

## INTERVIEW

### **H.E. Dr. Ahmed SHAHEED, the United Nations Special Rapporteur on Freedom of Religion or Belief (FoRB)**

**Liviu Olteanu (LO). Excellency, I would like to start this interview by asking you about your background and your previous and current mandate of the SR of the UN on Iran and of the SR on FoRB at the United Nations. How do you characterize the two mandates and which of them do you consider more difficult or more sensitive and concerned? Why?**

Ahmed Shaheed (AS). I believe that both UN special procedures grapple with intractable, politically-charged, and at times, culturally sensitive issues; often challenging the norms and principles that shape internal value-systems, guide social behavior and define crime and punishment.

In many ways, the issues that I contended with as the United Nations Special Rapporteur on the situation of human rights in the Islamic Republic of Iran represent a snapshot of some of the most serious challenges confronting my current work as Special Rapporteur on the right to freedom of religion or belief. At the heart of some of the concerns facing both mandates are issues related to the relationships that States have with religion.

All States, regardless of their relationship with religion, face challenges in the field of human rights. But research undertaken during my former and current mandate illustrate that States, like Iran, which possess systems of support that, in effect, grant monopolies in religious and State affairs to a particular religion, often find themselves at odds with their obligation to be impartial guarantors of human rights. This is because government efforts to secure and preserve the monopoly that State religions have in the public affairs of such countries frequently involve: (a) the application of high levels of restrictions on the rights of individuals that do not subscribe to the majority religion; (b) a high degree of regulation of the institutions and associations of minority religions; and (c) a propensity to enforce religious precepts of the State religion. As such, these States are more likely to discriminate against minority religions and tend to place high levels of restrictions on freedom of religion or belief of all.

**LO. According your perspective what do you consider are the greatest challenges for FoRB in the 21st Century and what can diplomats, politicians, religious leaders do to defend better the religious liberty?**

AS. The increasing interconnectedness and interdependence among countries and economies which mark this century have given rise to new social and political pressures. These circumstances are further complicated by greater State interference with religious expression in response to heightened security concerns emanating from ongoing acts of violence carried out by **extremists**. Persons belonging to religious minorities, in particular, are increasingly facing laws that in effect restrict their freedom, either alone or within a community, to manifest their religion or belief in worship, observance, teaching and practice.

Establishing a sound body of laws and policies for protecting freedom of religion or belief, while balancing the range of fundamental rights guaranteed by international human rights instruments and responding to manifold political, economic, social and cultural pressures constitute one of the greatest challenges for the defense of freedom of religion or belief.

**LO. Which are the priorities of your mandate and in what do you want to focus more?**

AS. The international community has generated a range of tools over the past seven decades for raising awareness and promoting respect for the right to freedom of religion or belief; for combatting discrimination, hostility and violence involving religion or belief; and for better ensuring State accountability. Many of these tools recognize the universal, indivisible, interdependent and interrelated nature of human rights, and that securing other fundamental human rights, including the rights to freedom of expression, association and peaceful assembly. They also identify the importance of focusing on persons in vulnerable situations and the intersectional dimensions of discrimination as well as the promotion of equality and pluralism.

My priorities include working with other special procedures, along with various aspects of the wider UN human rights system, member states and civil society actors at international and national levels to better leverage these tools as States contend with the complex challenges to protecting the right to freedom of religion or belief.

**LO. Do you consider the ‘religion’ a solution or a problem for worldwide security and peace? Why?**

AS. The correlation between religious persecution and national security threats has been evident in the events of this past century. I believe that respect for those rights on which the freedom of religion or belief for all persons depend (whatever their beliefs) is a critical element of any effort to promoting worldwide peace and security. This includes the right to freedom of expression, association and assembly and the right to be free from discrimination and violence. It is well recognized that violations of the right to FoRB and other human rights often give rise to hostility, conflict and violence. And it’s no accident that respect and equal protections for FoRB and other rights, regardless of immutable characteristics, religion or belief constitute one of the four pillars upon which the United Nations’ promotes its goal to “save succeeding generations from the scourge of war”. International human rights law does not define what ‘religion’ is—recognizing the importance of diversity and respecting the self-identification of people with life stances of their choice. International law, of course, protects only those religions or beliefs that do not seek to destroy the human rights of others.

