



Standing Commission 4: Championing Freedom of Thought, Conscience, and Religion

Roundtable Hosted by *Religions for Peace*

20 January 2022

Background

The *Religions for Peace* 2020-2025 Strategic Plan, developed through an inclusive and participatory process and adopted by the World Council on 26 February 2020, contains six strategic goals that provide a clear and collaborative framework for the activities of the entire *Religions for Peace* movement. Each of the goals advance *Religions for Peace*'s multi-religious vision of peace, build on its past work and align with one or more of the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs).

Five Standing Commissions – corresponding to the first five Strategic Goals – were established to serve as advisory bodies for *Religions for Peace*'s work in those respective areas. These Standing Commissions are the mechanism by which *Religions for Peace* leadership may directly collaborate on and guide the future of *Religions for Peace* programmes in their respective areas of focus. The shared vision of the Standing Commission is as a space of knowledge, information, co-creation, persistent guidance, and reflection. Each Standing Commission has representation of leaders with long-standing interest, engagement, and championship in the topic of this space. The Commission acts as the 'group of elders' to guide *Religions for Peace*'s work in this space. This Standing Commission works towards the goal of championing Freedom of Thought, Conscience, and Religion (FoTCR). The composition of this Standing Commission considered different areas of expertise, as well as different regions and religions.

Discussion Points

Ms. Deepika Singh gave an overview of *Religion for Peace* programmes related to the Standing Commission's focus. An [EU-supported consortium engaged](#) more than 7000 actors through seed grants, interfaith dialogues, and training to create a conducive environment for the protection of freedom of religion or belief in 10 South and Southeast Asia. Another highlight was the October 2021 conference in Lindau where two diplomacy roundtables related to FoTCR were held, one on protection of holy sites and practices and another on xenophobia, hate speech, and blasphemy laws. Ms. Singh also gave an overview of the work with the International Panel of Parliamentarians for Freedom of Religion or Belief; Freedom of Religion or Belief Leadership Network and other partners to hold high-level dialogues between parliamentarians and religious leaders. Under this partnership, five [dialogues on the intersection of SDGs and FoTCR](#) were held.

Prof. Azza Karam then called on commission members to critically reflect on the work of the commission to determine if it is having an impact and to suggest ways that the commission can work differently—together—to improve the status of FoTCR. The discussion was defined by several prominent themes including importance of the *Religions for Peace* Interreligious Councils (IRCs), the need to evaluate our programmes to determine future actions, and the importance of incorporating new voices and perspectives into our conversations.

Ms. Bani Dugal was impressed by the work of *Religions for Peace* at the Lindau conference and lauded its ability to bring youth and grassroots actors together with international experts. Ms. Dugal believes that being a facilitator of this sort of dialogue is an important role *Religions for Peace* can play at both the international level like Lindau conference as well as at the grassroots level. Dr. Karam emphasized that the strength of *Religions for Peace* is the network of IRCs that are both local and representative of faith communities and institutions. Ms. Singh drew attention to the IRCs' work at regional, national, district, and community levels as well as the work of the Woman of Faith Network and the Interfaith Youth Network. Mr. J. Mark Brinkmoeller stated that the uniqueness of IRCs is vital. Mr. Brinkmoeller spoke about his own experience witnessing the work of IRCs in Bosnia and Herzegovina.

Dr. Kishan Manocha inquired into the success of *Religions for Peace* capacity building efforts with religious actors in Southeast Asia, commenting that previous work with religious leaders at different levels has been difficult and inconsistent. Dr. Manocha suggested that there should be a platform for those who engage in capacity building to reflect on and evaluate their work with others so that they can determine what are the best practices. Mr. Brinkmoeller also highlighted the need to examine the relationship between development and FoTCR.

Dr. Christine Ryan drew upon her experience in gender equality advocacy to call for a critical reflection on positionality and commitment to anticolonialism. Dr. Ryan stated that a select group of individuals who primarily come from the Global North dominate the discussion of FoTCR. Voices from the Global South, particularly Indigenous communities, must be incorporated into this conversation. Furthermore, there is insufficient attention given to FoTCR issues in Europe and America.

Bishop Dr. Munib Younan stated that discussions around FoTCR focus on violations in the Muslim World while ignoring what is going on in other parts of the world. Bishop Younan expressed that it is important to examine what is transpiring in Europe with treatment of refugees in relation to FoTCR. Bishop Younan also stated that it is important to examine definitions of FoTCR to see if these definitions reflect commitment to FoTCR for all or simply for ourselves.

Prof. Karam welcomed the comments that came from commission members, expressing that it is important that we have diverse voices, examine FoTCR violations in the West, and reflect critically on our work. Prof. Karam stated that the work of the IRCs provides an opportunity to examine the intersection of development and FoTCR because many IRCs—through the [Multi-Religious Humanitarian Fund](#)—are responding to emergency needs and implementing development projects.

The roundtable was also characterized by discussion concerning the drafting of a white paper on FoTCR. Dr. Ganoune Diop is working on a document examining the connection between FoTCR and peace which he will share with the commission when it is completed. Dr. Diop's mentioning of the document prompted the commission to propose drafting a white paper on FoTCR. The full scope of the white paper has not been determined yet, but the drafting of the paper will be a collaborative project. In response to Bishop Younan drawing attention to Israeli efforts to confiscate lands which would impede access to Christian pilgrimage sites as well as the daily violations in the Al-Aqsa Mosque, Dr. Elizabeth Prodromou stated that she could collaborate with Bishop Younan in writing a document on this subject for the white paper. In response to concern expressed by Ms. Dugal that the paper may become too large and unwieldy by being a compendium of all sources, Dr. Diop suggested that the paper be a foundational document that can be expanded upon in the future.

Other important observations from the roundtable included Dr. Prodromou drawing attention to the line between violence and discrimination in cases of FoTCR violations. While acts of violence represent patently clear violations, it is more difficult when examining discriminatory policy. Dr. Prodromou stated that there needs to be more attention on cases of discrimination concerning education, professional space, property rights, and access to holy sites. Dr. Prodromou also raised the topic of religion being absent from discussions—particularly in the Academy—around diversity and inclusivity.

Mr. Knox Thames commended the unique religious perspective of the Standing Commission as well as suggested opportunities for *Religions for Peace* to play a role in the London Religious Freedom Ministerial in July as well as in October at the margins of the UN General Assembly Third Committee. Mr. Thames also suggested that IRFBA efforts to expand African engagement provide local *Religions for Peace* networks a great opportunity.

Amb. Marie-Therese Pictet-Althann suggested that *Religions for Peace* could benefit from working with the Geneva-based Inter-Parliamentary Union (IPU). Over 170 countries are members of the IPU, and the organization is active in interfaith dialogue and human rights.

Action Points

- The Standing Commission will draft a white paper on FoTCR.
- Possible collaboration with the Vatican Commission.
- Coordinate with Mr. Thames to possibly convene discussions at and with the UN.
- Introduce new voices from outside the Global North.
- Provide account of IRC projects in different regions to examine relationship between development efforts and FoTCR.
- Convene a seminar on status of FoTCR with religious actors.

Annexes

- List Participants
- Overview