

# FREEDOM OF CONSCIENCE AS A FOUNDATION FOR EDUCATION

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## **ABSTRACT: Freedom of Conscience as a Foundation for Education.**

This article focuses specifically on investigating how conscience develops throughout an individual's life, taking into account the intervention of education and studying how this process unfolds. The aim of this article is to understand how children's freedom of conscience develops throughout their education, how their environment influences this, and how religious instruction in school might affect children's freedom of conscience. The possession of conscience is inherent in human beings, and this is a primary and unique characteristic that differentiates them from animals. Also, as human beings, we are masters of our own ethical structure and have the right to a free personal conscience.

**Keywords:** *Freedom of conscience, human rights, religious freedom, education, human beings.*

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## **1. Introduction**

Freedom of conscience is the first of all human rights. As indispensable derivatives of it, other inalienable freedoms of the human person have emerged, namely: freedom of expression, freedom of the press, freedom of association and assembly, emigration, petition, guarantees against taxation, criminal procedures and laws, participation in the political life of the state, among others.<sup>1</sup>

However, the notion of freedom of conscience<sup>2</sup> is particularly difficult to understand due to its semantic, historical and geographical depth. It involves two complex concepts, already extremely controversial over the

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<sup>1</sup> Santiago, Munoz Machado, *Los itinerarios de la libertad de palabra*, Ed. Crítica, Barcelona, 2013, p. 22.

<sup>2</sup> Ioan-Gheorghe Rotaru, "Key aspects of the Freedom of Conscience", *Jurnalul Libertății de Conștiință - Supliment (Journal for Freedom of Conscience)*, Editions IARSIC, Les Arsc, France, 2016, pp.30-37.

centuries: freedom and conscience. Its definition has been the subject of numerous debates that are still not exhausted today.<sup>3</sup> Often confused with freedom of worship, freedom of conscience nevertheless goes beyond this freedom, as much and in the same way as it goes beyond other forms of freedom of opinion and personal or collective commitments: political, trade union, philosophical, artistic, metaphysical or scientific.

Freedom of conscience is an essential foundation of education<sup>4</sup>, as it guarantees respect for individual beliefs and encourages critical thinking, promoting a secular and democratic school environment. This means that school should be a space where no particular belief is imposed and where diversity of thought is respected, regardless of the student's social or cultural origin. Schools should promote an education that does not indoctrinate or segregate, but rather encourages coexistence and respect for all beliefs and non-beliefs.<sup>5</sup>

Education should prepare students to interpret the world and act accordingly, developing their capacity for analysis and reflection for a responsible life in a free society.<sup>6</sup> Secular education is a model that respects freedom of conscience, not imposing moral standards specific to a single religion or non-religion. It focuses on equality, coexistence and the common good within a framework of plurality. Education must contribute to the physical, mental, moral and social development of children, in freedom and dignity. Freedom of thought, conscience and religion<sup>7</sup> is

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<sup>3</sup> Valentine, Zuber, "Liberté de conscience", In: *Encyclopédie Universalis*, disponibil la <https://nomade.univtlse2.fr>, accesat în data de 16.10.2025.

<sup>4</sup> Ioan-Gheorghe Rotaru, "Valences of Education", In: *Proceedings of the 23th International RAIS Conference on Social Sciences and Humanities*, August 15-16, 2021, Princeton, NJ, United States of America, pp. 190-196. DOI: 10.5281/zenodo.5507180.

<sup>5</sup> Câmpean, A., Bocoș, M., Roman, A., Rad, D., Crișan, C., Maier, M., Tăușan-Crișan, L., Triff, Z., Triff, D.-G., Mara, D., Mara, E.-L., Răduț-Taciu, R., Todor, I., Baci, C., Neașu, M.-G., Dumitru, I., Costache Colareza, C., Roman, C. E. (2024), Examining teachers' perception on the impact of positive feedback on school students, *Education Sciences*, 14(3), 2024, p. 257. <https://doi.org/10.3390/educsci14030257>; WOS:001191791400001, IF=3.