**LO. To what conclusions are you coming regarding the global problems on the religious minorities and what do you think are the important needs of religious minorities in the international arena?**

AS. It is clear that increasing migration and globalization, along with the advent of easily accessible telecommunications and social media tools are changing the demographic and religious landscapes of many countries, accelerating the exchange of ideas and values and accentuating competing interests. States in every region are grappling with the need to respond to these shifts, and some are faring better than others.

Some states have chosen to establish hurdles to the equal enjoyment of human rights for newly emerging religious or belief communities; adopting laws and perpetuating practices that promote social hostility and institutional inequities and fostering conflict. Others are working to accommodate newer religious or belief communities, including by expanding protections for their full enjoyment of human rights. However, we also observe increasing opposition to these efforts by fundamentalist movements, some of which possess nationalist orientations.

Generally speaking, it is important that the international community invest in raising greater awareness about what constitutes the right to freedom of religion or belief. Religious minorities also require improvements in their capacity to both raise awareness about the challenges they face in exercising their right to FoRB in both international and national fora and promote accountability

**LO. In spite of the ratification of ICCPR why do you believe that Articles 18, 19 and 27 are still the objects of applicable tension for many Member States?**

AS. The ratification of a treaty is not a certification that the State has at that point attained the standards proclaimed in the treaty; rather, it is a commitment by the State to achieve and sustain those standards, through continued efforts and improvement. Furthermore, the relationship between freedom of religion and freedom of expression, among myriad other rights, has become increasingly tense, and in some ways, correlate with greater interconnectedness and human mobility. The ability to freely exchange values and ideas has become a source for offense and reason for violence for many, both offline and online. And the increasing use of religious freedom to discriminate against others or to deprive them of equal exercise of fundamental human rights are just some of the reasons why tensions (as well as overlaps) remain between the objectives promoted by Articles 18,19 and 27 of the ICCPR. Given the intersections and overlaps between these closely related human rights, a wholistic approach to human rights would assist in advancing norm clarity on freedom of religion or belief and dispel frequent misconceptions about the relationship between these rights.

**LO. We have to look to the persecution that affects hundred thousand of the Rohingyas in Myanmar and being refugees, the crisis in the territory where they live today. What can be done in their behalf?**

AS. Insufficient protections for fundamental human rights, tensions between security and development objectives in the country, along with a culture of impunity contribute to the situation of human rights in Myanmar, including the situation of the Rohingya and other religious and ethnic minorities. Sustained international pressure can be a powerful tool for promoting respect for human rights around the world, but this requires significant investment in the capacity of civil society actors to promote accountability. This includes the capacity of human rights defenders to monitor, document and report rights abuses to international human rights mechanisms, raise awareness about human rights in international fora and advocate for reform at the international and national level. States can also continue to use mechanisms like the Universal Periodic Review to promote accountability and they can continue to support the work of the UN Special Rapporteur on the situation of human rights in Myanmar. Beyond this, of course, immediate practical measures that advance effective protection for the Rohingya, both in Myanmar and while on flight, are needed, covering both humanitarian needs and human rights entitlements. Stronger measures to end impunity and create the space and conditions for the return of Rohingya are also needed.

**LO. What about the Christians' sacrifice and persecution, especially those from the MENA territory and other continents too. What the international community must do for them?**

AS. The Middle East faces a dubious future and continues to be convulsed by competing interests that predominantly fall along the fault lines of religious intolerance. As such, the international community must make freedom of religion or belief a strategic imperative for promoting peace and security in the region. This includes efforts to assist countries in their efforts to manage

disputes peacefully, protect their civilians and ensure respect for the right to freedom of religion or belief, among other rights, by promoting FoRB literacy and respect for the rule of law. This work will require the financial and political support of States to coordinate the complementary activities of a wide range of organizations in the UN system, non-governmental organizations (NGOs) and local citizens' groups in various countries. As with Myanmar, both immediate issues of humanitarian protection and ending impunity as well as medium term challenge of rebuilding economies and societies need to be addressed now.

