

Introduction: Freedom of Religion or Belief as a Human Right

By Heiner Bielefeldt, Thiago Alves Pinto, and Marie Juul Petersen

Abstract: Human rights remain a contested issue in theory and practice. Several scholars have criticized their theoretical underpinnings, and practitioners struggle to enforce these rights. The right to freedom of religion or belief is an integral part of the international human rights framework and, as such, has been criticized alongside human rights in general. Not only that, the right to freedom of religion or belief has been decried or ignored by some human rights defenders, while it has also been mishandled by groups aiming to undermine other human rights. Put simply, freedom of religion or belief is contentious right within the widely challenged field of human rights. Still, we believe that freedom of religion or belief is an inalienable human right, and in this introductory article we present a summary of a diverse range of actors that have in various ways defended this right in their own capacity, all around the world.

Keywords: Human rights; criticism of human rights; freedom of religion or belief; religious freedom

Human rights remain a heavily contested issue, with challenges coming from quite different angles. Whereas in the eyes of some critics, the establishment of international normative standards is a manifestation of sheer hubris (Posner 2014), others lament the absence of genuine moral vision and normative ambition (Moyn 2018). Representatives of post-colonial studies have argued that human rights merely conceal the ongoing hegemony of Western countries (Mignolo 2009), while feminists have pointed to male biases inherent in human rights norms and practices (Charlesworth 1995). Some observers fear an increasing politicization of human rights (including several signatories of the "Punta del Este Declaration on Human Dignity for Everyone Everywhere," 2018). Others diagnose the opposite, i.e. a gradual replacement of political emotions by abstract legalistic reasoning (Geuss & Hamilton 2013). Normative universalism has been equated to uniformity and a concomitant devaluation of cultural diversity (Mutua 2002). Another type of critique aims to unmask universalistic claims as metaphysical constructions incompatible with enlightened and scientific worldviews (Stamos 2013).

The various forms of criticism usually also cover the human right to freedom of religion or belief (FoRB), at least by implication (Sullivan et al. 2015). At the same time, the term “religion” seems to invite additional objections (Guiora 2012). This happens against the background of centuries-old traditions criticizing religion as a source of obscurantism, conflict, and divisiveness. Political struggles in the Middle East, South Asia, and the Balkans seem to confirm the widespread view that religion typically exacerbates existing fault lines. Moreover, patriarchal values deeply embedded in religious traditions justify ongoing discrimination against women and girls—or so it may seem (Failing et al. 2013). Religious leaders have castigated LGBTIQ+ persons as allegedly deviating from divinely ordered ways of conduct; some have even incited acts of collective hatred (Chitando 2016). According to many observers, such experiences cast a shadow upon a human right that *inter alia* carries “religion” in its title (Petersen & Marshall 2019). As a result, FoRB is exposed to multi-dimensional criticism, which in a peculiar way combines the various contemporary objections to human rights in general with old and new forms of the critique of religion.

At the same time, and just as worrying, there are tendencies among some of those who defend FoRB to do so in a way that is inconsistent with fundamental human rights norms, promoting FoRB in isolation or pitting it against other human rights. Dichotomized views 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 blasphemy laws would mean no less than denying its essential character as a right to freedom (Alves Pinto 2013; Bielefeldt et al. 2017). Particularly worrisome at present is the tendency to construct dichotomies between FoRB and rights related to gender equality and non-discrimination (Mancini & Rosenfeld 2018). Not only does such a dichotomized approach undermine the indivisibility, interrelatedness, and interdependency of all human rights (“Vienna Declaration and Programme of Action,” 1993); 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.

The editors of this special issue of *The Review of Faith & International Affairs* understand themselves as scholars and practitioners in the area of human rights, with a special interest in FoRB. We are neither neutral nor impassionate in this regard. The right to

FoRB, in conjunction with other human rights, is “close to our hearts”—to echo the title of an open letter that we launched on 10 December 2020 (Bielefeldt et al. 2020). (See the Appendix for the full text of the open letter.)¹ With this letter, we wanted 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 (“Universal Declaration of Human Rights,” 1948, art. 18; “ICCPR,” 1966, art. 18; “ECHR,” 1951, art. 9; “ACHR,” 1969, art. 12; and “Banjul Charter,” 1981, art. 8). 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.

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,” 1948, 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.

