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FREEDOM AND
PROSPERITY CENTER

Changing the conversation about religious freedom: An integral human development approach

Fabio Petito, Scott Appleby, Silvio Ferrari, and Michael Driessen

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The Freedom and Prosperity Center aims to increase the well-being of people everywhere and especially that of the poor and marginalized in developing countries through unbiased, data-based research on the relationship between prosperity and economic, political, and legal freedoms, in support of sound policy choices.

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During sunrise, a sea of clouds was generated over the Fengmi Mountain and Xingkai Lake in northeast China's Heilongjiang province.

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Preface

This report is based on a conference entitled “Religious freedom and integral human development,” which was organized by the Atlantic Council, the Embassy of the Sovereign Military Order of Malta to the Holy See, the Pontifical Urban University, the University of Sussex, the University of Notre Dame, and John Cabot University. The conference took place on June 5, 2024, at the Magistral Villa of the Order of Malta in Rome (Italy).

Watch the full conference, including keynote addresses and panel discussions.

The authors of this report are members of the academic committee that designed the conference. As referenced throughout, the text presents key ideas and arguments articulated by many of the speakers at the conference. More than a simple summary of the proceedings, however, the report offers critical engagement with and reflections on the meeting’s formal presentations, informal exchanges, and discussions. As such, the report reflects the authors’ interpretations of the proceedings.

The authors wish to thank Jeremy Barker and Andrew Dickson for assisting with research in the production of this report.

This image was captured on June 18, 2024, in Rome, Italy, during the event "Religious freedom and integral human development: A new global platform."

Executive summary

How can we talk of "leaving no one behind"— the central promise of Agenda 2030 of the United Nations—if we neglect all those who are marginalized, discriminated against, and persecuted owing to their very beliefs? And how can we invest in holistic models of human development without taking account of the human person's religious and spiritual needs? This report reinforces and deepens the emerging recognition by scholars and policymakers of the interdependent relationship between freedom of religion or belief—the human right enshrined in Article 18 of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights—and global development, as defined by the seventeen Sustainable Development Goals set forth in the UN's Agenda 2030. Put negatively, there is an increasing awareness of the intertwining nature of these two global existential challenges, namely the escalation of various forms of discrimination and persecution based on religion or belief, on the one hand, and the failure of the international community to arrest the devastating forces of climate change, violent conflict, global poverty, inequality, and other threats to human security, on the other.

The report explores the dual proposition that integral human development (IHD), an idea and aspiration resonant within many of the world's religious, philosophical, and wisdom traditions, provides fresh insight into the crisis of freedom of religion or belief; and that the concept of IHD is itself enriched and its significance further clarified when it incorporates a profound appreciation of the intrinsic relationship between religious freedom and human dignity. This dual recognition, in turn, opens a path for addressing obstacles to the full realization of freedom of religion or belief.

The report is inspired by Pope Francis's 2015 message to government leaders in his historic address to the United Nations on the occasion of the adoption of Agenda 2030:

> The simplest and best measure and indicator of the implementation of the new Agenda for development will be effective, practical and immediate access, on the part of all, to essential material and spiritual goods: housing, dignified and properly remunerated employment, adequate food and drinking water; **religious freedom and, more generally, spiritual freedom and education**. These **pillars of integral human development** have a common foundation, which is the right to life and, more generally, what we could call the right to existence of human nature itself.

By viewing the persecution and discrimination based on religion or belief through the lens of integral human development, and by considering multifaith perspectives on religious freedom and human development, this report offers a path for creating a new global platform for engaging religious and policy leaders as well as recommendations for designing innovative government-religious partnerships aimed at achieving more inclusive and peaceful societies.

1. "Full text of Pope Francis' speech to United Nations," via PBS, September 25, 2015, https://www.pbs.org/newshour/world/full-text-pope-francis-speech-united-nations; boldfacing added.

Introduction

With five years to go to achieve the United Nations' Agenda 2030, no country is on track to do so. The Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) have become an empty acronym, obscuring the fact that we are speaking not merely of theories or "targets," but of concrete existential challenges: poverty, war, discrimination, environmental degradation, and access to resources. Violations of religious freedom represent their own existential challenge across the world. Watchdogs report high and sustained levels of religious persecution and discrimination through state and societal violations of this human right.[2] These violations occur in a context of rising levels of polarization, social hostility, and communal violence, which are often accompanied by and intertwined with new waves of religious nationalism and extremism.

The right of freedom of religion or belief (FoRB)—which includes freedom of thought, conscience, and religious freedom—encompasses not only traditional religious beliefs but all nontheistic beliefs as well as the right not to believe.[3] Enshrined in article eighteen of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights (UDHR), it is often described as the foundation of all human rights and is seen as a key component of flourishing, peaceful societies, especially as these are envisioned in Agenda 2030. Indeed, this freedom not only allows everyone to choose and profess the religion or belief that is most in accordance with their conscience but also encourages the formation of alternative normative worlds in which different people experience new social relations and generate innovative models of human development. Yet the relationship between FoRB and sustainable development has been overlooked: FoRB receives little to no mention within the SDGs and has long been absent from policy conversations on international development.

Accordingly, an urgent question arises: How can we talk of "leaving no one behind," the central promise of Agenda 2030, if we neglect all those who are marginalized, discriminated against, and persecuted owing to their beliefs? How can we better understand the mutually defining relationship between the right to development and the right to religious freedom?

The rights to development and religious freedom are rooted in a claim about the nature of the human person and the priority to be given to the demands of human dignity. In his historic address to the United Nations on September 25, 2015, Pope Francis declared that, with respect to the newly adopted Sustainable Development Goals:

> The simplest and best measure and indicator of the implementation of the new Agenda for development will be effective, practical and immediate access, on the part of all, to essential material and spiritual goods: housing, dignified and properly remunerated employment, adequate food and drinking water; religious freedom and, more generally, spiritual freedom and education. These pillars of integral human development have a common foundation, which is the right to life and, more generally, what we could call the right to existence of human nature itself.[4]

Integral human development (IHD) is a holistic model of human flourishing rooted in the inherent dignity of each and every person. It is based on the idea that development is not the same as economic growth and requires attention to what Clemens Sedmak calls "dignity needs," which are "a class of personal needs that allow a person to live a dignified life. It moves beyond food and shelter to the inner life . . . Integral Human Development expresses an understanding of development that recognises the importance of (the idea of) the soul."[5]

IHD speaks powerfully to our global predicament. While the idea and aspiration are of Catholic provenance, its underlying values explicitly echo and complement holistic accounts of human development from other religious, philosophical, and wisdom traditions. By taking into account this broader human development context and directly engaging religious actors and multifaith perspectives, this report argues that IHD shifts our approach to the global crisis of freedom of religion or belief and the policy response to it in innovative ways.

Accordingly, the report addresses the following questions:

- In what ways might the defense and practice of religious freedom promote integral human development?
- How might the affirmation and enactment of the tenets of integral human development deepen political and legal support for religious freedom and help to overcome the obstacles to realizing it?

Our ambition is to change the conversation and set the conceptual foundations for building a new, religiously literate global platform for engaging religious and policy leaders globally on this pressing policy issue.

2. See, for example, Pew Research Center, "Government Restrictions on Religion Stayed at Peak Levels Globally in 2022," 2024, https://www.pewresearch.org/religion/2024/12/18/government-restrictions-on-religion-stayed-at-peak-levels-globally-in-2022/.
3. In this report, we use the terms "religious freedom," "freedom of religion," and "freedom of religion or belief" interchangeably to refer to the broad right to freedom of thought, conscience, and religion or belief—including the right to nonbelief—protected under international human rights law.
4. "Full text of Pope Francis' speech to United Nations," via PBS.
5. Clemens Sedmak, *Enacting Integral Human Development* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 2023), xiv.

Religious discrimination is a cross-cutting issue: protecting FoRB, we contend, can advance multiple SDGs. Across the world, people are marginalized on the grounds of their religion or belief. This affects not only the right of millions to practice their religion or belief; it imposes severe socioeconomic restrictions for religious minorities. Numerous cases have been found of religious discrimination impeding access to healthcare (SDG 3), education (SDG 4), food (SDG 2), clean water and sanitation (SDG 6), and decent work (SDG 8) as religious minorities are forced into unsafe, low-paid sectors within the economy, leaving many economically marginalized and poverty stricken (SDG 1).