**LO. Unfortunately, we still can observe harassment, discrimination, intolerance and even persecution affecting either Muslims, Jews, Bahais, Sikhs, Mormons, Christians as Catholics, Protestants, Baptists, Seventh-day Adventists or even Humanists, etc. How can be stopped this painful reality in the 21 Century?**

AS. In many ways the persecution of religious or belief minorities, including adherents of both older and newer faiths is an indicator for potential conflict and violence. International and national leaders must, therefore, be made to recognize that a lack of respect for FoRB often undermines national security and stymies economic development, and that fostering freedom of religion or belief and preventing violent extremism and atrocity crimes, including by expanding protections for religious or belief minorities where they do not exist, are necessary for the advancement and sustainability of a range of national priorities. There is growing investment in religion diplomacy by both states, international organizations and civil society--- these efforts could be more effective if these groups could build global coalitions to work together and generated synergies from their work.

**LO. On 2018 we have the 70th Anniversary of the UDHR, and according to it, the article 18 opened a globally perspective on religious freedom and freedom of conscience. Also the UN adopted the Declaration on the rights of persons belonging to national or ethnic, religious and linguistic minorities that provides that States “will adopt the necessary measures to ensure that persons belonging to minorities can express their characteristics and develop their culture, traditions...” and the UN Declaration on the Elimination of All Forms of Intolerance and Discrimination Based on Religion or Belief from 1981 which highlights: “the right of freedom of thought, conscience, religion or belief shall include, inter alia, the following freedoms as “to observe days of rest and to celebrate holidays and ceremonies in accordance with the precepts of one’s religion or belief”.**

In this context, on 27 of February 2018 was organized in the European Parliament in Brussels by the AIDLR a seminar co-hosted by MEP Hannu Takkula and MEP Csaba Sogor on “Challenges for Freedom of Religion and Freedom of Conscience in Europe... and Security”. As we know, Europe suffered wars, persecution and the loss of millions of people in its history - and we don't want to come back that times and tragedies - many of them suffered for being 'different' vs. the majority. Today Europe in many aspects can be considered a good example for other parts of the world and there are states in the EU which have adopted legislation that defends the freedom of religion and freedom of conscience for “religious minorities”; in my opinion, an example on balanced legislation and practice in behalf of religious minorities is Spain, where the Jews and Seventh-day Adventists can keep their holy day of rest - the Saturday- either on the issue of education (exams for students) or laboral; the State established alternatives on students' exams to be delivered in other days or after the sunset of Saturday.

**Special Rapporteur, in this regard, what can be done to avoid or to stop discrimination by legislation or practice in European countries and in all the world where still can be observed discrimination, misinterpretation and sometimes some extremist, populist attacks and hate speech that affect directly the religious minorities and... refugees; concretely, on the Seventh-day Adventists, I received information during the Seminar hosted in the European Parliament that**

there is still some discrimination on ‘their day of rest’ that is Saturday - e.g. Luxembourg, Belgium, France, Germany, Bulgaria, Austria, etc. (the states quoted can be considered democratic ones and promoting human rights) where students still have problems due to the exams established during their ‘day of rest’ that is Saturday. **How can be solved this problem – that is global one – and remembering to Member States on the need to foster not only legislation but good practice on “observing days of rest and to celebrate holidays” as was said by the UN Declaration from 1981?**