With this special issue, we want to continue the dialogue we initiated with our open letter, inviting FoRB scholars and practitioners to explore some of the most pertinent challenges related to FoRB today. Coming from different disciplines, from different parts of the world, and with expertise in different aspects of FoRB, the contributors present a rich diversity of perspectives on FoRB, each in their own way contributing with new knowledge about the actors, norms, practices, and dynamics that shape the field today. Such nuanced, empirical insights are much needed if we want to defend FoRB effectively against simplistic and distorted conceptions and uses. Careful analysis and critical scrutiny are the only available antidote to the ever-lurking dangers of complacency or arrogance, which could erode the credibility of human rights norms and poison human rights practice. It furthermore

helps tackle misperceptions, detect blind spots, and raise awareness about potentially negative side-effects, which even well-meaning commitment can always incur.

It follows from the nature of rights of freedom—like freedom of expression, freedom of peaceful assembly, or freedom of association—that they are open to quite different uses. Freedom of expression can be claimed by people with conservative or progressive political views, and demonstrators can use their freedom of assembly for all sorts of agendas. The same is true for FoRB. It protects traditional believers as well as reformers or non-believers; it can be invoked no less by feminist theologians than by their conservative critics; it facilitates personal commitment in the area of religion or belief, but it also backs up people who do not want to practice their religion, or who want to leave religion altogether. In addition to its openness to a broad range of religious and non-religious convictions, then, FoRB also covers quite different attitudes towards religion or belief. According to a widespread perception, however, FoRB seems to privilege conservative religious positions and practices. This perception may partly rest on the false assumption that FoRB would protect “religion” as such rather than empowering human beings with their diverse convictions, attitudes, and practices. Another important factor is the disproportionate visibility of conservative FoRB-related litigation within the jurisdiction of one particular country, i.e. the United States, which itself, too, receives disproportionate visibility. In her contribution to this issue, Elizabeth Platt sets out to develop a more nuanced view. She points out that while court cases involving conservative Christians, who refuse any involvement with gay couples or claim broad exemptions with regard to reproductive health issues, have attracted much publicity within and beyond the United States, FoRB-related litigation pursued in the interest of liberal or progressive viewpoints is hardly known at all. In her view, it is all more important to overcome such ignorance:

Over the past decade, people of faith have brought exemption claims demanding a religious liberty right to seek an abortion, perform same-sex marriages, protest the death penalty, assist immigrants, fight nuclear proliferation, provide harm reduction services to drug users, prevent environmental degradation, and resist ethnic and religious profiling.

Platt presents ten such cases with varied outcomes. The disproportionate publicity of conservative FoRB litigation is even more surprising against the long history of Supreme

Court cases dealing with vulnerable and marginalized minorities, as she points out: “Nearly all Supreme Court religious exemption cases of the 19th and 20th centuries involved members of small religious groups including Mormons, Jews, Seventh-day Adventists, Amish, and adherents of Native American religions.”

When analyzing the reasons underneath the one-sided picture of FoRB that has emerged, Platt observes that conservative FoRB claims frequently receive professional support from law firms specialized in religious freedom issues, often in connection with a conservative political agenda. By contrast, people claiming conscience-based exemptions with regard to liberal or progressive religious convictions are usually represented by lawyers without such specialization. This has not only resulted in higher success rates of conservative FoRB claims; it has also led to a disproportionate visibility and publicity of conservative cases. In the eyes of many liberal or progressive human rights activists, FoRB has thus received a somewhat dubious reputation. “The imbalance in whose religious practices gets litigated, discussed, and, more importantly, protected—caused in large part by the widespread disparity in resources dedicated to religious liberty advocacy—weakens not only sexual liberty and equality rights, but religious freedom itself,” Platt notes.

It may thus be more than a coincidence that much of the recent critical literature on FoRB stems from North American authors, who more or less seem to take for granted that religious freedom represents conservative or even right-wing interests. Perceptions outside of the United States can be rather different, though. In many countries, not least in the global south, advocates of FoRB may find themselves at the forefront of combating religious and political authoritarianism. The article by Jayeel Cornelio and Robbin Dagle is an impressive testimony in this regard. In their home country, the Philippines, the traditionally hegemonic Catholic Church continues to speak out against equal rights for sexual minorities. Nevertheless, realities are changing, and in their article, Cornelio and Dagle note that it is increasingly common to see queer Catholics who are active in their parishes’ ministries and activities. Especially the younger generation uses religious language and theological reasoning to claim recognition of different sexual orientations and gender identities. Cornelio and Dagle refer to one of their interviewees as an example: “while his church’s teachings affect how others might see him, he turns to God as his ‘best friend,’ to whom he can tell anything without being judged.” The interviewed person insists: “Yes, I was made by God this way.”

