

# **Freedom of Religion and Freedom of Drugs Use**

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## **Religious freedom, an important civilizational achievement**

There was a time when the authorities, on behalf of the churches, thought they had to enforce what people should and shouldn't believe. Other beliefs, and even disbelief, were criminalized and persecuted. There were special laws, special investigative bodies and special courts. The state's violence in religious affairs became terror. The bloody trail of the Inquisition continued for centuries.

Gradually there was some restraint, the motto became: "Cuius regio, eius religio".

Translated, this legal rule, coined in the 17th century by the German lawyer Joachim Stephani, means "Whose land, his religion". The concrete political expression of this principle meant that the religion of the ruler was to dictate the religion of those he ruled. Thus, there were Protestant, Catholic and Orthodox (Christian), but also Sunni and Shiite (Muslim) areas.

On the other hand, a civil opposition movement arose that advocated the individual decision of conscience of each person. The Netherlands under William of Orange was one of the first countries where former heretics, Baptists and Jews could settle without fear of persecution.

Religious freedom has been wrested from the rulers with great effort and it represents an important achievement of civilization. Everyone decides freely and independently which faith to choose and whether or not he or she does want to belong to any religion. Nowadays religious freedom is included in the canon of human rights and is enshrined in every democratic constitution.

## **Medieval conditions in drug policy**

Freedom, protected with regard to the belief and conscience of the individual, is still denied in the field of psychoactive self-determination. As far as drug policy goes, we are in fact still in a pre-Enlightenment of a "Cuius regio, eius pharmaca" - "Whose land, his drugs". The patronizing state wants to decide which medicines its subjects are allowed to use and which not. State governments arrange this according to their mood. Alcohol consumption is criminalized in most Muslim countries. In Bolivia, traditional coca use has been legalized, but even the use of the harmless Mate de Coca remains a crime worldwide. Recreational hemp use is possible without prosecution in Uruguay, Colorado, and the Netherlands, among others, but people in Saudi Arabia, Vietnam, or Iran may be executed for owning excessive quantities. Drug prohibitions must be upheld in the inquisitorial tradition with special laws, special investigative bodies and special courts.

State violence to uphold the prohibition of drugs has turned into a global war and official terror campaigns. Systematic violations of human rights and destabilization of democracy are the result.

## **Hate aimed at a specific group of people**

I would like to put it this way: when people are marginalized and criminalized for the sole reason that they have chosen a certain psychoactive substance, when people are exposed to artificially generated health risks or even driven to death for the sole reason that drug use is part of their lifestyle, then we are dealing with a form of hate aimed at a specific group of people.

We may need to make this even clearer in the discussion: Prohibition is a variation of hatred directed at a particular group of people. We should therefore not ignore the two main arguments advanced to defend prohibition:

Argument 1: "The prohibition of high-risk psychoactive substances means health protection." However, health protection is not a theoretical formula, but must be measured by specific problems and measures. If the current drug policy really focused on health protection, we would have the legally protected option of drug control. A method by which real dangers for consumers can be averted. On the other hand, there would be supervised spaces for drug use where users can find not only framework conditions for a lower risk for their drug use, but also advice and first aid in case of emergency. From the perspective of health protection, drugs prohibition is counterproductive.

Argument 2: "The drug ban means protecting minors." But it is clear that child protection in the shadow of illegality is not enforceable at all. Protection of minors only has a chance in a model of controlled regulation. The drug prohibition protects neither health nor youth, but represents a fundamentally derogatory ideology regarding arbitrarily defined forms of drug use.

## **Prohibition is in the tradition of the Inquisition**

I repeat it again, Prohibition is not in the tradition of the Enlightenment but of the Inquisition. It is not based on rational decisions, but rather on irrationality, suspicion and fear. In line with other social phenomena, I would like to speak of drug phobia here. Systematic violations of human rights and a destabilization of democracy are important consequences of such a prohibition policy.

For this reason, the question of overcoming the prohibition is not a secondary aspect of politics, but it touches on essential, existential aspects of our society. People who think that the issue of drug use is irrelevant still must consider drug policy. Because the demand for freedom of drugs is an existential need of our time.

## **Drug freedom as a right to liberty**

The prohibition policy should be replaced by the concept of "drug freedom". I understand drug freedom in the sense of analogous to religious freedom. This means that the state will not decide which drugs its citizens use. As adult citizens, people should be able to make this decision themselves. The permanent repression of the State towards selective abstinence should be replaced by a system of regulated, controlled distribution in accordance with the protection of youth and consumers. In public debate, the perception of drug use is dominated by legal, political, medical and problem perspectives. I see a decisive opportunity to approach this debate with more openness and competence by taking drug use seriously, as a cultural phenomenon.

## **Cultural integration of drugs**

The use of psychoactive substances is specific to human history. They were mainly used in medicine, in a religious context and as a recreational means. What position and role do drugs play in daily life, religion and ritual? Historically and territorially, treatment of intoxication and intoxicants has been tackled differently. Highly differentiated behaviors, rules and rituals were developed to integrate drugs culturally and thus reduce potential risks and dangers. Such cultural integration subsequently led to an interaction between drug use and culture. This perception of drug use as a factor in human culture helps on 4 levels:

1. We can learn to recognize drug use as a reality and accept this reality for what it is. This can help us say goodbye to the illusion or ideology of a purely abstinence-oriented society. This, in turn, frees us to focus our energies on developing sensible forms of regulation to minimize damage.
2. We can learn to better understand drug use. Why do people take drugs? What do you expect and what not? What is the role of drugs? What role do drugs play in the lives of individuals or groups? It will be crucial that we have this discussion not only about, but especially with drug users in society. A dialogue that can only succeed if criminalization is ended.
3. A better understanding of drug use helps to address this reality in our society in a more appropriate and focused way. Then we can also find new models in which drug use and drug users are socially and culturally integrated. Open forms of use can arise that minimize existing risks. And if people have problems with themselves and their drug use, they will not be punished, but can expect help in a protected environment.
4. Qualified prevention is not possible without knowledge of the cultural importance of drug use. If we can understand what is behind drug use, what people initially associate with what it means to them, we can also design necessary, sensible prevention in a professional and focused way.

(Original title "[Religionsfreiheit und Drogenfreiheit](#)," von Michael Kleim, Stadtjugendpfarrer in Gera. Translated by the DPI.)