<sup>6</sup> Ioan-Gheorghe Rotaru, "Current Values of Education and Culture", In: *Proceedings of the 23th International RAIS Conference on Social Sciences and Humanities*, edited by Nicoleta Elena Heghes, Princeton, NJ, United States of America, 2021, pp. 87-92. DOI: 10.5281/zenodo.5507021.

<sup>7</sup> Samuie Bâlc, „Omul integru: Între libertatea conștiinței și o libertate responsabilă”, *Jurnalul Libertății de Conștiință*, Vol.8, Nr.1, 2020, pp.568-580.

protected by international treaties, which also establish the obligation of states to respect the freedom of parents to educate their children in accordance with their beliefs.

Freedom of conscience is related to human dignity<sup>8</sup>, as both refer to the individual's right to develop freely and have their own moral and ethical thoughts.

It is of great importance to understand the rights and limits that individuals have regarding freedom of thought and choice. According to Escobar Marín<sup>9</sup>, two doctrinal positions can be distinguished on this issue. The first doctrinal current maintains that the analysis of religious facts is the object of ecclesiastical law within the sphere of civil law. The second doctrinal current focuses on the centralized conception of freedom of conscience, which includes religious, ideological and thought freedom.

Freedom of conscience has acquired great importance in today's social life, as there is a great variety of ideologies in the pluralistic world we live in, which is increasingly globalized. It is therefore essential for the State to protect this freedom of each individual in order to guarantee a coexistence based on respect and tolerance for diversity.

To the concept and importance of the individual's freedom of conscience, we should also add that of religious freedom and beliefs, as both are linked to each other, and religion and beliefs could be considered one of the ideological aspects that cause the most conflicts in different societies.

## 2. The content of consciences

The word „conscience” is a somewhat imprecise term. In its most popular sense, a person is often said to have lost consciousness, referring to a lack of present knowledge or self-perception. Thus, a period of fainting would cause a loss of consciousness. There are deeper and more complex connotations than the previous one; conscience is more closely identified with behavior appropriate to legal and social norms, but above all, ethical

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<sup>8</sup> Ioan-Gheorghe Rotaru, “Plea for Human Dignity”, In: *Scientia Moralitas. Human Dignity - A Contemporary Perspectives*, The Scientia Moralitas Research Institute, Beltsville, MD, United States of America, 2016, Volume 1, pp. 29-43.

<sup>9</sup> Escobar, Marín, J.A., “El derecho de libertad religiosa y sus límites jurídicos”, *Anuario Jurídico y Económico Escurialense*, 2006, pp. 26-33.

norms.<sup>10</sup> Conscience allows the individual to issue an opinion or judgment of practical reason about the morality of an action; it dictates what should be done or omitted in a specific case, applying the moral rules of the supposed system, regardless of its origin.<sup>11</sup>

The basic premise for explaining the term consciousness is to understand that it is an individual and very personal element; it is an ethereal and abstract element that is part of the most intimate part of the human being, of its essence and nature<sup>12</sup>, and which offers it, first of all, the notion of personal identity, that is, the possibility of recognizing itself as something singular and unique and, therefore, different from everyone and everything else.

Freedom of conscience, when postulated, recognizes the individual faculty to create, starting from religious or secular paths, his own convictions, beliefs or ideas, as well as to be guided by them. For this reason, none can be imposed and, therefore, the need arises to act in accordance with them and never in contradiction with them. The importance and significance that freedom of conscience has for each individual has an undeniable impact on his social and political environment, to the point of becoming a fundamental right of the secular and democratic state.<sup>13</sup>

Freedom of conscience, in its dogmatic-constitutional formulation, also finds expression in other freedoms, as well as in the field of the defense of minorities and the guarantee of multiculturalism.<sup>14</sup> These freedoms, which allow a person to acquire the necessary elements to form his own

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<sup>10</sup> Dionisio, Llamazares Fernández, *Libertad de conciencia, laicidad y tradiciones constitucionales comunes en los países miembros de la Unión Europea en Pluralismo religioso y libertad de conciencia*, Universidad Nacional de Colombia, Colombia, 2003, p. 3.

