

Religious freedom in the Teachings of Pope Francis in the Face of Selected Challenges of the Modern World

Wolność religijna w nauczaniu papieża Franciszka wobec
wybranych wyzwań współczesnego świata

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Abstract: Religious freedom is one of the fundamental human rights, guaranteeing the possibility to profess, practise and manifest one's religion or beliefs without fear of repression. Today, religious freedom on a global scale appears to be a multifaceted issue, and the exercise of this right in the postmodern world is marked by numerous challenges and threats. The pontificate of Pope Francis came at a demanding time, as the global context included a number of religious conflicts and increasing persecution on the grounds of religious belief. In a world dominated by secularism, relativism, radicalism and religious fundamentalism, the Pope points out that religious freedom appears to be a fundamental condition for authentic peace in a pluralistic world. Therefore, the subject of religious freedom has occupied an important place during the pontificate of the Bishop of Rome, as evidenced by its presence in many speeches, homilies and documents. The aim of this article is to analyse the theme of religious freedom in the teachings of Pope Francis. The article discusses the basic terminology related to religious freedom, the threats to it, and selected aspects of the Pope's teachings on this subject. The primary research method employed by the author is the analysis of selected source texts and the relevant literature.

Keywords: religious freedom, Francis, Christianity, religion

Streszczenie: Wolność religijna stanowi jedno z podstawowych praw człowieka, które gwarantuje możliwość wyznawania, praktykowania i manifestowania swojej religii lub przekonań bez obawy przed represjami. Współcześnie wolność religijna w ujęciu globalnym jawi się jako zagadnienie wielopłaszczyznowe, a realizacja tegoż prawa w ponowoczesnym świecie jest naznaczona licznymi wyzwaniami i zagrożeniami. Pontyfikat Papieża Franciszka przydał na czas wymagający, ponieważ globalny kontekst obejmował szereg konfliktów na tle religijnym oraz nasilające się prześladowania ze względu na wyznawaną wiarę. W świecie zdominowanym przez sekularyzm, relatywizm, radykalizm i fundamentalizm religijny Papież wskazuje, że wolność religijna jawi się jako podstawowy warunek dla autentycznego pokoju w spluralizowanym świecie. Dlatego tematyka wolności religijnej w trakcie pontyfikatu Biskupa Rzymu zajmowała ważne miejsce, o czym świadczą jej obecność wielu przemówieniach, homiliach oraz dokumentach. Ce-

lem niemniejszego artykułu jest próba analizy tematyki wolności religijnej w nauczaniu Papieża Franciszka. W artykule zostaną omówione podstawy terminologiczne dotyczące wolności religijnej, jej zagrożeń oraz wybrane aspekty nauczania Papieża na w/w temat. Podstawową metodą badawczą stosowaną przez autora jest analiza tekstów źródłowych oraz literatury przedmiotu.

Słowa kluczowe: wolność religijna, Franciszek, chrześcijaństwo, religia

Religion is an integral part of human life, culture and society (Piechowiak, 1996, p. 7). The German philosopher and psychologist Erich Fromm wrote that “never in the past has there been a culture, and – it seems – there cannot be one in the future, that does not have religion” (Fromm, 1966, p. 133). In the 20th century, a trend of denying God was widespread, which significantly influenced attitudes towards religion in society. In the 21st century, a significant shift has occurred in this area, manifesting itself in heightened tensions between the traditional understanding of religion and the processes of secularisation, cultural pluralism, relativism and globalisation. There has also been an increase in the importance of individual identity, which in turn is linked to the growing individualisation of beliefs. More and more people are moving away from traditional religious structures, choosing spirituality outside the classical institutional framework. Globalisation, together with the rapid development of technology (including the Internet), on the one hand fosters free religious expression, whilst on the other exacerbates conflicts arising from differences in worldview (Schreiber, 2012; Zachara, 2012; Ryczan, 2007, pp. 95–99).

Today, religious freedom constitutes one of the fundamental human rights, guaranteeing the ability to profess, practise and manifest one's religion or beliefs without fear of repression. Consequently, religious freedom, viewed globally, appears as a complex and multifaceted issue. Today, religious freedom is no longer merely a matter of law, but also a dynamic process of negotiating values within multicultural societies. The key challenge remains striking a balance between respecting diversity and maintaining community cohesion and a compromise-based coexistence. Currently, in many countries around the world, disputes are arising regarding the place of religion in the public sphere – ranging from the wearing of religious symbols in state institutions, through the influence of the Church or other faiths on the legal system and education, to religious discrimination and violence. Pope Francis points out that religious freedom is an inalienable human right which, despite the challenges of the modern world, constitutes the foundation of social peace, interreligious dialogue and the building of authentic brotherhood among nations. Furthermore, the Pope defends religious freedom as a key condition for the survival of authentic humanism, as well as peace in the modern pluralistic world (Francis 2016a, pp. 8–9; Francis 2021b, p. 4). In this context, the following questions arise: How did the Pope define and interpret religious freedom? Which elements of the teachings of previous popes on the aforementioned topic does Francis develop and reinterpret? The aim of this article is to attempt an analysis of the theme of religious freedom in the teachings of Pope Francis. The article will discuss the terminological foundations concerning religious freedom,

the threats to it, and selected aspects of the Pope's teachings on the aforementioned topic. The primary research method employed by the author is the analysis of selected source texts and the relevant literature. The selection of the speeches, homilies and papal documents analysed was based on their key significance, relevance and influence.

