Logos Universality Mentality Education Novelty: Law
ISSN: 2284-5968 | e-ISSN: 2458-1046
Covered in: ERIH PLUS, HeinOnline, CEEOL, Index Copernicus , CrossRef, CrossCheck, J- GATE, Google Scholar, Ideas RePeC, Econpapers, Socionet, KVK, WorldCat.

2025, Volume 13, Issue 1, pages: 30-42 | doi: https://doi.org/10.18662/lumenlaw/13.1/96

The Evolution of the Concept of Religious Freedom and Its Legal Protection

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Abstract: *Since ancient times, the need for religious freedom has been the expression of the human person's desire to manifest freely in the realm of faith. In connection with religious freedom, the concepts of freedom of thought and conscience have also developed. Over time, the fundamental elements of religious freedom have crystallized, which the states of the world protect at the constitutional and infraconstitutional levels, with the European Court of Human Rights being the driving force behind interpretations in this matter.*

Keywords: *religious freedom legal protection, freedom of thought, constitutional, infraconstitutional, European Court of Human Rights.*

How to cite: Necula, M.-I. (2025). The evolution of the concept of religious freedom and its legal protection. *Logos Universality Mentality Education Novelty: Law, 13*(1), 30-42. https://doi.org/10.18662/lumenlaw/13.1/96

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Introductory concepts – freedom and religious freedom on freedom

I will start my endeavor from simple to complex and from history to the present, hoping that when the issues become very arduous, I will have solid, basic support to use for solving controversial problems. In ancient Greek, the word for "freedom" was "eleutheria,"which, when translated into Romanian, means "liberty"(Carrez & Morel, 1999, 98). The word "eleutheros" belongs to the same family of words, meaning "broke" or "bankrupt." From this perspective, it seems that absolute freedom is achieved only by those who are no longer tied to material possessions (see the ancient Greek philosopher Diogenes of Sinope) because these possessions no longer belong to their heritage. In other words, any property diminishes the freedom of its owner.

In Ancient Greece, Plato, in the allegory of the cave, linked freedom to education (paideia), liberation (eleutheroo) being the consequence of discovering the truth (aletheia). In this sense, it was stated: "the more truth you have, the more freedom you attain." (Dumitriu, 1984, 268).

Regarding freedom, the evangelist John, quoting the words of Jesus Christ, mentions: "And you will know the truth, and the truth will set you free." (Bible, 1924/2016, John 8:32). In the following verses, this type of freedom is explained, namely: it is not acquired in relation to other people but with oneself and with the divine reasons that exist in creation. These reasons are, in fact, the divine laws that created and sustain the universe, and with which man can either come into harmony or conflict. (see Saints Justin Martyr and Philosopher, Maximus the Confessor, and Dumitru Stăniloae) The knowledge of these reasons, also called logos, as well as their fulfillment in one's own existence, liberates man. In Roman law, which had to regulate social relations in a slave society, the word "liber" is used for freedom, which expresses "the condition of a free man who is neither a slave (servus)nor a prisoner." In contrast to the slave, treated as an inanimate tool devoid of rights, the master or citizen freely disposes of their person and actively participates in the life of the city. Thus, freedom initially constituted a status, meaning social and political condition guaranteed by a set of rights and duties, before being conceived by philosophers and theologians as a purely psychological and moral individual characteristic (Michiduţă, 2011, 10-11).

In this sense, a free person has the right to decide on public and personal matters without interference from masters or owners. There are several types of freedoms. In this sense, it has been stated that: "there are as many freedoms as there are constraints from which we emancipate ourselves." It is usually discussed about physical freedom, intellectual

freedom, social and political freedom, the freedom to express and publish opinions, economic freedom, spiritual freedom, the freedom of indifference, moral freedom, the freedom of decision, etc. (Michiduţă, 2011, 13) to which we can, of course, add religious freedom, freedom of conscience, and freedom of thought.

Currently, in philosophical terms, freedom has been defined as: "the absence of constraint and the state of one who does what they want." (Didier, 2009, 181). We can observe that freedom is a philosophical and theological concept, materialized through legal and/or theological norms by political power and spiritual authority.

Historical aspects regarding the concepts of "freedom of thought", "freedom of religion" and "freedom of conscience"

As we will see, the three concepts are complementary. Historically, the precursor to the phrase "religious freedom" was the expression "free thought". This emerges in Ionia, starting from the 6th century BC, when a series of thinkers, rejecting the religious myths that explain the origins of the world and the order of things, attempt to replace them with observation and rational analysis (Trousson, 1997, 8). We believe that in the process of transmission, in this case of myths, a simplification and a deficient understanding occurred, which impoverished them of their initial content. Therefore, they would have needed to be refreshed through deepening and appropriate interpretation.

