PART 5

Conclusion

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Chapter 11

Way Forward[*]

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1 Recasting freedom of religion or belief for religious equality

The case studies presented in this book, and the insights drawn from their analysis, highlight the wealth of knowledge that can be gained from more grounded research on the nature, scope, and depth of religious otherization, as experienced by people who are already socioeconomically excluded. Further research is needed to redress the absence of discussion of religious inequalities in international and national discourses, policies, and practices of inclusive development. Undoubtedly, evidence is not a panacea for the redress of injustices; however, it provides some insights into what a development policy that is religiously inclusive of people on the margins may look like. Below are some overarching themes from the chapters, highlighting ways in which freedom of religion or belief (FoRB) can be recast conceptually and in praxis to redress religious inequalities. The three themes are: (1) broadening the meaning of FoRB, (2) understanding religious inequalities in their intersections with other drivers of inequality, and (3) embedding FoRB in relation to other banners such as heritage.

2 Whose reality of FoRB counts?

In this section, we highlight ways in which the various case studies have challenged us to reconsider broadening our conception of what constitutes FoRB and to interrogate what can be gained if we go beyond the top-down formulations that we sometimes use to straitjacket this highly complex idea.

In a global context where the targeting of people on the basis of their real or perceived religion or beliefs is both a daily reality for many and a threat to their very existence, there is an urgency in understanding and addressing FoRB violations. The advancement of the cause of making societies more inclusive and just, by redressing religious inequalities, is possible through visions that are 'at least to some degree… ours to shape, revise and reimagine, and mould to our interests' (Decosimo 2018: 15). To this end, we can reimagine what constitutes FoRB in order to broaden how it can be used. From the case studies presented here, we highlight three ways of recasting FoRB in ways that speak to people's realities.

First, religious equality is not to be equated with the right to practise a religion, but the right to exercise religious agency in whatever form or belief system, as long as it does not impinge on the rights of others. This exercise of religious agency includes the right to mix and match different beliefs.

Millions of people around the globe exercise their religious agency in a dynamic and fluid way that draws on the spiritual repertoires and heritages of their families, communities, and their own personal experiences. This practice of religious agency in a highly syncretic and eclectic manner can challenge leaders and influential figures in religious traditions, majority or minority, that endeavour to promote 'purist' versions of religion in accordance with their very specific interpretations.

Hence, FoRB necessarily entails protecting and defending the right of individuals and people to engage in different expressions of spirituality as they deem fit, even where this clashes with powerful bastions/guardians of specific religions. This is particularly important as some scholarship has recognised FoRB in intra-group terms; that is, as the freedom to challenge one's own religion from within. However, there is less consideration thus far given to the right to dynamically mix and match across religions or belief systems. In terms of action towards ensuring equality of all to exercise religious agency, it means challenging political movements that endeavour to homogenise society to follow one particular ideology and it also means challenging purists within any particular religion who vilify – to the point of persecution at times – followers who syncretically engage with different religious heritages.

In order to uphold individuals' rights to be free from all forms of religious homogenisation, this may mean, as in the case of Shah and Shah's chapter, defending the right of a woman who says she belongs to the Hindu faith to draw on repertoires of different religions as she wishes without being harassed by ultra-right-wing Hindus for not practising Hinduism in the 'pure' way. In other cases, where the actors are different, it may mean a struggle on dual fronts. Firstly, this may entail defending the rights of an individual who belongs to a minority religion in a particular context against state-endorsed homogenisation by the majority. Secondly, it may involve a struggle against the leaders within that individual's own religious tradition.

The second significant contribution from the case studies presented in this volume is also intended to broaden the conceptual bandwidth of the concept of FoRB. Scholarship and a great deal of praxis championing FoRB has focused on followers of religions that have doctrines which are often inscribed in a body of text (Gatti *et al.* 2019: 88–89). This is understandable given that many of the twenty-first century genocides have been against people with defined religions (Muslims in Myanmar and China, Yazidis and Christians in Iraq, etc.). However, the chapters on indigenous expressions of religious agency in India, South Africa, and Uganda also point to the attention that is needed to the 'belief' component of FoRB.

