

# Persuasion or coercion?



SCENARIOS

## Annotated scenarios for facilitators

The following scenarios are designed to help participants reflect on when protected religious persuasion becomes prohibited coercion. The scenarios are designed for use with the '[Persuasion or coercion](#)' exercise on page 91 but could also be used in a variety of other ways. Find handouts of the scenarios at [www.forb-learning.org/exercises/persuasion-or-coercion-scenarios](http://www.forb-learning.org/exercises/persuasion-or-coercion-scenarios).

### Scenario 1: Discrimination as a source of coercion

A man from a Christian-majority community converted to Islam. After he converted, he could no longer secure work as a casual labourer in his community. Local employers refused to hire him because he was a convert to Islam. After six months out of work, he reconverted to Christianity. Within one month he was able to secure work.

#### FACILITATORS NOTES

This is an example of social hostilities. In this case, the convert to Islam experienced discrimination from within his community. Discrimination and coercion are often connected. This man was denied employment as he was a convert; this is a form of coercion to change his beliefs from his community.

### Scenario 2: Risks for coercion in humanitarian provision

Following an earthquake in a Muslim majority country, a Muslim charitable organisation provided food aid to one of the worst-affected communities. The area was predominantly Muslim, but there was also a small minority of Christians. The charity used the local mosque as a food distribution point as it was one of the few buildings left intact. One of the charity workers felt moved to give da'wah (making an invitation to Islam) by what he saw around him. Because of this, some Christians believed they could not accept the food aid unless they converted to Islam and went hungry.

#### FACILITATORS NOTES

This is a complex scenario. On the one hand, the charity worker was exercising his right to manifest his beliefs by giving da'wah. However, context is important. In doing so, he risked violating the rights of others. Coercion can include the exploitation of situations of particular vulnerability. In the context of humanitarian disasters when people are in urgent need of humanitarian aid, linking the provision of aid to any expectation of conversion amounts to coercion. The charitable organisation should have a clear code of conduct in place for its workers, including ethical guidelines to ensure that the delivery of humanitarian aid is not linked to actual or perceived expectations of conversion.

### Scenario 3: Children and coercion in schooling

A Catholic school offered free education to children from poor families. The school accepted children from any religious background. Every morning, the children were required to participate in Catholic worship, regardless of their own religious beliefs. If a child refused to participate on more than three occasions, they lost their place at the school. A state school was available in the area but offered a much poorer quality of education.

#### FACILITATORS NOTES

Religious communities who run schools (especially those run with private financing) may have confessional elements in school life in line with their institutional identity and independence from the state. For vulnerable minorities this can be an important part of the preservation of minority culture and traditions. However, children may not be forced to participate in confessional religious instruction against their parents' wishes and as children mature their own wishes should increasingly be taken into account. In this case, the school accepted students of all faiths without providing exceptions. States have a duty to ensure that children can get exemptions to confessional religious instruction not just in theory, but in practice. In this case, no alternative option is offered. There is also a threat to withhold something of value: access to quality education. This is a coercive practice.

### Scenario 4: Legislative coercion and children

A Christian couple in a Muslim majority country had two sons. Following the couple's divorce, the children were brought up by their mother. Their father subsequently converted to Islam and the now teenage sons were re-registered by the authorities as Muslims against their will and against the will of their mother. The boys refused to take confessional religious classes in Islam in school and were thereby prevented from getting a school leaver certificate.

#### FACILITATORS NOTES

Law is by definition coercive, as citizens are compelled by the authority of the state to follow it. This is an example of legislative coercion to convert and violates the absolute ban on coercion to have or to change a religion or belief. Education regulations have also resulted in coercion through the denial of educational qualifications.

## Scenario 5: Coercion in the provision of humanitarian assistance

Officials from the state-funded 'Rural Buddhist Mission' in a Buddhist-majority country visited a Christian minority area during a food crisis. They offered Christian families sacks of rice and promised to take care of their children by providing them with a government-funded place at boarding school if the children converted to Buddhism and changed their religion on their national identity card.

### FACILITATORS NOTES

This is a clear case of coercion by a state-funded body. States have a responsibility to ensure that State institutions/state-funded bodies do not use the authority and resources of the state to coerce people to convert, especially in situations of particular vulnerability like a food crisis. Some states encourage religious persuasion activities on behalf of the State's preferred religion, while at the same time restricting the rights of people from other religions or beliefs to engage in religious persuasion.

