

World Interfaith Harmony Week 2026
RELIGIOUS FREEDOM IN PLURALISTIC SOCIETIES
Collective Responsibility in Countering Discrimination, Hate, and Intolerance
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Reflections By

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Religious Freedom in Pluralistic Societies: From Legal Protection to Dialogue

Thank you very much for the invitation. It is an honor to participate in this panel during World Interfaith Harmony Week. I would like to begin with a simple but crucial distinction and clarification: while contexts differ among us, I believe that religious freedom is not only a legal principle but also a lived social practice.

Legal frameworks are essential. Without them, minorities remain vulnerable. But laws alone cannot prevent discrimination, hatred, or polarization. These take root not only through extremist violence, but also through ignorance, fear, and everyday exclusion — in schools, families, public discourse, and even well-intentioned institutions.

Religious freedom is foundational to inclusive and democratic societies because it protects freedom of conscience—something that cannot be imposed or coerced.

When societies fail to protect religious freedom, they fail at a deeper level: they deny the dignity of persons whose identities, values, and moral frameworks are shaped by belief.

From the Chilean experience—a country that established a complete separation between Church and State in 1925—we have learned that secularism does not entail the eradication of religion from society. Rather, it creates the conditions for plural coexistence, where different beliefs can contribute to the common good¹.

Religious discrimination rarely begins with violence. It begins with symbolic exclusion:

¹ Cortés-Rodríguez, Rocío. "El patio de los disidentes: Los despatriados del cielo y de la tierra". *Revista Mensaje*, no. 745. Diciembre, 2025.

- When certain beliefs are treated as irrational or dangerous. And let me say that it can happen even within the same tradition. Intra-religious dialogue can sometimes be even more difficult to handle. Virgilio Elizondo points out how tensions take place in Catholic Churches where Latin American migrants bring their religious celebrations and festivities, such as the devotion to the Virgin of Guadalupe, that are “new” to local people, and so they feel uncomfortable and sometimes, fight against those practices, and therefore, it creates unnecessary tensions among parishes². Similar attitudes have been reported in Chile. Both groups need to find ways to coexist.
- When religion is reduced to a private hobby with no public relevance
- When minorities are spoken *about*, but not *with*
- Hatred grows where there is no encounter, and where public speech lacks ethical responsibility.

How can sacred texts and theological scholarship be used constructively to deepen interreligious understanding rather than division?

Theological scholarship and sacred texts can deepen interreligious understanding when they are approached as spaces of encounter rather than as weapons of identity. Division does not arise from theology or scripture as such, but from the ways they are interpreted, instrumentalized, and detached from their ethical and communal responsibilities.

Let me begin with theological scholarship. Every religious tradition develops its own theological frameworks to articulate identity, interpret revelation, and establish *healthy limits* on dialogue. This is not a problem; it is, in fact, a strength. Theology helps communities discern *why* and *how* they engage with others while deepening their own self-understanding. When practiced responsibly, theological reflection does not weaken religious identity; it refines it, making dialogue more honest and more grounded.

Theology becomes constructive when it recognizes that engaging the religious other is not a threat, but an opportunity for greater clarity about one’s own tradition. In this sense, theology can serve as a bridge: it provides the conceptual tools to articulate difference without turning it into hostility.

Now, a word about sacred texts. The problem is not the scriptures themselves, but the way they are read, interpreted, and mobilized in social and political contexts. Fundamentalist readings often isolate texts from their historical contexts, ignore internal diversity within the tradition, and absolutize a single interpretation as the only legitimate one. As scholars such as Albert Randall have shown, this kind of

² Elizondo, Virgilio P. *Galilean Journey: The Mexican-American Promise*. Revised and Expanded edition. Maryknoll, N.Y.: Orbis Books, 2000.

literalist and decontextualized reading has frequently been used to justify both internal exclusion and external violence³.

A constructive engagement with sacred texts requires resisting these reductive approaches. It involves slowing interpretation, situating texts within their broader canonical, historical, and ethical contexts, and recognizing that sacred scriptures have always been read in community rather than in isolation. When texts are allowed to remain complex, dialogical, and open to interpretation, they are far less likely to be used as instruments of division.

In this sense, theological scholarship becomes a practice of repair: it helps repair harmful interpretations of texts, and it also contributes to repairing social relationships damaged by fear, exclusion, or inherited prejudice. By offering careful hermeneutical tools, theology challenges simplistic readings and models intellectual and moral responsibility within religious traditions.

Finally, sacred texts deepen interreligious understanding by humanizing religious difference. They are not abstract documents; they are lived texts that shape the hopes, fears, sufferings, and moral commitments of real people. When scriptures are approached with this awareness, the “religious other” is no longer a theoretical problem, but a concrete neighbor whose life is shaped by meaning, faith, and vulnerability.

From this perspective, sacred texts are not obstacles to peace. When read responsibly and relationally, they become resources for ethical restraint, humility, and mutual recognition. Theological scholarship plays a crucial role in this process by keeping interpretation accountable, dialogical, and oriented toward the dignity of persons and communities.

