



*the* GLOBAL CHARTER *of*  
CONSCIENCE

*A Global Covenant  
concerning Faiths and  
Freedom of Conscience*

*Free to be human:  
Our first freedom, and the key to  
living with our deepest differences*

# the *Global Charter* of **CONSCIENCE**

*A Global Covenant concerning Faiths and Freedom of Conscience*

Keenly aware of the titanic promise and peril of our time, as forms of global interconnectedness reach an unprecedented speed, scale, and scope across the earth, we issue and subscribe to this Charter to address a major world challenge whose resolution will be decisive for the cause of civilization and human flourishing. That is, we address the urgent problems raised by the challenge of “living with our deepest differences” when those differences involve core beliefs, worldviews, and ways of life, and when they are increasingly found within single communities, nations, and civilizations.

Our purpose is to set out a vision of the rights, responsibilities, and respect that will be the foundation of a civil and cosmopolitan “global public square,” and the habits of the heart for those who would be “citizens of the world” as well as patriots in their own countries, and so to advance the cause of a “good world” and thus of global civilization over against the forces of global chaos.

## PREAMBLE

*Whereas* a fundamental feature of our human life is the characteristic drive for meaning and belonging;

*Whereas* for most people in most of history, and still today, this drive for meaning and belonging has been satisfied through ultimate beliefs and worldviews, whether supernatural or secular, transcendent or naturalistic;

*Whereas* religious and naturalistic beliefs and worldviews have inspired some of the best and some of the worst human attitudes and behavior throughout history – the worst including terrible examples of prejudice, hatred, conflict, persecution, censorship, repression, crimes against humanity and genocide that stain the pages of the human record;

*Whereas* the challenge of living with our deepest differences has been raised to a new level of intensity in the modern global era, because of the flow of people and ideas, and especially the impact of the media, travel, and the migration of peoples, so that it is now said that “everyone is everywhere” and diverse beliefs and worldviews are both in constant contact and interdependent;

*Whereas* the world is witnessing two opposing trends – the revitalization and growing political influence of religions, with the danger of attempts to retain the supremacy of one religion at the expense of others, and the spread of naturalistic worldviews, with the equal danger of excluding all religions from public life and thus favoring an exclusive form of non-religious worldview – and as a result, many of the traditional settlements of religion and public life show signs of stress and a need to be renegotiated;

*Whereas* the many trends of the advanced modern era – such as global communications, migrations, multicultural diversity, and the revolutions of science and technology – indicate that ethically contentious issues are likely to increase rather than diminish, and to demand clear values and wise solutions that transcend the conflicts between religions and non-religious worldviews;

*Whereas* there is a grave awareness of the terrible specter of weapons of mass destruction in the hands of violent extremists;

**Whereas** there are leaders and peoples in the world who in either theory or practice still deny the universality and equality of human rights to all human beings;

**Whereas** the idea of “the public square,” where citizens may come together to deliberate and decide issues of common public life, has long been precious and vital to peoples who value freedom and desire to take responsibility for their own lives and political affairs;

**Whereas** modern global communications, and above all the Internet, have expanded the notion of public life and created the possibility of an emerging “global public square;”

**Whereas** ultimate beliefs of all sorts have a primary and positive role in the diverse movements and organizations representing burgeoning civil society around the world;

**Whereas** human dignity, justice, and order are the necessary foundations for free and peaceful societies;

**Whereas** the history of human affairs is the story of the conflict between Right and Might, and between Reason and Conscience on one side and of Power and Interest on the other;

**Whereas** the *Universal Declaration of Human Rights* has become the most influential statement of rights in human history, and therefore the champion of reason and conscience in the Age of Rights and in the long human struggle to realize freedom, justice, and peace on earth;

# DECLARATION

We therefore set out the following declarations on freedom of conscience, faiths, civility, and peace on earth, to supplement and provide unreserved support for *The Universal Declaration of Human Rights* (The United Nations Assembly, Paris, December, 1948), and in particular to support Article 18 of *The Universal Declaration*, which reads: "Everyone has the right to freedom of thought, conscience and religion; this right includes freedom to change his religion or belief, and freedom, either alone or in community with others and in public or private, to manifest his religion or belief in teaching, practice, worship and observance."

