



Enhancing Freedom of Religion or Belief in the EU

Problems in the EU?

Participating in platforms that deal with Human rights in the EU, I often wondered if fighting for Freedom of Religion or Belief, for which my organization stands, is really the most worthy of all causes. After all, I hear of problems amongst the Roma Gypsies, Cyber security, problems with the ability for governments to pay pensioners their hard earned wages, liberation of the LGBT's and their quest for recognition of legal marriage, rampant and increasing child abuse, a seemingly thriving sex industry and slave trade, secularization and a change of moral standards as shown in the latest collapse and chaos in the financial sector.

One wonders if the EU really has issues regarding Freedom of Religion or Belief. Some even claim that we should focus on Syria, Africa or Asia. This quest has made me travel throughout the Middle East, participating in peace initiatives there, and to Tajikistan where we tried to persuade Civil Society of a so-called secular nation with 95% Muslims that torture is an unacceptable violation of human rights and there should be separation between not only State and Religion, but also between the Judiciary and Politics. It has caused me to do research regarding Freedom of Religion in Japan and Korea, and I have travelled extensively throughout Europe, Eastern Europe and the Balkans. And the answer is: "YES, even we in the EU have concerns with

Freedom of Religion or Belief that need to be dealt with. Let me give you a cross-view of some of the issues that I have observed.

Examples

- Many young religious immigrants are fleeing Greece back to their homeland because they face implicit and explicit persecution from some individuals and groups who consider them outside the acceptable main stream of Greek Religious or Cultural norms. And it is not just Golden Dawn that drives them out; it is lack of social acceptance towards non-Greeks that drives Golden Dawn, enhanced by the fright of Greeks to lose their precious few jobs to non-Greek Nationals. Currently, religious proselyting for non-Greek Orthodox people in Greece has become a dangerous sport.
- Poles, Czechs and Slovenians are condemned and kicked out of the family when they are converted to a faith other than that of the local religious tradition. I have personally seen several Young Single Adults being put on the streets because they joined another faith. Interesting enough, the parents are often not believers of their own faith themselves, but feel obliged to defend the traditions of their forefathers.

- Many Northern Germans, Scandinavians and Finns find it difficult to find or keep a job if they do not belong to the Lutheran tradition. In Belgium and other states the same is true if one is not of the Catholic persuasion.
- In many countries people are afraid of Muslims and Jews. Anti-Semitism and Islam phobia is rampant throughout the EU.
- Gay movements have been ousted by many Religious organizations and are trying to find ways to lobby for greater equality.
- Humanists in Great Britain complain when they hear of Religions growing and progressing in various locations throughout the EU. In actuality, Humanists should be working together with individuals and groups who believe in religious freedom.
- The headscarf issues in France are not just about head scarfs and Hijabs, but an expression of fear of change to traditional French societal norms because of influences from immigration. This same fear of change to traditional society exists in many countries in Europe.

So far, most of the remedies currently advocated in the EU promote legal solutions based on constitutional laws. Each nation subscribes to the UN's Declaration of Human Rights, which includes Freedom of Religion or Belief. Each EU nation has laws in place, and many cases go higher up to Strasbourg, where they seem to be more than 110.000 cases behind. Throughout Europe government institutions within individual countries try to deal with the issue. And the European Parliament has its own watchdog in the form of the Fundamental Rights Agency, which is trying to do a marvelous job, considering the enormous problems we face. Regularly I participate in their consultations, and I know how hard it is. So, no, not all is well in Zion. There is a long way to go. In my few remaining minutes I would like to propose a different type of remedy which could work in conjunction to the legal solutions. For, after all, **research shows that nations in which it**

is safe to have and share opinions, flourish, whereas nations that subdue individual feelings, pay a heavy toll in social and economic welfare¹. Much can be said on the need and blessings of Freedom of Speech and Freedom of Religious- and other Beliefs. Most likely, were I to tell you about it, I would be preaching to the choir; I think most, if not all, are already persuaded of its need for Freedom of thought and the freedom of Religion and freedom of Speech. But here are just a few arguments for having Freedom of Religion or Belief:

- It is a Human Right !!²
- For the purpose of social health, we need particularly a ***diversity of religions*** just as much as we need ***diversity of culture*** and ***diversity of thought*** and ***diversity of creativity*** and the arts³. The diversity colors our lives and our society from black and white and grey's to a whole spectrum of beauty and wisdom.
- If we remove the rights of man to dictate according to their conscience, we also take away their responsibility for their own actions⁴, and we bring their wrongdoings upon the controlling governments.
- Is freedom of religion or belief any different from the freedom to choose which preferences and role models we prefer in society, such as movies, movie stars, music, music stars, sports clubs, financial guru's or sports clubs?
- Freedom of Religion is much like freedom of Journalism. Sometimes we do not like what they say, but the fact that they say it and can say it, says something about us as listeners.

