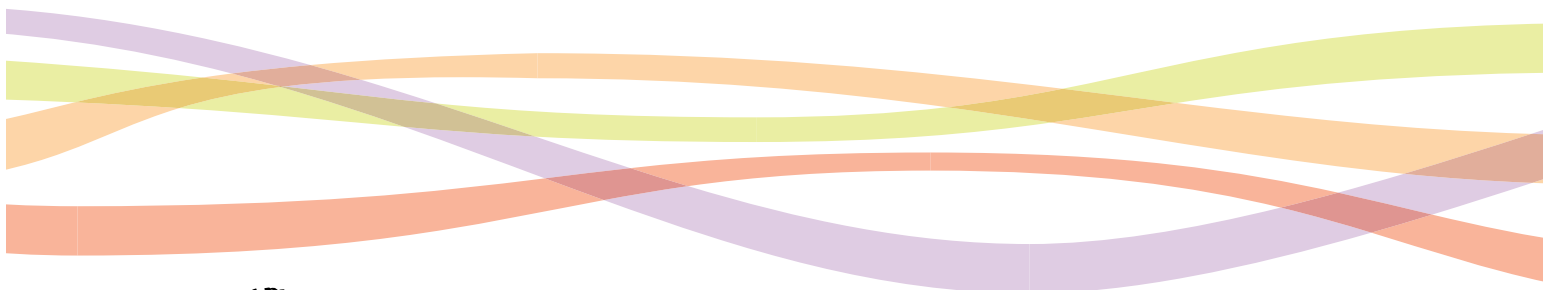


Freedom of Religion or Belief

A guide to biblical insights



World Council
of Churches

FREEDOM OF RELIGION OR BELIEF

A guide to biblical insights

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WCC Publications

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Introduction

Religious tolerance for peaceful co-existence in society is a must if humankind is to flourish. Yet, minorities who hold different beliefs from the majority are often perceived as a threat, then are stigmatized and used as scapegoats, creating unfounded and irrational fears.

The challenge for Christians is how to overcome the fear of those whose beliefs or appearance are different from ours. The three co-authors of this guide believe that Christianity offers conceptual and practical tools to meet the challenge. Together, the authors offer an introduction to a biblical understanding of human rights and the basics of freedom of religion or belief as a human right for all.

How to use this guide

This guide is intended to foster Christian growth in understanding of the right to freedom of religion or belief (FoRB) and to help Christians learn why it is necessary to put this freedom into practice. The guide is designed for reflection and exploration, alone or with others. The three sections offer information and reflection, followed by questions for exploration and suggested actions. Each section can also be used as an independent unit.

The guide can be used with other components of the [FoRB Learning Platform](#), which contains training materials on freedom of religion or belief and explains how you can work to promote it.

A. How does the Bible speak of human rights?

Human rights are for all human beings, whatever our nationality, place of residence, sex, national or ethnic origin, skin colour, religion, language, or any other status. These rights are about politics, law, ethics, and morals – about human relationships – and are foundational to freedom of religion or belief.

Reflection

There is no point trying to find a reference to “human rights” or “freedom of religion or belief” in the Bible: such references don’t exist there. But although these words and concepts are not in the Bible, it can be argued that the ideas behind them are biblical. The Universal Declaration of Human Rights is based on human dignity, equality, freedom, reason, and conscience. It declares the sacredness of freedom of both thought and religion: the right to teach, practise, and observe one’s religion or belief in an environment of friendship and “brotherhood.” Biblical principles and Christian theologians influenced the writing of the declaration, and these principles still speak powerfully to the development of human rights. The principles include ideas about the nature of humankind, the culture of “brotherhood,” dignity, conscience, and the freedom to worship, teach, and observe one’s religion or belief without fear.

1. Human Dignity

All human beings are born free and equal in dignity and rights. They are endowed with reason and conscience and should act towards one another in a spirit of brotherhood.
(Universal Declaration of Human Rights, Article 1)

Bible teaching

The creation story is the bedrock for Christian ethics and what it means to be a person. We are made in the image and likeness of God and regarded as equal before God and each other. This equality includes gender. It means that “To torture a human being is to torture a creature whose nature he or she shares with the Second Person of the Trinity.”¹ Murder is therefore “a direct attack

1. Nicholas Wolterstorff, *Journey Toward Justice* (Baker Academic: Grand Rapids, Mich., 2013), 139.

on God's dominion. Every murderer confronts God."² From this perspective flow ideas about dignity, reason, conscience, freedom, and equality before God and with other people. In the above text from Acts, which is set in the Areopagus, a religiously diverse centre of temples, cultural facilities, and a high court, Paul tells people that they all come from God. God's concern for everyone has everything to do with who we *all* are.

FOR EXPLORATION

- Do you find it easy to recognize the image of God in people who follow a different religion? How can we show others that we recognize and acknowledge God's image in them?
- How can your community promote the spirit of solidarity in your area?

