

David Pollock - European Humanist Federation

Remarks for OSCE HDIM meeting in Warsaw 24 September 2007
(Prevention of aggressive nationalism, chauvinism, and ethnic cleansing)

Aggression and chauvinism is not confined to governments. They also affect religions and their spokespersons.

On this occasion it is not Christianity I wish to criticise but the sort of extreme "political Islam" that is becoming pervasive, to the quiet dismay not least of many devout Muslims.

Extreme Islamists are aggressively asserting that any criticism of Islam or of any act done in its name amounts to a hate crime.

They cast themselves as victims; they promote the notion of Islamophobia on the lines of anti-Semitism.

And they take advantage of the flabby thinking of western liberals, co-opting 'progressives' who are all too ready to think in terms of group rights (human rights are always individual!)

and of relativistic values which leads them to accept intolerable behaviour and attitudes on the basis that different standards are legitimate for different communities, even if it means oppression of women, restriction of freedom of belief, violence against dissenters and so on.

These extreme but alarmingly numerous Islamists, wandering far from the peaceful message of mainstream Islam, have captured many governments and these in turn have gained control of the new UN Human Rights Council just as effectively as they controlled the old UN Human Rights Commission.

There they have passed - with support from one European country, Russia - a resolution against "defamation of religions"

On 14 March 2007 the spokesperson for the Organisation of the Islamic Conference asked for

"effective and legally binding measures for combating defamation of all religions and incitement to racial and religious violence".

This confuses two quite separate issues: defamation of religion, and incitement to violence. All of us must condemn incitement to racial and religious violence - including the extreme violence against apostates from Islam to be witnessed in some countries, such as the lynching of people accused of (but not yet tried for) blasphemy in Pakistan.

But defamation of a religion - criticism of it - is another matter. No-one has a duty to respect any religion. But lack of respect for a belief is quite different from hatred of the believer. And it is the believer that merits protection, not the belief - the individual who has human rights, not the religion or any institution connected to it.