

Conclusion: The Case of Religious Freedom and Populism

What Perspectives Can We Develop for a Constructive Culture of Discussion and Problem-Solving as well as Strengthening Human Rights?

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In this anthology, the authors have described and analysed, from various perspectives, how right-wing populists and extremists around the world try to appropriate religious freedom for their own purposes and reinterpret this in line with their inhuman ideologies and anti-democratic objectives. In the process, it has been demonstrated which societal and political dynamics favour the success of corresponding strategies of appropriation. In addition, the authors have discussed counterstrategies and presented possible courses of action.

Within the framework of this project, we have focused on the human right of freedom of religion or belief (FoRB), which is particularly exposed to the appropriations described above. However, it also becomes apparent that this phenomenon is part of a comprehensive interpretive struggle for reading and shaping normative foundations of social co-existence at both national and international level. Other concepts and terms that are highly relevant to human rights – such as democracy, peace, and the interests of certain population groups such as workers – are also targeted by populist appropriation and reinterpretation attempts. The appropriation and reinterpretation often follow very similar patterns to those described in this book. In this sense, the analysis of the appropriation and reinterpretation of religious freedom can also be understood as an exemplary case study for a populist appropriation and reinterpretation of human rights concepts and language in general.

The analyses presented in this book also offer lessons on how to deal with populism in general. Conclusions can be drawn on how constructive discourse

on controversial issues can be conducted without compromising and damaging human rights. While political parties, media professionals, lobby groups and religious communities have a special responsibility due to their particularly influential roles, ultimately all democrats have a duty to contribute to constructive discussions. In this sense, the following reflections and conclusions are addressed to all of these people acting in different areas of society and in different roles:

Forming new, broad alliances

Protecting and strengthening human rights requires broad-based alliances and democrats working together constructively:

- **Interacting respectfully:** Unlike right-wing populists and extremists, democrats should never fundamentally deny each other the competence and integrity to stand up for human rights, such as religious freedom. Even if populists deliberately resort to personal attacks in debates, democrats should maintain a rational and respectful discourse among themselves. Permanent disputes on side issues, chaos and a poisoned debate ultimately merely benefit populism and harm democracy and human rights.
- **Giving human rights as common ground priority over politicisation:** While it is legitimate (and sometimes necessary) to debate whether enough is being done for the protection and promotion of FoRB and other human rights, as well as what are the most effective means, there must always be consensus among all democrats that the promotion and protection of human rights is a shared goal that takes priority over party and power-political considerations and interests. Thus, the political debate should not revolve around the question of whether to protect and promote FoRB and other human rights but rather what the most effective means are to achieve this.
- **Moving away from treating human rights as a niche topic and from clientelistic thinking:** We need to break free from the prevalent stereotype that religious freedom is solely a right for the devout and conservative. Just as women's rights do not exclusively belong to the left, religious freedom should not be confined to the conservatives alone. Quite the contrary, the diversity of the human right to religious freedom – which is intended to be a universal right protecting and empowering every single human being

– should be explored and used as inspiration for innovative human rights initiatives.

- **Showing political presence and ambition and defining own priorities and initiatives instead of withdrawing:** Liberals, leftists, greens, social democrats and other progressive or secular-oriented forces should not let prejudices and far-right appropriation and reinterpretation deter them from an active commitment to FoRB. A withdrawal without comment – as seen, for example, in the case of the Intergroup on Freedom of Religion or Belief and Religious Tolerance in the European Parliament – only plays into the distorting far-right narrative that they are the sole political force concerned with religious freedom.
- **Developing discussion and policy-making formats beyond confrontation:** Democrats should work together to strengthen FoRB, putting aside divisions into different political camps and interest groups. Confrontational debates tend to create entrenched positions and often hinder democratic cooperation, which is essential for strengthening human rights. Actors such as the Christian Democrats – who in many places identify particularly strongly with the commitment to the promotion and defence of FoRB – should seek exchange with social democratic, green, leftist and liberal colleagues to develop cross-party plans to strengthen this human right. In turn, the latter are called upon to take up serious offers of dialogue. Differences of opinion must not lead to a refusal of exchange, unless the counterpart represents ideas aimed at fighting the very foundations of liberal democracy. It is also worthwhile to explore thematic facets beyond one's own party-political horizon and approach to FoRB.
- **Discovering synergies beyond the usual contacts:** When engaging in the promotion of FoRB and human rights as a whole, it is worthwhile to think beyond one's familiar network of contacts. For instance, cross-sector collaboration can expand the reach of one's own work to promote FoRB beyond the circle of one's own contacts and milieus close to oneself and create synergies in the protection and promotion of various different human rights. For example, a joint campaign by the Pontifical Mission Society *missio* and the German section of Reporters Without Borders advocating for the release of the imprisoned Vietnamese blogger and Catholic priest Nguyen