It is noteworthy that "laws recognizing the right to religious freedom date back at least to 539 B.C., from the moment Cyrus the Great was proclaimed emperor in Babylon" (Gunn, 2011, 162).

Subsequently, heresies were the form through which, at least in the early centuries of Christianity, "free thought" was expressed, being "a manifestation in relation to the prevailing ecclesiastical authority, which, however, claims it only for themselves, for tolerance is not part of their program: they aim to replace submission to one truth with submission to another truth, different but no less absolute" (Trousson, 1997, 5). It is characteristic of any religion or denomination to claim that the values it transmits to society are the best. From here, attachment is born, as well as possible deviant behaviors that attest to an unpredictable potential.

In the 16th century, Martin Luther "correctly used the expression, rare before him, of "freedom of conscience", but in a particular sense, which limits it to an inner freedom. The believer is freed from ecclesiastical tutelage, but the freedom of conscience remains tied to the reformer's message; it does not simply mean the right to practice faith outside any external recommendation, nor, especially, the liberation from any faith

(Trousson, 1997, 5). Therefore, the interpretation of the content of religious freedom has led to the emergence of the concept of freedom of conscience.

In the year 1570, Theodor de Beze will specify: "Shall we say that freedom of conscience must be accepted?" Not at all, if it is about everyone praising God according to their own liking, this is an inappropriate (devilish) doctrine. Freedom of conscience consists in praising God in purity, that is, without any recourse to human laws, and not in praising Him "each according to their own liking," an individualistic and inappropriate (diabolical) principle." (Trousson, 1997, 5). We note that there was a serious concern regarding the "liberalization" of truths of faith, so that each individual would have the right to believe and do whatever they wish in religious matters. The concern was legitimate because if each person has a different faith, their own faith, then we can no longer speak of communion in terms of faith and consequently not of ecclesial communities either.

So, in the 16th century, freedom of conscience referred to the fact that Scripture had to be interpreted by ecclesiastical authorities and did not imply freedom of worship or expression understood as dogmas.

Historical aspects regarding the right to religious freedom

The origins of this concept, I believe, must be sought in Greco-Roman and Judeo-Christian civilization, which constitute the foundation of the culture, spirituality, and social norms of today's European states.

In the early days of humanity, in many states, the political leader was also the high priest, which meant that the only accepted religion was the one imposed by the political regime. Therefore, the Latin expression "cuius regio, eius religio" became famous, which in a broader translation means: "whoever holds political power imposes the religion." In this sense, it was mentioned: "the confusion of the two orders, political and religious, was characteristic of primitive society." It seems that initially, religious power was established, and only later was political power formed around it. However, it did not take long for political power to gain importance and become the main force within ancient society, with religious power remaining to serve political power. The phenomenon is common to all ancient peoples. The political leader, both in the Hellenic World and in the Roman world, is endowed, solely by virtue of holding a leadership role, with religious power and duties. In Rome, for example, public worship could only be performed by political leaders (Uţă, 2011, 57). Therefore, generally speaking, with the exception of the Roman Empire, in the ancient world there was no right to religious freedom, also called the right to religious pluralism, in the sense of allowing the existence of multiple religions within the territory of the same state.

Within the Jewish people in antiquity, religious authority and political power were distinct, the king being anointed by the high priest in the name of God and having obligations regarding the protection and cultivation of the Mosaic religion. With the conquest of Israel by the Romans, "in Palestine, the Jews do not allow themselves to be assimilated, and their reactions surprise the Romans." Not only do they have a single God – the only true one – but the law of Moses oblige them to stand out: it imposes circumcision, the Sabbath, dietary taboos, the refusal of religious images, forbids mixed marriages, and excludes pages from the community. Rome had conquered so many different countries and imported so many foreign deities that it could have reconciled itself with this particularism if it had not had the consequences of a radical rejection of polytheism and contempt for the gods of the Empire. They were not reproached for worshiping Yahweh, but for despising the worship of others: contemptuous of the gods, they are, in the eyes of the conquerors, atheists"(Trousson, 1997, 24-25).

