

**Written Submission**

---

**COUNTERING  
RELIGIOUS HATRED  
CONSTITUTING INCITEMENT  
TO DISCRIMINATION,  
HOSTILITY OR VIOLENCE**

---

**Journalists and Writers Foundation's  
Contribution to the Call for Inputs by the  
Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights**

(Human Rights Council Resolution 53/1)  
A/HRC/RES/53/1



February 28, 2026  
NEW YORK

## **TABLE OF CONTENTS**

### **1. EXECUTIVE SUMMARY**

### **2. CONTRIBUTIONS BY PANELISTS**

- **Reflections by Dr. Rocío Cortés-Rodríguez**  
Department of Theology, Pontifical Catholic University of Chile
- **Reflections by Prof. Dr. Joan Hernandez Serret**  
Professor, Faculty of Communications, International University of Catalonia, Spain
- **Reflections by Ishka Eraman**  
Attorney and Vice President, The Hindu Unity Forum of South Africa
- **Reflections by Dr. Ali Unsal**  
Theologian and Writer, Deputy Director, WISE Institute, USA
- **Reflections by Dr. Marcel Israel**  
Board Member of Religions for Peace Europe and Bulgaria, Jewish Communities in Bulgaria

### **3. CONTRIBUTION, QUESTIONS AND REFLECTIONS BY THE AUDIENCE**

- Role of Political Leadership in Religious Polarization
- Causes and Prevention of Religious Violence
- Intra-Religious Conflict and Its Impact
- Government, Media, and Majoritarian Pressures
- Challenges to Religious Education Initiatives
- Expressions of Appreciation and Support
- Overall Engagement

### **4. MODERATOR'S REFLECTIONS AND SUMMARY**

- **Reflections by Dr. Rajendran Govender**  
Commissioner of the Cultural, Religious and Linguistic Rights Commission of South Africa

**Journalists and Writers Foundation’s Contribution on  
Countering Religious Hatred Constituting Incitement to  
Discrimination, Hostility or Violence**

(Human Rights Council Resolution 53/1)

1. The present contribution is submitted in response to the call for contributions pursuant to Human Rights Council resolution 53/1, to inform on the outcome of the virtual panel - *Religious Freedom in Pluralistic Societies: Collective Responsibility in Countering Discrimination, Hate, and Intolerance*.

**1. EXECUTIVE SUMMARY**

2. On February 10, 2026, the Journalists and Writers Foundation (JWF) convened a virtual panel entitled *Religious Freedom in Pluralistic Societies: Collective Responsibility in Countering Discrimination, Hate, and Intolerance* as part of World Interfaith Harmony Week 2026.
3. The virtual panel<sup>1</sup> moderated by Dr. Rajendran Govender, Commissioner of the Cultural, Religious and Linguistic Rights Commission of South Africa, addressed the growing global challenges of religious intolerance, hate speech, discrimination, and identity-based polarization, emphasizing their impact on social cohesion, democratic stability, and peaceful coexistence.
4. Key themes of the panel included the importance of religious freedom as a foundation for inclusive and democratic societies; the ways discrimination and hostility take root at the community level; and the need for ethical public speech in diverse societies. Participants highlighted in particular interfaith and intercultural dialogue as a practical tool for building peace, reducing polarization, and moving beyond symbolic engagement toward lived social practice. The discussion also explored preventive approaches to addressing ideological extremism and social fragmentation.
5. The panel underscored that protecting freedom of religion or belief is not solely the responsibility of governments or media, but a shared civic duty. Families, faith communities, educators, policymakers, civil society organizations, and individuals all play a role in shaping attitudes, public discourse, and everyday interactions that either reinforce inclusion or enable prejudice.
6. Aligning its objectives with the *OHCHR Call for Input under Human Rights Council Resolution 53/1 on countering religious hatred that incites discrimination, hostility, or violence* - the event aimed at increased public awareness of religious freedom as a shared societal value, stronger recognition of interfaith dialogue as a mechanism for social harmony, and practical guidance for communities to address discrimination constructively. It reinforced a collective commitment to dignity, mutual respect, and peaceful coexistence across religious and belief traditions.

