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Examples of conscience, justice, and religious liberty issues in California

California, like Taiwan, recognizes freedom of religion or belief. Sometimes, it is not granted without a fight.

*by Hans Noot**

*A paper presented at the seminar "California for Tai-Ji-Men: a Forum on Conscience, Justice, and Freedom of Religion or Belief," co-organized by CESNUR, Human Rights Without Frontiers, and Action Alliance to Redress 1219 on October 13, 2023 at Le Méridien Pasadena Arcadia, Pasadena, California.



"Trust in God, not gov[ernment]": protests against COVID-19 restrictions in Huntington Beach, California, 2020. *Credits.*

Conscience, justice, and freedom of belief are interrelated concepts that have been recognized and protected by international human rights law. Conscience is the inner sense of right and wrong that guides one's actions and decisions. Justice is the fair and impartial treatment of all people according to the rule of law. Freedom of belief is the right to hold and manifest one's religion or belief, or to have no religion or belief at all, without coercion or discrimination.

As it happens, in California, like Taiwan, freedom of religion or belief, is not necessarily granted without a fight. Here are some examples to draw from:

-California imposed strict restrictions on indoor religious gatherings during the COVID-19 pandemic, while allowing other activities such as retail shopping, dining, and entertainment to operate with limited capacity. Many religious groups challenged the restrictions as discriminatory and unconstitutional, and **the Supreme Court** ruled in their favor several times.

-California has faced several lawsuits over the display of religious symbols on public property, such as crosses, menorahs, and nativity scenes. Some plaintiffs have argued that these displays violate the separation of church and state and endorse a particular religion, while some defendants have argued that they are historical, cultural, or secular symbols that do not favor any religion.

-California has enacted laws to protect the rights of students and employees to wear religious dress and grooming, such as hijabs, turbans, yarmulkes, and beards, in schools and workplaces. However, some cases of discrimination, harassment, or denial of accommodation have still occurred.



"Prop 8=Religious Freedom" was a slogan of religion-based supporters of Proposition 8 in California. Credits.

And last, but no least, the 2008 **Proposition 8**, which was a ballot proposition and a state constitutional amendment intended to ban same-sex marriage in California. Amongst other groups it was especially relevant for members of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints. The Church issued **a letter to its members in California**, urging them to do all they could to support Prop 8. Church members raised at least \$14 million to the cause, accounting for more than **half of the donations** in favor of the measure. They also volunteered to campaign for Prop 8, making phone calls, distributing flyers, and knocking on doors. This was all done because the Church teaches that same-sex marriage is contrary to traditional marriage, which is seen as the backbone of healthy families and of society. However, the Church's involvement in Prop 8 also generated a lot of criticism and backlash from the opponents of the measure, who accused it of violating the separation of church and state, discriminating against gay people, and interfering in the democratic process. Some of the consequences were facing protests, boycotts, vandalism, and harassment from angry activists and groups, a lawsuit for failing to report some of their campaign contributions, and a damaged image in the media and in popular culture. In the end, it caused **a decline in public approval** and trust, as well as a loss of members and converts.



Tai Ji Men at the 54th Santa Clara, California, Parade of Champions, October 7, 2023.

For the Tai-Ji-Men to practice Qigong, California can be a safe haven. But, as with any new religious movement, especially for those from a foreign culture, one must be vigilant, and participate in the continual struggle to keep justice, freedom of conscience, and of religion or belief on the table. Whilst these rights are deeply enshrined in constitutional law, there is more than just a legal approach to it. They are not just granted by the state but fought for in a public arena of debate. And it is religions themselves, as they grant these freedoms to their own membership as well as protect those whom they do not agree with, which can take a leading role in making a society truly free from inappropriate discrimination and harassment—a society where the rule of law and the respect of people for each other reign supreme.

(*) **Hans Noot** is president of the Dutch **Gerard Noodt Foundation for Freedom of Religion or Belief** (GNF), named after the Dutch legal scholar and champion of religious liberty Gerard Noodt (1647–1725). He is a member of the International Advisory Board

of the [International Center for Law and Religion Studies](#) (ICLRS) at Brigham Young University, Provo, Utah, and co-organizer of "Breed Overleg Godsdienstvrijheid" (Wider Consultation on Religious Freedom), an initiative with the Dutch Ministry of Foreign Affairs.

New York City mosques can now broadcast Muslim call to prayer on Friday afternoons without permit

By [Celina Tebor](#)

[CNN](#) (30.08.2023) - New York City issued new guidance Tuesday allowing mosques (masjids) to broadcast the Muslim call to prayer on Fridays between 12:30 p.m. and 1:30 p.m. without obtaining a permit and despite sound restrictions in city neighborhoods.

According to the city, the guidance also allows the call to prayer to be broadcast in the evenings during Ramadan, a month-long period of fasting and prayer for the Muslim community.

"Today we are cutting red tape and saying clearly if you are a mosque or house of worship of any kind, you do not have to apply for a permit to amplify your call to Friday prayer. You are free to live your faith in NYC," Mayor Eric Adams said while announcing the new guidance Tuesday.

The call to prayer is the Adhan, also spelled Azan, which is usually broadcast publicly over speakers or a public address system in a house of worship that summons members of the Muslim faith for prayer, a news release from the city said.

The new initiative, launched by the NYPD, clarifies the call to prayer is allowed in New York City and "not prohibited despite sound restrictions in city neighborhoods," the release said.