Van Ly promoted both freedom of information and FoRB.¹ Interesting initiatives have also been taken to leverage synergies between the promotion of FoRB and gender equality.² Ecumenical and interreligious cooperation can also enhance the impact of efforts to safeguard and promote FoRB. Furthermore, it can strengthen FoRB in a unique way when secular humanists and religious communities work together.

Strengthening human rights education

Comprehensive and quality human rights education is essential:

- **Demonstrating the significance of human rights in everyday life:** While there is broad consensus that human rights are good and important, many people have limited knowledge of fundamental human rights concepts. A significant number of people perceive human rights as having little relevance to their everyday lives.³ The question of whether religious freedom is still necessary in secularised societies often arises. Therefore, it is crucial to convey the significance of human rights as vividly and concretely

1 *missio* Aachen: *missio* und Reporter ohne Grenzen gemeinsam für verfolgte Christen in Vietnam (1 Feb. 2016), <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=l-bEDHoMjBU>, accessed on: 25 Aug. 2023.

2 Stefanus Alliance International: Freedom of Religion or Belief for everyone: Women in focus, 2021, <https://www.stefanus.no/english/women-and-forb/>, accessed on: 25 Aug. 2023; The Danish Institute for Human Rights: Freedom of religion or belief, gender equality and the SDGs 2019–2020, <https://www.humanrights.dk/research-project/freedom-religion-belief-gender-equality-sdgs>, accessed on: 25 Aug. 2023; Track 2 of the Danish Government's strategy to promote freedom of religion or belief and protection of religion or belief minorities: <https://um.dk/en/foreign-policy/office-of-the-special-representative-for-freedom-of-religions-or-belief>, accessed on: 25 Aug. 2023.

3 Ipsos Public Affairs: Human Rights in 2018. A Global Advisory Survey, <https://www.ipsos.com/sites/default/files/ct/news/documents/2018-07/human-rights-in-2018-ipsos-global-advisor.pdf>, accessed on: 2 Aug. 2023 (Given the chosen wording of the question on p. 4, a social-desirability bias is possible, so that the actual gaps in knowledge could be even wider); European Union Agency for Fundamental Rights: Fundamental Rights Survey 2020, Luxembourg: Publications Office of the European Union 2020, http://fra.europa.eu/sites/default/files/fra_uploads/fra-2020-fundamental-rights-survey-human-rights-summary_en.pdf, pp. 3ff., long version: http://fra.europa.eu/sites/default/files/fra_uploads/fra-2020-fundamental-rights-survey-human-rights_en.pdf, accessed on: 2 Aug. 2023.

as possible, ideally in a way that allows individuals to establish immediate connections to their own daily lives and their unique personal realities.

- **Educating about common misconceptions:** One objective of strengthening human rights education should also be to clarify common misconceptions about human rights. Especially regarding religious freedom, many such misconceptions exist. For example, in secularised societies, freedom of religion is often confused with a freedom from religion that only tolerates religion in the private sphere. Another common misconception is to reduce religious freedom for the protection of cultural identities.
- **Tailoring human rights education and communication to target audiences:** To successfully impart knowledge and simultaneously achieve socio-emotional competence development, diverse methodologies and didactics need to be applied and adapted to the individual target audiences in each case. This applies to both formal educational settings and informal learning environments.
- **Bringing together expertise and outreach through cooperation:** A significant, largely untapped potential lies in bridging academic expertise from the scholarly community with the outreach and media skills of media professionals. In this way, formats can be developed that are not only educational and entertaining but also reach audiences beyond the academic world.
- **Strengthening media literacy across all age groups:** To build resilience against disinformation, raise awareness against misunderstandings and reveal and overcome prejudices that often severely harm human rights, media literacy must be enhanced across all age groups.
- **Promoting empathy and solution-oriented thinking:** Human rights education should not be limited to highlighting injustices but should also teach skills and strategies for problem-solving. Journalistic and activist contributions on and to human rights should also focus on problem-solving approaches and not stop at the typical approach of “naming and shaming.”

