



Social Sciences & Humanity Research Review



Human Rights Law and The Inadequate Protection of Minority Belief Students in Schools

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<https://doi.org/10.63468/sshrr.398>

ARTICLE INFO

Keywords: Freedom of thought; freedom of conscience; freedom of religion; minority belief students; human rights in education; religious liberty; inclusive education

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Article History

Received: 10-04-2026

Revised: 19-04-2026

Accepted: 30-04-2026

Published: 14-05-2026

ABSTRACT

The protection of freedom of thought, conscience, and religion constitutes one of the foundational principles of modern international human rights law. Despite extensive recognition under international and regional human rights instruments, minority belief students continue to experience exclusion, indirect coercion, discrimination, and unequal treatment within educational institutions. This essay critically evaluates the extent to which human rights law adequately safeguards these students, with particular emphasis on the operation and limitations of international and regional legal frameworks.

The discussion analyses key provisions contained in the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights, the International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights, the Convention on the Rights of the Child, and the European Convention on Human Rights. Particular attention is given to the jurisprudence of the European Court of Human Rights, including *Kokkinakis v Greece*, *Kjeldsen v Denmark*, *Lautsi v Italy*, *Folgerø v Norway*, and *Perovy v Russia*. The essay argues that although these instruments establish important normative protections, their practical effectiveness is undermined by vague legal standards, inconsistent judicial interpretation, broad state discretion through the margin of appreciation doctrine, and weak enforcement mechanisms. Furthermore, the article demonstrates how educational systems frequently privilege dominant religious or secular ideologies while minority belief students are compelled to navigate assimilation pressures and institutional disadvantages. It is contended that existing human rights protections remain insufficiently responsive to the lived realities of minority communities in educational settings. The essay concludes that meaningful reform requires stronger international monitoring, clearer legal obligations upon states, and educational policies grounded in pluralism, inclusivity, equality, and respect for diversity.



INTRODUCTION

International and national entities, as well as judicial bodies, consistently underscore the significance of the protection of freedom of thought, conscience and religion of minority belief students in school as enshrined in Article 9. The importance of this article in a "democratic society" can be asserted from this fact that it is delineated both international and regional level documents. Yet, despite these vigorous assertions, the defence of this right in educational institutions remains impaired¹. One significant hurdle is the vagueness of guidelines in international and regional frameworks, which leads to disparate state interpretations. The lack of a detailed, universal structure to address religious accommodations, exemptions in curricula, and equality in educational settings leads to uncertainties in safeguarding minority beliefs. Students from these minorities face a spectrum of obstacles, from cultural disregard to systemic discrimination. The educational milieu can unintentionally promote the beliefs of the majority, marginalizing minority viewpoints. The societal pressure in schools to assimilate into prevailing religious or cultural norms can suppress the intellectual and emotional development of minority-belief students, obstructing their liberty to articulate their views and pursue critical thought. The Independent Expert on Minority Issues, Gay McDougall, has highlighted that "in every part of the globe, children from minority groups disproportionately suffer from limited access to high-quality education," which steals from them "their full potential as humans and their capacity to contribute to their communities and broader society."² Moreover, the friction between individual freedoms and governmental objectives in education presents another challenge. States may contend that restrictions are essential for preserving educational cohesion or secular values in order to ensure respect for every religion³. Nevertheless, the actual protection of students with minority beliefs within the educational system is not always assured. States are bound by both positive and negative duties to 'everyone' within their borders, barring specific civil privileges like voting and candidacy, which are reserved for citizens. It is incumbent upon states to promote religious diversity and uphold the doctrines of diversity and patience within a democratic framework⁴. The European Court of Human Rights (ECtHR) in '*Kjeldsen vs. Denmark*⁵' regards that both public and private educational institutions should provide safeguards against religious indoctrination and must give preference to parental convictions as mandated by the second clause of Article 2⁶. Law on human rights is dedicated to protecting the innate worth and liberties of folks in various situations. The concepts of "margin of appreciation, reservation, and derogation" provide states with the latitude to deviate from human rights norms, which can lead to uneven protection levels. In '*Lautsi vs. Italy*', the complainant objected to the display of crucifixes in every classroom of her children's state school, arguing that it conflicted with the secular education she preferred. The Majestic Corridors declared no defilement, focused solely on Right to education instead of Freedom of thought, conscience and religion of minorities, emphasizing that 'the wearing of crucifix is not a crucial requirement in Christianity'. The lack of proper enforcement and remedial mechanism for minority student rights forced them to face discernment and in

¹ Kokkinakis v. Greece, App. No. 14307/88, 260-A Eur. Ct. H.R. (1993), § 31.

