



Wilton Park



Conference report

**Promoting religious freedom around the world**

Sunday 3 – Tuesday 5 July | WP1108



## Conference report

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With religious communities under threat of discrimination and violence in many parts of the world, this conference will identify how the international community can strengthen its ability to protect religious freedom. It will build new partnerships between governments, NGOs and faith groups to help the exchange of good practice and to develop practical proposals to support those wishing to exercise their right to peaceful worship.

#### **Key points**

- The protection and promotion of freedom of religion or belief continues to be a serious matter. The barometer of religious freedom is still reads very low in many parts of the world. The various lists of countries of particular concern as well as countries on key watch-lists are well-known. In addition, there is also a need to keep a watchful eye on the impact on religious minorities of the on-going change and political transition in the Middle East.
- While we may not be close to fulfilling the international norms and aspirations for religious freedom as set out in The Universal Declaration of Human Rights of 1948, interest in and concern have increased significantly, not least over the last couple of years. But are we getting better at promoting and protecting freedom of religion or belief?
- There is a keen interest in sharing best practices and concrete ideas on how to improve policy tools and their implementation. An important lesson learnt stressed by both practitioners and policy makers is the necessity for a multi-layered approach combining the human rights aspects with conflict resolution, development and interfaith measures.
- This more holistic approach calls for a multi-actor response emphasising the need for all to pull their weight in their respective areas. In the face of numerous contemporary challenges, innovative ways of engaging with religious leaders and civil society represent an important addition to classical diplomatic or government-to-government approaches.
- However, a searching question remains about our willingness to fully apply our set of tools to protect and promote freedom of religion or belief. The problem seems two-fold: Some governments seem only to pay lip-service to the cause of freedom of religion or belief. Others - governments as well as religious groups - seem only interested in speaking up when their own constituency is under threat.
- The discussions among practitioners and legal experts showed the necessity of going back to the fundamental question of *how* to promote religious freedom - namely, whether we can all agree to protect and promote these rights for the benefit of all - or are we only interested in the plight of our own?
- Indeed, singling out one's own group (e.g. in terms of 'phobia-isation') has become a dangerous surrogate for lack of progress on the ground. The international community and also the various religious groups or NGOs all have a responsibility to help the

debate return to questions about what freedom of religion or belief *for all* entails.

- Solving these underlying issues will enhance the possibilities of real progress.

## Why (and how) religious freedom matters?

1. Freedom of religion or belief foresees the 'presence of religion or belief' within contemporary society. For some it is a small step to recognise the role that religion and faith play both domestically and in terms of foreign relations. Others view the involvement of religion in the public arena with discomfort or unease. However, in a globalised world, a key challenge is to live together with our differences (including those with 'no' beliefs) and to advance religious freedom for the good of all.
2. There are serious and well-known restrictions on freedom of religion or belief around the globe. In certain parts of the world, religious freedom remains an abstract notion which is neither well protected by law in the countries concerned nor considered a common good within society. In Europe, the criticism has often focused on excessive secularism, for instance, banning the public display of religious symbols.
3. At the same time, it is clear that faith and religion are not always used for the sake of good. They can be a powerful and dangerous vehicles for intolerance, hatred and extremism - and this often with worrying impunity. Also, the political mis-use and 'instrumentalisation' of religion and faith (e.g. the fear factor) has become a regular feature in electoral politics.
4. We need to ask ourselves and to discuss some key questions: Why is it dangerous to look at what defines us? Why are religion and faith often linked to extremism? Why is religion at times at loggerheads with liberal modern thinking? How do we respond to the denial of freedom within different religions (abortion, conversion/apostasy, male leadership, women's rights etc)?
5. It is imperative that we better understand that religion and secularism are not always opposites. The relationship between state and religion varies considerably - and with it, the understanding of what has been coined the 'public square'. Is it 'sacred' (UK being mild and Iran a rigorous version of this model), 'naked' (US as the mild and China as the rigorous expression) or is it 'civil' (with equal freedom for all religions, faiths or beliefs)?
6. With the growing diversity and pluralism of our societies today as well as the strong link/spill-over between domestic and international issues, we need to address these questions not as a matter of debate but as practical questions, often, with the rights and freedoms of minorities at their centre.
7. Our focus needs to be on concrete action to support freedom of religion or belief in its different forms. But we also need to raise the difficult question of where to draw the limits of freedom - when is religious freedom taken too far?

