
Redefining Freedom of Religion for Children as Depicted in the Movie of *Are You There God? It's Me, Margaret*: A Postmodern Approach

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ABSTRACT

The author frequently observed parents embroiled in a continuous argument regarding the appropriate religious upbringing of their children, which seem to be an ongoing and persistent disagreement to this day. The matter then inspired the researcher to find out more regarding the religious freedom for children, especially in the United States, as seen in the movie version of *Are You There God? It's Me, Margaret*. In relation to the previous statement, this article formulates two objectives: (1) to present how the movie depicts the kinds of children's freedom of religion, and (2) to discuss how the findings of the first objective contribute to the ongoing polemic in the United States. The postmodernism approach was applied, by using Lyotard's theory, focusing on the diversity of experiences and the rejection of grand narrative as its starting point to unveil the fragmented freedom of religion for children in the US. The first results show that, according to the movie, two types of parents often engage in a debate: one who creates a religion-neutral environment and the other who creates a religion in a neutral environment. The second result shows that both types are valid. Unlike the freedom of religion for children, the freedom of religion of parents is, in a way, stronger than the rights of children. The powerful parental right is legitimate if parents do not break the border upon "the best interest of the children". Parents are then allowed to impart or not to impart their religious beliefs towards their children.

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INTRODUCTION

Frequently and unconsciously, the freedom of religion for children is being violated by either parents or their guardians who decide to impart their personal religion to their children. Surely, it is a natural feeling of a parent wanting the best for their children as a child is the love of their life, their pride, and their everything in this world. However, the dream that they wish their children could have a perfect life, in the end is what drives them to unconsciously or somehow consciously violate the children's right to their own freedom. This condition is in line with Reid's idea (2018), "The United States is currently involved in the violation of many set forth in the CRC, but if it were to ratify the CRC, it would then be expected to begin working towards fixing them".

On the other hand, there are some parents, who share the same value of wanting the best for their children, decided to give neither any intervention nor any exposures regarding religion and beliefs to them. These parents refuse to interfere with the matter of religious beliefs, allowing

children to learn and choose based on their own desire in the future. These types of parents frequently have in mind that by not giving any intervention in their children's life decisions and establishing a neutral environment from the beginning is the best for their children. The two types often engage in a debate as one thinks that their choice is the correct one over the others. However, one should not judge whether one is terrible, or the opposite is a violence of the rights of the children without digging a deeper understanding and analysis.

The 1960s was claimed as the biggest transition in history in terms of secularization and claimed to be the era of the death of God. However, according to Jones (1971), it is recorded that 90% of the American adult population was identified as Christian (2021). In 2022, the adult identified as Christian now has fallen to 63% (2022). It is also claimed that nowadays the number of younger parents raising kids without religion is growing rapidly. However, the opposite party of parents who raised children with religious backgrounds is found to be in a quite equal number. Throughout

the decades, the debate between the two parties has been a never-ending debate. Between 2016 to 2023, the researcher at least found 6 debate forums in Quora debating whether or not parents should teach children religion, not in public school but privately by parents. In sharing their arguments, parents mostly use their point of view. Hence, it left us a question about the freedom of religion of the children themselves.

Counting into the big eight as countries with the most religious freedom (US News, 2023), the US seems to be one of the pioneer countries upholding religious freedom at all levels. The government of the United stance is clear as the first amendment of the US Congress says,

Congress shall make no law respecting an establishment of religion, or prohibiting the free exercise thereof; or abridging the freedom of speech, or of the press; or the right of the people peaceably to assemble, and to petition the Government for a redress of grievances.

As with the first amendment, we might consider the US as a country where freedom of religion is fundamental and applied in all layers, to all citizens without exception. Unfortunately, the stance is

rather blurry, it needs more attention and detailed information, especially to protect the children's rights. An example of bolder action in protecting freedom of religion for children comes from Scotland. Their government has an exclusive organization for children and young people, which explicitly makes a clearer statement upon the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child's ratification article 14 regarding the protection of children's rights. The official says, "their parents can help them make decisions around religion, but a parent cannot force a child or young person to adopt a religion, and a parent cannot force a child or young person to stop following a religion" (2023).