Regarding Christians, they were initially viewed within the Roman Empire as atheists. Without having a past and without having a certain territory, that is, a state, "claiming that divine law takes precedence over human laws, they jeopardize the integrity of the Empire, within which they manifest as a foreign body." Even without discussing the refusal of imperial worship, their exclusive monotheism, which rejects religious and political structures based on polytheism, heralds an inevitable conflict"(Trousson, 1997, 25). Unlike the Jews, Christians practiced fervent proselytism, which concerned the Roman power structures, a fact that it also determined the many persecutions launched against Christians from Emperor Claudius in 46 AD to Emperor Diocletian in 304AD. With the emergence of Christianity, conflicts arose between the leaders of the Roman Empire and Christians, and Christians were condemned and executed for the crime of "lese-majesty" because they refused to participate in the worship of the Roman emperor in the public divine cult.

At one point, the Roman emperors understood that Christians also needed to be guaranteed religious freedom. In this regard, Emperor Galerius promulgated an edict of tolerance authorizing the freedom of assembly and proclaiming Christianity as "religio licita". Believers can finally breathe" (Trousson, 1997, 29). After this moment, the Edict of Milan by Emperor Constantine the Great followed, granting Christians the same religious freedom as other religions in the Roman Empire. With the separation of political power from religious authority, multiple religions emerged in the same geographical space. For example, in Ancient Greece and Rome, there was a polytheistic religion in which community members had the right to

express their religious feelings within pre-established frameworks. In Greece, there was also a temple for the Unknown God, which showed that there was a solution for all those who did not have the determination to be present at the worship of one of the gods of the Greek pantheon (Acts, 17:16-34). *Therefore, in ancient times, with few exceptions, the right to religious freedom was the ability of all members of a state to choose and practice the religion they desired, a fact respected by political leaders.*

However, the Roman Empire emerged from its neutral stance towards all religions, initially feeling the need to compensate Christians for three centuries of persecution by offering reparations. In response to this attitude, Emperor Julian the Apostate expressed disapproval, but it was short-lived.

In the year 380, through the Edict of Thessalonica, Emperor Theodosius the Great declared Christianity the only religion permitted in the Empire and ordered the prohibition of other religions. We have here, therefore, a restriction of religious freedom. Thus, "Christian values began to play an increasingly important role in Byzantine society starting with the Edict of Thessalonica by Emperor Theodosius the Great in the year 380." Thus, ecclesiastical autonomy expanded, non-judicial roles of the Church emerged, and some of the moral values of Christianity began to be part of the state's legal values (Necula, 2020, 66). Subsequently, in the Papal State, there was only one religion, Catholicism, while in England a new Christian confession emerged—Anglicanism—as a result of the conflict between the papacy and the King of England. In the 16th century, Lutheranism, as a Christian denomination, would not have emerged without the support of King Charles VI of Germany, who wanted to stop contributing to the construction of St. Peter's Basilica in the Vatican and have his own national church. In other words, the schism of the Christian Church was also based on political causes.

The 18th century brought profound changes in the religious sphere both in Europe, especially in France, and in America.

We stated that the "American model" in terms of religious freedom "is the consequence of the history of the American state." Thus, the colonists who came from Europe during the time when the Inquisition was showing its intolerance in religious matters wanted to create a state that would promote religious pluralism, with the state assigning itself an impartial role as an arbiter.

The religious neutrality of the American state seeks to reconcile two ideals, and at the same time two inseparable directions of tradition, namely: the universalist liberal ideals of the individual and the free choice and

practice of the religious who wish for their voices to be heard and their beliefs to be recognized and supported. In fact, this conception highlights the tension that exists within the American state between the separation of State and religious denominations, and the cooperation between the two" (Necula, 2020, 114-115). Therefore, all the turmoil in European society regarding freedom of thought and religion found a resolution in the new American society.

In fact, "although religion, in its traditional forms, may be in decline in some Western industrial societies, this is not the case everywhere." Thus, the U.S. is a noteworthy exception, where new forms of religion continuously emerge to meet inherent spiritual needs. Some of these have a religious character. In contrast, others are not truly religions in the usual sense of the word. The latter include alternative and complementary forms of healing, psychotherapies, techniques for developing human potential, ecology, holistic spirituality, New Age, celebrity worship, nationalist movements, and even sports. Whether these can be considered forms of religion or not depends on how religion is defined, a highly disputed issue. The American religious effervescence, which emerged against the backdrop of religious freedom respected and encouraged by the political factor, confirms the inner need of the human person to have a religion and to be part of a spiritual community (Necula, 2020, 105-106).