In recent years, governments have strengthened their foreign policy tools, global advocacy efforts, and international coordination to promote FoRB, as part of what is often referred to as the International Religious Freedom agenda. There is, however, a growing feeling that the current approaches appear overall to be failing, as religious persecution and discrimination continue to increase in many parts of the world. Governments have begun identifying dedicated religious freedom appointees, teams, and funding streams; and policymakers increasingly recognize the role for religious actors as a strategic partner in advancing the sustainable development of inclusive societies. Yet limitations remain. Government appointees are rarely given adequate resources, and there is a dearth of cross-governmental collaboration. More fundamentally, policymakers and practitioners remain unsure how to engage strategically with religious actors in order to respond to the global decline of FoRB and to foster lasting peace and implementation of the SDGs.

How might this policy agenda look different when seen through the lens of IHD?

This report identifies three potentially effective areas of policy engagement opened by seeing authentic development through the eyes of religious actors, and by adopting the lens of IHD to reimagine the global crisis of freedom of religion or belief and the policy response to it.

First, by fostering an inclusive and multidimensional perspective that reflects the cultural diversity of local, national, and international actors, a robust regime of religious freedom helps us understand and implement what constitutes authentic flourishing and development for the peoples of the world. This means that we come to understand that while economic viability is a requirement to make life livable, authentic development is not merely material in nature. The focus on IHD, in short, makes visible the broader societal value of religious freedom.

Despite its importance, religious freedom is often overlooked in development studies. The following questions may need to be reformulated or recast in light of IHD:

- What is the evidence that religious freedom is correlated with national indicators of economic and human development?
- Do violations of religious freedom enable job discrimination and the dominance of economic sectors by one ethnic or religious identity group? Does the suppression of minority rights to freedom of religion and belief enable land ownership and foreign investment to be channeled exclusively to one identity group?
- What can the policy community learn from an understanding of human development that prioritizes securing the cultural and religious requirements of human flourishing as central to political and social life?

Second, taking religious freedom seriously as a foundational human right means that religious actors must be integrated more effectively into efforts to achieve the SDGs or their successors. To this end, it is important to identify effective interreligious engagement strategies including ground-level, multiparty collaboration across identity groups. Interreligious engagement is a bottom-up, community-based approach, by which religious actors of various beliefs and backgrounds work collaboratively in partnerships with governments, international organizations, and other civil society groups.[6]

By articulating a spiritually inspired and religiously literate understanding of human flourishing, IHD provides an ideal platform for amplifying these interreligious efforts. Building that platform requires, inter alia, that we *identify and explore theological trends that prioritize religious freedom*—trends that are emerging alongside the relevant religious organization's engagement in interreligious dialogue with a new approach to it as a practice.

Finally, the global protection and advocacy of FoRB is suffering from a deficit of trust. It continues to be seen in some quarters as a partisan, calculating, political tool, often displaying double standards and favoritism of some groups. The perception that religious freedom is being used to further international agendas is damaging, and the following questions must be addressed straightforwardly:

- Is religious freedom advocacy merely or mostly the case of the Global North preaching to the Global South, in a way that suggests that religious freedom and the SDGs are no more than a neocolonial "Western" endeavor with a hidden agenda?
- How can we move past this suspicion and sincerely engage leaders and actors across the world? Can the dignity-based approach and language of integral human development contribute to this effort?

6. Fabio Petito, Stephanie Berry, and Maria Mancinelli, *Interreligious Engagement Strategies*: *A Policy Tool to Advance Freedom of Religion or Belief*, Policy Report, University of Sussex, December 2018, https://sussex.figshare.com/articles/report/Interreligious_engagement_strategies_a_policy_tool_to_advance_freedom_of_religion_or_belief/23464790.

The global context of freedom of religion or belief

Across the world, many individuals and groups face systematic marginalization, often on account of their religious beliefs, practices, or identity, resulting in various cases of active persecution and violence or more subtle inequalities such as a denial of access to resources, employment, citizenship, and other fundamental rights. Advocates and persecuted communities from seemingly every religious tradition, coming from every region of the world, can provide accounts of various forms of religious persecution. Increasingly, this discrimination seems to go hand in hand with acute polarization, rising social hostility, and communal violence, often intertwined with a new wave of religious nationalism and extremism.[7]

As the current UN special rapporteur on freedom of religion or belief, Nazila Ghanea, highlighted, these instances of religious discrimination are often intentional forms of marginalization—a denial of access to basic services and resources, and to democratic participation. Such discrimination constitutes a failure to uphold the very UN mandate for sustainable development.[8]

Drawing on the Catholic Church's unique diplomatic perspective, Archbishop Paul Gallagher, secretary for relations with states of the Holy See, observed that some 4.9 billion people—seven out of ten people worldwide—are prevented from exercising their rights to religious freedom and to freedom on matters of conscience. In his view, the reasons for hostility toward religion include religious nationalism which, he said, represents a politically and/or economically motivated abuse of state power that can lead to hostility toward religious minorities. Religious freedom violations occur in both the Global South and the Global North, which prides itself on advancing and even exporting human rights. In some countries, state and public institutions no longer even attempt to display neutrality and enforce a variety of secularism that is openly intolerant of beliefs other than the state-sanctioned ideology. In practice, this phenomenon leads to the marginalization of those who disagree or dissent from these ideological commitments. The absence of religious freedom in the global development agenda, such as the Sustainable Development Goals of Agenda 2030, is indicative of these broader trends in many sectors.[9]

Here it is interesting to note that the Second Vatican Council's Declaration on Religious Freedom, *Dignitatis Humanae* (Of the Dignity of the Human Person, 1965) describes religious freedom as foundational for all people, as a core dimension of human dignity. In this document, the Council articulates a defense of the right of individuals and communities to social and civil freedom in religious matters, free from constraint. It holds that truth cannot be imposed except by its own virtue.

Drawing on *Dignitatis Humanae*, Archbishop Gallagher argued that religious freedom occupies a place of priority among freedoms in both historical and logical terms. Religious freedom is a foundational right, in that freedom of thought and conscience provides the basis for other rights and imposes limitations on state power. Religious freedom thus serves as a bellwether of the state of freedom more broadly. Undermining religious freedom, therefore, risks undermining not just one right but an entire category of human rights. Despite its precedence and primacy, Archbishop Gallagher noted, religious freedom faces significant challenges across its individual, community, and institutional dimensions.

It is in this sense that religious freedom fosters a society dedicated to human flourishing. When a state grants equal rights of religion and belief to all communities, it paves the way for a societal commitment to the common good. Rather than imposing dogma or arbitrary ideas, a regime of religious freedom upholds the truth of the human person and undermines intolerance. Critically, in line with the central ideal of IHD, those able to enjoy religious freedom have the potential to realize their full humanity and thus to flourish as people of dignity.

7. US Commission on International Religious Freedom (USCIRF), 2024 *Annual Report*, https://www.uscirf.gov/annual-reports; and Brian Grim, Presentation, Panel on "Religious Freedom & Global Development: Evidence, Challenges and Opportunities from the Perspective of Integral Human Development," Conference on Religious Freedom and Integral Human Development, Villa Magistrale, Sovereign Military (S.M.) Order of Malta, Rome, June 5, 2024.
8. Nazila Ghanea, Keynote Address, Conference.
9. Paul Richard Gallagher, "The Promotion of Religious Freedom and Integral Human Development: The View of the Holy See," Conference.

Integral human development

Integral human development describes the state of a society in which the irreducible dignity of each person and every person, and the cultural and spiritual as well as economic and material requirements of human flourishing, are central to political and social life and upheld by the rule of law.[10]

The provenance of the term comes from Louis-Joseph Lebret (1897–1966), a French Dominican social scientist, philosopher, and pioneer of development ethics, who sought to «put the economy at the service of man.» After completing his theological studies in 1929, Lebret was assigned to the French port town of Saint-Malo where he observed the destitution of local fishermen and their families. He conducted in-depth surveys among the fishermen, regarding their problems and needs, aiming to find solutions. For ten years, in areas as diverse as Britain and both the Baltic and the Mediterranean regions, he studied connections between unemployment, low wages, the poorly organized local fishing industry, and the attempt on the part of international firms to monopolize the best fishing areas. Lebret determined that ingrained structural causes doomed small-scale fishermen in the broader market. At the same time, he established trade unions, co-ops, and maritime associations to reconfigure the way business was done. In 1942, Lebret created the *Revue Economie et Humanisme*, which became the vehicle for disseminating his ideas. A lecture trip to Brazil in 1947 led him to focus on development in what was then called the Third World. He worked in Brazil (1947–1954), Colombia (Lebret Mission 1955), Senegal (1958–1959), Lebanon (1960–1964), and other countries. And he concluded that chronic structural evils cannot be corrected by subjective good will but by the transformation of those structures, which presupposes a thorough understanding of how they work. He believed in the necessity of combining research and rigorous analysis with action. He was recognized by the United Nations as an expert on the question of living-standard disparities in the world.