Choosing constructive language

Democrats should practice an appropriate rhetoric and pay attention to using constructive language:

- **Do not adopt right-wing populist language:** Under no circumstances should democrats align their own language with right-wing populist rhetoric or adopt far-right populist narratives. For instance, this includes not using terms like “wokeness” as an alleged threat to religious freedom or endorsing Islamophobic slogans and conspiracy theories. Studies⁴ have not only shown that this is unlikely to be successful in containing support for far-right parties, but it also contributes to undermining and eroding human rights concepts and normalising extremist and dehumanising ideas and narratives.
- **Communicate concretely, vividly, understandably, sincerely and in a solution-oriented manner:** In public discourse on human rights, it is crucial to communicate concretely, vividly, understandably, sincerely, and with a focus on solutions. There is great potential for improvement in this regard without resorting to populist simplifications. Particularly when dealing with the often-inaccessible legal jargon, a “translation” into a language that can be understood in the context of the audience’s prior knowledge and everyday life is necessary. Technical terms and concepts such as *forum externum* or *forum internum* cannot simply be assumed as common knowledge. There is also often a great deal of confusion regarding the question of permissible limitations on human rights and the limits on the scope of such limitations.⁵ It is also important to avoid using clichéd language that shies away from commitment beyond purely symbolic acts, especially when political or financial costs are involved. Decision-makers must not hesitate to address problems only because some segments of their supporter base might perceive any approaches to solution as an imposition. Such fearful inaction and self-restraint not only leave opportunities for the promotion of human rights untapped but also contribute to the perception of political ineffectiveness, which populist actors often criticise democrats for.
- **Remain precise, avoid ambiguity:** At the same time, it is important to use precise language. Ambiguous or vague formulations should be avoided,

4 See e.g. Lewandowsky, Marcel/Wagner, Aiko: “Fighting for a Lost Cause? Availability of Populist Radical Right Voters for Established Parties. The Case of Germany,” in: Representation 59 (3/2023), pp. 485–512; Krause, Werner/Cohen, Denis/Abou-Chadi, Tarik: “Does accommodation work? Mainstream party strategies and the success of radical right parties,” in: Political Science Research and Methods Bd. 11 (1/2023), pp. 172–179.

5 Compare the German concepts of *Schranken* and *Schranken-Schranken*.

even if it is a strategy to avoid commitment or assumption of responsibility. If there is indeed a significant uncertainty or a gap in knowledge, it is better to acknowledge it as such. The use of formulations that consciously or unconsciously arouse resentments is particularly problematic. For example, if the term “political Islam” is used synonymously with the term “Islamist extremism” (an equation that does not typically occur with the terms “Christian democracy” and “Christian fundamentalism”), this highlights Islamist extremism as a problem, but at the same time also falsely suggests that political engagement motivated by Muslim faith is generally problematic. Such false generalisations not only trivialise the actual extremist threat but also fuel prejudice against non-extremist Muslims and thus create an atmosphere that can in turn be exploited by Islamist extremists for spreading hatred.

- **Do not spread untruths:** Unlike populists and extremists, democrats should take particular care not to consciously or unconsciously contribute to the spread of untruths, misleading representations and false generalisations and prejudices. For example, churches, politicians and the media should beware of falling for phantom debates such as debates about an alleged renaming of Christmas markets and St. Martin’s processions. When democrats take a stand in such debates, they should first check whether any serious proposal related to the claim actually even exists at all to avoid replicating disproven⁶ conspiracy theory narratives. Indeed, if democrats attack political competitors or religious minorities using misinformation, this not only fuels prejudice but also destroys trust in democracy.
- **Shape the political agenda yourself, develop and present own content:** Instead of only reacting to populist initiatives and external events, democrats should proactively initiate human rights-related discourses and present their own ideas and approaches for solutions, making visible constructive democratic perspectives. For instance, churches can rectify the often-distorted term “Christian values” used by far-right groups by highlighting their own understanding of the term, making it clear that love for one’s neighbour and mercy are at the core of Christian values. At the same time, they should engage in a manner that authentically embodies these values, making them tangible. Churches can also use their Christian holidays to