<sup>11</sup> Salcedo, Hernandez; José Ramón, "Libertad de pensamiento, libertad religiosa y libertad de conciencia", en *Anales de Derecho*. Vol. 15, 1997, p. 97 disponibil la <http://revistas.um.es/analesderecho/article/view/81451>, accesat în data de 17.10.2025

<sup>12</sup> Sara, Acuna Guirola, *La libertad de conciencia y el derecho a contraer matrimonio con eficacia civil por las minorías religiosas en Pluralismo religioso y libertad de conciencia*, Universidad Nacional de Colombia, Colombia, 2003

<sup>13</sup> Mădălina Stan, „Democrația, legitimitatea și Parlamentul European”, In: *Analele Universității „Ovidius” Constanța*, Seria: Drept și Științe Administrative, Vol. I, 2004, pp. 145 -147.

<sup>14</sup> Marcos, Criado de Diego, "Tolerancia, libertad de conciencia y laicidad en la configuración histórica del Estado", In: *Libertad de Creencias e intolerancia en el franquismo*, Marcial Ponce, Universidad de Alicante, Madrid, 2008, p. 26.

conscience and, consequently, to be dignified, are ideological freedom; religious freedom; the right to education, freedom of teaching, freedom of expression, freedom of information and the right to conscientious objection.

### 3. Freedom of conscience in family education

The family is the first socialization agent in a child's life, as they are the first people with whom the child will develop a relationship and social bond. Therefore, they are responsible for initiating a teaching-learning process that directly influences the child's life. This process, through which the family begins the socialization of the individual, is characterized by the transmission of attitudes, interests, values, and goals.<sup>15</sup> In this way, the individual will gradually acquire the culture of the social environment in which he is immersed, integrating it directly into his personality and, thus, adapting to the social environment in which he was born. For the socialization process to take place, it is essential that the family establish a teaching process and provide the necessary tools for learning to take place. In the first years of life, in the family environment, socialization is particularly intense. Based on the experiences of these early years, the individual develops as a person, receiving great influence from attachment figures, with whom he feels safe and who instill in him the confidence to experiment and, in turn, to carry out the learning process. Individuals develop both physically and socially, thus acquiring the basic guidelines for integration into social life. The way in which these emotional relationships are established with family members will determine the development and personality of the individual.<sup>16</sup>

According to Craig<sup>17</sup>, three types of parenting styles can be distinguished:

- *Authoritarian*: This style helps children develop autonomy. Communication with them is open, offering them flexible rules. In this case, children tend to have greater personal confidence

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<sup>15</sup> Ioan-Gheorghe Rotaru, "Familia—loc hărăzit de Dumnezeu pentru formarea caracterului", *Argeșul ortodox* X, 2011, nr. 514, p. 5.

<sup>16</sup> Aroca, C. Montolio, *La violencia filio-parental: una aproximación a sus claves*, Valencia, Universitat de València, 2011, p. 84.

<sup>17</sup> Craig, Grace. J., *Desarrollo Psicológico*, México, Prentice-Hall Hispanoamericana S. A., 1996, pp. 182-184.

and self-control, are socially competent and show better academic performance and high self-esteem.

- *Authoritarian*: These parents prefer to give orders to their children, from whom they expect obedience. Communication between them is limited, and the proposed rules are inflexible. These parents also do not encourage independence. Children show signs of exclusion, are often fearful, grumpy, shy and irritable. Girls usually tend to remain passive and dependent until adolescence, while boys become rebellious and aggressive at this stage.
- *Permissive*: These parents exhibit few or no restrictions, showing „unconditional love” for their children. Communication is usually between the child and the parents, who have a lot of freedom and little direction. Parents do not set limits for their children. As a result, children tend to be aggressive and rebellious, socially incompetent and impulsive. Occasionally, some of these children may tend to be active, sociable and creative.
- *Indifferent*: These parents do not set boundaries for their children and lack affection for them. These parents focus on themselves, their problems and their lives and do not provide adequate support to their children. This group also includes hostile parents, with whom children tend to exhibit impulsive, destructive behaviors and delinquent actions.