FOR ACTION

- Pray for those whose human dignity is violated: that they will feel that what has been taken from them has been restored.
- Pray that God will show you ways to help those who are suffering violations.

2. Universalism

Bible teaching

The people God had in mind when he made the rainbow covenant were not Noah and his sons, but the people who didn't have a relationship with God, who had been the objects of his wrath, now to be protected by a universal covenant. Later, God's covenant with Abraham is intended for "all the families of the earth" (Genesis 12:3). Here are glimpses of God's intentions to include everyone in the common good.

The answer to the question about how to inherit eternal life fuses two of the most sacred laws: Love God, and love your neighbour as yourself.³ When Jesus was asked for a definition of "neighbour," he told the story of the Good Samaritan (Luke 10:29-37). A Samaritan from a religious background diametri-

Reflection: The Bible and human dignity

Genesis 1:26a, 27: Then God said, "Let us make humankind in our image, according to our likeness. . . ." So God created humankind in his own image, in the image of God he created them; male and female he created them.

Genesis 9:6: "Whoever sheds the blood of a human, by a human shall that person's blood be shed; for in his own image God made humankind."

Acts 17:25b, 28: . . . he himself gives to all mortals life and breath and all things. . . . For "In him we live and move and have our being"; as even some of your own poets have said, "For we too are his offspring."

2. Claus Westermann, *Isaiah 40–66: A Commentary* (London: SCM Press, 1926), 468.

3. Luke 10:27 brings together two of the most revered Old Testament teachings of the *Shema* (Deut. 6:4-6) and the prelude to the Leviticus version of the commandments (Lev. 19:18). In Matt. 22:34-40 and Mark 12:28-31, these two teachings are distinguished from each other.

cally opposed to Judaism showed what it meant to be a good neighbour by reaching out to a stranger who had been abused and stripped of his dignity and was in need of help.

God is looking for people who will inherit the kingdom: those who feed the hungry, clothe the naked, give water to the thirsty, and visit the prisoner. Here, *the least of these who are members of my family* must surely point to people who need support in gaining access to the most basic human rights, no matter what their race or beliefs.

FOR EXPLORATION

- Do you feel comfortable or uneasy about everyone having equal rights, regardless of their religion or beliefs?
- Can you relate to the teaching above? How can you implement this teaching in your community?

FOR ACTION

- Watch the film *Introduction to freedom of religion or belief*.

3. Justice

Bible teaching

The Judeo-Christian understanding of justice makes it particularly relevant for a theology of freedom of religion or belief: it is *inclusive*, *comprehensive*, and *transcendent*.

In the Old Testament, the word *mishpat* – Hebrew for “justice” – occurs over 400 times. It offers a profound and transformative approach to justice that is associated with ideas of mercy, as in Micah 6:8. Biblical justice demands “acquitting or punishing every person on the merit of the case, regardless of race or social status. . . . But *mishpat* means more than just punishment of wrongdoing. It also means to give people their rights.”⁴

Reflection: The Bible and universalism

Genesis 9:12-13: “This is the sign of the covenant that I make between me and you and every living creature that is with you, for all future generations: I have set my bow in the clouds, and it shall be a sign of the covenant between me and the earth.”

Luke 10:25-28: Just then a lawyer stood up to test Jesus. “Teacher,” he said, “what must I do to inherit eternal life?” He said to him, “What is written in the law? What do you read there?” He answered, “‘You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your strength, and with all your mind; and your neighbour as yourself.’” And he said to him, “You have given the right answer; do this, and you will live.”

Matthew 25:40: “And the king will answer them, ‘Truly I tell you, just as you did it to one of the least of these who are members of my family, you did it to me.’”

4. Tim Keller, *Generous Justice* (London: Hodder & Stoughton, 2010).

The universality and inclusivity of justice

At the very dawn of the Jewish community's consciousness, justice was mandated for the foreigner as much as for the covenant people of Israel.

The moral code of inclusive international justice was written into the basic assumptions of biblical justice. In this way the covenant people would become "a light to the nations" (Is. 42:6; 49:6). This universal application of justice was summed up by Jesus in his Sermon on the Mount. When Jesus taught about persecution, he reminded the crowd that God is good to the just and the unjust alike.

Comprehensive and holistic justice

Importantly, we see in the Bible that justice was understood as the integration of *holiness*, *righteousness*, and *justice*. There was to be no distance between these ideals. The Old Testament clearly demonstrates a very strong parallelism between "righteousness" and "justice" (Ps. 11:7; 6:6; 50:6; 72:1; 89:14; Prov. 8:20; 29:26; Is. 33:5).

If "holiness" is understood as our vertical relationship with God, then "righteousness" may be understood as the communal expression of that holiness, and "justice" may be understood as God's mandate to dismantle institutional injustices. This relationship between justice and righteousness is particularly emphasized in Isaiah's prophetic work, which speaks so much about justice (Is. 1:21, 27; 5:7; 58:3-10).

