

# The bogus gospel of free trade and free religion

Elizabeth Shakman Hurd May 20, 2014, Al Jazeera America

Religious freedom and economic liberalization go hand in hand. Or so we are told.

The Maryland-based Religious Freedom and Business Foundation (RFBF), a lobbying group that promotes “respect for freedom of religion or belief,” claims that “religious freedom is good for business.” Yet contrary to the gospel preached by the RFBF, economic liberalization has brought repression and dispossession to at least one community, the K’iche’, a Maya ethnic group from the western highlands of Guatemala. Their experience suggests a different and darker story connecting free markets and free religion.

Part of that story involves what counts as religion. Those who tie religious freedom and free markets fail to recognize the K’iche’ people’s relationship to their land (and their associated cultural and religious practices) as religious, so the fact that the [changes associated with economic liberalization](#) make it impossible for the K’iche’ to continue their cultural and religious life does not register as depriving them of anything of significance. Neoliberal advocates convince governments to accept the property and resource rights of companies, and then religious freedom advocates reassure the indigenous population and others that they haven’t suffered a religious setback. Both moves ensure that indigenous people lose their culture and capacity to carry on the lives they were living — as well as any claim to harm.

In recent years, 87 [Maya communities](#) in the department of El Quiché, represented by the K’iche’ People’s Council (KPC), unanimously rejected the mining and hydroelectric projects proposed for Guatemala in the wake of the North American Free Trade Agreement and other treaties. Foreign commercial companies responded to those rejections with offers to reward them with a higher percentage of profits, failing to understand, as Dianne Post [points out](#), that “the reason these projects were rejected is not monetary but is linked to the refusal to allow destruction of the earth for religious and cultural reasons.” The KPC’s refusal to acquiesce in these projects has led to discrimination and violence, including massive violations of K’iche’ cultural heritage and land rights facilitated by collusion among multinational mining corporations, the police and the Guatemalan state.

The U.S. State Department reports that in 2012 there were “no reports of abuses of religious freedom” in Guatemala. K’iche’ attachment to the land does not qualify them for the national and international legal protections for religious freedom celebrated by the RFBF and its allies. The KPC’s claims are ignored because, in some important sense, they

are perceived as having no (recognizable) religion. Violations of K'iche' religious-cultural heritage are inaudible in the dominant register of religious freedom, which privileges a right to belief.

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Yet the problem runs deeper than simple recognition of K'iche' claims to the land as religious and therefore deserving of protection. To rely on religion as a category in law means that some groups will inevitably be disadvantaged and others privileged. In this case a range of transnational mining, hydroelectric, monoculture and oil interests have stacked the decks in favor of those who benefit from opening Guatemala to transnational capital. According to the KPC's spokeswoman, Lolita Chávez Ixcaquic, who is protected by precautionary measures after an assassination attempt, "companies have come to plunder and loot our water, land and oil."

K'iche' contributions to world culture are incontrovertible. In 1992 Rigoberta Menchú, a K'iche' indigenous rights activist, won the Nobel Peace Prize. In 2009 the Newberry Library announced the digitization of the most studied indigenous document of Mesoamerica, the mid-16th century Popol Vuh, or "book of events," a mytho-historical narrative based on pre-Colombian oral traditions that recounts the creation of the universe, the origins of the K'iche' people and the history of their dynasties until the arrival of the Spanish in 1524.

As campaigns for religious freedom and economic liberalization spearheaded by the RFBF, the U.S. government and other interests gain traction, it is time to acknowledge that legal protections for religions and religious rights are always partial, reflecting and privileging particular understandings of religion and particular conceptions of freedom. In this case, it is a religious economies model that favors consumers of religion for whom believing is taken as the defining characteristic of what it means to be religious and the right to believe (or not) as the core of what it means to be free. As individuals and groups around the world submit to this particular system of religious freedom and subscribe to a theory of the free religious market, they are also submitting to a particular — and not universal — conception of freedom itself.

The K'iche' may have the right to believe or not believe whatever they choose; in the world of religious freedom advocates, the K'iche' are certainly free to browse and shop in the marketplace of belief and unbelief. But if they cannot keep the mining companies off

their Guatemalan highlands, does it matter?