Humanists have championed the importance of recognising and including the rights of those who do not belong to a religion and define themselves as atheists or non-believers pertaining to a dominant or majority faith, and have consistently reminded advocates that it is about freedom of religion **or** belief. The contribution that the scholarship in this volume makes is on the importance of recognising those that believe deeply in a spirituality that entails rites, rituals, and beliefs but is of a non-codified nature and is unconventional in its character. This is perhaps particularly most powerfully conveyed by the chapter on South Africa:

> During an interview in Marapong with Francina Nkosi, resident of Shongoane and local human rights defender, she shared her hope for future developments in Lephalale, that 'land be made available for farming', as a gateway to poverty reduction by uplifting women's participation in agriculture, as well as reducing food and intergenerational nutrition security. Nkosi further described how 'land is sacred in African traditions; therefore, it not only nourishes us with food, indigenous seeds and livelihoods, it is through the land that we are able to dream and connect with to [*sic*] our African spiritualities'.
> (Tifloen and Makgoba, this volume, p167)

One of the areas that merits further engagement is the protection of indigenous people's FoRB, or their right to religious equality. Marshall (2021: 30) notes that,

> of particular concern currently is the vulnerability and invisibility of indigenous belief systems and religions that are being decimated by the loss of territories and land with either natural features or ancestral burial sites that are critical to their world view and spiritual systems and beliefs. It is tragic and wrong that indigenous peoples feature so little in debates at this time about FoRB.

One of the reasons for the absence of an engagement with the right to religious equality of indigenous people is that indigenous people themselves have rarely framed their struggle for rights to land and preservation of their own cultural fabric in terms of FoRB. A classic example is the Adivasis who represent one of the world's largest surviving populations of indigenous people, yet they are politically, socially, and economically marginalised, even more so than India's Scheduled Castes in some human development dimensions. Most are traditionally forest-dwelling and have animistic religious practices but have been dispossessed of their ability to access the forest and follow their spiritual traditions, which are inextricably intertwined with the forest.

This book has sought to contribute to redressing this gap by highlighting the trajectories of indigenous people and their sacred beliefs when they are encroached upon by governments, non-state actors, and the private sector. The relationship between the material and immaterial challenges many of the conceptions of conventional understandings of what is sacred. This is because it shifts our attention away from the sacred (understood in terms of places of worship and the objects in them) and towards considering water, trees, and the relationship between nature and humans as sacred.

3 Intersecting identities, intersecting drivers of inequality, and intersecting struggles

In this section, we draw inferences from the various chapters on how inequalities shape experiences of religious otherization.

Relatively privileged groups can be motivated to initiate conflict to preserve access to power and resources (Cederman, Gleditsch and Buhaug 2013; Østby 2013). For example, the Alawites in Syria, despite being a

religious minority, have used their control over state and military power to oppress other religious groups in the country. It is also important to note, as Ghanea (2012) suggests, that a group that is being oppressed on account of their religion in one context may be the oppressors in another context. For example, Hazara Shias are the targets of extreme oppression by the Taliban in Afghanistan, while in neighbouring Iran, a theocratic government ruled by Shia clergy is oppressing religious minorities.

Hence, **minoritiness** is very much a concept that is devoid of meaning when referring to a religious group stripped of their specific context. The concept of intersecting identities contributes to the analysis of the situatedness and contextualisation of **minoritiness**. It allows for an exploration of the dynamic way in which power permeates and informs relations of privilege and subordination in any given context. The case studies presented in this book all provide detailed examples of intersecting identities, whether this is at the ethnic–religious nexus (Nigeria, Sudan) or geographic–religious marginality (South Africa), or indigeneity–religious marginality (Uganda, Adivasis in India), or at the intersection of caste and religious marginality (Hindus and Christians in Pakistan, Dalit Hindus, Christians, and Muslims in India).

A key axis that underpins all the cases of intersecting inequalities is their socioeconomic exclusion. All the contributions in this book have shown how critically important it is to use an intersectional lens when analysing the interplay of many drivers of inequality, discrimination, and targeting experienced by people on the ground.