In Isaiah 5:16, holiness, righteousness, and justice are held in equal balance in the English translations of the Bible: "But the Lord of hosts is exalted by justice, and the Holy God shows himself holy by righteousness."

Justice and transcendence

When Christians approach the right of freedom of religion or belief – and other matters of justice – they are conscious of their obligations to act within the rule of law and judicial systems, but even more importantly, to act from a deep conviction that universal justice expresses who God is and is a distinguishing character of God's kingdom (Is. 9:7; 42:1-6; 51:5).

Along with the powerful passages from Isaiah, this link between God and the reign of justice is echoed especially in the Psalms.

Biblical justice means that Christians are obliged to pursue justice beyond narrow tribalism, nationalism, or religious sectarianism.

Reflection: The Bible and the concept of justice

Deuteronomy 27:19: "Cursed be anyone who deprives the alien, the orphan, and the widow of justice."

Leviticus 24:22: "You shall have one law for the alien and for the citizen: for I am the Lord your God."

Matthew 5:45: "He makes his sun rise on the evil and on the good, and sends rain on the righteous and on the unrighteous."

Psalms 45:6: "Your throne, O God, endures forever and ever. Your royal scepter is a scepter of equity. . ."

Psalms 89:14: "Righteousness and justice are the foundation of your throne; steadfast love and faithfulness go before you."

Psalms 97:2: "Clouds and thick darkness are all around him; righteousness and justice are the foundation of his throne."

4. Freedom

Bible teaching

The Bible's salvation history appears powerfully in the well-known account of the exodus (Ex. 3–15). The importance God placed on freedom clearly shows that freedom is a precondition for life to flourish, as exemplified in the exodus.

Isaiah's "suffering servant" – meaning Jesus – suffered for *everyone*. This means that the servant who bore "sins" and "sorrows" endures "all that mars our lives, disappointments, bereavement, tragedy, whatever."⁵ What is especially important is that this is *innocent suffering* for everyone. As numerous passages point out, gratuitous suffering is condemned in the Bible.⁶

Jesus' ministry shows that good news to the poor, freedom from prison, sight to the blind, and freedom for the oppressed have no reference to ethnicity, race, or creed.

FOR EXPLORATION

An influx of asylum seekers came to Europe in the fall of 2015, most of them fleeing war and extremist violence in Iraq, Syria, Afghanistan, and Somalia. Europeans treated the newcomers with a mixture of welcome and rejection. Many who needed protection from war were not granted asylum – among them people from majority religions, persecuted members of minority religions and beliefs, and many who converted to a new religion or belief in Europe, a choice that has life-threatening implications in several countries of origin.

- How can we bring the good news of freedom to the oppressed and needy? Think of concrete examples.

FOR ACTION

- Pray for those whose freedom is severely compromised by persecution.
- Advocate for them and be prepared to challenge harsh state decisions.

Reflection: The Bible, salvation, and the mission of God

Exodus 12:31-32: Then [Pharaoh] summoned Moses and Aaron in the night, and said, "Rise up, go away from my people, both you and the Israelites! Go, worship the Lord, as you said. Take your flocks and your herds, as you said, and be gone. And bring a blessing on me too!"

Isaiah 53:12: Therefore I will allot him a portion with the great, and he shall divide the spoil with the strong; because he poured out himself to death, and was numbered with the transgressor; yet he bore the sin of many, and made intercession for the transgressors.

Luke 4:18-19: Jesus reads in the synagogue from the scroll of Isaiah: "The Spirit of the Lord is upon me, because he has anointed me to bring good news to the poor. He has sent me to proclaim release to the captives and recovery of sight to the blind, to let the oppressed go free, to proclaim the year of the Lord's favour."

5. Alec Motyer, *The Prophecy of Isaiah* (Leicester, UK: InterVarsity Press, 1993), 431.

6. Ex. 23:7, 8; Deut. 19:10-13; 2 Kings 21:16; 24:4; Jer. 7:6; 19:4; Amos 2:6

5. Freedom to have, choose, change, or leave a religion

The right to freedom of religion or belief includes “freedom to change [one’s] religion or belief.”⁷ “No one shall be subject to coercion which would impair [one’s] freedom to have or to adopt a religion or belief of [one’s] choice.”⁸ Freedom from coercion also means that individuals have the freedom to choose for themselves the manner in which they practise their religion or belief.⁹ The right to choose and change may never be limited.¹⁰ Sadly, coercion, or forcing people to act against their own will, is very common. Today, almost 80 per cent of the world’s population experiences some degree of religious repression: although Christians are persecuted more than those of most other faiths, people of all faiths experience religious persecution. This includes atheists who defend human rights freedoms.

Bible teaching

The story in Genesis of being cast out of the garden of Eden is based on a critical human faculty: the power and freedom to choose. The freedom to choose is a fundamental biblical principle, even where there appear to be limited options to choose between. The “Eden principle” reappears through the witness of scripture. Joshua asks the people to choose between God and other gods (Josh. 24:15), and Elijah offers a dramatic choice between the Lord and the gods of Baal (1 Kings 18:16-39).