² OHCHR. (n.d.). Promoting and protecting the right to education for minorities. <https://www.ohchr.org> (accessed 4 January 2024).

³ İzzettin Doğan and Others v. Turkey, App. No. 62649/10 (Eur. Ct. H.R. Apr. 26, 2016).

⁴ Serif v. Greece, 1999-IX Eur. Ct. H.R. 53.

⁵ van Dijk, P., & van Hoof, G. J. H. (1998). Theory and practice of the European Convention on Human Rights (3rd ed.). Kluwer Law International.

⁶ Kjeldsen, Busk Madsen and Pedersen v. Denmark, 1 E.H.R.R. 711 (1979–1980), 50.



toleration.⁷ This essay scrutinizes these assertions, exploring the relevant principles at every level treaties and institutions.

- **Human Rights entities at International level:**

The human rights mechanism of UN is divided into two types: those founded on treaties and those based on the UN Charter itself. The former are specialized entities established to oversee adherence to specific human rights treaties, deriving their authority from the treaties ratified by states, and are composed of independent experts. The latter, in contrast, are designed to raise awareness on the reverence of human rights, and address violations, drawing their authority from the UN Charter and comprising member states. Article 18 of The Universal Declaration of Human Rights (UDHR)⁸ articulates that everyone is entitled for this right which encompasses not only the liberty to adopt a religion or belief of one's choice but also practice it in any way either alone or with others, and both in public and private domains. Notably, the UDHR does not directly tackle the safeguarding of minority beliefs within educational systems. Another body known as (ICCPR) provides a detailed interpretation of this right in Article 18. This article highlights that the nature of this right is although non-coercive, safeguards everyone rights to express their religion or beliefs. Additionally, the ICCPR acknowledges the privileges of parents and guardians to guide the spiritual and ethical training of their offspring by their convictions, as stated in Article 18(4), without explicitly focusing on the minority belief students⁹. However, Article 27 of the same specifically safeguard minority rights and influence countries like China to adhere to it¹⁰. According to Article 13(3) of another notable covenant known as (ICESCR) the ratifying states are obliged to give value to the sole authority of parentage or respectable elders to choose any institution which they considered aligned with their own belief or norms set by states¹¹. The (CRC) well known as Convention on the Rights of the Child also gives weight-age to this valuable right of children and impose obligation on the states to respect the privileges of parents or caretakers in guiding their children in these matters while considering the developing capabilities of children¹². This provision safeguards the individuals from indoctrination by state via education by the dint of customary role of parentage in nurturing and guiding their offspring according to the values they deem significant. Nevertheless, the freedom to express one's belief or principles can be legally regulated when necessary to guard the security of populace, mandate, well being, ethics, or the basic rights and self-determinations of others.¹³

- **Regional Human Rights Treaties and Bodies:**

The European Convention on Human Rights (ECHR) in its article 9 enshrines the same right including the liberty to change one's belief, either individually or collectively, and both in community or secluded spheres¹⁴. The European Court of Human Rights (ECtHR) has adjudicated matters concerning religious freedom in educational settings, often focusing on reconciling personal freedoms with statutory limitations aimed at ensuring the safety of populace, mandate, well-being, ethics, or the fortification of rights of

⁷ Lautsi v. Italy, App. No. 30814/06, 50 E.H.R.R. 42 (Eur. Ct. H.R. 2011) (Grand Chamber), 50.

⁸ United Nations. (1948). Universal Declaration of Human Rights, Art. 18.

⁹ International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights, Dec. 16, 1966, 999 U.N.T.S. 171, Art. 18, 18(4).

¹⁰ Kolodner, E. (1994). Religious rights in China: A comparison of international human rights law and Chinese domestic legislation. *Human Rights Quarterly*, 16, 455.

¹¹ International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights, Dec. 16, 1966, 993 U.N.T.S. 3, Art. 13(3).

¹² United Nations. (1989). Convention on the Rights of the Child, Art. 14.

¹³ Committee on the Rights of the Child. (2015). Interim report of the Special Rapporteur on freedom of religion or belief (A/70/286), Arts. 14(1)–(2).