## ARTICLE 1 – FUNDAMENTAL FREEDOM

Freedom of thought, conscience, and religion, which together may be described as religious freedom, is a precious, fundamental, and inalienable human right – the right to adopt, hold, freely exercise, share, or change one's beliefs, subject solely to the dictates of conscience and independent of all outside, especially governmental control. This freedom includes all ultimate beliefs and worldviews, whether supernatural or secular, transcendent or naturalistic.

## ARTICLE 2 – BIRTHRIGHT OF BELONGING

This right to freedom of thought, conscience, and religion, is inherent in humanity and rooted in the inviolable dignity of each human individual, in particular in the character of reason and conscience. As a birthright of belonging, freedom of conscience is the equal right of all human beings regardless of their religion, gender, race, class, language, political or other opinion, or nationality, and regardless of any mental and physical handicap and any social, economic, or educational deprivation. Freedom of conscience is the right of believers, not beliefs, and a protection for human beings rather than ideas.

## ARTICLE 3 – INDEPENDENT OF GOVERNMENTS AND MAJORITIES

As a right that is inherent in humanity and in the dignity of the human person, freedom of thought, conscience, and religion does not finally depend on the discoveries of science, the favors of the state and its officials, or the changing will of majorities. It is therefore not a government's right to grant or to deny, but a government's responsibility to guarantee and guard. Human rights are a bulwark against all undue interference and control of the human person.

## ARTICLE 4 – INTEGRAL AND ESSENTIAL

Freedom of thought, conscience, and religion is among the earliest of the human rights to be recognized, and a primary and essential human right that is integral and essential to other basic rights and may not be sundered from them. Just as the right of freedom of assembly assumes and requires the right of freedom of expression, so the right of freedom of expression assumes and requires the right of freedom of conscience. Freedom of conscience, or freedom of religion or belief, is therefore far more than freedom for the religious: it is a core right for all human beings. While there are different systems for the protection of human rights, there are no alternative systems of human rights, but an equal and universal system of rights for all human beings and the whole world. Without respect for rights, human dignity suffers. Without respect for human dignity, there can be no justice. And without respect for justice, there can be no true and lasting peace on earth.

## ARTICLE 5 – YARDSTICK OF FREEDOM

Freedom of thought, conscience, and religion, or freedom of religion or belief, protects different aspects of religious freedom that are integral, interlocking and essential for a full understanding of freedom. To the extent that a society protects all these aspects of freedom for people of all faiths and none, it may be considered free and just, for freedom too is an aspect of social justice. Conversely, to the extent that a society refuses to protect any or all of these aspects of freedom, it forfeits its claim to freedom and justice.

## ARTICLE 6 – DOUBLE PROTECTION

Freedom of thought, conscience, and religion is among the civil and political rights enumerated in the *Universal Declaration of Human Rights*, but it must not be separated from the social and economic rights also enumerated. Both together serve the fundamental requirements for just and free societies. The former protects the dignity and freedom of the human individual, whereas the latter protects the solidarity and justice of human society.

## ARTICLE 7 – FOUNDATION OF SOCIETY

Freedom of thought, conscience, and religion is fundamental for societies as well as for individuals, because it serves both as a protection for individual citizens and as a prerequisite for ordering the relationship of religions, ideologies and public life. This is especially important in today's world where pluralism makes religious liberty more necessary, just as religious liberty makes pluralism more likely.

## ARTICLE 8 – UNCONDITIONAL

The right to freedom of thought, conscience, and religion is absolute and unlimited in terms of belief, though not in terms of practice. No human being should therefore suffer discrimination, persecution, penalties, imprisonment, or death because of beliefs with which others disagree. In terms of practice, this right is limited because of the equal rights of others on whom practices impinge. However, any limitation to freedom of religion or belief is a matter of exception, which demands restrictive conditions prescribed in international instruments, such as the *International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights*. Consideration for the rights and responsibilities of each citizen and the wider common good is an ongoing challenge for societies that would be both just and free.

## ARTICLE 9 – RIGHTS AND RESPONSIBILITIES

The right to freedom of thought, conscience, and religion, or religious freedom, contains a duty as well as a right, an obligation and not only an entitlement, because a right for one person is automatically a right for another and a responsibility for both. All citizens are responsible for the rights of all other citizens, just as others are responsible for theirs. A society is only as just and free as it is respectful of this right, especially toward the beliefs of its smallest minorities and least popular communities.