*“Religious freedom matters - the real question is how we live together with our differences”*

## Fulfilling the international aspirations for religious freedom

8. The Universal Declaration of Human Rights of 1948 sets out the right of freedom of thought, conscience or religion. Why then, do so many people continue to suffer persecution for their religious beliefs, and why does sectarian violence continue to rise?

Recent surveys suggest that 70% of the world's population live in countries where there are high or very high levels of restriction on religious freedom. Why is that? Is the international community complacent? Are there inherent problems in the development of the legal framework of freedom of religion or belief? Has the human rights community failed in engaging freedom of religion or belief fully?

## Freedom of religion or belief as the stepchild of human rights?

9. Freedom of religion or belief has not fared particularly well as a human right. In 1962,

the UN General Assembly decided to draft Conventions on both racial and religious discrimination. The Convention on the elimination of all forms of racial discrimination was adopted in 1965, but work on the Convention on religion or belief stopped in 1967, and has not been restarted since, on the grounds that it would be 'premature' and would risk unsettling the consensus concerning existing international standards.

10. The renewed political interest in the topic has led to some reconsideration of this legal question. There is both an opportunity and a need for new thinking on how best to advance freedom of religion or belief within the international arena. Others are less convinced that the way forward is to restart work on a UN convention as they fear that this would only lead to a further weakening of existing international standards.

#### **Protecting individual's rights vs. protecting a religion?**

11. In practice, it is far easier to speak of the freedom of religion or belief than it is to understand what, exactly, it means and what it requires and of whom. This limited understanding and consensus have failed to combat the rising tide of restriction, hostility, and violence experienced by many religious believers.
12. Whereas the starting point ought to be the right of individual believers to hold and act in accordance with their beliefs, there has been a serious drift towards trying to protect particular religions. This trend has a counter-productive side as witnessed by the defamation debate, used to justify apostasy and blasphemy laws whose repressive outcomes are evident. It is not clear that changing the terms of this debate to 'incitement to religious hatred' would constitute a significant change for the better.

#### **The rise of the 'phobias'**

13. The 'phobia-isation' of the debate on freedom of religion or belief has created a worrying and dangerous approach to this topic. The attempts to equate anti-Semitism with 'Islamophobia' are well-known and remain problematic. However, without wanting to enter into a discussion of the genesis (and hierarchy) of such intolerance, it seems fair to say that the very focus on the hatred, prejudice or fear of any religion has led to a danger of tackling hostility experienced by some religious groups by offering them heightened degrees of scrutiny, when even legal protections that are not offered to others.
14. Is the next step in this logic 'Christianophobia'? It may well be true that changing societal assumptions concerning the place of Christianity have left increasing numbers of Christians in Western Europe feeling marginalised. At the same time, we are witnessing a sharp increase in anti-Christian sentiment and violence not least in Muslim majority countries.
15. While violence and discrimination against particular groups should be addressed, 'phobia-isation' has become a dangerous surrogate for lack of progress or an unwillingness to confront underlying issues, specifically the failure of commitment to freedom of religion or belief *for all*.

#### **Back to basics - keeping 'narrow religious self-interest' out of the equation?**

16. How to change the current approach focused on the restrictions of the rights of others and dominated by language of special pleading, disadvantage, hostility and hate? The international political community - and also the religious communities - need to revisit their approach to freedom of religion or belief.
17. But is there a real willingness within the international community to address the issues at the heart of the problem? Can we turn the clock back and put freedom of religion or belief for all at the centre of the equation again? Or has continuing the parallel pursuit of separate agendas focusing only on one's own set of freedoms, acquired a life of its own.
18. Instead, there is a pressing need for all to return to the issue of what freedom of religion or belief as a human right *for all* actually entails, in a coherent and transparent manner. Religious groups have their role to play - provided they are willing to stand up for the

rights of all faiths - not just their own.