¹⁴ European Convention on Human Rights, Nov. 4, 1950, ETS No. 5, Protocol 1, Art. 2; Art. 9.



others. The Court has valued the value of diversity and forbearance in education, hence acknowledged the discretionary power of states in the form of 'Margin of Appreciation', honoring parental rights to direct the sacred and ethical upbringing of their offspring according to their beliefs. The ECtHR has affirmed that the right to freedom of religion also encompasses the choice not to express one's religion or belief, safeguarding minority beliefs within educational institutions¹⁵. Everyone holds the educational right as inalienable therefore bound the states while rendering this obligation to give importance to the right of guardians to teach their offspring's aligning with their belief and philosophical principles. In the case of *Perovy vs. Russia*, the majority of ECtHR judges, found no violation of the guardians right to educate their off springs in accordance with their religious belief (under Article 2 of Protocol 1) nor any infringement of their religious freedom (under Article 9). This judgment came after a controversy over a Russian Orthodox blessing in a state school, which the family opposed. The Court saw this as a one-time event without elements of coercion or indoctrination, emphasizing the prompt and appropriate response by local authorities and reinforcing the acceptability of passive religious symbols. The dissenting view revealed that the Court did not fully consider the ceremony's potential impact on the child, a point that had been significant in earlier cases.

The African Charter¹⁶, through Article 8, affirms that every person is entitled to enjoy this right taking into consideration the limitations enshrined by law and order. There is, however, a recognized necessity for deeper analysis regarding how this right is actualized in educational environments and the safeguarding of minority beliefs. The Inter-American Commission on Human Rights well known as (IACHR)¹⁷ in its article 12 also guarantees this freedom to retain or alter one's belief or principles, and to practice or propagate these, either individually or collectively, in public or private. No one shall endure undue constraints that could compromise their liberty to keep or alter their faith or philosophies. Limitations are permissible only as outlined by law¹⁸. Moreover, the custodians are also at liberty to up bring their off springs in accordance with their belief.¹⁹ The IACHR can examine cases concerning violations of these rights in educational settings within its area of jurisdiction.

- **Critical Evaluation:**

The criticism that human rights legislation is insufficient in safeguarding the right of minority belief students in educational institutions may hold some merit. While broad frameworks for this right are outlined by international and regional instruments, there can be gaps in the specificity needed to address the distinct challenges that minority belief student encounter in schools, and the effectiveness of these rights can be contingent on state interpretation and sovereignty. While these instruments set global norms, their real-world impact hinges on individual nations commitment to embedding and applying these norms within their domestic laws. Prime responsible for the enactment and enforcement of human rights protections are national governments. Malcolm Evans argues that the availability of alternative educational options is a crucial factor in shaping whether a state has failed in its obligations under Article 2 of Protocol 1. The presence of indoctrination risk is evident if a school teaches beliefs contrary to those

¹⁵ Plesner, I. T. (2005). Legal limitations to freedom of religion or belief in school education. *Emory International Law Review*, 19(2), 557.

¹⁶ African Charter on Human and Peoples' Rights, June 27, 1981, OAU Doc. CAB/LEG/67/3 rev. 5, Art. 8.

¹⁷ Inter-American Commission on Human Rights. (1959). American Declaration of the Rights and Duties of Man, Art. 12.

¹⁸ *McCann and Others v. United Kingdom*, 21 E.H.R.R. 97 (1995).

¹⁹ United Nations Human Rights Committee. (1994). General Comment No. 22: Article 18 (Freedom of thought, conscience or religion).



held by parents, and the availability of alternative schooling options is a significant factor in determining whether there has been a breach of obligation²⁰.