Within the Catholic Church Lebret advocated for an increased solidarity with poor countries; Pope Paul VI appointed him a consultant to the Second Vatican Council, and Lebret contributed to the drafting of *Gaudium et Spes*, the Second Vatican Council's Pastoral Constitution on the Church in the Modern World. Lebret represented the Holy See at the first United Nations Conference for Trade and Development in 1965. Perhaps most significantly, he drafted key sections of Pope Paul VI's 1967 encyclical, *Populorum Progressio*, which put forward the concept of integral human development.

Lebret was influenced by, and influenced many of his contemporaries, not least Jacques Maritain and his concept of integral humanism.[11] One of Lebret's disciples, Denis Goulet, summarized a core element of IHD: "Societies are more human, or more developed, not when men and women '*have more*,' but when they are enabled to '*be more*.'"

These historical details underscore the fact that IHD has its origins in a particular religious community and tradition, namely Roman Catholicism, with its own specific conviction about the human person, that is, its own specific cultural and theological anthropology, according to which every person, in line with his or her divinely bestowed dignity—an inherent defining quality which the state cannot grant or take away—is called to flourishing and self-actualization within a transnational community of common purpose.

This historical and enduring specificity of origin and sources raises the question of whether IHD is sufficiently open to epistemological and philosophical pluralism, whether it can become a trusted, empowering framework within which an overlapping consensus about the centrality of the right to religious freedom can be advanced.

Each pope, from Paul VI to Francis has invoked integral human development as a guiding principle and arguably as the interpretive key to the rich, 134-year-old tradition of Catholic social thought and action. And each of the popes, John Paul II and Francis most emphatically, has presented IHD as a second-order bridging discourse open to and welcoming engagement with other religious traditions, wisdom traditions, and humanist philosophical traditions. Indeed, there is a recognition that IHD cannot evolve as a compelling insight into human nature and human society without this engagement.[12] The potential for an effective universalism is real, or so Catholic proponents of IHD believe, while striving to avoid any odor of moral superiority or trace of cultural or religious arrogance or imperialism. Indeed, by embracing an understanding of development and freedom based on human dignity and the common good, Lebret intended to offer a vision of human growth and social change that speaks to people from many different moral and religious traditions. This horizon that transcends the Catholic and Christian context is also noticeable in the sources he used.

10. Scott Appleby, "Integral Human Development: What It Is and How It Contributes to a Better Understanding and Implementation of Religious Freedom," Conference.
11. Jacques Maritain, *Integral Humanism*, trans. Joseph W. Evans (Notre Dame, Indiana: University of Notte Dame Press, 1973 [1936]).
12. The Ansari Institute of the Keough School of Global Affairs is dedicated to contributing to the evolution and refinement of IHD by convening religious actors from multiple traditions to explore the concept and present their own teachings and practices that resonate with the concept of human dignity and its relationship to human freedom.

Even though his central inspiration remained Catholic, he made use of ideas from various sources, including existentialist philosophy and the writings of Indian leader Mahatma Gandhi and Bengali poet Rabindranath Tagore.

How does the concept of IHD view the human person in her innate freedom? According to Sedmak, in his pivotal, groundbreaking book, Enacting Integral Human Development, proponents of IHD invite an understanding of the human person beyond any of the roles he/she may inhabit: A patient in a hospital is "so much more" than a patient; an incarcerated person is "so much more" than a prisoner; a refugee is "so much more" than a refugee; a person living in poverty "is so much more" than a poor person.[13]

Integral human development is more than an idea or concept, however; it is an invitation to and platform for moral discernment and ethically informed action. IHD calls for an ongoing assessment of social situations; it is incompatible with a view of the human person as an "unencumbered self" and considers the person as a relational being with a history and a multidimensional existence.

What does integral human development have to do with freedom of religion or belief?

Are we really in the middle of "a global crisis of religious freedom?" To some extent, this predicament of crisis is not new. A little over one hundred years ago, thousands of Jews were being killed in Eastern and Central European pogroms; fifty years ago, half of Europe was under a regime that oppressed all religions. If we look at other continents, the situation was no better. It is reasonable to wonder whether there was more religious freedom in the past than today. So why do we all talk about religious freedom as "a right in danger" or "a right under attack?"

In large part, it is because expectations and perceptions have changed. What was accepted in the past is no longer, fortunately, acceptable today. We live in the age of rights and we demand more from the right to religious freedom than just a defense against persecution or discrimination. Therefore, we should address a different question: Is the right to religious freedom, as regulated today in the laws of our countries and in international conventions, still adequate to the needs of contemporary society?

Here our answer is again positive, but only in part. As Professor Rocco D'Ambrosio also observed,[14] it is not enough to focus on legal restrictions of religious freedom and to combat persecution, social hostility, and hate speech based on religion or belief. All this is absolutely necessary, but if we stop here, we remain prisoners, perhaps without fully realizing it, of an excessively defensive conception of religious freedom.

Looking at freedom of religion through the lens of integral human development can help to overcome this narrow approach.[15] IHD provides a horizon at the center of which is human dignity. In this context, freedom of religion is simply a tool: indispensable but not an end in and of itself. Even if we were able to fully guarantee freedom of religion, the question would remain: freedom for what? The capabilities approach to development, citing economist and philosopher Amartya Sen, would answer that freedom "is both the primary objective, and the principal means of development."[16] The IHD approach accepts the second part of this answer but not the first: In this approach, the primary end of development is to ensure human dignity for all.

This approach has a significant impact on the way freedom of religion is conceived. Living with dignity requires something more than the *freedom from*—from persecution or discrimination. It requires the *freedom* to—to contribute to the common good through life experiences and projects of "living together" that embody the religious worldview of an individual or a community. This positive conception of religious freedom makes it possible for individual and collective religious identities to become a social resource. In this sense, it is true that a society that promotes freedom of religion has the potential to develop in a way that is more enriching than one that does not respect this right. Indeed, it can make use of resources that are precluded to the other. But we must take great care to correctly interpret the link between religious freedom and development. We know that there are countries with little or no religious freedom that have experienced strong economic development and have been able to develop welfare, health, and school systems that have reduced poverty, mortality,

13. Sedmak, Enacting Integral Human Development.
14. Rocco D'Ambrosio, Presentation, Panel on "From Idea to Policy Impact: Looking at Religious Freedom through the Lens of Integral Human Development," Conference. D'Ambrosio is a professor of political philosophy at the Pontifical Gregorian University in Italy.
15. Silvio Ferrari, "What Is the Contribution of Freedom of Religion or Belief to Integral Human Development?," Conference.
16. "Amartya Sen Shares His Theory of Development as Freedom," Ikeda Center for Peace, Learning, and Dialogue, https://www.ikedacenter.org/resources/amartya-sen-shares-his-theory-development-freedom.

and illiteracy. But can there be true development without freedom of religion, education, expression, association, and so on? The answer of the approach consonant with integral human development is "no," as true development requires broadening the perspective from material to immaterial goods and introducing, alongside the economic, scientific, and technological dimensions of development, the cultural, spiritual and religious ones that are essential for human-scale development or, rather, for a development on the scale of human dignity.

In other words, IHD offers a moral ground and framework which is capable, through a disciplined process of dialogue and cross-cultural collaboration across traditions, of achieving an overlapping consensus among growing numbers of religious and secular communities and institutions.

Consider how an approach consonant with integral human development promises to add a recognizable but still new depth dimension to the campaign for and defense of the right to religious freedom—and to the bolstering of other human rights. It holds that the following principles are essential to such a campaign for the freedom of religion and belief:

- The central role of human dignity.
- A relational understanding of the human person and human freedom.
- A moral understanding of development itself.
- The recognition of material needs and realities amid inequalities of opportunity.
- The consideration of cultural richness, beauty, and the moral imagination of particular peoples and societies.
- The importance of the nonreproductive aspects of human life.
- Special consideration of the most disadvantaged and those left behind.
- A recognition of interconnectedness and integral ecology.
- A sense of the relevance of first and last questions: Where do we come from? Where are we destined?
- The understanding of human flourishing as the growing realization of one's potential, that is, the realization of a kind of "fullness" of life as a person free to determine one's own fundamental beliefs.

All of these and other dimensions of a rich concept of integral human development have much to contribute to the still evolving regime of the right to religious freedom. This is the first contribution IHD can give to a reconceptualization of the right to freedom of religion.

