



## Religious Equality and Freedom of Religion or Belief: International Development's Blindspot

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# RELIGIOUS EQUALITY AND FREEDOM OF RELIGION OR BELIEF: INTERNATIONAL DEVELOPMENT'S BLINDSPOT

By Mariz Tadros

**T**he objective of this paper is to interrogate the role and place of freedom of religion or belief (FoRB) in Western approaches to development.<sup>1</sup>

Attention to FoRB has in recent years become increasingly prominent in Western foreign policy more broadly, but little attention has been given specifically to FoRB in development policy and practice; in fact I argue in this paper that FoRB is a blind spot in most development policy and practice. This is problematic not only because it means that there is a risk that foreign policy initiatives to promote and protect FoRB remain largely detached from people “on the ground,” but also because it means that development actors overlook or misunderstand important aspects of contemporary inequalities and injustices in the contexts in which they work.

The lack of attention to FoRB—or religious equality—is particularly interesting when considering that attention to religion has, in recent decades, become increasingly prominent in development. But a religion-sensitive approach to development is not necessarily the same as a FoRB-sensitive approach. Comparing the two approaches, I argue that while there are some important convergences, we are also dealing with

very distinct divergences. In order to truly support freedom of religion or belief and have a full understanding of religious inequalities within international development, we need a distinct agenda that goes beyond “add religion and stir.” In the paper, I explore where the opportunities and challenges lie for synergies between international development frameworks and programming and freedom of religion or belief. I expose the critical tensions inherent in such processes, and the kinds of paradigmatic shifts that need to happen, in

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**Abstract:** The relationship between freedom of religion or belief and international development continues to be severely under-explored in the literature, despite the copious body of scholarship that distinctively deals with each separately. The relevance of exploring this nexus is particularly significant in view of the increasing visibility of multilateral, bilateral, and non-governmental action aimed towards advancing freedom of religion or belief through development or humanitarian aid. Western development thinking, policy, and practice has always struggled with how to engage with religion. This article analyses the sources of confusion between religion and freedom of religion and belief, and the challenges of addressing religious inequalities in theory, policy, and praxis.

**Keywords:** FoRB, religion and development, religious inequality-blind development, FoRB-sensitive development, religious inequalities

terms of language and framing, operational practice, and most importantly, epistemological changes needed to think outside the box to make FoRB-sensitive development a reality.

The article is structured as follows: Section one gives a brief overview of the genealogy of the FoRB and foreign policy agenda, pointing to the lack of engagement with the development sector; section two discusses whether the “religion and development” agenda can contribute to strengthening our attention to, and understanding of, FoRB in a development context, arguing that the two approaches are in fact fundamentally different from one another and that a distinct FoRB-approach is needed; and finally section three identifies some of the main challenges in actually implementing such a FoRB-sensitive approach to development.

But before I delve into the analysis, a few words on terminology. I engage with FoRB in this paper as “religious equality.” The aim here is to redress inequalities that people suffer on account of their religion or beliefs, not only in terms of restrictions on their freedom but also in terms of underlying power differentials. I recognize that there are limitations to the concept of religious equality. Most importantly, the concept may be misinterpreted as exclusively focusing on those who are marginalized on account of having religious beliefs or being perceived as such. However, the need to redress religious inequality also applies to those who self-identify as atheist or are associated with atheism in contexts where society is intolerant of those who are of non-faith. The reference to inequality in the present paper, then, is broadly to all those people who experience any process of “otherization” or discrimination on account of the religious identity they hold or not hold. The term also applies to situations where individuals or communities suffer because of intersecting identities—in other words, when their religious identity intersects with other identity qualifiers such as gender, race, class, geographic location, political orientation, or others.

## The Genealogy of the “FoRB and Foreign Policy” Agenda

Despite the fact that the right to FoRB has featured in human rights conventions since the

birth of the international human rights system, it is only in recent decades that we have seen concerted action around FoRB in the field of foreign policy. Barker and Bennett (2019) thus identify 1998 as the critical juncture for bringing the issue to center stage in global policy, when the United States prioritized the promotion and defense of international religious freedom through its foreign policy following the passage of the International Religious Freedom Act (IRFA). Barker and Bennett (2019, 17) note that since the IRFA was enacted,

violations of religious freedom have received greater attention by an increasing number of multilateral organizations such as the United Nations (UN) and the European Union (EU), and more than a dozen countries identify the promotion of international religious freedom as a core element of their foreign policy.

