

Religious Freedom

Small Group Studies in Three Modules



Module 1: 'Render to Caesar' (Matt 22:21)

Key Question: How do we experience religious freedom, or the lack of religious freedom?

This module provides resources to help us reflect on what we mean when we talk about 'religious freedom'.

Setting a Context: The media seems to run a new story every week about 'attacks' on religious freedom. It is easy to be influenced by stories in the media. Some of these stories may be accurate. Many have been shown to be inaccurate. But most, if not all of them, will be removed from our personal experience.

We may also hear similar stories passed on by word of mouth. Some of these may be true, some may not.

Our Personal Experience (15 minutes)

In groups of 3 or 4, **share your personal experience:**

- Q. Have you personally experienced restrictions in terms of your own religious freedom?
 - If you have, what was the experience?
 - Was it a reasonable or unreasonable restriction (taking into account all the circumstances)?
- Q. Do you, in your everyday life, consider that your religious freedom is constrained?
- Q. Do we draw any conclusions from our conversations on the above questions?

Other Experiences (10 minutes)

In the same groups, **discuss one or more of the following recent stories.** An important question might be 'Where does freedom lie?'

An 11-year-old boy has been banned from joining the Scouts because he doesn't believe in God, and therefore was unable to take the Scout oath, despite his Muslim, Hindu and Buddhist peers being offered an alternative oath to swear. (Note: in December 2012 the Scouts announced proposals to amend the 'promise' to recognise that some (many?) would not wish to swear an allegiance to 'god'.)

www.telegraph.co.uk/news/religion/9617456/Schoolboy-banned-from-Scouts-for-being-an-atheist.html

The Christian owner of a bed and breakfast has been ordered to pay damages after a court found her refusal to let a gay couple stay in one of her double-rooms amounted to direct discrimination and a breach of equality law. Michael Black and John Morgan brought a civil case against Susanne Wilkinson, who owns the Swiss Bed and Breakfast in Cookham, Berkshire, after they were refused accommodation at the premises in March 2010 despite having made a reservation and paid a deposit.

<http://www.guardian.co.uk/world/2012/oct/18/christian-gay-couple-ordered-pay-damages>

A number of self designated "Gay Bars" have a "no-heterosexuals policy." The staff of a bar, which is primarily patronised by members of the gay community, refused to serve a couple who were presumed to be 'straight'. www.independent.co.uk/voices/commentators/philip-hensher/please-keep-out-of-gay-bars-and-clubs-646295.html

All Together (5 minutes)

With everyone together again, **consider briefly** if any common themes have emerged from the above conversations.

Another Perspective (25 minutes)

All together, **view the video** of David Kerrigan's interview with Shami Chakrabarti. www.facebook.com/video/video.php?v=10150845988851247 (19minutes)

Chakrabarti highlights that building a liberal, pluralistic society is done by respecting and celebrating differences, not seeking to create uniformity. She is clear that the right to be different does not extend to harming other people. She believes it is unworkable to separate public and private worlds, and recognises that there will be times when individual conscience will collide with equality of treatment of others.

Following the video, **briefly discuss** (5 minutes) if the interview has brought any new thoughts or issues to our attention.

"Everyone has the right to freedom of thought, conscience and religion; this right includes the freedom to change his religion or belief, and freedom, either alone or in community with others and in public or private, to manifest his religion or belief in teaching, practice, worship and observance." (Article 18 – Universal Declaration of Human Rights)

Thomas Jefferson; "No man has a natural right to commit aggression on the equal rights of another, and this is all from which the laws ought to restrain him."

Theological Reflection (30 minutes)

In the light of our own life experience and taking into account the stories that we have heard and have discussed what insights are brought by scripture?

First of all, with the whole group together, **read aloud** (different readers):

- Galatians 2.20
- Philippians 2.5-11
- Matthew 22.21

Then, in the same groups of 3 or 4 as before, **discuss some or all of the following questions:**

- Q.** What do these passages tell us about our 'freedom' as Christians?
- Q.** What, according to these passages, are Christians to be free to do?
- Q.** What, from reading these passages, might you conclude that Christians are not free to do?
- Q.** What is to be the benchmark of Christian freedom?

Baptists have acknowledged the authority of Scripture in all matters of faith and practice from their earliest days. This means the freedom to interpret scripture and the commitment to follow religious convictions. Internally for Baptists there has been a continuing tension between the autonomous individual and the larger congregation, closely tied to the tension between the autonomous church and the larger family of Baptists.

Drawing Things Together (10 minutes)

With everyone together again:

Discuss if any fresh thoughts have emerged from the conversation and reflections and consider again if any common themes have emerged.