6 For fact-checking, see <https://www.mimikama.org/klarstellung-zu-st-martin/> and <https://www.belltower.news/die-4-besorgt-buerger-theorien-an-denen-man-merkt-dass-weihnachten-vor-der-tuer-steht-46042/>, accessed on: 2 Aug. 2023.

become visible in the public sphere and invite participation beyond their inner circles.

- **Break out of the negativity bias and create positive visibility for minorities:** In order to prevent paralysing feelings – such as feeling powerless, overwhelmed, anxious and disillusioned – from becoming dominant, public debates and media coverage should not be limited to the confrontation with disasters and scandals but also provide space for success stories, proposals for solutions and signs of hope. For example, reporting in Western Europe on Muslims should not be limited to reports on extremist violence and Islamist threats or on xenophobic and Islamophobic violence or discrimination; rather, positive contributions of the religious communities to the societal life should receive increased visibility.

Finding solutions to problems in a level-headed and evidence-based way

Solution-finding processes should be participatory and comprehensible as well as factual and evidence-based:

- **Establish differentiated problem descriptions:** Problems should be named clearly. However, policymakers, media professionals and other people in positions of responsibility in particular should refrain from sensationalism and dramatisation and attach importance to a differentiated and evidence-based description and assessment of problems. In order to create a better basis for planning, it is advisable – for instance – to differentiate between violations of FoRB according to their severity. This is also important because it devalues the term “persecution” if even comparatively mild cases of discrimination are labelled as such. Caution must also be exercised when using numerical data in human rights reporting (rankings comparing the human rights situation in different countries, figures on the number of people affected by human rights violations, etc.). This cannot be done in a serious and reliable way without providing context and transparently describing the limits and inaccuracies of the methodology.
- **Promote quality reporting and sustainability of action:** Even in an era where live updates and breaking news are increasingly prevalent, thoroughness should take precedence over speed and quantity. In project planning and grant allocation, implementing a smaller number of projects

of high quality and impact in a sustainable manner should be favoured over a mass of short-lived projects that can at best provide short-lived, merely symbolic accents. Solving complex problems requires persistence and effort beyond short-term peaks of media attention and waves of outrage. Media professionals have a special responsibility to realise such a standard.

- **Move away from a culture of polarisation and outrage, and focus on concrete projects instead of empty words and pure symbolism:** The far right must not be allowed to dictate the political agenda for the entire society. The vociferous culture wars fuelled by the far right which often aim in particular at symbolic politics (for example prolonged debates about diversity and inclusive language guidelines, often based on false allegations) divert attention from more pressing issues and make it difficult to sincerely discuss legitimate and relevant issues of contention.⁷ Democrats should not engage in such culture wars and instead name their own priorities for public debate and bring realistic proposals for solutions into the discussion.
- **Be critical but have humility and appreciation for expertise instead of considering oneself an expert on everything and falling for an overestimation bias:** Especially in agitated debates, it is crucial to recognise the limits of one's own knowledge and differentiate wisely between opinion and knowledge. The mass of information available via a short internet search query tempts people to see themselves as experts on almost everything, whether football, virology or security policy. Thorough research requires considerable effort. Mere opinion pieces are certainly not an adequate substitute for sound analysis, and critical source evaluation is more important than ever in the digital age.

7 How can religious minorities in distress be better supported internationally? How can religious and ideological radicalisation be dealt with? How can anti-Semitic and other misanthropic attitudes in migrant and non-migrant populations be effectively counteracted and prevented? How can integration be promoted? How can measures to protect domestic security be designed to be effective but also proportionate? How can a cooperative relationship between the state and religious communities be implemented without favouring individual religious groups or the state exerting undue influence on the internal affairs of religious communities?