---

<sup>1</sup> Virtual panel is available at <https://youtu.be/B-BU5YUdkTw?si=1YExXqwbsIVLyLiJ>

7. The present submission reflects the outcome of the panel discussion, linking grassroots perspectives with international human rights frameworks to identify root causes, policy gaps, and preventive strategies. The submission contains multi-stakeholder and practical recommendations to strengthen social cohesion, protect freedom of religion or belief, and counter incitement to discrimination, hostility, or violence, both online and offline.
8. The contributions of panelists that follow were guided by a preset list of questions designed to align with the key elements of Human Rights Council resolution 53/1, and to ensure a focused and structured exchange.

## **2. CONTRIBUTIONS BY PANELISTS**

**Reflections by Dr. Rocío Cortés-Rodríguez**

Department of Theology, Pontifical Catholic University of Chile

---

### ***Religious Freedom in Pluralistic Societies: From Legal Protection to Dialogue***

#### **Why is religious freedom essential for inclusive and democratic societies?**

9. Religious freedom is both a legal right and a lived social reality. Legal protections are indispensable, particularly for minorities, but they are not sufficient on their own. Discrimination and polarization often emerge through everyday exclusion, ignorance, and fear long before they appear as overt hostility or violence. At its core, religious freedom safeguards freedom of conscience and affirms the dignity of individuals whose identities and moral frameworks are shaped by belief. The experience of countries such as Chile demonstrates that secularism, when properly understood, does not exclude religion from public life but creates the conditions for plural coexistence and constructive contributions to the common good.

#### **How do discrimination and religious hatred take root within communities?**

10. Religious intolerance typically begins with symbolic exclusion rather than violence. It grows when beliefs are dismissed as irrational or threatening, when religion is confined to the private sphere, or when minorities are spoken about rather than engaged directly. These dynamics can also arise within religious traditions themselves, where unfamiliar practices create tension. Hatred thrives where there is little encounter and where public discourse lacks ethical responsibility.

#### **How can sacred texts and theological scholarship deepen interreligious understanding rather than division?**

11. Sacred texts and theology become constructive when approached as tools for understanding rather than instruments of identity conflict. Responsible theological scholarship strengthens religious identity while providing the conceptual framework to engage difference without hostility.

12. Division arises not from scripture itself but from literalist, decontextualized, or politicized interpretations. Careful, historically grounded, and community-based interpretation helps prevent misuse, repairs harmful narratives, and humanizes religious difference. When read relationally, sacred texts can foster humility, ethical responsibility, and mutual recognition.

### **How should public speech be guided ethically in diverse societies?**

13. Public language shapes social reality. Media, religious leaders, educators, and policymakers share responsibility for ensuring that public discourse does not reinforce fear or exclusion. Ethical communication requires accuracy, restraint, and a commitment to fostering understanding rather than amplifying polarization or grievance.

### **How can societies prevent polarization and ideological extremism?**

14. Preventing polarization requires sustained investment in religious literacy, education, and opportunities for meaningful encounter across differences. Dialogue must move beyond symbolism into everyday practice across civic spaces such as schools, universities, healthcare settings, and community institutions. Genuine dialogue does not require abandoning convictions; it requires clarity of identity combined with openness to learning from others.

### **Conclusion**

15. Religious freedom cannot be sustained through legal frameworks alone. It depends on social conditions that make freedom meaningful in daily life, including encounter, education, and shared responsibility across families, faith communities, institutions, and civil society.

16. Countering religious hatred ultimately requires investment in relationships, because durable social cohesion is built through engagement and mutual recognition, not separation.

### **Reflections by Prof. Dr. Joan Hernandez Serret**

[Professor, Faculty of Communications, International University of Catalonia, Spain](#)

---

### ***What role can education systems, communication platforms, and media narratives play in preventing religious polarization in pluralistic societies?***

17. Education, communication platforms, and media shape how people perceive difference. Their influence is decisive: they can either normalize coexistence or reinforce division. Education systems are the first line of prevention. Schools are where children learn to live with difference beyond the family environment. When classrooms reflect the real diversity of society, everyday interaction turns coexistence into a lived experience rather than an abstract ideal. Shared learning and social mixing reduce prejudice early by replacing stereotypes with personal relationships. This form of daily reciprocity is one of the most effective ways to prevent fear and hostility from taking root later in life.