This principle continues into the New Testament as a two-way proposition. Christians are chosen, but equally may choose to follow Jesus or to walk away from him (John 6:66-70; 13:18; Luke 18:28). Jesus loved a wealthy man who refused to follow him (Mark 10:17-31), and Paul lamented the fact that Demas left the faith (2 Tim. 4:10). The Bible includes clear references to the freedom to choose, practise, or change one’s religion or belief, and offers a clear view of what the right choice should be. Yet, from Eden to Demas the message is consistent: people should be free to choose, even where that choice takes them away from fellowship with God. Church history has not always been faithful to this truth, but the biblical view is that people are free to choose to reject God.

7. Universal Declaration of Human Rights, Article 18, clause 2. Article 18 states in full: “Everyone has the right to freedom of thought, conscience and religion; this right includes freedom to change his [or her] religion or belief, and freedom, either alone or in community with others and in public or private, to manifest his [or her] religion or belief in teaching, practice, worship and observance.”

8. [International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights, Article 18, paragraph 2.](#)

9. Swedish Mission Council, *What Freedom of Religion Involves and When It Can Be Limited: A Quick Guide to Religious Freedom* (2010).

10. Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights, General Comment No. 22: The right to freedom of thought and religion (30 July 1993).

FOR EXPLORATION

In Sierra Leone, Muslims from different branches within Islam, Christians of different traditions, and traditional African spiritualists live together in an amicable culture of peace and harmony at both family and public levels. Conversions from Islam to Christianity and vice versa are common. The Inter-Religious Council of Sierra Leone has been a pivotal peace builder following the cruel civil war.¹¹

- Is there freedom to choose one's religion or belief in your country?
- What are the benefits of free choice? How can we promote and raise awareness of this right?

FOR ACTION

- Watch the films *The right to have or change your religion or belief* and *Protection from coercion*.

Reflection: Freedom to choose

Genesis 3:9-11: The Lord God called to the man, and said to him, "Where are you?" He said, "I heard the sound of you in the garden, and I was afraid, because I was naked; and I hid myself." He said, "Who told you that you were naked? Have you eaten from the tree of which I commanded you not to eat?"

6. Defending human dignity

Through our brief overview, it becomes clear that the Bible has an investment in what people have to say about human dignity and what it means to be human.

Reflection: Christian response

Some scholars highlight that freedom of religion or belief is conducive to healthy and richer societies. According to these studies, this freedom builds respect and trust between peoples and employees, gives voice to religious and ethical thinking, defuses religion-related tensions and conflicts, reduces corruption, encourages broader freedoms, allows religious groups to develop the economy positively, and helps overcome overregulation and coercive laws.¹²

Christians who support persecuted Christians are carrying out a biblical mandate of keeping the salt and light in society. Christians who defend people of other faiths powerfully reflect the mind of God, who made everyone

11. Report of the Special Rapporteur on freedom of religion or belief, Heiner Bielefeldt, A/HRC/25/58/Add.1, Addendum, Mission to the Republic of Sierra Leone.

12. [Research summary](#) by The Religious Freedom & Business Foundation. Sociologist Robert Woodberry points to the association of proselytizing Protestant faiths with economic development throughout the world in the previous century. Alexis de Tocqueville recognized that such Protestant associations in the early history of the United States of America established seminaries, constructed inns, created churches, disseminated books, and founded hospitals, prisons, and schools.

in God's own image. Christians who join human rights activists in defending even an atheist's freedom to blog against oppressive regimes affirm God's gift of choice and maintain the flow of freedom of conscience and speech, which is critical to just communities.

In the public communication between people, words have an important part to play. How we describe fair play and decency in our global village remains important. Human rights have become a common reference point of our time, and Christians have a responsibility to learn and make ethical demands in this language. Only if we engage in this debate, as Paul did in Athens, can we create space for churches.

The restoration of faith's legacy is at the heart of the human rights agenda. The Universal Declaration of Human Rights and its Article 18 on freedom of religion or belief are, in part, the product of faith communities at the time. The World Council of Churches, through its Commission of the Churches on International Affairs, actively brought the voice of churches into the drafting process of the declaration; the commission's first director, Frederick O. Nolde, was one of the drafters of Article 18.¹³ Today, an important task of Christians and of our faith communities is to remind everyone that freedom of religion or belief is intrinsic to human rights and should be respected at local, national, and international levels.

FOR EXPLORATION

- Discuss how freedom of religion or belief can benefit your country.

FOR ACTION

- Preach, teach, and pray (in church and in public) for human dignity, freedom, and freedom of religion or belief to become reality for all.
- Demand that decision makers in your country promote freedom of religion or belief.
- Watch the film *The right to manifest (practice) religion or belief*.

13. Report of the workshop "Religion and Religious Freedom in International Diplomacy (22–23 September 2016)," organized by the United Nations Special Rapporteur on freedom of religion or belief in collaboration with the World Council of Churches and Finnish Ecumenical Council.

