

# Religious Freedom Climate Change: Rights and Responsibilities, Values and Virtues

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## **Abstract**

*The world urgently needs Religious Freedom Climate Change. Many countries have high or very high obstacles to religious freedom. Millions of Christians are under persecution for their faith. To bring change, we need to build a Global Religious Freedom Movement involving governments, parliamentarians and civil society. Also important is religious responsibility which includes duties to build balanced societies and sustainable development, recognizing the strong nexus between religious freedom and the dignity of every person. Freedom of Religion or Belief involves the dimensions of teaching, worship, practice, and observance. A key element for success is networking with like-minded individuals, communities, and organizations. We are all equal in dignity, but all different in identity.*

**Keywords:** Freedom of Religion or Belief (FoRB), Human Dignity, International Religious Freedom or Belief Alliance (IRFBA), Religious Freedom Climate Change, Religious Responsibility

## **Religious Freedom Climate Change**

To address our current reality concerning Freedom of Religion or Belief (FoRB), I am convinced that the world urgently needs Religious Freedom Climate Change.

Due to widely spread various forms of FoRB violation, almost 80% of the global population live in countries with high or very high obstacles to religious freedom (according to data from the Pew Research Center in Washington, DC) (Pew Research Center 2024). And trends are worrying as well: violations are on the rise. There are four distinct levels of oppression: intolerance, discrimination, persecution, and genocide—crime of crimes. Nine out of ten genocides in history were based on religious motives. Mankind would eliminate most of the gravest mass atrocity killings if FoRB was respected. Former FCO Secretary of the UK Jeremy Hunt commissioned special research focused on persecution of Christians worldwide. Bishop Truro's Report (2019) speaks about more than 250 million Christians under persecution for their faith (Mounstephen 2019), declaring Christians as being the most persecuted faith community globally. J. Hunt rightly labeled this situation as “the most scandalous violation of human rights in our times”!

But nations with dominantly Christian cultures rule a big and potent part of our world as well. Where are the root causes of the problem?

There is a visible gap between words and deeds, duties and practical delivery, between external and traditional image and internal content of public policies. We often see societies disconnected from their roots. Politics is frequently only an empty-value talk, while true virtues are missing.

## **Building a Global Religious Freedom Movement**

In order to achieve this goal, we need to build a Global Religious Freedom Movement by pulling together efforts of like-minded Governments, Parliamentarians and Civil Society—Faith-Based Organizations (FBOs), Churches and Religious Communities.

In general, we can link with the UN effort in this area. In particular, there are UN Special Rapporteurs nominated and working since 1985 in the area of FoRB. In 1998 the US Congress adopted the International Religious Freedom Act (IRF Act) with institutionalization of the IRF as a regular part of the US foreign policy, including monitoring and reporting about the real international situation (USCIRF Commission).

In 2013 the EU adopted its first ever Guidelines on Protection and Promotion of FoRB. In 2014 the first Intergroup for Religious Freedom and Tolerance was established in the European Parliament.

In 2015 a FoRB consultation group of diplomats was founded in the EU and the global Inter-Parliamentarians Panel for FoRB started to work. Today it counts over 400 MPs worldwide. Finally, as a reaction to mass atrocities in Iraq and Syria committed by the ISIS terrorists, the first ever Special Envoy for Promotion of FoRB outside the EU was established in 2016. Evidently, it worked well, especially in tandem between the EU and the USA. This decision of the EC President J.C. Juncker and my impactful effort—saving 25 people from death row or long imprisonment—served as inspiration for the majority of EU Member States. After 2016 18 EU countries nominated their envoys, ambassadors, or plenipotentiaries, although with very little coordination.

Several Regional Fora defending religious freedom for all started to cooperate (SEAFORB, SAFORB). A new initiative on the intergovernmental level came in 2018 from the US - Ministerial Conference on Advancing IRF.

In 2020 the International Religious Freedom or Belief Alliance (IRFBA) was established with a Council of Experts. Today it is a network of more than 40 countries. Civil society contributes to this global effort from 2021 through IRF Summits and IRF Roundtables.

There is one point particularly important for all religious communities: When we call for religious freedom we have to remember the second side of the same coin: religious responsibility. Because freedom cannot survive

without responsibility, that must be shouldered. Rights include duties to build balanced societies and sustainable development.

In this quest for tolerant societies and peaceful coexistence, the media play a very important role. Very often a violation of religious freedom is overlooked and remains hidden. Ignorance, indifference, and fear are influential and omnipresent siblings—*allies of Evil*. Therefore, civic engagement, education, and human courage are very important antidotes of those allies. The role of the media and academia cannot be overstressed here.