18. Media narratives carry a parallel responsibility. The pressure for speed and simplification often produces stereotypes and reductive portrayals of religious communities. Language matters:

sweeping generalizations and collective labels erase individual complexity and reinforce prejudice.

19. Ethical journalism should therefore prioritize verified information over opinion presented as fact, ensure a diversity of voices so communities can represent themselves, and avoid framing entire groups as responsible for the actions of individuals. Responsible media can humanize difference rather than reduce it.
20. Communication platforms, particularly digital social media, present both opportunity and risk. While structured spaces such as interfaith councils and dialogue forums function as practical arenas for cooperation and shared problem-solving, online environments often operate differently.
21. Algorithm-driven content tends to reinforce homogeneity, amplify conflict, and create echo chambers that deepen polarization and dehumanize perceived opponents. Preventing this requires stronger media literacy, critical engagement, and the intentional creation of digital spaces that encourage respectful exchange rather than confrontation.

## **Conclusion**

22. Preventing religious polarization depends on shaping social habits of perception and interaction. Education builds early empathy through contact. Responsible media and communication practices prevent the spread of stereotypes and collective blame. Together, they help form the ethical culture on which democratic coexistence depends. Social cohesion ultimately rests on everyday choices to understand rather than judge, and to treat difference as a basis for shared life rather than division.

## **Reflections by Ishka Eraman**

*Attorney and Vice President, The Hindu Unity Forum of South Africa*

---

***How can faith communities, especially youth initiatives and grassroots leadership, strengthen tolerance?***

**Why are faith communities central to strengthening tolerance?**

23. In pluralistic societies, religious freedom depends not only on constitutional protection but also on everyday social practice. While governments establish legal safeguards, individuals, faith institutions, and community organizations often have the greatest influence on attitudes and behavior.
24. These spaces shape how people learn respect, equality, and coexistence. When religious communities actively promote inclusion and reject discrimination, they reinforce human dignity and ensure that the exercise of one group's rights does not undermine the rights of others.

### **What role do religious organizations play in preventing intolerance and extremism?**

25. Faith institutions are uniquely positioned to guide their members toward responsible and respectful engagement with others. Because they influence beliefs, values, and social norms, they can either fuel division or foster restraint and understanding.
26. When religious leaders emphasize fairness, compassion, and the ethical limits of asserting one's own rights, they help prevent fanaticism and discourage the idea that protecting one identity requires diminishing another. Education within religious settings is critical to counter ignorance and enable informed and respectful coexistence.

### **Why is education within faith communities essential?**

27. Knowledge reduces fear and resistance. When young people and community members understand both their own traditions and the diversity around them, they are more likely to accept difference and engage constructively.
28. Education within faith contexts reinforces core values such as kindness, tolerance, and inclusivity, and helps individuals approach social tensions with perspective rather than reaction.

### **How do youth initiatives strengthen tolerance?**

29. Youth engagement is one of the most effective long-term strategies for building inclusive societies. Participation in faith-based youth programs develops communication skills, confidence, empathy, and social awareness.
30. Service activities and shared projects expose young people to diverse experiences and encourage humility, responsibility, and cooperation. These experiences shape lifelong attitudes toward difference and leadership.

### **What is the importance of grassroots leadership?**

31. Grassroots leaders create accessible, trusted spaces where young people feel comfortable engaging and learning. Their proximity to the community allows them to model inclusive values and provide practical guidance on respectful interaction across religious and cultural lines. When youth are given leadership opportunities at the local level, they become agents of inclusion who can influence their peers and communities.

### **How can interfaith and community initiatives support this work?**

32. Practical, shared activities are more effective than abstract dialogue alone. Joint service projects, environmental campaigns, community events, and informal social gatherings create opportunities for relationship-building across religious boundaries. These interactions normalize cooperation, reduce social distance, and reinforce mutual respect through lived experience.

## **Conclusion**

33. Strengthening tolerance requires sustained investment in youth, local leadership, and everyday interaction. Faith communities that prioritize education, service, and inclusive engagement help develop empathetic leaders and socially responsible citizens. Over time, these grassroots efforts build the social foundations for a more cohesive, respectful, and resilient pluralistic society.