### **So what is at the heart of the debate today?**

19. While the norms of 1948 were clear, the political reality of the role of religion in today's world is far more complex. The relationship between state, religion and society has evolved considerably. Terms like privacy, family life and women's rights have undergone great change. While new questions have arisen about the role of religion in integration, identity and social cohesion. Age old values are changing and being challenged all the time.
20. We need to stimulate, not stifle debate. Human rights may not provide all the answers. But we need to look at the underlying issues related to fulfilling the norms of 1948. Human rights as a technical legal tool will have limited effect if not applied in the proper context. A review of court rulings should be part of this exercise. But it should also involve the important issue of civic education and religious education of youth, religious leaders, diplomats, civil servants etc.

### **Breaking down the barriers**

21. What are the main theological, cultural, societal and political objections and how can these obstacles be overcome?

### **Facing religious leaders with their responsibility**

22. A significant part of the problem stems from the impunity often conferred when policies and practices are conducted in the name of religion. More attention needs to be given to this issue. We need to engage directly with religious leaders, who have responsibility vis-a-vis their own communities. When atrocities are committed in the name of a particular religion, there is a need to address this with its most senior leaders. Only by doing so can we challenge the impunity of violent abuse conducted in the name of religion.
23. An interesting and concrete case of doing so was the statement/fatwa issued at an Iraqi religious emergency summit in Copenhagen on 12-14 January, 2011. On the last day of the summit, the religious leaders - representing Sunni and Shia Muslims as well as Christians - issued a statement directed at the Iraqi government which underlined that the Christians are a fundamental part of the Iraqi people and that it is an Iraqi responsibility to defend the Christians and their rights. A fatwa condemning attacks against Christians and other religious minorities was endorsed by the Muslim religious leaders and subsequently read out in a large number of Iraqi mosques. It stopped the killing - at least for a while...

*"When religion goes wrong, it often goes very wrong"*

### **Cross-cultural and inter-religious dialogue**

24. Putting religious freedom and genuine tolerance high on the agenda of cross-cultural and inter-religious initiatives would help to serve as a general confidence building measure between people of different religions. There seems to be a need for greater collaboration between the religions in reaching out to the 'other' and in making more proactive attempts at better understanding and more genuine respect of one another. Religion remains highly contentious and 'when religion goes wrong, it often goes very wrong'.

It is clear that not everything should be accepted in the name of 'cultural diversity'.

Tolerance needs to have its limits. Religious extremism which encourages violence and intolerance remains unacceptable. Just as critical questions need to be raised about the degree of freedom individuals have to adopt (or not) their religion as a matter of choice, rather than of socio-cultural necessity imposed by birth. There is also a need for such intra-faith questioning and increased tolerance; most notably within Islam. What is your freedom worth, if it is not safe to practice or not to practice?

### **Freedom of religion or belief as a litmus test of a free and tolerant society?**

25. In the former Soviet states, the barriers to religious freedom are multiple and cannot be

separated from other freedoms such as the right to life, freedom from torture and inhuman or degrading treatment, the freedoms of expression and of association etc. They are aimed at all - the majority Muslim religious community as well as the smaller communities including Bahai'is, Christians, Jews, Jehovah's Witnesses and Hare Krishna devotees. Religion is generally seen as dangerous and a powerful vehicle for independent political ideas which are not welcome within politically repressive/closed states.

26. Policy makers and diplomats however need to insist that freedom of religion or belief must be addressed as a mainstream human right inseparably linked with other fundamental freedoms. They need to challenge the idea that one can promote tolerance and dialogue whilst directly attacking the rule of law and other fundamental human rights. They need to reflect on whether their policies and actions empower the people or the governmental oppressors. They should also highlight in public and private the experience and the views of the victims so as to expose the systemic nature of many violations.