¹ [The Central Liberal Truth](#), Laurence E. Harrison, p 36-37

² United Nations Declaration on Human Rights, Articles 18-20

³ [A Terrible Beauty](#), Peter Watson; Essay on Civilizations and their discontents

⁴ See arguments on Gerard Noodt in 16th Century.

- The question is not which religion is true, or which religion should we turn away from, but what value does this religion or belief add to society, and what does it do for the individual who believes in it? Think of how values are taught through religions, such as human dignity and human warmth, the need for inner-peace, respect for the other, self-worth, the importance of human individuality and diversity. And if religions do not traduce (transfer) these values anymore, who are we going to ask to take over? The schools, the Media, the Government, parents?

FoRB defined

In my examples of problems in the EU you might have noticed that there are a few issues at stake here.

- a. There is the issue that we talk about Religions as institutions that are either the victims or culprits of Freedom of Religion or Belief.
- b. Then there is the whole matter of so called “Religiosity” of individuals – or in other words, the opinions or religious beliefs of persons. Whether or not these beliefs relate a religious belief in the spiritual sense of the word, or beliefs in a secular way, or in the way of gender attraction, should not matter. In other words, whether or not the belief is of a religious or spiritual or traditional nature, or on a social front, should not make any difference. All should be respected and have equal voice unless those views violate the principles of human rights set out in the UN Declaration of Human Rights.

In my research as an anthropologist I have found that much of the intolerant attitudes within Europe are in large part actually caused by main-stream churches. The causes can be described as follows:

- a. Some religions are afraid to lose their power connection with social and civic leadership. Often money is involved and their influence in a modern world diminishes due to a louder cry for separation between Church and State.
- b. Some religions are dramatically losing their sheep to either other religious movements or to a secularizing society. Much of that has to do with individuals becoming more intellectual and less spiritual; orthodox answers towards scientific findings and social values (such as evolution, the dates of the creation of the earth, tolerance towards abortion, the use of anti-conceptive- and anti-HIV drugs, etc.) appear less satisfying or even unsupportable.
- c. Much of the growing secularization deals with a shift in the involvement and control of education. In the past, some churches were dominant in the education world, as well as in the religious world. People were educated in their schools during the week days, influenced in their churches during the weekend, and much of social life revolved around the church in the center of the village. That has changed, and in most of the churches in Western Europe, the pews are empty.

The loss of this pervasive influence is strong, and it seems that the main-stream religious organizations find it difficult to reinvent themselves and adjust to their new role in a modern secular Europe. Because, the major Religious institutions have been at the root of theophobia in Europe in the past, many in society now often over-react to the past power of these churches and would deny these churches the opportunity to contribute to society in appropriate and helpful ways.

Remedies

1. Color the landscape

I would propose to use the strength of religious organizations as they are needed in the social landscape. What's more, I would suggest that ***the greater the diversity of religions decorating society, the healthier and wealthier it becomes, both socially and economically, as long as influential religious institutions maintain high levels of democratic participation.***

2. Strengthen and respect the Watch dogs

The watch dogs, like the Fundamental Rights Agency and the countless NGO's in the field that put up red flags when something goes wrong, need to receive due attention. They do their research, write their articles and books, and organize conferences such as these. They are the standard bearers, and their work is invaluable. Let's keep giving them our support.

3. Re-invent the role of religion within society

Furthermore, I would suggest ***putting pressure on countries that still strongly sponsor religions financially and decreasing their sponsorship over the coming years--letting them find their own niche in society, without political support or support from the tax offices.*** That applies to a lot of countries within the EU, from Germany to France, and especially Eastern European nations and the Balkans. There is a role for religions and religious movements and other organizations with a strong belief system. But we need to rethink their relationship to democratic governments and what roles they should play in a democratic society.

4. Judicial protection

As you can tell from my argumentation there is another way to tackle Freedom of Religion or Belief besides the legal way. It is true that we need to

keep utilizing the legal entities that protect all forms of Human Rights. The courts, the police apparatus and other social institutions need to keep working on discrimination, hate-speech, and the abuse of the weaker groups of society. In fact, more work needs to be done on equal right protection in the work place, and protection of children in the homes. More protection for the disabled, etc., etc.. These issues require money, experts and lots of attention.

