



FOREF (Forum for Religious Freedom) -Europe, Office: Seidengasse 28/4, 1070 Vienna, AUSTRIA
President: Prof. Dr. Christian Bruenner, Secretary General: Peter Zoehrer
Phone: +43 6645238794, E-mail: webmaster@religionsfreiheit.at, Website: www.religionsfreiheit.at

2007 HUMAN DIMENSION IMPLEMENTATION MEETING

Warsaw, 24 September – 05 October 2007

Working Session 2:

Combating intolerance and discrimination and promoting mutual respect and understanding

AUSTRIA

State sponsored discrimination of religious minorities – Analysis & recommendations:

Austria, with a population of 8, 2 Million has no less than 34 Anti-Sect offices operating in the country. Proportionally, this marks an unmatched record in Europe and even on a global scale.

- Including the Federal Sect Observatory, there are 6 state sponsored sect-observation offices
- 9 Catholic Sect Offices
- 7 Protestant Sect Offices
- 4 Private Sect Offices
- and 8 Family Counselling Offices with special emphasis on “Sectarian issues”.

1. The Federal Sect Office

In 1998, the Austrian Parliament passed the Federal Law for the Establishment of a **Documentation and Information Office for Matters Concerning Sects**. The tasks of this office, whose head was appointed and supervised by the Minister for Social Security and Generations, were to collect and distribute information about dangers originating from programs or activities of sects, or sect-related activities. The Federal Sect Office receives over €500,000. - per year support from the Federal Government.

Members of minority groups and renowned constitutional experts, such as Dr. Heinz Mayer or Prof. Dr. Christian Bruenner have repeatedly questioned the constitutional legitimacy of the Federal Sect office.

The following aspects and activities of the Federal Sect Office do not comply with Art. 9 EMRK; Art. 18 AEMR, OSCE standards or even the Austrian constitution:

Violation of equal rights and the principle of church/state separation:

- **“Sects” within the mainstream churches are excluded from observation** by this office. The law is not applied to state-recognized churches and confessional communities and is therefore discriminatory.
- **Two key staff members of the Federal Sect Office:** A Catholic theologian and a pedagogue in Protestant theology.
- The FSO organises and sponsors regular meetings (Fachtagungen) with Protestant and Catholic Sect offices.
- The director of the Federal Sect Office (Dr. Mueller) appointed in 1998, is the former leader of the controversial Vienna based, private Anti-Cult Organisation GSK („Gesellschaft gegen Sekten- und Kultgefahren"), which is also a member group of FECRIS, the controversial European anti-cult umbrella organisation. Critics say that Dr. Mueller is using the anonymity of the FSO to cater to the aims of FECRIS. Staff of the FSO regularly attend international conferences of FECRIS.

Austria’s constitutionally granted neutrality of the state in religious matters is torpedoed by these facts. Members of religious minorities report numerous cases of religious discrimination in schools, communities and in their workplace. Even established NGOs with a consultative status at the UN (ECOSOC), who are running peace initiatives or relief projects in line with the UN-Millennium goals reported to FOREF, that their work has been severely hampered by the interventions of the so called “sect experts”. Victims especially hold the state responsible for creating an atmosphere of religious intolerance and spiritual apartheid.

2. 43 Anti-Sect Videos circulate in Austrian Schools

Most high-school students have to attend lessons on “Sektenaufklärung”, which in reality present a biased message on several religious minorities in religious, political, and social classes. The information contained in the teaching material is not only largely outdated but it is also discriminatory and biased since it

is often produced by the apologetic quarters of the mainstream churches in order to defend themselves against competing small religions. However, teachers in public schools use the material of the Catholic Church and Protestant Church to allegedly educate and warn the youth. They also use a number of the 43 anti-sect videos which are being circulated nationwide in schools and the content of a former government brochure against so-called “sects” which also contained a blacklist. Especially children, whose parents are members of a targeted religious minority are suffering under these circumstances. So far, the Ministry of Education has done little to prevent the use of stigmatising anti-sect teaching materials.

3. The Vienna based, private Anti-Cult Organisation GSK, member group of FECRIS

GSK is sponsored by the City of Vienna (annually €10,000) & the State of Lower-Austria. The State Government of Lower Austria provides project centred monetary support to GSK and employs the group to hold anti-sect seminars for parents and schools, disregarding the unscientific approach of GSK and the controversy of one leading figure of the organisation: **Mr Friederich Griess - Board Member, webmaster of GSK and current president of FECRIS.**

Mr. Griess has been convicted for defamation a number of times against the religious group Norweger (Smiths Friends, a Christian group present in over 60 countries). He made statements without any foundation such as: the group were the cause of a suicide, that they have a higher suicide rate than the general population and that they caused psychological damage. Yet despite court decisions, he still made false statements about the group on the Internet. The degree of his religious intolerance can be measured by one typical quote of Mr. Griess: In a book *"Mein Kind ist sektenhörig"* he states: *"Sect-people are 80 percent primitive and stupid persons"* and *"The people there are becoming more and more stupid and it is easy to realize from one hundred meters that they belong to a sect"*.

4. Cases, where the Federal Government and local governments have responded positively to criticism of human rights defenders:

- In 2002 the Ministry of the Interior closed the Police Sect-Office in the Vienna headquarters of the Federal Police.
- 2002/3 the Ministry of Social Affairs stopped the reprint, online publishing & distribution of its widely criticised and discriminatory “Sect-Brochures”, which blacklisted a number of religious minority groups and was distributed in schools

and public institutions.

- In 2003 the State Government of Upper-Austria stopped the production & distribution of the so called Linzer “Sect CD-ROM”, which attacked over 350 religious minority groups. The deputy-governor has surrendered to the pressure of FOREF (Forum for Religious Freedom) after a one year long campaign.
- In 2006 the Ministry of Social Affairs stopped financing GSK, the Austrian FECRIS group.
- Several State sponsored “sect offices” have – over the recent years – become more scientific and moderate in their approach.
- The national media has become more objective in dealing with the “Sect Issue”.

RECOMMENDATIONS

FOREF recommendation to the Austrian Government and public administration:

- Stop funding prejudiced public and private organizations which promote and propagate defamatory statements about faith communities and religious organisations. Such activities infringe the principles of tolerance and integration promoted by the OSCE to which Austria has committed itself.
- Revise legislation which initiated the institution of the Federal Sect Office to include ALL religious communities of faith and belief, including the so-called official religions, to overcome the discriminatory character.
- Prohibit the distribution and use of bigoted anti-sect videos in schools and public institutions.
- Stop all collaboration with FECRIS-affiliated organizations that fuel intolerance and suspicion towards minority religions in the public and the media.