B. What do history and the Bible teach us about living in peace with others?

1. Discrimination, intolerance, and violence

History records waves of discrimination, intolerance, and violence against members of one religion by members of another religion. Discrimination, intolerance, and violence also often occur between different groups *within* religions. Economic and political factors regularly underlie these conflicts, with some groups and individuals using religion to provoke conflict.

The many examples of such behaviour include the post-Reformation violence among Christian denominations in Europe, the Dutch persecution of Roman Catholics in colonial Sri Lanka, and the current persecution of Ahmadiyya Muslims in Pakistan.

In the aftermath of the Second World War, recognition of the human capacity for structural aggression and destruction led to the drafting of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights in 1948. The declaration sets out ideals and standards of behaviour that are meant to eliminate oppression, violence, and discrimination and to safeguard the freedom of all people.

FOR EXPLORATION

In Matthew 5:44, Jesus says: “I say to you, Love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you.”

- Who would Jesus want you to love and pray for in your context?

FOR ACTION

- Pray for people facing discrimination and persecution because of their religion or belief.
- Pray that Jesus will reveal himself to those who discriminate, violate, and persecute. Ask Jesus to transform their minds and hearts as Paul’s heart was transformed.

2. Freedom of religion or belief in the Universal Declaration of Human Rights / International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights

Freedom of religion or belief is the freedom to *practise* one's religion or belief, the freedom to *change* religion or belief, and the right to *teach* one's religion or belief. It is connected to freedom of thought and conscience and is expressed through the right to choose or give up a religion. It requires that political elites, legislators, and policy makers put in place laws that protect religious diversity.

Reflection: Why is freedom of religion or belief important?

Freedom of religion or belief exists at two levels: an individual has freedom of conscience that no tyrant or discriminatory law may restrict, and has the right to express their beliefs; and groups have the right to engage in activities that reflect their traditions, practices, ways of gathering, concept of sacred spaces, and lifestyle choices.

These freedoms of worship, observance, and practice may be limited by the state only under very narrowly and exhaustively defined conditions. In the UK, for example, these must be “prescribed by law and are *necessary in a democratic society in the interests of public safety, for the protection of public order, health or morals, or for the protection of the rights and freedoms of others.*”¹⁴

FOR EXPLORATION

- Watch the film *The right to manifest (practice) religion or belief*.

FOR ACTION

- How can you promote this right in your context?

3. Violations of freedom of religion or belief

According to recent studies, 84 percent of the world's population identifies with a religious faith. Simultaneously, in the year 2015, 79 percent of the world's population lived in countries with high levels of restrictions on or violations of freedom of religion or belief. Violations take two forms: government restrictions and social hostilities. Not all religious or faith groups or individuals are affected in the same way, as violations usually target specific groups.

14. [The Human Rights Act \(UK\) 1988, Article 9.](#)

Examples of violations of freedom of religion or belief and their causes

- **The political inclination to favour majority religious communities** in democratic systems of governance to ensure a consolidation of political power in return. This leads to grievances within the ranks of those who suffer discrimination as a result. In Malaysia, for example, the majority Muslim citizens benefit from the *Bhoomi putra* (sons of the soil) policy, from which Christian and Hindu citizens are excluded.
- **Legitimate economic growth in religious minorities** creates animosity and violent reaction from the majority community. For instance, much of the anti-Muslim sentiment in predominantly Buddhist Sri Lanka today is provoked by resentment towards the entrepreneurial skills, business acumen, and resulting economic achievements of the smaller Muslim community.
- **Entrenched historical privileges** in some societies suggest a religious bias when these societies become religiously diverse and the same privileges are not granted to newcomers. In the United Kingdom, for example, all religions are recognized as being equal before the law, but the conventional presence of a number of bishops as ex-officio members of the House of Lords conveys a disproportionate privilege.
- **The fear of difference within societies** often emerges when the dominant class or community perceives a threat to its entrenched ideals. This fear is often a reaction to a different set of values or way of life – real or perceived. An example of this fear of difference in South Asia would be the perception that the minority Christian community has a liberal stance on public concerns such as gender rights and human sexuality that the rest of society is not willing to accept.
- **Religious nationalism or extremism** occurs where a majority religion receives some level of state endorsement to its claims to have the supreme truth. Other religions are then considered less authentic, misleading, and even a source of contamination, making their adherents subject to harassment and restrictions. Pakistan's blasphemy law is an extreme example of the violation of minority religious groups such as Hindus, Christians, Druze, and Ahmadiyya. It is often used to settle personal differences without a just hearing. While the majority of convictions are made against Sunni Muslims, all minorities are affected.
- **Authoritarian regimes** often seek to control all aspects of the life of society, including religious communities. Organized religious activity can be viewed as a potential challenge to the leadership, which results in the banning of gathering for worship, infiltrating security people within religious communities, and detentions of adherents of particular communities.