The idea of poverty amplifying the effects of religious marginality and, vice versa, religious marginality worsening poverty, are both well demonstrated in the case studies presented here. In South Africa, extreme poverty has made the people in Steenbokpan (Tifloen and Makgoba, this volume) increasingly vulnerable to the allure of selling land to mining companies in a manner that does not secure their rights to their sacred sites. In Pakistan, being born in a context where caste is prevalent and being in extreme poverty accentuates the vulnerability of Hindus and Christians in Sindh to experiencing attempts at conversion and being targeted for their religious affiliation. Alternatively, having faith and beliefs tied to the land, such as in Uganda, increases the vulnerability of the indigenous people to impoverishment and relative deprivation when they are evicted from their ancestral grounds.

However, the fact that experiences of marginalisation are compounded by the interplay of different drivers of exclusion (religious affiliation, ethnicity, class, caste, political orientation, etc.) does not preclude a separate analysis of how each driver affects the lived reality on the ground. For example, in the case of Pakistan, the experiences of exclusion of the Hindus and Christians from the World Bank's poverty alleviation programme was because they belonged to religious minorities, even if caste/class accentuated such experiences. This is critically important as the recognition of intersecting identities and intersecting drivers of inequality should not be used as a pretext for overlooking or denying the nature of religious otherization or targeting.

In other words, in view of the dire circumstances facing all socioeconomically excluded individuals who are of Dalit background,

some may be tempted to negate the religious affiliation dimension and emphasise that the discrimination they are subjected to is not on account of being Hindu or Christian but because of their caste. The recognition of the caste dimension of their identity should not be the basis of subsuming religious affiliation under it, thereby denying their very specific experiences of targeting on account of their association or affiliation with a minority religion in the context of Pakistan.

Making visible the variegated components of intersecting identities and drivers of exclusion and marginalisation points to the differentiated experiences of religiously marginalised people. All the case studies in this volume are underpinned by experiences of discrimination, targeting, and religious otherization to various extents. However, this does not suggest that everyone's predicament is one and the same. Fox's study of 597 religious minorities' differentiated experiences of discrimination in 177 countries arrives at the same conclusion: that there are variations in manifestations and power configurations (Fox 2016). Undoubtedly, there are recurring patterns of how religious otherization occurs, in terms of how vilification, unequal rights, and unequal duties manifest themselves. However, the chapters in this book bear evidence to the fact that powerholders treat individuals and communities differently depending on a number of critical factors.

The first factor is the extent to which the individual or community is deemed to represent a threat to the status quo, and the interests of those in power. It is not surprising therefore that where land and economic assets are concerned, groups and communities who hold beliefs distinct from the majority become the target of oppression (the chapters on India, South Africa, and Uganda in Part 3 are powerful examples). The second factor is the extent to which powerholders pursue an ideology of homogenising society and what means they have available to enforce it.

Third, the level of internal cohesion within a group or community as well as its repertoires of strength, resistance, subversion, adaptation, and survival can also, to a certain extent, influence how it is affected by the policies and practices of religious marginalisation.

While the Adivasis have experienced extreme forms of violence, their ability to organise collectively and effectively has at times enabled them to stand strong in the face of violent assaults by Hindu extremists. On the other hand, the various groups living in south Sudan, having experienced ethnic and religious cleansing by the Sudanese government in the north, were so weak and economically impoverished that they had no choice but to participate in Islamic financing programmes, even when they found the Islamic Bank to be a dubious actor and its policies anathema to their ideals of religious pluralism. Accordingly, on the one hand, it is crucial to recognise the commonality of religious otherization as a phenomenon and on the other, to avoid essentialisation that operates on the assumption that all religious minorities share one common experience.

On a practical policy level, it is understandable that activists and champions of religious equality and pluralism may wish to see all people who experience religious otherization unite against the actor in power that is advancing a religious homogenisation scheme. By understanding that distinct intersecting identities are experienced by religiously otherised

individuals and communities, we will gain insights into their reading of their position and situation. For example, an Ahmadiyya minority in Pakistan may be keen on distinguishing their 'Muslimness' from groups that are non-Muslim minorities and go to great lengths to signal that they are not to be 'put in the same basket'. Hence, people may not engage in collective action around a common agenda of challenging religious homogenisation.

