Freedom within religion: conscience, dissent and pluralism

IARF contribution to the consultation on the freedom of opinion and expression mandate, 2026–2029

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Our perspective

IARF brings together free, liberal and progressive religious communities and individuals across diverse traditions. We approach freedom of opinion and expression as part of religious life: the freedom to inquire, interpret, create, question authority and speak from conscience. Our published positions defend freedom within religion and the freedom to criticise religious ideas and institutions. [1, 2]

Our distinctive concern is the person who wishes to remain religious while challenging an interpretation presented as the only legitimate one. These freedoms must also protect conservative believers, people changing or leaving a tradition, and people with no religious belief. Religious belonging should be compatible with intellectual honesty and moral disagreement.

1. Strategic priorities

We recommend making peaceful religious dissent and internal religious diversity explicit throughout the proposed priorities on violence, digital information environments, gender and youth, and democratic backsliding and civic space. The central question is whose expression receives protection when states or institutions claim to defend religion. Where recognised leaders are treated as a community's sole representatives, people challenging their interpretations can disappear from both public debate and the evidence used to shape policy. This connects religious pluralism to civic space: the ability to form associations, publish alternative interpretations and challenge those claiming religious authority.

The underlying standards are already well developed. The Human Rights Committee's guidance addresses religious diversity, coercion, criticism and religious-offence laws. [3, 4]

The Special Rapporteur on freedom of religion or belief expressed the point directly in 2020: “For women and LGBT+ individuals, realizing religious freedom is often about realizing their agency and equality within religion.” [5] The mandate can add value by examining how these standards work in practice: who can speak, who can prevent them, and which remedies restore their ability to participate.

Religious communities retain legitimate autonomy over doctrine, worship and voluntary association. Public authorities should distinguish that autonomy from coercion and the exercise of state-enforced powers. Freedom within religion protects people’s ability to question, organise and advocate change; it does not require the state to decide theology or guarantee a religious office.

The same attention to individual agency is needed when religious expression affects others. From a liberal religious perspective, restrictions on visible religious expression, dress or symbols should be examined on their merits, rather than rejected in principle. Particular care is needed where children are involved, adults exercise authority or people act on behalf of the state. A pupil’s position differs from that of a teacher or public official. Assessment should consider religious freedom, children’s rights and evolving capacities, gender equality, public responsibilities and equal access to education and services. [3, 6]

Those directly affected, including women and girls, should be heard. The assessment must consider evidence of risks, practical effects and less restrictive alternatives. Any restriction must have a clear legal basis, pursue a purpose permitted by the relevant treaty provision, and satisfy necessity, proportionality and non-discrimination. Opinion and inner belief themselves remain absolutely protected. [3, 4, 6]

2. Regional perspectives

Within our international field of work, we identify the following three pressing challenges.

a. Criminalising religious dissent and criticism

We urge the mandate to press for repeal of offences criminalising blasphemy or religious insult as such. Scrutiny must also reach incitement and extremism provisions when they are used to punish peaceful religious disagreement. General Comment No. 34 protects criticism of religious leaders and discussion of doctrine; restrictions must meet article 19(3), including when article 20(2) requires prohibition of advocacy of religious hatred constituting incitement to discrimination, hostility or violence. [4]

The problem takes different forms. An August 2026 UN communication raised allegations that Ahmadis in Pakistan were prevented from praying even on private premises, alongside concern about penal provisions criminalising aspects of their religious expression and

identity. [7] Here, the issue extends to who is permitted to identify and practise as a member of a faith.

In Poland, Article 196 criminalises offending religious feelings through public insult to an object of worship or a place for public religious rites. [8] An ecumenical Eucharist before Warsaw Pride in 2019 led to prosecution. Faith and Rainbow described it as genuine, inclusive worship. A foundation participating in the proceedings reports a trial acquittal on 23 February 2026, described as non-final. [9, 10] This history shows why the mandate should examine the burden of prolonged proceedings as well as their outcome.