In pluralistic societies, public speech carries ethical weight. Words do not merely describe reality; they actively shape it. For this reason, media professionals, religious leaders, educators, and policymakers share a collective responsibility to ensure that public discourse does not fuel fear, exclusion, or incitement, but instead fosters understanding and coexistence.

Preventing polarization requires sustained and intentional efforts. It calls for education at all levels, rooted in religious literacy as a long-term social investment. It requires the creation of spaces of encounter—not only within churches, synagogues, mosques, or temples, but also in schools, parks, hospitals, universities, and civic institutions—where people can meet one another beyond stereotypes. It demands a commitment to dialogue, even when disagreement persists.

As Pope Francis pointed out, true openness does not mean abandoning one’s convictions. Rather, it involves remaining “steadfast in one’s deepest convictions,

³ Randall, Albert B. *Holy Scriptures as Justifications for War: Fundamentalist Interpretations of the Torah, the New Testament, and the Qur’an*. Lewiston, NY: Edwin Mellen Press, 2007. Also see: Cortés-Rodríguez, Rocio. “Religión, Paz y Violencia: La propuesta de Razonamiento de la Escritura.” *Revista Cascada*, febrero 2025.

clear and joyful in one's own identity," while remaining genuinely open to understanding others and trusting that dialogue can enrich all sides. Dialogue, according to Pope Francis, should not be reduced to a superficial diplomacy that says "yes" to everything to avoid tension, but must be rooted in truthfulness, generosity, and mutual respect⁴.

In this sense, religious freedom cannot survive on legal protection alone. While laws and policies are indispensable, they are insufficient without the social conditions that allow freedom to be lived daily. Religious freedom requires social encounter, hospitality, education, and dialogue, and the active involvement of families, faith communities, schools, and civil society in promoting not only tolerance, but genuine recognition.

If we are serious about countering religious hatred, we must invest not only in norms and institutional frameworks, but in relationships. Because, ultimately, building bridges is far better than building walls.

Thank you very much.

RESPONSES TO THE DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

Why religious freedom matters?

Religious freedom is foundational to inclusive and democratic societies because it protects freedom of conscience—something that cannot be imposed or coerced.

When societies fail to protect religious freedom, they fail at a deeper level: they deny the dignity of persons whose identities, values, and moral frameworks are shaped by belief.

From the Chilean experience—a country that established a complete separation between Church and State in 1925—we have learned that secularism does not entail the eradication of religion from society. Rather, it creates the conditions for plural coexistence, where different beliefs can contribute to the common good.

How discrimination and hatred take root?

Religious discrimination rarely begins with violence. It begins with symbolic exclusion:

- When certain beliefs are treated as irrational or dangerous
- When religion is reduced to a private hobby with no public relevance
- When minorities are spoken *about*, but not *with*

Hatred grows where there is no encounter, and where public speech lacks ethical responsibility.

⁴ Francis, Pope. *Evangelii Gaudium : Of the Holy Father Francis to the Bishops, Clergy, Consecrated Persons and the Lay Faithful on the Proclamation of the Gospel in Today's World*. First printing, December 2013. Vatican City]: Libreria Editrice Vaticana, 2013, section 251.

Three concrete tools for countering hatred

Based on my work in Chile and in international interfaith settings, I would like to highlight three practical tools for countering discrimination and intolerance.

1. Hospitality

Hospitality is not mere politeness. It is an ethical stance shared across religious traditions — from the Bible to the Qur'an.

In interfaith contexts, hospitality means being willing not only to welcome people, but also to be changed by encounter. Peace begins when we choose to welcome rather than exclude.

2. Religious literacy

Religious literacy goes beyond knowing facts about religions. It is the ability to understand how belief shapes everyday life: What people eat, how they dress, how they pray, how they make ethical decisions.

A religiously literate society does not fear difference — it understands it. And importantly, religious literacy is one of the most effective antidotes to fanaticism and extremism.

3. Interfaith dialogue as social practice

Interfaith dialogue must move beyond symbolism.

It must become collaborative, embodied, and local—within schools, neighborhoods, media, and civil society.

Dialogue works when it creates trust, not when it erases differences.

A word from the Christian tradition

From a Christian perspective, particularly after the Second Vatican Council, interreligious dialogue is not a threat to faith; it is an expression of fidelity to it.

Nostra Aetate affirmed that truth, holiness, and wisdom can be found beyond the boundaries of Christianity, and that encounter with the Religious Other deepens — rather than weakens — self-understanding.

This shift is especially relevant today, when Christianity must be careful not to contribute — even unintentionally — to exclusionary narratives.

Ethical public speech and preventing polarization

Public speech in plural societies must be guided by responsibility, accuracy, and humility.

Words shape realities. Media, religious leaders, educators, and policymakers all share responsibility for ensuring that speech does not fuel fear or incitement.

Preventing polarization requires:

- Education rooted in religious literacy
- Having spaces of encounter

- And a commitment to dialogue, even when disagreement remains

Conclusion

To conclude: Religious freedom cannot survive on legal protection alone.

It requires social encounter, hospitality, education, and dialogue.

It requires moving from tolerance to mutual recognition.

If we want to counter religious hatred effectively — as the OHCHR rightly urges — we must invest not only in norms and policies, but in relationships.

Because, ultimately, building bridges is far better than building walls.

Thank you very much.