



February 2021 Conversation



**DYNAMIC GOSPEL
NEW EUROPE**
CONVERSATION
AND GATHERING

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Welcome

Welcome to February's Conversation page. You can find everything you need for the February Lausanne Europe 20/21 Conversation right here. This month's Impact Group looks at the issue of Freedom of Religion or Belief.

Depending on where you live in Europe, your experience of challenges to your own freedom of religion or belief will vary. The articles will give you different perspectives on this issue and we would encourage you to spend time praying together for Christians around the world who face persecution.

If you have any questions, please do not hesitate to email us at conversation@lausanneeurope.org

And if you are just starting your Impact Group, or are confused about what they are about, then check out the introduction pages to the [Conversation](#) and [Impact Groups](#) to find out more.

Instructions

1. Introductions and Prayer

Begin with prayer but if there is someone new to the group, make sure everyone introduces themselves.

2. Scripture

Philippians is written in the context of severe persecution. And yet Paul still finds ways to enjoy God, to minister to Christians through writing his letters, and to share the good news of Jesus Christ. If you have not read through Philippians before as a group, please do so before you meet. Notice Paul's joy, peace and confidence despite his imprisonment and the fact that execution could be coming at any point. Invite the Lord to help you consider honestly how you feel about suffering for your faith.

Jesus calls his followers to take up their cross (Matthew 16: 24), He promises suffering (John 15: 20), and He asks us to love our enemies (Matthew 5: 44). When Paul urged his readers to pray for political authorities (1 Timothy 2: 1-4),

those authorities were the Roman Empire, the brutal persecutors of Christians. Suffering is part of our faith but we are called to continue loving and praying. Some of us have lived our lives with hardly any difficulties caused by our beliefs but, if so, we have enjoyed an exceptional situation.

1. What clues are there in Philippians to indicate how Paul maintained his hope, confidence, and zeal to practice his faith in the face of suffering?
2. How can we apply Paul's words to our situation in Europe today?
3. And how can we encourage our brothers and sisters around the world who are suffering persecution?

3. Freedom of Religion or Belief | Close to Home

To prepare for your Impact Group, we encourage you to look at the articles below. If you only have time to read

one of the resources, we recommend you read the first article, Julia Doxat-Purser's Introduction, which contains links to organisations and resources to help you go deeper if you wish.

1. What problems of freedom of religion are you aware of in your nation and what are the causes?
2. Are these freedom of religion difficulties causing Christians to retreat in any way? What good responses to these challenges do you know of?
3. Leach's article reminds us that Daniel knew when to compromise and when to stand firm, risking his life as a result. When your faith clashes with the prevailing culture or rules, what might good or bad compromise look like, for example, for you in your working life or for your church's plans?
4. Mutzner gives theological reasons for saying Christians should defend the rights of all people to freedom of religion or belief. How do you feel about Christians defending the rights of other faiths and perhaps working with them to promote freedom of religion?

Prayer for Freedom of Religion or Belief | Close to Home

- Pray for your government and the European Union to understand, value and defend freedom of religion or belief for their citizens and also for asylum seekers.
- Pray for all advocacy efforts to strengthen freedom of religion or belief across Europe.
- Pray for Christians in Europe to be so captivated by Christ that we can have Paul's attitude of joy, peace, and zeal in the face of potential discrimination or even persecution.

4. Freedom of Religion or Belief | Around the World

You may already have known something about the persecuted Church and even supported one of the specialist ministries that care for our suffering brothers and sisters from around the world. If not, we hope that you took some time to look at the recommended websites as you prepared for this conversation.

1. Are you aware of situations around the world where Christians are suffering severe persecution? What stories have you heard?
2. What good advocacy efforts do you know of to defend our persecuted brothers and sisters and also those of other faiths who suffer?
3. Share about any freedom of religion or belief organisation you support and why. Or share why you feel drawn to pray for a particular situation.