Unfortunately, the US does not ratify the UNCRC, making an unclear stance on its position in defending the rights of children. The debate between the two types of parents and parenting styles, whether to teach the children religion or not, has been a never-ending debate for decades. Some parents appear to respect the others' choice, while the rest engage in a debate with those who have different perspectives. As previously mentioned, the researcher at least found six big debate

forums in Quora between 2016 and 2023 over the matter of imparting parents' religious beliefs. The condition where the government of the US did not ratify the UNCRC appears to implicitly play a role in the never-ending debate.

Despite the condition nowadays where there is an increasing number of millennial parents raising kids without any religious community background, the number is still close to fifty-fifty compared with parents who send children to Sunday school or other religious events. The PEW Research Center survey found that 48% of kids in the age between 13 to 17 say that they share totally the same religion as their parents did. Whilst other 43% kids say that between them and their parents shared some beliefs and only 8% claimed they had different religions. As Jesse Smith, a doctoral candidate of Pennsylvania State University, mentioned in his writings "parental religiosity is consistently found to be the single strongest predictor of child religiosity over the life course. Parents who are closer to their children exert a stronger influence on their children's religious life" (334, 2021).

Written in 1970 by Judy Blume, *Are You There God? It's*

Me Margaret captures the condition nicely: capturing the harmonious relationship between the pro-teaching-religion to children and the against team parents, as well as being a good example of how to be a supportive American citizen to uphold the First Amendment. From the previously mentioned condition and background, this article aims to find whether or not introducing a certain religion and interfering with a child's right of freedom of religion by exposing parents' religion to them is a violation.

This article highlights the argument between two groups of parents. Each argument coming from each group claims that the way they choose is the best way, and each group of parents claims that their way is the right one or the truest one, whilst what the opposite is doing is somehow wrong. People should not judge the choice of some people to give influence on their children regarding religion or not giving any religious background and let the children decide on their own in the future. Using the perspective of Lyotard about postmodernism, the researcher wants to dig more into the fragments that live within American society upon principles of freedom of religion, which are depicted in

Are You There God? It's Me Margaret.

METHODOLOGY

The authors conceptualize the meaning of freedom of religion for children through the movie version of *Are You There God? It's Me Margaret*. The urgency of this study comes with the persistent parental conflicts over children's religious upbringing, and the tendency that it is often overshadowed by dominant parental rights in a pluralistic society like the US.

DISCUSSION

The Religion Neutral and Un-Neutral Environment

As the types and kinds of freedom of religion are not clearly describe, and that the clause only mentioned that the limitation of freedom of religion is on the public moral and health, and the rights of other, it can be implied that the types and kinds are not limited to any as long as it does not harm others and violate public moral and health. In response to the urgent need to address children's freedom of religion, some categorizations were developed based on the universal principles of freedom of religion through Article 14 of the United Nations

Convention on the Rights of the Child (UNCRC) and based on the movie's scene.

Neutral Environment

Religion neutral environment can be defined as the disengagement of parents in their children's religious matters. Parents decided to not involve and let their children later in their life learn and decide their own religion. This term of neutral environment is borrowed from article 14 of the UNCRC, as they mentioned that "Parents are also not obliged to provide a religiously 'neutral' upbringing...". Although the organization did not mention explicitly, from the quotation it implicitly tells us that they considered the parent and parenting style of religion's freedom in two categories: neutral and un-neutral.

Some religion-neutral environment scenes are depicted and being the highlight in the movie. The first act of a religion-neutral environment that Margaret's parents created, can be seen and is subcategorized.

1. A Free of Religious Perspective since Early Age

Margaret's parents in the movie neither seem to introduce anything related to their religion nor provide any

exposure to their religion. A proof that Margaret's parents did not introduce or give exposure about religion to Margaret can be seen from when her parents are both shocked hearing Margaret going to the temple and joining the Jewish praying section with her grandmother, as they never wanted nor imagined that anybody would let Margaret learn about religion so soon.

Herb, Margaret's father, in the scene says that he was shocked by Margaret's confession that she had just gone to the temple with her grandmother. The stronger reaction comes from Margaret's mother. Barbara was even more shocked, disappointed, and angry at once.



