

## Religion, Human Rights and Foreign Policy

- Thank you for inviting me to come and speak at this event
- My brief is to speak about Human Rights and Foreign Policy
- Since 1948, the UN Universal Declaration of Human Rights has been part of mainstream foreign policy, to varying degrees of success.
- Foreign policy is conducted:
  - Multilaterally: at the UN or the in the EU
  - Bi-laterally: between individual States.
  - Uni-laterally: as actions by single States. These actions are taken by actors on two levels:
    - locally by politicians, lawyers, officials and policymakers
    - internationally by diplomats and ambassadors around the globe.

The spectrum is wide, from resolutions made at the UN, to a modest third secretary, anywhere in the world, deciding how to help a citizen who has had his or her Human Rights violated.

- Within Human Rights considerations, the Freedom of Religion or Belief is highly problematic or contested:
  - Some think that it is foundational/of the first order.
  - Others consider that it is too complex and often controversial or too difficult to engage.
  - Others consider that it is not important enough to engage with, when economic and social rights are of greater significance.
- At the UN, it is either the subject of fierce debate or completely ignored, and similarly within member States.
- In the EU, and at the External Actions Service (EEAS) in particular, the Freedom of Religion is a hot topic: there are strong representations from the Christian Democratic traditions in the Parliament. The High Representative, however, is very cautious about this topic.
- Previously, all Commonwealth statements and declarations have avoided reference to FoRB. In 2012 FoRB was included in the new Commonwealth Charter supported by the Canadian government in particular.
- Last month (February 2013), the Canadians appointed their first Ambassador for Religious Freedom (Andrew Bennett?)
- The US has had an Ambassador for International Religious Freedom for over 10 years.
- Where there are ambassadors and offices, politics is never far behind.
- At the same time diplomats and desk officers etc. want to know what to do in practice to support FoRB. They particularly want to know how to respond to violations. The promotion of the Freedom of Religion or Belief has had mixed history with the UN. Dr. Gunner (spelling?) mentions the 1981 Declaration, which supported the elimination of all forms of intolerance/ discrimination on the basis of religion or belief.

- BUT there was little, if any, follow up, mostly due to a lack of resources available.
- A lot of current work is shaped by the 2011 UN HR Council Declaration 16/18: Combatting intolerance, negative stereotyping and stigmatisation of; and discrimination, incitement to violence or violence against persons, based on religion or belief.
  - The title itself is political
  - It has Gained acceptance from a wide audience
  - It includes “everyone’s” concerns
  - It was agreed by the Obama administration, Egypt and the OIC.
  - The resolution was passed without the need for a vote.
- Related to this had been the “Istanbul Process”, spearheaded by Hilary Clinton at a conference in Istanbul. It started in Istanbul in 2010. The dialogue has continued in Geneva, Washington (Dec ’11) and London (Dec ’12). It may continue next in Geneva.
- I chaired the London conference under the auspices of Wilton Park, from which a report should now have been published.
  - The conference was highly charged and highly political
  - The West readily promotes freedom of religion
  - The OIC wants to legislate against “intolerance and incitement”
- Diplomats are still asking what tools they will have to act. They need practical foreign policy in order to deal on the ground with problems relating to:
  - Places of worship, religious sites, cemeteries and shrines
  - Care of these sites and the right to open new ones.
- Diplomats need to have the ability to monitor, record and challenge violations of FoRB.
- They need to have good religious literacy in order to accurately read the role of religion in diverse situations.
- At the same time education is paramount, and curriculums in schools need to promote tolerance.
- We need to support the importance of different religious communities speaking out for each other when violations occur.

The conversation has to continue. The next place on the agenda is Geneva in June. A UN observatory to monitor violations has been proposed. Reports also need to be made to the UN by member States, outlining progress nationally.

Churches need to build good relationships with their own national Foreign Ministries. They need to enquire about their support of FoRB for all. In particular they need to encourage their own governments to submit their reports to the UN on progress made in relation to FoRB.