



Your Forum for Religious Tolerance & Human Rights

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Statement presented by Peter Zoehrer, SG, FOREF-Europe

The Role of Religion in the Protection of Human Rights and Human Dignity

1. The power of true religion

Mr. Chairman, your Excellencies, Distinguished guests, Ladies and Gentlemen: in 1948, the United Nations adopted the Universal Declaration of Human Rights which operates as an authoritative guide in the field of human rights. FOREF Europe seeks to promote the vision of religious freedom found in Article 18 of the Declaration:

Everyone has the right to freedom of thought, conscience and religion; this right includes freedom to change his religion or belief, and freedom, alone or in community with others, and, in public or private, to manifest his religion or belief in teaching, practice, worship and observance.

As his Excellency Ambassador Makarim Wibisono has correctly stated: the Universal Declaration of Human Rights has largely been drafted by experts of religion.

Religion has always played a central role in the protection of human rights and especially in the promotion of human dignity. For example the abandonment of slavery was inspired by the biblical concept of “Imago Dei” (Genesis: All men are created in the image of God).

What makes religion strong in the protection of human rights and human dignity is:

- Its emphasis on man’s spiritual and eternal nature and dignity as a child of God.
- Its rejection of hatred and violence
- Its obligation to practice love by living for others
- Its power to forgive and reconcile
- Its vision for a world of peace, harmony and mutual prosperity

2. Abuse of Religion as violation of basic human rights



Sadly, throughout history - even until today, religion has often been misinterpreted, misunderstood and misused for hegemonial interests, discrimination and even violence. (crusades, inquisition, religiously motivated wars until today).

If a particular religion claims to be exclusively assigned by divine providence to be the only one, the human rights of people of other faiths or convictions can be severely endangered

As Rev. Dr. William McComish stated: Never quote a spiritual source to justify discrimination or violence!

That is the very reason why true religious leaders and defenders of religious freedom always emphasise the importance of religious tolerance.

3. Religious Freedom as a fundamental human right

"The right of freedom of conscience and belief ... religious freedom constitutes the very foundation for the other fundamental freedoms of man!" Cardinal Franz KÖNIG (Austria)

For a religious person, can there be any other right more important than the freedom to worship your creator and follow his will in the way your conscience commands you to do? Mr. Chairmen, your Excellencies, the importance of religious freedom has been dismally neglected by political leaders! On the contrary, great human rights defenders have always regarded the freedom of faith and conscience as the "mother of human rights". Therefore, the significance of religious freedom for creating social harmony and world peace cannot be emphasised enough.

4. Religious Freedom in Europe under threat

"Each civilisation should be judged by the way it treats her minorities!"

Mahatma Gandhi

The escalation of religious intolerance and discrimination throughout the new Europe should be a matter of great concern to our political leaders, the European Union and the United Nations.

- Anti-Semitism is on the rise again.
- Islamophobia is spreading throughout Western - and Eastern Europe.
- Sectophobia – the irrational fear of so called "sects" or religious minority groups has been rising during the last 40 years in Western Europe and since the fall of the iron curtain is now also manifesting in Eastern-Europe.

This is not just a mere assumption. Even governments and powerful state sponsored organisations have been supporting the agents of intolerance and discrimination of minor religions and new religious movements.

Mr. Chairmen, your Excellencies, Ladies and Gentlemen: It is exactly this kind of religious discrimination that Article 18 was designed to prevent. This is made clear by the UN Human Rights Committee, which in its Comment 22 states:



Article 18 is not limited in its application to traditional religions or to religions and beliefs with institutional characteristics or practices analogous to those of traditional religions. The Committee therefore views with concern any tendency to discriminate against any religion or belief for any reasons, including the fact that they are newly established or represent religious minorities that may be the subject of hostility by a predominant religious community.