In their article, Cornelio and Dagle offer a complex picture of current conflicts in the Philippines, a country with a difficult legacy of dictatorship, populism, and authoritarianism.

On the one hand, conservative religious and political forces utilize religious freedom as an ideological weapon in cultural wars—analogously to tendencies observable in the United States. On the other hand, the authors themselves make “the case for robust religious freedom for LGBTQ+ persons.” While sexual minorities still suffer discrimination and marginalization in the Philippines, “their moral and theological articulations are also assertions of their religious freedom.” “My life is a protest,” notes one of Cornelio and Dagle’s interviewees, succinctly illustrating that FoRB is truly everyone’s right.

Cultural wars involving religious issues typically rest upon the assumption that there is an inherent contradiction between the human right to FoRB and other human rights norms, like the elimination of discrimination based on sexual orientation or gender identity. The case study from the Philippines, however, illustrates how complex such conflicts are. To construct them as a zero-sum-contestation, where one side can merely win what the other side loses, does not match the reality.

Another example of a falsely constructed abstract dichotomy concerns an alleged antagonism between FoRB and freedom of expression (FoE), which Marie Juul Petersen addresses in her article. While FoE widely enjoys the reputation of a liberal right, which opens the space for aggressive criticism, artistic experimentation, and political provocation, FoRB seems to limit or even shrink that very space—or so is the assumption. And whereas FoE facilitates critical debates on religious themes, FoRB seems to call for respecting religious sensitivities and taboos. In other words, even though FoRB carries “freedom” in its title, it has the awkward reputation in the eyes of some observers of being a less liberal or even illiberal right, which supposedly functions more like a stopper against too lavishly wide interpretations of FoE.

Petersen challenges this picture thoroughly—without denying conflicts around critical comments on religious issues or satirical representations deemed “blasphemous” by some believers. The question is always what exactly the role of FoRB and FoE in such conflicts should be. One cannot reiterate enough that FoRB does not protect the reputation of religions; rather, it protects human beings in their freedom to find their own ways in the area of religious and non-religious convictions and conviction-based practices. When seen from this perspective, however, FoRB and FoE are “closely intertwined,” as the author points out. “Both FoRB and FoE protect the freedom of individuals to have thoughts, opinions, or convictions and to express [them].” Blasphemy laws sometimes enacted upon the mistaken idea of thereby supporting FoRB, actually amount to the opposite. Not only are they based on a thorough misperception of FoRB, i.e. a denial of its nature as a human right protecting

human beings in their freedom; they typically also lead to practical violations of FoRB, e.g. by intimidating members of certain religious minorities, dissenters, converts, or reformers. “In fact, more often than not, restrictions on FoE will also result in restrictions on FoRB.”

Petersen cites the *Rabat Plan of Action* elaborated in 2012 under the auspices of the UN Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights as a positive example of how to create synergies between different human rights, including between FoRB and FoE. The Rabat Plan pursues the purpose of combating acts of collective hatred, including in the area of religion and belief. While criminal law can play a limited role in this regard, always connected to a very high threshold, the Rabat Plan mainly draws on non-restrictive measures, such as education, awareness-raising, interreligious dialogue, or public demonstrations in support of targeted minorities. The point is that FoE plays a positive role in this regard. Rather than standing in opposition to each other, FoRB and FoE largely work in the same direction. “Key in this respect are initiatives to speak out against hate speech Early and clear communication can prevent tensions from escalating and open a space for ‘counter-speech’ from other actors.” This may contribute “to building a democratic, pluralist society where we, in all our diversity, can live peacefully together, even when disagreeing vehemently.”

The practice of FoRB has much to do with the preservation of cultural heritage. For example, acts of vandalism like the destruction of cemeteries have often been used to send hate messages to religious minorities. Whenever indigenous peoples lose control over culturally important sites, e.g. as a result of economic modernization processes, this typically also raises issues of FoRB. Religious practices like pilgrimages are usually directed towards burial places of saints or other important buildings. Conflicts over religious sites in Jerusalem, Hebron, Istanbul, Nikosia, Ayodhya, and elsewhere testify to the highly symbolic significance of certain cultural heritages for the religious identity of many people. It is all the more surprising that overlaps between FoRB and cultural heritage protection have so far received little systematic attention, as Knox Thames and Emily Scolaro observe in their contribution to the special issue. They are convinced that this is “an area needing more connectivity, as unrealized synergies exist between freedom of religion or belief and cultural heritage protection (CHP).” The authors inter alia cite a famous case brought before the International Criminal Court, i.e. the destruction of religious buildings in the ancient town of Timbuktu. This case has become known as a war crime, whose “FoRB implications were largely ignored.” Obviously, this is an area that warrants more systematic analysis.