Selected challenges to religious freedom in the modern world

Postmodernity faces many challenges that affect or infringe upon the religious freedom of individuals and communities. Processes such as secularisation, globalisation and laicisation are interrelated phenomena, though they are not identical. Their interrelationships are complex and depend on the social, cultural and historical context.

Andrzej Napiórkowski (2013, p. 18) considers that the concept of secularisation¹ is accompanied by a wide range of phenomena, such as the weakening of the role of Christianity, secularisation, emancipation, a kind of 'de-churching', as well as demythologisation and irreligiousness. Janusz Mariański (2002, pp. 1089-1092), however, points out that secularisation is not limited solely to the context of Christianity, but concerns all religions, although it is particularly pronounced within European Christianity. It is worth emphasising that, according to this author, secularisation is primarily a process – a transition from a period favourable to religion to a phase in which religion is gradually pushed to the margins of social life. And this is not about the fixed characteristics of specific individuals or situations, but about long-term, historically conditioned dynamics of change. These include, amongst other things, the restriction of religious freedom within the state, the separation of church and state, the decline of religious authorities, and the rise of religious indifference (Mariański, 2002, pp. 1089-1092; Mariański J., 2007, pp. 105-126). This process unfolds differently in Europe than in Asia or Africa.

Globalisation is another postmodern phenomenon, which we understand as a complex process encompassing various spheres of life – political, economic, social, cultural and religious. Within this framework, religious systems are being transferred and adapted to entirely new social and cultural contexts on an unprecedented scale (Czupryński, 2017, p. 147). One definition states that it is a process "taking place on a global scale, characterised by an increased intensity and speed of the exchange of people, goods, information, knowledge and ideas, as well as the standardisation of economic conditions, lifestyles and ideological visions" (Glombik, 2015, p. 411; Ryczan, 2007, pp. 96–102). The roots of this process date back to the turn of the 15th and 16th centuries. Globalisation contributes to the dynamic development of technology, communication and transport, enabling the rapid flow of information, people and goods. On the one hand, it brings many benefits, includ-

¹ The term 'secularisation' is etymologically derived from the Latin word *saecularis* (Latin for 'secular'), which in turn derives from another term, *saeculum* (Latin for 'age' or 'century'), meaning a specific duration of something, a generation, a period of time, a single generation or a specific age, and is therefore associated solely with the temporal world (Draguła, 2010, s. 11-12; Vanney).

ing economic growth, access to knowledge and the bringing together of cultures. On the other hand, however, it is controversial and gives rise to problems such as the deepening of social inequalities, the dominance of Western culture, the marginalisation of traditional values and identity crises (Łuszczak, 2017, pp. 5–6; Glombik, 2015, pp. 411–413).

Globalisation is not a uniform phenomenon; it unfolds differently depending on the region and the socio-cultural context. It requires conscious management to minimise its negative effects and promote equitable development. This process also has a significant impact on religion, both through its spread and through changes in its social role. Thanks to advances in technology, the media and mobility, people and religions are crossing traditional geographical and cultural boundaries (Dziuban, 2008, p. 319; Paleczny, 2008b, pp. 39–40; Paleczny, 2008a, pp. 134–140). Religious systems are spreading into new environments, leading to their adaptation, transformation or syncretism. On the one hand, globalisation fosters religious pluralism – different faiths coexist within the same societies, which necessitates dialogue, tolerance and interfaith cooperation. On the other hand, it may lead to secularisation and laicisation, especially in Western societies, where religion is increasingly losing its influence on public and private life (Dziuban, 2008, pp. 319–321). At the same time, opposing reactions emerge: religious fundamentalism as a response to a perceived threat to identity and tradition in a globalised world (Szulist, 2017, pp. 264–265). Religion can also be used as a tool of resistance against the dominant cultural and economic models imposed by globalisation. This process does not invalidate religion, but transforms its forms of presence and significance in the life of society and the individual (Waszczak, 2010, pp. 117–120; Dziuban, 2008, pp. 323–324). Globalisation is a dynamic process that brings about social, cultural and economic changes. Consequently, these changes may influence a sense of cultural and religious identity.

Radicalism² is a complex phenomenon resulting from a combination of religious, social, political and psychological factors. The PWN Dictionary of the Polish Language provides the following definition of the term: ‘uncompromising attitude; extremism in views and methods of action or conduct; an attitude and behaviour that are extreme in terms of means and ends’ (Beźnic, 2012, p. 326). A person with radical views is characterised by a drive for fundamental changes that are intended to be effective, fundamental and uncompromising (Beźnic, 2012, p. 326). The concept of radicalism (much like the term extremism) is ambiguous in nature and is applied in the analysis of diverse manifestations of human culture-forming activity (Beźnic, 2012, p. 326). Adam Michnik (2005, p. 261) writes that “radicalism springs from the human longing for a sinless, harmonious and just world. Those who believed that fascism would remove the corruption, filth and humiliation born of demoliberalism were not genetically tainted monsters. Those who believed that communism would remove injustice were not latent criminals. Those who today believe – like Islamic, Jewish and Christian fundamentalists – that states organised according to religious norms will eradicate sin, injustice and wickedness – are not cynical

2 The word ‘radicalism’ derives from the Latin words: *radix* – root, and *radicalis* – thorough (Beźnic, p. 325).

propagators of violence, hatred and intolerance. Each of them dreams of a radical purification of the world, of discovering the true, good nature of humanity beneath the shell of sinful everyday life. Perhaps the most important message of the twentieth century is the realisation that purifying the world of sin is a dangerous delusion of a mind thirsting for good – we are doomed to imperfection.” Social reformers and ideologues often cite inspiration drawn from religious ideas, such as Martin Luther King Jr. or Mahatma Gandhi.