Prayer for Freedom of Religion or Belief | Around the World

- Spend some time praying for the situations of persecution you feel drawn to pray for.
- Pray for those who suffer, those who are the cause of the suffering and those who have the power to bring the suffering to an end.
- Pray for all those ministries which advocate for and support the suffering Church.

5. Make Your Contribution to the Conversation

We really want to hear back from your Impact Group after each session. Please find a few minutes to summarise what you hear from God, the highlights of the discussion, and any questions that were raised, in the comments box immediately below. See you next month.

[GO TO THE CONVERSATION](#)

Freedom of Religion or Belief - An Introduction

By Julia Doxat-Purser

[*Go to the article online*](#)

The United Nations Declaration of Human Rights, hugely influenced by the prominent Christians who helped to draft its articles, begins by recognising the inherent dignity, worth and equality of the human person and family. The premise that a human being has rights comes from the belief that each of us is made in the image of God. Thus we are all infinitely precious and worthy of both protection and freedom.

So, God grants human rights, not governments. Rather, governments have a God-given role to do good and bring justice [1]. But, sadly, the authorities do not necessarily always do good, and discrimination and persecution can result.

Freedom of Religion or Belief, often abbreviated to FoRB in political circles, is a foundational human right. It is the freedom for everyone, including those with a secular worldview, to believe what they wish and to live their lives according to that belief. Article 9 of the European Convention of Human Rights states that people can practice their beliefs publicly and with others, as well as to practice their belief privately and alone. Permitted limitations are limited. That is, they are only allowed if public safety, public order or the health or freedoms of others are in peril. Individual believers are protected, rather than the belief itself.

Closely associated with FoRB is freedom of expression and freedom of assembly and association. All people can receive and share information and ideas, meet with others and create bodies like churches. Again, permitted limitations are limited.

The United Nations Declaration of Human Rights and International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights state very similar rights for everyone around the world. So, if these rights are in international law, why are there sometimes restrictions on Christians in Europe? More seriously, why do millions of Christians face the most appalling persecution: intimidation, ostracism, closure of churches, confiscation of literature, restrictions on evangelism, violence, imprisonment, even death?

Around the world, the reasons for restrictions, discrimination or persecution vary.

- The intolerant attitudes of another faith or worldview,
- The intolerant attitudes within a political ideology,
- The intolerant attitude of one Christian denomination towards another,

- A sense of national identity linked towards one faith or worldview,
- The two sides of a political conflict being given religious labels to help justify their cause,
- Poor governance or rule of law. In some nations, everyone might suffer restrictions on their human rights so Christians suffer along with everyone else. Or the local authorities ignore national law and choose to enforce much harsher restrictions.
- Clashes of rights between different groups. While human rights law says that all are equal before the law and all human rights are equal, too often society chooses to favour the rights of some over others.

The pressure may come from the authorities or the community or even a Christian's family.

Solidarity with those who hurt

When one part of the body hurts, all the body hurts [2]. It is so important that we remember our brothers and sisters who suffer because of their faith.

There are many specialist organisations which support the persecuted Church through prayer, discipling, practical solidarity and campaigning. See [here](#) or [here](#) for just a few of the great NGOs you could connect with. They can help you know how to pray as well as give you opportunities to engage in simple campaigning or direct encouragement to persecuted Christians.

We can only pray if we are informed. Each year, the [World Watch List](#) is published, highlighting the 50 nations where it is most dangerous to be a Christian. Reading about persecution can overwhelm us. But perhaps you could pray for one nation each week. Or ask the Lord to guide you to focus on supporting the Church in one or two countries. Or, when a nation is in the news, this could prompt you to pray for the Church there. Or maybe your church could mark International Day of Prayer for the Persecuted Church ([IDOP](#)), held every November.

Our own freedom of religion or belief?

No European country is in the top 50 most dangerous nations. We are blessed with tremendous freedom and should ensure we make the most of the freedom we have.

Nevertheless, Christians in Europe can face difficulties. The kinds of problems vary considerably.