Many American atheists hide their unbelief due to social stigma in Christian culture

By [Leonardo Blair](#), Senior Features Reporter

[The Christian Post](#) (15.06.2023) - In [Psalm 14](#) of the Bible, the revered King David of Israel condemns people who don't believe in God as fools who are "corrupt" and "have done abominable works."

"The fool hath said in his heart, There is no God," he declares in Scripture. "They are corrupt, they have done abominable works, there is none that doeth good."

Now, many American atheists say that, despite their growing numbers in society, they often choose to hide their unbelief due to fear of social stigma, a recent [study](#) published by the University of Nebraska-Lincoln suggests.

Dena Abbott, assistant professor of counseling psychology at the university, conducted a yearlong study of 600 atheists nationwide divided equally between rural-residing participants and "woman-identified" participants.

Abbott said in a statement released this week that female atheists frequently reported being seen as "sexually immoral," while atheists living in rural areas that tend to be more conservative struggle to find secular mental healthcare providers to help them cope with being in the minority.

"Atheists living in small towns — which tend to be more religious and politically conservative — often reported experiencing a heightened sense of danger because of their non-belief," Abbott explained. "Rural atheists talked about a fear of violence more than urban atheists did."

While there were few reports of hate crimes against atheists, Abbott said one participant in the study reported getting death threats at a local restaurant for writing a secular opinion in a community newspaper.

According to a 2021 [Pew Research Center](#) report, 29% of U.S. adults identify as "nones" — people who describe themselves as atheists, agnostics or "nothing in particular" — while 63% identify as Christian.

The nation's share of religious "nones" at the time was 6% higher in 2021 than it was five years earlier, and 10% higher than it was a decade ago, added Pew.

A Pew analysis published last September also [predicted](#) that if the pace at which Christians abandon their faith before age 30 were to accelerate beyond its current pace, without any "brakes" in the trend, then the United States could no longer be a majority Christian nation by as early as 2045.

In the September 2022 study, Pew highlighted four hypothetical scenarios out of several possibilities to demonstrate how the U.S. religious landscape might change over the next half-century. The impact of younger Christian adults abandoning their faith without limitation was modeled in one of those scenarios.

"By 2055, the unaffiliated would make up the largest group (46%), ahead of Christians (43%). In 2070, 52% of Americans would be unaffiliated, while a little more than a third (35%) would be Christian," stated the Pew report from last September.

Photo: Empty church in this undated photo.Unsplash

Anti-cult pro-Russia and pro-China activist assaulted a Scientology church and a synagogue

The interesting story of Randi Nord opens a window on the American and international ramifications of bigotry

by Massimo Introvigne

[Bitter Winter](#) (10.05.2023) - On May 3, 2023, Royal Oak, Michigan, 44th District Magistrate Donald Chisholm [charged a woman called Randi Nord](#) with ethnic intimidation and vandalism. Royal Oak is a suburb of Detroit, and is where Nord defaced a synagogue by painting a Nazi swastika on its wall. She also painted swastikas on a baby stroller and a car belonging to Jewish families, and was arrested on May 1 with the cooperation of the FBI.

Randi Nord is a woman with a very interesting story. According to [media reports](#), she is the founder of [Geopolitics Alert Independent World News](#). The pompously named media outlet deals often with Yemen and publishes anti-Israeli and pro-Venezuelan articles. Nord has also echoed [Russian positions](#) on issues such as Internet governance, and routinely republished [Chinese propaganda](#) on various subjects. She even claims that Cuba's medicine is so advanced that they have developed a [cancer vaccine](#).

Nord is also an anti-cult activist. Her website published an article (since taken down) calling Falun Gong [a "Scientology-like cult"](#) and accusing it of having invented the organ harvesting narrative for its own anti-Chinese purposes.

[She also attacked](#) "the criminal and cult-like aspects" of Scientology, although just to be ecumenical she added that, "Most Christian mega-churches are not that far off from the Church of Scientology—they are companies in the business of ripping people off based on fear. The mega-churches are just a little less cult-y."

The problem with Randi Nord is that she does not limit herself to writing. She also acts upon her bigotry. Before assaulting the synagogue, in March 2023 she [was involved in an arson attack](#) against the Church of Scientology of Farmington Hills, another suburb of Detroit. [According to Chief Jeff King](#) of Farmington Hills police, Nord "was charged with two different felonies and given bond that included a tether" for the anti-Scientology attack. She had cut her tether since.

And there is more. She painted together with a swastika the word "Azov" on the wall of the Royal Oak synagogue. The immediate interpretation of the media was that [she wanted to glorify Ukraine's Azov Battalion](#), often referred to as "neo-Nazi" (although, as [readers of Bitter Winter know](#), its story is much more complicated). This looked strange, given Nord's political inclinations.

Eventually, she confessed to the police that it was the other way around. She hoped that her crimes would be attributed to pro-Ukrainian activists, and wanted to generate anti-Ukrainian and pro-Russian feelings. According to the Royal Oaks detective who [received her confession](#), "She said she planned to do as many hate crimes as possible and blame them on AZOV [Battalion]."

When she tried to set fire to the Church of Scientology in Farmington Hills, she had just [returned from Serbia](#), where she spent two years. What she did there is unknown, but certainly the country hosts very active pro-Russian ([and anti-cult](#)) organizations.

Nord deleted her Twitter account in 2022. She opened [a new one in May 2022](#), with no posts but an old Soviet poster "Visit the USSR."

HRWF: More reading

[The Detroit Jewish News](#)
[Macombdaily](#)
[CBS News](#)

Photo: The Woodward Avenue Shul was defaced April 28 – The Detroit Jewish News
[Credit](#)
