

**1. Religion tangled up with law is being used as a weapon against individuals because of their gender, sexual orientation, race, and ethnicity. What can/should be done to ensure that our laws and their application are free from such bias?**

The very first phrase of the Bill of Rights, a document that defines and protects our most basic human liberties, states that “Congress shall make no law respecting an establishment of religion, or prohibiting the free exercise thereof.” This clause is crucial in ensuring freedom for all people; throughout history, a wide variety of denominations have been persecuted for practicing their faith. To protect this fundamental right, other legislation has also been passed, such as the Religious Freedom Restoration Act of 1993 (RFRA). However, this protection has also caused significant harm. Used as an excuse for discrimination and bigotry, the idea of freedom of religion has allowed too many to mistreat others due to gender, sexual orientation, race, ethnicity, and more. Now, we have reached a time when the balance between these two liberties must be restored. It will not be easy, but I believe that it is possible.

In the discussion of rights and freedom, it is important to recognize the true definition of freedom. In a civilized and functioning society, freedom can not be the ability to do whatever one wants, exempt from restrictions or consequences. If this were the case, we would live in anarchy. Instead, I believe that freedom is most aptly defined as the ability to be and do however one wishes, so long as it does not impose upon the rights of others. As stated in “Freedom of Speech in Wartime” by Zechariah Chafee, Jr. in the June 1919 Harvard Law Review, “your right to swing your arms ends just where the other man's nose begins.” This is an important concept to remember in the discussion of religious freedom. To define any freedom, including religious, as all-encompassing is foolish and dangerous; the true definition of freedom, where the rights of others are also considered, is pivotal to protecting the liberties of all people.

Throughout the past decade, this definition has been tested as tensions in the realm of freedom of religion have risen to a breaking point. With numerous cases at a variety of levels, up to the Supreme Court, freedom of religion has begun to be used as a justification for injustice. For example, in the well-known case of *Masterpiece Cakeshop Ltd. v. Colorado Civil Rights Commission* in 2018, a bakery in Lakewood, Colorado refused to make a cake for a wedding between two men. In this case, the Court ruled in favor of Masterpiece Cakeshop, reasoning that the company had the right to deny service to the couple under the Free Exercise Clause. Another crucial case was *Burwell v. Hobby Lobby Stores*; in this case, Hobby Lobby Stores Inc. refused to provide the contraception guaranteed to their female employees under the Affordable Care Act due to religious objections. Their case, too, was upheld, this time under the RFRA.

Though this issue is quite complex, I believe there is a solution. In this situation, I feel that a two-pronged approach would be most effective, the first element being one of logic. Living in the United States, one of the clearest ways to protect our rights is through the Supreme Court. Through older precedent and current cases, our laws, rights, and freedom are determined. Of course, in many cases the Court has upheld laws that further injustice, or struck down ones that work to stop it--but this can be changed. Through organizations like the American Civil Liberties Union (ACLU), we have been able to create precedents of tolerance and protect necessary rights. In the 1970s, the now-Supreme Court Justice Ruth Bader Ginsburg worked as a part of the ACLU to strike down a myriad of sexist laws through the Supreme Court, making important headway in the fight for women's rights. By challenging bigotry in the courts, change can be made. I believe that this is an important part of the path forward, away from religion as a mask for prejudice.

However, though the use of the Supreme Court is necessary for the protection of our freedom, it is futile without societal change on a larger scale. For example, in the 1832 Supreme Court Case *Worcester v. Georgia*, in a question of Native American sovereignty, the Supreme Court ruled in favor of the Cherokee Nation. Unfortunately, both the state of Georgia and President Andrew Jackson were extremely opposed to this ruling and refused to carry it out, so no change came from what should have been an enormous step in guaranteeing freedom for native nations. As a society, in order to affect change, we must become more understanding and empathetic. In listening to others' opinions and ideas, even if they do not match our own, we can begin to create change by starting to understand another's point of view. Additionally, and perhaps the most important, is the necessity to employ the idea of the inherent dignity and worth of every human being. Through recognizing that each person deserves to live and be treated with the basic rights of respect and acceptance, positive change begins.

Freedom of religion and its infringement on other rights is not an isolated issue--far from it. Rather, it sets a precedent for a whole other realm of concerns. This problem of the expansivity of the freedom of religion comes down to something much more basic: how one treats others who are different from themselves. Differences in fundamental beliefs, such as how much one weighs the value of others' rights, complicate the issue, but at its core, this debate questions whether one believes that every human, not just one group or another, deserves to live freely. For the answer to this question to be a resounding "yes" from every person asked, there is still a significant amount of work to accomplish. This work will be difficult, but if we approach these issues using critical thinking, compassion, and the belief that every person matters, it can

be done; we can create positive change and ensure that freedom is exercised in the right way so that no one is left out.

## **2. One paragraph autobiography including interests, activities, and college goals.**

As a senior at Cleveland High School, I have had the opportunity to become involved in a variety of activities in the past four years. I have been a part of several clubs, such as UNICEF Club and the National Honor Society since my sophomore year, and was the secretary for Key Club this past year. Additionally, I have participated in the CHS soccer program for all four years, and because of this, I plan to play club soccer in college. I have also had the opportunity to become a part of the CrossFit community through the CrossFit class at our school, something I love. Outside of school, I play club soccer for Portland City United and enjoy cooking, reading, playing piano, and spending time outside. Also, I am an active part of my Unitarian Universalist Youth Group, where we discuss social justice issues and perform community service. I have had a variety of wonderful opportunities to volunteer outside of this as well, such as working at Buckman Elementary School in an after school program there and campaigning for a healthcare measure. After high school, I plan to attend college, though I am still deciding on which university. In my higher-level education, though I am not entirely sure what major I would like to pursue, I may follow a path in the legal field, as I have become quite interested in law and the justice system lately. Additionally, I hope to minor in Spanish, as I have greatly enjoyed learning it throughout middle and high school and would love to become fluent.