

## Responding to tricky questions

As you run trainings on freedom of religion or belief, you might encounter tricky questions about human rights from participants. Here we have compiled some potential questions and objections you might encounter and ideas for responding to them. Every audience and context is different, so not every objection or response will be relevant for you. Nonetheless, we hope this compilation will help you prepare for difficult conversations.

When you respond to objections, remember to affirm any truth to be found in the objection and any personal experiences it reflects. Remember that it is ok to respond to by saying that you don't know and that hopefully the training process will help you explore the answer together! Processes of attitude change are usually slow and gradual. Aim to gently sow and water seeds of change rather than expecting immediate changes of opinion.

For factual questions about what FORB involves and when it can be limited, please watch our series of [short films](#) on the topic.

Many tricky questions relate to HOW to tackle a particular problem for FORB and make change. The exercises in the '[Action planning for FORB](#)' section on page 163 can help your group explore the answers to such questions.

**WATCH  
THESE FILMS**  
to help you answer  
factual questions  
on FORB.

### ----- RISK AND SECURITY CONSIDERATIONS -----

Strong objections to human rights, and in particular religious objections, may be a warning sign of risk. In difficult contexts, frank discussion about rights and violations may result in existing tensions within the group becoming accentuated, or in risks to the safety of you or your participants. If discussions move in a direction that could lead to risk, break the discussion off, acknowledging the sensitivity of the topic. Divert discussion to areas of mutual agreement and spend some time focusing on relationship and trust building exercises in the group.

### NOTE

#### To challenge or to listen?

It can be tempting to challenge people and say 'your attitude is bad' or 'you've got that wrong' in response to some statements. It may indeed be necessary to stop some discussions and remind people of the ground rules, particularly if others in the group feel attacked or demeaned. However, changing mindsets often necessitates listening and appreciative reasoning – a sensitive conversation in which both the facilitator and person raising objections try to find common ground, however small. One to one discussion in breaks or after sessions may be a useful approach, especially if the person with the objection is dominating discussions or contributing to a negative atmosphere within the group.



## Theme – Majorities versus minorities

**OBJECTION:** The majority should have more rights! They have the right to decide in a democracy.

**OBJECTION:** Minorities should take on board our beliefs and lifestyle if they want to live here, it's our country.

**POSSIBLE RESPONSES:**

- In a democracy the political party that gets the most votes is invited to form a government. But for a democracy to be sustainable and healthy, that government needs to protect everyone's interests. Without equal rights for all citizens, democracy can become a tyranny of the majority – rather like two wolves and a sheep voting on what to have for dinner!
- If your government can deny rights to minorities and if minorities here must conform to majority beliefs and lifestyles – what does that mean for people of your faith who live as minorities in other countries? Is it ok for their governments to do the same thing and deny them rights?
- Democracy is dependent upon human rights. Free and fair elections are impossible without rights such as freedom of speech and of information, freedom of assembly and association, freedom of the press, and the universal right to vote. Without these rights citizens can't form political parties, form an informed opinion about who to vote for or vote safely.
- Diversity of cultures and traditions enriches society in many ways, for example through the arts and food.

**OBJECTION:** Human rights are only important for minorities.

**POSSIBLE RESPONSES:**

- Human rights are important for people who belong to all kinds of minorities because they often face greater risks, for example of discrimination. Nonetheless, human rights are for everyone. Human rights seek to protect everyone from the abuse of power and promote everyone's welfare. No one wants to be arrested for no reason, tortured or discriminated against and no one wants their children to be denied an education. Regardless of whether we belong to a majority or minority, we all want to live in societies where we are protected from these things – societies where our human dignity is protected by right.
- We have multiple identities. I might be part of a religious or ethnic majority but belong to another kind of minority – for example through having a disability.



## Theme – Western values and plots

**OBJECTION:** Western powers use human rights to put down and harm the standing of other countries, even though they don't respect the standards themselves. Human rights are just a tool for political power games.