Some Evangelicals endure the ongoing little signs that those around you think you are second class citizens. Others are frustrated at unnecessary bureaucratic hassles which make it so difficult, for example, to get a new church building. Others are now scared to talk about their faith at work for fear that they could lose their jobs. And there are growing numbers of cases where the rights of members of the LGBTI+ community not to be offended are now prioritised over the freedom of conscience of Christians.

And then there are the many Christian asylum seekers who fear persecution if they are returned home. Too many are deported because the authorities do not take seriously the risks they face. Or they doubt that the asylum seeker is a genuine Christian because he or she is unable to answer difficult theological questions or because the assessors do not accept the evidence given.

The challenge is to respond in ways that honour Christ. It can be tempting to retreat into the safety of our Christian family, to hold back from sharing our faith, perhaps even to compromise our beliefs. Others react with anger,

dividing the world, not necessarily 100% accurately, between those who are for or against Christianity. But surely Scripture teaches us to stand firm, to love our enemies and to share the Good News of Jesus Christ anyway?

Across Europe, we are also able to speak up to improve freedom of religion. This might involve quietly talking to your employer or your child's school to see if there can be some flexibility to resolve an issue of conscience. Or we can attempt to build a more positive relationship with local government through our church's community action or offers to pray. This can help the authorities see us as reasonable and helpful members of society so that, for example, they will be more open to granting permission for our open air service.

There is also a place for bigger scale advocacy, seeking to influence government in order to change problematic laws or prevent new ones from being created. And we should do all we can to persuade the authorities to show more fairness when making judgements about asylum seekers.

If everything else fails, we can go to court to defend our rights. Judgements do not always go as we might wish. And a weak case which fails can create a precedent that limits freedom for everyone else. But let's pray for the lawyers who can select and then argue strong cases which can bring both positive resolution for the individuals involved and more clarity about the importance and scope of FoRB.

It is not all about us. Followers of other faiths should be able to feel part of society and have the freedom to fully practice their faith. In some countries, some say that animal or child rights are more important than FoRB, leading to calls for bans on Kosher/Halal slaughter or male circumcision. While of course animals and children have rights, to downplay FoRB like this is incredibly serious for everyone.

These examples remind us that life is complicated. Our countries are made up of different groups whose rights can clash. We have to be able to live together with our deepest differences. This means that we cannot always get everything we want. No one should be able to cause genuine harm to another. But there is also an issue of being good neighbours if our societies are to hold

together. While we ask people to respect our rights, let's also be concerned about the rights of others. We need a civil public square [3] in which we are all concerned about the well-being of the other and can negotiate the inevitable tensions with fairness.

Further resources on FoRB and how to defend it can be found [here](#). But, in the end, we are called to deepen our trust in and love for the Lord. Then, like the apostle Paul in Philippians, we will be able to rejoice and passionately live out our faith in the face of the worst persecution.

[1] Romans 13:1-7

[2] 1 Corinthians 12:26

[3] The civil public square is explored in the [Global Charter of Conscience](#)

The Challenges for Christians in Secular Western European Contexts

By Nola Leach

[*Go to the article online*](#)

The nature of society in Europe is changing. My experience is primarily in the UK and even here gone are the days when culture was automatically framed by Judeo-Christian values, and laws passed based on these timeless truths. Since the First World War, and with the fruits of the Enlightenment and Darwin, we have begun to see the retreat of Christians from national life. In the past, the default position was the Christian faith, even if it was not a personal faith as we would understand it. At times of crisis, it was the Church that was turned to. In 2021, no longer is the language of Christian teaching understood or natural. Nowhere is this illiteracy clearer than in the example told me by a senior political commentator who, in discussion with a very senior journalist, mentioned the Book of

Romans. The question then came “Who published this book?”