However, this holistic conception of development is only half of the picture. Up to now we have underlined that IHD broadens the understanding of development to encompass, around the notion of dignity, dimensions of human life that had hitherto been neglected when speaking of development. Now we would like to highlight the other principle on which IHD is grounded, the awareness that (and here we are quoting the encyclical *Laudato Si*) the notion of development cannot be imposed from outside but must be understood "within the world of symbols and customs proper to each human group."[17] This caveat applies not only to the notion of development but also to its components. Therefore, when we affirm that the religious dimension is a component of integral human development, we should take into account that, although all human beings have in common a religious or spiritual dimension of their life, this dimension manifests itself in many different forms according to the historical, social, and cultural context where it has taken shape. In this sense an approach informed by IHD is inherently plural, because it includes different expressions of the religious dimension of human life.

This second characteristic of integral human development has relevant consequences for religious freedom because it helps us to understand that religious freedom is not a right without history or context. Starting from a universal basis and in response to a universal need, it develops according to times, forms, and ways that arise from and are deeply rooted in particular cultures. This is the reason why freedom of religion cannot be exported from one country to another as, in recent years, many have tried to do, always unsuccessfully. Technology, science, and wealth that are the basis of economic development can be exported: Freedom of religion can only be cultivated starting from the different seeds that every culture and civilization provides.

In short, integral human development provides freedom of religion with a framework oriented toward the development of human dignity—a framework that requires careful consideration of the dual imperatives of religious freedom (freedom to, and not only freedom from) and its contextual roots. While these imperatives and practices can be cultivated within each human environment, they cannot be exported *tout court* from one to another.

The holistic lens of integral human development also highlights a shortcoming in the current efforts to measure the state of religious freedom. As noted by development practitioners, measuring development based on economic indicators alone is insufficient. Measuring religious freedom based on indicators that primarily consider its violations, government restrictions, and social hostilities is unlikely to provide an adequate picture of religious freedom as a lived reality. These "negative" indices should be complemented by other measures that consider how religious actors, when they are free to profess and practice their religion, contribute to their societies' flourishing. Adding this "positive" metric would provide a more nuanced and realistic picture of the global status of religious freedom.

17. Pope Francis, Encyclical, "Praise Be to You," *Laudato Si*, (2015), §144.

Integrating religious freedom, religious engagement, and the SDGs

The Freedom and Prosperity Indexes developed by the Atlantic Council's Freedom and Prosperity Center have found a clear, positive relationship between religious freedom and economic development. At the same time, the absence of religious freedom can result in the marginalization of potentially key development actors and their lack of access to resources and opportunities for development. From this perspective, advancing religious freedom is not only a good in and of itself, but it also serves to unlock and advance other freedoms, thereby contributing to economic development and human flourishing.

Overall, although it has become broadly accepted that FoRB and economic development go hand-in-hand, recent research suggests a cautionary note: There is mixed evidence that FoRB is correlated with national-level economic development, given that economic growth has occurred alongside restrictions of religious freedom, particularly in contexts like China.[18] FoRB's relevance to prosperity, decent work, and poverty reduction seems therefore more visible within local, grassroots development contexts. At this local level, FoRB violations and religious discrimination can overlap with the dominance of economic sectors and job discrimination, and with land rights and foreign investment being siphoned to one identity group. The examples from India and Pakistan discussed later in this report demonstrate this pattern.

Religious discrimination is, in fact, a cross-cutting issue, meaning that protecting FoRB strengthens multiple SDGs. Unfortunately, while the SDGs agenda has been praised and criticized at the same time for its comprehensiveness, with its long list of goals and targets arguably covering the full scope of the international human rights regime, there is, surprisingly, no explicit reference to the human right of freedom of religion or belief—something that might still support the view put forward in an influential report about FoRB years ago entitled "An Orphaned Right."[19]

It is broadly accepted, however, that FoRB has a clear resonance with SDG 16, whose aim is to advance peace, justice, and strong institutions to build peaceful and inclusive societies. In other words, FoRB is crucial to building peaceful, democratic societies, which cannot flourish if they do not respect cultural and religious diversity. Institutions themselves are stronger and gain popular legitimacy when they are representative, that is, comprised of members of all communities.

By contrast, a lack of FoRB, leading to discrimination and persecutions based on religion or belief, can serve as a driver of violent conflict. In such cases, the conflict is fueled by grievances associated with religiously motivated human rights violations, unequal socioeconomic status, or the denial of access by religious minorities to resources, income, education, and healthcare.

More recently, there has been some scholarly and policy interest in trying to identify the connection between FoRB and other specific SDGs.[20] For example, it has been argued that FoRB and gender equality (SDG 5) are interlocking and interdependent. Guaranteeing FoRB provides women agency over a central aspect of their daily lives and multiple decisions that matter enormously for them and their families; it also recognizes the specific gender-based violence and discrimination often faced by female religious minorities. Women serve as some of the most stalwart defenders of FoRB across multiple levels, and FoRB advocacy will be severely weakened if they are excluded. Women are crucial to securing FoRB in local contexts and to community ownership of projects, often serving as important grassroots mediators in cases of sectarian violence. Women are also influential leaders, practitioners, and experts in their own right, and policymakers should ensure women are at the table not just at local levels but at international agenda-setting events.

A robust regime of FoRB strengthens the protection of marginalized groups and enhances the practice and defense of other human rights, all of which are indivisible and interdependent. In addition, FoRB can also serve as a bellwether right: when FoRB is under attack, democracy is also often under attack. In fact, FoRB goes to the heart of the SDGs in calling for the inclusion of all members of society. Nations cannot achieve their full potential if people are

18. For a recent discussion on the relationship between economic growth and religious freedom in China, see Ilan Alon, Shaomin Li, and Jun Wu, "An Institutional Perspective on Religious Freedom and Economic Growth," *Politics and Religion* 10, no. 2 (2017): 689–716; and Brian J. Grim, "The Modern Chinese Secret to Sustainable Economic Growth: Religious Freedom and Diversity," *Review of Faith and International Affairs* 13, no. 2 (2015): 1–12.

19. "Article 18: An Orphaned Right," Report of the UK All-Party Parliamentary Group on International Religious Freedom, 2013, https://appgfreedomofreligionorbelief.org/media/Article-18-An-Orphaned-Right.pdf.

20. Marie Juul Petersen, *Promoting Freedom of Religion or Belief and Gender Equality in the Context of the Sustainable Development Goals: A Focus on Access to Justice, Education and Health* (Copenhagen: Danish Institute of Human Rights, 2020); and Mariz Tadros, *Invisible Targets of Hatred: Socioeconomically Excluded Women from Religious Minority Backgrounds*, CREID Working Paper 2020, 2, Coalition for Religious Equality and Inclusive Development (Brighton: Institute of Development Studies, 2020).

excluded based on their belief and identity. Creating space for civil society is necessary for human rights, development, security, and peace; when everyone can participate in public life, policymaking is more informed, effective, and sustainable. As pointed out by Joseph Lemoine, senior director of the Freedom and Prosperity Center at the Atlantic Council, this is particularly relevant now because of concerning signs of democratic backsliding.[21]

If religious communities have the freedom to exercise and practice their religion, it is possible—and in some cases, likely—that they will support the SDGs for all. Of course, not all religious actors can be expected to use their religious freedom to advance the common good, given that some religious groups and individuals can be as prone to sectarianism and exclusivism as some states and secular parties. That said, few religious actors—except certain types of extremists—deny the importance of human rights and development, even if their own discourse about and warrants for these "goods" may not align in every respect with the discourse and warrants of the United Nations or other international and transnational development agencies.

In other words, religious values are also often intertwined with and reflect the beliefs and desires of their adherents, many of whom want and demand human rights and the achievement of the SDGs for all.

