

Religious Freedom for all (Christians)?

by Arie de Pater, EEA Brussels Representative

Freedom of Religion or Belief (FoRB) is a precious human right. It is close to the core of who we are as human beings and it greatly influences the way we see and interpret the world. However, we can easily take it for granted. Encounters with persecuted Christians help us realise how precious FoRB is. It is definitely worth defending and promoting. But should we advocate for this freedom, or just for Christians?

The European Evangelical Alliance, along with most Christian religious freedom organisations, is strongly convinced that we should defend and promote FoRB for all people, regardless to what faith or ideology they adhere to. There are several reasons for this.

The Bible clearly states that all human beings are created in the image of God. Therefore, we all share the same infinite worth and dignity and innate rights. Our attitudes, policies and actions must be shaped by these truths. Regardless how much God wants all of us to stay close to Him, He created people with a free will. This includes the choice to go after other gods or no god at all. Therefore, despite how much we want all people to become Christians, they can only do so out of their own free will. They should be free to choose and free to change. That's at the very heart of FoRB. In relation to this, it is important to mention that FoRB is an individual human right. It protects the individual and not any religion or belief as a whole.

A freedom that only applies to a select group of people is called a privilege rather than freedom. Our brothers and sisters living in countries with a single dominant religion, not being evangelical, can tell us more about how that looks like in practice. Therefore, it is important that all religions or beliefs are treated equally, both in theory and in practice. If states are actively defending and/or promoting one particular religion, all other religions suffer. A neutral position of the State is therefore paramount for full Freedom of Religion or Belief.

Whether we like it or not, our societies are increasingly diverse. The Global Charter of Conscience rightly observes: "...pluralism makes religious liberty more necessary, just as religious liberty makes pluralism more likely."

FoRB does not only protect one's conscience and deepest personal convictions, it also provides the right to manifest one's religion or belief, either alone or in community with others. This includes the right to teach and to evangelise. So, as much as FoRB protects us, it also provides us the space to reach out to others, sharing the Gospel with them. Without Freedom of Religion or Belief for all, they would not have the freedom to listen and convert.

Advocating for FoRB for all does not mean nor imply that to us all religions and beliefs are equal. Of course not! We just ask for all religions to be treated equally. Working on the topic from a general human rights perspective, rather than from a purely Christian one, increases our audience and support. This cooperative approach in advocating for Freedom of Religion or Belief has opened political doors that otherwise would have been closed, leading to more FoRB.

Of course, we realise that other religions might occasionally benefit from this general call for Freedom of Religion or Belief more than Christians do. But we are convinced that an increasing openness for religious diversity in our societies will ultimately bless us all. And the Gospel is Good News. The Lord is not afraid of freedom. He can and will win people to Christ. ■