

**New  
Internationalist**

# Argue better

**New Internationalist Easier English  
Ready Upper Intermediate Lesson**

Today's lesson:

- Reading
- Thinking / planning
- Speaking
- Language of agreement and disagreement, interrupting, and managing discussions

First argument:

‘Is it a good idea for  
religion to be part of  
politics?’

What do you think these two women will say about it?

[https://eewiki.newint.org/index.php?title=Is it a good idea for religion to be part of politics%3F](https://eewiki.newint.org/index.php?title=Is_it_a_good_idea_for_religion_to_be_part_of_politics%3F)

Make a few notes about what you think

**YES**

**NO**



**DAWN FOSTER**

Dawn Foster is a staff writer for *Tribune* and *Jacobin* magazines, and a columnist for *The Guardian* newspaper. She regularly appears as a political commentator on the BBC's *Newsnight* and *Sky News*.



**YASMIN ALIBHAI-BROWN**

Yasmin Alibhai-Brown is an award-winning journalist, broadcaster, author and weekly columnist for the *i* newspaper. She is also a co-founder of the charity British Muslims for Secular Democracy.

## Argument: Is it a good idea for religion to be part of politics?

**YASMIN - No:** Religion and state should always be separate. I am a Shi'a Muslim. I pray, I go to mosque and I feel part of a wider global community. My religion is in my heart and head. It helps me when there are lies and noise. It makes me try hard to be a better person. Millions of believers from different religions and countries feel the same. But political Islam is aggressive, powerful, and totally unethical. Think about Iran and Saudi Arabia. Iran is a brutal Shi'a theocracy and Saudi Arabia is a Sunni-Wahhabi powerbase which violates every human right. Think about authoritarian, powerful Catholicism. Secular states have their bad histories too and some, like China, are behaving in a terrible way towards individuals and minorities. But I think that the worst states in the world are those that use God to control the minds and actions of their people. Religion does have a place in public life. But when bishops, rabbis, priests, and mullahs get political roles, they corrupt politics and religion.

**DAWN - Yes:** Like Yasmin, I'm religious, I am a very active Catholic – I go to mass a few times a week. I meet my church's youth group, I go on prayer retreats. Catholicism is part of my life like socialism and trade unionism. It is a part of all of my life. My belief in equality and workers' rights comes from my religion and my politics. Collective action is important for the success of campaigns and movements. I belong to the Catholics for Labour group in the UK Labour Party. It has people from the Right of the Party to people to the Left of the Party. We all work together and our differences are not important. Oscar Romero was made a saint in 2019. At first, he thought politics and religion must be separate. But when he saw military police killing innocent religious people, low-income workers, and rebel priests like Rutilio Grande, he decided to use his position to criticise the government and stop the killings. He was assassinated, but he has inspired millions of people, and his death put pressure on the US government to change its position a little in Latin America. As religious people, we must act when we see injustice. We have to fight for people and for a common humanity.

**YASMIN - No:** I am not as deeply religious as you are, Dawn, and I do not think my religion is the most important part of my self. It is a part of who I am, because I was born a Shi'a Muslim and my mother was a real believer. And she made me into the person I am. But she could see how religions could and did stop change and how religious leaders exploited human fears to control them. When I was six, she took me away from of our faith school in Uganda and sent me to a multifaith school instead. I go to mosque sometimes and I find it helpful for a time to be with other believers. But very soon I find their opinions annoying. Our Islam is open and modern but the believers seem to feel they are superior. This, you will know, is the same in all religions. You are right about the good work of religious people and many of them are heroes. But in the past and now different forms of Christianity have had a terrible effect on people around the world. Their abuse of power is worst when it is linked to governments. For example, when they make people feel they must have babies, they must punish gay people, they must reject unmarried mothers. Political leaders control more. Look at the anti-gay laws across Africa. The laws against abortion in so many Catholic countries. Are you not against such violations of human rights? You say religious people must act when they see injustice but how can we understand the millions of religious people who seem to agree with terrible injustices? You don't seem to understand that and I think you should.

**DAWN - Yes:** I agree that religious communities can become insular. That's why it is so important to meet people from other churches and faiths, and with people with no faith. When religion is separate from politics, it becomes more insular and more open to abuse. Politics plays a very big part in our lives, and political policy is very important for a lot of the ideas at the centre of the main faiths- for example, charity, togetherness, human dignity, helping family life, fighting homelessness, and opposing war and violence. These ideas should not belong only to the Left or the Right, and people of all faiths should protest against politicians for not building a fair society. A lot of the issues in our financial system do not agree with many ideas in Christianity and Islam. And people from all religions can help to fix a broken system - campaigners and party members and faith leaders. People respect religious leaders and listen to their opinions when they speak for the oppressed. For example, when the Archbishop of Canterbury criticised British government policies that do not fight poverty. If we involve religion in public life and show that faith and politics can work together, it puts pressure on religious institutions to be more open and stop the silence that can let abuse continue.

