

Spoken contribution by Michael Nugent, chairperson of Atheist Ireland, to the OSCE Human Dimension conference in Warsaw, Poland, during working session 2 on Freedom of Thought, Conscience, Religion or Belief, on Tuesday 27 September 2011.

There is an interesting phrase on the OSCE website, in which the OSCE pledges to combat “all forms of racism, xenophobia, and discrimination, including anti-Semitism and discrimination against Christians and Muslims.” But why are these three religions given this special emphasis? Surely it is members of smaller religions and atheists who are most subject to religious discrimination and intolerance?

The Holy See delegate said yesterday, and I agree with him, that we should respect the dignity of the human person. This comes from an organisation whose Cardinal Murphy O'Connor has told the BBC that atheists are not fully human. Can you imagine the outcry if an atheist was to say that about members of any religious organisation?

In Ireland, we have a new government that has inherited a system which discriminates seriously against atheists. We are starting a presidential election campaign in which atheists cannot run, because you have to swear a religious oath to take office. The same applies to becoming a judge in Ireland. Ireland became the first country in the 21st century to pass a blasphemy law a couple of years ago. Our education system is controlled 90% at primary level by the Roman Catholic Church, which uses a system of permeating a Roman Catholic ethos throughout the entire curriculum. I am hopeful, or certainly more optimistic, that under our new government these issues can be tackled, but they are urgent and they need to be resolved as soon as possible.

At an international level, a conference in Dublin earlier this year launched a newly restructured group called atheist Alliance International, which will be advocating for atheism and secularism on an international level. We have passed a declaration called the Dublin Declaration on Secularism, which is available on the OSCE website, under Atheist Ireland's submission, and I urge all delegates to read that and to support it.

I will end by saying that religious States promote religion. Atheist States promote atheism. We want a secular State, that promotes neither, that respects everybody's rights and that is neutral on the issue of religion. A secular state is the only way to protect equally the rights of religious and nonreligious people.

Thank you very much.