



Foreign &
Commonwealth
Office



Wilton Park



Report

**Promoting freedom of religion or belief: what is the
role of education?**

Wednesday 5 – Friday 7 December 2018 | WP1662

In association with:



CHEVENING



Report

Promoting freedom of religion or belief: what is the role of education?

Wednesday 5 – Friday 7 December 2018 | WP1662

Context

Freedom of religion or belief is a human right enshrined in the Universal Declaration of Human Rights. However, in many parts of the world, religious minorities are persecuted, discriminated against or treated as second class citizens. Promoting respect for different faiths and beliefs and ensuring that people have the freedom to practice as they choose is not only crucial to individual and community well-being, but to the social fabric of entire countries and regions, and to global peace and stability.

This Wilton Park event, in partnership with the UK Foreign and Commonwealth Office and with Chevening, brought together Chevening scholars from around the world with experts on freedom of religion or belief and education, to share experience and best practice around how the freedom of religion or belief can be better protected and promoted, and what role education can play in safeguarding it.

Goal and objectives

This event sought to bring together Chevening scholars with experts on freedom of religion or belief and education to:

- Examine the role of education in developing a common approach to promoting freedom of religion or belief- how can education promote inter-faith respect and tolerance?
- Draw from the diverse experience of Chevening scholars to build a more nuanced picture of the challenges involved in protecting belief and religious practice
- Work towards new guidance and best practice on how to promote freedom of religion and belief
- Identify creative approaches to promote tolerance, diversity and freedom of speech through education
- Discuss how the higher education sector can better reach across religious divides and bring different communities together, drawing both from the experience of the UK and elsewhere

Introduction

1. FoRB is a fundamental human right as articulated in Article 18 of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights and codified in many national laws around the world. FoRB encompasses not just the freedom to hold personal thoughts, opinion and faith, but also being able to manifest them individually or collectively, publicly or in private.
2. However, we know that around the world, people are often judged, discriminated, persecuted, even killed for their religion or belief, especially people from minority groups. Even though the right to freedom of religion or belief is protected by international human rights law, it can be difficult to guarantee and protect this right at

family, school, society and state level. An approach that builds an enabling environment where FoRB can flourish is key, and education - both formal and informal - is a critical part of building this environment.

3. The discussion ranged widely, from the nature of religion, to education, politics, society, culture and the relationship between them all – and evoked as many questions as answers. Religion or belief is both a critical way in which societies and cultures are organised, and something deeply personal. Moreover, the contexts of different countries varies widely, with appetite for prioritising FoRB depending on the historical and cultural background, political will and situation.
4. However, the participants felt that there was a deep need for a movement to promote FoRB, and highlighted a number of ways for this to happen, and how various actors, including the FCO, might promote a FoRB friendly environment through education.

What does FoRB mean?

5. Under Article 18, everyone has the freedom to ‘thought, conscience and religion’ on the same plane. This includes the freedom to change religion or belief, as part of a community, in public or in private. It also includes the not to have a religion or belief.
6. Participants discussed how freedom of religion or belief is not an esoteric belief in itself, but plays a key role in advancing other human rights – it is about ensuring that people have the opportunity to fully develop the human personality, and to live the life they choose both as individuals and as part of a community.
7. This holistic approach is key to ensure that people have a nuanced understanding of what FoRB is – that it has internal and external elements to it.
8. Freedom of religion or belief is the fastest eroding human right in the world. States often avoid speaking on religion for fear of further enflaming problems, meaning that they can often simmer for years or even escalate.
9. Freedom of religion or belief requires an enabling environment that allows people to hold and practice their faith or belief freely. If there is not an enabling environment, then everyone’s rights are being violated- not just those who may be experiencing persecution.

Rooted in lived experience

Intolerance has multiple victims and is a form of self-harm as well as harming others.

10. There is a need to inoculate against intolerance to promote freedom of religion or belief – and participants felt that rooting the discussion in lived experience was a key way in which to achieve this.
11. This reflects the need that work to promote FoRB be values driven. Participants agreed that we should try to do better than working towards mere ‘tolerance’ –aiming to work for acceptance, respect and even celebration of difference.
12. This would serve to challenge and address narratives that feed off positioning those of different religions as an ‘other’ – and a means to teach respect not fear, understanding not intolerance.
13. Young people growing up need to be rooted in different perspectives and should be exposed to different beliefs and ways of life early on. This means getting to know people who are different and who hold different beliefs, to build trust that is rooted in lived experience and not from a textbook.
14. Participants discussed how promoting shared activities in the community, such as multi-faith sports teams, or cooking classes, can build trust between people of different religions or beliefs through a common goal, whilst always being rooted in lived experience.

