



CULHAM ST GABRIEL'S

Why is Freedom of Religion or Belief of interest and relevance to Culham St Gabriel's Trust?

About Culham St Gabriel's

Culham St Gabriels (CStG) is an endowed charitable foundation. CStG is committed to providing teachers of religion and worldviews and other professionals with the support, connections and professional development they need to be positively aware of the benefits of a high-quality study of religion and worldviews and the role that the study of religion and worldviews plays in contributing to well-informed, respectful and open societies.

Our Vision

Our vision is for broad-based, critical and reflective education in religion and worldviews contributing to a well-informed, respectful and open society.

Our Mission

The Trust works towards its vision by:

- Increasing public understanding of religion and worldviews education
- Engaging with, informing and influencing decision makers
- Creating well-informed, empowered and influential educationalists
- Establishing and building strategic and collaborative partnerships and networks
- Commissioning and publishing focused and accessible research
- Championing and developing inspired and well-resourced teaching and learning

Freedom of Religion or Belief (FoRB) and Education

Nearly 20 years ago the Organization for Security and Co-operation in Europe's (OSCE) *Toledo Guiding Principles on Teaching about Religions and Beliefs in Public Schools*¹ 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 emphasizes 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*², have contributed to a

¹ <https://www.osce.org/files/f/documents/c/e/29154.pdf>

² <https://theewc.org/resources/signposts/>

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 other things, a statement on FoRB and Education which began by recognizing 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 Religious Education: pathways forward

The commitments relating to FoRB and education made at the London Ministerial, in-line with previous Ministerials and other key publications including the Toledo Guiding Principles, highlighted the need to “prioritise inclusive curricula and training”³. Furthermore, the statement emphasized that 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”⁴. Such statements align closely with ongoing and iterative conversations within the RE community about how best to enable children to learn about religion and belief.

Contemporary conversations within the RE community about whether the ‘world religions paradigm’ suitably reflects patterns in global religious belief⁵ resonate with the challenges and opportunities presented by FoRB. Some academics point to the complex reality of ‘lived religion’ which is deeply contextual and to rapidly changing demographics (particularly the rise of non-religiousness in many parts of the world) as being reasons to consider a religion and worldviews approach to the teaching of the subject. Alongside this, they place a pedagogical emphasis on interpretation, taking into account different ways of knowing (such as theology, philosophy, history and the social sciences) about religion and non-religion.

With interest only likely to increase in the role of education in promoting and protecting FoRB⁶, it appears that the global network of scholars and educators developing new approaches to the teaching of religion and belief are well placed to be partners in these efforts for several reasons.

³ <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>

⁴ Ibid

⁵ RE Council Worldviews Project: Draft Handbook © REC 2022

⁶ See for instance, a recent United Nations Security Council resolution on FoRB which was one of a number of recommendations made as part of the Bishop of Truro’s report on FoRB for the British government. <https://iirf.global/news/religious-freedom-news/un-security-council-adopts-resolution-to-protect-religious-minorities/>; <https://press.un.org/en/2023/sc15321.doc.htm>

At its core, a religion and worldviews approach is centred around how religious and non-religious people encounter, interpret, understand and engage with the world, each other and questions of reality. By definition, this approach is comfortable with ideas of pluralism, better reflecting the complex societies in which individuals live and therefore more likely to be able to provide “positive and accurate information about different faith and belief communities”⁷. In addition, the approach places emphasis on responsible hermeneutics, intellectual humility and wise interpretation supporting a pedagogy which aligns well with FoRB principles.

Furthermore, a religion and worldviews approach, is well placed to be able to emphasize “the benefits of pluralism and the importance of human rights, including freedom of religion or belief”⁸. Consequently, the global network of scholars and educators working on developing worldviews approaches to the teaching of religion and belief are well placed to be partners for the promotion and protection of FoRB in schools.

How does the current conversation about FoRB and education relate to the work of CStG?

Given the alignment between ongoing conversations within the RE community about how best to enable children to learn about religion and belief, and thinking within the FoRB community, it is advisable to consider the implications for CStG.

- Increasing public understanding of religion and worldviews education

As noted elsewhere in this document, there is considerable interest in FoRB which transcends politics, and includes many religious and non-religious communities in the UK. There is an alignment between a religion and worldviews approach and FoRB principles. Therefore, by CStG engaging with discussions in the FoRB space, there is an opportunity to talk about and promote this approach and be advocates within this space. In addition, there is an opportunity demonstrate to the public the potential impact of an education in religion and worldviews in relation to the promotion and protection of FoRB.