### **Reflections by Dr. Ali Unsal**

Theologian and Writer, Deputy Director, WISE Institute, USA

---

## ***Religious Freedom, Polarization, and Systematic Discrimination in Türkiye: The Case of the Hizmet Movement***

### **Overview**

34. Since the failed coup attempt of July 15, 2016, religious freedom in Türkiye has significantly eroded through selective and targeted measures against individuals and institutions associated with the Hizmet Movement and its founder, Fethullah Gülen.
35. Rather than applying restrictions in a neutral manner, actions by the authorities have treated religious affiliation and intellectual association as indicators of criminality. This approach has contributed to widespread polarization, social exclusion, and long-term damage to social cohesion.

### **Criminalization of Religious Thought and Expression**

36. Religious texts, sermons, and writings linked to Hizmet have been used as evidence in terrorism-related prosecutions despite containing no incitement to violence. Possession, study, or recommendation of such materials has led to investigation or prosecution.
37. Religious leaders and educators were dismissed from their positions, not for misconduct but for perceived affiliation. Many lost their professional roles, community standing, and social networks, creating a climate of fear, self-censorship, and the effective removal of an entire religious-intellectual tradition from public life.

### **Institutionalized Hate Speech and Social Stigmatization**

38. Official rhetoric and pro-government media have framed Hizmet followers as traitors, internal enemies, or existential threats. This language has reinforced moral exclusion and normalized social hostility, leading to discrimination in workplaces, neighborhoods, and family networks. When such narratives originate from state authorities, they shape public behavior and legitimize exclusion.

## **Mass Professional and Social Exclusion**

39. Emergency decrees led to the dismissal of tens of thousands of professionals across sectors without individualized evidence or effective legal remedy. Informal blacklisting has restricted access to private employment, while passport cancellations have limited mobility. The consequences have extended to families, producing long-term economic and social marginalization often described as a form of civil death.

## **Politicization of Religious Institutions**

40. Mosques and Friday sermons have been used to reinforce political loyalty and frame certain groups as internal threats. The use of religious language to stigmatize a specific community has transformed places of worship from inclusive spiritual spaces into instruments of social division, undermining both religious integrity and public trust.

## **Restrictions on Religious Rights in Detention**

41. Reports indicate that detainees associated with Hizmet have faced limitations on basic religious practices, including access to religious materials, communal worship, and spiritual support. In some cases, discriminatory treatment combined with inadequate care has resulted in serious harm and loss of life, highlighting the human impact of these policies.

## **Erosion of the Rule of Law**

42. Many prosecutions have relied on association rather than individual conduct, weakening principles of legal certainty and individual responsibility. The European Court of Human Rights has in this context issued multiple judgments identifying violations of fundamental rights, including unlawful detention and denial of fair trial guarantees.

## **Conclusion: Broader Implications for Religious Freedom**

43. The situation in Türkiye illustrates how quickly religious freedom can be undermined when the state determines which beliefs or affiliations are acceptable. The issue extends beyond a single movement: when one religious community is excluded or criminalized, the broader principles of pluralism, human dignity, and social peace are at risk.
44. Protecting freedom of religion or belief therefore requires safeguarding the rights of all communities equally, as a foundational condition for justice, coexistence, and long-term stability.

## Reflections by Dr. Marcel Israel

Board Member of Religions for Peace Europe and Bulgaria, Jewish Communities in Bulgaria

---

*From European Interfaith Cooperation: What practical institutional partnerships best strengthen religious harmony across diverse societies?*

### **Which partnerships are most effective at the institutional level?**

45. Experience across Europe shows that religious harmony is strongest when interfaith initiatives move beyond dialogue alone and build sustained partnerships with public institutions and civil society. Effective cooperation includes engagement with municipal and regional authorities (such as city senates), national ministries, parliamentary groups, universities, research institutes, and faith communities.
46. These partnerships embed interfaith work within public policy, education, and community life, ensuring that religious freedom and social cohesion are treated as shared societal responsibilities rather than isolated religious concerns.