In 2016, the EU designated a special envoy for Freedom of Religion of Belief, and in 2018 the EU parliament published special guidelines on the promotion of freedom of religion or belief, with an intra-parliamentary group publishing an annual report on the state of FoRB globally. Several countries have followed suit with the establishment of their own special envoys for FoRB, including Norway, Denmark, the United Kingdom (UK), the Netherlands and others.

In their scoping report, Barker and Bennett (2019) detail fairly high-level action on FoRB, including bilateral government engagements and multilateral platforms, mostly also featuring governments. While established in the Cold War for cooperation across ideological divides, the Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe (OSCE) represents one of the oldest multilateral platforms through which issues of freedom of belief, conscience and thought are discussed. A more recent initiative includes the International Panel of Parliamentarians for Freedom of Religion or Belief (IPPFoRB), established in November 2014 at the Nobel Peace Center in Oslo, Norway. In that meeting, 30 parliamentarians from 17 countries signed the Oslo Charter for Freedom of Religion or Belief, the founding document of IPPFoRB. The

Canadian government, via its Canadian Office for Religious Freedom, further established an International Contact Group on Freedom of Religion or Belief (ICG) in 2015. While the full list of the 20 participating countries has not been made publicly known, they include the United States, the UK, Norway, Cameroon, Jordan, and Indonesia (Barker and Bennett 2019). A preliminary analysis of multilateral or bilateral activities suggests that most of their work is premised on documenting and monitoring FoRB violations in countries and raising issues of violations of FoRB through policy dialogues with the government at hand. There is additionally substantial work on collecting data, undertaking training for diplomats, and providing toolkits.

Increasingly, a number of governments are claiming to include religious inequality in their development activities, in part as a response to pressure from identity-based advocacy groups to demonstrate that not only their foreign policy but also their development policy was cognizant and responsive to the scale and severity of religious-inspired human suffering in many parts of the world.<sup>2</sup> For example, Barker and Bennett (2019) illustrate that the Danish Mission Council Development Department (DMCDD), which manages a pooled fund that primarily supports poverty reduction initiatives in developing countries, had its budget increased by the Ministry of Foreign Affairs in 2017 with the expectation that future development projects will address FoRB.

Three other initiatives are more focused on Christian minorities. In 2011, Norway established the Minority Project, focusing on Christian minorities in the Middle East and improving the situation of vulnerable religious groups worldwide. The project is led by the Special Envoy for Human Rights, who reports to the Ministry for Foreign Affairs. Initiatives “include the creation of monitoring and early warning mechanisms for vulnerable groups and the development of measures to improve conditions for persecuted religious minorities who are being subjected to harassment and discrimination” (Barker and Bennett 2019, 61–62). There is also the State Secretariat for the Aid of Persecuted Christians in Hungary, which sits in the Prime Minister’s Office, and as the name suggests is a

state agency committed to improving humanitarian and developmental assistance to Christians suffering persecution in the Middle East and sub-Saharan Africa. Moreover, in 2019, the British government launched an investigation into the Foreign and Commonwealth Office’s (FCO) response to the persecution of Christians globally, and issued a number of recommendations for targeted actions, presented in what became commonly known as the Bishop of Truro’s Report.

Most of these initiatives, however, are engaged in diplomacy rather than on-the-ground development efforts; and the exceptions, such as USAID’s Center for Faith and Opportunity Initiatives, are often more broadly committed to the inclusion of faith-actors in development rather than to a FoRB-sensitive approach as such.<sup>3</sup> And as I shall discuss below, a “religious engagement” approach cannot necessarily be equated with a FoRB-sensitive approach to development.

### “Religion and Development” and FoRB: Two Sides of the Same Coin or Diverging Foci?

In recent decades, we have witnessed increasing attention to religion and religious actors in development research, policy, and practice. This “religious turn” in development has received much attention in literature (see e.g. Deneulin and Bano 2009; Deneulin and Rakodi 2011; Jones and Petersen 2011; Marshall 2015; McDuie-Ra and Rees 2010; Tadros 2011; Ver Beek 2000 and many others); and I will not go into further detail in this paper. What interests us here is whether the “religion and development” approach can contribute to building a FoRB-sensitive approach to development. Often, a FoRB-sensitive approach is equated with a religion-sensitive approach, implicitly or explicitly making efforts to formulate a specific FoRB approach to development superfluous. “Why do we need to talk about FoRB when we are already talking about religion?” But as I shall argue below, while the two agendas do converge on some points, they also significantly diverge on others.