AS. Article 2(1) of the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights requires State parties to respect and ensure that all individuals within their territory enjoy the rights recognized in the Covenant “without distinction of any kind, such as race, colour, sex, language, religion, political or other opinion, national or social origin, property, birth or other status”. It is the cornerstone of the principle of non-discrimination in international human rights law. The principle of non-discrimination applies to both the enjoyment and lawful restriction of this right. Indeed, a claim for equality for all is inherent to the right to freedom of religion or belief. Nonetheless, a large percentage of discriminatory provisions imposed by States and actions taken by non-State actors are based on religion or belief, and disproportionately target religious minorities. In certain States where religion has been given “official” or privileged status, other fundamental rights of individuals, especially religious minorities, are disproportionately restricted or vitiated under threat of sanctions as a result of the obligatory observation of State-imposed religious orthodoxy. The right to freedom of religion or belief is also challenged by States that attempt to impose a doctrinal secularism to sanitize the public sphere of concepts associated with religious or belief systems. Apart from the ongoing need to tackle direct and open manifestations of discrimination, there is a need for greater sensitivity to more obscure forms of discrimination, such as prima facie “neutral” rules limiting certain manifestations of religion. Although they usually do not target a specific community openly, such rules can amount to discrimination against persons belonging to religious minorities. Similar problems may arise with regard to dietary rules, fasting, labour regulations, public health norms, or public holiday observances as in the specific case of Seventh Day Adventists. Overcoming the various forms of discrimination in the field of religion or belief, including indirect and structural discrimination, is a complex task that requires moving beyond mere formal or codified equality towards the concept of substantive equality, including by adopting practical measures that ensure reasonable accommodation. More specifically, amid increasing globalization and rising diversity, it appears axiomatic that the role of the State as an “impartial guarantor” of the rights of all is mostly likely to be fulfilled when the State adopts a posture of cooperation and accommodation without identification.

**LO. What influence do you consider religious minorities have for peace and worldwide security? Why?**

AS. Freedom of religion or belief is one of those issues that few global leaders would actually oppose. However, few are willing to make it a foreign policy priority, because it is often regarded as merely a humanitarian issue of little strategic consequence, if any. I believe that the best practices for promoting peaceful, inclusive societies are those which address protections for the most vulnerable among us, including religious minorities. In this way, the challenges facing these communities represent some of the most the most complex, intractable but pressing challenges of our time. In this way, the role and influence that religious minorities have for promoting peace and security is incredibly significant. Diversity and pluralism are the hallmarks of modern societies and the religious or belief minorities enrich these societies, embed respect for others and set the plural context in which democracy and human rights thrive.

**LO. The Universal Declaration of Human Rights, through Article 18 has a special relevance on the issue of religious freedom regarding the right of every person, but when you look at the geopolitical context and the threat of fundamentalism, extremism and terrorism, do you**

**believe that today it would be possible to obtain this same agreement regarding the right to change one's religion? Why or why not?**

AS. It is difficult to answer this question. While it is true that we are observing very negative trends towards what seems to be increasing levels of religious intolerance worldwide, a review of the development of the normative framework surrounding Article 18 suggests that the issue of the right to change one's religion has always been a controversial one. (One need not look further than the text of Article 18 in the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights which conspicuously drops the explicit reference to the right to change one's religion which appears in the Universal Declaration of Human Rights.) What is clear, however, is that there cannot be a meaningful right to freedom of religion or belief unless it includes the freedom to change one's religion or belief. Although the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights and the Declaration on the Elimination of All Forms of Intolerance and of Discrimination Based on Religion or Belief are less explicit than article 18 of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights in endorsing the right to change one's religion, the Human Rights Committee provided greater clarity in its General Comment No. 22 (1993). In particular, it stressed that the right to "have or to adopt" a religion or belief necessarily entailed the freedom to choose a religion or belief, including the right to replace one's current religion or belief with another or to adopt atheistic views, as well as the right to retain one's religion or belief. This language – "including the right to change one's religion or belief" – is also consistently reflected in resolutions on freedom of religion or belief adopted by consensus by the General Assembly and the Human Rights Council. It should be noted that this provision refers specifically to the internal dimension of freedom of thought, conscience, religion or belief (often referred to as *forum internum*), which enjoys unconditional and unqualified protection and cannot be restricted, limited, interfered with or derogated from under any circumstances, including during times of public emergency. At a practical level, the whole idea of "faith" or "belief" necessarily implies a voluntariness or free will, and therefore a right to believe or not believe, or to change or not change one's beliefs.