In the realm of religion, radicalism is evident today in various forms, and can be defined in both positive and negative terms. In a positive sense, it denotes a deep and consistent attitude of faith, which involves a full commitment to living in accordance with the principles of one’s religion. This may manifest itself in genuine piety, charitable works or involvement in community life. An example of positive religious radicalism was the attitude of St Francis of Assisi, who devoted himself to a life of poverty and love for his neighbour (Giuseppi, 2017). Enzo Bianchi, a Christian theologian, points out, however, that evangelical radicalism in Christianity means a return to the roots, to establishing a deep relationship with Jesus. “A Christian who follows Jesus in a radical way shows to those who have no faith and regard His life as illusory, His relevance, His reality in the history of our world, within the community of people” (Bianchi, 2000, pp. 9–10). This theologian takes a critical view of contemporary radical culture, understood as a drive towards uncompromising revision which, rather than recognising Jesus’ message, leads to its marginalisation and excludes God from this sphere (Bežnic, 2012, pp. 330–331; Bianchi, 2000). Negative religious radicalism denotes an extreme interpretation of religious doctrine. Such an attitude leads to the rejection of other worldviews and religions. In such cases, dialogue becomes impossible. In its extreme forms, it can take the form of fanaticism or religious fundamentalism, and may also lead to violence. In summary, negative religious radicalism may attempt to impose a faith on an entire social group (Bežnic, 2012, pp. 330–331). This approach to religious radicalism is fuelled by a sense of threat, particularly in societies where social inequalities exist and religious leaders and their personal preferences gain influence. Radical religious groups often do not accept other religions, or even moderate adherents of their own faith. Consequently, this can lead to religious persecution; one example is the Islamic State, which persecuted Iranian Yazidis in its activities (Wawrzyńczyk, 2018, pp. 346–363). The causes of religious radicalism can be found in a sense of marginalisation, an identity crisis, a reaction to processes of secularisation and the influence of the Western lifestyle, as well as in difficult experiences related to war.

Basam Tibisi (1997, p. 23) points out that “religious fundamentalism has become a global political phenomenon”. Referring to Anthony Giddens’s words that “fundamentalism is a child of globalisation in two senses, for it is both a reaction to globalisation and a means of exploiting it (recognising the dual nature of fundamentalism is the starting point for all interpretations of this concept)” (Baranowska, 2010, p. 76; Giddens, 2000). Anthony Giddens further emphasises that fundamentalism constitutes a certain reaction to the process of erosion of traditional norms in society. “It is a defence of tradition in the classical sense, through an appeal to ritual truth in a modern world that appeals to reason.

What is significant here is not what people believe, but how they defend their beliefs, why they hold on to them and how they justify them” (Baranowska, 2010, p. 76). Judyta Bielanowska defines religious fundamentalism as “a radicalised, even extreme attitude, having little in common with conscious spiritual or mystical experience, let alone with reflective contemplation of the doctrine prevailing in a given religion and the interpretation of the basic tenets of faith through the prism of dynamically changing external circumstances—that is, the passage of years, decades, centuries, and shifts in the general human mindset. Religious fundamentalism most often constitutes a passive, unreflective imitation of the way of life and beliefs of individuals regarded as religious authorities or charismatic leaders”.³ Fundamentalism offers individuals and communities a sense of stability, belonging and clearly defined moral principles. In turn, religious fundamentalism emerges as a reaction to changes that are perceived as a threat. Therefore, in this context, fundamentalism appears as an attempt to defend identity, tradition and values in an increasingly globalised world. Religious fundamentalism is based on a literal interpretation of sacred texts, whilst rejecting any compromise with modernity. Currently, there is a rapid radicalisation of young Muslims in France, as evidenced by recent studies: “49% of French Muslims want Catholics to convert to Islam, 36% want churches to be converted into mosques, and 25% of French Muslims say that ‘France’ is a word they reject” (Millière, 2024).

A defining feature of today’s world is the intensification of religious persecution, as well as an unprecedented escalation of the migration and refugee crisis. The international organisation Open Doors reports that the right to choose and practise one’s own religion is among the most frequently violated human rights in the world. This phenomenon occurs despite the fact that almost all countries in the world are signatories to the UN Universal Declaration of Human Rights, which not only prohibits discrimination on the grounds of religion but also emphasises the right of every individual to freedom of thought, conscience and religion (Open Doors). Religious persecution constitutes a violation of human rights and fundamental freedoms; it is characterised by discrimination encompassing a wide range of behaviours, from the prohibition of religious practices to social ostracism. The regions where the most severe persecution occurs include the Middle East, Asia and parts of Africa (Open Doors; Allen, 2015, pp. 44-46).