Geopolitical landscapes

15. Participants felt that there was a need to consider geopolitical realities and how they may shape narratives about freedom of religion or belief – it is often very difficult to separate religion from politics. There are many examples of authoritarian regimes such as theocracies who use religion to further their political aim, and often hijack freedom of religion or belief in the process.
16. Therefore, freedom of religion or belief should be seen through a prism of social, political and cultural issues. Western actors in particular need to be wary of inflaming the tensions that exist- and seek to support champions of tolerance in the local community and narratives for tolerance that already exist rather than imposing values externally.
17. Examples given of how this can work were discussed, such as faith leaders drawing from religious texts and narratives in order to promote love, acceptance and tolerance. However, this work must be authentic and come from the community itself.

Safe and brave spaces

A golden combination of safe and brave spaces is needed.

18. Discussion subsequently focused on the media debates around the perceived tension between free speech, and so- called safe spaces. Many participants felt that rather than a binary decision to be made, actually the best approach is for a balance of the two. The majority of human rights always need to be balanced against one another; reasonable limits may be placed on both freedom of speech and freedom of religion or belief to protect other rights.
19. This led to the discussion of 'safe' and 'brave' spaces as a way to cultivate this balance- building a space where people feel comfortable to express their views, and affirmed in their identity, free from abuse or targeting– the safe space- but also encouraged to accept some risk, be honest and speak frankly- the brave space.
20. Participants felt that some spaces could even combine the two – the 'safe brave space' to drive forward change and trust. Discussion centred around whether the FCO could help to curate some of these 'safe brave spaces' to drive forward the discussion on freedom of religion or belief. This could help to challenge dominant narratives, and help to broker harmony between different faith groups. There is no right not to be offended – but treating each other with respect is paramount.
21. The example of institutions like Cumberland Lodge and Wilton Park were raised, where people live and work together as well as attending discussions and workshops. Start easy, then move towards the difficult questions.
22. In education, FoRB should be combined with positive interfaith religion literacy- again rooted in lived experience to bring beliefs to life and allow students to see faith as one aspect of a whole person. This could involve ensuring that faith friendly societies are supported to ensure that different faith groups have their own safe space- whilst also creating brave spaces where different faith groups can mix and respectful debate is welcomed.
23. Educators should also aim to open up the channels of communications by creating a safe classroom environment where students can freely and openly debate issues in a non-judgemental, but respectful way.
24. It was felt to be key that especially in a university context that students have autonomy and ownership over the content and are given the space to discuss. Often methodology matters more than the content itself.

Claim and reclaim, learn and unlearn

Find someone who does not share your faith and talk to them about challenges to your faith.

25. There is a need to challenge dominant narratives about certain religions- and this can mean both learning and unlearning, as well as tackling stereotypes.
26. Participants acknowledged that very often, groups and networks that discuss FoRB are self-selecting groups with people who are already engaged in the topic. There was discussion around how to engage with those who might exclude themselves, or be left out of, important conversations on FoRB. One way to do this is to 'mainstream' issues of freedom of religion or belief into other conversations rather than making it a stand alone topic- linking it to issues of human rights, politics, or even economics could be a way of ensuring that more people realise the value of FoRB.
27. In order to achieve this mainstreaming of FoRB, participants felt that utilising long term global networks was key- such as Chevening scholars and alumni, but also engaging with other global groups such as the Association of Commonwealth Universities, and NGOs working in development or education who may not already be thinking about how their work relates to FoRB in a systematic way.

Creating a framework for FoRB friendly education

Education is a key component of developing religious literacy, that leads to the honouring of difference and a culture of mutual respect, love and understanding.