William Nye, a respected former government adviser at the heart of power, wrote about the “secularising spirit” now permeating the machinery of government in the UK and the West. After 20 years of working at the highest level he sees the gradual “squeezing out of Christianity” from national life, despite the public expressions of support from senior Members of Parliament. The effect has been that more and more Christians are afraid to speak out and feel disenfranchised.

What makes this so alarming is that traditionally Christianity has been a very vocal faith. Christians speak the truth because God's love compels them. Mr Nye's comments are a reminder that at the very least Christianity is seen as an irrelevance and at worst something which must be rooted out of society in favour of a more progressive understanding of "truth". Secularism, materialism, and the postmodern mentality has undermined Christian values to the point where Christians themselves feel pressure to stay silent. Liberalism is the new touchstone.

A hierarchy of rights has emerged with the right to be whoever one wants to be sexually, which is nowadays considered to be a more important right than freedom of religion and belief. Debate is being shut down and Hate Crime legislation seeks to criminalise thought and speech in private as well as in public.

Against this background it is easy to be depressed, but God is at work! A strange paradox is evident. On the one hand the UK Government is praising and giving funding to Christian initiatives in communities and recognising the rich contribution the church makes to national life, and on

the other it is proposing measures that could privatise Christianity.

At the 2018 National Parliamentary Prayer Breakfast the Prime Minister Theresa May made this comment: "The Christian gospel has transformed the United Kingdom, with its values and teachings helping to shape the laws, customs and society of the country." While the speaker, Tim Keller, spoke about Jesus' mandate to be the "salt of the earth": "Christians should be dispersed in the societies of the world... bringing out the best in that particular culture and preventing its worse tendencies as well. But only if Christians remain 'salt', which is different from the rest of the culture."

So, can Christians still be bold and effect change, and if so how do we do it?

My experience with CARE, a Christian charity which seeks to uphold God's truth in society, working at the highest levels of Government to propose good laws and mitigate against bad, is that we can and must. In the Creation Mandate in Genesis God calls us to "rule the world with Him and for Him". He is a God of justice as well as of salvation and we must be a voice for the voiceless. There

remain many opportunities to seize. We must while we are still able.

Over the years we in CARE have learned some key lessons about how we act as we uphold truth but with grace.

Firstly we must engage with passion and conviction. Abraham Kuyper, the Dutch theologian and Prime Minister of the Netherlands between 1901 and 1905 wrote, "In the total expanse of human life there is not a single square inch of which Christ, who alone is sovereign, does not declare 'That is mine!'" We have a right to "take every thought captive for Christ".

However, in an increasingly intolerant and spiritually illiterate society we must also do so with wisdom. That means being informed, not making knee jerk reactions to situations, but acting on good research and intelligence. We need to use the right language, meeting people where they are. The Apostle Paul was a master at this. He used the tools and opportunities of his day. He reasoned in the synagogue with the Jews and in the marketplace with God-fearing Greeks. In Athens he disputed with philosophers at the Areopagus and referred to the altar to the unknown God. What is striking here is that he spoke

out with courage. Wisdom does not mean keeping quiet when God's truth needs to be upheld. We must not sleepwalk into the future. The prophets of the Old Testament fearlessly condemned injustice and as the psalmist and Isaiah 58 proclaim, this is true worship.

Of course, it is important to choose the right battles to fight. Politics is often the art of making a choice between relative goods and lesser evils. Sometimes that means that compromises have to be made for a "win" further down the line. The Old Testament prophet Daniel was a wonderful example of this. He immersed himself in understanding an alien culture, but stood firm on the fundamentals of his faith where there was no room for compromise. Often this is a difficult line to maintain. Similarly, the media must be used wisely. This is a whole subject in itself, but a couple of points need stressing. While it is flattering to be invited to contribute, it is essential to be aware of unforeseen hidden traps and to know when not to respond. A plan must be in place in the eventuality of things going wrong.