Whereas, the Grand Chamber in the *Iautsi Vs. Italy* and in *Folgerø and other vs. Norway* case inclined custodians prerogative to impart their belief and ethical principles in the teaching sphere of their off springs²¹ but this prerogative is not enjoyed fully in its true sense. However, the relationship between religion and education has been contentious in court, notably in the *Leyla Şahin Vs. Turkey, S.A.S. v France, R (Begum) v Headteacher and Governors of Denbigh High School* and *Perovy Vs. Russia*. The Court, using the margin of appreciation doctrine, favored the state in cases with strong views. The 'margin of appreciation' principle²² allows little discretion to states in applying fundamental rights in a way which they considered reasonable in specific circumstances. For instance, when two rights are in conflict, or when a right conflict with a societal concern, flexibility in the application of human rights standards is needed. This flexibility, however, should not serve as an excuse to infringe upon the rights of minority-belief students. While some rights are absolute, such as the prohibition against torture or slavery, others like the right of religion or belief are not, allowing states some discretion in their protection and respect. In 1980, the ECtHR in *Sunday Times vs. UK*²³ case articulates that the Convention intends to establish certain international standards to be observed by the signatory states, not to mandate absolute uniformity. International standards recommend opt-out provisions for doctrinal religious instruction in schools, but challenges arise with integrated curricula where religious teaching is embedded within general education, making opting out difficult. In the *Kjeldsen, Busk Madsen, and Pedersen vs. Denmark* case, the European Court stated that although schools are permitted to teach religious or philosophical content, it must be done objectively, critically, and pluralistically, taking into account the availability of alternative educational routes like private schools or home schooling. Despite of this ruling most of the Irish people asserted that opt out is not a way to redress because it is not implemented in schools in letter and spirit²⁴. Moreover, reservations are official statements made at the time of treaty signing or ratification, aiming to exempt or change the legal impact of some treaty parts. The UK, for instance, has qualified its acceptance of Article 2 Protocol 1 of the ECHR, which affirms the right to education, by stating it only agrees to this insofar as it is compatible with efficient instruction, training, and reasonable public expenditure²⁵. While reservations can encourage more states to ratify treaties and acknowledge diversity, they can also challenge the universal nature of these agreements, as observed by William Schabas. 'Derogation' refers to the suspension or limitation of certain treaty rights during emergencies, allowing obligations to be limited in response to unforeseen events²⁶. These derogation's are meant to be exceptional and temporary. Art 27 of the ICCPR, for instance, indicates that while minority rights are acknowledged, derogation's are

²⁰ Evans, M. (1997). Religious liberty and international law in Europe. Cambridge University Press.

²¹ Moeckli, D., Shah, S., Sivakumaran, S., & Harris, D. (2022). International human rights law (4th ed.). Oxford University Press.

²² Rainey, B., McCormick, P., & Ovey, C. (2020/2021). Freedom of thought, conscience, and religion. In Jacobs, White, and Ovey: The European Convention on Human Rights (8th ed.). Oxford University Press. <https://doi.org/10.1093/he/9780198847137.003.0017>

²³ Sunday Times v. United Kingdom, 2 E.H.R.R. 245 (1979),65.

²⁴ Mawhinney, A. (2007). Freedom of religion in the Irish primary school system: A failure to protect human rights. *Legal Studies*, 27, 379.

²⁵ Howard, D. (2021). Article 2 of Protocol 1: Right to education. In *Human rights law directions* (5th ed.). Oxford University Press. <https://doi.org/10.1093/he/9780198871347.003.0024>

²⁶ International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights, Art. 4; American Convention on Human Rights, Art. 27; European Convention on Human Rights, Art. 15.



permissible under Art 4, provided they do not result in discrimination based on race, religion, or other social factors but the question is that either they are utilized in literal sense. In practice, despite legal recognitions like in *Prince vs. President*,²⁷ which acknowledged Rastafari as recognized religion²⁸, practitioners like the Rastafari in Malawi still suffer discrimination. For example, Rastafari children are often excluded from public schools if they wear dreadlocks, which compel a choice between adhering to religious customs and complying with school regulations. Even though Malawi's Constitution espouses an equality clause prohibiting discrimination, Rastafari individuals still confront prejudicial treatment about their religious practices. On the other hand, the Bible Believers Church successfully argued for an exemption from public school dress codes, citing a biblical injunction for long hair, yet this has not led to similar exemptions for Rastafari followers²⁹. Efforts to advocate for change are critical both domestically and globally to spotlight and address breaches of human rights.

- **Potential Remedies and Recommendations:**

Reform in education is essential to foster exclusivity within academic settings. Introducing curricula that encompass a spectrum of viewpoints is a key to cultivating an environment of tolerance and empathy. Organizations dedicated to civil liberties and individual human rights proponents have a significant role in raising awareness and prompting legislative reforms. Facilitating conversations and partnerships among various religious and cultural factions in schools is vital to enhance mutual comprehension and esteem, thus creating a climate that embraces varied beliefs and values. It is imperative that all nations, through their statutes, uphold the array of religious, ethical, and political beliefs of their people and acknowledging the myriad of opinions on the optimal way to live.