The intersections of identities and inequalities also drive struggles that involve an enmeshment of material and spiritual claims-making. Rarely is the banner of religious equality or FoRB raised independently of other demands associated with economic justice. In the case of the Adivasis, for example, their demands for 'water, forest, land' represented a common struggle for both land and the right to their spiritual and cultural heritage, since all three involved a co-penetration of the spiritual and the material (see Mader, this volume).

In South Africa, the Ithuteng Women's Group continue to save indigenous seed as an act of resistance, and farm on a small scale, very much like what the Adivasi groups do with their 'seed bank'/'seed exchange'. The communities' seed-saving preserves and counteracts the over-extraction of natural resources and the resultant ecological degradation, by preserving biodiversity and promoting the sustainable use of natural resources. This action also preserves traditional seeds which form part of these cultures and contribute to ensuring food security.

4 Broadening the horizons of how we promote religious equality

In this section, we highlight the possibilities of promoting FoRB under other banners or platforms. One of the key learnings from the case studies presented in this book is that there is a pressing need for creative ways to enable the advancement of religiously inclusive societies and politics for the benefit of poor people that go beyond the conventional human rights and foreign-policy instruments that have been the 'bread and butter' of FoRB promotion. The evidence from the chapters on India, South Africa, and Uganda in this volume indicates that protection and preservation of people's religious and cultural heritage is a very important approach for promoting FoRB and pressing for religious equality. Evoking heritage protection has cultural, political, and legal merits which have not been fully recognised in FoRB scholarship. It has the potential to recast FoRB beyond its foreign-policy genealogy and release repertoires of creativity and innovation to make societies more inclusive of the 'religious other'.

The use of heritage repertoires to make manifest the identity of a religious minority enables a connection with the broader population. This enables that population to taste, smell, hear, and sense the value of living in a multicultural and religiously diverse society. It turns religious equality on its head: from being an issue exclusively considered a zero-sum game to one where the benefits of diversity are tangibly demonstrated and experienced. It is the population experiencing the value of other cultural traditions in a celebratory manner that paves the way for an emotional connection with those considered as 'the other'. The strength of such an approach in the case of the Adivasis is that its deployment of recognisable heritage markers allows for its self-preservation without seeming insular or hostile to the broader population. By mediating heritage practices to officials and the

community in colourful and celebratory ways (music and art), and even including outsiders in celebrations and affirmations of heritage, it mitigates against accusations of being dangerously clandestine and hostile to the broader culture.

The other advantage to engaging through the communication of heritage markers is political. Adivasi performativity through heritage in the form of song, dance, or food is conducive to providing a recognisable, distinctive identity *vis-à-vis* other movements that are classified as security threats by the Indian government. In such a context, it is the celebration of indigenous culture and spirituality through a heritage prism that, in the words of Mader (this volume), serves to provide a 'protective shield and alibi' (p116). Mader contrasts the celebration of religious events 'enjoying greater *de facto* legal protection than protests, and cultural festivities serving as platforms for engaging high-ranking officials and politicians without being overtly "political"' (p116). While the Indian constitution does guarantee right to FoRB, however, people who have evoked the right to religious equality have on many occasions faced a societal backlash from more militant sections of Indian society that follow a hard-line Hindutva ideology (see chapters on India by Mader, and Shah and Shah, this volume).

Claims-making in relation to national laws and programmes intended to preserve a country's cultural diversity demonstrates the legal merits of promoting religious equality through heritage. In India, it is a non-FoRB-specific legal act that can serve to promote FoRB – such as the Forest Rights Act, which privileges claims-making made on the basis of indigeneity 'on the basis of religion or distinct spiritual practice' (Dlugoleski 2020: 239). In South Africa, people also mobilised to demand their rights to land (and by proxy, access to the sacred sites on those lands) by pressing for the enforcement of the heritage law.

In all of the cases above, rights-claiming under the heritage banner was not only made in terms of tangible heritage (such as heritage sites) but also intangibly, in terms of religious practices, rites, and rituals that render meaning through collective memory. This is crucial as it suggests that for the interface of heritage and FoRB to serve to secure people's rights, both spheres would need to significantly broaden their horizons. While FoRB would need to capitalise more on heritage repertoires for promoting inclusive societies for the socioeconomically religiously marginalised, heritage preservation as an arena would need to recognise oral and intangible heritage more at its centre rather than at the fringes.

