

# Religious discrimination in the European Union

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On behalf of ENAR, I would like to welcome you all - those who came from far away and those who live in Holland. This country which is small in size but big at heart has been for me an exemplary land of tolerance, accommodation and multiculturalism on the European continent. Of course, late Pim Fortyne and his party did manage to make many decent Dutch people feel ashamed, but it was for a very short period. Fortunately Holland quickly bounced back.

One of the arguments used by the PFL in its election campaign was how Muslim communities are destroying the fiber of Dutch society. Political movements all across Europe - France, Austria, Denmark, Italy and now even Switzerland are using religious hatred to enhance their share of votes.

ENAR which primarily works with anti-discrimination directives is increasing aware of the changing nature of discrimination. From race to ethnicity to culture and to religion.

It is very few diehards Nazis who talk about colour, race or genes in the European context. Now it is religion, which is in the center of discussion and an excuse to keep out the "Unwanted ones".

In the aftermath of 11<sup>th</sup> Sept 2001, many among Muslim communities in Holland and other countries through out Europe and North America experienced mass hysteria and demonisation.

The world's second largest religion, Islam became feared and hated because of the horrible acts of a few misguided zealots. School children were harassed; young girls had their headscarves pulled away, old women were spat on and shops were smashed.

Some airlines refused to accept passengers who looked "Middle Eastern", wholly innocent people were attacked and in a few cases killed.

Of longer consequence, governments in the West rushed to pass draconian anti-terrorism laws that gave the state exceptional powers to override basic civil rights of anyone looking "suspicious".

Not surprising these laws have been used primarily against followers of Islam. A network of experts set up in October 2002 by the European Commission at the request of MEPs has published their first annual report criticizing anti-terror drive as a risk to civil liberties. (06 May 2003 - Independent)

Soon after that, another religious community came under attack. As the result of Israel – Palestine conflict in the Middle East and American bombing of Afghanistan, Jewish communities through out Europe became a renewed target. They were terrorized and attacked, very much as Muslim communities. Young Palestinian and other Arabs were willingly joined by the well-established anti- Semitic forces among the native Europeans.

According to the latest Annual report of the French National Committee on Human Rights (April 2003 issue of Migration News Sheet) there were 992 threats, 731 were directed against Jews and 169 against Muslims.

The figures for threats and for acts of violence in 2002 were the highest in the past 10 years.

All these actions are deplorable and destructive; these must be dealt with judicially and, politically and by sustained campaigns.

But the questions, which arise and need a clear response, are:

- Can we lobby against religious hate when the media continues to play a vital role in spreading propaganda against Islam and Judaism?
- Can we take legal action against acts based on religious hate when governments are busy making laws which discriminate directly or indirectly against certain religions or their followers?
- Can we educate the public, while they are bombarded by political statements, which are not only anti-immigrants and anti-non – European but also talk about making Christianity the 'official' religion of Europe?

We must look for the answer in the recent history. On December 10th, 1948 the General Assembly of the United Nations adopted and proclaimed the Universal Declaration of Human Rights. Article 2 of this declaration clearly states:

“Everyone is entitled to all the rights and freedoms, set forth in this Declaration, without distinction of any kind, such as race, color, sex, language, religion, political or other opinion, national or social origin, property, birth or other status”.

## What is a religion

I have time and again heard people talking about the need to protect religions and faiths. But only large established religions like Christianity, Islam, Judaism, Hinduism, Buddhism, Bahai, Sikhism and few more. But we live in an age of diversity, individual

choice and enlightenment. We have also many smaller faiths, religious movements and sects among us, which need protection. One may disagree with their teaching or philosophy, but every one who experiences discrimination, oppression and exclusion, must be protected. We should not be selective or take it upon ourselves to be the judge of other people's religious belief and practice. As long as it is done with respect to an individual's free will and in accordance to law, they have a right to be protected against all kinds of discrimination – State, public or intellectual.

## **Religious intolerance**

Of course, all states are sovereign and have the constitutional right to protect their citizens from external and internal threats. Problem arises when the state takes it on itself to define certain religions as "dangerous" and "unwelcome".