Figure 1. Margaret's mother's reaction

Barbara says that she cannot believe what just happened, that her mother-in-law took

Margaret to the temple without asking their permission, although it was Margaret's own idea. When Margaret confesses that it was all her idea, wanting to go to the temple and that later she will try church, her mother reacted in a higher pitch, implying that she was really angry and disappointed. Not only does the conversation show explicitly the shock and disagreement of Margaret's parents, but it is also a short and powerful statement to implicitly prove that Margaret's parents had never introduced any religion to Margaret. Further, it seems that they did not have the intention to let Margaret learn about religions before she is an adult, although it is only a year to go until Margaret turns twelve.

The second proof that Margaret's parents never introduced religious beliefs to Margaret can be seen through her conversations with Mr. Benedict, her teacher. It was the end of the class when Mr. Benedict called Margaret to have a conversation with him regarding the school project. Mr. Benedict was curious that Margaret wrote 'religious holidays' as something that she hates, and thus he asked why.



Figure 2. Margaret's conversation with Mr. Benedict

Margaret says herself that she is not into religious holidays because she did not celebrate any of them. Although her parents are not atheists, both still hold their own religion; clearly, it can be seen from the conversation that they never celebrate the big days in their religion. This can be considered as another proof that both were in agreement not to introduce their religion to Margaret. As with Margaret's next statement, it clearly shows that her parents decided that Margaret is not into any religion until one day she can finally decide on her own.

2. An Absolute Freedom of Religion

The freedom of religion of a parent comes with the right of parents to introduce their religion towards their children (2015). However, in the movie, as well as becoming the main theme in the story, is that Margaret's parents give her absolute freedom of religion. The absolute terms here refer to the non-intervention of

Margaret's parents in her religious life. Margaret is allowed to choose and decide about her religious life on her own. This typical treatment given by Margaret's parents can be seen when Margaret goes to religious places without the guidance of her parents.



Figure 3. Margaret at a temple with Sylvia

Margaret goes to the temple with her grandmother. Margaret is so confident asking her grandmother that she wants to join prayer in the temple because her parents always told her that she can choose her own religion when she is an adult, now that she is almost an adult, she thinks she is ready. Although the day after that, when her parents find out that she has gone to the temple with her grandmother, Herbs is surprised, and Barbara is mad. However, the conflict just passed quickly, and her parents did not take the problem seriously. There is no explicit statement, but it can be inferred from the conversation after Herbs persuades Barbara that it is not a bad thing because Margaret will soon be

glad that her parents never force her to go to religious prayer.



Figure 4. Herb and Barbara discussing Margaret going to a temple

It can be deduced that Margaret's father himself felt tired of the endless events at the temple that his parents asked him to attend during his childhood. He is trying to be as positive as he can and persuade Barbara to allow Margaret to start learning religions sooner. Although it seems that Barbara is strongly against Margaret learning about religion, Barbara makes no answer, implying that at one point she agrees with her husband. After a while, there is a scene showing Margaret going to a church with her friend, Janie, and her mother.



Figure 4. Margaret going to a church with Janie and her mother

Margaret is happy to join the morning prayer. It implicitly tells that Margaret's parents finally agree that Margaret starts to learn religions earlier, before she turns 12, and she finally attends a church with her best friend. Another scene used as a supporting statement that Margaret's parents allow her to learn about God can be seen when Margaret joins the Christmas Eve mass with Nancy's family.



Figure 5. Margaret attending the Christmas Eve mass with Nancy's family

Margaret joins the Christmas Eve mass with Nancy and her family. As in the previous debate, Barbara seems to reject Margaret's request to learn earlier about religion, yet in this picture and as in the previous picture, which shows Margaret going to religious places, it can be inferred that Margaret's parents finally agree that Margaret tries church and learns a bit sooner about religion.

Margaret also whispers in silence that she is more confused than ever regarding

the religion that she should choose. Her whisper is proof that her parents give her absolute freedom of religion, as it seems that Margaret never shared with her parents what she felt about God, and her parents never asked or discussed anything about God and religions with Margaret.

Unneutral Environment

The growing number of religiously free-child rearing is undeniably huge. In the last two decades the number of pro-teaching-religion parents finally beats the non-pro-teaching, even until in the early 21st century the number seems far away to be beaten. The near to fifty-fifty condition makes a clearer vision to the fact that the two sides with different views and values, the pro and non-pro teaching, exist. It simply tells the viewers that both are justified now and then, even though in the previous two decades, the number of child rearing with religion was not even touching 10%.

