



Conference

Regional Perspectives on Interfaith Cooperation for Peace and Human Rights

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Interfaith cooperation on religious freedom issues: a European perspective

When I was 20, I was a convinced atheist and I once wrote in my personal diary: "If I ever become a Christian, it will be the sign that I have caught a mental disease and I will have to be cured of it willy-nilly."

Seven years later, I became a Protestant and fortunately, I was not sent to a psychiatric hospital to be cured of my disease. I felt a call for defending the rights and freedoms of the Christians in atheist Communist countries. Which Christians? Only Protestants? In my quest for organizations helping these Christians, I only found faith-based institutions assisting their own coreligionists behind the Iron Curtain. Orthodox were only defending Orthodox, Catholics were only defending Catholics, Protestants were only defending Protestants and Jews were only defending Jews. In the 1970s, the main denominations of Christianity were also divided by iron curtains and interfaith cooperation was almost non-existent in the fight for religious freedom. My conception was then and still is that freedom of religion is indivisible and therefore during my free time I decided to start work as a volunteer for Protestant, Catholic and Orthodox organizations. Beyond my personal solution for fighting for the religious freedom of all Christians in Communist countries, I slowly managed to convince the Catholic, Protestant and Orthodox organizations I was helping to demonstrate together outside the embassies of the Soviet Union, Czechoslovakia and other countries. There were difficult debates inside the concerned faith-based organizations before they decided to co-organize common defense actions. They were then probably

less convinced by the concept of indivisibility of religious freedom than by the necessity to unite their efforts so that their voices can be better heard. At that time, historical religions were fiercely competing for the monopoly of the “Truth” and were easily anathematizing each other. The perception of religious freedom changed with the development of the ecumenical movement in the religious field and of the international human rights movement in the secular field, especially with Amnesty International.

The concept of indivisibility of religious freedom was further developed by the United Nations and various regional inter-state organizations such as the Council of Europe, the European Union or the OSCE. Just to name a few. These international political organizations have their own “sacred scriptures”: the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, the Helsinki Agreements, the European Convention of Human Rights, the Charter of Fundamental Rights of the European Union. All these international instruments guarantee the right to freedom of thought, conscience, religion or belief for all and proclaim the principle of non-discrimination and equality before the law without distinction as to race, sex, language or religion. “Missionaries” of the international human rights community have preached the Good Word among many states and many nations have converted to the international human rights standards: 192 states are now members of the UN, 56 of the OSCE, 46 of the Council of Europe and 27 of the European Union. Mechanisms have been put in place, to identify the states who sin against the international human rights norms. While anti-Semitism had always been combated in Western Europe after WW II, this evil ideology never died and this issue remains high on the agenda of the UN, the OSCE, the Council of Europe and the European Union. Another issue has also forced its way through their agendas: intolerance and discrimination against Muslims.

The issues of religious freedom, religious intolerance, religious discrimination, defamation of religions, religious hate crimes, anti-Semitic and anti-Muslim incidents, intolerance towards ethno-religious groups can now be raised across the religious spectrum in a wide range of political arenas: at the UN through the Human Rights Council and the Universal Periodic Review, at the OSCE through the annual Human Dimension Implementation Meeting (HDIM) of the Office for Democracy and Human Rights (ODIHR), at the Council of Europe (CoE) through the European Commission against Racism and Intolerance (ECRI) and the European Court.

It must be stressed that faith-based organizations have largely contributed to these developments in the secular space by organizing or participating in seminars and academic conferences or by using these mechanisms.

The spread of the culture of non-discrimination and tolerance through the inter-state organizations and their various institutions, the media and school education has greatly contributed to the integration of the concept of the indivisibility of religious freedom among the historical religions, in their local communities, in the minds of the believers from all horizons. However, strong resistances still persist and more interfaith cooperation is still needed in some parts of Europe. This can only be achieved if states and civil societies create a culture of mutual respect and understanding between communities of faith and belief.

Religious diversity goes far beyond the perimeter of the so-called historical religions. In every country, there exist hundreds of small religious groups with their own theology and their own practices; in the world, there are thousands of them. They never leave their social environment indifferent. Sometimes, they are heavily persecuted but most of the time, they are victims of discrimination and intolerance at various degrees.

In the European space, they are called sects or cults by historical religions. Orthodox churches in Eastern Europe call most of them totalitarian and destructive cults although they have never been sentenced by any court.

In the last fifteen years minority faith and belief communities have been suspected of being harmful or dangerous by the parliaments of a number of democratic states, such as France, Belgium and Austria. They have been defamed by the media and consequently perceived negatively by civil society. This hostile atmosphere has led to the stigmatization of these religious groups, to a wide range of acts of intolerance and discrimination by public and private actors: victimization at work or at school, attacks on the reputation of ordinary persons on the ground of their religious affiliation, loss of employment or promotions, refusal or limitation of the right to visit their children or rejection of the right to custody in cases of divorce, impossibility of renting public or private spaces for religious ceremonies or meetings, judicial complaints for supposed illegal practice of medicine, cases of temporary imprisonment, etc.

Religious freedom is indivisible and cannot be denied to any religious group whatever its membership and its historicity. This has been confirmed by the current and the former UN Special Rapporteurs on Freedom of Religion or Belief. Understanding, tolerance and respect must not be a privilege of historical religions.

The battle for religious freedom for all and for everybody is a never-ending fight against prejudices, distortions of the reality, lies and defamation. Interfaith dialogue with new religious movements is a necessity for a better mutual understanding and a harmonious society. Interfaith cooperation on religious freedom issues cannot be limited to a privileged category of religions but must include all communities of faith and belief.

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