## ARTICLE 10 – GOLDEN RULE

The principle that the right to freedom of thought, conscience, and religion is inalienable and equal for all represents the universal Golden Rule for religious freedom, and underscores the importance of the universality of rights in different societies and nations. There are no rights exclusive to any privileged religion, worldview, or group. Any assertion of a claim to rights with respect to faith, whether in regard to freedom to believe, or to worship, or to build places of worship, or to convert others, automatically requires the claimants to offer that same right to people of all other faiths.

## ARTICLE 11 – THE RIGHTS OF BELIEVERS IN ASSOCIATION

The rights to freedom of thought, conscience, and religion apply not only to individuals, but to individuals in community with others, associating on the basis of faith. Each person treasures the rights that inhere as in their person as an individual. Equally, each person treasures membership in families, communities, religious groups, and other deep affiliations that are essential to culture. The rights of people in association are as meaningful and significant as the rights we enjoy as individuals.

No community of faith has rights that are superior to any other community, but the rights of thought, conscience, and religion are rights both for individuals and individuals in community because belief is both an individual assent and an associative practice. As such, religious groups must be free to govern their internal affairs free from governmental or outside interference in questions of doctrine, ethics, selection of leaders, design of organizational polity, the admission and dismissal of members, and the future direction of the organization or community.

## ARTICLE 12 – NO ONE SETTLEMENT

Each community, nation, or civilization is free to forge its own unique settlement of the relationship of religions, worldviews, and public life, and will do so naturally in light of its own history and its own culture. There is therefore no single, uniform settlement to be agreed upon by all, or imposed on all. But at the same time, diverse local settlements of religion and public life should embody the common universal rights and principles that are the hallmark of rights-respecting peoples everywhere. According to their success or failure to recognize and implement these rights in their local situation, communities, nations, and civilizations may be judged as more or less just, and more or less free.

## ARTICLE 13 – BEWARE FALSE ORDERING

An undeniable lesson of history is that the greatest threat to freedom of conscience is when the ordering of religion and government becomes coercive and oppressive to those who do not share the official views. This happens especially when government uses the mantle of an ultimate belief, or when an ultimate belief uses the power of government to coerce conscience and compel belief. This problem persists today when religious tests are used to proscribe speech or to bar individuals from political office; or when even moderate forms of religious or secularist settlement deny or curtail the rights of those within their society who hold different beliefs and worldviews; or when a state uses laws and actions to discriminate against religious minorities.



## ARTICLE 14 – DIGNITY OF DIFFERENCE

Freedom of thought, conscience, and religion means that human diversity represents a dignity of difference as well as a danger in difference, though there is always a responsibility to find common ground across the differences without compromising the differences that matter. Rightly respected and ordered, diversity based on the dignity of difference is positive and can lead to richness, strength, and harmony in society, rather than to conflict, weakness, and disunity. In contrast, for a community or country to speak of harmony and diversity with no regard for religious freedom is a contradiction in terms and politically unsustainable in the age of global rights.

## ARTICLE 15 – DIFFERENCES IRREDUCIBLE

Freedom of thought, conscience, and religion means there is a beneficial value but a definite limitation to the approach that seeks unity and resolution through dialogue and co-operation between religions and worldviews. In the end, the decisive differences between the world's ultimate beliefs are ultimate and irreducible – and these differences are crucial for both individuals and for societies and civilizations. This realistic recognition of the limits of dialogue is rooted in the constraints caused by deep commitments to truth claims. Religious freedom is the freedom to be faithful to the faiths in which individuals and communities believe on the basis of the dictates of conscience.

## ARTICLE 16 – CIVIL PUBLIC SQUARE

The public place of freedom of thought, conscience, and religion in a world of deep diversity is best fulfilled through the vision of a cosmopolitan and civil public square – a public square in which people of all faiths, religious and naturalistic, are free to enter and engage public life on the basis of their faith, but always within a double framework: first, under the rule of law that respects all human rights, freedom of conscience in particular, and makes no distinction between peoples based on their beliefs; and second, according to a freely agreed covenant specifying what each person understands to be just and free for everyone else too, and therefore of the duties involved in living with the deep differences of others.