There are religious hatred lobbies in Europe which are well financed and well connected; they are responsible for creating a political climate in which discriminatory laws are being passed with little real opposition.

In a situation where the laws of EU member states are now being integrated and harmonized and common laws are being proposed, action must be taken now if we are to be effective in lobbying against religious hate.

Prejudice in the public sphere is of course, not produced by the media alone. Very often their role is to reproduce discourses originating elsewhere, for example, from politicians, government officials, police, judges, employers, others with status as academics, artists or business leaders. With the protection of the European Convention on Human Rights, the media enjoys relative editorial freedom.

## **Specific principles of good practice**

ENAR being the largest NGO network in EU has embarked upon "A lobby against religious discrimination". I would like to put forward some proposals for the consideration of this conference. We must pledge to:

- Defend basic human rights and democratic principles and to reject all forms of racial violence, incitement to racial hatred and harassment and any form of religious discrimination
- Refuse to display, to publish, to distribute or to endorse in any way views and positions, which stir up or invite prejudices, hostility or division between people of different religious origin and to deal firmly with any anti-religious sentiments within its own ranks

- Deal responsibly and fairly with sensitive topics relating to religious minority groups and to avoid stigmatization of any religious group
- Refrain from any form of alliance or cooperation with a political party, which stirs up or incites religious prejudices and religious hatred or attempts to do so.
- Strive as much as possible for the equal representation of the various religious groups in society at all levels of the parties with a special responsibility for the party leadership. Stimulation and support of recruitment of candidates for political functions as well as membership from ethnic minority groups with different beliefs would be a good signal.

### **Tolerant and multi-religious society**

In a society which wishes to transform it from mono-religious to multi-religious, it is necessary that:

- the minorities must be offered a chance to practice their own religions
- the minorities must have a right to organize themselves and look after their religious interests
- the concept of ethnic and cultural equality should be enlarged to include religious equality in the constitution and legal system

### **Religious interaction through education**

If we talk about religious interaction through education, then educational institutions can create an atmosphere of tolerance by:

- preparing discussions and study material for students
- creating contacts to religious organizations working for an inclusive society
- educating the teachers in religious minority issues
- creating meeting forums and workshops for parents to listen to each others point of views – good and bad
- Invite inter -faith scholars and experts to hold seminars, debates and panel discussions

### **Priorities in relation to policies for religion and belief**

In all of the countries of Europe some action must be taken urgently, while options must be open for further medium and long-term solutions. The key areas are those relating to work, education, public order and the role of the state.

By December 2003 all EU Member States must have laws prohibiting religious discrimination in the employment field, to comply with EU Employment Framework

Directive. There should also be legislation to permit reasonable time off for religious holidays and for religious observance at work.

There is a need to review of access to education for religious minorities and to remedy inequality. As a priority there must be in every state effective protection against hate speech and hate crimes based on membership of a religious group. No one should face threats or intimidation on the grounds of their religious beliefs.

On the long term, one must look at the equal access to state funds for religious activities and all-religious educational foundations, establishment of religious schools, tax relief for religious charities and a full review of established church and its role in the secular life.

In the end of today, after Vera's and Sophie's part called 'food for thoughts' there would be place for questions from the audience. Please take active part in it. I personally would like to bring the role of media in spreading religious hatred and discrimination in the society.

Once again, welcome to the conference and I assure you that we all would go away from here, wiser, dedicated and thoughtful.

## References

1. Universal Declaration of Human Rights. Article 2 - December 10, 1948
2. UN declaration proclaimed by General Assembly resolution 36/55 of 25 November 1981
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6. Substantive Rights and equal treatment in respect and belief - by Gay Moon and Robin Allen - European Human Rights Law Review - Nov 2000
7. British newspaper, Guardian - 28.02.2001
8. Report from European Monitoring Center on Racism and Xenophobia - March 2001
9. Report on religious intolerance - Helsinki Federation for Human Rights - June 2001
10. Danish newspaper, Christian Daily - 26.06.2001