In a 2025 judgment concerning Russia, the European Court of Human Rights found violations of freedom of expression in cases involving religiously provocative exhibitions and artworks. It criticised domestic courts for equating religious offence with incitement to hatred and relying almost exclusively on Orthodox Christian perspectives. [11] This illustrates how restrictions framed as protection against hatred can enforce a dominant religious interpretation.

Literature, visual art, performance, parody and satire must remain free to challenge religious authority and reinterpret inherited symbols. Their protection cannot depend on a test of reverence or orthodoxy. Perceived sacrilege, shock or offence alone cannot justify suppression. [12] The mandate should examine the expression's purpose, setting and actual risks, rather than accept an allegation of religious insult as evidence of harm.

b. Violence and coercion that silence religious diversity

Berlin's Ibn Rushd-Goethe Mosque, which welcomes LGBT+ Muslims, reported suspending its open activities in 2023 because of terrorist threats; its founder was already under police protection. Berlin's security authorities documented propaganda associated with Islamic State Khorasan targeting the mosque's inclusiveness. [13, 14]

The mandate should assess whether protective arrangements preserve community life and public participation, as well as respond to immediate threats. [4] Those arrangements should be developed with affected people and accompanied by effective investigation. Assessment should also consider whether security measures restrict access or shift unsustainable burdens onto a small community.

Coercion can also arise within communities and relationships of dependence. The expression mandate should examine how people can question religiously justified practices, obtain independent advice and report abuse without retaliation. This links freedom of expression to the ability to exercise conscience while remaining within a faith.

So-called gay conversion practices illustrate why religious motivation cannot settle the question of permissible regulation. The Independent Expert's 2020 report documents harm and distinguishes freely chosen support for exploring or affirming identity from claims to convert sexual orientation or gender identity. [15] We recommend clear protections against coercive, deceptive or abusive interventions, including those conducted through speech, with

particular safeguards for children. Rules should identify the prohibited conduct and misleading therapeutic claims, while preserving protected expression of belief and freely chosen, non-coercive pastoral support for exploring identity. Affirming religious communities and people subjected to these practices should help shape those protections.

c. Digital exposure and exclusion

The mosque's appeal describes threats circulating through social media. [13] For dissenters, finding supportive communities online can also expose views or identities they cannot safely disclose locally. The mandate's gender-justice work already recommends secure communication, anonymity and digital literacy. [16] The priority is to test whether these protections and effective remedies reach people challenging religious authority.

Questions for investigation include how exposure of identities or fabricated religious accusations translate into offline threats; whether coordinated reporting can remove lawful religious criticism, satire or discussion of sexuality; and whether appeals work for smaller languages and traditions. Assess whether moderation and appeals distinguish criticism of doctrine from harassment or incitement against believers, rather than relying on the presence of religious language.

3. Maximizing impact

For 2026–2029, we propose four connected measures, centred on a joint project with other relevant mandates.

First, hold a focused consultation with the religion or belief and cultural rights mandates, leading to practical guidance on recurring conflicts involving religious expression. Use a limited set of cases to show how existing standards apply to religious offence, incitement, restrictions in public institutions and regulation intended to prevent coercion or abuse. Apply the Rabat framework to incitement questions and the relevant limitation tests to other restrictions. [17] The added value would be worked examples for judges and public officials showing how to assess context, evidence, competing rights and less restrictive responses. Defamation guidance should preserve safeguards for truth, opinion and public-interest criticism, and support proportionate remedies. [4]

Second, follow a small number of cases illustrating different mechanisms of restriction. Agree priorities with affected people and identify the change sought: repeal of religious-insult offences, safeguards against misuse of incitement laws, an end to proceedings against protected expression, effective protection from threats, or access to a remedy. Report subsequent developments, including whether communities can resume activities and whether reprisals continue. This would connect individual communications to recurring legal and institutional problems.

