

## Forewords

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As a human right, the freedom of thought, conscience and religion (henceforth *freedom of religion or belief*) is neither understood nor used in the same way by everyone. In fact, some weaponize it to divide, prefer, exclude or even dehumanize rather than respect, empower, support and promote inclusion.

Nonetheless, the international human rights law framework shapes freedom of religion or belief, situates it, and grounds it legally. It may be appropriated or misappropriated by different actors in different ways. However, once orphaned from its legal and normative foundations, it loses its power. More accurately, it loses its legitimate claim as an international legal human right.

This book captures the various ways in which efforts are made in many contexts around the world to appropriate this freedom to foster discrimination, exclusion and – effectively – violations of human rights. In some contexts, this effort towards appropriation is camouflaged and subtle, as it takes some legal know-how to identify and expose its faulty underpinnings. In others, it is quite blatant and even somewhat comical, whereby it doesn't take much to recognize the falsity of its claims.

One of the responsibilities upon us in relation to freedom of religion or belief in these turbulent times is to be on the lookout for such shaky claims. Having once been a somewhat specialist and rare claim, freedom of religion or belief has entered into the mainstream in many legal, political and advocacy circles. For all the opportunities that this has offered, it has also given rise to the challenge of how to deal with freedom of religion or belief's "false friends."

This book helps us to understand the underlying factors that are giving rise to the proliferation of such false friends and their related false claims, as well as analyzing and addressing them in a sober, intelligent, and resolute manner, whenever and wherever they arise.

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Human rights are a thorn in the side of right-wing populists and extremists. Human rights are committed to the dignity of every individual and – as universal rights of freedom and equality – stand in stark contrast to the exclusivist power interests of revisionist forces, not least due to their high emancipatory potential. They are not compatible with the misanthropic, discriminatory ideologies that these forces use to justify or disguise their power interests or that they even believe and live out of radical delusion.

In this context, corresponding actors typically do not openly denounce human rights. Instead, their fight against human rights takes on a more subtle form that is no less perilous: rather than calling for the abolition of human rights, they simply reinterpret them in terms of their own ideologies and power interests. Violations of human dignity are put into fine words, with the goal being a creeping degradation that obliterates human rights in their genuine essence to the point of unrecognizability and in many respects turns them into their opposite. Understanding the patterns and strategies of appropriation and distortion is essential to effectively counteract them and ensure that human rights can fulfill their potential. This book makes a crucial contribution in this regard by focusing on a human right that is particularly often the target of populist attempts of appropriation and reinterpretation by the far right around the world, namely freedom of religion or belief.

To understand why and how populist appropriations succeed, it is insufficient to describe their rhetorical patterns. Rather, it is crucial to also grasp the social context in which the appropriation takes place and analyze what dynamics emerge from it. Regarding the freedom of religion or belief, it can be observed that political forces from the far right present themselves as defenders of this human right and as “true conservatives,” and that religious freedom often has a somewhat dusty reputation in the societies of Western Europe and North America, which have become increasingly secular. The right is sometimes incorrectly perceived as an antiquated relic. Commitment to religious freedom is then misunderstood as conservative clientelistic politics. Some even raise the question of whether religious freedom is still needed in a secular society. There are a number of widespread misunderstandings be-

hind this: freedom of religion or belief is not a protective program for outdated structures, but rather a right to freedom that enables everyone to practice a religion or belief freely. It is about the possibility of forming and expressing one's own beliefs and convictions, and thus seeking answers to fundamental questions of human existence. Here, an essential dimension of human existence is fulfilled for religious as well as non-religious people. Freedom of religion or belief touches us all, and without it the canon of universal human rights would not be complete.

It is not in the interest of populists to resolve these misconceptions. On the contrary, the withdrawal of democratic forces from open involvement in promoting freedom of religion or belief and the increasing polarization of the debate are playing into the hands of the extreme right. Thus, religious freedom is coming under pressure from two sides and is in danger of being damaged. This is partly the case because the dynamics described above make it difficult to find constructive solutions to problems and tensions that exist in the context of religion, such as the question of how to deal with religiously motivated violence.

We would therefore like to express our sincere thanks to the authors of this book for presenting not only competent analyses of the problems but also concrete approaches to counteracting populist appropriation, strengthening freedom of religion or belief and shaping a culture of debate that enables constructive and productive solutions to even sensitive problems.

Countering populist appropriation and misinterpretation and strengthening human rights is a task for society as a whole. At the same time, the Christian churches have a special responsibility. Particularly when it comes to the populist appropriation of religious freedom, we are called upon to oppose it in the clearest possible terms and raise awareness of the problems associated with such narratives and resentments, not least when they are spreading in the context of church communities and structures. In a time marked by numerous crises, there is also a pressing imperative to enable us as churches in Western Europe to offer people in search of meaning, orientation and community a real alternative to the false promises and sham solutions of the populists and extremists.

**About the Pontifical Mission Society *missio* Aachen:**

The Pontifical Mission Society *missio* Aachen (German: *Internationales Katholisches Missionswerk missio e.V.*) was founded in 1832 and is the world church partner of the local churches in Africa, Asia and Oceania. Every year, the aid agency supports about 1,000 projects of its partners in the areas of education and training, pastoral, social and interreligious work as well as infrastructure. As a specialised agency for international church cooperation, *missio* is one of more than 100 papal mission agencies worldwide. *missio* considers the mutual exchange of experience between the local churches as a community of learning, prayer and solidarity as essential. The human right to religious freedom is a priority issue. *missio* carries out information and education work, builds national and international networks of church, civil society and political actors at home and abroad and mobilises people to campaign for religious freedom worldwide.

**About the German Commission for Justice and Peace:**

The German Commission for Justice and Peace (German: *Deutsche Kommission Justitia et Pax*) was founded in 1967 and considers itself to be the joint forum of Catholic institutions and organizations active in the field of international responsibility of the Church in Germany. The German Commission for Justice and Peace is their common voice in society and politics and thus an agent of societal and political dialogue. The commission elaborates contributions to Germany's development cooperation, peace and human rights policies and develops concepts for the international work of the Catholic Church. For years, a basso continuo of the human rights work of the German Commission for Justice and Peace has been the commitment to the freedom of religion or belief as a human right. At the same time, the aim of the commission's work is to identify new or hitherto unjustly neglected issues and – in cooperation with international partners – develop innovative concepts and proposals for problem-solving.