## ARTICLE 17 – CONVERSATION FOR THE COMMON GOOD

Among the responsibilities and duties required of citizens by virtue of their respect for freedom of thought, conscience, and religion is engagement in public conversation over the common good, and a recognition that persuasion has replaced coercion in public debate. In particular, human beings who engage in public life require a willingness to listen to others, and an ability to persuade others in terms that are accessible and persuasive to them – recognizing always that it is persuasion that bridges the gap between personal beliefs and the public good, and that the more diverse a society is, the more persuasive individuals and groups must be if they wish their views to prevail in public life.

## ARTICLE 18 – ARTICLES OF PEACE

This model of a civil public square attains its unity through articles of peace rather than articles of faith. Based on articles of peace, unity is forged through a framework of common rights, responsibilities, and respect, within which each faith and worldview is free to be faithful to its own beliefs and moral visions, yet also knows how to differ and live peacefully with the differences of others. Importantly, the model of a civil public square does not aim for a unity based on articles of faith. The dignity of difference and the fact of human diversity mean that unity can never be attained by a search for a lowest common denominator religious unity, or through interfaith dialogue.

## ARTICLE 19 – CIVIL SOCIETY

This declaration of the rights to freedom of thought, conscience, and religion, as well as its accompanying vision of a civil public square, is vital to the flourishing of civil society. As individual societies and the whole world come to thrive through the energy and dedication of citizens engaging in a myriad of voluntary and non-governmental organizations, it is necessary for them to have the freedom to express their moral visions in their chosen channels of voluntarism, philanthropy, reform, and social entrepreneurialism. A civil public square is therefore essential to a healthy civil society, just as a healthy civil society is vital for fostering a civil public square.

## ARTICLE 20 – PEACE THROUGH JUSTICE

This Charter of the rights to freedom of thought, conscience, and religion assumes that peace is more than the absence of conflict, and that peace through justice and the wise ordering of religion and public life is always better than peace through victory and the force of arms. Workable and lasting peace is not utopian, and does not envision the ending of all tyranny and the arrival of final peace on earth. The human goods of justice and freedom are always hard won and maintained at a cost, but peace ordered through justice is the only peace that is a true foundation for human wellbeing.

## ARTICLE 21 – CHALLENGE TO THE RELIGIOUS

The rights to freedom of thought, conscience, and religion, as well as the realities of modern religious diversity, and the responsibilities of a civil public square all pose a particular challenge to the traditional standing of established, or monopoly religions. We live at a time when fewer and fewer countries are dominated by one religion or worldview, and all the beliefs of the world are either present or available everywhere. Among the major challenges to traditional religious believers are an acknowledgment of the excesses and at times evils of religions, a recognition of the rights of other religious believers, and an equal regard for the rights of the increasing number of people who are non-religious in their worldview and ultimate beliefs.

## ARTICLE 22 – CHALLENGE TO THE SECULARISTS

The same rights of freedom of thought, conscience, and religion, as well as the same realities of contemporary diversity, and the same responsibilities of a civil public square all pose an equally fundamental challenge to those who adhere to a restrictively secular worldview, as well as to the notion of strictly secular public life in which religion is excluded from public discussion and engagement. Among the major challenges to these secularists are an acknowledgment of the role of exclusive forms of secularism in many of the world's recent oppressions and massacres, an appreciation that the process of secularization is not necessarily inevitable or progressive, and a proper recognition of the rights of religious people in public life – the denial of which is illiberal, unjust, and a severe impoverishment of civil society.

## ARTICLE 23 – FIRST STEP ONLY

This declaration of the rights to freedom of thought, conscience, and religion is foundational and necessary, but only the first step in furthering religious freedom in just and free societies. As a form of moral suasion, it must always be followed by a second step – legal implementation of the same rights in national and international law – and then by a third step: cultivating, through civic education and transmission, the habits of the heart that alone ensure that respect for rights and responsibilities are handed on from generation to generation. All three steps are needed for a society, or for the world, to achieve a genuine and lasting measure of justice and freedom.

## ARTICLE 24 – ONGOING QUESTIONS

As the history of *The Universal Declaration of Human Rights* shows, its powerful influence in advancing the Age of Rights has gone hand in hand with enduring questions and criticisms. In particular, there have been persistent challenges to the basis of its affirmations, to the universality of its claims, and to the inclusiveness of its reach – and thus to “the right to its rights.” Because of the changing fortunes of human philosophies and the recurring fact of the deliberate abuse of human rights by certain authorities, such challenges will always persist and will always require a robust response, and by advocates of this Charter too, especially to the challenge to universality.