- i. **Suggestions at International Level:**

Robust global legal frameworks like (UDHR) known as the Universal Declaration of Human Rights and (ICCPR) known as the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights respectively must be expanded to directly tackle the specific issues that minority belief students encounter in schools. Consideration should be given to the creation of new protocols or treaties while considering the safeguard of their rights. Human right bodies, such as the UNCHR should introduce a strategy for watching minority student rights. These strategies must carry out inclusive appraisals, investigations, and updates on daily basis depicting states duties to protect those rights as fulfilled. However, it requires worldwide principles expressing a mechanism to introduce comprehensive educated atmosphere which encourage multiplicity, particularly for minority-belief students. Therefore, these principles used as a milestone throughout the world in setting educational framework and bring into light the importance of an atmosphere that encourage multiplicity. Initiatives throughout the world must be started, in collaboration of UNESCO and other pertinent bodies, intended at improving the proficiencies of instructors, school representatives, and educational legislators. Concentration must be made on encouraging the consciousness about diverse philosophies, indulgent into diversity of belief systems, and integrating the human right norms into global spectrum of teaching. Furthermore, all global institutions, bodies and agencies should start campaigns in order to bring awareness in populace on marginalized group rights. Using platforms like social media, educational resources, and international conferences, these campaigns should aim to engender a worldwide ethos of tolerance and inclusive.

- ii. **Recommendations at Regional Level:**

²⁷ Prince v. South Africa, 2002 (3) BCLR 231, 250.

²⁸ Reed v. Faulkner, 842 F.2d 960 (1988).

²⁹ Mhango, M. O. (2008). Constitutional protection of minority religious rights in Malawi: The case of Rastafari students. *Journal of African Law*, 52, 218.



Regional Human rights institutions, such as the Council of Europe or the African Commission on Human and Peoples' Rights, should articulate fresh or upgrade prevailing rights, assertions to explicitly embrace the rights of marginalized students. These declarations should reflect the specific regional meticulousness and work as an adjunct to the global human rights framework. Working in tandem with regional educational organizations is a key to setting and upholding standards that foreground inclusivity and honor the spectrum of beliefs. Such collaboration would involve assisting member states in crafting educational policies that are both grounded in human rights tenets and responsive to the distinct cultural and religious makeup of the region. The formation of regional task groups, bringing together government officials, the civil sector, and educational institutions, is crucial. These collectives would be charged with pinpointing unique regional challenges and devising strategies to safeguard the rights of minority-belief students. Activities could include exchanging successful strategies and crafting guidelines that have particular regional relevance. Promoting regional educational and cultural exchange programs can also play a substantial role. Such initiatives would encourage interactions and foster understanding among students from varied belief systems, contributing to the dismantling of stereotypes, the cultivation of tolerance, and the growth of reciprocal respect. Furthermore, the creation of regional consortia of legal and advocacy groups dedicated to the rights of minority belief students would provide invaluable support. These collections would offer legal aid to those impacted, collate data on rights infringements, and advocate for legal reforms and policy alterations at the regional echelon to fill existing voids and bolster protection for these rights³⁰.

CONCLUSION

To sum up, strong foundations for safeguarding the rights to freedom of thought, conscience, and religion at international and regional level having a significant journey ahead in ensuring these rights are effectively actualized, especially in the realm of education. The fluid nature of case law is crucial in the continual shaping of the interpretation of these rights. However, there is an ongoing need for diligent efforts to narrow the divide between legal standards and their practical application to safeguard the rights of students with minority beliefs in educational environments. Human rights legislation is a potent instrument but must evolve to meet the specific requirements of minority belief students, confirming that the right to freedom of thought, conscience, and religion is fully accessible to everyone. Striking equilibrium between individual rights and the prerogatives of educational entities is an intricate endeavor that demands persistent focus and refinement in legal and judicial practices. A cohesive methodology involving governments, global entities, regional bodies, and the civic community is vital to forge sustainable and impactful improvements.

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³⁰ Moeckli, D., Shah, S., Sivakumaran, S., & Harris, D. (2022). *International human rights law* (4th ed.). Oxford University Press. <https://doi.org/10.1093/hec/9780198860112.003.0020>



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