An introduction to the issue of religious freedom

The term ‘religious freedom’ (Latin: *libertas religionis*) was first used by Tertullian, a Christian theologian at the turn of the 2nd and 3rd centuries (Skrzypczak, 2020; Wąsik, 2015, pp. 81–90). This concept has a long and complex history, evolving alongside changes in the fields of science, society and politics (Karasiński, 2007, pp. 201-203). Initially,

3 J. Bielanowska. (n.d). *Fundamentalism*. Religious Freedom Laboratory. Accessed at: <https://laboratoriumwolnosci.pl/slownik/fundamentalizm/> (2025,14,07).

the idea referred to the issue of religious tolerance and the limited scope of freedoms for followers of different religions. However, in the 20th century – following the Second World War – the term acquired particular significance in the context of human rights. In 1948, the UN General Assembly adopted the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, which included Article 18, stating: ‘Everyone has the right to freedom of thought, conscience and religion; this right includes 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’ (UN, 1948, p. 3; Cox, 2015, p. 52).

Undoubtedly, the subject of religious freedom is an important and topical issue, which is why it occupies a significant place in the teaching of the Magisterium of the Catholic Church. In 1965, during the Second Vatican Council, the Catholic Church promulgated the Declaration on Religious Freedom “*Dignitatis humanae*”, which contains moral teaching on the subject of religious freedom. This teaching holds that “all people should be free from coercion by individuals, social groups or any human authority, at least to the extent that no one is compelled to act against their conscience or hindered when acting in accordance with their conscience-whether privately or publicly, alone or in association with others – in independent groups [...] the right to religious freedom is in fact rooted in the dignity of the human person” (DH, no. 2). Rober Skrzypczak (2020) emphasises that “the principle of human dignity, self-evident in itself, takes on special significance in the light of the Christian faith. It derives entirely from the event of the Son of God becoming man, thereby raising the dignity of the human person to the level of divine life. And although religious freedom constitutes an irrefutable truth closely linked to faith in Jesus Christ – and over the centuries, though not without difficulty, has found confirmation in the words and deeds of Jesus’ authentic disciples” (Skrzypczak). In summary, the Council Fathers recognised religious freedom as an essential aspect of human nature, independent of any specific faith and its doctrinal content. The analysis conducted by the participants of the Second Vatican Council points to the anthropological foundation of the right to religious freedom and stems precisely from the dignity of the human person. Tadeusz Płoski (2009, p. 57) points out that religious freedom comprises two aspects: freedom of conscience (internal) and an external aspect, which “refers only to what is expressed outwardly”.

The Catechism of the Catholic Church (2009, no. 2108, p. 495) states that the right to religious freedom “does not imply moral approval of adherence to error, but rather the natural right of the human person to civil liberty, that is to say – within proper limits – to freedom from external coercion in religious matters on the part of political authorities”. This means that every person, by virtue of their dignity, possesses a natural right to civil liberty in matters of faith (CCC, 2009, no. 2019, p. 495). No one should be compelled by political authority to accept or reject specific religious beliefs. This right, rooted in human nature, should be duly recognised and guaranteed in the legal order of society as a civil right.

John Paul II expanded upon the teachings of the Second Vatican Council on the subject of religious freedom and was one of the most important advocates of this value in the

20th century. The Pope's teachings on this subject had a significant influence on the development of Catholic thought, as well as on the shaping of human rights policy worldwide (Feliciani, 2017, pp. 112-113; Karasiński, 2007, pp. 201-212). The Pope taught that truth constitutes the moral foundation of every freedom, referring to the words from the Gospel of St John: 'You will know the Truth, and the Truth will set you free' (Jn 8:32). Quoting the words of St John Paul II, "freedom of conscience and religion does not mean [...] the relativisation of objective truth, the search for which is the moral duty of every human being. In an organised society, this freedom is merely the institutional expression of that order according to which God has decreed that His creatures may, as free and responsible persons, come to know and accept His eternal plan of covenant and respond to it" (John Paul II, 1988; Kmiec, 2020, p. 178). It is clear from John Paul II's statement that religious freedom is not merely a privilege, but constitutes a fundamental right that should be guaranteed by civil law. The Pope spoke of contemporary challenges to religious freedom, which he listed as secularisation, moral relativism and religious extremism. In his teachings, he warned of the dangers posed by a lack of respect for truth and morality, which form the foundation of authentic freedom. True freedom cannot exist without reference to the truth, and religious freedom should be based on the pursuit of the good and the truth.

The themes addressed in this paragraph were also present in the teachings of Benedict XVI. Fr. Jerzy Lewandowski (2010, p. 15) describes the Pope's concept as "metaphysical liberalism, which assumes that man always remains free, even though in reality, in specific situations, people experience various forms of social, historical or religious bondage. Man is free by nature and never loses this natural freedom. Human nature is identical with the nature of freedom". In turn, Fr. Janusz Szulist (2021, p. 138) emphasises that the Pope, in his teaching, "did not by chance draw attention to the fact that religious freedom is the source of other human rights and duties, the realisation of which constitutes a manifestation of the broadly understood process of the humanisation of the world". In his Encyclical *Spe salvi* (SpS), Benedict XVI presented a vision of religious freedom in which "he assumes that, when making fundamental decisions, every person, every generation, is a new beginning. Of course, new generations must build upon the knowledge and experience of those who preceded them, just as they may draw upon the moral heritage of all humanity" (SpS, 2007, no. 24). In summary, the authentic freedom of the individual is subject to an internal contradiction when it does not coexist with the freedom of others and when it does not respect their agency.