- Engaging with, informing and influencing decision makers

FoRB is a priority for this government and given the leadership which the UK government has shown in the space (e.g. hosting the ministerial) it seems likely that it will remain a priority for future governments. CStG currently has strong and positive relationships with key government officials (both elected/government appointed officials and civil servants) involved in policy relating to FoRB. This in turn has allowed for those officials to introduce CStG to influential decision makers in other government departments, particularly within DfE. FoRB is regularly raised in questions in both Houses of Parliament. Politicians who have asked questions about FoRB in the past have also shown an interest in RE in general. Therefore, monitoring who is asking questions about FoRB is a useful indicator of whether they are interested in other questions relating to religion or belief, including RE. This approach has enabled CStG to engage with decision makers who were new to the Trust and to inform them about the work of the Trust.

- Creating well-informed, empowered and influential educationalists

As noted elsewhere in this document, FoRB and FoRB principles are a priority for this government, are likely to be a priority for future governments, and given the breadth and depth of interest globally, are likely to become more visible over time. Therefore, providing educationalists with the tools to

⁷ Ibid

⁸ Ibid

understand how FoRB principles relate to the work which they are doing, will enable them to be better positioned to advocate for an education in religion and worldviews.

In the future, grounding advocacy work in FoRB principles could become an approach for advocating for more resources for teaching religion and worldviews in educational settings. As a recent article in *The Times*⁹ showed, there is appetite from Senior School Leaders for resources and support for teachers to teach topics considered to be controversial or challenging in the classroom, particularly as they pertain to freedom of speech. The conceptual overlap between FoRB and religion and worldviews could be an opportunity therefore to position religion and worldviews as a space within the curriculum within which challenging and difficult conversations can take place. This would then give Senior School Leaders stronger justification to provide support for the subject.

- Establishing and building strategic and collaborative partnerships and networks

As noted elsewhere in this document, FoRB is a priority for all kinds of organisations in the UK. Some of those organisations already have a stake in schools and education, others do not. However, many of those organisations will recognize the role that education can and must play in promoting and protecting the principles of FoRB in the UK. Therefore, engaging in FoRB spaces can be a means for CStG to develop relationships with new partners and strengthen and enhance existing networks. For instance, through recent and sustained participation in the UK FoRB Forum, many new organisations have become aware of the work of the Trust and are more likely to have favourable perceptions of the Trust because of the shared commitment to the promotion and protection of FoRB. Similarly, more established relationships with organisations such as Humanists UK and the Association of Citizenship Teaching have been deepened and strengthened over that time with the possibility of greater strategic thinking possible.

- Commissioning and publishing focused and accessible research

Given the changing context in which there is rising interest in FoRB and Education and given also the leading position which CStG has in supporting the Education sector, it is unsurprising that the Trust should receive applications for grants to explore this space. The award to the Association of Religious Education Inspectors, Advisers and Consultants to further the Young Ambassadors programme with a specific FoRB focus, is a case in point and potentially indicative of a future trend.

So as to support this possibly emerging trend, the Trust recently produced a primer for Educationalists on the FoRB and Education nexus. It is now available on the CStG website¹⁰.

- Championing and developing inspired and well-resourced teaching and learning

CStG has an established track-record in supporting the development of excellent teaching in the RE space. This extends to making decisions to pilot new methods, approaches, and learning about the space as it has evolved over the years. Given the convergence between FoRB principles and a religion and worldviews education, there exists the possibility that CStG would seek to proactively explore this convergence. CStG could seek to explore the public-facing elements of that convergence for many of the reasons already explored in this document, but it could also do so specifically to develop inspired and well-resourced teaching and learning.

⁹ <https://www.thetimes.co.uk/article/free-speech-a-major-concern-for-schools-head-teachers-warn-gkwpg6k6v?shareToken=7e658d08faf830a90ada9e3139d4c0c3>

¹⁰ <https://www.cstg.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/sites/4/2023/06/Freedom-of-Religion-or-Belief-and-Education-in-the-UK-final.pdf>

In the case of FoRB and religion and worldviews convergence, the lack of an established literature in this space, coupled with a lack of effectively and thoroughly evaluated interventions, serves to highlight the need for well-resourced and well-planned interventions. Therefore, the FoRB Primary Project being delivered by CStG now serves as a model for the kind of targeted intervention which the Trust can make. This extends beyond the mere development and delivery of the intervention and includes to the ability of CStG to leverage its profile on behalf of the project to champion well-resourced teaching and learning in the FoRB and religion and worldviews space.

This position paper was written by Josh Cass (Consultant, CStG) and Kathryn Wright (CEO, CStG)

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