Discussing the crucial challenges for African development, Yawovi Jean Attila, professor of cannon law at the Pontifical Urbanian University, emphasized that virtuous individuals, shaped by religious values, are essential for societal progress. Religious freedom is necessary in order for religions to educate and form men and women to be honest and virtuous. Keenly aware of the disconnect between professed religious beliefs and actions, Attila acknowledged that it is not only a question of freedom but also one of behavior. Development, he noted, is the implementation of those virtues necessary to address the suffering of the other. So, today's challenge is one of behavior, of putting virtue into action.[22]

The importance of religious-secular partnerships

Goal seventeen of the SDGs stresses that these goals can be achieved only via a multistakeholder collaborative approach and global partnerships. In this respect, the international policy community has begun to recognize religion's positive role in supporting sustainable development and has increasingly sought to partner with religious actors to achieve Agenda 2030. Several foreign and international development ministries—US Agency for International Development (USAID), the United Kingdom's Foreign, Commonwealth & Development Office,[23] Germany's Federal Ministry for Economic Cooperation and Development (BMZ), the Italian Agency for Development Cooperation (AICS), and the European Union's Directorate-General International Partnerships, for example—have launched pilot projects and funding streams to implement development interventions that engage the social capital and capacities vested in diverse faith communities. Multilaterally, the creation of a global platform like the International Partnership on Religion and Sustainable Development (PaRD), is bringing together governments, international organizations and religious actors to harness the positive impact of religion in sustainable development. PaRD has helped to bring a more focused consideration of the role of religion in development, an approach which has started to influence the UN system.[24]

While this shift has been helpful, we need to think more strategically about how religious engagement can contribute to the wider SDGs agenda, from climate action (SDG 13) to quality education (SDG 4), from global health (SDG 3) to gender equality (SDG 5), and from building peaceful and inclusive societies (SDG 16) to developing new responsible consumption models (SDG 12). Religions bring certain distinctive advantages as partners in sustainable development. They have the practical capacity to deliver positive outcomes in contexts where other forms of engagement fail (with civil society or business, for example, the two sets of actors explicitly mentioned by SDG 17). Rooted in the local community, religious actors are frontline service providers who stay put when the going gets rough; they regularly call attention to humanitarian crises that are otherwise overlooked. They can motivate behavioral change in their coreligionists, and many are also globally networked and connected. Moreover, religious actors often enjoy trust, reach, and relationships denied to many governments and

21. Joseph Lemoine, Presentation, Panel on "Religious Freedom & Global Development," Conference.
22. Yawovi Jean Attila, Presentation, Panel on "Religious Freedom & Global Development," Conference.
23. It was previously called the Department for International Development (DFID).
24. See the UN Interagency Task Force on Engaging Faith-Based Actors for Sustainable Development, Annual Reports of 2016 and 2017, respectively.

nongovernmental organizations, and are uniquely able to respond to psychological and spiritual needs.[25]

For these reasons FoRB is crucial to achieving the SDGs, as it enables religions to collaborate with governments, international organizations, and other stakeholders toward this end. The SDGs themselves should include concepts, language and metrics that resonate within religious traditions.

Drawing on more than thirty-five years with the World Bank and the past twenty-five years pioneering innovative solutions connecting religion and development, Katherine Marshall challenges the familiar canard that there is a lack of evidence of the importance of religion to development. Rather, the central question is what to do with that evidence. "Localization offers the constant reminder that context matters," Marshall acknowledged, "but the question is how to translate local knowledge into practice? How do you combine the practical wisdom that comes from the people on the ground with the technical expertise available within the global community—and, then, how do you convince the individuals who have to implement recommendations through new policies and practices?"[26] In short, how to link the insights of a more religion-aware assessment of individuals and communities with the global development agenda?

Perhaps the most fundamental contribution religious communities individually and collectively bring to the discussion, she said, is "a concern for the vulnerable, a concern for the poorest in our communities, our concern for the minorities who are left aside." Given the global goal to "leave no one behind," faith-based actors have an opportunity to translate those values into something that truly works. Integral human development captures well this insight by focusing on the development of the whole person and the development of each person.

Marshall also addressed the tension between religious freedom advocacy and religious engagement work. In the United States, unfortunately, this has caused a political divide among diplomats, experts, and other practitioner-stakeholders who work on issues of religion and international development or relations. Recognizing that religious freedom advocacy tends to look more at violations, whereas religious engagement looks much more at what a religious community is doing for the common good, she called for the representatives of these two fields to engage in greater levels of coordination and cooperation, on the grounds that promoting religious freedom and engaging religious actors are separate but complementary functions.

The case of the recent work done by USAID in this respect is worth mentioning here. Peter Mandaville, who served as senior adviser for faith engagement at USAID during the Biden administration, described how government agencies are developing more nuanced, localized strategies for engaging religious actors on development and rights issues.[27] As a development organization, he said, USAID has found international religious freedom relevant to democracy, rights, and governance, each of which is part of the holistic approach to development that defines its work. Within USAID's development work, there has been an essential element of strategic religious engagement, which is different than advancing religious freedom or interreligious dialogue, though closely related to it. Strategic religious engagement is about how USAID formed partnerships with faith-based organizations to implement and advance a full range of development functions in areas like public health, education, and food security. Strategic religious engagement has involved direct partnerships with faith organizations to advance humanitarian goals.

In September 2023, USAID launched the US government's first-ever strategic religious engagement policy within the foreign policy and national security space. Mandaville explained that this policy framework provided a blueprint that made the case to development professionals that religious engagement and partnerships with faith-based actors are essential for accomplishing their existing goals and objectives. It provided a roadmap and principles to guide that work; the principles directly referenced ideas like integrity, respect, and even human dignity. In seeking to operationalize such work, development practitioners need to consider the relationship between religious freedom promotion and strategic religious engagement. There is a necessary complementary and symbiotic relationship between the two. At least a modicum of religious freedom is a crucial and obvious prerequisite for successfully realizing the goals of strategic religious engagement. Conversely, effective religious engagement should result in greater religious freedom, as faith-based actors exercise their religious beliefs and actively contribute to their communities.

Like other presenters Mandaville underscored the importance of contextually relevant interventions and locally led development (aka the localization agenda), which was the North Star that had been increasingly shaping the trajectory and content of USAID's work during the Biden administration. Localization includes changing how money flows and focusing on getting resources more directly into the hands of local

25. A. Dickson and F. Petito, *Religious Engagement and the SDGs: A View from Rome*, ISPI Policy Brief, Italian Institute for International Political Studies, July 2022, *https://www.ispionline.it/sites/default/files/pubblicazioni/analysis_dikcson_petito_01.08.2022.pdf*

26. Katherine Marshall, Presentation, Panel on "Religious Freedom & Global Development," Conference.

27. Peter Mandaville, Presentation, Panel on "An Interreligious Conversation: Integral Human Development, Human Dignity and Religious Freedom," Conference.

actors. Streamlining the labyrinthine bureaucratic requirements associated with a huge agency is crucial to such an effort. Finally, he said, designs and implementation of programmatic interventions should reflect the needs, priorities, experiences, worldviews, and values of their partners in the countries in which they work. Religious freedom and IHD, therefore, are directly relevant to locally led development as it centers the conversation on human dignity.

The promotion and protection of freedom of religion and belief for all people around the world, the ability to worship and to practice one's faith or no faith at all, or to realize one's conscience in the public square, is a fundamental right and core dimension of upholding human dignity for all people and a central part of carrying forward international development in today's world, Mandaville asserted.

Interreligious engagement, human dignity, and religious freedom

In recent years FoRB violations have increased, a trend that displays growing intolerance, social hostility, and sectarian violence—at times reaching the level of regional or intrastate conflict. Unfortunately, religion seems to inspire this trend, given the rise and visibility of religiously motivated terrorism, persecution of minority religions by the majority religion, sectarian violence, religious nationalism, and the "return" of the language of holy wars, for example, in the cases of Russia-Ukraine and Israeli-Palestinian conflicts. In short, religion is increasingly seen as part of the problem.

Yet a new and welcome era of interreligious solidarity has developed over the last two decades, both globally and locally. In addition, there has been a remarkable rise in the efforts of religious leaders, communities, and faith-based organizations to respond to political violence and tensions through interreligious dialogue and collaboration. An important example of this new trend is the historical Document on Human Fraternity, cosigned five years ago in Abu Dhabi by Pope Francis and Sheik Ahmed al-Tayeb, the grand imam of al-Azhar.[28] With this document the two religious leaders sent a powerful message in favor of political inclusion and against the persecution of minorities, especially in countries where Islam or Christianity represent the majority religion. If we are all children of the same God, the document proclaimed, then we are all brothers and sisters, and cannot treat each other as "slaves." We all need recognition and respect, including the right to participate in public life as citizens with full rights, freedoms, and responsibilities.

As a result of these new developments, scholars and policymakers have begun to recognize the positive role that religious leaders and, in particular, interreligious dialogue, and collaboration can play in promoting peaceful and inclusive societies. This is why today the protection of FoRB is, in our reading, inseparable from the promotion of peaceful and inclusive societies—one of the central tasks of Agenda 2030, in particular SDG 16. Therefore, we call on governments and international organizations to take seriously the potential of interreligious dialogue and collaboration, and to conceive of these religious-led practices as crucial policy tools to promote FoRB and combat intolerance and discrimination based on religion or belief. This new type of partnership of secular-interreligious partnerships is what we call *interreligious engagement strategies*.[29]

This unprecedented wave of interreligious solidarity, dialogue, and collaboration has opened a new era of interreligious dynamics. As a policy framework, interreligious engagement recognizes these novel dynamics and seeks to amplify them through innovative secular-religious partnerships aimed at achieving more inclusive and peaceful societies.

