



OSCE Human Dimension Implementation Meeting

Warsaw, 25 September 2007

Working Session 2: Combating intolerance and discrimination and promoting mutual respect and understanding

The public financing of projects and organizations spreading religious intolerance must stop !

The commitments of the OSCE and its participating states, of the Council of Europe and of the European Union with regard to religious tolerance and respect of the diversity of religious and non-religious beliefs have always been unambiguous. It should therefore be expected that these inter-state actors and state actors invest a maximum of their available resources to promote religious tolerance but is this really the case?

On 28 June 2007, the Conference of INGOs of the Council of Europe organized a study day entitled "Sects and cults: a challenge to democracy and human rights" without any question mark at the end. This conference raises a number of questions.

Must it be understood that the organizers of that study day can distinguish sects and cults from religions and can identify them by name?

Must it be understood that the Council of Europe shares the view that so-called sects and cults represent a challenge to democracy?

Did the Conference of the INGOs ignore at that time that some of the guest-speakers or movements represented on the panel of that study day are known to be antireligious or opposed to religious diversity?

This is the case of the UK-based movement FAIR, *Family Action Information and Resource*, a sect-hunting organization represented at the study day by its president Tom Sackville. This is the case of the French movement UNADFI, the *National Union of Associations for the Defense of Families and Individuals Victims of Sects*. On 18 July, the Court of Appeals in Rouen condemned the president of UNADFI, Catherine Picard, to pay 6,750 Euros to the Jehovah's Witnesses for defamation. Catherine Picard, who is also Socialist Party regional councillor in

Haute Normandie, had made a statement in October 2005 to the newspaper *Dépêche d'Evreux* wherein she accused Jehovah's Witnesses of "being organized as all mafia-like movements in the fashion of a pyramid." The court found that Catherine Picard had "in excessive fashion and by a tendentious presentation thrown discredit upon the Jehovah's Witnesses and . . . given her excessive statements utterly devoid of good faith had gone beyond the limits of acceptable free opinion."

Was it consistent with the commitments of the Council of Europe to invite such movements inside its walls?

Another speaker invited to that study day is also more than controversial in his country: Alexander Dvorkin from the Center of Religious Studies in Russia. He is the author of a book on so-called destructive religious cults, including some neo-protestant groups operating in Russia. For several years, Dvorkin worked for the Russian Orthodox Church in its fight against new religious movements but was finally dismissed. Dvorkin has been sued on numerous occasions. Some years ago, he was invited to give lectures to students of the Moscow State University School of Journalism but the Dean, Dr. Yasen Zasursky, who had occupied that position for 40 years, did not renew his contract because of his hostility to non-Orthodox denominations. Dvorkin unsuccessfully challenged the decision in court. Dvorkin was also taken to court by the head of the Moscow Helsinki Committee, the famous Soviet dissident Lyudmila Alexeyeva, whom he had accused of being paid by the Church of Scientology. The court found out that his accusations were not founded.

The question is: Who was responsible for the agenda of such a conference? Who suggested that such a meeting be held? Why were no scholars of religion/new religious movements invited to participate? Why were the anti-sect groups so well represented and especially so many critics of European Court decisions in favor of religious minority groups? Why was this meeting not advertised to ALL groups/NGOs which have an interest in the subject? Last question but not least: Did the Conference of the INGOs contribute financially to that conference?

The financing by public powers of private organizations that under cover of protection of the family and the individual carry out activities defaming systematically certain religious groups is a source of concern for human rights organizations. This is the case in several European countries. For years, UNADFI and other anti-sect organizations in France have been financed by the Cabinet of the Prime Minister and other public entities. Maybe the time has come to change this policy in France and in other countries. Maybe this funding would instead be better invested in projects and organizations that really promote religious tolerance.

This statement is sponsored by the ***European Network for Religious Tolerance and Non-Discrimination*** created in July of this year by our organization and to which 18 religious and non-religious organizations from Austria, Belgium, Bulgaria, Germany, Malta, Netherlands, UK have adhered up to now.

Recommendations

Human Rights Without Frontiers Int'l recommends to the OSCE and the Council of Europe to organize a conference about the non-state actors that create a climate of religious defamation and intolerance, and in particular the so-called antisect/anticult groups.