Cultivating a constructive approach to fears and distresses

Fears (and other negative emotions) can be a helpful warning sign, but they can also be misused as a pretext or excuse and have a paralysing or even destructive effect. Accordingly, a constructive approach to fears is necessary to effectively address actual hardships:⁸

- **Take each other seriously and recognise the (im)possibilities for discussion:**⁹ A liberal democratic society thrives on the fact that there is room for different opinions as well as tensions and conflicts. The exchange between people and groups with different views, opinions and backgrounds can even be productive. However, the prerequisite is the willingness to engage with other – sometimes even contrary – views and the acknowledgement of human dignity. Accordingly, it is important to distinguish between sincere concerns and selfish manipulative instrumentalisations of fear. It must also be clear that an attitude of openness must not mean feigning understanding for problematic thoughts, simply recognising and approving everything and trivialising inhuman positions. On the contrary, taking people seriously also means highlighting contradictions and problematic consequences of their views.
- **Provide inclusive space for community and identity building as well as for the endowment with meaning:** Religious communities have the potential to offer real alternatives to the harmful sham solutions that populism and extremism offer to people searching for identity, community, and meaning for their lives. In order to fulfil this crucial function, they must be perceived as trustworthy points of contact for addressing fears and sorrows, and therefore work hard to regain lost trust.
- **Prioritise support for the most vulnerable and take the affected individuals seriously:** At international, national and local levels, special attention should be given to those who objectively need help the most. Commitment to the most vulnerable must be authentic and should not be driven by self-

8 See also Justice and Peace Europe: Facing our Fears and re-connecting the World. Concerted Action 2023 – Summary, <http://www.juspax-eu.org/en/dokumente/Summary-Concerted-Action-2023-2024.pdf>, accessed on: 25 Aug. 2023.

9 See also Sekretariat der Deutschen Bischofskonferenz (ed.): Dem Populismus widerstehen. Arbeitshilfe zum kirchlichen Umgang mit rechtspopulistischen Tendenzen (= Arbeitshilfen Nr. 305), Bonn 2019, p. 72.

interest or instrumentalised for the sake of positive self-presentation, attracting political support, or economic gain. For example, it leaves a bitter taste when the sponsor of an aid project for Christians in the Global South releases a glossy promotional video consisting of a string of words of gratitude from the beneficiaries but does not leave room for the personal perspectives of those affected.

Leave no room for extremism and hate

As extremism and right-wing populism aim to sabotage constructive debates and solution finding, it is important not to leave any space for these forces:

- **Do not offer populism and extremism a stage:** Representatives of right-wing populist and extremist parties and groups should not be offered a stage to spread their inhuman narratives, including at church events. Media and other societal actors should also develop strategies against instrumentalisation of their discourse platforms and formats from the far right and particularly avoid a false balance that presents dubious positions as equivalent and gives them legitimacy.
- **Object strategically:** Transgressive behaviour must also be clearly named as such. If there is a danger of a fundamental shift in discourse through hate speech and disinformation, counter-speech should be developed and deployed. However, counterstrategies must be well planned and coordinated. It is particularly important to ensure that countermeasures do not simply lead to problematic narratives receiving attention in the first place.
- **Resist and counteract normalisation or relativisation:** Right-wing populist, far-right extremist and inhuman ideas must never be normalised or relativised. If attempts are made to camouflage such views as “bourgeois” or “conservative,” this must be clearly contradicted at all levels of society.
- **Use well-founded instead of emotion-driven criticism:** Even if the content of right-wing populist and far-right extremist narratives is outrageous, criticism should be as factual and level-headed as possible. By contrast, purely emotion-driven or polemical reactions should be avoided as this only provides populists with targets for further attacks.
- **Protect and support human rights defenders, strengthen (digital) civic courage:** Effective measures must be taken to ensure the protection of human rights defenders. For example, if church members who advocate

for church reform processes receive death threats,¹⁰ this must not only be condemned in no uncertain terms but also have consequences under criminal law. Civic courage must also be promoted in the digital space.

The list of recommendations – which are based on the analyses and research results of the authors of this volume – is not to be understood as exhaustive. However, the recommendations show where political and civil society actors, media professionals, representatives of religious communities and society as a whole have the opportunity and the responsibility to resolutely counter populist appropriations and instrumentalisations of the human right to religious freedom and other human rights. Further studies of individual options for action as well as comparative analyses of the appropriation and reinterpretation of other human rights are desirable.