5. Separation between government roles and religious roles

In some states, like Belgium, the law states that there must be religious education in schools. At first glance this sounds nice for religious people. But this approach causes some difficulties that defeat its purpose. The first is that school education is a government role, whereas religious education is a role that should be done by the religions. In Belgium the natural consequence is that the state, therefore, provide funds for religions to do their teachings. But the enormous number of religions that would apply for these funds make it undoable. The remedy they came up with is that only 6 major religions would be allowed as umbrella organizations that can provide religious education. Any religion that wants to teach religious education, must register under any of these six allotted religions. This particular remedy causes that most other religions do not want to register under any of these six. A Bahai, for example, is neither protestant, nor catholic, nor Jew, and certainly not Moslim. Not only can they not teach religion in school, but they can also not register as an accredited religion. This Belgian case is one of several problems that is caused by the state mingling in religious affairs, and vice versa. We could give examples of the French state providing church building support for Catholicism, or for their financial support to anti-cult

organizations such as MIVILUDES. There should be an even clearer separation between Church and state.

6. Social Debates

Freedom of thought and expression, though, does not belong in the courts, except where society has failed. This issue should not belong to Strasbourg in France, but on the streets of Europe. The problem is primarily a social mind set, not a legal one. So long as someone cannot talk to his neighbor because he is a member of another Church, or if someone has to hide in a closet because of his deep inner convictions, or has to flee his family or his nation because of his affiliation to a different religion, the law has done him only limited good. Much of the intolerance we face cannot be protected by law. So, we need to promote societal changes that encourage and support the legal protections already in place.

7. Intervention within our cultural way of thinking

Cultural changes are increasing in speed

Europe is rapidly losing its national, cultural, traditional and religious boundaries, and we will see more and more of a melting pot. The internet and more people speaking or communicating in English on the Internet is one of the drivers. But also think of the influence the open borders of Romanians, Bulgarians, Albanians and other nations will have over the coming years. There will be a great influx of people from poor European Countries to nations with a greater socio-economic welfare system. Over the coming years we will see a stronger Europe focusing on what's happening within our own EU border. If we are not careful we will measure more oikophobia (fright of the great world around us), while what is really needed is more of a global village feeling. We do not need to participate in destructive levels of religious competition. Admittedly, some levels of

competition do push us all to refine our efforts and therefore contribute to the amelioration of society, but too much creates disharmony and animosity. Cooperation--in which we all work towards the eradication of poverty, global warming, the population crunch, economic disaster, and even abuse of human rights--on the other hand, could lead to greater success for all. Each social group has their own strengths and weaknesses in these areas. We need to learn to not just tolerate others, but to respect them and work together as nations, as religious groups, and as individuals, regardless of race, creed, gender attraction, cultural or traditional background.

Controlling cultural changes

We could make a difference if we unitedly propose and advocate public announcements and programs that advocate more open acceptance of different religions and their viewpoints, as well as welcome their contributions to the betterment of society, we would improve the communities and nations that we live in. Just think how much influence the media has over the minds of our people. And how about the opinion of our school teachers and our politicians and our professors? How much influence do News-Carriers have, and Advertisement Agencies? Marketing experts are continually working on changing people's preferences, thinking and behavior into commercialism. What I am proposing is not to try to convert people to a religion or a political party. What we want to achieve is a society with people who value integrity and tolerance towards other organizations and respect for people of different persuasion than theirs. Just as much as governments of Sovereign States respect each other, in spite of their differences, so we want social institutions to respect each other and individuals to respect governments, politicians and parents. The question, of course is how do we do it?

Fund Projects

My proposal would be to continue to move government funds away from Religious Institutions and anti-religious movements⁵ to **projects** that enhance tolerance of beliefs – whatever their kind. This is a new way of thinking that requires more input. It is pro-actively helping society think better about the direction we have been heading in the past. So what I am proposing is that the Euros will be more and more focused on projects that promote tolerance and Respect-Speech. Think of projects that promote tolerance education in schools, such as the so-called Toledo Project of the OSCE⁶; adjusting the school curriculum to include training on the content and practical use of the Declaration of Human Rights of the United Nations; youth activities that teach diversity thinking; Radio-TV-Social Media spots that show the roots, the differences and the consequences of hate speech, vs respect speech. Think of moviemakers and song writers that write appealing scripts that make people think about the issue. How about municipal debates, newspaper columns, or religions that take initiatives to listen to the so called “other”? What if universities find ways to promote the debate, and receive some funding for these projects? My proposal would entail to not fund the organizations that come up with these projects, but to have these organizations put forward their proposals, which, after approval from the EU are funded. A budget is then allotted to the project according to their projected and anticipated success. We could organize project contests. The objective of it all is to make it appealing for organizations or groups to enhance the advantages of human tolerance and respect for each other. I imagine that the churches could play a major role in this, as the word “love”

⁵ Like MIVILUDES in France and FECRIS in Austria, France, Russia, etc.