A common factor between a religion-sensitive development agenda and a FoRB-sensitive one is that both recognize that religion

is important and influential and has not been duly acknowledged or engaged with in development planning, programming, or evaluations. Both agendas push back against the way in which religion has been conceptualized, classified, or understood. Both consider the realm of the immaterial as significant and reject reductionist explanations that perceive religion as more likely than not a by-product of another dynamic (class, ethnicity, geography).

To make development more sensitive to religion, religious literacy would feature as one of the important elements of delivering on both agendas (FoRB and religion in development). Diane L. Moore, Director of the Religious Literacy Project at Harvard Divinity School, defines religious literacy as “the ability to discern and analyze the fundamental intersections of religion and social/political/cultural life through multiple lenses,” specifically through an understanding of the beliefs, central texts and practices of religious traditions and how these intersect with social, political and cultural spaces (The Religious Literacy Project 2019). Some have argued for the integration of religious literacy in development (Gingerich et al. 2017) and a number of initiatives have been established to promote religious literacy in development using different methodologies and approaches. Some are in-house, involving the training of diplomats and policymakers inside ministries, while others are more open to anyone interested, such as the Joint Learning Initiative, the FoRB Learning Platform, and ACT Alliance. Development field practitioners undertaking scoping studies, planners undertaking political economy analysis, programmers and monitoring and evaluation specialists would need to have the knowledge, mindset, attitude and skills at understanding the broad breadth of ways in which religious agency, history and doctrine influence power dynamics on the ground. These power dynamics would also require an understanding of how they work within groups and across groups.

However, beyond recognition of religious agency and religious literacy competencies, there are some critical differences in the conception of a FoRB-sensitive development approach and a religion-aware one. If we conceive of both it

would be wrong to assume that, since both agendas engage with religion, the terms they use would refer to the same phenomenon.

The emphasis on the nature of power inequality at the heart of religion and development is different to that of the FoRB-in-development agenda. In religion-aware development policy, the desired outcome is the recognition and inclusion of religious discourses and actors (Berger 2014). A FoRB-sensitive development policy would focus not only on the secular-religious divide but on the divide within religious and non-religious groups as well. Moreover, whereas religion-sensitive development endeavors to integrate religious actors, norms and beliefs in understandings and interventions to bring about social change, a FoRB perspective also recognizes the involvement of those of non-faith or no belief. Arguably since development programming, policies and practices have been secular by and large, it is the inequalities within groups and among those who hold religious beliefs that has been most challenging conceptually and operationally for development actors to tackle.

Second, the scholarship for a religion-sensitive lens on development sought to redress how international policymakers and programmers discriminated against or ignored organizations on account of their faith. The most commonly used example was a USAID regulation that prevented the organization from funding FBOs—a regulation that was overturned in 2004 on the basis that “USAID may not discriminate for or against a program applicant because the organization is motivated or influenced by religious faith to provide social services, or because of their religious character or affiliation” (USAID, n.d.). The normative underpinning of the religion in development agenda (or at least subsets of it) has been to bring to the fore the positive role that religious agency has, in the form of leadership, organizations and discourses, and how this can contribute towards a more holistic form of development.

A case in point is the International Partnership on Religion and Sustainable Development, a convening platform funded by the German Federal Ministry for Economic

Cooperation and Development (BMZ) and the United States Agency for International Development (USAID). According to its mandate

PaRD brings together governmental and intergovernmental entities with diverse civil society organizations (CSOs) and FBOs, to engage the social capital and capacities vested in diverse faith communities for sustainable development and humanitarian assistance in the spirit of the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development. (PaRD, n.d.)

The point behind PaRD and other similar initiatives (such as the Joint Learning Initiative) is to bring to the fore the positive contributions of the religious in development.

On the other hand, the theory of change underpinning FoRB-in-development is that there is a need to recognize and redress the inequalities that face people who are discriminated against on the basis of their faith, which means addressing the prejudices of both secular and religious actors. It recognizes that the political appropriation of religion for the exercise of power has led to a growth of fundamentalist religious discourses and activism that negatively impact religious inclusivity. Champions of a religion-sensitive lens onto development, whether academics or development practitioners, have focused on the exclusion of religious actors, understandings, and beliefs by a persistent secular straitjacketing of development. However, champions of freedom of religion or belief in development recognize that the threats to religious inclusion lie not only with those who wish to exclude all expressions and forms of the religious from development, but also a range of religious actors, beliefs and practices which perpetuate religious otherization.