Above all, as Peter urged us, we must challenge where necessary but always be winsome and respectful (1 Peter 3:15). Relationships are key. The role of leaders in national

life is often lonely and places huge pressures on both the politician and his or her family. Indeed, even in the UK in recent years our member of Parliament colleagues tell of horrendous abuse and even death threats. We must take time to get to know our elected representatives and support practically in any way we can. Incidentally, I have rarely known a politician who, when asked if they would value our praying for them, has refused! Commending them for good things they have done to encourage them often means that they will listen when we have to challenge them. In short, we must earn the right to speak and be listened to and build genuine relationships full of grace and truth.

We have to engage prayerfully with integrity and faith, above all recognising that leaders were put there by God "to do us good" (Romans 13). I find it fascinating that in saying this to the new Christians in Rome, when freedom was under threat, twice Paul stressed this fact. If we do nothing else, we can and must pray for them.

We live in a time when the debate about the role of faith in public life in Europe is becoming even more heated. Indeed, for some it is becoming difficult to navigate. Making sense of what it means to live and act as a

Christian in what can be a hostile environment is not always easy, and it becomes even harder the more one gets involved but being salt and light means we must take action.

Returning to Daniel he was able to live out his faith with integrity and, at the same time, find favour in the eyes of pagan kings. He faced tests of faith far beyond those which most of us in the West are called to experience, yet on each occasion found that God honoured his faith, empowered, and protected him.

So, let us "Go into the world uncorrupted, a breath of fresh air in this sinful and polluted society. Provide people with a glimpse of good living and of the living God." (Philippians 2:15, The Message)

Advocating for Persecuted Christians in a Way That Reinforces our Christian Witness

By Michael Mutzner

[Go to the article online](#)

As Evangelicals who believe in salvation by grace, through faith – a personal and individual decision – our desire is for every human being to live in a context where he or she has the opportunity to freely choose Jesus Christ as Savior. We believe in a God who has given great freedom and responsibility to human beings to choose Him or not, and to assume the consequences of their choices. Freedom of conscience and freedom of religion have, therefore, been values historically cherished by Evangelicals, and rightly so.

In addition to this theological attachment to religious freedom, Evangelicals also face socio-political realities that lead them to emphasize this fundamental right. Globally, the majority of Evangelicals live in countries where their freedom of worship is restricted. In our work representing the World Evangelical Alliance at the UN, I see it every day: when we ask our member alliances what priority issues they would like us to take up with their governments at the UN, religious freedom almost always comes first. The defense of our Christian brothers and sisters whose religious freedom is violated is a cause to

which we are called to commit ourselves with strength and courage.

But, and this is nothing new, any good thing and any good cause can also be misused. In recent years, more and more political parties or governments have presented themselves as defenders of the religious freedom of Christians in a way that is in reality instrumentalizing these concepts in the service of a domestic political agenda. Because we are strongly attached to the notion of freedom of religion, Evangelicals are vulnerable to this kind of manipulation. When Christians are associated with such an agenda, it can be an obstacle for non-Christians to adopt the Christian faith. Therefore, this situation compels us to redouble our efforts to consider how we can do the work of advocacy for the freedom of belief that is aligned with the Gospel and that strengthens our Christian witness. Here are some avenues for reflection.

1) Advocating religious freedom for all - not just for Christians

Firstly, by definition, freedom of religion exists for everyone or it does not exist for anyone. To demand religious freedom for only one group is an inherent contradiction. Therefore, if we want freedom for Christians,

we must ask for freedom for all faiths. In its Resolution on Religious Freedom and Solidarity with the Persecuted Church (2008), the World Evangelical Alliance says that “We affirm the advocacy for persecuted Christians and adherents of other faiths towards those in governments (...). The right to religious freedom is indivisible and cannot be claimed for one particular group only to the exclusion of others”.