**LO. Which are the global trends and risks toward religious freedom and freedom of conscience?**

AS. In my report to the 72<sup>nd</sup> Session of the UN General Assembly, I identified many of the global trends that pose serious risks for the right to freedom of religion or belief, namely in the form of religious intolerance. From 2007 to 2015, roughly one quarter of countries around the globe were affected by significant and unlawful limits on freedom of religion or belief and/or experienced high or very high levels of social hostility involving religion or belief. Today, three quarters of the world's population live in countries that have either restriction on the right to religion or belief or a high level of social hostility involving religion or belief. Global restrictions on freedom of religion or belief increased in 2015 after a two-year downward trend. Overall, in 2015, nearly 60 per cent of countries experienced increases in government restrictions and social hostilities involving religion or belief. Increases in unlawful government restrictions against religious groups remain one of the primary and most fundamental factors in the increasing levels of religious intolerance in any given society. Other factors and phenomena accounting for increases in religious intolerance include globalization, which has precipitated pluralism even in societies that have remained isolated for centuries, and growing migration, which has increasingly brought different religious communities into much closer contact. Indeed, State and non-State reactions to the phenomenon of globalization have rendered many societies more vulnerable to tribalism, xenophobia and nativism as individuals search for the visceral safety and comfort that shared national, racial, cultural, religious or nonreligious identities and beliefs ostensibly provide. Those anxieties are further exacerbated by concerns regarding job loss or wage competition and fear that immigrants will undermine the traditional language, religion or way of life of "native" populations, not to mention long-held class and power dynamics. Such anxieties and hostilities are further exacerbated by governments, officials, politicians and agitators keen to seize on them, often by targeting religious minorities, migrants and others in order to advance their own agendas.

In addition to identifying these troubling trends, I outlined five pervasive and invasive manifestations of religious intolerance that must be addressed if we are to ensure the full realization of the right to freedom of religion or belief and offered recommendations for how this could be done. These manifestations include: 1) State discrimination in law or practice; 2) the use of blasphemy, apostasy or anti-conversion laws; 3) unlawful acts by non-State actors (including hate crimes by private citizens or more serious acts, including atrocity crimes, by armed and/or terrorist groups); and increasing trends surrounding the 4) securitization and 5) politicization of religion or belief.

**LO. Your colleague and the former Special Rapporteur on FoRB Dr. Heiner Bielefeldt, after he participated some years ago in 2014 in Madrid at the first International Conference on “Human Rights and Religious Minorities” organized by the AIDLR and co-sponsored by the Ministry of Justice and Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Spain, the Secretary General of the AIDLR launched the “Dialogue Five” framework by joining together for the first time in this targeted format different actors (1. diplomats, 2. politicians, 3. religious leaders, 4. academia and 5. civil society representatives (NGOs, media, etc). That time, Heiner stressed on the importance “to copy” internationally this frame created by the AIDLR Secretary General by working together all actors and coordinating at international, regional, national and local levels all efforts on concerned issues as freedom of religion and freedom of expression (see ‘Dialogue Five’ described in “Religious Freedom’ Influence on Peace and Security” magazine (2017/2018)). From your perspective as a current UN SR on FoRB, when you look today to the international insecurity and crisis, are you considering that this framework (Dialogue Five) is still crucial – why? - and what can be done to be put it more in practice by Member States in favor of peace and security? How and Who can accomplish this Coordination of all actors so necessary today?**