A review of the religion and development literature shows minimal engagement with the question of religious marginality and inequalities among and within communities or with FoRB more broadly. There is some scholarship examining the institutional discrimination facing religious minorities; for example in the labor market (Basedau, Govien, and Prediger 2018),

housing sector (Marshall and Van Saanen 2007), health sector (Martin 2008), and some explorations of intersectionality, such as in David Mosse's seminal work on how the intersection between caste, religious affiliation and discrimination impacts on people's access to development in India (2012, 2018). Such work also includes Frances Stewart's (2008) important work on horizontal inequalities relating to religious and ethnic minorities' collective experience of marginalization and its relationship to violence. Nonetheless, by and large, the nexus of religion-identity-development-inequality is virtually absent in the religion and development scholarship, and even more so in development policy and programming.

Third, and this is perhaps the greatest difference, is the question of the actors and agendas that are being incorporated into the development sphere. While not generalizing, the rationale for bringing in religious leaders, FBOs and discourses into development was precisely because they are influential on the ground, because they have leverage, outreach and a gathering and sometimes provide critical services. In other words, religious actors may have been marginal to international development actors, spaces, and agendas, but they were not in their own "local" contexts. On the contrary, it was by understanding that they wield power in relation to others in their community that the case for recognition was made.

In contrast, the rationale for a religious equality agenda is precisely the reverse: that certain religious actors, often a numerical and political minority, are marginalized, overlooked, shunned, and excluded, both individually and collectively. It is not that they do not have power, nor that we wish to engage with them as simply victims who have no agency, but that relationally they suffer from being excluded from mainstream religious discourses, from legitimacy and from influence on account of their affiliation—or at least association with a religious identifier, a difference that is looked down upon. In other words, it is precisely because they suffer from multiple, intersecting forms of exclusion and powerlessness that they need to be incorporated, to redress their inequalities for a more inclusive development agenda.

The differences in making development more religion aware and FoRB sensitive on account of the differential power base and positioning of religious leaders and actors on the one hand and members of marginalized religious communities on the other is significant operationally. For example, whereas the inclusion of religion in development practically may mean the invitation of faith leaders and organizations to contribute and partner with development actors, it is not so straightforward for religious minorities and non-believers. In some countries such as Pakistan, Ahmadis conceal their identity in order to avoid government crackdown. In Iraq, the Kakais proclaim publicly that they are Muslim in order to avoid extremist group assaults. The sensitivities around engaging with FoRB on the ground are immense; integrating FoRB in development is not a case of “add religious freedom to the religion and development agenda and stir.” This is because, while it builds on the importance of recognizing the role of religious norms and beliefs in influencing, it specifically tackles the unequal power relations that people experience on account of being seen as the religious “other,” be they of the same faith as the majority, of a minority faith, or of no belief. Hence, the opportunities and challenges of mainstreaming FoRB in development are to a large extent different to those involved in adopting a religion-sensitive lens to development. The last part of this paper will highlight some of the specific issues with a FoRB-sensitive development agenda.

### FoRB’s Uneasy Relationship with Development

The challenges of making international development frameworks, policymakers, and practitioners more cognizant and responsive to religious inequalities are marked by both the limitations of present frameworks and also by the positionality of Western actors (how their intentions are perceived in the light of their identity). A *longue durée* reading of Western powers’ engagement with religious pluralism in colonized countries sheds much light on why development academics and practitioners who

wish to break with their countries past, as colonizers are uncomfortable with incorporating FoRB in development. The history of British, French, and Belgian colonialism is marked by a strategy of divide and rule or divide and conquer. Several religious conflicts around the world that have escalated into genocides have their roots in the interventions of colonialist powers in previous centuries. British colonialism in Myanmar has been considered to have contributed to the conditions for a backlash or desire for revenge against the ethno-religious minorities that the Buddhists began to perceive as a threat (Rogers 2018). In Egypt, British colonialist powers were believed to have sought to allocate resources in ways that created divisions between the Muslim majority and Christian minority. In India, the entrenchment of religious identities via the introduction of political and economic measures that supported mobilization around communal religious identity lines is believed to have sowed mistrust and fear for loss of power. However, communal tensions and violence cannot all be reduced to the role of colonialism since in many cases tensions preceded colonialism, including in the cases mentioned above (Myanmar and Egypt).