The picture of an un-neutral parenting style is also depicted in the movie. Despite not being as many as the neutral parenting style scene, the movie draws a highlight of the era when child rearing was the majority's choice at that time.

1. Taking Children to Religious Places

The first type of with-religion child rearing can be seen through the scenes in the movie where children in the story join their parents in the sacred places, such as the church.



Figure 6. Margaret going to a church with Janie and her mother

Janie and her mother are members of the black church. Janie's mother teaches her Christianity since her father is not seen, and the religion is unknown. Janie seems to enjoy the prayer and implicitly shows that her mother successfully converted her to be a Christian.

Another scene that shows the act of parents taking children to church can be seen when Nancy's family joins the Christmas eve prayer.



Figure 7. Nancy's family joining the Christmas Eve mass

Nancy's whole family attending the Christmas eve prayer shows that they are an obedient Christian family, unlike Margaret's mother who decided to not include Margaret in her religion and never introduce her a thing about Christian. It be inferred that Nancy's parents are the pro-religion-teaching parents and Nancy's parents also seem to successfully convert their two children to hold Christian as their religion.

2. Child Baptism

The other act of an un-neutral environment found in the movie is the pedobaptism or child baptism. It is Laura Danker's parents who conducted the child's baptism. This agenda can be seen through the action when Laura Danker and Margaret are together in the library doing homework. At first, Margaret was asking when Laura's mother would pick her up and then Laura told her that her mom will pick her up after her confession.



Figure 8. Margaret having a conversation with Laura about pedobaptism

The conversation Laura Danker has with Margaret explicitly shows that she is a Catholic and now that she is still in the sixth grade or eleven years old, meaning that her parents did the pedobaptism to her. It is strengthened by the fact that in the movie, Laura went to confession by herself and after that her mother just picked her up. It indirectly tells us that she has been doing this confession for routine, giving us more proof that she undergoes to the child baptism as previously mentioned that someone cannot join the sacrament of confession or any other sacraments before they have been baptized.

Despite the lesser scene of un-neutral environment that depicted in the movie, it can be disclosed from the scenes that in the story the pro-teaching-religion or the with-religion child rearing is more common and well represented the status quo in that era where majority choose to pass religion towards their children. In addition, Margaret's parents portrayed the minority in that era, and it can be drawn that both parties exist and are justified. A few numbers do not imply that people in the opposite bench of majority do

not exist and that their belief is wrong or invalid.

The Parents and Children's Rights: Which Wall is Higher?

The Position of Children's Rights

The condition where the US is the only country to not ratify the United Nation Convention of the Right of Child (UNCRC) results in the unclear position of the government in defending the rights of children in the US. Although the US is contributing to the convention, the government decides not to submit the sign to ratify the Convention. The George Walker Bush Administration opposed the CRC and was expressing their deep political legal concern that by ratifying the treaty it would backlash the US laws of privacy and family rights (Blanchfield, 2015). In short, the main objection of the government of the US is the possibility of the UN making an intervention to the parents' rights which at the same time is considered a threat to the law (2017).

The US federal government has what is called The Children's Bureau under the Administration for Children and Families in the Department of Health and Human Services. The Children's Bureau, known as CB,

focuses to improve the lives of children and the family through programs which aimed reducing child abuse and neglect, increasing adoptions, and strengthening foster care (2023). Through their mission and agenda, it clearly demonstrates that the children's rights to religion are not in the list. Further, as mentioned by Blanchfield that by ratifying the UNCRC it would be against the family rights itself, it clearly depicts the picture of the stance of the US government upon children's right to religion. In short, being the only country absent to ratify the UNCRC and the lack of governmental organization in defending the right of children and so their voices lead to the conclusion that the US government is taking aside more to the parents' rights rather the children's rights, especially in the case of freedom of religion.

Children's Rights in the Movie

The position of children's rights where they are put under the parent's right is also portrayed in the movie. The strongest evidence that children's right to religion is put in the second place can be seen by seeing Laura. She needs to go to confession and later continues with "It's something you have to do when you're

Catholic". Indeed, she is a Catholic and is already baptized because she does the sacrament of confession. Clearly her parents conducted the baptism for her during her childhood. For some people who are against child baptism, they believe that children are not yet into the sense of being able to choose the faith nor have the capability to be responsible for themselves, thus they should not be baptized early. Richard, a president and professor of systematic theology says, "We wholeheartedly affirm that baptism is rightly administered to adults (never before baptized) when they profess faith in Christ.". However, he then continues his writing with, "We don't merely baptize young children; we baptize both professing believers and their young children ..." (2020). Through the writings, it can be inferred that there are two types of Catholics' parents, one that is into child baptism and one that is against. Parents who conduct the child's baptism tend to come from the same Catholics affiliation.