Third, investigate the digital mechanisms identified above with affected speakers, platforms and independent researchers. Request information about handling of abusive reporting, contested religious content, exposure of identities and appeals across languages, including changes in platform rules or state demands for removal. Test whether generative AI changes the scale or credibility of fabricated religious accusations, including in campaigns that cross borders. Seek practical improvements in secure participation and redress, and examine whether translation and other tools can widen access without creating new risks of disclosure or misrepresentation.

Fourth, involve religious and humanist organisations in testing voluntary practices that protect questioning and dissent. Drawing on Faith for Rights, invite communities to document approaches such as confidential access to advice, ways to raise concerns without retaliation, and space for competing interpretations. [18] Publish what participants find useful, what fails and what depends on context. This would give progressive religious communities a practical role while respecting institutional autonomy.

4. Inclusion and participation

Participation should not depend on nomination or endorsement by recognised religious leaders. Combine open invitations with direct outreach to independent and reforming communities, Indigenous spiritual practitioners, women's and youth networks, LGBT+ believers and people outside formally recognised organisations. Include those who wish to remain in their traditions as well as those who have left. Explain selection criteria and check for gaps in region, language, disability and religious perspective.

Give participants a role at three stages: choosing research questions, interpreting the evidence and developing recommendations. Invite them to check factual accounts of their contributions and explain how their input affected the work. This makes participation consequential while preserving the mandate's independent judgment.

Provide interpretation, accessible formats, and remote, written or asynchronous routes. Offer confidential contributions and separate discussions where power imbalances would inhibit speech; establish consent to attribution and protection against involuntary disclosure from the outset. Children need appropriate formats and safeguarding, with respect for their views and parental guidance consistent with their evolving capacities. [6]

The test of impact is whether threatened communities can sustain their collective life, dissenting believers can be heard, and people can question religious authority without surrendering their religious belonging.

References

[1] IARF, Our Vision and Identity.

[2] IARF, public statement on freedom of expression, 19 August 2022.

[3] Human Rights Committee, General Comment No. 22, CCPR/C/21/Rev.1/Add.4, paragraphs 2–6 and 8.

[4] Human Rights Committee, General Comment No. 34, CCPR/C/GC/34, paragraphs 7, 9, 11, 21–23, 47–48 and 50–52.

[5] Special Rapporteur on freedom of religion or belief, Gender-based violence and discrimination in the name of religion or belief, A/HRC/43/48, final report, 24 August 2020, paragraphs 73–74.

[6] Convention on the Rights of the Child, articles 2–3, 5, 12–14 and 28–29.

[7] UN Special Procedures, communication AL PAK 3/2026, 21 August 2026, pages 1–4 and 6.

[8] Poland, Criminal Code, Article 196, official consolidated text updated 28 August 2026.

[9] Faith and Rainbow, statement on the prosecution arising from the Warsaw Pride liturgy, 29 October 2019 (Polish).

[10] Wolność od Religii Foundation, account of the Pride liturgy proceedings, updated 7 July 2026 (Polish).

[11] European Court of Human Rights, judgment concerning religiously provocative artworks in Russia, applications 3007/06 and three others, 6 February 2025, paragraphs 8–10 and appendix.

[12] UN Special Procedures, communication AL NGA 1/2024, 29 April 2024, annex, pages 7–8.

[13] Ibn Rushd-Goethe Mosque, Liebe bleibt Halal: Rettet die Ibn Rushd-Goethe Moschee, community appeal published on All Out (German).

[14] Berlin Senate Department for the Interior and Sport, Verfassungsschutzbericht Berlin 2024, pages 19–20 (German).

[15] Independent Expert on protection against violence and discrimination based on sexual orientation and gender identity, Practices of so-called “conversion therapy”, A/HRC/44/53, 2020, paragraphs 55–58, 68–73 and 87.

[16] Special Rapporteur on freedom of opinion and expression, Gender justice and freedom of opinion and expression, A/76/258, 2021, paragraphs 109–112.

[17] Rabat Plan of Action, A/HRC/22/17/Add.4, annex, appendix, paragraphs 29 and 36.

[18] 18 Commitments on Faith for Rights, 2017, commitments III and V–VII. Voluntary framework developed by faith and civil society actors.