The second challenge for development actors to engage with the promotion of FoRB is concern with being perceived as extending the legacy of missionary activity in the global South, where missionary activity often accompanied a colonial presence. According to Fountain (2015, 85), “contemporary Western development is a direct descendent of Christian proselytizing impulses, dispositions, practices, and organizational forms.” As with this quote above, the Christian missionary legacy has by and large been represented in a deeply negative light in much of the literature that development draws on (post-colonialism, anthropology, etc.; see Fountain for multiple examples of this). However, the salience of a negative representation of missionary activity also reflects the generalization of a number of expressions of agency that are highly diverse in both denomination and relationship with the colonizers and the colonized across very different times and places. In a study of activist forms of

Protestant missionaries, Woodberry (2012, 254) notes that there is evidence that some missionary movements/groups played a central role in contributing to local groups' capacities and skills to mobilize the masses against colonialist rule, in particular in the 19th century and early 20th century, stating that while some missionaries were paternalistic and racist, there is evidence too of others whose support for local populations was part of their commitment to societal reform, which in turn emanated from their faith. The evidence as expected will vary from context to context.

The extent to which countries can position themselves as the protectors of religious harmony and cohesion without their colonial past casting a shadow on their credibility, and most importantly, their intentions, needs to be explored at length. There is certainly a gap in the evidence we have in this area. Many countries consider the state of religious pluralism in their contexts as a matter of

national sovereignty. The question is not one of the contemporary record of promoting religious freedom or its coherence, but rather a question of perception. For example, in many colonial contexts in the Middle East, some indigenous churches responded to British colonialism in the 19th century by aligning themselves with Muslims. Their rejection of colonial patronage for their protection was informed by the desire to define themselves as patriotic churches (Tadros 2016). In a context where indigenous churches' patriotism is always under scrutiny, the extent to which a collaboration with a former colonial power can create a public image problem cannot be underestimated. This of course varies from one context to another and one phase to the next.

Yet the United States, the most vocal promoter of religious freedom which does not have a colonial legacy of divide and rule, cannot boast a positive track record of pursuing policies that promote social cohesion, pluralism, and religious equality. The legacy of the American occupation of Iraq following the overthrow of Saddam Hussein is believed to have contributed

to the generation of religious intolerance which reached the level of religious cleansing in the beginning of the 21st century. 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. On the one hand, it has meant that there is substantial weight and visibility given to FoRB that was absent before. All the multilateral initiatives, even when not led by the US, have involved high level US foreign representation. More recently in 2018, Mike Pence, the Vice-President of the US, held an inter-ministerial meeting on FoRB in Washington, followed by a second in 2019.

These were well attended, with over 3,000 participants. This has given visibility to the issue and allowed for the exchange of ideas and strategies across different actors.

On the other hand, the association of US foreign policy with FoRB is not

without its challenges for legitimacy. Wherever or whenever American foreign policy suffers from a credibility or legitimacy deficit, its promotion of FoRB by default also suffers among some domestic and external actors. The question of the alignment of American foreign and domestic policy with promotion of FoRB has again raised questions on the impacts and outcomes for redressing religious inequality on the ground for those who need it most. For example, while Donald Trump has explicitly identified Christians from countries such as Syria as particularly vulnerable and a priority for his administration (Brody 2017), this has not translated into consistent policy. A report in Christianity Today (CT) notes that for 2018,

though most of the refugees welcomed over the past year are Christians, the overall drop means far fewer believers are finding refuge in the US than in prior years. In the 2018 fiscal year, 15,748 Christian refugees entered the country, a 36.4 percent decline from the previous

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year and a 55 percent decline from fiscal year 2016. (Jackson 2018)

Within that overall decline in refugee populations and in the number of Christian refugees admitted, the drop is also very notable for Christians from the Middle East, as noted by the CT report:

only 70 Christians from places like Iran, Iraq, Lebanon, Palestine, Syria, Turkey, and Yemen were resettled in the US in the last fiscal year [2018], compared to more than 3,000 Christians from the region who came in fiscal year 2017.

The restrictions on refugee entry harmed other religious minorities more substantially than Christians, yet even the latter's vulnerability has increased. This demonstrates that broader policy (restrictions of refugee intake) has had an impact that far outweighs that of having a high-level US government-sponsored summit on freedom of religion or belief. Herein lies the conundrum: broader policies can have unintended outcomes, undermining religious freedom, that outweigh the formulation of policies that seem on the surface to specifically aim at redressing religious inequality. Operationally, for example, USAID has announced that it will pursue an aid policy that ensures that development assistance in Iraq is sensitive to FoRB. However, if the broader US foreign policy in Iraq contributes to insecurity, religious minorities will consider it unsafe to participate in developmental activities funded by USAID.