### **Citizenship first, religious identity second?**

27. In other countries, it is religion - more than nationality or citizenship - that seems to guarantee an individual's rights. If individuals do not belong to the majority religion, their socio-political status suffers. The plight of the Coptic Christians in Egypt is suggested as a case in point. At stake is their physical safety as well as their discriminatory exclusion from official functions and underrepresentation in government and other state structures.
28. Will it be possible post-Tahrir Square to focus first and foremost on citizenship, and to allow all Egyptians regardless of their faith to contribute in the public arena? (One should not forget however in that context that for many years political Islamists were kept at arms length by the former regime). Or will a political void emerge which will encourage sectarian tensions and violence? It is imperative to create a state which will protect the rights of all, so that there will no longer be a need to speak as 'Christians' or any other persecuted group.
29. Anti-Muslim sentiments in parts of Europe, the ban of veils and minarets as well as the debate 'against' multiculturalism are examples which demonstrate that Europe is also challenged by this question of 'citizenship first, religious identity second'. While there should be no place for complacency in this debate, we need to focus on where the problems and challenges to religious freedom are the most serious. Oppression in certain parts of the world leads to death – this is clearly more urgent than the banning of veils and minarets.

### **Putting religious freedom to the test - infringements or desired limits?**

30. What practical policy responses to visible or invisible infringements or restrictions of freedom of religion or belief in the following four areas?

### **Legal recognition of religions:**

31. Central to the issue of religious freedom is the question of how religion is protected or organised in relationship with the state. There are a variety of models including the established church model (with the head of state being the head of church, the state religion model where there is no separation between state and church/religion, Islamic states and technically secular models (which often make space for a one predominant religion).
32. The recognition of (other) religious communities is important in determining a number of practical issues such as symbolic recognition, access to funding and to legal protection. The various ways of dealing with the case of Scientology show that even among countries with relatively similar legal traditions, the outcome can be very different. Does that make one country less tolerant or is this an expression of a legitimate decision to extend recognition and thus rights to some, but not all? In any event, it seems clear that no religion or its followers can be above the law.

*“Religion in Europe is a bit like doing soft drugs - you are okay at home, but do not get caught in public”*

### Public manifestation:

33. For some, this is the ultimate litmus test for how tolerant a society really is. Are individuals free to express their religious identity by wearing skull caps, veils or crosses? For others, this is about more than public manifestation of religious identity. It is about its manipulation by political as well as religious leaders. Are the restrictions imposed for instance on the wearing of the veil justified - on which grounds? Is praying in the public street justified? Is it an expression of a problem not dealt with at its origin, i.e. the need for proper prayer space for a significant minority religion? Abstract discussions of this often become meaningless.
34. The attempt to compare the demands for minarets in Switzerland (and elsewhere) with those for churches in Saudi Arabia or even Egypt does not hold up for scrutiny. It is not the number of minarets that restrict the religious freedom of Muslims in Europe per se. Whereas the scope and nature of the restrictions (including the total absence of prayer facilities) encountered by non-Muslims in parts of the Muslim majority countries remain a very serious concern. It is quite difficult to have an informed discussion about these very sensitive questions in the public arena as they are often hijacked by other concerns. The opposition to Ground Zero Muslim Cultural Centre in New York, which took many by surprise, showed this with great clarity. Is part of the solution here better communication and the proper engagement of the media?

### Apostasy and conversion:

35. Here we touch upon potentially the most serious and pressing threats to freedom of religion or belief worldwide. The main reason for this is the Muslim belief that leaving Islam is at best a grave sin, at worst a crime of apostasy that merits execution. The injunction in the Koran of 'no compulsion in religion' is a principle clearly at odds with a practice of imposing the death penalty for apostasy.
36. In addition, article 18 of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights explicitly refers to the right to change religion or belief not as a 'manifestation', thus not subject to certain restrictions allowed by governments, but a non-derogable right. However a number of governments are particularly resistant to being approached on this issue.
37. How, if at all, can such deeply held beliefs be reformed - and by whom? A role for the religious scholars of Islam? And for more education and stronger rule of law?
38. Part and parcel with the issue of apostasy is the question of conversion. If you are free to change your religion or belief, are you also then free to seek information about other religions or to tell others about your religious convictions? This is one of the intersections between freedom of expression and freedom of religion. A central question here is how to make sure that sharing one's beliefs with others (with a view to inviting - never to compel - them to join on the same religious path) is done in a non-aggressive manner.
39. Some Indian states have restricted the propagation of religion and other South Asian states, such as Nepal, are in the process of introducing limitations. Should such limitations be challenged? Do states need these kinds of limitations in order to preserve particular identities and ideologies of their countries? If so, is it legitimate for a state to impose limits on the 'sharing' of one's religious belief? Or might this risk protecting the religion of the majority at the cost of individual freedom to seek and share information and make personal choices? Do laws on conversion risk playing a similar role to blasphemy laws in demonising smaller religious communities and increasing their vulnerability in the wider community? Or are they indeed needed to protect vulnerable people from exploitation by those with, for example, financial power?
40. There may well be a need to revisit our mental picture of proselytising from 'white missionaries far away from home' to local people from majority and minority religions or beliefs trying to persuade others to adopt their convictions. It would seem that a power analysis is crucial when choosing an appropriate policy approach to questions of conversion and propagation. Whose rights are threatened - and in what ways? What is

