly pluralistic.

All faith groups must respect law and order so that the state can function in an unbiased way, according to the laws of the land. The recurrence of

sacrilege in the form of burning of places of worship - especially Hindu temples - has continued with little regard to law and order. Since May 2008, there have been at least 10



This Christian church (left) and Muslim mosque (right) are located opposite each other on Amy Street, Toorak, Suva. About 5 minutes walk from this place is another church and a Hindu temple. In this area, a Catholic and Hindu primary school, plus a Methodist primary and secondary school located within 15 minutes walking distance, exemplify that different religions and beliefs can co-exist peacefully in Fiji.

reported attacks of sacrilege in Fiji, including theft and the burning of religious places of worship.

Whereas freedom is not an absolute, any society committed to the values of

Freedom of Religion and Belief must know that this is a guiding principle for religious tolerance. The struggle for religious liberty has been ongoing for centuries, and has

led to innumerable, tragic conflicts with the loss of thousands of lives. Religious tolerance is essential for lasting peace in the world.

- this article was written by Rev Akuila Yabaki, CCF

## Useful links

- Global Peace Works: [www.globalpeaceworks.org](http://www.globalpeaceworks.org)
- Foundation for Human Rights and Tolerance UK: [www.humanrightsandtolerance.org/links.html](http://www.humanrightsandtolerance.org/links.html)
- Religious Tolerance Organization: [www.religioustolerance.org/](http://www.religioustolerance.org/)
- First Amendment Center: [www.fac.org](http://www.fac.org)
- The Institute of Religion and Policy: [www.religionandpolicy.org/](http://www.religionandpolicy.org/)
- International Coalition for Religious Freedom: [www.religiousfreedom.com/](http://www.religiousfreedom.com/)

## CCF publications on religious tolerance

- 'Guidelines on Religious Tolerance' pamphlets
- 'Let's All Celebrate' - multiculturalism book
- 'Building Religious Tolerance: A Report of the Religion and Human Rights Seminar' (2006 - Labasa, 2005 - Suva)

### Contact CCF on:

Ph: (670) 3308379

Fax: (679) 3308380

Email: [ccf@connect.com.fj](mailto:ccf@connect.com.fj)

Web: [www.ccf.org.fj](http://www.ccf.org.fj)

PO Box 12584, Suva, Fiji  
23 Denison Rd, Suva, Fiji

## How widespread are violations of freedom of religion or belief?\*

UN Special Rapporteurs Reported Violations:

1999: 46 states

2000: 55 states

2001: 52 states

Reported violations in

2001: Afghanistan, Azerbaijan, Belarus,

Bhutan, Bulgaria, Burundi, Chad, China, Côte d'Ivoire, Egypt, Eritrea, Georgia, Greece, Hungary, India, Indonesia, Iran, Israel, Italy, Jordan, Kazakhstan, Kuwait, Laos, Latvia, Lebanon, FYR Macedonia, Malaysia, Maldives, Mexico, Myanmar,

Nauru, Nepal, Niger, Nigeria, Norway, Pakistan, Papua New Guinea, Philippines, Republic of Korea, Russia, Saudi Arabia, South Africa, Sri Lanka, Sudan, Turkey, Turkmenistan, Uganda, Ukraine, United Kingdom,

Uzbekistan, Viet Nam and Yemen.

\* Data from the UN's For the Record 1999-2001 (<http://www1.umn.edu/humanrts/edumat/studyguides/religion.html>)

## Key international documents

### 1945 - Charter of the United Nations

This founding document for the United Nations forms the basis for all UN treaties, conventions, declarations and procedures, describes religion as a fundamental freedom.

Article 1 on the Purposes and Principles of the UN:

3. To achieve international co-operation in solving international problems of an economic, social, cultural, or humanitarian character, and in promoting and encouraging respect for human rights and for fundamental freedoms for all without distinction as to race, sex, language, or religion; and

4. To be a centre for harmonizing the actions of nations in the attainment of these common ends ([www.un.org](http://www.un.org)).

### 1948 - Universal Declaration of Human Rights

(UDHR) Guarantees Freedom of Religion and Belief under:

Article 18

Everyone has the right to freedom of thought, conscience and religion; this right includes freedom to change his religion or belief, and freedom, either alone or in community with others and in public or private, to manifest his religion or belief in teaching, practice, worship and observance.

### 1966 - International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights

(ICCPR) Came into force in 1976, and guarantees Freedom of Religion and Belief under:

Article 18

1. Everyone shall have the right to freedom of thought, conscience and religion. This right shall include freedom to have or to adopt a religion or belief of his choice, and freedom, either individually or in community with others and in public or private, to manifest his religion or belief in worship, observance, practice and teaching.

2. No one shall be subject to coercion which would impair his freedom to have or to adopt a religion or belief of his choice.

3. Freedom to manifest one's religion or beliefs may be subject only to such limitations as are prescribed by law and are necessary to protect public safety, order, health, or morals or the fundamental rights and freedoms of others.

4. The States Parties to the present Covenant undertake to have respect for the liberty of parents and, when applicable, legal guardians to ensure the religious and moral education of their children in conformity with their own convictions.

1981 - Declaration on the Elimination of All Forms of Intolerance and of Discrimination Based on Religion or Belief

1993 - Human Rights Committee's General Comment Number 22 on Article 18 of ICCPR

## Do we have Freedom of Religion in Fiji?

This question was posed to people passing by in a Suva street, and there answers are given below.



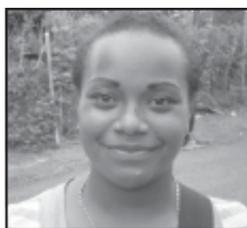
**Vini Rainima, 39**  
Housewife

Yes, there is religious freedom in Fiji because our nation is a multicultural one and we can see many people from different religious backgrounds who integrate well.



**Vijay Kumar, 47**  
Self-employed, Tamavua

Yes, there is religious freedom because people in Fiji are free to choose and worship their own Gods and the government does not force us to follow any particular religion.



**Kelera Meiniu, 19**  
Tacirua

No, despite Fiji being labeled as a multiracial country, I don't believe we have religious freedom because people often burn temples down and this is a real shame on our country.



**Peni Malitalo, 42**  
Samoa

Yes, Fiji is just like my home country Samoa - a Pacific paradise where people are free to choose their own religions. Look around you; there are so many churches, temples and mosques.



**Kashim Ali, 34**  
Gardner, Nadawa

No, we don't have religious freedom in our country because of people burning temples down. People should learn to respect and accept other religious groups.



**Charrisa Panuve, 14**  
Student, Tamavua

Yes, we have religious freedom in our country because now people can choose their own religion. We do not necessarily have to follow what our parents follow.



**Netani Bulavakarua, 21**  
Accounts Clerk, Samabula

No, the government has given us religious freedom but there are some people who disrespect other people's religion and this is clearly depicted in recent sacrilege acts.



**Rana Lateef, 14**  
Student, Nailuva

Yes, there is religious freedom in Fiji. We are a multicultural nation. People of different races get together to celebrate different religious festivals with a lot of enthusiasm like Diwali, Eid and Xmas.