The challenge of integrating FoRB in development is exacerbated by polarization globally, but particularly in the US, between the right and left on human rights. While the promotion of religious freedom is commensurate with a human rights approach to development, the polarization between right and left has also seeped into this sector. Which rights become fashionable in development planning and programming is not only premised on the urgency of the situation on the ground or the information available, but also on the political orientation of power-holders responsible for decision-making. The extent to which FoRB is

associated with a rightwing rights agenda and whether this has an influence on its uptake in development requires further exploration. One observation is that left-leaning academics, think tanks, development actors and sometimes politicians are more likely to defend the rights of religious minorities (particularly Muslims) living in the West, while their right-wing oriented counterparts tend to defend the rights of religious minorities internationally. For example, in the UK, the left leaning Labour party released a Race and Faith Manifesto for the 2019 national elections (Labour 2019). In this manifesto Labour made one mention of Christians in passing, alongside other groups, in their right to attire without discrimination. On the other hand, in the same document, they made six mentions specific to the rights of Muslims domestically. Conversely, the Conservative party 2019 party manifesto spoke about defending all faiths from persecution domestically but also added that they will seek to implement the Truro report, which proposed a series of recommendations for improving the situation of the persecution of Christians overseas (Conservatives 2019). These represent deep-seated ideological fault lines which are beyond the scope of this paper to analyze, but which are important to take note of as they inevitably have spillover effects on international development, whether directly or in more subtle ways.

Moreover, the integration of FoRB in development operationally carries different risks to those involved in raising the issue through diplomatic channels. The promotion of FoRB in foreign policy does not involve grassroots work often because of concerns that direct engagement with the population on the ground would be considered a violation of a country's sovereignty or a form of espionage. Diplomats often raise issues of religious freedom in bilateral policy dialogues or through multilateral conferences/summits, etc. Some embassies do have, through their political office, local researchers that gather information on the state of religious freedom, which sometimes involves interviews with various stakeholders, however, these interviews tend to be with elites and undertaken in a relatively insulated environment.

On the other hand, the integration of freedom of religion or belief in development has very different risks associated with it. First, if development programs are funded through bilateral or multilateral assistance, the program must be negotiated with the host government. As several donors interviewed pointed out, if a partner country does not identify issues of religious inclusion as a priority issue in the development agenda, it is very difficult to include it. For FoRB to be meaningful, it needs to be embedded in existing development programs and it needs to be multiscale, involving work with communities at a grassroots level. Similar challenges are faced by non-state actors working on FoRB as human rights organizations, however with some major differences.

In many religiously heterogeneous contexts where religious intolerance is high, the status and situation of religious minorities is considered a national security matter, which means that it is conceived to be the remit of security officials to govern sectarian tensions and manage them. For example, in Egypt, when sectarian violence erupts against Christians in local communities, the security apparatus convenes what they term “reconciliation committees” which force perpetrators and victims to sit together and agree to non-escalation. These reconciliation committees have obfuscated the role of the police and the judiciary in enforcing rule of law and have led to the usurping of justice for victims (Tadros 2013). The local development practitioners who wish to engage in work that promotes social cohesion in such contexts may be seen to cross a red line since they are “intruding” on the sphere governed by the security apparatus, unless the latter has given them the greenlight to work.

The risks of backlash for bilateral or multilateral actors, should they be seen as working in a highly sensitive area, are very substantial in some contexts. A very conspicuous risk is that authorities would regard working on religious inequalities as an act of domestic interference, not of poverty alleviation, and on account of this, rule out the aid package altogether. One donor working in Pakistan said that any inclusion of religious inequality issues in

their development work might put their whole program at risk of closure if the government were hostile to it. The second and related risk is that at a community level, a foreign-funded program engaging with issues affecting religious minorities would incur the wrath of nationalist and religious fundamentalists who would collectively organize to thwart it. In other words, it carries the risk of a societal backlash if communities reject interventions that serve to improve the situation of religious minorities, leading to their rejection of other developmental interventions and jeopardizing further work with other vulnerable groups (Mohmand 2018). A third, and again inter-related risk is that both bureaucracies and political parties back home (where donors are based) would dispute the value and relevance of aid that does not have immediate and demonstrable impact on the ground. Given the pressures on donors to show how funding for development interventions has produced impact, demonstrating changes in the status of religious minorities or changes in social cohesion is very difficult within the cycle of a project.