While exploring the potential for more synergies between FoRB and CHP, Thames and Scolaro, at the same time, stick to a clear conceptual differentiation between the two

aspirations. Projects aimed to preserve cultural sites do not necessarily follow the human rights approach, which itself, by contrast, is essential for the understanding of FoRB. As already mentioned, FoRB consistently keeps the focus on human beings as rights holders. This does not preclude using FoRB on behalf of religious and cultural heritages. After all, the interest and concerns of human beings in the area of religion and belief can be complex; they also include the availability and accessibility of a religious site, which therefore needs to be preserved in the first place.

Caution is also needed when dealing with issues at the intersection of FoRB and security concerns. This is an area where much work has been invested by the Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe (OSCE), as noted in the article by Susan Kerr, who is herself Senior Advisor on FoRB in the OSCE. Respect for human rights, alongside the principles of the rule of law, like transparency and accountability, contribute to building sustainable trust in society, which itself is beneficial also to security. In Kerr's words, "Security can only flourish and be sustainable where there is a full respect for human rights." This also includes FoRB, whose potential for security agendas has explicitly been addressed in the number of OSCE conferences. "OSCE human dimension commitments acknowledge the importance not only of human rights generally, but of FoRB specifically, to security through a body of commitments on this topic, in which a lack of FoRB is noted to cause greater insecurity."

While respect for FoRB can enhance security, it is important to stress that the normative status of the right to FoRB does not depend on its actual usefulness for specific security agendas. Lack of clarity in this regard harbors the danger of undermining human rights, which enjoy the peculiar normative authority of "inalienable rights," after all. Moreover, Kerr also addresses tendencies of "securitization" in the OSCE region, i.e. overly restricted control politics carried out in the name of security. As a result, "FoRB can fall casualty to securitization agendas." This obvious danger warrants ongoing critical scrutiny, including the precise contextual understanding of security—a concept open to vastly diverse interpretations.

As mentioned at the beginning of this introduction, FoRB remains exposed to multifaceted criticism, which often combines objections to the justifiability and viability of universal human rights with old and new forms of the critique of religion. When trying to make sense of FoRB in the light of such criticism, one certainly has to deal with specific contexts and context-sensitivity more generally. Erin K. Wilson sets out to explore the potential of "vernacularization" in this regard. She explains: "Vernacularization focuses more

on the practice of human rights, a focus that was adopted by anthropologists explicitly to bypass the universalist-relativist debate By focusing on how human rights are practiced, the emphasis shifts away from endeavors to demonstrate the normative value of human rights to instead explore the impact of human rights on small communities *in situ*.” Dealing with vernacularization also facilitates a critical analysis of possible biases ingrained in the concept of the juridical practice of FoRB.

The problem is that within most legal contexts, there are already implicit assumptions circulating about what “religion” means, and these implicit culturally, historically, and politically informed assumptions inform the decisions that are taken by courts and by legislators regarding what does and does not count as religion and where and how it is permitted to be practiced.

Wilson provides a number of illustrative examples demonstrating how concepts like “freedom,” “choice,” “religion,” or “belief” unfold contextual meanings, which are surprisingly and disturbingly different from the interpretations usually taken for granted in international jurisprudence. As a result, some local activists have decided to use an alternative vocabulary. One example is the promotion of human rights as an opportunity for “becoming fully human”—a wording not occurring in any of the official UN human rights documents. Another example is the deliberate avoidance of the term “belief,” which many people in Gujarat seem to associate with problematic superstitious practices.

Those exploring the potential of vernacularization usually focus on “processes by which ideas from transnational origins migrate to smaller communities,” as Wilson points out. She cites the example of the *Faith for Rights* project initiated by the Office of the High Commissioner for Human rights, which endeavors to involve local faith communities for the promotion of universal human rights. Less attention has so far been paid to processes of “vernacularization in reverse,” i.e. the move from local contexts back to the interpretation of international standards. Wilson is fully aware that this may incur the risk of diluting human rights norms, a problem that obviously requires critical attention. Nevertheless, she does see potential in efforts to vernacularize human rights: “On its own, vernacularization is not enough. Yet in cooperation with efforts to enshrine legal and political protections, vernacularization has the potential to contribute to longer-lasting changes in structural inequalities and injustice.”