*"Faith as something caught not taught"*

the power relationship between groups? What intended and unintended consequences can limitations have? And, finally, what are the unintended consequences when/if 'authorising' unlimited proselytizing (i.e. how to protect missionaries who take considerable risks)?

41. Some see merit in handling the right to propagate not as a 'first priority right', but as a right to be exercised with the greatest of responsibility which in some circumstances should best not be exercised at all. At the same time, others focus on the negative experiences that minorities, for example, in India have had of legislation in practice - and therefore consider the issue a priority for advocacy. In any case, both historical and more recent examples of proselytizing (for instance in the former Soviet Union) illustrate with clarity the need to remain critical about why and how the propagation of religion is carried out.

### **Blasphemy**

42. The topic of whether religion should be legally protected against criticism and ridicule has been hotly debated for a number of years. The arguments on both sides are well-known. A fundamental question seems to be why are calls made for blasphemy or defamation laws? Are they made to defend a religion or to punish non-followers and others?
43. The inseparable link between freedom of religion or belief and freedom of expression is clear. Laws that limit the latter through banning blasphemy or defamation of religion cause suffering for religious people and free thinkers in numerous countries. In the case of Pakistan, we have seen examples of how these kinds of laws are both used and abused.
44. At the same time, we know there are limits to what can be said, let alone what is wise to say. You may not promote hatred on the basis of nationality, race or religion in a manner that constitutes incitement to discrimination or violence. But where do you draw this line - and how do you enforce these general principles?
45. While there is a clear need in the short term to protect individuals, who find themselves targeted by overzealous blasphemy laws, there is a longer term need to address the underlying issues. This is alongside the need to looking into how to prevent escalations based on isolated events triggered by individuals for whom incitement is not a concern, rather the opposite. Education, responsible media and the link to public order all seem relevant here.

### **Protecting religious minorities under threat today**

#### **What immediate actions to take?**

46. Government actions need a solid legal base, as well as a firm anchor in a correct understanding of the situation on the ground. Embassies and delegations are important eyes and ears. Contributions from NGOs can here be very welcome provided they truly aim to inform not to inflame.
47. To make tangible progress we must first understand what is at stake. When assessing a particular case of violation or infringement, we need make sure we have the full picture, factoring in also the close connections between religion and politics in this field.
48. Our response may not be immediate but one that focuses more on the longer term. However, our message should be clear: We protect and treat all minorities the same way - an attack on one is an attack on all.
49. We have the choice of delivering these messages either in public or in private. Our choice depends on what we think will be most the efficient way of trying to improve the situation on the ground. Experience shows that in some cases, working silently with the authorities in question is the only and most efficient approach. In other cases, we needed to resort to strong public messages at times followed up by demarches and

sanctions.

50. The experience within the multilateral set-up, including the Human Rights Council, where we have no shortage of legal texts on this topic, leaves one wondering why concrete action at times is so difficult. Why the reluctance to implement the protection of religious minorities? Are some governments only paying lip-service to freedom of religion or belief? If so, why? Out of fear or out of doubt?
51. Finally, when it comes to protecting religious minorities under direct threat, it is important to work quickly and together with those actors who can have a direct effect on the ground. We need to look at - and learn from - the best practices of engaging faith leaders, local NGOs (like Freedom House) and others whose joint efforts have made a difference on the ground.