In addition to the positionality of donors and contextual sensitivities, there are also institutional challenges for development actors to engage with integrating or mainstreaming freedom of religion or belief in their programming. The first is associated with planners’/practitioners’ own positionality and personal stances on issues to do with religious discrimination. This is distinctly different from a lack of knowledge associated with religious illiteracy, but rather about the personal insights and experiences of development professionals. It is not part of their conventional development practice to be reflexive about their own personal prejudices, stances, and positioning on matters to do with religious persecution. Do practitioners consider religious discrimination as “artificial” or “imposed by the West”? Do they have issues with recognizing a group being religiously marginalized in one context but in the position of a perpetrator of religious prejudice in another? As the late Cassandra Balchin reflected from a number of workshops with staff at Oxfam:

What does being politically neutral mean? No matter what Oxfam's institutional approach, the NGOs it partners with and individual staff are bound to have their own political preferences. In many contexts, political preferences are closely tied up with approaches to religion (e.g. supporting a party that promotes secularism, or conservative interpretations of religion), while partner NGOs may be the public wings or undisclosed fronts of political forces. (Balchin 2011, 11)

One of the major disconnects in attitudes towards engaging with FoRB is the assumption amongst some practitioners that those who seek to redress religious inequalities are people of faith. This is not specific to those who work in development, with the same assumption observed by Petersen and Marshall (2018, 15) amongst human rights activists: "Among secular human rights organizations, conversely, this misperception of FoRB as a right that primarily concerns religious communities and individuals is—in part—to blame for their lack of engagement with FoRB." However, an underlying reason may be a question of normative perceptions among human rights advocates (and development practitioners as well). Whereas advocating for women's liberation in the global South is considered progressive, the same image does not hold for championing the rights of those who hold religious beliefs. The same applies for environmentalists, development practitioners and human rights activists who are seeking to protect indigenous people and their ecologies but who are not originally from these communities.

Undoubtedly promoting the ability of indigenous people and religious minorities to represent themselves and amplify their voices where they are marginalized is key. However, what is argued here is that there is a need to challenge the misguided assumption that one needs to be religious (a person of faith) to engage with the cause of advancing religious freedom or redressing religious inequalities. For example, in the aftermath of the Egyptian uprising in 2011, there was significant interest on the part of

international and national civil society organizations with the commitment to supporting locally-led inclusive development policies, as well as on the part of international feminist organizations to ensure that any political transition was gender-sensitive. However, both the documentation of risks and policy recommendations completely ignored how the political ascendancy of religiously conservative Islamist movements was affecting the position and situation of poor Coptic women (i.e. intersection of poverty, religious marginality, and gender). In other words, feminist activists and development programmers that may or may not be people of faith, should have, on account of their commitment to inclusivity, incorporated the inequalities experienced by Coptic women in their analysis of the situation of women on the ground more broadly and the kinds of policies they formulated (see Tadros 2015).

Another major challenge to development programming engaging with religious inequalities seriously are the potential tensions with other inequalities. For example, some international donors would put religious minorities, indigenous groups, trans people and the disabled all in the same category of vulnerable people or those suffering from exclusion. However, on the ground, although all of the above may experience various levels of powerlessness, they do not necessarily see themselves as part and parcel of the same process of exclusion. For example, in Nigeria, while there have been instances where women leaders from the two main faiths (Islam and Christianity) were able to collaborate around championing girls' education as part of a common agenda around gender equality, their commitment to gender equality did not extend to lesbian women, and in fact they organized collectively against the extension of rights to LGBTQ (Nagarajan 2018).

In some instances, marginalized members of religious minorities may not only not show any solidarity with LGBTQI as a marginalized group but may, indeed, hold the same homophobic attitudes towards them as are prevalent in that society more broadly. One LGBTQI activist queried how CREID can advocate for the rights

of religious minorities when many of its leaders are homophobic? (personal conversation with LGBTQI activist, anonymized, September 2019).

The idea of the indivisibility of rights, while theoretically coherent, is very messy on the ground for several reasons. First, as mentioned above, the assumption that individuals or groups who experience a violation of rights may empathize with each other's exclusion is not a given. Second, there may be real tensions ideologically and pragmatically between one set of rights and another (for example in the case above, between women's rights and religious interpretations of religious texts on sexuality). Third, which rights gain public visibility domestically or internationally is often associated with factors beyond the actual rights in question. As mentioned earlier, the association of the US promotion of FoRB with the Republican party has meant that those endorsing or challenging FoRB domestically have had to contend with how they wish to position themselves in relation to the political agenda more broadly of this political party. The indivisibility of rights conceptually is perhaps underpinned by the assumption that all rights will be given the same prominence in any framings of inclusive development. However, which rights assume center stage in international development policy frameworks shifts across time, with operational implications for implementing any agenda that is premised on an integrated approach to the promotion of inclusion.