AS. One of the most important mechanisms available to the UN Special Rapporteur on the freedom of religion or belief is the convening power to bring together all relevant stakeholders in order to protect and promote this foundational human right. My predecessor, Professor Heiner Bielefeldt, took full advantage of this mechanism by recommending and stressing initiatives such as the “Dialogue Five” framework created by the AIDLR Secretary General Dr. Liviu Olteanu. I very much intend to continue this approach and believe that without it we will never be able to fully realize the right to freedom of religion or belief. This is why I have encouraged all stakeholders—including states, faith leaders and civil society—to fully engage with, and utilize, the recommendations outlined in non-binding resolutions and plans of action (i.e. Human Rights Council Resolution 16/18, the Rabat Plan of Action, etc.) But following up on implementing Human Rights Council resolutions and action plans initiated by the United Nations will not be enough to create the conditions for religious tolerance and inclusion. As I mentioned in my 72<sup>nd</sup> Session of the UN General Assembly, “the full exercise of the freedom of religion or belief also requires a set of positive policy measures aimed at creating, perpetuating and promoting tolerance and inclusion in the areas of education, religious literacy, media, civil society development, and State cooperation with religious leaders and communities.” Examples of such proactive policies can range from what I have called “FoRB literacy” —more education and awareness regarding not only the right to freedom of religion or belief in the international human rights framework, but also a deeper understanding of other religions, faiths and beliefs — to the adoption of reforms that tackle more invidious forms of discrimination such as “structural violence.” Admittedly, adopting such proactive and involved policies that require the input of all relevant stakeholders will not be an easy task. But if we are to create truly open societies that not only celebrate but also promote, nurture, and perpetuate religious tolerance and inclusion, we must invest more in adopting smarter, more creative, more innovative, and more holistic measures.

**LO. In the context of your report submitted to the 37th session of HRC in Geneva, what**

**initiatives and steps do you believe can be done from the side of states to put into practice your recommendations?**

AS. In my first report, I outlined my methods of work and programmatic priorities which will largely support an overall agenda focused on addressing the implementation gap between the existing normative framework and the full realization of the right to freedom of religion or belief. In my most recent report to the 37<sup>th</sup> Session of the Human Rights Council I addressed challenges linked specifically to state-religion or entanglements and identified concrete steps States can take to ensure that these relationships do not hinder or restrict the right to freedom of religion or belief. Indeed, all States, regardless of their relationship with religion, face challenges in the field of human rights. States that have preferences towards religion(s) frequently engage in practices that unduly restrict the freedom of religion or belief, especially for individual who belong to minorities communities that are especially prone to being targeted or affected by discriminatory practices. In this regard, it is important that States implement laws, regulations, and policies that fulfill their duty to be “impartial guarantors” of the enjoyment to freedom of religion or belief of all individuals and groups within their territory and subject to their jurisdiction. In situations where States opt to offer a privileged legal status or position to certain religious or belief groups, such status should be accorded in strict conformity with the principle of non-discrimination. Additionally, limitations on the manifestation of religion based on the “morals” exception of Article 18(3) should not be derived exclusively from a single tradition reflecting the morals of the majority or ruling elite. Other specific recommendations made in the report include scrapping anti-blasphemy or conversion laws which, without fail, violate the right to freedom of religion or belief.

**LO. WHEN (or IF) could we have an International Covenant based on Religion or Beliefs in the United Nations as is the ICCPR?**

AS. While Article 18 of the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights and its interpretation by the UN Human Rights Committee remain the most detailed articulation of the international community’s understanding of the core elements of the right to freedom of religion or belief, and subsequent normative developments have expanded that understanding (which is continually evolving), there are still a number of areas that are susceptible to dispute. Undoubtedly, one of the ways to address these misunderstandings is to further develop the normative framework by relying on additional “hard law” mechanisms in the form of an international covenant that more specifically, and explicitly, protect the right to freedom of religion or belief. Yet it is important to also note, as I have in my previous reports, that there is actually a high degree of unanimity regarding the contours of the right to freedom of religion or belief (and Article 18) between and among the various UN human rights bodies. This suggests that many, if not most, of the chronic failures we witness when it comes to protecting and promoting the right to freedom of religion or belief are rooted in the implementation gap between the existing normative framework and the full realization of the right. This is why I have advocated for an agenda of implementation that will serve as the guiding framework for my mandate for the next three years—a framework that is consistent with the growing emphasis placed by the UN Human Rights Council on the need to address persistent gaps in compliance with human rights standards. As part of this framework, I will focus on the array of “hard” and “soft” law tools, initiatives, and non-binding resolutions already developed at the international and domestic levels to close this implementation gap. These include the UN Human Rights Council Resolution 16/18 on combating intolerance, negative stereotyping, stigmatization, discrimination, incitement to violence and violence against persons based on religion or belief; the Rabat Plan Action on the prohibition of advocacy of national, racial or religious hatred that constitutes incitement to discrimination, hostility or violence; and the more recent Beirut Declaration and Fez Declaration/Plan of Action for Religious Leaders and Actors to Prevent Incitement to Violence that Could Lead to Atrocity Crimes.