28. Participants felt that the FoRB friendly education environment should:
 - Respect the perspective of religion and belief even though it may be different from what science would teach.
 - Get the practicalities right. Ensuring the practical needs of people of different faiths are met are a crucial foundation to build trust and understanding- that dietary requirements are catered for, spaces for prayers are offered, and that the timing of activities respects religious requirements and holidays wherever possible.
 - Allow students to freely express their religion and belief as long it does not disrespect or violate the rights of others.
 - Put the emphasis on character building to allow understanding, empathy, and critical thinking to flourish.
 - Encourage students to experience different religions and beliefs, for example by visiting places of worship, organising discussions with various religious leaders and celebrating different religious festivals.
 - Connect the values of FoRB to all the various field of study so that students can understand it comprehensively. It takes a holistic approach to promote FoRB in education.
 - Create 'safe brave spaces' inside and outside the classroom, so students can be free to have an opinion, and choices on FoRB without being judged, as long as they also respect other's religion and belief. This includes supporting students who adopt different religions or beliefs to that which their parents have decided for them.
 - Involve parents in activities that promote FoRB, and encourage them to adopt the same values at home.
 - Support teachers to prioritise FoRB values, both in religious education and general education. Build teachers networks to share best practices.

29. Approaches should be context driven, and come from the local community, encompassing both top down and bottom up approaches. Drawing on local religious frameworks can be helpful.
30. Educators should be encouraged to bring their whole selves to work, and root discussions of FoRB in their lived experience and that of their students.

Promoting FoRB through education: ten recommendations for an FCO toolkit

1. Aim to create a ripple effect by identifying potential partners to collaborate with, to include other governments, universities, schools, religious communities, media, and NGOs.
2. Use its platforms, both real and digital to build a movement, ensuring that FoRB is consistently mentioned in key speeches and social media posts.
3. Encourage alumni from FCO scholarships to actively participate in FoRB issues- and offer in country support through e.g. FCO posts to do so.
4. Through cultivating a network, collect and highlight stories of successful inter-faith educational projects, working to build an evidence-based toolkit that other organisations and players can draw from to implement their own – and make it accessible to all online.
5. Seek to empower local actors, building a toolkit that is grounded in supporting local action, that emphasizes flexibility for a variety of different contexts.
6. Link FoRB to other issues that people care about. How does FoRB relate to peace, to prosperity, even to climate change? Can it be linked to other international campaigns, such as girls' education, or freedom of the press? Utilise these links to get buy in from new and perhaps unexpected areas.
7. Organise more educational interfaith events around the world, aiming to bring together different viewpoints and seek common ground, and curating 'safe brave spaces'.
8. Make it personal: always ground discussion around FoRB in lived experience – use events and social media to highlight real stories of people from different faiths, and explore what their religion or belief means to them.
9. Seek to utilise the network to push freedom of religion or belief higher up the international agenda, utilising key international events to create 'moments' for FoRB.
10. Bring in famous faces – or those who might be influential at a local level- to further drive the message.

Conclusion

There are many approaches to promote FoRB through education from a personal to a global level. Participants felt that everyone can work to utilise their own personal and professional networks, engaging in difficult conversations where necessary, to promote the values of FoRB. Wherever we are, we can all start to do something to support FoRB.

FoRB is an issue for international prosperity and peace, and needs to be supported by a global community. In the words of Margaret Mead: 'Never doubt that a small group of thoughtful, committed citizens can change the world; indeed, it is the only thing that ever has'. However, in the context of the current world we live in today, we should put at least two more words to complete the sentence, which are organised and well-networked citizens – of which FCO scholars are a very good example.

A working team amongst committed Chevening scholars to progress issues on FoRB was convened- FCO should utilise the enthusiasm and interest that Chevening scholars have on this topic, and seek to implement some of the recommendations that participants came up with.

Olivia Murphy, Feby Indirani, Ross Armstrong

Wilton Park | March 2019

Wilton Park reports are intended to be brief summaries of the main points and conclusions of an event. Reports reflect rapporteurs' accounts of the proceedings and do not necessarily reflect the views of the rapporteur. Wilton Park reports and any recommendations contained therein are for participants and are not a statement of policy for Wilton Park, the FCO or the UK government.

Should you wish to read other Wilton Park reports, or participate in upcoming Wilton Park events, please consult our website www.wiltonpark.org.uk. To receive our monthly bulletin and latest updates, please subscribe to <https://www.wiltonpark.org.uk/newsletter/>