



The debate was secured by Lord Alton of Liverpool, who moved that the House takes note of worldwide violations of Article 18 of the 1948 Universal Declaration of Human Rights, and the case for greater priority to be given by the United Kingdom and the international community to upholding freedom of religion and belief.

*Read the Archbishop's speech:*

"My Lords, I am grateful to have the opportunity to speak in the debate, and I thank the noble Lord, Lord Alton, for securing it and for all of the work he has undertaken in this area over many years; and I'd want to associate myself very closely with what he said in his really eloquent opening speech, and also with the speeches of the Noble Lords, Lord Mackay and Lord McFall.

"I'd also want to add my tribute to the Right Reverend Prelate, the Bishop of Leicester, and to add that as he will be much missed by this House, I will personally miss him enormously for the advice he has given me on numerous occasions.

"We have already heard examples of many of the horrific situations around the world where people are persecuted for their religion, or for their absence of religion. I myself have witnessed such persecution, in its rawest forms, during my visits to the 37 other provinces of the Anglican Communion. Almost half of these provinces are living under persecution. They fear for their lives every day.

I want to make two points briefly in the short time available in this debate. The first one is that the relationship between law and religion is invariably a delicate one. The passionately lived religious life, or the passionately lived humanist life, of so many people around the world and in this country cannot be compartmentalised within our legal and political systems. It is not good enough to say that 'religion is free within the law'. As the point was made so eloquently by the Noble Lord, Lord McKay, religion defines us – it is the fundamental element of whom and what we are.

"Thus religious freedom – and the freedom not to have a religion – stands beneath the law, supporting it, creating the circumstances in which you can have effective law; and has done in this country since the sealing of Magna Carta eight hundred years ago – negotiated by my predecessor Archbishop Langton – which in its first clause says: 'the English Church shall be free, and shall have its rights undiminished, and its liberties unimpaired.'

"Religion gave birth to the rule of law, particularly through Judaism, and the question therefore is how do we translate this undiminished right, this unimpaired liberty, into the contemporary situation, where too often – as we have heard from the Noble Lord, Lord Alton – culture, law and religion seem to have incommensurable values?

"The foundational freedom of religious freedom in the state prevents the state claiming the ultimate loyalty in every area – a loyalty to which it

has no right, never has done and never will do if we believe in the ultimate dignity of the human being.

"My second point, though, is that religious freedom is a freedom that is threatened on a global scale, as we've heard, but also in a very complex way. Attacks on religious freedom are also linked to economic circumstances, to sociology, to history and to many other factors; and so, practically, if we are to defend religious liberty, we have to draw in these other factors.

"For example, if we want to defend religious freedom around the world – and again, I say, the freedom to have no religion – don't sell people guns who oppress religious freedom. Don't launder their money. Restrict trade to them and confine the way we deal with them – and above all speak frankly and openly, naming them for what they are.

"Where a state claims the ultimate right of oppressing religious freedom, it stops the last and the strongest barrier against tyranny. From the beginning of time, from the beginning of the Christian era, when the Apostles said they would obey God rather than the Sanhedrin, through the Reformation to the martyrs of communism, to Bonhoeffer, to Archbishop Tutu and our own day round the world, we have needed religious freedom as a global defence of freedom."

4 min read

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