“**With only a minority of Canadians attending a place of worship regularly, is it important to preserve freedom of religion and conscience in Canada’s increasingly secularized society?  Why or why not**?”

Tremendous progress has been made in preserving freedoms for all women and men. Gender equality is still a pertinent issue, and preserving the freedom of religion and conscience is vital to gender equality. Furthermore, the preservation of religion and conscience is linked to several key areas of successful and prosperous society. In the course of history, religious persecution has lead to colonialism, warfare, and state regulation, this continues today in the middle east and in parts of China. Freedom of religion can help insure personal freedoms, regardless of the number of people attending places of worship, as religion, conscience and faith are not dependent upon attending a place, but matters of individual mind and faith.

History has shown through the course of time that religious persecution can lead to profound harm for humanity. Some of society's oldest codices were written utilizing religion to lend weight to their impact and adherence. One need only review the persecution of early Jews and Christians to witness the impact of religious laws over time. Throughout history people have been persecuted based upon their religious beliefs and practices, for non-normative practices of their contemporaries, be that Judaic conversion to Christianity, pagans or shamans practicing religions of origin when they were colonized by early Christians. Migration to North America from Europe and England was due in part to the Puritans, Quakers and others attempting separation from the Church of England owing to burnings, hangings and torture for practicing outside the state religion. Although seeking to escape religious persecution they would themselves engage in the persecution of others, including Anglicans, Catholics, Lutherans, other monotheistic European religions and of course whose who practiced goddess religions and shamanism.

When the United States penned their Constitution, though the intent is widely debated, the first amendment states  “Congress shall make no law respecting an establishment of religion or prohibiting the free exercise thereof”. Furthermore, in the Treaty of Tripoli, President Adams declared the United States not to be founded upon Christianity.[[1]](#endnote-1) Regardless of where one lands in the United States constitutional debate, it is clear that the early founders of that country recognized the impact and potential effects of either penning a state religion or severely limiting religious practices. They instead, wisely chose to leave matters of religions and conscience to the individual. In North America, these basic principles would become the cultural and legal framework for the establishment of religious freedoms. Prior to World War II, Roosevelt spoke to the Four Freedoms, one of which was the Freedom of Religion[[2]](#endnote-2), which would become a precursor to the United Nations, Universal Declaration of Human Rights[[3]](#endnote-3). Internationally, religious conflict still occurs where there is little religious tolerance and freedom. Conflicts between, sects, major religions and faiths have and continue to lead to militarized disputes and loss of life. Religious freedom remains an important issue.

The Religious Freedom and Business Foundation has published that religious freedom benefits society, nationally and globally by through a direct correlation with peace and stability. Furthermore, in countries where religious freedom exists, there are economic benefits through increased local and foreign investment.[[4]](#endnote-4) Conversely stifling religious freedom can have adverse effects on business, national and local economies. One need only to look toward the middle east and observe a decline in tourism in places where there is unrest linked to religious conflict as one example. Businesses more commonly have lawsuits filed against them for violations of religious freedom. This can cost them by means of loss of customers, legal defense, retraining, and bad press. Those companies that have adopted and endorse at all levels religious freedom avoid these costs. As recently as last year, international Abercrombie & Fitch received the brunt of bad press and lost many customers related to limiting the religious dress of one of its employees.

Religious freedom supports gender equality, the freedom and well being of women. Recent studies have indicated that religious freedom is also closely linked to increased income and financial viability, more so for women.[[5]](#endnote-5) Furthermore, women in countries which support religious freedom are more likely to have their equality recognized. Although recent media coverage may cause one to question the relationship between religious freedom and women's equality via the United States Supreme Court Case ruling for Hobby Lobby, religious freedom is by and large associated with better health care for women as well lower infant mortality.[[6]](#endnote-6) In Africa, there has been an increase in the persecution of women practicing witchcraft. Some researchers have concluded that these persecutory actions are an attempt to restrict and control women.[[7]](#endnote-7) These actions are not just about what the individual believes but where and how they practice their individual faith. Supporting religious freedom can equalize the status of women and neutralize such persecution.

Religious freedom is an important human right that potentially touches upon many areas of living day-to-day. Religious freedom is not simply about the possession and practice of a belief system and attending a religious centre, church, synagogue, or temple. Religious freedom encompasses much more broadly things such as:

* religious clothing
* diet
* rites of passage
* ownership of places of assembly
* managing religious organizations (centre's of education, training, social assistance, etc.)
* publishing, owning, and dispensing materials
* raising children in agreement with one's belief system
* communicating for the purpose of voluntary influence[[8]](#endnote-8)
* belief systems, including atheism[[9]](#endnote-9)

Religious freedom therefore touches upon virtually every facet of life. Thomas Reese expresses, "Nor is religious freedom only about beliefs that you hold in your heart but don't express." This is an important distinction as it articulates that it is not just the overt, but the subtle, personal beliefs that one holds as sacrosanct that are protected. As religious freedom touches upon so many aspects of life it would be easy to conclude that religious freedom must be granted at the exclusion of other rights, as articulated by the U.S. Commission on International Religious Freedom, "freedom of religion or belief may be subject to only 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." Guarding other individual rights is crucial to successful religious freedom, to ensure that social stability and safety are held stable. Such limits also ensure that practices such as child marriage, female genital mutilation, and other abusive practices are not acceptable.

Attending to the overall good of society, the "freedoms of others" protecting religious freedom is essential to protecting human rights. Defending freedom of religion and conscience is a separate issue from the drop, or perhaps future rise, in attendance at places of worship. Freedom of religion is closely linked to too many other freedoms: liberty, expression, equal protection, thought, opinion, and others. Protecting freedom of religion ensures protecting these other basic rights. Even though fewer people identify as having a particular religion many more people are claiming their own spirituality. This too is protected when religious and conscience freedoms are preserved. As society progresses, for each of the reasons cited above, protecting freedom of religion and conscience can help ensure a civil, safe and prosperous society.

1. http://www.militaryreligiousfreedom.org/about/religious-freedom-and-the-military-a-short-history/ [↑](#endnote-ref-1)
2. http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Four\_Freedoms [↑](#endnote-ref-2)
3. http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Universal\_Declaration\_of\_Human\_Rights [↑](#endnote-ref-3)
4. http://religiousfreedomandbusiness.org/2/archives/05-2014/1.html [↑](#endnote-ref-4)
5. http://www.cardus.ca/policy/article/2992/ [↑](#endnote-ref-5)
6. http://religiousfreedomandbusiness.org/2/archives/05-2014/1.html and http://www.cardus.ca/policy/article/2992/ [↑](#endnote-ref-6)
7. http://blog.uvm.edu/vlbrenna-rel163/witchcraft-wicked-women/ [↑](#endnote-ref-7)
8. http://ncronline.org/blogs/faith-and-justice/religious-freedom-fundamental-human-right [↑](#endnote-ref-8)
9. http://www.cardus.ca/policy/article/2992/ [↑](#endnote-ref-9)