#### **Where action is most needed?**

52. The US Commission on International Religious Freedom has in its annual report for 2011 highlighted 14 countries which are of particular concern (Burma, China, Eritrea, Iran, Iraq, North Korea, Saudi Arabia, Nigeria, Uzbekistan, Vietnam, Turkmenistan, Egypt, Sudan and Pakistan). Another 11 countries are on their 'watch list' (Afghanistan, Belarus, Cuba, India, Indonesia, Laos, Russia, Somalia, Tajikistan, Turkey and Venezuela).
53. It is interesting to take a closer look at Pakistan and the plight of minorities and religious freedom there today. Whereas the intention at the founding of the country in 1947 was one of religious freedom for all and all being equal citizens of the state, today's situation is quite different. Pakistan is confronted with violations of religious freedom on a daily basis. Blasphemy laws are routinely being abused, resulting in lengthy detentions, physical violence, forceful conversions and at times death. The violation of minorities' rights has increased to the point of making today's Pakistan one of the most intolerant societies.
54. What are the reasons behind this dire situation of religious intolerance? Five such reasons stand out: unstable government, discriminatory laws, religious extremism, fanaticism and terrorism, poverty and finally illiteracy. The complexity of the challenge of turning around this country is enormous. Addressing it requires a sustained multi-layered approach drawing on a multitude of different actors from both the government/state level and from within civil society.
55. There is a strong call for action in the following fields: Local education on what ethnic tolerance means. Religious education as a standard part of the curriculum within state-run schools (the issue of teaching in the madrassa system was not touched upon but is a chapter in itself). Increased exchanges among all relevant actors (religious, human rights, community leaders), including enhanced interfaith dialogue between majority and minority communities.
56. Likewise, restrictions should be imposed on hate speech and publications inciting fundamentalism. Discrimination laws, rules and practices towards minorities should be revised and abolished. Legal and financial support should be provided to the victims of discriminatory laws or hate crimes, including shelter and security assistance for those who live under threat. The international community should promote democracy and support the current democratically elected government.
57. Finally, the external ramifications of political life (and security) in Pakistan - be it the continuing dispute with India over Kashmir, the fall-out from the war in Afghanistan (with over 3 million Afghan refugees in Pakistan), and the fight against terrorism - all compound the difficulties.
58. The challenge is thus monumental. And it clearly goes beyond the question of protecting religious freedom. The UK has launched its biggest country project ever for the benefit of Pakistan, spending £ 600 million over 4 years. In addition to its Member States' bilateral contributions, the EU has in its multiannual indicative programme

earmarked 200 million euro over 3 years to Pakistan. What about other international actors? The US? The UN? Does the OIC and its 57 Member States have the means to offer resources? Are we all pulling in the same direction? Are we all trying to combine all resources and efforts - be they Diplomacy, Defence or Development - to, among other things, reduce and mitigate sectarian tensions?

### **Looking ahead**

59. At a time of change and political transition in the Middle East, there is good reason to remain particularly watchful of the impact on religious minorities. Religious and other minorities are often the first to bear the brunt of political transition, in particular in countries facing serious economic challenges.
60. We must work together with the new authorities to effectively enforce human rights, including those of religious minorities. It will be important for all people to enjoy the freedom to live according to their beliefs and to recognise as a society the strength of religious diversity. The developments in Egypt in particular need to be followed closely.