## Scenario 6: Punishment of legal persuasion

A local Christian pastor visited an indigenous community as part of his evangelistic work. One family in the community had recently converted to Christianity from the majority religion and he wanted to provide spiritual support and encouragement to them. While he was there, he visited four other families, shared his beliefs with them and invited them to pray with him. Two of the families decided to convert to Christianity. The local authorities were unhappy and reported the pastor to the police. The pastor was charged with 'forced conversion', found guilty and sentenced to one year in prison.

### FACILITATORS NOTES

The pastor has a right to approach people with the purpose of talking about his beliefs. Those he approaches have the right to choose to listen or to ask him to leave, to choose to pray with him or not and to choose to convert or not. In this case two families chose to convert and two did not.

The conviction of the pastor is a violation of his rights and indicates that the authorities do not recognise the freedom of indigenous community members to change their religion or belief. 'Anti-conversion' laws have been widely adopted in India, Myanmar, Bhutan and Nepal. The laws appear to assume that it is unlikely that anyone wants to convert of their own free will and consent, instead treating all converts as passive recipients of external, unwanted pressures that they lacked the capacity to resist. As such, all religious conversions are seen as suspicious and liable to investigation and prosecution. Although prosecutions are relatively rare, these laws make converts and communities vulnerable to accusation, attacks and arrests.

## Scenario 7: Social hostilities towards non-believers

A Muslim woman in a Muslim-majority country was threatened with physical violence by her community after she expressed agnostic beliefs in a social media post online. She publicly recanted her agnostic beliefs and stated that she is a Shia Muslim.

### FACILITATORS NOTES

This is an example of social hostilities. In this case, the woman experienced coercion in the form of threats of physical violence from her community.

## Scenario 8: Destruction of ceremonial artifacts to achieve 'salvation'

A group of evangelical Christians visited a remote area of Southeast Asia as part of their missionary work in the region. Communities in the area practice animist beliefs. Log drums are an important ceremonial element of the traditional belief system, used to announce important events. The evangelical group destroyed a log drum with a chain saw, telling the community concerned that this was a necessary part of saving their souls.

### FACILITATORS NOTES

The right to freedom of religion or belief not only extends to followers of the world's major religions. In this case, the group of evangelical Christians violated the rights of those holding animist beliefs. This type of violation is as significant as destroying a Christian cross or desecrating a Muslim or Jewish burial ground, for example.

## Scenario 9: Development assistance and coercion

A Catholic charity in South America was operating a clinic serving an indigenous community in the Amazon area. The community practiced traditional animist beliefs. The charity indicated to the community that they could provide other amenities such as drilled wells for a clean drinking water supply, if the community agreed to convert to Catholicism. The community elders convened a meeting with the whole community. They collectively agreed to convert to Catholicism. As soon as the charity had finished drilling the wells, the community collectively reconverted back to their traditional animist belief system.

### FACILITATORS NOTES

Coercion to convert can include the exploitation of situations of particular vulnerability. When humanitarian aid or basic service provision is linked to an expectation of conversion it amounts to coercion. Here there was a promise of humanitarian assistance in exchange for conversion. The Catholic charity should have a clear code of conduct in place, including ethical guidelines to ensure that charity work or delivery of humanitarian aid is not linked to expectations of conversion. In this case, the community understood that this practice was coercive and pretended to comply!



## Scenario 10: Legislative coercion to adopt/retain a religion

A young Muslim woman in a Muslim majority country met and fell in love with a Christian man and the couple wanted to marry. National legislation does not permit Muslim women to marry non-Muslims. The young man decided to convert to the majority religion in order to be able to marry his soulmate. He was ostracised by his family and community following his conversion. The psychological stress caused contributed to the marriage failing. Following his divorce, the man wished to return to his community, but legislation does not allow people to leave the majority religion.

### FACILITATORS NOTES

Law is by definition coercive, as citizens are compelled by the authority of the state to follow it. In this example the couple's right to form a family is made conditional upon conversion. This is an example of legislative coercion to convert to and retain the majority religion and violates the absolute ban on coercion to have or to change a religion.

#### Source

Rachel Fleming