The identity of Laura's parents is not revealed in the movie. It thus can be made into two scenarios: (1) both of her parents are Catholics and (2) her parents are doing the intermarriage but one must be

Catholic and hence she can be baptized. However, the two scenarios make no difference. The main concern is that in Laura's case, the movie depicts child baptism which shows that children's right to freedom of religion is put on the second place after the parents.

Another part of the movie which shows the condition where children's rights are placed as secondary can be seen even through the constructed neutral environment. Although Margaret's parents decides that they create a neutral environment and will let Margaret choose on her own, yet there is a point where her mother, Sylvia, is showing an authoritarian objection towards Margaret learning religions. Sylvia is strongly against the idea that Margaret wanted to learn religions sooner. In the engaged argumentation, Sylvia insisted that Margaret should not learn about religion sooner. However, Margaret convinces her that there is only one year left until she is turning 12 which can be considered as an adult. Luckily, her father Herb took side on Margaret. After Margaret leaves the room, her father also tries to convince Sylvia to allow Margaret to find out about religion earlier as what she wanted. At that point, the discussion ends.

Even though Margaret is allowed to go to church, it was obvious that before her father convinced Sylvia, there is no way Sylvia is going to allow Margaret to learn about church. It implicitly shows Sylvia has the feeling of superiority over her daughter's right to freedom of choice and religion. Consciously or unconsciously, Sylvia tries to defend her rights as a parent over Margaret's freedom of religion. Assuming that Margaret and her parents are living in a country such as Scotland, Sylvia's actions might be considered as forcing a child which is clearly against the children's right under the article 14 which says "... a parent cannot force a child or young person to adopt a religion, and a parent cannot force a child or young person to stop following a religion" (2023).

Behind the Powerful Parental Rights

Often people and parents think that children's rights are after their parents due to the thought that children are immature individuals. Children are often unable to distinguish bad or good things, and often unable to take responsibility upon their own actions. Hence, their parents are acting as their legal custody to take responsibility for them, and it is allowing them to make

decisions on behalf of their children. Parvis (2020) states that according to the Fourteenth Amendment, the Supreme Court has interpreted that in accordance with family law as,

the right of the individual...to marry, establish a home and bring up children, ... and generally to enjoy those privileges long recognized at common law as essential to the orderly pursuit of happiness by free men. (Meyer v. Nebraska, 262 U.S, 390, 1923).

In strengthening the previous results, Parvis took the more recent precedents *Troxel v. Granville*, 530 U.S 57 (2000),

liberty interest ... the interest of parents in the care, custody, and control of their children-is perhaps the oldest of the fundamental liberty interests recognized by this (Supreme Court). ... It is cardinal with us that the custody, care, and nurture of the child reside first in the parents (2020).

The quotations implicitly show that, according to the constitution and through the parental law, parents are allowed to act and behave in accordance with their private preferences if it is legal.

Pervis, however, later in her writings explains that parental rights is set with limitations. She says that the state's standard in courts to decide parenting and child custody is under the best interest of the child (2020). Abaya writes that the term "best interest of the child" is the main principle used to guide the governmental policies regarding the children's rights in the U.S territories (2022). According to Melone, the "best interest for children" might be perceived differently, yet the closest refers to the custody, visitation discussions, and decisions that must be protecting the child's security, physical and mental health, and the development of their future (2023). The lacking point of the United States government is their clarity over the term "best interest" itself. Through several cases in decades, as previously written cases example: *Meyer v. Nebraska*, 262 U.S 390 (1923) and *Troxel v. Granville*, 530 U.S 57 (2000), the term "best interest for children" can be widely translated without specific provision. In addition, the term is only working as guidance of the judges, meaning that when things and problems related to children are not up in the Court, the term is shut

down and only parents' rights play the role there.