**POSSIBLE RESPONSES:**

- Any tool, however good, can be misused. Human rights are sometimes used in political power games. It's also true that no country has a perfect record on human rights (although some have far better records than others). Some governments commit blatant violations of rights while accusing others of the same. But that doesn't mean that human rights are unimportant for us – the rightsholders. They are about our freedom, safety and well-being.
- A lot of human rights abuses happen in the community – for example through discrimination and hate crimes. Even if governments fail, we as citizens can contribute to making human rights a reality in our communities. We can also join together to stand up for one another's rights and challenge government failures to respect rights. When we do this, it becomes harder for governments (western or otherwise), to continue to commit human rights violations. The question is not if governments play political games, but what we can do to make human rights a reality for ourselves and our communities.

**OBJECTION:** Human rights are foreign, Western values and cultural imperialism.

**POSSIBLE RESPONSES:**

- The Universal Declaration of Human Rights was drafted by representatives from many parts of the world with different religions and beliefs. Those representatives emphasised that human rights are about human dignity and the needs we all have in our daily lives. Almost all countries in the world have signed up to human rights – agreeing to respect, protect and promote them.
- Human rights are about how we should be treated and treat others in our schools, farms, workplaces, homes and neighbourhoods. They aim to protect us from abuse by those who have power over our lives – landlords, employers, teachers or even family members, and from abuse by the authorities. That matters to us all.
- Look at the rights formulated in the Universal Declaration of Human Rights and pose questions. Do any of them relate to things we consider to be human needs? Which specific rights do you think are 'foreign'? Are there any we don't want for ourselves?

**OBJECTION:** Human rights are individualistic. In our culture, collective duties and relationships are more important than individual rights. The fabric of our society will fall apart if everyone claims their rights without regard to their responsibilities.

**POSSIBLE RESPONSES:**

- It is true that human rights take their starting point in the rights of the individual. It's important that individuals have rights – because as individuals we can be vulnerable to abuses, for example by corrupt officials or abusive family members. When that happens, we should have access to justice and help.

- Even if human rights take their starting point in the individual, many human rights protect the things we do together. For example, we have the right to form a family, freedom of assembly gives us the right to meet in groups, and freedom of religion or belief protects our right to belong to a community of believers, form religious organisations and worship together. There are also some group rights protecting indigenous peoples and minorities.
- Human rights also involve responsibilities. Everyone has the responsibility to accept and respect other people's rights – to treat people well and to work for a society where no one is subject to the abuse of power. The fabric of society would be much stronger if everyone took that responsibility on board.

## Theme – A toothless tool and an irrelevance

**OBJECTION:** States violate human rights repeatedly and no one stops them. They fail to protect people. What's the point? Human Rights are just words on paper.

**OBJECTION:** Human rights might work for people in the West or people in the cities, but they have no impact on village life.

### POSSIBLE RESPONSES:

- There is no international police force to stop governments that violate human rights. The international community often fails to stop severe human rights violations. And when governments enact laws and policies to enshrine human rights, these sometimes have little impact at the grassroots level. Nonetheless, human rights are not pointless.
- Human rights can't be achieved from the outside. Making human rights a lived reality for ordinary people is a process that we create within our communities and nations. The process is often painfully slow, demanding patience, bravery and good strategies – especially when those in power don't want things to change. The journey towards change is often long and made up of small steps. Many things may be unrealistic to achieve in the short term, but the journey is worth it.
- Good laws, regulations and policies are important at the international, national and local levels, but the next step is vital too – building institutions that function. That means making sure the rules are well known and followed by everyone with responsibility for them. This involves building awareness, skills and systems of accountability at every level – from the rural village to the supreme court.
- Many rights abuses take place in the community. Achieving human rights relies on raising awareness of rights and transforming attitudes, values and behaviours among ordinary people at the grassroots level.
- There have been many achievements! Campaigns to abolish slavery, to gain the right to vote for all, to enact laws that protect women from domestic violence or to ensure households in marginalised areas gain access to public services like healthcare and electricity – these are just a few examples of how human rights work has made life better for ordinary people all over the world. It's easy to forget how many rights we have gained through the struggles of past generations.

## Theme – Religious objections to human rights

### NOTE

Religious objections touch upon complex, sensitive issues and religious interpretations and reasoning are highly contextually varied. The suggested responses below provide basic general advice and do not include discussions of particular religious teachings.

If you anticipate that these issues might be difficult to handle in your group, consider inviting a resource person who shares the faith tradition of those with objections to help you run a session. Are there religious organisations or leaders that work for human rights in your context that you could approach?