By articulating a spiritually inspired understanding of human development around the concept of human dignity, IHD provides an ideal platform for strengthening these interreligious efforts and increasing their impact. IHD offers a moral grounding and framework which, through a disciplined process of dialogue and cross-cultural collaboration across traditions, can achieve an overlapping consensus among growing numbers of religious and secular communities and institutions.

Brett Scharffs, reflecting on *Dignitatis Humanae* as a pivotal statement linking human dignity and religious freedom, reported that in his decades-long work convening dialogues globally around law and religion, the decision to focus the

28. His Holiness Pope Francis and the Grand Imam of Al-Azhar Ahmed Al-Tayeb, *A Document on Human Fraternity for World Peace and Living Together,* Abu Dhabi, February 4, 2019, https://www.vatican.va/content/francesco/en/travels/2019/outside/documents/papa-francesco_20190204_documento-fratellanza-umana.html.

29. F. Petito, "From Freedom of Religion or Belief (FoRB) Advocacy to Interreligious Engagement in Foreign Policy," *Global Affairs* 6, no. 3 (2020): 269–286; and Fabio Petito, Fadi Daou, and Michael D. Driessen, *Human Fraternity and Inclusive Citizenship: Interreligious Engagement in the Mediterranean*, ISPI Report, June 2021, https://www.ispionline.it/en/publication/human-fraternity-and-inclusive-citizenship-interreligious-engagement-mediterranean-30794.

discussions on human dignity tended to "elevate rather than degrade" the conversation and encouraged reciprocity. Scharffs and his colleagues explored concepts of human dignity in different regions, a practice that functioned as an effective way of cultivating consensus, rather than imposing an external agenda or set of understandings. The idea of human dignity, in short, can serve as a unifying concept across different cultural and religious contexts.[30]

There are practical challenges to promoting religious freedom and human dignity in diverse global settings, however. Sharon Rosen, global director for religious engagement at Search for Common Ground, an organization with more than ninety offices across Africa, Asia, and the Middle East, emphasized the need for context-specific approaches. Recognizing that four-fifths of individuals identify with a religious community, she said that finding arguments from within religious traditions can be of great value, as the Document on Human Fraternity has shown. From within her own tradition as an observant Jew living in Jerusalem, she cited how a vision of social justice flows from teaching regarding the sanctity of all human life and its inalienable dignity. Precisely because we are called upon to affirm the dignity of all, she noted, we are required to pay special attention and concern to those whose dignity is vulnerable or marginalized: the poor, the stranger, the widow and orphan, the minorities in our midst. The Torah is accordingly replete with commandments regarding our ethical responsibilities toward the vulnerable in society.[31]

Reflecting on her experience across many countries and traditions, Rosen argues that religious actors have a crucial role to play in not only helping to de-escalate violence and conflict and build peace, but generally to help with the enormous social issues including climate change, migration, poverty, inequality, refugees, hate speech, and more. To do this effectively, she highlighted the need for an intrareligious and interreligious approach and an extrareligious or multisectoral approach to collaborate fully.

Interreligious dialogue can include a variety of forms of interactions ranging from theological exchanges to day-to-day socializing and common social action by different religious individuals on specific issues. Interreligious dialogue as a sustained, global practice is a relatively new phenomenon and has become more frequent over the last two decades. The most significant trend within this growth has seen interreligious dialogue moving steadily from theology to practical collaboration.

Among the forms of interreligious dialogue and collaboration carrying the most potential in terms of building peaceful and inclusive societies, she added, are those that recognize and respect the differences of the participants and strive to involve "difficult" religious actors beyond the "usual suspects" (i.e., religious actors that have been involved in the interreligious dialogue movements for decades). Indeed, interreligious dialogue and collaboration represent arguably one of the most dynamic and promising areas of active citizen participation and new sociopolitical leadership—especially among young people and women—against the background of a contemporary scenario of democratic crisis marked by disengagement, disenchantment, and a rejection of public responsibility and the search for the common good.

These new trends confirm and strengthen the need for more inclusive approaches to religious engagement and freedom promotion. Richard Sudworth, who has led the interfaith work of the Anglican Church, noted that advocacy for religious freedom has created "unusual bedfellows" like evangelical Christians partnering with Muslims on issues of common concern domestically and internationally. "When you encounter the other in relationship, suddenly your vision is expanded, and you see the human dignity of the other," he said. Or, as Mahan Mirza forcefully argued with respect to the transformative power of interreligious dialogue: "Encounter matters."[32] Sudworth noted that true encounter requires the translation of ideas across contexts to find the concepts and actors that resonate in each location. From his experience, he has seen that in contexts where women are involved in prominent roles in civic society, the relationships across religious communities are often much stronger. One of the strengths of an approach informed by the values of integral human development is attention to the realities of the whole person and the whole society, and recognition of the specific culture and history of a place. As he noted, "the local informs the understanding of the geopolitical."[33]

Integral human development envisions the state of society in which respect for the dignity of the human person, manifested by ongoing efforts to secure the cultural and spiritual as well as economic and material requirements of human flourishing, is central to political and social life, upheld by the rule of law, and reflected in peaceful and just relations among nations, states, and peoples. A new secular-interreligious partnership would be based on this kind of moral and political vision of a shared peace and prosperity. IHD has the potential to authorize and

30. Brett Scharffs, Presentation, Panel on "An Interreligious Conversation," Conference; and see Punta del Este Declaration: Human Dignity for Everyone Everywhere, International Center for Law and Religious Studies, n.d., https://www.iclrs.org/blurb/punta-del-este-conference-human-dignity-for-everyone-everywhere/.

31. Sharon Rosen, Presentation, Panel on "An Interreligious Conversation," Conference; and see The Common Ground Approach to Religious Engagement Toolkit, Search for Common Ground, https://www.sfcg.org/what-we-do/religious-engagement/.

32. Mahan Mirza, Presentation, Panel on "An Interreligious Conversation," Conference.

33. Richard Sudworth, Presentation, Panel on "An Interreligious Conversation," Conference.

shape a new kind of interreligious mode of religious-secular engagement, more robust and inclusive of all players, that could prove more effective and enduring than the current paradigm in fostering sustainable constructive change.

In addition, religion's comprehensive view of the human person's dignity as being grounded in a transcendent reality that cannot be granted by the state or taken away by the state is less susceptible to arbitrary manipulation by self-interested groups and individuals. As Scott Appleby has powerfully put it: "Whether articulated through the concept of integral human development, Islam's abiding notion of the absolute sovereignty of God over human affairs, or Judaism's affirmation of the covenant between God and humanity as the foundation of ethical reasoning, religion brings to the post-secular milieu an antidote to paralyzing solipsism and the shattering of moral consensus into seven billion discrete, irreconcilable fragments."[34]

Richard Sudworth aptly summarized the nature of this work as a "heuristic endeavor"—an ongoing process of learning and refinement rather than a fixed set of solutions. While significant progress has been made in understanding and promoting religious freedom and human dignity globally, it remains a dynamic field requiring continuous adaptation, dialogue, and inclusive engagement.

From idea to policy impact

In recent years, governments have strengthened their foreign policy tools, global advocacy efforts and international coordination to promote FoRB. Governments have begun identifying dedicated FoRB appointees, teams, and funding streams; policymakers increasingly recognize religious actors as a strategic partner in advancing the sustainable development of inclusive societies. There has been growing international collaboration on these issues, particularly under the auspices of the International Religious Freedom or Belief Alliance (IRFBA), a grouping of forty-three countries committed to promoting religious freedom.

A lively debate on how best to promote FoRB through foreign policy, however, has seen strategies shift from naming-and-shaming approaches and megaphone diplomacy to new bottom-up, collaborative approaches which engage multiple civil society actors, religious leaders, communities, and organizations. In this context, development interventions and interreligious engagement have been identified as crucial policy tools to promote FoRB and combat intolerance and discrimination based on religion or belief. There are now examples of governments and international organizations institutionalizing this line of thinking.[35]

The global protection of religious freedom is suffering, however, from a deficit of trust. In many parts of the non-Western world it is seen as a form of cultural imperialism politically driven by different geopolitical interests, including classical missionary ones. As Mirza observed, this is especially the case in the Global South, where religious freedom and the SDGs have been perceived in many countries as a neocolonial, "Western" endeavor with a hidden agenda.[36] This perception that religious freedom is being used to advance surreptitious international agendas is exacerbated by an epoch-making transformation in the ideological-normative structure of international society, which is increasingly marked by a new form of "civilizational" politics in which religious and culturalist references play a more important role than before.[37] This trend can amplify social hostility between communal groups based on religion or belief. In this context of instability, regional conflicts, and the indirect failure of fragile states to protect religious freedom, FoRB violators are empowered.