FOR EXPLORATION

- Does your country or community face any situation similar to those outlined above?
- How would you describe the situation of freedom of religion or belief in your country/area?

Old Testament Reflection:

Read these biblical texts, then explore them using the questions that follow.

The covenants: Gen. 9:8-17; 17:1-22; Ex. 2:23-24; Josh. 24:19-28;
Jer. 31:31-34; 32:36-44

In all the covenants of the Bible, the promise is that humans will be blessed with the fruit and goodness of the earth if they honour the laws of creation and accept their obligation to God for righteous relations and values. Where there is harmony and freedom and no one harms, exploits, or abuses the other, the rights of all are safeguarded. It is in this mutuality of human obligations that we catch a glimpse of the objective of international covenants and charters, where freedom of religion or belief clearly means freedom, justice, and peace.

The prophets: Amos 2:6-7; 3:1-5; 5:4, 14-15; 8:4-8

The prophets stress that the aggressive greed of the rich ruling class is the cause of human rights violations. The clamour for dignity and freedom therefore comes from the crushed and marginalized poor. The Christian response is to compel violators to repentance, accountability, and a better social order. Where a righteous and just compromise occurs between violator and victim, the prophetic vision of inclusive reconciliation is realized. Righteousness in the Bible means to live with respect for God, neighbour, and nature: the fruits of righteousness are freedom, justice, and peace for all.

The Sabbath–Jubilee covenant: Lev. 25

Given the extreme disparities in opportunities and wealth, and given the human tendency to exploit, this covenant requires a periodic review and a return to social justice (the emancipation of all slaves), economic justice (the cancellation of all debts), and eco-justice (the time for restoration of creation). This covenant calls us to do justice by our neighbour and all creation and to return to communion with God.

Within the United Nations system there is a periodic review of all States. The Universal Periodic Review, which examines human rights situations in all countries, might be seen as reflecting the pattern of the Jubilee review, with the objective of giving an account of the extent to which our mutual obligations of creating a safe, just, and reconciled world have been realized. Calls

for accountability are not interference: they safeguard human rights. When addressed with discernment, wisdom, and humility, accountability exposes the absence of freedom and the need for respect of the rights of each person for the common good.

FOR EXPLORATION

- How can our communities implement the biblical covenants in multi-faith societies?
- What sort of regular reviews does your community have to check that people are being treated in a just and fair manner?

FOR ACTION

- Watch the film *Protection from coercion*. How does it apply to your society?
- Study the short WCC document “[Christian Witness in a Multi-Religious World](#).”

4. Reconciliation

Religion and belief-based organizations and movements play an important role in the realization of human rights. Religions and beliefs contain spiritual values that, when best expressed, are unique in their ability to elevate human dignity and ensure human rights. Diversity of values that arise from religions, beliefs, and cultures is a key to democracy.

New Testament Reflection

Universal naming of victims: Matt. 25:31-13-46

In this passage, Jesus names the universal victims of structural violence as those who lack fundamental rights and freedoms: the hungry, the naked, and the imprisoned. It is these harsh realities that rob people of their human value and freedom and, on the positive side, activate selfless service in other humans. Such selfless service amounts to a spontaneous spirituality that operates outside formal covenants, schemes, and systems and is motivated by the plight of the victims and by their right to be liberated from these humiliations. Those who serve selflessly are oblivious to self-gratification or reward. When one person recognizes the humanity of another person, both individuals reach their fullest human stature, and God is pleased.

Vocation and the cross: Matt. 5:38-42

In the Sermon on the Mount (Matt. 5–7), Jesus offers more insights on human obligations. In calling on us to go a second mile with someone who asks us to travel one mile with them, or to offer an additional garment to someone who asks for one garment, he reminds us of faithful consistency: our work for the well-being of the other can never be piecemeal or selective. In telling us to offer the other cheek when someone strikes us, Jesus is most radical. In hostile circumstances, we are to remain in striking distance, as this is the same distance for the embrace of reconciliation. The possibility of being repeatedly hurt and harassed is the cost of engaging in selfless service. Here we get a glimpse of the cross – the hardship and suffering that can come from obedience. The work of selfless service is fraught with risk and danger.

Vulnerable servants: Matt. 13:24-30

Finally, the parable of the wheat and weeds calls us to be honest. We are all a mix of wheat and weeds, and so no one has the right to be self-righteous. We are all vulnerable and prone to oppressive and selfish ways. The key lies in being aware of this condition and moving forward with humility rather than being blind to the plank in our eye and turning arrogant and haughty. Jesus' method of dealing with our tendency to be oppressive is self-scrutiny. We are to acknowledge, recognize, and work on these tendencies, so that as transformed and yet vulnerable people aware of our inadequacies, we can become people who address social discrepancies in favour of the well-being of all.

FOR EXPLORATION

- Do you see potential in the examples below for transforming the people of God into supporters of freedom of religion or belief in God's world? How?