5 Moving forward

The chapters in this book represent a first step to providing badly needed evidence on what works and what does not in redressing religious inequalities in different contexts. It is a call for further research but does not present a blueprint for what such an agenda should look like. The cases are intended to stir debate about the blind spots, the 'elephants in the rooms' and the unspoken, uncomfortable truths.

We, as researchers, practitioners, faith leaders, human rights activists, policymakers, and programmers, need to broaden our range of collaborators, the spaces in which we engage, our epistemic approach, and how we learn

(and unlearn, by challenging our assumption about the nature of FoRB or religious equality and inequality).

In order for us to be able to identify marginalised people's resistance to religious otherization and other injustices, we would need to be able to recognise these forms of action where they occur. This necessitates constructing partnerships with those actors, as diverse and as unconventional as they are, so as to be in the position to learn alongside them. For Western research, policy, and practice institutions, no matter how committed to learning from the bottom up they may be, their positioning does not always enable access beyond a narrow remit. Many of the cases presented in this book undoubtedly point to the richness of human struggles in relation to FoRB and religious equality around the world, but many are outside the remit of conventional international development projects.

One of the key elements to broadening our horizons in this area is to recognise that many people's struggles are not framed in terms of FoRB or religious equality. When you are on the margins of society, you may not be aware that constitutionally or by law, you are supposed to be treated without religious discrimination or that the forms of encroachment you experience represent FoRB violations. This internalisation of marginalisation has long been documented in the literature; however, it is particularly relevant for the discussion of people's experiences of inequality.

Moreover, even if they are acutely aware that they are being denied a right that is theirs, this does not suggest that they are aware of mechanisms/instruments that enable them to successfully secure their entitlements in the name of FoRB. This is powerfully conveyed in the chapter on South Africa:

> ...people were not well informed on their rights regarding FoRB, nor were they familiar with the NHRA [South African National Heritage Resources Act No. 25 of 1999], which is in place to protect the cultural and religious rights of people in South Africa. In summary, we recognise that people mobilise around the rights which they know they have.
> (Tifloen and Makgoba, this volume, p168)

In this book, we have sought to make visible these invisible dynamics at work – invisible not to the people experiencing them, but to scholars, practitioners, and activists keen to learn from global struggles around FoRB. We have proposed the term religious inequality to amplify the relational dimensions of the intersections of poverty, religious marginality, and other qualifiers such as gender, ethnicity, caste, class, political orientation, geography, and so forth. In so doing, we have urged that religious minorities are not engaged with in a reified manner, but rather, that religious otherization be understood in a contextual and situated manner. We hope that the case studies presented here have not only piqued the interest of FoRB and development scholars but also policymakers keen on being truly inclusive in their outreach.

As Thane notes in her chapter, except for one marginal mention, religious inequalities are entirely lacking in the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) as well as in the international agencies' strategies of

enforcement. And yet religious otherization needs to be acknowledged if the 'leave no one behind' agenda is to become a reality. Feldmann Kaye's chapter shows concretely how taking into account FoRB and religious inclusivity is essential for achieving SDG 3 on health and wellbeing for all. Aderounmu's chapter shows the importance of considering the dynamics of religious majority–minority relations when designing interventions that seek to redress inequalities in education in alignment with SDG 4 on quality education. The extension of scholarships for socioeconomically deprived students is, in principle, a scheme that secures an educational pathway for the underprivileged. However, if a scholarship scheme is implemented without sensitivity to the power dynamics in a context where tensions run high, it can create new sources of social in-cohesion along religious lines.

Undoubtedly, this book represents only the beginning of a journey to pluralise scholarship, democratise the essence of religious equality, and press for evidence-informed policy. It has generated as many questions on power dynamics as it has shed light on them.

There is much work to be done in collaborative partnerships to understand experiences of religious otherization by socioeconomically marginalised people and ways in which they resist. Moreover, we have yet to undertake participatory yet systematic studies of the intended and unintended consequences of major multilateral and bilateral aid initiatives in terms of their impact on redressing religious inequality or promoting FoRB. Finally, there is so much learning awaiting us from people on the margins who use different framings, approaches, actions, and claims-making to counter religious otherization outside our own conceptualisations and lenses. This book is a first step in that direction.

Notes

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