International and national regulations regarding religious freedom. Guarantee clause and limitation clauses

Originally, religious freedom represented "an absolute natural right of man" (Stuparu, 2009, 21) to manifest their faith through communal and individual worship, but over time, also the right to choose the religion or religious denomination they wish to embrace. Therefore, "religious freedom primarily refers to the freedom of an individual or a person within a community to practice any religion or belief without discrimination, restrictions, or limitations. "The religious dimension of this fundamental right is built on the basis of a freely consented relationship with the divinity and represents a personal choice that must be respected and guaranteed by society and authorities" (Stuparu, 2009,17-18). It has been firmly argued that "the freedom to choose and to manifest one's convictions and beliefs is a right enjoyed by both believers and atheists, agnostics; especially in the case of religious freedom, the freedom of choice is very important, with any indoctrination being prohibited" (Savu & Weber, 2011,131). Experts in the field have argued that regarding religious freedom, we can talk about guarantee clauses and limitation clauses. Guarantee clauses are provided in

international conventions and in the constitutions of states "including measures to protect freedom of religion and beliefs, highlighting the scope of this right." (Gunn, 2011, 162).

At the international level, there are several systems for the protection of human rights, among which the most important are: the Universal Declaration of Human Rights (UDHR) and the European Convention on Human Rights (ECHR), among others. In the UDHR, Article 18 states: "Everyone has the right to freedom of thought, conscience, and religion; this right includes the freedom to change their religion or belief, as well as the freedom to manifest their religion or belief, either individually or in community with others, in public or private, through teaching, practice, worship, and observance." "In the ECHR, Article 9 provides: 'Freedom of thought, conscience, and religion"". Everyone has the right to freedom of thought, conscience, and religion; this right includes the freedom to change their religion or belief, as well as the freedom to manifest their religion or belief individually or in community with others, in public or in private, through worship, teaching, practices, and the observance of rituals. 2. The 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 in a democratic society. "The Universal Declaration of Human Rights has posed a real challenge for Muslim countries." The Declaration itself assumes that the member states of the United Nations are secular in the sense that religion is not a dimension that determines citizenship. This contrasts with the medieval system, where belonging to a particular faith and even its interpretation constituted the basis for legitimate membership in a state. People whose loyalty was questionable were subjected to the Inquisition in Europe and torture in Baghdad" (Sookhdeo, 2012, 189-190).

Without claiming to be exhaustive, I consider that the CLAUSES OF GUARANTEE of religious freedom as resulting from international treaties and from the jurisprudence of the ECHR are as follows:

- respect for the autonomy of religious denominations;
- equality of religions and state neutrality towards religions;
- civil and/or criminal protection against blasphemy, incitement to religious hatred, etc.;
- protection of religious manifestations and the wearing of religious attire;
- ensuring religious assistance for those who do not have easy access to religious services: penitentiary, hospital, military, etc.

The autonomy of the Church is one of the rights that are part of the guarantee clauses. It is respected when religious denominations are governed by their own statutes or canonical codes and when normative acts regarding religious denominations are based on their consultation. In this regard, we stated: We believe that in order to truly respect religious freedom for any bill that targets religious denominations or even religious denominations, it is mandatory to consult them, even if for some aspects the opinion is conforming and for others advisory. Weal so consider it necessary, due to the fact that in Romania religious denominations as legal entities have a very clearly defined identity, that in every normative act applicable to these denominations they be explicitly mentioned. The absence of an express provision can generate confusion or abuse. Moreover, this right of religious denominations to be consulted is also enshrined in the normative act that regulates their relations with the Romanian State (Necula, 2020, 285). It is about Article 50 of Law 489/2006, which enshrines the right of religious denominations to be consulted regarding draft laws that directly concern them: "Art. 50. - (1) Any amendment or addition to this law shall be made with the prior consultation of recognized denominations and incompliance with the legal norms regarding decision-making transparency." (2) Representatives of religious denominations have the right to participate as invited guests in the debate in Parliament and its committees on draft normative acts concerning religious life, the activities of denominations, confessional education and teaching, social assistance, and national heritage regarding denominations.

"Another aspect to highlight is that 'human rights law protects the autonomy of the Church—protects the freedom of religious communities to govern and organize themselves, to make decisions on religious matters without government intervention, to set their own criteria for granting membership, for appointing leaders, for establishing doctrines, etc."(Garnett, 2011, 82) An important element of autonomy is the exclusive jurisdiction of the Orthodox Church over clergy in matters of ecclesiastical discipline. Thus, the content and limits of the autonomy of the Romanian Orthodox Church stipulate that "the decisions of the disciplinary bodies have the authority of res judicata, but the exclusive jurisdiction of the Church over clerics is exercised in cases concerning doctrinal and deontological issues." Our argument takes into account the provisions of the Statute for the Organization and Functioning of the Romanian Orthodox Church in force since 2008, which states: "Art. 156 (6) By virtue of the autonomy of cults, as provided by law, and their specific competencies, ecclesiastical courts resolve internal

disciplinary issues, and the decisions of ecclesiastical courts at all levels are not subject to appeal in civil courts." Art. 157 The Holy Synod is the only canonical court for its members for any kind of deviations from the Church's teachings and discipline" (Necula, 2020, 67).