**LO. In these times of insecurity and crisis, do you consider that “Diplomacy and Education for Religious Freedom” Must be “A Priority for Public Policy”? Why?**

AS. Since assuming my new role as mandate holder, I have repeatedly emphasized the need to promote greater understanding among diverse communities in the face of increasingly negative worldwide trends suggesting rising levels of intolerance, violent extremism, and populism. This understanding is, in part, rooted in common misperceptions and misconceptions that are both the product of the complexity of this right, and the political and ideological dispute over the norms of the international legal framework that underpin it. But a common understanding regarding what the right to freedom of religion or belief means cannot take place without a serious investment in what I, and others, have called “FoRB literacy” —more education and awareness regarding not only the right to freedom of religion or belief in the international human rights framework, but also a deeper understanding of other religions, faiths and beliefs. We also need to pay attention to “FoRB diplomacy”, which includes using the convening power of my mandate to engage with critical stakeholders, including States, to promote inter-faith dialogue and understanding and implement smart laws and policies to ensure the full realization of the right to freedom of religion or belief.

**LO. What global role do you think civil society and international NGOs could have on the defense of human rights, religious liberty and religious minorities?**

AS. The FoRB mandate has had a very fruitful relationship with a range of civil society actors over the past 30 years. Their contributions to the capacity, efficiency and impact of the special procedures and other human rights mechanisms, and their ability to generate respect for human rights domestically, has been (and remains) crucial to bolstering respect for the right to freedom of religion or belief both nationally and internationally. The roles and responsibilities of civil society actors, especially religious and community leaders, in generating cross-boundary cooperation among religions and beliefs is critical, and I look forward to working with all non-governmental human rights organizations, including faith- and belief- based civil society actors, to build coalitions that transcend boundaries based on religion or whatever belief. From the get-go one of my top priorities has been to continue to engage with, and expand, this network of actors and stakeholders in an effort to benefit from this vital resource.

**LO. What message would you like to give to the readers of the “Conscience of Liberty” journal that has this year the 70th Anniversary from its first magazine published in 1948 by Dr. Jean Nussbaum and with the important support of Madame Eleanor Roosevelt that was for 16 years the first President of the Honorary Committee of the AIDLR?**

AS. It has been my privilege and honour to have this opportunity to discuss the priorities of my mandate and exchange ideas with the distinguished members of the AIDLR, an association that has been more critical to the promotion and realization of the right to freedom of religion or belief than perhaps any other since its founding in 1946. It is no exaggeration to say that without the vision, efforts, and persistence of Dr Jean Nussbaum, Eleanor Roosevelt, and other members of AIDLR the development of the normative framework related to the protection and promotion of this foundational right would not be where it is today. And that is to say nothing of the critical and exemplary role that AIDLR has played in bridging the gap between civil society and human rights bodies both at the national and international levels, including UN human rights mechanisms such as my mandate. My message to the International Association for the Defence of Religious Liberty, and the readers of the “Conscience of Liberty” journal, is to continue the amazing and tireless work of the organization with an eye towards deepening its efforts to combat the root causes of religious intolerance throughout the world. This work is especially needed in light of the trying times in which we currently live, and the increasingly negative worldwide trends

suggesting rising levels of violent extremism, populism and nativism. As Dr. Nussbaum wrote in 1948, “[t]he work lying ahead is immense, but will certainly not go beyond our strength and means if everybody gets down to work, with courage.”