**YASMIN - No:** I agree with you when you write that religions can (and should) bring people together. People of faith can bring these values into politics and society. Charity, for example, is a part of Islam and of Christianity. And I know how much Christian Aid or Islamic Relief does around the world. But I fear and hate the way religion works with political power, for example, when church leaders bless Donald Trump and say his opponents are godless. The worst example is Myanmar, where Buddhist monks have supported the persecutions of the Rohingya Muslims. And women and girls, even rape victims, are put in prison in some South American states if they have abortions. And here in England and Wales, more faith schools are starting. These schools have good exam results, but they are socially conservative and focused on their own religious ideas. In Northern Ireland, people are encouraging integrated schools because the people there know what happens when religious and political apartheid continue from generation to generation. I am so happy we talked about this. It has helped me understand why faith means so much to many of us and made me put myself in a wrong position: states and faiths must be separate.

**DAWN - Yes:** But in the US, many religious leaders have spoken against Trump – a number of nuns and Jesuit priests were arrested for demonstrating against his immigration policies after they refused to leave a sit-in. Religious leaders have been deeply involved in anti-racist and anti-fascist struggles, and often killed themselves when speaking against repressive governments. The demand for faith schools isn't only about exam results, but it's because people want to connect with their own culture. My Catholic school taught us a lot about the history of oppression, struggle, and the fight for civil rights. Parents don't choose all schools for social conservatism. In Northern Ireland, especially with housing, the state has not thought about religious backgrounds and rushed to build integrated communities without thinking about safety and cultural history. This has resulted in attacks on homes and families running away for their personal safety after police warnings. The state must think about how important religion is to so many people. The state must not try to impose secularism on a community without thinking about the consequences.

# How did / could you do the following:

Interrupt politely

Agree

Partially agree

Disagree

Manage the  
discussion

Clarify direction

Review what has  
been said so far

Some suggestions - match:

**1/ Interrupt politely**

**2/ Agree**

**3/ Partially agree**

**4/ Disagree**

a)

- Well, I think you're right about xxx, but not really about xxx
- Actually, I'm not so sure all of that is true

b)

- Can I just say ...
- If I could, I'd like to just say something

c)

- I'm really sorry, but I can't agree on that, because ....
- I'm afraid I don't agree with you on that as ...

d)

- I agree, yes, that's a really important point!
- I totally agree with you!

And now match these suggestions too:

**5) Manage the discussion**

**6) Clarify direction**

**7) Review what has been said so far**

a)

But we've already agreed on that point  
Can we get back to the main question?

b)

OK, so we've got several points, now we need to ...

So let's see if we're ready to present now

c)

I'm not sure that's really relevant

Have we all had a say? – how about xx, what do you think?



Now use the language in this second argument:

**Should the West  
stop giving aid to  
Africa?**

# What do you think these two men will say?

<https://eewiki.newint.org/index.php?title=Argument: Should the West stop giving aid to Africa%3F>

## YES



### FIROZE MANJI

Firoze, a Kenyan activist, is founder and former editor of Pambazuka News, and founder and former Executive Director of Fahamu. He edits a number of publications including *African Awakening: The Emerging Revolutions* and is currently spending a year in Berlin as a Richard von Weizsäcker Fellow at the Robert Bosch Academy.

## NO



### PABLO YANGUAS

Pablo is a consultant on aid effectiveness who has worked in Ghana and Honduras with INGOs, the UK Department for International Development (DFID) and the World Bank. An Honorary Research Fellow at the University of Manchester's Global Development Institute, he is the author of *Why We Lie About Aid: Development and the Messy Politics of Change* (Zed Books 2018).

# Preparation:

- 1/ Make a few notes about what you think about the topic**
- 2/ Decide on 5 phrases you can try out to manage the argument, and tick them later when you use them**
- 3/ Read the argument from the weblink or from the next slide and note down 5 words or phrases you'd like to use – tick them later when you use them**

## Argument: Should the West stop giving aid to Africa?

**FIROZE:** Since it started, international aid from the West was for the purpose of bringing African economies into the global capitalist system. This system relies on Africa's resources to grow. The relationship of giving aid has developed over hundreds of years and it is harmful to most Africans. And no-one has challenged how the West gives aid. The West has exploited the people and resources of Africa for at least 50 years. Africa has helped develop the West as much as the West has helped underdevelop Africa. Africa gets about \$133.7 billion each year from official aid, grants, loans to private companies, gifts etc. (from a 2014 report). But at the same time, about \$191.9 billion comes back to the West from Africa in the form of debt repayments, multinational company profits, illegal money, fishing or cutting trees and in other ways. But this may be more than \$218 billion now. So Africa loses more than \$85 billion every year. This means that West is not helping Africa, but Africa is helping the West. So let's get the question right: Should Africa stop giving aid to the West? The answer to that is definitely yes.