Between the Two Times: Then and Now

The movie preserves the original setting of times and places as the original book. It picturized the 1970's condition well. Each piece of literature tends to mirror the spirit of its era. An author's surrounding background, time and placed, is the strongest influential element upon the work. Jenkins believes that the personal background of an author significantly shapes the overall story. He then explained by saying,

... socio-economic influences, cultural heritage, life events and explorations of identity can all bleed into an author's work inadvertently or consciously. Even the time period and historical context during which they lived play a crucial role in molding their perspective ... (Jenkins, 2023)

It is obvious that Blume, the novel's author, is influenced by the 1970s. Majority of adults in the US in late 1970's or around 90% self-claimed to be a Christian, meanwhile only 7% of the total population is identified as without any religion (McCarthy, 2019). In addition to this, the movie depicts quite the same

things as the surrounding neighborhood of Margaret's and her school friends are mostly Christian, it was only her who was raised from intermarriage parents and raised of free religious perspective. "Parent-child agreement on religious affiliation is consistently high" (Hill via Wilson, 1997:290).

As with the previous statement, it shows that even before the 1990s the condition where parents are imparting their religious beliefs to their children is high in the US. As an example in this case, is conducted by Matthew Brown who finds out about older generations passing their religion using 360 samples of Californian families. The research shows that in the 1970s seven out of ten parents passed their religious belief towards their children, and only three who choose to not pass their religion to the next generations (2013). Another example used as a proof is the survey of the American Enterprise Institute (AEI). The company conducted a survey in 2019 regarding the decline of religious beliefs within American families from all nations.

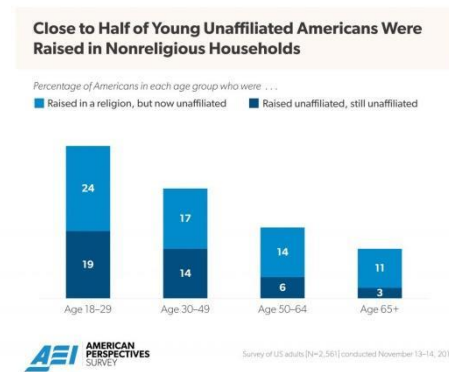


Figure 9. Child Rearing Regarding Religion

The sample of the survey is 2561 adults aged 18 and above living in the US. From the first chart they offer, it can be seen that as many as 66% of adults aged 18 to 65 or above are raised with a religion (2019). Through the red lines, the movie indeed depicts the real condition of that era where majority parents decide to impart their religious beliefs towards their children rather than create a more neutral religious environment.

On the contrary, discussing the present era, through the same survey conducted by the American Enterprise Institute, the percentage of American adults raised in a religion but then now turns to be an unaffiliated adult reached the highest with 24%. Meanwhile, the older adults aged 30-49 with the same religious environment and now unaffiliated ranked the third position with 17% (2019). This data again taken from the

American Enterprise Institute indirectly shows us that children from nineteen to fifty years ago (early 2000s and 1970s) have the big possibility of previously in their childhood having the feeling of being forced to hold the religion that their parents tried to impart, proven by their now choosing to be an unaffiliated adult.

CONCLUSION

Unlike the freedom of religion that adults had, the freedom of religion for children is nuanced and presents a unique challenge. In conducting this research, the researcher applied the postmodernism approach. Lyotard's objection to grand narratives became the stepping point of this research to present the more diverse fragments laying under societies. Using the postmodernism approach the researcher presents two categorizations of parenting style related to child's freedom of religion: as portrayed through the characters Mr. Herb and Mrs. Barbara (Margaret's parents) which focus on creating neutral environment beliefs, and the other one shown through the character of Janie's and Laura's parents who shares their religious perspective towards their children or to

the extent of conducting baptism for their son/daughter. The depicted neutral and unneutral parents are indeed happening since then until now. The pros and cons to religious child rearing are all valid and correct in their own ways. According to UNCRC and the United States' government, parents' right to freedom of religion comes with their right to teach their children about their religious beliefs if the parents are fit and they do not go beyond the boundaries of "the best interest of the child". It is quite an irony where a nation that dreams of a total freedom of religion yet limits the children's right to their own religious liberty; that these children need to wait until they are considered to be a mature adult before being permitted to convert or follow their own religious preference meanwhile the border upon the harm and "the best interest of the child" is undefined clearly.

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