## ARTICLE 25 – CLAIM TO UNIVERSALITY

*The Global Charter of Conscience* asserts its claim to universality in terms of its scope, though not its observance. It is universal in that it is grounded in the dignity and equality of all human beings, and it is addressed to all the citizens of the world, on behalf of all the rights-respecting citizens of today's world. We make this declaration with the full realization that to claim to speak from *nowhere* is impossible, and that to speak from *everywhere* is incoherent. We speak from *somewhere*, and in our own time, but with the sure confidence that these declarations, agreed on by people of many traditions and perspectives, are universal affirmations that speak to and for all human beings across all continents and all centuries – even to those who now resist the equality and universality of human rights.

## ARTICLE 26 – ENDURING OBSTACLES

All declarations of human rights encounter enduring obstacles, above all the realities of human nature and the crooked timber of our humanity. Just as *The Universal Declaration of Human Rights* has advanced the cause of justice in the face of deliberate, flagrant, systematic, and continuing violations of human rights, so this Charter openly acknowledges that it will encounter similar challenges and opposition. Problems such as neglect, forgetfulness, hypocrisy, deliberate violations, and criminal abuses of human dignity and rights are both to be expected and resisted. Far from nullifying the rights asserted here, such violations highlight their character and importance.

## ARTICLE 27 – FIRST PRINCIPLES BEST

This Charter of the rights to freedom of thought, conscience, and religion starts and proceeds by the consideration of fundamental first principles. It therefore stands in strong contrast to other approaches to resolving problems of religious conflict that will always prove inadequate or dangerous because they ignore or bypass the primary rights of freedom of conscience, and the fact that freedom of conscience is a protection for believers, doubters, and skeptics, but not for beliefs.

Two such faulty approaches are especially common. On the one hand, some people view tolerance as the attitude of those who believe nothing and as the fruit of indifference toward faiths. On the other hand, some people believe that disagreement with, and criticism of other beliefs is innately intolerant. In response: Discourse concerning the ultimate beliefs of others must be respectful, but many critiques and caricatures are not 'blasphemy' or 'defamation.' There must be a commitment to the equality of freedom of conscience and religious freedom for all. Like all human rights, freedom of thought, conscience, and religion is the right of every human being without exception. There can be no human rights for some but not others.

All approaches that ignore the consequential character of ultimate beliefs in life and the primary place of religious freedom, and its rights, responsibilities, and respect, are inadequate for the proper defense of justice and freedom. Worse, such faulty approaches can also be dangerous, because either their motive or their unintended effect is to favor one religion or worldview at the expense of others, and so to undermine the equality and universality of the right of freedom of conscience in another way. It is never an advance in human rights when special protection for some people becomes oppression or discrimination for others. Nor when law is used to provide protection for a particular belief to the detriment of individuals who do not subscribe to that belief.

### ARTICLE 28 – PACESETTER FOR TOMORROW

The rights to freedom of thought, conscience, and religion, as well as the vision of a cosmopolitan and civil global public square are a crucial pacesetter and precedent for preventing global chaos and moving toward the governance of the global civilization of tomorrow. As globalization has advanced and human interconnectedness has increased, it is evident that global communications and global economics have far outstripped global politics. What global governance will mean in the future is not yet clear. But if the world is to respect both diversity and universality, and justice is to strengthen freedom in the search for peace, then a cosmopolitan and civil public square is a necessary stepping stone toward the global governance that is to come.

### ARTICLE 29 – NO FINAL WORD

The stern verdict of time on all human endeavor is "This too shall pass," which means that the wisest and best intentioned settlements of religion and public life are no more than the best so far. We therefore acknowledge humbly that this Charter is neither perfect, nor final, nor agreed by all. It represents our best current judgment as to the place of the rights to freedom of thought, conscience, and religion in our world. But it is always open to future generations to improve and advance these affirmations, aiming always to build societies that are yet freer and more just, and thus more favorable to the highest human flourishing and the creation of a good world.