Therefore, the type of parenting style exercised by parents in the early stages of an individual’s development will significantly influence this process, having a major impact on the individual’s personality. This will lead them to develop their own thoughts, moral beliefs and ideals, influenced by the type of guidance received in their primary environment, considered the family. That is, the family, as the main factor of influence in the development of an individual, acquires great importance, because it shapes him and prepares him for life in society. In this sense, the family is decisive for the formation of the conscience of an individual.

#### 4. Freedom of conscience in school education

Freedom of conscience in school education is the right of students to hold and express their own beliefs without being discriminated against or forced to adopt those of others. This implies that schools should be secular spaces that promote critical thinking and respect diversity, allowing students not to participate in religious activities that contradict their families' beliefs and ensuring that values-based education does not impose the values of a single group. Schools should not indoctrinate or impose moral standards of a particular religion or belief, but rather promote an environment of respect and tolerance. Schools should be a space for the development of critical thinking and civic spirit, within a framework of understanding, peace and respect for diversity. In order to guarantee freedom of conscience, the institution should not impose any religious doctrine.

In advanced societies, public schools represent one of the most important spaces for promoting mutual respect and tolerance, as well as for educating in values and principles essential for the health of a democratic state, such as pluralism, equality and non-discrimination, social justice, and citizenship values, among others.

The great social and economic progress brought about by the widespread recognition of compulsory basic education as a fundamental pillar of developed societies and by the elevation, through the influence of international texts, of the right to education to the category of a fundamental right of every individual, has led to the recognition by states of the obligation to implement socio-economic measures designed to guarantee the effectiveness of this right, ensuring access to basic education for the entire population through free schooling. This consideration of basic education as compulsory and accessible to all responds to an optimistic anthropological conception, based on the conviction that all people are, to some extent, educable and that, precisely because basic education is compulsory for all, it should be accessible to all.<sup>18</sup>

Freedom of conscience in schools is a fundamental right that guarantees the right to believe or not to believe and is ensured by the princi-

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<sup>18</sup> Gimeno, Sacristan, J., *La escolarización obligatoria: su sentido educativo y social*, Morata, Madrid, 2000, pp. 54-95.

ple of secularism, which imposes the neutrality of schools and prohibits proselytism. This means that students can express their opinions in a spirit of tolerance, but they cannot wear ostentatious religious symbols or influence others, as schools must remain a space of neutrality to guarantee respect for the integrity and beliefs of each person.

## Conclusions

Contemporary research has deepened our understanding of consciousness as an anthropological phenomenon. Consciousness can no longer be defined solely as the product of institutional, cultural or moral conditioning. Nor can it be reduced to “as for oneself”. Consciousness is part of human developments that are both individual and collective and involves various mental processes<sup>19</sup> through which the human being develops a series of identity, affective, cognitive thoughts, which justify and guide daily practices and commitments, more or less shared with peers. Finally, the third and final point of reference that follows from the previous one is that the exercise of freedom of conscience requires the organization of communication situations in which opinions and judgments can be confronted. Sociocognitive conflict<sup>20</sup>, a very revealing concept regarding the beneficial role of confronting points of view for individual learning of theoretical and technical knowledge, may also prove relevant in terms of social learning, especially that which contributes to the development of freedom of conscience.<sup>21</sup>

Understanding that freedom of conscience, especially in its religious dimension, is a foundation of democratic societies and one of the vital elements in shaping the identity of believers and their conception of life, but also understanding that for non-believers, agnostics, skeptics and indifferent people this is a treasure of great value, helps us to approach the transcendence of this freedom in the contemporary world.

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<sup>19</sup> Daniel, C. Dennett, *La conscience expliquée*, Ed. Odile Jacob, Paris, 1991.

<sup>20</sup> Willem, Doise; Gabriel, Mugny, *Le Développement Social de l'intelligence*, Ed. Inter-Editions, Paris, 1981.

<sup>21</sup> Samuel Bâlc, „Comunicare și Motivare în Contextul Libertății Religioase”, *Jurnalul Libertății de Conștiință*, Vol. 7, Nr. 1, 2019, pp. 139-151.

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