

SOTERIA INTERNATIONAL
SPIRITUAL HUMAN RIGHTS



Contribution to working session 10: Freedom of Thought, Conscience, Religion or Belief

Soteria International finds that the main issue and obstacle for transparency and collaboration between state and civil society is a deeply rooted mutual mistrust between states and associations of conscience or belief.

Many associations that we meet in our work have given up on being integrated in society. Some associations believe that their fundamental rights will never be fully secured and some create an identity on this. Some hesitate to speak openly with us about their issues, expecting only to be ridiculed or misunderstood once more.

The state and public mistrust is partly based on the few but well described cases of criminal or subversive elements hiding behind the guise of being a spiritual movement. Probably just as big an obstacle is that most of today's decision makers grew up with only one dominant religion and are unaccustomed with pluralism in this field.

Media and public opinion naturally join to perceive any unknown spiritual practice as strange and potentially harmful.

Law and policies are naturally cultural-conservative that we are blind to acknowledge, until we find ourselves outside of it.

All in all we have a situation where both parties look at each other with suspicion or animosity, not trusting the actions or motives of the other. In the view of spiritual movements, society de facto does not let the individual to live according to his conscience or belief. Society looks for criminal or subversive elements, ready to judge any new spiritual movement as a "sect".

When it comes to spirituality, all the OSCE participating countries have a recent history of totalitarian regime. Pluralism and tolerance within spiritual practice is novel in Europe, which suffers birth pains of gradually letting go of being a uni-cultural society.

In modern history tolerance and pluralism between different groups is new and society is naturally conservative. Australia was one of the first countries to give women the right to vote and be elected (1902) but it took 41 years before a woman was actually elected. Aborigines were not given the right to vote until 1962.

The spiritual practice performed daily by millions of devotees is self-funded research and human development programs with great benefits for society, bettering health and life quality.

Obvious financial benefits have led some to promising programs regarding spiritual practice in medical care and production workflow. Still, for the greater part the spiritual potential is left out of society's agenda.

Society's hostility has imposed a hedge-hog communication strategy on many associations of conscience or belief. This hinders the natural interaction between the associations and thus the natural development within this field of research. Lacking openness between the authentic spiritual movements further leaves the field open for charlatans and criminal or subversive elements to flourish.

It further hinders the ambitions described by the ministerial decisions regarding transparency and dialogue when it comes to lawmaking and policy regarding freedom of thought, conscience, religion or belief.

Spiritual practice becomes a critical matter of identity, similar as gender or ethnicity. It seems society still has room only for one spiritual identity. Belonging to a sport club can be cool or corny, as with football or chess, but non-conventional spiritual affiliation often means to step out of society.

Qigong was practiced openly and unhindered as a form of gymnastic in Communist China. When Falun Gong re-introduced spirituality and healing into the practice, severe persecutions started. You can find similar pattern with yoga in Europe today, supported in the fitness centres but suspicious and even suppressed as spiritual path.

ODIHR and the OSCE participating states must take measures to facilitate a harmonious transition to a spiritually pluralistic and open society. Discrimination and ignorance must be combated and the positive integration in society promoted.

The work of the ODIHR Panel of Experts on Freedom of Religion or Belief must be pursued and aimed for a direct and dialogue between state and associations of conscience or belief.

Recommendations:

Soteria International recommends ODIHR to acutely emphasise on implementation of transparency and dialogue between states and civil society regarding freedom of conscience and belief policies.

Soteria International recommends the ODIHR to facilitate an unbiased dialogue regarding spiritual values and policies for the bettering of society, promoting transparency, knowledge and tolerance.