Living respectfully with others: We are best able to live respectfully with others when we understand and commit ourselves to the following Christian values and practices:

1. Human dignity: The fulfillment and the fullness of human stature is a major motif of the Bible. This is seen in the pivotal links between the image of God in humans and the love we must show our neighbour.

2. Freedom: The Bible is forthright that freedom and dignity depend on our human obligation to protect and serve the well-being of all life. The Bible stresses the unconditional value of human individuals and community, and the fulfillment that service brings us.

3. Selfless service: Jesus elaborates on the value of the human and the human obligation of selfless service. The encounter with God obliges us to engage with our neighbour in a life-giving way. The obligation of selfless service (*agape* love) that Jesus taught and lived calls us to create an interdependent community in which each person cares for the other and both grow in

the midst of the flawed circumstances, which international declarations and covenants seek to eliminate.

4. Sustainable peace: When we see the value of each person, it generates the energy needed to sustain actions that address and overcome the humiliation and violation of life. Our actions help to establish social order, trust, and harmony by retaining the well-being of humans and all living things.

5. Rule of law: Covenants, laws, and constitutions serve a purpose: without them, societies end up in chaos. However, we are never to forget that in the hands of tyrants and powerful ruling classes, the best laws can be manipulated for selfish gain; this is true of international declarations and covenants as well. In practice, therefore, the teaching of Jesus serves as the non-negotiable ingredient that shapes and undergirds all charters and covenants and constitutions.

6. Awareness raising: We are to expand the influence of mutual human obligation in widening circles at regional and global levels. This means churches are to teach and encourage awareness of international covenants on human rights and freedom of religion or belief as well as to develop in our congregations the ethic of compassionate justice in current affairs in local, regional, and global spheres.

7. Freedom to practise religion: The gospel radicalizes our understanding of the freedom to practise religion and the freedom to exercise our obligation of selfless service. Freedom of religion or belief releases persons and communities to engage in compassionate justice where true freedom belongs.

8. Inclusivity: Promoting freedom of religion or belief is not the monopoly of the religious, as secular persons have the same obligation.

C: How Christians can promote freedom of religion or belief

1. Calling to promote freedom of religion or belief

According to the Orthodox theological scholar Rev. Dr Emmanuel Clapsis, “The Christian churches in their ecumenical fellowship and in their desire to manifest their unity in Christ have recognized that their faithfulness to the gospel demands their active participation and contribution in collaborative efforts towards the building of a culture of peace. The awareness that religious beliefs and practices in some instances can be interpreted and used to accentuate differences and generate violence has led them to search for ways to remain faithful to their particularities and at the same time to embrace others – at least in the public realm of life – with a sense of justice and recognition of their difference.” Denial of differences can lead to atrocities, such as those experienced in Europe during the Holocaust. Even where people have different religions or no religion, they have human dignity which must be respected for a society to progress with democratic values, pluralism, and religious tolerance and peace.

2. Freedom of religion or belief brings peace, security, and economic sustainability

The promotion and protection of religious freedom or belief is important for peaceful co-existence in society. International human rights law declares that “recognition of the inherent dignity and of the equal and inalienable rights of all members of the human family is the foundation of freedom, justice and peace in the world.”¹⁵

Where human rights and religious freedom are not well established in society, peaceful co-existence is almost impossible to achieve. Where there is no clear legal framework protecting the freedom of religion or belief, and no general understanding in communities of the importance of that freedom, religion can become a tool for political purposes. Double standards might result whereby those in power give preferential treatment to others of the

15. [Preamble, International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights.](#)

same religion as themselves and turn a blind eye to abuses and violations being committed against those of different religions.

The interference of religion in politics, and vice versa, is all too common. Some politicians are known to misuse the influence of religious leaders and communities to obtain political support during election campaigns, which can be harmful to both the political system and religious communities. In his book *Religion, Power, Politics*, former World Council of Churches General Secretary Konrad Raiser describes the relationship between religion and politics as being the subject of heated debate, with concerns about this in the Muslim world dating from the Iranian Revolution of 1979; he also observes that despite the constitutional separation of church and state in the United States, conservative Christian positions have exercised direct influence on government policy.¹⁶

How religious communities can make a difference to ethics and the economy

The greater the levels of inequality in a country, and the higher the risk of poverty, the more fertile the ground for conflict. Conflict creates massive economic impacts, both within a country's borders and for its neighbours. A strong human rights culture protects society from conflict situations, ensuring a positive climate for economic investment and growth.

People are often faced with what appears to be a choice between ethics and economic development. However, choosing the path of ethical behaviour and treating the other in the way we would like to be treated ourselves ultimately contributes to the stability of a nation and invariably leads to greater benefits in terms of economic development. In this respect, religions have an important role in using both their voices and the ethical tools at their disposal to address corruption, which is a major obstacle to prosperity and economic development.

