

## Close to Our Hearts: Freedom of Religion or Belief as a Human Right

We, the undersigned, are committed to promoting the right to freedom of religion or belief (FoRB) and have supported this right in different capacities and in various ways across the globe. We are concerned about political or ideological tendencies that obscure the human rights nature of FoRB. With this letter, we wish to reaffirm the status of FoRB as a human right, on a par with other human rights and firmly anchored within the broader international human rights system.

We are concerned about current trends which seek to promote FoRB in isolation or pit it against other human rights. Without denying the legitimacy of specialization in the field of human rights, we reject the construction of abstract normative hierarchies between different rights, which undermine international human rights protection. Moreover, while tensions between different human rights issues can always occur in concrete contexts, it would be dangerously misleading to turn such inevitable tensions into abstract dichotomies. Policies to promote one specific human right with the strategic intention of de-legitimizing or minimizing other human rights will ultimately erode the integrity and normative force of human rights in general.

Dichotomized views, which pit FoRB against other human rights, exist in various ways. For example, some contend that FoRB is inherently in opposition to freedom of expression, thereby obscuring the fact that the two rights have much in common and can mutually reinforce each other. To harness FoRB as an alleged justification of anti-blasphemy laws would mean no less than denying its essential character as a right to freedom. Particularly worrisome at present is the tendency to construct dichotomies between FoRB and rights related to gender equality and non-discrimination. Not only does such a dichotomized approach undermine the indivisibility, interrelatedness and interdependency of all human rights; it also tears apart the life-world of countless people, whose needs, yearnings and vulnerabilities lie in the intersection between FoRB and gender equality, including those who belong to sexual orientation and gender identity minorities. In order to do justice to the various features which together define personal identity, a holistic framework of human rights remains indispensable.

As a human right, FoRB is part and parcel of the international human rights framework, which itself is based on the “recognition of the inherent dignity and of the equal and inalienable rights of all members of the human family” (Universal Declaration of Human Rights, preamble). Notwithstanding this common denominator of all human rights, each of those rights also has its specific features, aims and applications. FoRB plays a crucial role in that it reminds us that human beings can search for meaning in various ways and cherish profound identity-shaping convictions, in conformity with which they may wish to live their lives, as individuals and in community with others. Without adequately recognizing this central dimension of the human condition, human rights would cease to be fully humane.

We therefore pledge our continued commitment to freedom of religion or belief as an inalienable human right, convinced that such a commitment can only be meaningful within the broader human rights approach. In the face of growing political and ideological tendencies towards normative fragmentation, relativism and selectivity, this elementary insight warrants public re-affirmation.

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