### **FoRB: Setting the Record Straight**

A significant part of problems around FoRB is caused by incorrect understanding and interpretation of FoRB. Valid international and constitutional law recognize it as freedom of thought, conscience, and religion, because each human person has three essential dimensions: rationality, morality, and spirituality. There is a very deep and strong nexus between religious freedom and the dignity of every person. From this point of view, protection of FoRB is important for all, for people from A to Z (from atheists to Zoroastrians). FoRB covers individual and community dimensions of our living, both private and public domains, and refers to teaching, worship, practice, and observance. Limitations are allowed only when public interest is at stake (public order, security, health, etc.), but they must be lawful, legitimate, and proportionate (necessary) to the said objectives.

FoRB is a central human right, a litmus test of all human rights. It is located in the center of the HRs declarations and covenants (see UDHR, ICCPR). When FoRB is not respected as the deepest expression of an inner personal freedom, subsequent external freedoms (freedom of expression, media, assembly, association, ownership, etc.) will be violated or restricted as well.

Religious literacy is another missing dimension of diplomacy and statecraft today. To live together in pluralist, diverse societies it is an indispensable key competence. Those who do not understand religion and especially

abuse of religion, cannot understand what is going on in the world today. And when we do not understand, how can we define the diagnosis, and how can we successfully heal the wounds of society?

### **Civic Engagement**

The best and the most efficient type of civic engagement is a combination of hardworking, teamworking, and networking with like-minded individuals, communities, and organizations.

The universality of HRs represents universality of solidarity. József Tischner, inspirational figure of the famous Polish workers movement *Solidarność*, said: “Either solidarity is universal, or none. Fractional solidarity is not a solidarity.” We are all part of and live in one humanity. Therefore, we are all invited (UDHR) to behave in the spirit of brotherhood. Global Religious Freedom Movement and RF Climate Change need both FoRB Defenders and FoRB Builders.

Education in cultural competences, communication skills, and religious literacy is a must in today’s world of conflicts and tensions, migration, and wars.

If we want to discover root causes of today’s situation and worrying trends, we must dig deeper. Roots are invisible or less visible, but decisive. Values and virtues are like fruits and roots of a good tree. Rights and duties are two sides of the same coin, like freedom and responsibility. Balance is where two sides are equally respected and promoted. Crisis comes with a disbalance, loss of equilibrium. Future is born through giving and sacrifice, not through consumption. For such ethics true virtues are necessary, especially in the leadership of society and institutions of power.

### **Human Dignity and FoRB**

As I stated earlier, there is a nexus and interdependence between human dignity and FoRB. Therefore, deeper understanding of FoRB comes with reflection on human dignity. Our dignity nurtures three dimensions of being: individual, relational, and social. Every person is at the same time *homo rationalis*, *homo moralis*, and *homo religiosus*.

The Universal Declaration of Human Rights, the UN founding document from 1948, mentions dignity five times! Dignity is a fact from which our inalienable rights and duties are derived. More than 160 Constitutions in the world refer to human dignity, including the Constitution of India, the most populous country in the world (Preamble, 1947).

But how much are our citizens and adolescents—our future citizens—taught about human dignity and dimensions of religious freedom? Education is life itself, not a preparation for life only. Therefore, we must promote life-long learning.

In December 2018, at the 70th anniversary of the UDHR adoption, the Punta del Este Declaration on Human Dignity for Everyone Everywhere was signed and published ([www.dignityforeveryone.org](http://www.dignityforeveryone.org)). This 10-point document is supported by hundreds of personalities from academic, political, religious, and civic areas of life. The Declaration is still open to additional signatories.

The logical next step of this initiative is a potential UN General Assembly resolution on Human Dignity Day. This would allow us to clearly recommit to the foundational principle of our universal and fundamental human rights and freedoms, together with our responsibilities. The Diplomacies of Uruguay, Kenya, and Gambia announced they were ready to co-sponsor such a draft proposal to the UN General Assembly. This would definitely help to educate more about the meaning, value, and respect of human dignity. If there are some additional countries (governments, leaders) ready to join this noble initiative, please let me know.

Dignity is the highest worth of a human person, transcending the whole material world! A culture of human dignity building on ancient silver and golden ethical principles is visibly needed today. Equal dignity is a moral principle. This should be translated via legislation and rule of law into a socio-political principle of equal citizenship. In many countries it is still a problem. Religious or ethnic minorities suffer from intolerance or discrimination. Equality before law is missing.

The ideal of a modern, non-tribal society is “Unity in diversity.” It is based on the constructional, defining principle of humanity: We are all equal in dignity, but all different in identity. Dignity is a fact, and our human rights and human duties are only derived from dignity.

I would like to conclude with an invitation to speak and work for Religious Freedom Climate Change and to build a Global Religious Freedom Movement! I can assure you that our era, the XXI century, will become more humane and more peaceful than the current conflicts and violent trends signal and warn us.

Courage and wisdom, cooperation and coordination of the like-minded, joint actions, and perseverance are needed!

## References

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