Members of religious communities (such as parishes, seminaries, councils of churches, and ecumenical advocacy networks) can contribute to creating spaces for economic development through bringing ethical perspectives, which are needed as deterrents against greed, exploitation, and the use of people as merely a means for accumulating wealth.

FOR EXPLORATION

- To what extent do we examine the requirements of our religious beliefs before making political decisions?
- How can we be reconciled with those who share our beliefs but make different political choices?

16. Konrad Raiser, *Religion, Power, Politics* (Geneva: WCC Publications, 2013).

3. Discrimination and persecution on the basis of religion

Religious tolerance is essential to creating and maintaining peaceful social communities. The abuse of religion for political purposes deprives any society of the peace to which the whole human family deeply aspires.

How Christians can overcome the fear of those who are different

Christian theology puts at the centre of its teaching the protection of the human dignity of every single individual. The foundational rationale for this is that human beings are created in the image of God: “So God created humankind in his image, in the image of God he created them; male and female he created them” (Gen. 1:27). This idea or principle is expressed in Article 1 of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights: “All human beings are born free and equal in dignity and rights. They are endowed with reason and conscience and should act towards one another in a spirit of brotherhood.” Theology and human rights law stand together for the principle of the protection of human dignity and non-discrimination.

If religious freedom is attacked by state or non-state actors, it directly affects the dignity of individuals and of whole communities and puts their properties and places of worship at risk. Let us simply remember here the violence and violation of human rights in Syria and in Iraq. In those countries, people are persecuted daily because of their religion and beliefs. They suffer arbitrary killing and execution, disappearance, torture, and sexual violence. The dignity of all those people and therefore the image of God is demeaned.

In this and so many other situations around the world, the church has a great responsibility to help its members fight for their rights. It must ensure the promotion of equality and non-discrimination in society. It should stand for democratic and pluralistic societies where each person has a voice. Where Christians constitute the majority of the population, these values should be actively promoted. Those who believe that they are created in the image of God have a great responsibility to protect that image, not only in themselves but also in others.

In every Orthodox service, the entire community is invited to pray for believers and their communities: “For this parish and city, for every city and country, and for the faithful who live in them. . . .” In the Holy Orthodox Liturgy, the faithful are invited to pray “For travellers by land, sea, and air, for the sick, the suffering, the captives, and for their salvation.” Another example is the invitation of the Orthodox to pray “For our deliverance from all affliction, wrath, danger, and distress.” We may see here that the image of God in people is being assumed and embraced by the entire Orthodox community in various situations of everyday life.

FOR ACTION

- Watch the film *Protection from discrimination* and engage in its discussion points.

4. Action Guide

What parishes and individual Christians can do to promote freedom of religion or belief

On the parish level:

- a) identify victims who are experiencing discrimination or being bullied because of their belief
- b) raise awareness at the local ecumenical level about the need to protect and proactively prevent violation of the dignity of persecuted persons
- c) organize seminars and invite local politicians to address the issue in connection with national legalization, pointing to the fact that there is protection under international law for freedom of religion or belief on this issue
- d) talk to members of the disadvantaged community, especially if your parish is part of the majority church community; this would be a true sign of solidarity
- e) invite local business community leaders to address victims' issues
- f) invite people who are being persecuted on the basis of their religion or belief to explain what they have gone through; pay attention to gender perspective
- g) organize a seminar/training session on freedom of religion or belief to explain this fundamental human right to parishioners
- h) report violations of religious freedom to local, national, regional, and international authorities and to human rights ombudsmen who are dealing with the issue
- i) strengthen cooperation between the church and civil society on human rights
- j) play an active role through ecumenical and interreligious organizations and strengthen the common understanding of the violation of religious freedom or belief
- k) advocate and stand up for the rights of minorities (see the Conference of European Churches' [Charta Oecumenica](#))

What individuals can do with youth and children in the church and community

If you live in a country and community where it is safe to advocate for freedom of religion and belief without reprisals, consider the following activities:

- a) Draw simple posters about the right to have freedom of religion or belief and post them around your area. Ask youth in your church or community to join in.
- b) Create a drama about a common violation in your area and include a way it can be resolved: perform the drama in church, in schools, at community gatherings, etc.
- c) Put new words to a well-known song to show why freedom of religion or belief is important.
- d) Ask someone who has experienced persecution to speak. Find out if they would be willing to speak on local radio (make sure it is safe: no real names should be used).
- e) Ask your pastor or priest to preach on tolerance, freedom of religion or belief, and unity.
- f) If you detect hate speech, report it to your pastor or priest or to another community leader.
- g) Run an awareness-raising campaign with the resources you have, such as speeches or posters.
- h) Establish or take part in interfaith dialogue to build bridges between individuals of different faiths.
- i) Form a youth club to run a freedom of religion or belief campaign for local youth. Let the youth make recommendations about how to improve the situation and invite them to present their ideas in church or in the community.
- j) Invite children of different faiths to play with your children.
- k) Ask a local teacher to talk to students at school about the right to freedom of religion or belief.

Contributors

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