### **How do national interfaith bodies translate cooperation into practice?**

47. National platforms, such as those operating within Religions for Peace Europe, function as coordination hubs that bring together religious leaders, academics, professionals, and public officials.
48. In countries such as Bulgaria, interfaith forums organize seminars, roundtables, and public events that connect religious communities with universities, national academies of science, and government ministries responsible for education, culture, health, interior affairs, and foreign policy. This multidisciplinary approach allows interfaith engagement to address real social issues and build institutional trust.

### **Why is long-term partnership essential in post-conflict or post-authoritarian contexts?**

49. Historical experience demonstrates that discrimination and mistrust often emerge from past systems of repression or forced assimilation. In post-communist societies, where religion was restricted and civil society weakened, rebuilding trust requires sustained cooperation across communities and institutions.
50. Bulgaria's current collaboration among Muslim, Orthodox, Catholic, Protestant, and Jewish communities illustrates how long-term partnership can restore confidence and normalize coexistence after periods of state-led exclusion.

### **What role do academic and research institutions play?**

51. Partnerships with universities and national research bodies strengthen interfaith work by grounding it in evidence, education, and professional expertise. Academic involvement

supports religious literacy, policy development, and public education, while also creating neutral spaces for dialogue that bring together scholars, religious leaders, and policymakers.

### **How can interfaith dialogue move beyond symbolism?**

52. Dialogue becomes meaningful when it is linked to practical cooperation. Joint initiatives addressing environmental protection, disaster response, public health, social services, and community welfare transform interfaith engagement into visible contributions to the common good. This practical collaboration builds trust and demonstrates the social value of religious cooperation.

### **What broader social actors are critical?**

53. Families and civil society remain the foundation of tolerance, as attitudes toward difference are learned early and reinforced through everyday social interaction. Schools and community organizations complement this role by promoting education, participation, and shared civic values.

### **How should public discourse and democratic institutions support these efforts?**

54. Ethical public communication is essential. Narratives that incite hatred or collective blame undermine social cohesion and should be actively countered. At the same time, preventing polarization requires investment in education, digital literacy, civic participation, and strong democratic institutions that reinforce inclusion and resilience against extremism.

### **Conclusion**

55. The most effective model for strengthening religious harmony is partnership-based and multi-level: interfaith networks working alongside governments, academic institutions, civil society, and local communities.

56. When cooperation is institutionalized, practical, and oriented toward shared social challenges, it builds durable trust, strengthens democratic stability, and makes pluralism a functioning reality rather than an abstract principle.

### **3. CONTRIBUTION, QUESTIONS AND REFLECTIONS BY THE AUDIENCE**

57. Approximately 120 participants joined the event via Zoom and actively engaged through the chat. Their questions and comments reflected strong interest in the political, social, and institutional dimensions of religious freedom, as well as appreciation for the practical insights shared by the speakers.

### **Role of Political Leadership in Religious Polarization**

58. Participants raised concerns about the responsibility of political leaders in shaping religious tensions. One question asked to what extent political actors -both in government and opposition

- should be held accountable for the rise of religious hatred globally. Related reflections emphasized how political rhetoric, policy choices, electoral strategies, and identity-based mobilization can either mitigate tensions or deepen divisions.

### **Causes and Prevention of Religious Violence**

59. Audience members also asked why religious violence persists worldwide and what practical measures can address its root causes. The question reflected broader concern about the interaction between social grievances, political manipulation, misinformation, and the misuse of religious identity.

### **Intra-Religious Conflict and Its Impact**

60. A question directed to the panel addressed internal disputes within the same religious tradition, particularly when organizations publicly criticize one another on social media. Participants highlighted concerns that such conflicts may weaken the credibility of faith communities and undermine broader interreligious cooperation.

### **Government, Media, and Majoritarian Pressures**

61. Several reflections noted that governments and media institutions can play a decisive role in either promoting inclusion or fueling polarization. Concerns were raised about majoritarian politics, communal narratives, and media-driven propaganda. Participants suggested the need for stronger legal and institutional safeguards against rhetoric and practices that incite division.