**PABLO:** I agree that after decolonization, it has often been easy to see foreign aid as just another part of global capitalism. The aid system started after the Second World War to help the two big powers: communism and Western anti-communism. But this politics of power cannot be the only reason for more and more aid, to countries with no special interest for the West. Other reasons are humanitarianism and internationalism, whether these are positive or not. Stopping foreign aid will not stop exploitation in the future. Africa would simply owe more money (from Firoze's figures, from \$85 billion it owes now to over \$200 billion). If we stop Western aid, most money from other countries would only go to the most important people in African capitals. Now there are many groups that benefit from Western foreign aid.

**FIROZE:** Pablo, you haven't understood. Aid is not one way of getting money to Africa. Aid makes it possible to take money from Africa. In the world of today, we make nature something we can buy and sell, we privatize what should be public, we have free markets, and we allow big companies to destroy the environment. Aid uses public money to help these neoliberal ideas, so most people in the world get poorer and a few important people get richer. Many of the smaller groups that receive aid money often deliver services. Society accepts them and they are dependent on foreign aid. But they try to 'save' people. And so they need to keep the people who need 'saving'. The history of this industry is 'white saviours' going to save the black Africans. This is what 'aid' is now. But it doesn't have to be that way.

**PABLO:** People have been exploiting Africa for at least 500 years, but the aid system is only 60 years old. So aid cannot be the cause of exploitation. Here is an example. In Ghana, I see foreign companies looking for offshore oil and important people in Ghana are happy to give contracts that are not very transparent. No aid there. But a local group of Ghanaians are trying to change the policy about natural resources and make contracts more transparent – with the support of foreign aid. Also, in Rwanda, the government is very suspicious of foreign help, but they ask international partners for money for economic changes in the country – changes that could make them free of depending on aid. There are no white saviours or African victims in these examples. Just civil-society challengers trying to keep elites accountable; or leaders seeking funds to implement their own developmental vision. That right there is the kind of progressive action that aid can support around Africa.

**FIROZE:** Pablo, you should remember that oil, gas and coal are multi-billion-dollar businesses, but every year these companies get billions in help avoiding tax, financial help from their home governments: big donor countries such as the UK, US and Canada. Millions of dollars of aid go directly to projects to make businesses more responsible, such as the \$4.5-million grant by the Canadian government to Lundin for Africa, part of the big Lundin Group of mining companies, for mining in Ghana, Mali and Senegal. And OECD records show that Rwanda – a government that does not allow people to disagree with it – received more than \$1 billion dollars in aid in 2016. The 'progressive action' you talk about needs us to help people fighting for freedom. For example, Abahlali baseMjondolo, the South African movement for people who live in shacks, doesn't need or want 'aid', but needs protection for its members against attacks from the government. There are organizations around the world that work hard to make their governments and businesses help, and help people in many countries. This type of help gives hope for the basic economic, social and political changes we need.

**PABLO:** Firoze, I think this discussion is like the basic discussion between maximalists and incrementalists. Maximalists usually believe – like you are arguing well – that we need to change everything about what is happening today because it is so bad and corrupt. Incrementalists say that small improvements now are more practical than a revolution in the future, but we have to live in an imperfect world. And of course, this is an imperfect world. Some of the most successful reductions in poverty have been by governments that are not democratic; and more open societies often have greedy businesses or support illegal acts. That is the Africa of today. Similar to Europe, the US and Asia. Foreign aid is not perfect, but it helps in the grey areas of development. It works slowly: testing, searching, making many mistakes, but also helping people work together sometimes, and planting the seeds of change. This division between maximalists and incrementalists is not good. While the internationalists are arguing, many types of nationalists and populists will take control because people are afraid of the other one. I hope, if foreign aid is good or not, you can work together with incrementalists like me and see us as friends, not opposites as we work for progress in Africa.

# Feedback:

1/ How was the second argument better than the first one?

2/ How is your next argument / discussion going to be even better?

Practise reading some more balanced arguments on contentious topics, then find someone to discuss with:

<https://eewiki.newint.org/index.php?title=Arguments>