In academic literature, Marek Bielecki (2014, pp. 513-515) presents the following definition of religious freedom: "it is one of the fundamental rights of the human individual, independent of social status, gender, beliefs or any other characteristics that allow a person to be identified [...] religious freedom should be understood as a right belonging to the human individual (personal freedom), which may be exercised individually (individual freedom) as well as collectively with others (communal freedom). It is also a right enjoyed by organised communities, such as churches, religious associations and ideological organisations (institutional freedom)". Applying this to everyday life – just as the state

should not force a citizen to adopt a specific way of thinking on political or ideological matters, so too should it not interfere with their religious choices. As a rational and free being, a person has the right to seek the truth and act in accordance with their conscience (Gryz, 2020, pp. 134-143).

Religious freedom in the teachings of Pope Francis

Pope Francis's pontificate lasted from 13 March 2013 to 21 April 2025. The issue of religious freedom was a recurring theme in his speeches, homilies and papal documents. The Bishop of Rome's conception of this freedom centred on several key principles derived from the teachings of the Catholic Church and his pastoral sensitivity (Napiórkowski, 2020, pp. 33-35). Among the main elements of this concept are: religious freedom as a fundamental human right, the rejection of fundamentalism, opposition to persecution and intolerance, brotherhood, interreligious dialogue and respect (Francis 2014h, pp. 12–15; Francis, 2014a, pp. 4-9). In this section, the author analyses the concept of religious freedom as understood by Pope Francis, drawing on relevant and influential sources.

a) Religious freedom as a foundation of human rights

In his homilies, speeches and reflections, the Pope has often emphasised the importance of religious freedom as a fundamental human right, which is not respected everywhere, for 'this is particularly the case where religious freedom is not guaranteed or fully respected. However, this also occurs in countries and communities which, on paper, protect freedom and human rights, but in reality believers, and above all Christians, face restrictions and discrimination' (Francis, 2014c, p. 33; Francis, 2014i; Francis, 2015d, pp. 14–15). In his encyclical *Fratelli tutti* (2013, no. 279), the Pope writes that "there is a fundamental human right that must not be forgotten on the path to fraternity and peace: it is religious freedom for the followers of all religions. This freedom shows that we can find good understanding between different cultures and religions. It also testifies that there are many important things we have in common and that it is possible to find a way of peaceful, orderly and tranquil coexistence, in a spirit of acceptance of differences and joy in the fact that we are brothers and sisters as children of one God". The Bishop of Rome taught that religious freedom constitutes the integration of a fundamental human right, peace and brotherhood. Respect for and observance of this freedom protects the individual and fosters the formation of communities in a world that is today highly diverse in terms of culture and religion.

On 20–21 June 2014, a scientific conference entitled "*Religious Freedom under International Law and the Universal Conflict of Values*" was held at the Free University of the Assumption of the Blessed Virgin Mary (LUMSA) in Rome, at which Pope Francis (2014e, p. 14) delivered a speech, emphasising that "the intellect recognises religious freedom as a fundamental human right which reflects man's supreme dignity, his capacity to seek and accept the truth, and sees in it an indispensable condition for the development of all his potential. Religious freedom is not merely freedom of thought or private worship.

It is the freedom to live according to ethical principles consistent with the truth discovered, both privately and publicly. This is a great challenge in a globalised world, where weak thinking – which is like a disease – also lowers the general ethical standard and, in the name of a falsely understood tolerance, persecutes those who defend the truth about the human person and its ethical consequences” (Francis, 2014e, p. 14; Francis, 2014f, pp. 35-36; Francis, 2014i). The Pope emphasised that legal systems should recognise, guarantee and protect religious freedom, which constitutes a right inscribed in human nature and is inseparably linked to the dignity of the person. He stressed that this issue is a hallmark of democracy and one of the foundations of the rule of law (Francis, 2014e, p. 14) .

Subsequently, the subject of religious freedom was raised by the Pope during his apostolic journey to Albania in September 2014. The speech delivered at that time during a meeting with leaders of other religions and Christian denominations in Albania was characterised by a spirit of dialogue. He emphasised that Albania’s history had been marked by a period of dictatorship and religious persecution. One of the significant changes that had taken place in this society was the creation of conditions for the development of religious freedom. Therefore, the Albanian experience holds particular value in the coexistence of different religions and denominations, presenting it as an example of mutual respect, solidarity and peaceful coexistence. Using Albania as an example, the Pope pointed out that religious freedom appears as the foundation of a democratic society (Francis, 2014h, pp. 14–15; Francis, 2014g, pp. 10–11). The central theme of the address was to emphasise the importance of authentic interreligious dialogue, based on the recognition of the equal dignity of every human being and respect for the religious identity of others. Francis emphasised that true peace does not stem from uniformity or the denial of differences, but from the ability to experience them in a spirit of openness and mutual trust. He also pointed out that Albania could serve as a model for other countries in building a pluralistic society, in which religion is not a factor of division, but of cooperation and the common good (Francis, 2014h, pp. 14-15).