Further facets of the struggle for the interpretation of human rights illustrated by the example of religious freedom

The case studies in this book have focused on a particular type of appropriation and reinterpretation of religious freedom that is especially relevant in “Western” countries, namely the appropriation by right-wing populist and extremist forces. However, other actors who are not usually classified as “far-right extremists” or “right-wing populists” in the narrow sense of the terms also endanger FoRB in various regions of the world, questioning its character as a universal right to freedom:

- The **narrative of threatened religious (traditional) values** that need to be defended – especially against the backdrop of globalisation and secularisation – is widespread worldwide. In many countries, nationalists in particular use and fuel this narrative, including without direct reference to religious freedom. This defence of alleged “Christian values” can be observed in many countries with a Christian majority, especially in Europe, America and Africa. Likewise, radical Islamists and Islamist-oriented state leaders

10 See e.g. Kirche und Leben: “Drei prominente Katholikinnen und ihr Umgang mit Hass und Hetze. Morddrohungen gegen Theologin Wuckelt von kirchlichen Reformgegnern” (5 Jul. 2023), <https://www.kirche-und-leben.de/artikel/morddrohungen-gegen-theologin-wuckelt-von-kirchlichen-reformgegnern>, accessed on: 2 Aug. 2023.

present themselves as defenders of Islam and its values and traditions. In India, Hindu nationalism is on the rise, which claims to protect Hindu traditions and ways of life from alleged external influences and aggressively attacks people of other faiths.

- In some cases, this narrative of defending religious values is also linked to a **postcolonial critique** that questions human rights because they are perceived as a colonial or Western construct imposed without considering other cultural traditions and schools of thought in different regions of the world. This argumentation provides a helpful excuse for autocratic and totalitarian regimes to relativise their own human rights deficiencies and violations or to exclude and reinterpret aspects of human rights that are inconvenient for them. Such arguments are particularly destructive for individuals from disadvantaged groups as they help to establish and perpetuate oppression. There is an urgent need for further research in this area taking into account the fact that the recourse to human rights in Western countries – especially during the colonial era – was associated with striking contradictions that still persist in neocolonial contexts.
- In the Middle East and North Africa (MENA) region, it is noticeable that governments often do not speak of “religious freedom” but “religious harmony” or “religious tolerance.” However, from a human rights perspective, neither of these alternative expressions is equivalent to “freedom of religion” as the other two concepts ascribe less importance to the aspect of freedom or even suppress it altogether. However, the autocratic regimes of the region in particular benefit from such alternative framing, as it allows them to use concessions in the field of interreligious cooperation for a **branding strategy** while at the same time covering up unpleasant conflicts and problems.¹¹
- Totalitarian regimes such as the People’s Republic of China with its **Sinicization policy** pursue aggressive strategies to adapt religious communities to their own ideology and to gain total control. They spread the illusion of an unrestricted scope of action for religions in the state, while at the same time subjecting them to maximum control and suppressing op-

11 On the concepts of branding and shaming, see Hirschberger, Bernd: External Communication in Social Media During Asymmetric Conflicts: A Theoretical Model and Empirical Case Study of the Conflict in Israel and Palestine, Bielefeld: transcript 2021, pp. 20–32.

ponents. The aim is to secure their own rule from the outset and avoid any form of potential opposition.

- In the **context of wars and (armed) conflict**, it can often be observed that conflict parties deliberately highlight alleged and actual violations of FoRB and other human rights attributed to the opponent side in the sense of a **shaming strategy** to damage the image of their opponents and thereby reduce the willingness of third parties to support them, as well as stirring up anger against the opponent among their own supporters.

The types of problematic constellations briefly touched upon here require further research. Concrete case studies examining corresponding patterns as well as their possible connections with the right-wing populist and extremist appropriations and reinterpretations of religious freedom described in this book would be desirable.

The various problematic tendencies described above attacking the understanding of religious freedom as a human right can lead to massive damage to FoRB and human rights as a whole, and ultimately to the abolition in their current form as universal rights to freedom, which in turn facilitates concrete human rights violations. It is therefore particularly important that democrats work together and persistently to counteract such attacks. As described above, there are many opportunities to contribute to this.