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Religious freedom in America

Americans prize religious freedom for their own beliefs but are less protective of the religious liberties of other groups. Take our quiz to test your knowledge of national attitudes and beliefs relating to the free exercise of religion.

by [David Briggs](#)

February 15, 2011

Editor's note: Scroll down for the quiz.

Americans believe in religious freedom.

More than nine in 10 U.S. respondents to a [2006 Pew Forum survey](#) said it was “very important” to live in a country where they can practice their religion freely. Only 5 percent of respondents to the [2009 State of the First Amendment survey](#) commissioned by the First Amendment Center said there is too much religious freedom in the United States.

Yet from the nation’s earliest days, when religious tests for office were commonplace, and continuing through a history burdened by virulent anti-Catholicism and anti-Semitism, there have always been powerful efforts to limit religious expression.

Now, at a time when the nation is lamenting a loss of civility, engaged in a war on terror and divided on immigration issues, the challenge emerging again is how to preserve religious liberty for all.

There may be temptation to legislate against an Islamic center being built near Ground Zero or to prohibit a pastor from publicly burning Qurans, but coercion is the wrong road to take, said religious liberty scholars.

Take away religious freedoms, and violent religious persecution and conflict are likely to increase, Brian Grim of the Pew Research Center and Roger Finke of Pennsylvania State University write in their new book, [“The Price of Freedom Denied: Religious Persecution and Conflict in the 21st Century.”](#)

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“Even though religious freedoms are inconvenient, they’re the very things that diffuse religious tensions,” said Finke, who is also director of The Association of Religion Data Archives. “Their religious freedoms are my religious freedoms.”

In their global study, Grim and Finke found that what fuels religious tensions across the globe are social and legal pressures to limit religious expression and growth, most often brought to bear against minority faiths.

The U.S. is no exception. Consider these examples:

- Sixty-two percent of religious freedom court cases from 1981 to 1997 involved minority religions, Grim and Finke reported. During that period, minority religions received favorable rulings in just more than a third of the cases, while mainline Protestants were successful in 70 percent of their cases.
- From 1992 to 2005, the number of complaints of religious discrimination filed with the Equal Employment Opportunity Commission rose 69 percent. In comparison, Grim and Finke noted, the number of complaints of racial or gender discrimination filed with the agency over the same period rose less than 10 percent.
- In an [August 2010 Pew poll](#), a majority of respondents objected to the construction of an Islamic center and mosque near the World Trade Center. A quarter of respondents said local communities should be able to prohibit the construction of mosques if they do not want them.

It’s not just minority religions.

While national attention is focused on mosque controversies, what is less well-known is that Muslim groups are far from alone in facing challenges over new construction. Local governments bowing to pressures from “not in my backyard” groups of neighborhood residents or a desire to keep limited open land on the tax rolls are limiting the rights of Christian congregations to build new churches, said Anthony Gill, a political scientist at the University of Washington.

“This is widespread across all denominations,” he said. “It affects everybody.”

And even if Americans say they support religious freedom, many are not aware of the rights protected by the Constitution.

In the [State of the First Amendment 2009 survey](#), less than one in five respondents could name freedom of religion as a right guaranteed by the First Amendment. In Pew’s [2010 U.S. Religious Knowledge Survey](#), just more than a third of respondents knew that classes in comparative religion may be taught in public schools.

Why does that matter?

Religious liberty cannot be taken for granted, scholars said, and all faith groups have a stake in protecting the fragile rights of religious freedom.

“It’s not just recent history,” Gill said. “It’s all of history.”

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