### **Next steps: enhancing freedom of religion in the short and long term**

#### **How to improve the way we promote freedom of religion or belief?**

61. While efforts are being made to develop foreign policy instruments and tools in Europe and elsewhere (for instance Canada), the US has already a considerable track record in terms of its model put in place by the International Religious Freedom Act of 1998. This act established the State Department's Office of International Religious Freedom, with an Ambassador at Large for International Religious Freedom as the head of Office and principal advisor to the President and the Secretary of State on matters of religious freedom and an independent Commission to offer recommendations.
62. The set-up and the history behind the creation of the IRF office (as well as its relation to the politically-appointed US Commission on International Religious Freedom, which to some extent acts like a watch-dog on the State Department's activities inter alia by issuing its own (parallel) annual report), is best seen as unique to the US context. Instead of trying to emulate this US specific model, each country - as well as the EU - has to develop its own 'home-grown' set-up.
63. Nonetheless, there seems to be good reason for comparing notes and exchanging best practices - each with our different backgrounds (and baggage) and approaches. This goes from the more practical issues (like work methods, tool-kits (public or not), innovative ways of keeping track of events, the idea of 24/7 hotlines, training of diplomatic staff, ways of improving reporting and sharing of these) to more strategic questions (as, for instance, more targeted and automatic use of these reports on a country-by-country basis, experiences in working across-government (like '3-D'), working as an international community shoulder-by-shoulder in particular countries of concern etc).
64. An important lesson learnt stressed by the practitioners in this field seems to be the necessity for a multi-layered approach with three strands.
  - The first is the human rights approach - here the focus is on the monitoring of and reporting on violations and on holding the relevant people accountable.
  - The second strand is conflict resolution approach - aiming at finding preventative measures and solutions to avoid infringements or violations.
  - The third and final strand is the interfaith and interreligious approach - with a strong emphasis on better information and education of what religion is and is not.
65. Addressing religious freedom from such a multi-layered approach clearly shows that it will require a multi-actor response. To date there has been an over-reliance on what governments and states can do by themselves. In the face of the challenges today, there seems to be a strong call for a more holistic approach with a clear

encouragement for all to pull their weight in their respective areas of expertise or responsibility.

### **A special word of encouragement to Europe**

66. While the concern for freedom of religion or belief is not new in Europe, let alone within the EU, the interest from political leaders as well as civil society has grown considerably over the last couple of years. Not surprisingly there are increased expectations as to how the EU might address this issue. Below are three areas of such recommendations:

### **Mainstreaming freedom of religion or belief**

67. This involves ensuring that issues related to freedom of religion or belief are integrated into the primary human rights strategy for all relevant third countries. The issues need to be identified so that key messages and ways to convey these need to be integrated within wider human rights strategies. This is a considerable task which necessitates a clear and committed focus.

### **Identifying priority countries for more intensive action**

68. This complements broader mainstreaming. In addition to analysis and active diplomacy, it should include targeted support for research in support of civil society and interfaith initiatives. Careful reflection is needed when choosing which countries to focus on. Is the best way always the 'worst offenders' list? It seems a valid approach but it has dangers of politicising just as it risks mirroring rather than complementing the US approaches. Would another way forward be a list based on where the EU can be most effective in constructive engagement, with an element of burden-sharing among EU Member States, with the Dutch pilot countries as an example for other European countries to learn from?

### **Thematic focus and training**

69. There seems to be an acute need for thematic engagement on key issues that are common to many countries. Opportunities for learning and exchange of experience around these issues need to be looked into at the regional level but also internationally.

70. In order to be effective, Foreign Service personnel need not only tools or toolkits but also knowledge to implement them. This involves staff training - here the US experience may well be worth looking into. The Office of International Religious Freedom regularly participates in courses on 'Religion and Foreign Policy' as well as in inter-agency seminars on 'Engaging Communities of Faith to Advance Policy Objectives'. Finally, officials need to build relations with and make use of the expertise to be found within faith communities and relevant NGOs.

### **A final word to all - practice what you preach.....**

71. A certain milestone was reached in March of this year, when the Human Rights Council did not adopt a defamation of religions resolution, but instead adopted consensus resolution (16/18) moderated to address religious intolerance without resorting to the divisive language of defamation of religion.

72. The resolution calls for a number of actions to be taken to translate this resolution into action. It will be important if this milestone is to be followed by others, that these calls for action get heard both by states and governments (at which most are aimed) but also by religious leaders and civil society at large. Without follow-up this will have been just another futile paper process - disconnected from the reality on the ground.

73. It is always easier to 'name and shame', then it is to start with oneself. We all have constituencies at home whose experience and concern over abuses, deprivation or discrimination motivate us to raise our voices. But sometimes we also need to turn the mirror around and look at how well we protect freedom of religion or belief *for all* within our own societies. If we could all make that our starting point, we would have made a big step forward. We would be practicing what we have been preaching - for the benefit of all.

**Merete Bilde**

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