The case of India, which the US Commission on International Religious Freedom's *2024 Annual Report* identified as a "country of particular concern" for violations of religious freedom,[38] is a case in point. India exemplifies mistrust of Western intentions. Rajeev Bhargava, the well-known scholar

34. Scott R. Appleby, "Comprehending Religion in Global Affairs: Toward a Postsecular Paradigm of Religious Engagement to Advance Human Fraternity," in *Human Fraternity and Inclusive Citizenship: Interreligious Engagement in the Mediterranean*, eds. Fabio Petito, Fadi Daou, and Michael D. Driessen, 2021, 67–85.
35. USAID has recognized this policy complementarity in the agency's Strategic Religious Engagement Policy; the Italian government has created a special envoy for FoRB protection and interreligious dialogue; and the Organization for Security and Cooperation's Office of Democratic Institutions and Human Rights has recently published a toolkit on FoRB and interreligious and interfaith dialogue and partnership.
36. Mirza, Presentation, Panel, "An Interreligious Conversation."
37. F. Petito, "The Contemporary Ambiguities of Religions as a Source of Civilisational Identity," in *Nations under God: The Geopolitics of Faith in the Twenty-First Century*, eds. Luke Herrington, Alasdair McKay, and Jeffrey Haynes, e-book, (E-International Relations publishing, 2015), 63–70.
38. USCIRF, 2024 *Annual Report*.

and authority on multiculturalism and secularism in India, has developed a sustained critique of the Hindu nationalism of the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP). At the conference, Bhargava described the culture of suspicion that undermines religious freedom advocacy in India.[39] Decrying the current climate of religious intolerance and discrimination, he cited incidents of violence against religious minorities, targeted primarily at Muslims but also Christians and other communities. While such persecution is unjustifiable, Bhargava said, there remain widespread concerns about religious freedom, fueled by Christian missionary activities among Hindus.

There is constitutional protection for religious freedom in India, including the right to freedom of religious belief and practice and the right to preach and propagate. This right of preaching or propagating encompasses a right in two dimensions, Bhargava explained. First, the right of the "convertee" is the freedom for someone to move from one religion to another. Second, it can also be seen as the freedom of the "converter," the freedom to preach and propagate one's faith. Tensions arise because there is a perception that many "conversions," rather than genuine and chosen freely, are forced indirectly. The exploitation of marginalized groups in India like Dalits (members of the lowest class) and Adivasis (indigenous people) is a matter of concern and a source of the escalating tensions in Hindu-Christian relations.[40]

Bhargava quoted religious scholar Wilfred Cantwell Smith, who predicted challenges for Christian theology in the face of religious diversity: "The impact of agnostic science will turn out to be child's play compared to the challenge to Christian theology of the faith of other men and women."[41] This perspective, in his view, underscores the difficulty that traditional Christian theology faces in accommodating religious pluralism. Bhargava suggested that the perception of Christianity as an exclusivist religion and even a threat to other faiths contributes to the suspicion and tension surrounding religious freedom advocacy in settings of religious diversity.

Bhargava's position is conceptually even more radical, especially from a legal perspective. For him, FoRB should include not only the right to change religion but also the right to be Christian and Hindu or Muslim and Buddhist at the same time. He resents the fact that human rights law has implicitly adopted an "exclusionary" concept of religion, according to which one cannot become a Christian (or a Muslim or a Jew) without abandoning Hindu rites, traditions, and beliefs. This is the radical basis of his criticism of proselytism; adopting his position would require a new interfaith and cross-cultural dialogue that does not take for granted certain Eurocentric and Abrahamic assumptions about religion.

The discussion of the case of India, regardless of what one might think of the state of religious freedom under Prime Minister Narendra Modi, shows the need for bridging the gap of misunderstanding and mistrust by devising new heterodox conversations involving groups from different cultural backgrounds, civilizational locations, and religious affiliations. In our increasingly multicultural and postliberal international society, we need more than ever a new and reinvigorated season of interreligious and intercultural dialogue.

From this perspective, integral human development can be understood as more than an idea or concept. It is an invitation to and platform for ethically informed action grounded in a multidisciplinary, multicultural, humanist, and religiously informed vision of the human person as a spiritual as well as a political rights-bearing actor.

The authors of this report propose this mode of cross-cultural and interreligious encounter and dialogue, informed by the values of integral human development, as a necessary first step and precondition to subsequent phases of a strategic process to foster interreligious collaboration and advocacy. Once trust is established among the various religious participants and their state or secular interlocutors, the core participants would be prepared to enter into carefully designed postsecular partnerships with governments and international organizations.

This proposed process and strategy for interreligious engagement seems to us to be potentially more effective in advancing FoRB. Ambitiously, we believe that it carries the promise of a new politics of hope, something we need more than anything in our societies in the Global North and South, and the East and West.

In terms of concrete policy action, and as noted above, it has become possible today to include FoRB within development, humanitarian, and peacebuilding interventions in multiple ways by recognizing and highlighting the power inequalities based on religion or belief—religious inequalities that intersect with other inequalities including class, gender, caste, and ethnicity. FoRB also can be advanced indirectly through projects working to implement the SDGs. Where FoRB issues are too contentious to address directly, these initiatives can nevertheless bring together different communities and begin to build trust through joint action toward achieving other SDGs, e.g., providing clean water and sanitation. This tactic augments development programming by promoting bottom-up, interreligious coalitions that can also be central in supporting FoRB and peaceful and inclusive societies locally.

39. Rajeev Bhargava, Presentation, Panel on "From Idea to Policy Impact," Conference.
40. For a recent critical discussion of the topic, see L. David Lal, "In Search of a Utopian Society: Situating 'Dalit' Conversions in Contemporary India," CASTE: A Global Journal on Social Exclusion 4, no. 2 (2023): 288–305.
41. Wilfred Cantwell Smith, The Faith of Other Men (Harper & Row's Harper Torchbooks, 1972), 121.

As the conference participants have noted, ample evidence suggests that a context-informed approach is vital for development projects aiming to achieve the SDGs and protect FoRB. Context and local knowledge are vital: As soon as projects, programs, or agendas are seen as an external, foreign imposition, they lead nowhere. A context-informed approach should engage local actors and organizations, and integrate their understanding of problems and solutions, while preventing the instrumentalization of the engaged individuals and communities, which would deepen any stigma or hostile attitudes inspired by such projects.

Mariz Tadros, the director of the Coalition for Religious Equality and Inclusive Development at the Institute of Development Studies in the United Kingdom, described the experiences of integrating FoRB into development work as part of a UK-funded project to explore how practitioners can work in extremely fragile, complex contexts in promoting freedom of religion or belief in Pakistan.[42] The project addressed water access for a marginalized Christian community amid the COVID-19 pandemic. Accessing water for the community meant that women were required to go into another majority community and bring water back to their own. In the context of heightened health concerns with limited water supplies, communal tensions increased. Additionally, there were elevated risks of sexual harassment for these minority women. A solution emerged to develop a new COVID-19-friendly water plant in this community. However, the organizers formed a committee of women from the community to oversee and operate this plant. The women had a vested interest in running the project, and their new role was beneficial in empowering them within their community.

Three policy lessons emerged from this project, Tadros reported: First, for freedom of religion or belief to be relevant in development, it must be relevant to people's priorities. Second, local capacity is essential, not just in establishing a project with experts coming in and out, but in sustaining the project over time. Third, representation matters. This is where preventing development from being diluted and not serving minorities becomes very important. By investing women from religious minorities with the responsibility to manage the oversight of the water plant, the project ensured that there was representation for minorities and prevented it from being co-opted by other, more dominant actors.

Being attuned to the religious dynamics of society is vital for recognizing how these factors affect an individual's day-to-day experience. Contexts also vary tremendously and change rapidly over time. They must therefore be continually, carefully, and thoughtfully monitored and analyzed in all their layers of complexity. For example, layered analysis of the religious dynamics within a state at a given time—including majority versus minority religion or belief communities, shifts in religious leadership, and intergenerational and gender dynamics—is an appropriate starting point. This contextual analysis, as well as the mapping of religious identity at local, national, regional, and global levels, needs to be regularly updated as these structural conditions are constantly shifting.