Our commitment to the religious freedom and human rights of people of all faiths is also motivated theologically. We believe that all human beings are created in the image of God and therefore that we form one human family - albeit greatly damaged by the fall. Thus, we should avoid giving the impression that we are only interested in protecting our fellow brothers and sisters in Christ. It is our duty to advocate also for the rights and dignity of our “neighbors” who are our brothers and sisters “in humanity”, including their right to follow what we see as false beliefs. We do this, believing that they will also have to take responsibility for the consequences of their decisions before God. This is a freedom and a responsibility that God himself has granted to humanity. In its 2008 resolution, the World Evangelical Alliance, states

the following: “The WEA differentiates between advocating the rights of members of other or no religions and endorsing the truth of their beliefs. Advocating the freedom of others can be done without accepting the truth of what they believe”.

Such a neighbor-centered advocacy goes against the logic of many in the world who advocate only for the interests of their own group and to the detriment of others. Commitment to religious freedom for all is part of this witness of universal love, which is in the image of God and which implies defending the freedom of those who believe differently. It is a prophetic sign and a testimony in favor of the Gospel among the nations. On the contrary, to defend only the freedom of Christians is a counter-witness that is contrary to the biblical teaching that every human being is created in the image of God and endowed with the same immense value.

2) Advocating for all human rights and the rule of law - not just for freedom of religion

Further one cannot choose some human rights and neglect others because all rights are interdependent and interrelated. In other words, we cannot be champions of religious freedom and turn a blind eye to other human

rights. If a government does not respect the rule of law, if the judiciary is not independent, if equality among all citizens is not guaranteed, or if freedom of association and expression is violated, there will be no religious freedom either. Religious freedom in the strict sense cannot therefore be our only criterion for judging a human rights policy. If we are truly concerned about the common good of humanity – and we should be – our interest will be for the protection of all human rights.

Second, our advocacy should not confuse what we expect from the State with what we expect from the Church. We expect the State to guarantee a free society where all persons, including Christians, enjoy the same rights and freedoms. We envisage a State that does justice, fights corruption, guarantees freedom even for unpopular minority groups and in which there are no second-class citizens. The role of the Church is to advance the Kingdom of God, to bear witness to His love in action and in truth and to proclaim the Gospel and its values – something in principle it can best do in such a free society. The advancement of the Kingdom of God is not the role of the State. Of course, if the Church, by the grace of God, succeeds in this mission, biblical values will infuse society

and possibly influence its laws and the values of the nation and its institutions. Nevertheless, every human society is inevitably made up of a certain religious pluralism and it is our duty as Christians to remain faithful to the defense of these freedoms for all, whether we are in a position of minority or majority.

3) Being prophetic - and avoiding a victim mentality

Several studies show that, numerically, Christians are the most persecuted group in the world, and that unfortunately this trend is growing. This sad reality should challenge and motivate us to pray, to support the persecuted Church and to advocate for the victims and their freedoms. But this situation also carries a risk: that of developing a victim mentality.

A victim mentality is not the model shown to us by the apostles in the New Testament. In the face of persecution, after being beaten with sticks, they even felt joyful that they had been judged worthy to suffer outrages for the name of Jesus (Acts 5:41).

If we analyze the world and its conflicts exclusively from the perspective of the persecution of Christians or the clash between civilizations and religions, then we risk

misunderstanding certain more complex realities and our advocacy will not be adequate and wise. For example, if we are too quick to use terminology such as “Christian genocide” in face of conflicts where other dynamics are (also) in play, or where the use of the term “genocide” is an overstatement, even in the case of a tragic reality, the world will not take us seriously. Indeed, such an interpretive lens leads to shortcuts and simplistic understandings, where in fact the root causes are often multiple and complex.

Rather than allowing ourselves to be tempted by a victim mentality or a simplistic assessment of multifaceted dynamics, the way we deal with persecution can be an opportunity to fulfil our prophetic vocation, speaking truth with wisdom. We can seek dialogue with the authorities concerned and invite them, firmly but respectfully, sometimes in public or sometimes in private meetings, to change course and to respect justice and the human rights of the people under their responsibility. It is my hope, that our prophetic advocacy may also be a Christian witness in accordance with the Gospel and God’s love for the whole of His Creation.