### **Challenges to Religious Education Initiatives**

62. Participants asked how institutions should respond when efforts to introduce inclusive religious education face resistance. In response, panelists pointed to practical dialogue-based approaches such as Scriptural Reasoning and referenced institutional resources, including those developed by the Rose Castle Foundation, which has experience implementing interfaith learning in challenging environments.

### **Expressions of Appreciation and Support**

63. Many participants shared messages of gratitude, noting that the discussion encouraged empathy, listening, and relationship-building across differences. Comments emphasized that pluralism requires ongoing effort and that the panel's practical perspectives helped reinforce the importance of mutual respect, inclusion, and shared responsibility.

### **Overall Engagement**

64. The quality of questions and reflections demonstrated both the global relevance of the topic and the strong interest in actionable strategies. Audience participation enriched the discussion and underscored the need for continued dialogue on the political, educational, and social dimensions of religious freedom in pluralistic societies.

#### **4. MODERATOR'S REFELCTIONS AND SUMMARY**

##### **Reflections by Dr. Rajendran Govender**

Commissioner of the Cultural, Religious and Linguistic Rights Commission of South Africa

---

##### **Overview**

65. The virtual panel *Religious Freedom in Pluralistic Societies: Collective Responsibility in Countering Discrimination, Hate, and Intolerance* brought together scholars, theologians, legal experts, and civil society leaders from diverse regions. The range of perspectives raised by panelists highlighted both, the global urgency of the issue and the shared responsibility required to protect religious freedom in increasingly diverse societies.
66. Active participation and meaningful exchange between panelists and a globally engaged audience was enabled by the virtual format, which was smoothly managed. The discussion was rigorous, globally representative, practical in orientation, and conducted in a spirit of mutual respect.

##### **Why is religious freedom essential for inclusive and democratic societies?**

67. Religious freedom emerged as a core democratic value grounded in human dignity and freedom of conscience. Panelists emphasized that stable democracies do not suppress diversity but manage it through legal protection, equal treatment, and inclusion. Safeguarding minority rights was identified as essential to social cohesion, institutional legitimacy, and constitutional integrity.

##### **How do discrimination and religious hatred take root within communities?**

68. Hatred rarely begins with overt violence. It develops through stereotypes, misinformation, social exclusion, and the political instrumentalization of identity. Structural inequalities, unresolved historical tensions, and the rapid spread of digital misinformation were identified as key factors that intensify division and normalize prejudice.

##### **What roles do families, faith institutions, schools, and civil society play in promoting tolerance?**

69. Tolerance is shaped through multiple social institutions. Families cultivate early attitudes of empathy and respect. Faith institutions influence moral norms and can model inclusive leadership. Schools strengthen religious literacy and critical thinking. Civil society organizations create spaces for dialogue, advocacy, and cooperative community initiatives that translate values into practice.

### **How can interfaith dialogue move beyond symbolism to lived social practice?**

70. Panelists stressed the need to shift from occasional ceremonial engagement to sustained collaboration. Joint service projects, humanitarian work, and long-term partnerships were identified as effective ways to integrate interfaith cooperation into everyday social life and build trust across communities.

### **How should public speech be guided ethically in diverse societies?**

71. Public discourse carries significant social impact and should be grounded in dignity, accuracy, and responsibility. Political, religious, and media leaders bear particular responsibility to avoid inflammatory or dehumanizing language. Freedom of expression must be balanced with safeguards against incitement to hostility or violence.

### **How can societies prevent polarization and ideological extremism?**

72. Prevention requires a comprehensive approach: inclusive education, strong and accountable democratic institutions, efforts to reduce structural inequalities, opportunities for cross-community interaction, and responsible governance of digital information environments.

### **Audience Engagement**

73. Participants contributed with thoughtful and substantive questions, prompting deeper analysis and practical reflection. The level of engagement underscored the international relevance of the topic and the demand for continued dialogue and policy attention.

### **Overall Assessment and Concluding Reflection**

74. The virtual panel *Religious Freedom in Pluralistic Societies* reaffirmed that religious freedom is not only about protecting belief. It is about sustaining coexistence, strengthening democratic resilience, and upholding human dignity. In pluralistic societies, tolerance must move toward solidarity, and dialogue must translate into shared responsibility.

\*\*\*