⁶ <http://www.osce.org/odihr/49220>

is preached from every pulpit. Yet, at the same time, much love is not lost for those who are not of their faith. That needs to change.

8. Certification as a supporter of Human Rights

Let’s make it attractive for religious groups and people of other convictions to want to sign up to all of the elements of the United Nations Declaration of Human Rights. Organizations that do are more likely to behave in accordance to the law of the land and do not pose much of a danger. As a consequence, they will be more easily trusted and they will more likely receive financial-aid for their Human Rights Projects. This will strengthen the idea that NGO’s will not fight each other in a dog fight for the right to be heard above other well needed colleagues, but they will recognize that ALL of the articles of Human Rights are needed, and that we all need each other to eradicate discrimination based on Gender, Gender Attraction, Religious- or other Beliefs, Affiliation, or whatever is unnecessary and destructive in a free Europe – free in more than just freedom from oppression or bondage, but free to think and act within the law.

Summary of United Nations Declaration of Human rights

1. All are born free and equal in dignity and rights.
2. No distinction in rights and freedoms based on race, colour, sex, language, religion, political or other opinion or social origin, property, birth or other status; political jurisdictional or international status of the country or territory to which he belongs
3. The right to life, liberty and security of person.
4. No one shall be held in slavery or servitude.
5. No torture or cruel, inhuman or degrading treatment or punishment.
6. Equal treatment before the law.
7. Equal protection by the law.
8. Equal remedy by the competent national tribunals for acts violating the fundamental rights granted him by the constitution or by law.
9. No subjection to arbitrary arrest, detention or exile.
10. Full equality to a fair and public hearing by an independent and impartial tribunal, in the determination of his rights and obligations and of any criminal charge against him.
11. Rights for those charged of a legal offence:
 - a. The right to be presumed innocent until proven guilty
 - b. The protection from guilt of any penal offence on account of any act or omission which did not constitute a penal offence, under national or international law, at the time when it was committed; no heavier penalty to be imposed than the one that was applicable at the time the penal offence was committed.
12. No subjection to arbitrary interference with his privacy, family, home or correspondence, nor to attacks upon his honour and reputation.
13. Rights for movement and residency
 - a. Freedom of movement and residence within the borders of each state.
 - b. Right to leave any country, including his own, and return to his country
14. Rights towards asylum seekers
 - a. The right to seek and enjoy asylum from persecution.
 - b. This right may not be invoked in the case of prosecutions genuinely arising from non-political crimes or from acts contrary to the purposes and principles of the United Nations. Rights towards asylum seekers
15. Everyone has the right to a nationality. No deprivation of nationality or right to change nationality.
16. Marriage rights:
 - a. No limitation to marry and found a family
 - b. Marriage shall be entered into only with the free and full consent of the intending spouses
 - c. The family is the natural and fundamental group unit of society and is entitled to protection by society and the State
17. Property rights
 - a. Everyone has the right to own property alone as well as in association with others
 - b. No one shall be arbitrarily deprived of his property
- 18. Freedom of thought, conscience and religion; including freedom to change religion or belief, freedom to either alone or in community with others and in public or private to manifest his religion or belief in teaching, practice, worship and observance.**
- 19. Freedom of opinion and expression.**
- 20. Rights of association and assembly**
 - a. **Everyone has the right to freedom of peaceful assembly and association**
 - b. **No one may be compelled to belong to an association**
21. Community and political rights
 - a. Right to take part in government of his country
 - b. Equal access to public service in his country
 - c. Right to democratic political processes
22. Right to Government initiated social security (economic, cultural) commensurate to his dignity and free development of personality
23. Labor:
 - a. Right to work, free choice of employment with just and favourable conditions of work and protection against unemployment
 - b. Everyone, without any discrimination, has the right to equal pay for equal work
 - c. Rights for those working to just and favourable remuneration ensuring for himself and his family
 - d. Right to form and to join trade unions for the protection of his interests
24. Right to rest and leisure, including reasonable limitation of working hours and periodic holidays with pay
25. Rights in the home:
 - a. Right to a standard of living adequate for the health and well-being of himself and of his family (food, clothing, housing and medical care and necessary social services, and the right to security in the event of unemployment, sickness, disability, widowhood, old age or other lack of livelihood in circumstances beyond his control).
 - b. Motherhood and childhood are entitled to special care and assistance. All children, whether born in or out of wedlock, shall enjoy the same social protection
26. Educational rights
27. Cultural, moral and material protection
28. Entitlement to a social and international order in which the rights and freedoms set forth in this Declaration can be fully realized
29. Rights and duties within communities and their laws
30. Disclaimer to the Declaration, that it may not be used to destroy any rights and freedoms as set forth therein.