

Inter-Religious Inclusion in Europe

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Inter-Religious Inclusion in Europe' session of the European Leadership Conference on “Human Rights: Are Democratic Nations Upholding the Standard?” was chaired by interfaith veteran; Rev. Dr. Marcus Braybrooke, a retired Anglican priest, now holding the position of President of the World Congress of Faiths.

The first presentation, Freedom of Religion and Belief and Religious Freedom in Europe, was given by Mr. Peter Zoehrer, Chief Editor and Secretary General of FOREF-Europe (Forum for Religious Freedom-Europe) and Advisor to Universal Peace Federation (UPF) - Europe on Human Rights. Before asking the question whether standards of religious freedom and inclusion are upheld by democratic nations, one must first define religious freedom.

He defines religious freedom as: a principle that supports the freedom of an individual or community, in public or private, to manifest religion or belief in teaching, practice, worship, and observance. The concept is generally recognized also to include the freedom to change religion or not to follow any religion. Freedom of religion is considered by many people and nations to be a fundamental human right.

In a country with a state religion, freedom of religion is generally considered to mean that the government permits religious practices of other sects besides the state religion, and does not persecute believers in other faiths. Mr. Zoehrer also points out that Article 1 and Article 18 of the UN Declaration of Human rights states that everyone has the right to freedom of thought, conscience and religion.

Unfortunately, it is the opinion of some people that religious freedom does not afford the same protection of other human rights and these failings are not understood by many.

ForB (Freedom of Religion or Belief) is an EU initiative laying guidelines which are to be practiced beyond its borders, drawing attention, as appropriate, to freedom of religion or belief in the Universal Periodic Review of the UN Human Rights Council.

This organization lets the EU engage in the fight against all forms of intolerance and discrimination on grounds of religion or belief, and the implementation of the relevant legislation and action to focus on the right of individuals, to believe or not to believe from an impartial point of view. They also provide officials with practical guidance on how to seek to prevent violations of freedom of religion or belief, to analyze cases, and to react effectively to violations wherever they occur, in order to promote and protect freedom of religion or belief in the EU's external action.

Several studies clearly show that, in many countries, religious freedom is not practiced and the persecution of minority religions is widespread. Even countries within the EU are guilty of this charge and the reality is that the European Union is demanding Human Rights standards of others which it fails to implement within its own borders, practicing a “Drinking wine and preaching water” or “Do as I say! Don't do as I do” attitude.

After briefly citing examples of state level discrimination of religious belief within the EU; France, Switzerland and Hungary, Mr. Zoehrer ends by quoting Mahatma Gandhi, 'Each civilization should be judged by the way it treats her minorities' and Martin Luther King Jnr., 'We have to live together as brothers & sisters or perish together as fools.'

Rev. Dr. Marcus Braybrooke introduced the next speaker, Imam Dr. Abduljalil Sajid, a fellow leader in the Imam Sajid World Congress of Faiths, a scholar, educator and real powerhouse of interfaith harmony and religious rights within Europe. Islamophobia: Hostility and Discrimination against EU Muslims is denial of their basic Human Rights in Europe: An Islamic Perspective. Are Muslims the new Jews of the current century?



Bis Millah HIR Rahma nir Rahim (I begin with the name of Allah the Merciful and the Mercy-giving) Assh-hadu an la ilaha ill-lal-Lahu Wah-hadu la Sharika Lahu Wa assh-hadu anna Muhammadan Abdu-hu wa Rasu-lu-hu. (I declare that there is no god but Allah, Allah is one and has no partner, and I also declare that Muhammad is Allah's servant and His last Messenger.)). I greet you with the greetings of Islam (Assalamu Alaykum wa Rahmatullah wa Barakathu (May God's blessing and peace be with us all.)

Imam Dr. Abduljalil Sajid greets the room and gives thanks to Mr. Peter Zoehrer for outlining the situation that many Muslims face in Europe and around the world.

He opens with the simple question, “are Muslims being treated equally and fairly?” To answer this question, he remembers a report that he was part of a commission to write. The first report on the subject of “Islamophobia” in the world, to be commissioned. The report made 60 recommendations of which only 30 were completed. The issue of hostility against Muslims is painfully apparent and in plain view to many people. The Times Newspaper sympathetically described Muslims as the Jews of this century, meaning that they are experiencing discrimination and hostility born from the same ignorance which caused people of the Jewish faith to be persecuted in the previous century. Because of this, some countries are banning religious symbols and customs connected to Islam. Quoting former Archbishop, Lord Carey, he says, “Any country that is afraid of religious symbols is not worth living in.” We should all treat each other with respect and divinity so they can flourish in the way that we all want them to”

Although Kofi Annan made it very clear in a UN conference in New York that the UN will combat Islamophobia and anyone who wants to accept any faith has the fundamental right to do so, many states and people still fear Islam.

