

THE RIGHT TO FREEDOM OF SPEECH AND FREEDOM OF EXPRESSION

Secularism allows freedom of expression of opinion. Furthermore, it is a core principle of secularism.

The freedom of expression is human expression of opinion. "I regard homosexuals as bad" may be protected but how can you protect, "God tells me that they are bad"? See how one is expressing your view while the other is expressing God's. You cannot really speak for God and freedom of expression bans people setting themselves up to be the representative of x and thinking they can speak for x.

Obviously as a belief is stronger than an opinion and more evidence-based, a belief enjoys more value and right of expression than an opinion. That is not very relevant to law which is a pity and down to the fact that you cannot know if a person really believes what they say they do.

Freedom of speech is not really a genuine human right. Freedom to express one's belief or opinion certainly is. The two are not the same. A person can say anything they want. But a person cannot express their opinion or belief unless it is their sincere opinion or their belief.

Freedom of speech should mean freedom of expression. That is what this website means by freedom of speech.

Taking responsibility for what you say means you have to be open to being corrected.

Criminalisation of abusive speech is wrong. Only defamation and threats of violence and inciting people to commit murder should be criminalised if any abusive speech should be. But even then the person is not silenced but challenged and exposed. Nobody stops you from using hate speech but you will have to pay a price if you do.

Secularism allows religion and everybody freedom of expression provided it does not call for violence or illegal activity or oppose the common and public good.

The exception is when the state is sure it can prevent a religion's statements from resulting in violence or crime. That is why there is no room for attempts to make expression of the doctrines of militant Islam illegal.

In the real world, people should be allowed to call for violence and be allowed to make racist statements etc. The law can decree that it is only allowed if a more reasonable voice is immediately made available. Suppose a Muslim cleric comes to Ireland to ask for the destruction of the Catholic clergy. Let him ask but make sure there are leaflets or a speaker to give the other side. Freedom of speech must be allowed completely as long as steps are taken to prevent and arrest any damage done.

All people have a right to speak their minds. If they do, nobody should take offence but just ask why they say such things and gently correct them if they think they are wrong. We must sit down with those people we do not see eye to eye with and talk. Nothing is solved by silence.

If we are confident in the power of truth we will not react violently should somebody say something we consider outrageous. The problem lies in us not in what was said.

If people use the right of freedom of expression they must admit us the right to express disagreement with them. The right to freedom of expression does not mean we must let anybody away with abusing it. Those in that category are:

People who keep contradicting themselves - if a person says they believe or think something they owe us the duty of being consistent. For example, we must complain if somebody says chance made all things while claiming to believe in God.

People who only pretend to believe or think what they say they believe or think. People cannot believe anything contradictory.

People who tell those who express their knowledge or belief, "That is your opinion". They have no right to decide that it is an opinion unless they can show that you don't have sufficient evidence. If you don't, then you don't know what you claim to know and you don't believe what you claim to believe. To call knowledge or belief an opinion is insulting and disrespectful. An opinion is only what you think - its weaker than belief or knowledge.

The Declaration of Human Rights goes, "Everyone has the right to freedom of opinion and expression; this right includes

freedom to hold opinions without interference and to seek, receive and impart information and ideas through any media and regardless of frontiers."

This actually opposes religious freedom in the sense that though it allows religious opinion it does not mention or protect religious belief. Belief and opinion are not the same thing and Christianity and Islam insist that their doctrines are more than just opinions.

However secularism agrees that religious opinions should be respected which means regarding them as mere opinions. It means refusing to mock or ridicule those who hold them. It allows for politely challenging those opinions.

Helping a person see for themselves is not interference. What is interference is telling them lies or manipulating them or threatening them to change their beliefs. Much religion is in violation of this declaration. Catholicism's distortion of the truth and its desire to get an unfair advantage over young children to make them believers is against this right.

Should a secular state allow consenting adults to say handle deadly snakes and drink poison during religious services? It certainly should not allow adults to be helped to do these stupid things. If a minister provides the poison and you take it then he or she needs to be made to answer for it before the law.

And the cultists who handle the snakes and ingest the poison are not really consenting adults. They think God's magic is going to protect them. If you marry your girlfriend's twin instead of her and you think it is her you are not a consenting adult for you don't know the full facts. Secularism does not let religion gravely harm people even if they consent.

Catholics say that abortion is never needed to save a life though this view is never suggested in peer reviewed studies. They should be penalised for giving scientific misinformation. A fake scientist would have to account for it to the law and so should they.

The common view is that your views are your own business but uttering them is different and is everybody's business for you make it so. Given that people often attack or discriminate against others such as Muslims or pagans or gays, speech that encourages that action should be criticised. It should be challenged. But not banned.

Expressing a view makes it the business of others particularly those to whom you expressed it. Thus using, "I have a right to my opinion" when used to stop a challenge or as an excuse for not listening to others is not acceptable.

Why is freedom of speech so important?

Because it can be. Dangerous and stupid and superstitious views should not be suppressed, but neither should they be deliberately given a platform to spread.

Because truth involves not only discovering what views to accept but which ones to reject. You need to hear nonsense before you can dismiss it.

Because if freedom of speech is suppressed you will never be sure if you are being told the truth about anything. Truth will suffer and be lost. It will inspire little or no confidence.

Because truth matters. People need truth before they can make proper choices. People have a right to the truth even if they do not like hearing it.

The reason you have the right to express a view even if it is wrong is so that it can be put out there for examination. It needs to be considered to see if it is true or not.

Freedom of speech presupposes that truth is good for us even if it is not always pleasant. It presupposes that truth is important in itself. Nonsense can never be equal in value to a fact.

X has freedom of speech to say what is nonsense. Y has freedom of speech to say what the truth is. Does it follow that both have an equal right to freedom of speech? Practically speaking the answer is yes. In principle, if a choice is forced on you to respect X or Y's freedom of speech you must choose Y. This is hypothetical but it shows that the freedom of speech given to X is somewhat grudging.

The lesson is to make sure you have your facts right before you speak and your confidence will soar. You don't want to go through life with a freedom of speech that is tolerated grudgingly because you are full of nonsense. This is another reason why truth is so important.

Superstition and religion even if they say they uphold freedom of speech still work against it. Anything that confuses people hinders freedom of speech. It makes it harder for the intelligent voice to be heard. It is hard enough to decide what needs to be done for say the health service without religion and superstition creating controversies and issues and moaning about being deprived of rights they do not have. Religion and superstition are based on the notion that they have information from a higher intelligence and their claims are not testable and that is where the danger is. But they waste time and cause trouble by accusing people who contradict them of offending them.

FINALLY

The common view is that your views are your own business but uttering them is different and is everybody's business for you make it so. Defending an individual's free speech does not mean defending an individual's ideas. It means there is a right to refute them firmly. Given that people often attack or discriminate against some minorities, speech that encourages that action should be criticised severely but not banned.