The case study presented by Saumya Uma is a disturbing example of how the language of “religious freedom” has been turned and twisted by some religious leaders and believers in India to defend female genital mutilation (FGM), as it is practiced by a small Shia minority living in the country. Although India has formally outlawed FGM, the government seems to turn a blind eye to the problem by simply denying its existence. As Uma points out, even some female members of the said community claim the right to continue FGM, which various UN bodies, including the Committee on the Elimination of Discrimination Against Women and the Committee on the Rights of the Child, have unambiguously condemned as a harmful traditional practice and a violation of human rights. Uma argues that the invocation of religious freedom is unjustified in this regard. Her article culminates in a clear profession of a holistic human rights approach:

FoRB is a human right for everyone, which includes all women and girls. No set of women or children ought to be compelled to choose between FoRB and other human rights such as the right to dignity, equality and non-discrimination, the rights to bodily integrity and sexual autonomy ... and the human right to the highest standard of physical and mental health.

The articles by Erin Wilson and Saumya Uma should be read in conjunction. Together they shed light on the ambiguities of “localizing” FoRB. As Wilson rightly points out, the language of FoRB is alien and irrelevant to many, and a certain degree of vernacularization is indispensable, if this right is to find broader resonance. At the same time, and as Wilson also discusses, vernacularization also brings along the risk of not only dilution, but misuse of FoRB, and the case study presented by Saumya Uma illustrates the need to constantly and consistently ensure that all understandings of FoRB are unequivocally human rights-based. In the face of widespread misperceptions, one has to emphasize again and again that FoRB does not uphold dogmatic truth claims, shield the integrity of traditions, or defend the reputation of religions. Instead, FoRB protects human beings in their freedom to find their ways in the vast area of religious or non-religious convictions and concomitant individual and communitarian practices. It is this consistent systematic focus on human beings as rights holders that further connects FoRB with other human rights, as already discussed above with regard to gender justice and freedom of expression. As an integral part of the broader human rights approach, FoRB must not serve as an excuse, let alone a justification, for cruel practices like FGM.

In recent years, religion has received renewed attention as an important factor in international development cooperation. Some commentators have noticed a “religious turn” in concomitant policy documents, while experts often demand more “religious literacy” when designing development projects. However, as Mariz Tadros observes, religious literacy is not per se tantamount to FoRB literacy: “we need a distinct agenda that goes beyond ‘add religion and stir’.” For all the talks about religion, she says, an understanding of FoRB and its significance for a human rights-based approach to development is still missing: “FoRB is a ‘blind spot’ in most development policy and practice.” FoRB may even come into direct conflict with certain attempts to harness religion for developmental purposes. Those interested in utilizing the resources of religion for the promotion of development will naturally turn to influential communities, thus exacerbating existing hegemonies and fault lines, possibly without even noticing what they are doing. It is at this juncture that FoRB practitioners have to bring in their critical perspectives. Tadros points to the flipside of agendas wishing to benefit from the hegemonic religions, as a result of which “certain religious actors, often a numerical and political minority, are marginalized, overlooked, shunned, and excluded, both individually and collectively.”

When arguing for more FoRB-sensitivity in development cooperation, Tadros addresses another problem: “The fact that the United States is spearheading FoRB through foreign policy instruments and continues to be the main player in the field is a double-edged sword.” The observation already made by Elizabeth Platt, i.e. that FoRB often gets associated with a US-led conservative or even right-wing agenda, has a bearing on international development policies as well. As a result, critics have questioned the credibility and even the very legitimacy of commitment for FoRB. Without denying the relevance of critical questions, Tadros nonetheless holds “that it would be inconsistent, even hypocritical, to pronounce a commitment to leaving no one behind while purposely leaving behind those who suffer from the intersection of religious marginality and poverty.”

We would like to express our profound gratitude to all the contributors to this special issue. The articles contain a diversity of viewpoints on FoRB, always in connection with other human rights concerns. It is our hope that this collection will stimulate further discussion on FoRB, a human right which is “close to our hearts” and indispensable for an adequately complex human rights framework.

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Appendix: Open Letter on FoRB and Human Rights

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

An Open Letter, 10 December 2020

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.

List of signatories (in their personal capacity):

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¹ The letter was the result of a consultative process including several FoRB experts and practitioners, organized by the three authors of the present introduction, together with Katherine Thane. The letter was signed by more than 175 people from all over the world, including academics, activists, NGO representatives, members of religious minority groups, and others, reflecting a great diversity of beliefs and convictions. The statement, including the list of signatories, is also available online here: <https://forms.gle/wcMQzPQyt2dxRMgT7>.