



CULHAM ST GABRIEL'S

Freedom of Religion or Belief and Education in the UK



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Introducing Freedom of Religion or Belief (FoRB)

Current interest in Article 18 of the 1948 Universal Declaration of Human Rights – which has come to be commonly referred to as the Right to Freedom of Religion or Belief (FoRB) – can be traced back to the decision by the US Government to appoint an Ambassador-at-Large for International Religious Freedom in 1998.

That decision, coupled with the establishment of The Office for International Religious Freedom within the US State Department which has the power to deem countries where the Rights associated with FoRB are being violated as Countries of Particular Concern, began to draw attention to what had been termed as “an orphaned right”¹. As interest in FoRB grew, global efforts to promote and protect that right grew with it.

FoRB is the freedom to have, choose, change or leave a religion or belief and the freedom to practice or manifest a religion or belief, including non-religious beliefs such as Humanism and Atheism. It asserts the right to protection from coercion and discrimination in matters of religion or belief, including the right for parents to bring up children in accordance with their beliefs. Critically, FoRB does not protect religions or beliefs from criticism, in other words, it does not enable persecution on the grounds of alleged blasphemy. As there is no hierarchy of Human Rights, FoRB needs to be protected and promoted in relation to other Rights and this process can often arise in tensions between different Rights.

Today many countries, including the UK, have senior politicians appointed to oversee efforts in relation to FoRB and there are increasing numbers of civil society organisations working to promote and address FoRB violations. Within this space, special efforts are increasingly being given to the role which education can play in promoting and protecting FoRB.

¹ https://www.researchgate.net/publication/245031973_Article_18_An_Orphaned_Human_Right





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FoRB and Education

Nearly 20 years ago the Organisation for Security and Co-operation in Europe's (OSCE) *Toledo Guiding Principles on Teaching about Religions and Beliefs in Public Schools*² set out principles to improve the understanding of the world's increasing religious diversity and the growing presence of religion in the public sphere. The rationale was two-fold: first, that there is positive value in teaching that emphasises respect for everyone's right to FoRB, and second, that teaching about religions and beliefs can reduce harmful misunderstandings and stereotypes.

Subsequent publications such as the Council of Europe's 2014 *Signposts – Policy and practice for teaching about religions and non-religious world views in intercultural education*³, have contributed to a growing body of work which connects education about religion and belief, with societal freedoms in general and FoRB in particular.

More recently, the London 2022 International Ministerial Conference on FoRB (which itself built on previous rounds of FoRB Ministerials) culminated in, amongst others, a statement on FoRB and Education which began by recognising the importance of education in promoting respect for Human Rights. The statement then went on to make some specific commitments to:

- Prioritise inclusive curricula and teaching, matched to all students' needs, regardless of their background, that provides foundational skills for all. In addition, curricula should provide positive and accurate information about different faith and belief communities and combat negative stereotypes.
- Support teaching that promotes the equality of all individuals, regardless of their religion.
- Protect education establishments and ensuring all students have access to education regardless of their faith or any other characteristic. This includes ensuring access to safe alternative spaces for education in emergencies and protracted crises.
- Promote international efforts to support education reform, emphasising the benefits of pluralism and the importance of human rights, including freedom of religion or belief. Regular evaluation of education materials and practices should be carried out to ensure that these standards are always maintained.

FoRB and the Education Field: An overview

While there are many organisations that work in both formal and non-formal educational settings to provide Human Rights education materials, the number working specifically on FoRB is very low indeed. Those organisations working to develop and deliver resources include: Adyan Foundation, Hard Wired, the Khalili Foundation and the FoRB Learning Platform. There are others, such as Stand Up! Education, but these tend to take a broader approach without placing FoRB at the centre of their methodologies.

² <https://www.osce.org/files/f/documents/c/e/29154.pdf>

³ <https://theewc.org/resources/signposts/>

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Typically, those resources and projects which do exist, tend to focus on older children (11 plus). The resources also skew towards delivery in non-formal settings. In other words, there are very few projects anywhere in the world which work with teachers to develop and deliver resources which promote FoRB in the classroom and particularly with the primary age group (5-11).

FoRB and Religious Education: pathways forward?

The commitments relating to FoRB and education made by governments (including the UK government) highlighted the need to “prioritise inclusive curricula and training”⁴. Furthermore, curricula “should provide positive and accurate information about different faith and belief communities” and highlight “the benefits of pluralism and the importance of human rights, including freedom of religion or belief”⁵. Such statements align closely with ongoing and iterative conversations within the RE community in England, as well as parallel conversations about Religion, Values and Ethics in Wales and Religious and Moral Education in Scotland about how best to enable children to learn about religion and belief⁶. This includes considerations as to whether it is a space within the wider curriculum for children to learn about human rights and for tackling harmful societal stereotypes and discrimination, including anti-religious hate.

Contemporary conversations within these communities about whether the ‘world religions paradigm’ suitably reflects patterns in global religious belief⁷ resonate with the challenges and opportunities presented by FoRB. With interest in the role of education in promoting and protecting FoRB only likely to increase, it appears that the global network of scholars and educators working on new approaches to the teaching of religion and belief are well placed to be partners in these efforts.

⁴ <https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/freedom-of-religion-or-belief-and-education-statement-at-the-international-ministerial-conference-2022/statement-on-freedom-of-religion-or-belief-and-education>

⁵ Ibid

⁶ In England see Schools Standards and Framework Acts 1998; in Wales see Curriculum and Assessment (Wales) Act (2021); in Scotland see Education (Scotland) Act (1980)

⁷ RE Council Worldviews Project: Draft Handbook © REC 2022

About the author

Josh Cass is an experienced interfaith professional who has worked for a wide range of organisations such as the Sigmund Sternberg Charitable Foundation, Culham St Gabriel’s, the OSCE/ODIHR, the United Nations Alliance of Civilisations, the British Council’s Bridging Voices Programme, the Faith and Belief Forum, the Forum for Discussion of Israel and Palestine (Fodip), the Encompass Trust and St Ethelburga’s Centre for Reconciliation and Peace.

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