On 25 November 2014, Pope Francis delivered an important address to the Council of Europe in Strasbourg, in which he emphasised the significance of the European continent’s wealth, namely its nations, languages, and their cultural and religious identities. He pointed out that “the vision of the founding fathers was to rebuild Europe in a spirit of mutual service, which even today, in a world more inclined to demands than to service, must form the basis of the Council of Europe’s mission for peace, freedom and human dignity (Francis, 2014j; Francis, 2014i). The Pope emphasised that human rights, peace and respect for human dignity are also fundamental European values, upon which a society respecting these principles should be built (Francis, 2014j).

Subsequently, in the Apostolic Exhortation *Evangelii Gaudium* (EG), the theme of religious freedom is addressed, although it is not the main subject of the document. The Pope situates this topic within the context of interreligious dialogue, human rights and respect for the dignity of every human being. He emphasises once again that religious freedom is a fundamental human right, encompassing the right to publicly express religious

beliefs, and that it is the duty of the state to ensure protection and support, rather than to restrict them (EG, 2014, no. 255). This topic is set within a broader chapter covering relations with other religions and cultures in the context of dialogue in the broadest sense and authentic evangelisation, which is to be based on respect and freedom of conscience (EG, 2014, nos. 238-258).

The Pope emphasised that religion must not be used to violate human rights, including religious freedom. The peaceful coexistence of different religious communities constitutes a good, enabling development as well as peace. Religious freedom appears as a space in which people can function in an environment characterised by respect and cooperation, including non-believers. Religious freedom is a consequence of the personal dignity of every human being, regardless of religious affiliation. Therefore, the Pope pointed out that no pressure should be exerted on anyone, because truth prevails through strength and a focus on the common good, and this is made possible precisely by religious freedom (Francis, 2014d, pp. 35–36; Francis, 2014b, pp. 23–24; Francis, 2014i; Francis, 2014j; Francis, 2016b, pp. 18–19). During Francis's pontificate, the theme of religious freedom as an inalienable human right has been raised on numerous occasions, highlighting that its violation amounts to an undermining of human dignity.

In the homily he delivered during the canonisation of St Joseph Vaza in Sri Lanka in January 2015, the Bishop of Rome emphasised that every person should have the freedom to make choices, both as an individual and as part of a community. Every person should be able to express their views freely. "Saint Joseph Vaz is an example that overcoming religious divisions in the service of peace is both possible and necessary. True worship of God cannot lead to discrimination, hatred or violence, but should manifest itself in respect for the sanctity of life, the dignity and freedom of every human being" (Francis, 2015a; Menke, 2016, pp. 130-131). The homily reiterates the thesis that human beings have the freedom and the right to express their views. The Bishop of Rome returned to this theme during his papal apostolic journey to Manila, emphasising that people should exercise religious freedom prudently. It is a fundamental principle, but it should be exercised with prudence and within the bounds of responsibility (Francis, 2015a; Francis, 2015b).

The Pope addressed the issue of religious freedom during numerous speeches, including during his visit to the United States in September 2015, emphasising its importance for the organisation of a pluralistic society based on mutual respect and fraternity (Francis 2015c). A particularly significant moment was Francis's address to the US Congress in Washington, when he became the first Pope in history to speak to that body. In his message, he emphasised the role of various religious traditions that have helped shape American national identity. At the same time, he highlighted the need to respect freedom of conscience and religion as the foundations of democracy. He then went on to mention four important figures who have influenced the history of the United States. The Bishop of Rome first mentioned Abraham Lincoln as a symbol of freedom. He then named Martin Luther King as a symbol of freedom within pluralism and the fight against exclusion and discrimination. The next person mentioned was Dorothy Day as an advocate for social

justice and human rights. The last person cited was Thomas Merton as a representative of dialogue and an attitude of openness to God (Francis 2015c, Menke, 2016, p. 131). The message emerging from the speech was to present religious freedom as a principle enabling peaceful coexistence, community-building and the fight against exclusion, rather than as an individual right (Francis, 2015c).

The following day (25 September 2015), the Pope addressed the 70th session of the UN General Assembly in New York, in which he emphasised that for sustainable development it is crucial for those in charge of society to ensure that all citizens have at least the minimum spiritual and material resources necessary for a dignified life and for starting and maintaining a family (Francis, 2015e; Menke, 2016, pp. 131-132). It is also worth mentioning the speech delivered by Francis on 26 September 2015. It took place at a symbolic site of American tradition of freedom and democracy – Independence National Historic Park in Philadelphia. In his speech, the Pope referred to the Declaration of Independence, which states that ‘all men are created equal, that they are endowed by their Creator with certain unalienable rights, and that governments exist to protect and defend those rights’ (Francis 2015d, Menke, 2016, p. 132). Religious freedom is “a fundamental right that shapes the way we interact socially and personally with our neighbours who hold religious views different from our own. The ideal of interreligious dialogue, in which all people of different religious traditions can engage in dialogue without conflict. This is what religious freedom allows” (Francis, 2015d; Francis, 2015f, pp. 14–15). The Pope went on to emphasise that religious freedom entails the freedom to worship God, both individually and in community. Conscience plays a vital role here. “Religious freedom, by its very nature, goes beyond places of worship and the private sphere [...]; the religious dimension is not a subculture, but is part of the culture of every nation and every state” (Francis, 2015d). In summary, the aforementioned freedom transcends the individual and collective spheres; it emerges as a human right and a means by which a person can shape their relationship with the Other. This relationship can be realised despite differing views and professed faiths. Moreover, the pursuit of freedom understood in this way constitutes the ideal of interreligious dialogue, since the religious dimension is part of the culture created by humankind, and this culture enables the realisation of an attitude of tolerance and dialogue (Francis, 2015d; Menke, 2016, p. 132).