Various European governments have created “black lists” of religious minority groups. Sadly, according to the motto “big fish eats little fish”, even main stream Churches are often promoting state sponsored discrimination of so called “sects” or small religions. This has been possible through their powerful constituencies in most European countries.

5. The case of Austria

In Austria, we have over 80 percent Catholics. Islam, with 400 000 Muslims constitutes the second largest faith community. There are approximately 600 religious minority groups. Only 13 faith communities enjoy special privileges by the state. With a population of 8.2 Million Austria has no less than 34 Anti-Sect offices operating in the country. Proportionally, this marks an unmatched record in Europe and even on a global scale.

- Including the Federal Sect Observatory, there are six (6) state sponsored sect-observation offices
- Nine (9) Catholic Sect Offices
- Seven (7) Protestant Sect Offices
- Four (4) Private Sect Offices
- and eight (8) Family Counselling Offices with special emphasis on “Sectarian issues”.

Austria’s constitutionally granted neutrality of the state in religious matters is torpedoed by these facts. Members of religious minorities from Austria and neighbouring countries report numerous cases of religious discrimination in schools, communities and in their workplace. Even established NGOs with a consultative status at the UN (ECOSOC), who are running peace initiatives or relief projects in line with the UN-Millennium Development Goals reported to FOREF, that their work has been severely hampered by the interventions of the so called “sect experts”. Victims especially hold the state responsible for creating an atmosphere of religious intolerance and spiritual apartheid. As a result, in July the European Court of Human Rights has rebuked Austria for its discriminating legislation against non-traditional faith communities.

6. Institutionalised discrimination of religious minorities in Europe

In spite of many objections by faith communities, the Council of Europe granted FECRIS (*Fédération européenne des centres de recherche et d’information sur le sectarisme*) consultative status in 2005. The named organisation - under the banner of human rights - promotes discriminating anti-cult legislation throughout Europe. FECRIS receives substantial funding (over 90% of its annual budget) from a government who is a member of the G8. Numerous protests of human rights defenders in the OSCE, COE, the UN and other Institutions have yet to bear fruits.



7. FOREF recommendations to religious leaders, NGO representatives and human rights defenders

- Appeal to governments to stop funding prejudiced public and private organizations which promote and propagate defamatory statements about faith communities and religious organisations. Such activities infringe the principles of tolerance and integration promoted by the UN, OSCE and the European Union.
- Appeal to religious leaders to promote tolerance toward all religious groups, regardless whether they are weak or strong, large or small.
- Appeal to religious leaders to invoke the great power of religion for reconciliation and peace building. After all, we are one family under God.

"We must learn to live together as brothers and sisters or perish together as fools." Dr. Martin Luther King Jr.

End of statement

Brief history of FOREF Europe:

1998: FOREF (Forum for Religious Freedom) & Religious Freedom Website (www.religionsfreiheit.at) was initiated by Peter Zoehrer (Austria) "out of necessity", since the government has just introduced two new laws, severely curtailing the rights of religious minority groups: 1) the establishment of a "federal sect observatory office" (annual budget over € 500 000), 2) the introduction of a law for "confessional communities".

2002: Zoehrer, the initiator of FOREF got enlisted in Who is Who- Austria as human rights activist.

2003: FOREF regularly reports to the media, OSCE, US-State Department, Human Rights Without Frontiers and various other human rights organisations on religious freedom violations in Austria & other European countries.

2006: FOREF-Europe registered as an official Association (NGO). Prof. Dr. Christian Bruenner, a renowned constitutional expert becomes president & Mr. Zoehrer takes on the job of secretary general.

2007: FOREF establishes an international scientific board of experts & a religious board.

2008: The website counts 100 000 to 150 000 hits per month and has become a respected religious freedom monitor and medium-forum for members of religious minority groups, their opponents, public media, legislators, government agencies and Human rights defenders.

During the past 8 years FOREF scored over 30 victories in helping victims of religious intolerance to regain their rights, get vindicated from injustice, discrimination or persecution.