## CONCLUSION

In conclusion, we issue *The Global Charter of Conscience* in the strong hope that, like *The Universal Declaration of Human Rights*, it will advance the cause of freedom of thought, conscience, and religion for people of all faiths, religious or naturalistic. Our express goals for the Charter are three:

- First, that it will be a beacon expressing the highest human aspirations for freedom of thought, conscience, and religion.
- Second, that it will be a benchmark enabling the most rigorous assessments of freedom of thought, conscience, and religion, which communities, countries, and civilizations have achieved so far.
- Third, that it will be a blueprint empowering the most practical implementation of freedom of thought, conscience, and religion, in both law and civic education.

In sum, *The Global Charter of Conscience* is a response to a crucial and unavoidable part of the promise and peril of our time. Only by the wise and courageous application of these affirmations can humanity turn the danger of the differences between ultimate beliefs into a dignity of difference that will help make the world safer for diversity.

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**Among the first people to endorse The Global Charter of Conscience are the following:**

(names of organisations given for identification purposes only)

- Prof Dr Heiner Bielefeldt, *UN Special Rapporteur on freedom of religion or belief.*
- Habib Charles Malik, *PhD, Lebanon.*
- Dr Jean-Paul Willaime, *Sociologist and Research Director, l'École pratique des Hautes Études (Sorbonne University, Paris, France).*
- Prof N. Barney Pityana, *Rector of The College of the Transfiguration, South Africa, Chairman of the South African Human Rights Commission from 1995 to 2001.*
- Dr. Thomas K. Johnson, *Academic Council, International Institute for Religious Freedom of the World Evangelical Alliance, United States of America.*
- Rev. Godfrey Yogarajah, *Executive Director Religious Liberty Commission of the World Evangelical Alliance.*
- David McIlroy, *Barrister, Visiting Senior Lecturer in Law, SOAS, United Kingdom.*
- Prof Dr John Warwick Montgomery, *Professor Emeritus of Law & Humanities, University of Bedfordshire (UK), Barrister-at-Law (England and Wales), Avocat à la Cour (Barreau de Paris).*
- Prof Dr Thomas Schirmacher, *Director, International Institute for Religious Freedom (Bonn, Cape Town, Colombo) and Professor of Sociology of Religion (Timisoara, Romania).*
- Étienne Lhermenault, *President of the National Council of Evangelicals in France.*
- Jonathan Chaplin, *Director, Kirby Laing Institute for Christian Ethics.*

## SPECIAL RECOMMENDATION

The *"Global Charter of Conscience"* is a powerful document. I appreciate its enormous potential to inspire practical commitment on behalf of freedom of thought, conscience, and religion or belief and to contribute to a better understanding of human rights in general. In the spirit of the 1948 *Universal Declaration of Human Rights* (UDHR), the Charter underlines the universal validity of freedom of religion or belief as an inextricable part of a holistic human rights agenda in which civil, political, economic, social and cultural rights can mutually reinforce each other.

Against the background of existing authoritarianism in many parts of the world, the Charter makes it clear that recognition of everyone's freedom of religion or belief must never be misconceived as an act of mere political tolerance or even state mercy. Rather, being based on the inherent dignity of all human beings, freedom of religion or belief has the rank of an inalienable universal human right, thus commanding unconditional respect. To cite the strong words of the Charter: *"It is therefore not a government's right to grant or deny, but a government's responsibility to guarantee and guard."*

In addition, the Charter emphasises that respect for freedom of religion or belief goes way beyond the private sphere by contributing to the emergence of a "global public sphere" in which the existing diversity of deep convictions – religious or non-religious, new or traditional – can manifest itself in a fair and inclusive manner. It would thus be too narrow to assume that freedom of religion or belief is a right only of those who consider themselves as religiously committed in a traditional understanding. As the Charter points out, the right to freedom of religion or belief has a broad range of application by equally protecting "believers, doubters and skeptics" while not shielding any ideas or beliefs against public criticism.

In a world in which *"the challenge of living with our deepest differences has been raised to a new level of intensity,"* freedom of religion or belief may be more important than ever for the development of a culture of respectful coexistence and open communication. I see the *"Global Charter of Conscience"* as a strong support in this on-going endeavour. May the Charter find many readers across continents, cultures and denominations.



**Prof Dr Heiner Bielefeldt,**  
*UN Special Rapporteur on  
freedom of religion or belief*