The motivation of the person asking questions/objecting is also important to consider in order to assess risk – are they genuinely curious, wanting to know if they can be both true to their faith and work for human rights, or actively trying to be divisive?

Remember that it is ok to say you don't know and to suggest that participants keep thinking about how their faith relates to the topics discussed throughout the course.

### FORB AND THEOLOGY

Find resources for several religions [here](#).

**OBJECTION:** Human rights are a human creation. We follow the divine will and law. Our religion provides all the answers we need – we don't need human rights!

### POSSIBLE RESPONSES:

- Human rights are a human creation. Nonetheless, within every religious tradition there are many scholars, leaders and members who believe that the contents of human rights broadly reflect core teachings of their religion about human dignity, justice and responsibility. Perhaps as we explore human rights together, we'll discover elements of common ground with our faith traditions.
- Human rights fulfil a different function to religious teachings. In a world where people of many faiths and none live side by side, human rights give us a common language to talk about the kind of society we want to build together. They also provide a legal framework we can use to hold governments to account – to make sure they respect human dignity and justice.
- Representatives of many religions and beliefs were involved in drafting the Universal Declaration of Human Rights and the drafts were intensely debated by all the members of the United Nations. Some of these debates were about how the rights proposed relate to religious and humanistic values. The goal was to develop a declaration that would be truly universal – to define rights that everyone can agree on, regardless of religion or ideology.

**OBJECTION:** I can't work for human rights and/or FORB because they are not acceptable in my religion.

Trainings can easily be derailed by discussions of particular rights or ways of implementing rights that people disagree with. Ask what specific rights the objector is concerned about. Unless agreement on that particular right is key to achieving your aims, try to refocus on areas of agreement and gradually widen the area of consensus for us.

### POSSIBLE RESPONSES:

- Ask whether there are human rights/aspects of FORB which reflect the values of the objector's faith tradition and if there are human rights problems that they would like to see tackled. Point out that the purpose of the training is not that we should agree on everything but to become stronger changemakers, tackling problems in our communities.

- Try to give examples of the concrete impact violations of the right concerned have on individuals, groups and society. How does the harm created relate to messages of human dignity and love to be found in our religions?
- Perhaps limiting rights through laws is not the best method for promoting ethics and morals.
- Ask the group what their religion(s) says about the right they object to and what should happen to people who exercise it. Is there only one relevant text or interpretation? Are there texts, values or interpretations that support the right in any way? Have teachings changed over time?
- Countries with the same type of religious majority handle human rights and FORB very differently. There is not one Muslim, Buddhist or Christian way to legislate on human rights.

**TIP!** Ask a religious leader or theologian who is committed to human rights to help lead discussions like this!

**QUESTION:** Doesn't accepting equal rights for other religions imply that I think all religions are equally true? Do I have to give up thinking that my religion is the only true religion to work for FORB for all?

**OBJECTION:** Why should we give equal rights when our religion is superior?

**POSSIBLE RESPONSES:**

- Freedom of religion or belief protects your right to believe that your religion is the only true way. It also protects other people's right to believe their religion or belief is the only true one. It's not the place of human rights or international law to pass judgement on questions of religious truth. Human rights focus on people, based on ethics of human dignity. They create a safe space in which we can live side by side with all our differences, by establishing minimum standards for how we should treat each other with respect and dignity.
- Most religions highlight the importance of human dignity and include some version of the golden rule – that we should treat others as we wish to be treated ourselves. Ask participants if their religion has a golden rule and to share teachings that relate to this. Ask if it is possible to live up to the golden rule if people don't have equal rights?
- Treating people equally in relation to the minimum standards of human rights is not the same as saying that we approve of their beliefs. We can fundamentally disagree with people's beliefs without resorting to discrimination, violence or denying rights. Limitations to the right to practice religion are only allowed when the practice concerned threatens other people's rights and freedoms, public health etc.
- Are there rights we want for ourselves, but think should be denied to others? If we deny other people these rights, how can we be sure there won't come a time the government thinks it's ok to deny our rights? Unless everyone has rights, no one has rights. What we have then are legal privileges which the state has temporarily granted us and can remove whenever it suits the state's purposes.
- Human rights are what protect people of our same faith who live as minorities in other countries. If we say that the majority or the state in our country can decide who has rights and who doesn't, then we are saying that it is ok for other states/majorities to deny people of our same faith their rights.