b) Religious freedom and brotherhood, peace and dialogue

In his teachings, Pope Francis emphasised that religious freedom is the foundation of lasting social peace (Francis, 2014a, pp. 4–8; Francis, 2014b, pp. 31–33). He believed that every person has the right to seek the truth and to express their beliefs in a spirit of respect for others; therefore, “every person must be free, whether alone or in association with others, to seek the truth and to express their religious convictions openly, free from intimidation and external coercion” (Francis, 2015a). He pointed out that overcoming religious divisions fosters peace. He cited the example of St Joseph Vaz, who “shows us that true worship of God does not lead to discrimination, hatred or violence, but to respect for the sanctity of life, the

dignity and freedom of other people” (Francis, 2015a; Menke, 2016, p. 130).

In the Pope’s teaching, the theme of peace occupies an important place and recurs in many of his documents, homilies and speeches. He understands peace not merely as the absence of war, but as true brotherhood and harmony encompassing people within the community (Francis, 2015g; Francis, 2019e, pp. 9–10). In the Bishop of Rome’s address in Strasbourg, cited earlier, the theme of peace also featured prominently. This is borne out by the following words: ‘To achieve the good that is peace, we must first and foremost educate people towards it, rejecting the culture of conflict which seeks to intimidate others and marginalise those who think or live differently. It is true that conflict cannot be ignored or concealed – it must be confronted. But if we remain trapped in it, we lose perspective, our horizons narrow, and reality becomes fragmented. When we become stuck in a situation of conflict, we lose the sense of the deep unity of reality, we halt history, and we fall into internal self-destruction through fruitless contradictions. Unfortunately, peace is still all too often wounded. This is the case in many parts of the world where various kinds of conflict are rife. It is also the case here in Europe, where tensions persist. How much pain and how many victims are there still on this continent, which ardently desires peace, yet so easily succumbs to the temptations of the past! That is why the Council of Europe’s efforts to seek a political resolution to current crises are both important and encouraging. Peace is also put to the test by other forms of conflict, such as religiously motivated and international terrorism, which harbours a profound contempt for human life and reaps a harvest of innocent victims without distinction” (Francis, 2014j). The Pope emphasised that peace, in the Christian sense, is a combination of three aspects: comprising “a gift from God, the fruit of the free and rational action of a person who seeks the *common good* in truth and love” (Francis, 2014j). In this context, the Bishop of Rome pointed out that the development of democracy, together with the rule of law, constitutes a fundamental framework for building peace in society.

The Pope has repeatedly emphasised that ‘there is no future without peace, and that there is no end to the work of building peace, for peace is an ever-present task’ (Zaremba, 2025, p. 136; Francis, 2015g, pp. 38–39). According to the Bishop of Rome, peace is one of the fundamental categories of human rights (Francis, 2014; Zaremba, 2025, p. 142; Francis 2017, pp. 5–6). Analysing the Pope’s discourse on religious freedom as a condition for peace, one can observe that he promotes dialogue and cooperation between religions, and may also point the way to overcoming existing conflicts. “An attitude of openness in truth and love should characterise dialogue with believers of other non-Christian religions, despite various obstacles and difficulties, especially fundamentalism on both sides. Interreligious dialogue is a necessary condition for peace in the world and is therefore a duty for Christians, as well as for other religious communities. This dialogue is, above all, a conversation about human life or, simply, as the bishops of India suggest, ‘an attitude of openness towards them, sharing their joys and sorrows”’ (EG, no. 250).

In his teaching, Francis pointed out that religious freedom and fraternity are elements of peace and social coexistence (Francis, 2022). It is precisely religious freedom

that provides the space in which a person can seek the truth, as well as express their faith individually and communally. Brotherhood, in turn, serves as a shield whose task is to protect the aforementioned freedom. Moreover, brotherhood fosters a sense of solidarity among people and enables the cultivation of mutual respect (FT; Francis 2015, pp. 38–39; Kućko, 2020; Francis, 2015f, pp. 14–15; Francis, 2015g, pp. 38–39; Francis, 2019c). In his teaching, the Pope admonished that true brotherhood would not be possible in places where freedom of conscience and religion is not respected. “If everyone’s right is not harmoniously subordinated to the greater good, it is ultimately understood as a right without limits, and thus becomes a source of conflict and violence” (FT, no. 111). The text of the encyclical echoes and confirms the teaching on religious freedom as a fundamental human right, “which must not be forgotten on the path to brotherhood and peace: it is religious freedom for the followers of all religions. This freedom shows that we can find good understanding between different cultures and religions. It also testifies that there are many important things we have in common, and that it is possible to find a way of peaceful, orderly and harmonious coexistence, in a spirit of acceptance of differences and joy in the fact that we are brothers and sisters as children of one God” (FT, no. 279). The Pope taught that authentic religiosity does not lead to violence, but can serve as a starting point for fostering an attitude of respect, dignity and freedom for every human being. Religious freedom is an element of coexistence within society, but only when faith is expressed in a sincere and voluntary manner, free from coercion and instrumentalisation. Religion provides a space in which fraternity and interreligious dialogue can together build a harmonious society (FT, no. 283).