I agree with the statement that "the right to freedom of religion is not only a right of individuals but also of institutions, associations, communities, and congregations" (Garnett, 2011, 82). This statement raises an issue that I believe is increasingly at the center of public debates, namely the rights and freedoms of communities in relation to individual rights and freedoms.

Regarding the CLAUSES LIMITING RELIGIOUS FREEDOM, they are part of this freedom. Thus, limitation clauses "identify the circumstances under which a state or government may legitimately restrict the exercise of a right." An example of a limitation clause can be found in one of the oldest and most renowned documents identifying the right to freedom of conscience, the French Declaration of the Rights of Man and of the Citizen of 1789, which was later incorporated into the current Constitution of France. Article 10 of the Declaration of Human Rights states the following: No one shall be hindered on account of their opinions, even their religious opinions, as long as the manifestation of these opinions does not disturb the public order established by law (Gunn, 2011, 163-164). The conditions for a limitation clause to be reasonable: it must be provided by law, support a legitimate interest of the state, and be necessary or proportionate.

From this perspective, it can be observed that between religious freedom and other fundamental rights and freedoms, there can be tensions that need to be resolved through their mutual limitation or the limitation of one of them. Thus, we have at least the following limitations:

- limiting religious freedom in relation to the right to private life or health (if a blood transfusion can be refused by a relative due to religious considerations);
- limiting religious freedom in relation to the right to life (exorcisms, the Tanacu Case, Vatican exorcist Gabriel Amorth, state protocols for exorcisms)
- limiting religious freedom in relation to the right to children's education and the right of parents to decide on the religious education of their children; (See the 2015 Decision of the Constitutional Court of Romania regarding religious education, which stipulates that parents have the right to decide whether to enroll their children in religious education or not)

- the limitation of religious freedom in relation to freedom of expression is mutual, as evidenced by the recommendations of the Venice Commission as well as by the case law of the ECHR and the courts in Romania;
- limiting religious freedom in public spaces (the presence of religious symbols in schools (crucifix, icons), wearing the burqa in schools, etc.

Regarding the penultimate limitation, it has been rightly argued that the State's guarantee of religious freedom also involves measures to limit media abuses committed in the name of freedom of expression. Thus, "another complex point of intersection between religion and freedom of expression is related to the right of the State to address (and how it should address) forms of expression that subject religions or religious persons to hatred, contempt, ridicule, or negative stereotyping." Article 20(2) of the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights states the following: "any advocacy of national, racial, or religious hatred that constitutes incitement to discrimination, hostility, or violence is prohibited by law" (Opened for signature on December 16, 1966, 999 UNTS 171, art. 20(2) (date of entry into force March 23, 1976) (Assembly, U. G. (2025).). State representatives are thus obligated to implement laws that prohibit what is also referred to as religious hate speech or religious defamation (Evans, 2011, 52). In this sense, interpreting Article 30, paragraph 7 of the Constitution of Romania (Chamber of Deputies, n.d), "the Constitutional Court of Romania held in Decision no. 36/2001 that the exercise of freedom of expression may involve certain restrictions and conditions, according to the law, precisely so that the rights and freedoms guaranteed by the Constitution to citizens, their interests, and, implicitly, public order, health, and morality are not affected."

This restriction must be proportional to the situation that caused it and cannot affect the existence of the right or freedom"(Tomescu, 2013, 39). We consider that the greatest risk is that the media may favor certain religions or religious movements to the detriment of others, without any realities supporting this attitude, as these are in fact forms of subtle proselytism" (Necula, 2020, 124). We are talking about the so-called secular religions that have values which the media often supports without explicitly stating that they are religious values.

Conclusions

Religious freedom is primarily an individual right, but to the extent that the individual already has a clear religious option along with other individuals, the protection of the community's religious freedom is necessary.

Although religious freedom is protected by universal norms, at the national level, the constitutions of states nuance both the guarantee and restriction clauses. Moreover, the national specifics, meaning the history and culture of the states, as well as the ideology of the political parties in power at any given time, determine either the reduction of guarantees or the reduction of restrictions.

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