Imam Dr. Abduljalil Sajid notes that, in the Quran, after the creation of man, Satan feels superior to man and acts upon it. Such superiority complexes are a creation of Satan. Diversity is a God given gift and he has commanded us to make sure we help each other and work together to challenge any differences we have among ourselves. These are emotions that men and women feel, and it is individuals, not nations that make the difference.



Prof. David Baer, Professor of Theology and Philosophy, teaching Ethics at Lutheran University of Texas spoke about state level religious discrimination in Hungary entitled, 'All animals are equal but some animals are more equal than others: Continuing Problems with Hungary's Law on Religion'. Married to a Hungarian lady and spending time in Hungary, he published an open letter to famous Hungarian Catholic Bishop criticizing the church for not doing anything about the repressive laws on churches that was enacted

there. The law was concerning the status of a religious group. What was to be counted and recognized as a church, what was to be excluded and what was to happen to those who were?

There was an initial bill proposed which granted 362 churches and religious institutions officially recognized status. A last minute review cut that number down to only 14. Other than the 14, any religious association seeking official sanction will have to demonstrate its presence in Hungary for at least 20

years, obtain 1,000 signatures, gain the support of a government minister, pass review by the National Security Service, AND win a two-thirds vote of parliament. Observed one Hungarian newspaper, "Gods are now sitting in parliament" who get to decide who constitutes a church and who does not?

The list of 14 was later expanded to include smaller Christian groups and large non-Christian groups but the selection remains highly discriminatory.

Because the law states that the religious organizations must be suitable for cooperation with the state in pursuit of the public good, which is a very vague set of guidelines, it opens up the legal opportunity for the state to act in an arbitrary manner. Although they later added an appeal process, because of the vague nature of the initial decision making, it is hard to imagine a situation where an appeal will go through as the law gives the government the legal right to act in such a manner. As an example, Prof. David Baer used the example of the leader of the Hungarian evangelical fellowship who was denied status. He was close to the president, even baptized his children. Since then, their relationship soured and he is now a critic of the regime. It is widely believed that this is the reason his church is not included in the list of recognized churches. He closes by referring to and quoting George Orwell's *Animal Farm*, 'All animals are equal, but some are more equal than others'.

The chair of this panel, Rev Dr. Marcus Braybrooke points out that a church has been set up for atheists and Edwin Shuker jokes how the Hungarian government would classify them before introducing the final speaker of the panel, Vice President of the European Jewish Council, Mr. Edwin Shuker.



Speaking on the topic of anti-Semitism, he makes a distinction between the suffering of those who have suffered discrimination at the hands of individuals and those who have suffered discrimination at the hands of their homeland state. For the first part of his life in Iraq this was fearful and traumatic. As a child, you see yourself the way you are and wonder why others can't see the same.

Sitting in the core of power in the UK where he can speak freely with no censorship or discrimination, Mr. Edwin Shuker identifies groups that oppose the Jewish faith and culture: anti-Semites on the street, the far left, the far right, jihadist extremists and vocal anti-Semitic internet users. The internet is a new world which is very hard to censor with full freedom of speech. Haters have made full use of that privilege to abuse Jews. There are ways of curbing the most extreme manifestations of hate on the internet but they have not been put into effect yet.

Another more passive form of discrimination is that practiced by some in the working world. Many Jewish people will not sacrifice the Sabbath for any work or mission. This has been the cause of his own mother being made redundant for not being able to work on a Saturday on religious grounds. An appeal and tribunal was ineffective.

There are always movements against circumcision, calling it mutilation and child abuse, but by working together with religious leaders, some people have found that there are ways of making compromises without compromising faith. An example of this would be the move of some Jewish communities to have circumcision performed by someone medically trained rather than an untrained rabbi at the collaborative request of groups outside the Jewish community. Though mutually beneficial communication, results can be achieved.

The next point was about the personal discrimination that many people face on a daily basis. A survey concluded that 45% of the people fear abuse on the street on the internet. 33% fear physical attacks. The perception of fear is just as important as the act itself and it is down to the religious communities themselves to spearhead the problem. Check your own homes, schools and curriculums. Do we have prejudices against others? If we do, then we cannot expect to be treated without prejudice. Do we exaggerate the way we have been treated? If we do then we are harming the cause. The real cases of discrimination will not be taken seriously.

“The vast majority of European people and states are accepting. They have opened their arms and borders to accommodate Jews. We need to be careful when we speak, be grateful and work with them to eliminate all faults in society. We don't like being talked about badly so we must see, in our own home, how to we talk about others in a similar or worse situation?”

The journey to full acceptance begins with your own attitude towards others. Only then can the attitudes of those who discriminate against you change.