In this respect, multiple identities need also to be considered, particularly the ethnoreligious aspect of FoRB, which can often be ignored. When focusing on religious minorities at the expense of ethnic minorities, intersections between religion and ethnicity are often ignored, which show how groups such as Hazara Shia (i.e., those of Hazara ethnicity and others belonging to the Shia religion) or Uighur Muslims are doubly persecuted. Due attention must be paid to the intersectionality of identities, including religion, disabilities, gender, class, and caste, and how these multiple identities intersect with discrimination and FoRB violations, with cases of gender-specific religious persecution becoming increasingly apparent.

Tadros also drew on a project that explored how intersecting identities in India (e.g., faith, class, gender, disability) influence the experience of inequality and marginalization, with a particular focus on people with disabilities from minority religious backgrounds. She highlighted how participatory methods allowed people to express what makes life worth living—an exercise that resonates with the focus on human dignity that animates integral human development. These approaches, which provided a more nuanced understanding of challenges between religious communities as well as within the same religion, deepened our understanding of how race, class, gender, and caste can all be part of the spectrum of inequalities present in a society. The policy message that emerges is that a human-centered, religious-sensitive comprehensive approach to development enables us to see the broad spectrum of intersectionality and inequalities, including a lack of religious freedom.

Finally, Tadros emphasized the urgency of incorporating FoRB into the development agenda in time to influence what will come after the Sustainable Development Goals. The SDGs mention religion only in one subindicator of Goal 10. This near omission of one of the most powerful sources of motivation of human belief and behavior reflects a general rule—and lingering bias— in international development practice: "What you can't count does not count."

If there is a desire to reverse this "secular myopia" and bring the richness of integral human development to a broader policy audience, there is only a short time to make sure those indicators are included in the next phase of international development efforts, given that the relevant stakeholders are already crafting the new post-2030 agenda.

42. Mariz Tadros, Presentation, Panel on "From Idea to Policy Impact," Conference.

This image was captured on June 18, 2024, in Rome, Italy, during the event "Religious freedom and integral human development: A new global platform."

In short, Tadros's intervention underscored the time-sensitive nature of influencing global development frameworks to integrate the principles of IHD and to address religious freedom violations.

In sum, we assert that in moving from ideas to policy impact, there is a need for holistic, context-sensitive approaches that recognize the complex interplay between religious identity, human rights, and socioeconomic development. Moving forward, policymakers and development practitioners should focus on integrating FoRB considerations across sectors, building local capacity, addressing intersectional vulnerabilities, and developing robust indicators to measure progress. By doing so, they can work toward a more inclusive and equitable approach to development that respects and promotes religious freedom as a fundamental dimension of human dignity and flourishing.

The IHD lens allows us to sketch a policy approach that:

- Integrates FoRB more fully into broader development and human rights frameworks. Religious freedom should not be treated as a separate issue but as an integral part of human dignity and development.
- Prioritizes the importance of local context and participatory approaches. The examples from Pakistan and India demonstrate the value of engaging local communities and understanding their specific needs and priorities. This approach helps ensure that FoRB initiatives are relevant and sustainable.
- Emphasizes the intersectionality of violations of religious freedom with other forms of discrimination and marginalization. Gender, caste, ethnicity, and economic status were all identified as factors that interact with religious identity to create complex patterns of exclusion and vulnerability.
- Reveals and addresses tensions between different conceptions of religious freedom, particularly regarding missionary activities and conversion. The insights from India highlighted the need for nuanced approaches that respect both the right to practice and share one's faith and the concerns of communities about cultural preservation and coercion.
- Fosters a new mode of interreligious and cross-cultural dialogue. Without addressing the issue raised by Bhargava—can I be Hindu and Buddhist at the same time or do I need to make a choice?—no regulation of proselytism and conversion will solve the problem. There is a need to open innovative spaces for new religious-cultural heterodox conversations which do not assume the predominant Western and Abrahamic matrix of human rights discourses.
- Stresses the importance of data and measurable indicators in advancing FoRB within development frameworks. The call for influencing the post-2030 SDG agenda underscored the need for concrete metrics to track progress on religious freedom and its impact on development outcomes.[43]

43. The Atlas of Religious or Belief Minority Rights is an example of innovative concrete metrics to track progress of religious freedom by comparing the different levels of protection for minority rights granted by each state, the legal status enjoyed by each minority group both across the European Union and in each member country, and the specific areas of rights that are at stake. See more about the project and its mapping tool at https://atlasminorityrights.eu/.

This image was captured on June 18, 2024, in Rome, Italy, during the event "Religious freedom and integral human development: A new global platform."

Conclusions: Changing the conversation

There is a critical need to integrate religious freedom more explicitly into development frameworks, including the SDGs. This integration recognizes the fundamental role of religious belief and practice in human flourishing and social cohesion. By encouraging a more holistic and nuanced understanding of human needs and potential, integral human development, a holistic model of human flourishing rooted in the inherent dignity of each person and every person, offers a valuable lens through which to approach both religious freedom and development work. The relationship between FoRB and sustainable development can be better understood, and their respective rights better promoted, by engaging the concept of IHD, whose ideas and values are based on the dignity of the human person in ways which explicitly echo and complement holistic accounts of human development from multiple religious, philosophical, and wisdom traditions.

The international policy community has started to realize that the issue of freedom of religion or belief is coimbricated with many other dimensions of the development challenge. Recognizing this essential dimension of marginalization owing to the persecution of religious actors and communities can help some of the most vulnerable communities achieve some of the goals put forward in the international development agenda. Seeing these issues through the prism of IHD enables us to see that religious freedom is not only "freedom from" persecution or discrimination. Religious freedom is also "freedom to" contribute to life together in diverse communities and to realize the common good of the society. This lens also points to a fuller conception of the dignity of the human person and of society as a whole. This framework allows for a shift from merely protecting against persecution to enabling religious minorities to contribute positively to society in their own way.

However, it would be a mistake to think that there is only one way to build a holistic model of human flourishing. It is essential to explore, understand, and compare how different cultural and religious traditions conceive of and cultivate the relationship between freedom of religion or belief and integral human development. The next meeting of this research project will be devoted in part to this question.

Msgr. Anthony Onyemuche Ekpo, the undersecretary of the Holy See's Dicastery for Promoting Integral Human Development, argued that IHD, by encompassing a holistic model of human flourishing that authorizes action to overcome obstacles thereto, constitutes a platform for innovative, action-oriented intra- and inter-communal dialogue and encounters.[44] Drawing on the language of Pope Francis's recent magisterium, Msgr. Ekpo stresses that a culture of encounter and dialogue offers an opportunity to address the needs of the marginalized. IHD, he added, is a vision that inspires collaborative partnerships

44. Anthony Onyemuche Ekpo, Presentation, Panel on "Religious Freedom and Integral Human Development: Changing the Conversation," Conference.

for the common good; as such, it creates the conditions for creativity to flourish. With the inclusion of faith-based actors and sensibilities, policymakers and development practitioners can consider the spiritual aspects of human existence alongside economic, social, and political dimensions and perhaps find allies to develop more creative and resonate interventions.[45]

A journey to shift the conversation by bringing these two agendas into a creative dialogue has begun. We need to foster these new forms of intercultural, interreligious, and interpolitical dialogues to build what Pope Francis has called "social friendships" across divides. We need long-term thinking to address the emerging global challenges, including collaborative academic programs that bring together experts from different religious traditions.

A platform on religious freedom and integral human development is vital for this effort to convene across disciplines and communities. These settings enable robust conversations and engagement to pursue a fuller vision of human flourishing. In linking religious freedom more closely with IHD, we can pursue more effective and sustainable solutions to global challenges.

Changing the conversation on religious freedom through the lens of integral human development argues for a process of multilevel engagement which:

1. Is based on a «presumption of worth» of the other, even when dealing with challenging ideologies or regimes. Engagement must proceed from a presumption of worth. Dialogue must be undertaken in the spirit of a culture of encounter.
2. Remains open to learning and to genuine, creative interreligious and postsecular dialogues. These are necessary to expand the political imagination and to create new practical innovations to respond to global policy challenges.
3. Strives to improve the knowledge base for action-oriented policy for the common good in a culturally pluralistic and politically fragmented global society. Such innovative government-religious partnerships aimed at achieving more inclusive and peaceful societies would amplify the seeds of hope nurtured by the new interreligious dynamics and narratives of solidarity and human fraternity.

45. Pope Francis, Encyclicals, "Praise Be to You," (2015), and "All Brothers: On Fraternity and Social Friendship," *Fratelli Tutti*, (2020).

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