## Theme: Freedom and control

**QUESTION:** Those people practice religion in a way that doesn't fit well with our culture. Not everyone from that religion practices in that way so it's obviously not essential. If it's not essential, we should be able to forbid it.

**QUESTION:** If religious authorities say that a religion should be practiced in one way, why should we allow people to do it differently?

### POSSIBLE RESPONSES:

- Religions are enormously internally diverse. There are different ways of doing things within any given faith and there is rarely one religious authority that is accepted by all believers. In an increasingly mobile world people with diverse ways of doing things live alongside each other.
- Imagine you had to flee to another country. How would you feel if that society denied the right to practice in ways that you hold dear or forced you to practice religion in a way that went against your conscience?
- People don't have to prove that their practices are essential to their religion in order to be allowed to practice them. We should be free. In order to restrict our freedom to practice religion, the state has to show that the limitation proposed is necessary, for example to protect public health or the rights and freedoms of others. Replacing freedom with unnecessary restrictions leads to resentment and social tension, puts excessive and arbitrary power in the hands of the state and moves society away from democracy and towards dictatorship.

## Theme: Offence and harmony

**QUESTION:** Is there a right to be protected from being offended?

**OBJECTION:** Allowing minorities/freethinkers to talk about/practice their religions freely risks undermining our values and social cohesion.

**OBJECTION:** No one should offend other people's religious feelings. We should ban blasphemy and other offensive speech and behaviour. This is how we can maintain harmony and protect the sacred.

**OBJECTION:** We should be protected from our religion being portrayed in negative ways – it results in discrimination.

### POSSIBLE RESPONSES:

- According to international law, everyone has the right to believe, practice and express their beliefs freely, so long as that practice does not harm the rights and freedoms of others. International law does not protect us from having to see and hear things we disagree with or from critique of the things we value. There is no human right to protection from feeling offended.
- It can seem logical and moral to ban offensive speech and behaviour, in order to protect social harmony. It is, however, impossible to define what is offensive. Some people are offended by the mere existence of ideas other than their own. According to international law, the speech that should be banned is hate speech that incites hatred and violence. Laws on blasphemy, apostasy and 'protecting social harmony' are usually much broader than this. They tend to:
  - be vague making it hard to know what is considered illegal.
  - define offence from a majority perspective (in practice if not in theory).

- be open to abuse and false accusations – it’s hard to prove you didn’t say something.
  - encourage violence by supporting the idea that we should punish people who peacefully express beliefs that the majority don’t like.
  - result in people who peacefully express their beliefs being blamed for social tensions. People who react to peaceful expression with hatred and violence should bear that responsibility.
- It may seem right to ban the ridicule or critique of religions and religious institutions in order to protect the sacred. However, external and internal critique plays an important role in making religious institutions stronger and more faithful. Religious institutions are staffed by people and people sometimes get things wrong. It is only possible to deal with problems when we can talk about them without fear. Recent scandals concerning child abuse in religious institutions illustrate the importance of this freedom.
  - Might ‘harmony’ built upon minorities and freethinkers keeping quiet about their beliefs and identities be a pretence that is only experienced as harmony by the majority? Will we have a stable, peaceful society in the long term if only the majority feel there is harmony and cohesion?
  - There is no human right to protection from feeling offended. In fact, critique and the tolerance of diverse and contradictory opinions are vital for a healthy society. However, when the state, the media and/or majority communities engage in the systematic negative and antagonistic portrayal of minority religions, discrimination and violence towards followers of that religion results. This is the case even when the individual statements being made do not amount to hate speech or incitement to violence. Respect for human rights and the stability of society are dependent on the state and the media behaving ethically and impartially. Work to promote ethics in politics, the media and public discourse and prompt responses to hate speech and incitement are of enormous importance.

“These tips have helped participants in the FORB training of the trainers course to build their confidence in facilitating conversations on sensitive topics. It helps them recognise that there is more than one ‘right’ way to handle tricky questions. Attitude change can take time - it’s so helpful to have gently thought-provoking responses at hand”

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