Religious convictions regarding the sanctity of life form a firm foundation of an ethical and moral nature. And this is one of the points where religion does not divide, but offers opportunities for dialogue. Therefore, fraternity can constitute the practical realisation of religious freedom, as it will respect the dignity of the Other and strive for the common good of the social community (Francis, 2014f, pp. 35–36; Francis, 2021a, pp. 4–5; Francis, 2021b, p. 4). The recognition of the dignity of every human being is the common denominator of religious freedom and fraternity. Only when every person has the right to freely profess their faith and is treated as a brother or sister does it become possible to build peace, based not on domination but on mutual trust and solidarity.

Pope Francis has expressed the conviction that religious freedom is a prerequisite for social peace, and his clear commitment to interfaith dialogue (particularly with Islam) stems from his belief that religions are not a source of war. Religions should serve as instruments of genuine peace. In this context, it is important to recall the *Joint Declaration on Human Fraternity for World Peace and Living Together*, signed in Abu Dhabi in 2019 by Pope Francis and the Grand Imam of Al-Azhar, Ahmad Al-Tayyeb (Francis, 2019a). The main message of the document is the pursuit of universal peace in the world and the fostering of relationships based on brotherhood. The document was received with approval. Zbigniew Kubacki, a researcher in the field of interreligious dialogue, points out that “the document is a source of inspiration and, at the same time, a huge challenge for many

institutions, organisations, political and religious leaders, and in particular for Catholics and Muslims” (Kubacki, 2024, pp. 31-44; Perzyński, 2025, pp. 399–400). However, there are critical voices suggesting that the declaration is not sufficiently precise and does not place enough emphasis on the issue of the persecution of Christians. The document states that “freedom is the right of every person: every person has freedom of belief, thought, expression and action. [...] Religious pluralism and diversity are an expression of God’s wisdom” (Francis, 2019). This is a somewhat controversial formulation, as the position adopted in it views religious pluralism as an opportunity rather than a threat. According to the Pope, religious pluralism can provide an opportunity to initiate interreligious dialogue. The Apostolic Vicar of Southern Arabia, Bishop Paolo Martinelli, said that “the very idea of a joint text on human fraternity is something unprecedented, which opens up the possibility of a stable common path between Christians and Muslims [...] with the signing of the document, a new phase in dialogue has begun; this is not about confronting doctrines, but about seeking ways for religions to cooperate towards a more humane and fraternal world (Dudek, 2024). In the opinion of the Muslim scholar Bass Tibi, “for genuine dialogue to have a chance of materialising, Muslims must abandon double standards; namely, the freedom of religion guaranteed to them in Europe should also be the standard in Islamic countries with regard to Christians” (Baran, 2020, p. 128; Babiński, 2009, p. 88). This document may serve as a source of inspiration for future generations.

To summarise, in the Pope’s teaching, religious freedom constitutes both an individual right and a fundamental condition for social, local and international peace. Peace enables interfaith dialogue, a sense of solidarity and respect for the dignity of every human being, regardless of their religion or lack of faith.

Summary

Pope Francis assumed the Petrine ministry during a difficult period marked by numerous religiously motivated conflicts and increasing persecution of believers. The issue of religious freedom has undoubtedly occupied a prominent place throughout the Pope’s pontificate, as evidenced by its presence in many of his speeches, homilies and documents.

Religious freedom is a fundamental human right, yet its realisation in the post-modern world is fraught with challenges and threats that characterise both democratic and authoritarian states. In a world dominated by secularism, relativism, radicalism and religious fundamentalism, the Pope points out that religious freedom appears to be a fundamental prerequisite for authentic peace in a pluralistic world.

An analysis of the Pope’s teaching reveals that he focuses on specific dimensions encompassed by the concept of religious freedom. These aspects are human rights, fraternity, interreligious dialogue and peace. These are key values that determine the proper functioning of the individual within society. Reflecting on Pope Francis’s teachings, the following conclusions can be drawn religious freedom constitutes a right of both the individual and the community. This freedom can serve as a path to reconciliation, the resolu-

tion of conflicts, and the joint action of believers from different religions within a single community. The right to religious freedom should not be confined solely to the private sphere of human life, but should be an integral element of human dignity, which is significant for personal life and influences social and international life.

Pope Francis continues the Church's teaching on the subject of religious freedom, but places greater emphasis on its practical dimension. In his teaching, he emphasises the communal dimension of religious freedom, concerning the right of communities to exist and function in the public sphere. Another key focus of the Pope's teaching has been the issue of fraternity and peace, which are linked to the freedom in question.

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