## Conclusion

This article has delineated some of the challenges and conundrums of redressing religious inequalities in development. Indeed, the very legitimacy of the proposition that FoRB should feature as one of the issues that international development should be engaging with is deeply contested. In a seminar on whether the integration of religious marginality in development is a pathway of recognizing that creed and need converge (Institute of Development Studies, University of Sussex, October 14, 2019), one of the recurring questions was whether, as outsiders, we have any

right to hold to account other countries for their FoRB record. The problematique of external, Western actors finger-pointing in the arena of human rights, be it women's equality, FoRB, or other rights, has consistently been raised, in particular on account of the inconsistency and indeed hypocrisy with which human rights have been championed. However, a counter argument is 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.

The efforts at eliciting a paradigmatic shift in international development towards removing its secular blinkers are important for understanding the multidimensionality of the power dynamics at work, beyond the visible and the material. Such efforts are also important in encouraging a more comprehensive and realistic mapping of actors on the ground, which include both secular as well as religious expressions of agency, and those where the demarcations are more blurred. However, the integration of a religious lens into development is a necessary but insufficient approach to addressing FoRB. Because of the reasons for this that have been highlighted in this paper, there cannot be an "add religion and stir" approach to addressing religious inequality. It needs to be recognized in its own right as an issue that merits its own concerted focus. In other words, a deepening of a religion-sensitive lens onto development, even if consistently applied across the board, will not by default contribute to redressing inequalities that intersect across religion and other identifiers. Redressing religious inequalities needs to be recognized in its own right as part of the broader agenda of tackling the kinds of inequalities that lead to exclusion and marginalization.

As with the global advocacy for gender equality in international development, we cannot overlook sensitivities around a deeply politicized theme such as FoRB. However, as with gender equality, the critical questions are who is doing the mainstreaming, what legitimacies do they wield in relation to whom, and how is mainstreaming promoted? Admittedly, as a social category of analysis, gender and religion are not

the same thing, and neither are gender and religious equalities/inequalities necessarily driven by the same dynamics. However, gender mainstreaming in development may be relevant for mainstreaming religious inequalities because both are deeply politicized and contentious. Moreover, development actors, policy, and practice also suffered from being inadvertently and deliberately gender blind, with gender power hierarchies representing a clear blind spot.

Given the resistance to addressing religious equalities in international development, the historical and ongoing struggle to mainstream gender in development presents insights into

eliciting positive change. The intention here is not to duplicate strategies and tactics, but rather to understand processes of negotiation, navigation, and even normalization. A key point in this regard is that collection of evidence is needed on many levels. These include how intersecting inequalities affect the lives of religious minorities, the extent to which they are included/excluded from development access and outreach, and also the extent to which development programs have implicitly affected the positioning of religious minorities on the ground, whether intentionally or unintentionally. ❖

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## About the Author

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## Notes

1. This article is based on the 2020 report *Inclusive Development: Beyond Need, not Creed*, co-authored with Rachel Sabates-Wheeler. The report was originally published by the Coalition for Religious Equality and Inclusive Development (CREID) and the Institute of Development Studies (IDS). The report can be accessed here: <https://www.ids.ac.uk/publications/inclusive-development-beyond-need-not-creed/>. Permission to reproduce parts of the report in the present journal article has kindly been given by CREID/IDS.
2. Interestingly, human rights organisations, whose raison d'être is to advance rights more broadly, have not engaged with FoRB violations in the same way as they have with violations based on political belief, gender or other identifiers (Petersen and Marshall 2018). Petersen and Marshall (2018, 13) argue that "this does not mean that mainstream human rights organisations did not care about religiously based discrimination and conflict, but that they tended to see the topic as being 'really' about something other than religion—whether ethnic or racial discrimination, gender inequality, or political oppression—and as such, something tackled more usefully within e.g. frameworks on minority rights, non-discrimination, women's rights, or freedom of expression than within a FoRB framework."
3. It is important to note here that there are other country-level initiatives that are specifically committed to supporting religious minorities of other faiths (for example Saudi Arabia, Turkey, and increasingly Qatar are earmarking resources and technical support to supporting persecuted Muslims, however there is often very little information publicly available on their programmes or activities, see for example a report by Barzegar and El Karhili (2017) as an example of one scoping of the sector.

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