

Protection of minority faiths from religious discrimination

A statement by the Family International, a Christian non-conformist minority with around 3,800 members living in OSCE countries and 8,000 elsewhere in the world.

On the occasion of the OSCE *Conference on Anti-Semitism and on Other Forms of Intolerance*, 8-9 June 2005, Cordoba, Spain.

The agenda for this conference includes the topic of "fighting intolerance and discrimination against Christians and members of other religions: respecting religious identity in a pluralistic society." This paper will look at the position of the "other religions", some of which have their roots in Christianity and others in less traditional religious outlooks. The intention of this statement and our participation in this conference is to draw attention to the plight of even the smallest of religious minorities, whose sincerity, beliefs and even right to existence are often disregarded.

What are the "other religions"?

"Other religions" can be a convenient term to describe minority religions as it carries no bias or prejudice. In fact, the reality of life for members of "other religions" which are non-traditional, non-conformist and/or do not have a historical presence in a certain country, is not often so straightforward. Minority religions in the OSCE region are frequently given a pejorative "sect" or "cult" label, which reflects neither a respect for their religious identity nor an understanding of their sincerely held religious views. After all, as the proverb goes, "one man's religion is another man's cult."

As has often been stated in conferences, such as today's event in Cordoba, "tolerance, respect for diversity, adapting and accommodating change are fundamental to peaceful and prosperous co-existence, to the development and stability of societies and people".¹ This tolerance should extend not only to those religions which are familiar in our society, whose identity has been defined over the centuries, but also to those who embrace new varieties of philosophy, religion and ideals, living their lives according to their sincere beliefs, no matter how unusual those beliefs may seem.

The responsibility of the State to protect the rights of its citizens to freedom of thought, conscience and religion, including their rights to be free from discrimination, is clearly stated in international treaties and conventions, ranging from the landmark Article 18 of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights (1948), to numerous agreements and declarations by the OSCE, further United Nations covenants, and so on. That this responsibility of promoting tolerance extends to non-traditional minority faiths was clarified by the United Nations Human Rights Committee in a detailed comment on Article 18 of the Universal Declaration, issued in 1993:

Article 18 is not limited in its application to traditional religions or to religions and beliefs with institutional characteristics or practices analogous to those of traditional religion. The Committee therefore views with concern any tendency to discriminate against any religion or belief for any reasons, including the fact that they are newly established, or represent religious minorities that may be the subject of hostility by a predominant religious community.²

The agenda introducing the June 2003 OSCE Supplementary Meeting on Freedom of Religion and Belief, held in Vienna, informed us that "the community or state is responsible for an atmosphere of tolerance, that is, for ensuring that no one is victimized by intolerance. When minority religions or beliefs cannot freely exercise their right to manifest their religions or beliefs, the State has to offer due protection."

The appropriate use of language regarding minority religions is one example where the state can actively promote tolerance and thus protect its minorities. Conversely, the misuse of language or of concepts can contribute to the discrimination that believers face in everyday matters.

The use and misuse of language in the debate on religion

The *sect* and *cult* labels are examples of language difficulties. The original meaning of the term *cult* derives from the French word "*culte*" which came from Latin noun "*cultus*," related to the Latin verb "*colere*" which means "*to worship or give reverence to a deity*". This can be applied to any group of religious believers. Current sociological usage

¹ Statement by Ambassador Paul Heinbecker, Permanent Representative of Canada, to the 56th Session of the United Nations General Assembly, New York, November 9, 2001

² U.N. Human Rights Committee, General Comment No. 22 (1993), paragraph 2.

of **cult** is that of “an innovative, fervent religious group, as contrasted with more established and conventional sects and denominations.” However the popular, media usage carries a very negative meaning: a marginal evil quasi-religious group.

Likewise **sect**. By definition, a **sect** is a small religious group that is an offshoot of an established religion or denomination. It holds most beliefs in common with its religion of origin, but has a number of novel concepts which differentiate them from that religion. However, in many countries, the term “sect” takes on the negative meanings associated with the word “cult.” The two terms are considered synonyms in many cases.

However, sects can be considered a normal mechanism by which new religious movements are generated. The Jewish people were a sect 3500 years ago when they were enslaved in Egypt. They were again a sect or cult for centuries under many regimes in Europe and elsewhere. Christians were a sect in the first centuries of our era. The Protestants were a sect when Luther and others broke with the Church. Every new religion has been a sect in its origin. Most sects die out quickly; others linger; still others grow and evolve into a new established religious movement and are properly called denominations.³

This is not merely an academic discussion about language. Religious minorities that are described as **cults** or **sects** face implicit and explicit discrimination, which in some cases has been exacerbated by state policy. Clear examples of this include the infamous “sect” lists, such as the French National Assembly’s “list of dangerous sects” in the Guyard Report of 1995, and a list appended to a report published by the Belgium government around the same time. These and other similar lists, as well as registration requirements that differentiate between long-established religions and their newer counterparts, have reinforced a de facto understanding amongst the public, further propagated by the media, that some religions are acceptable and some are not.

A further example: In the British House of Lords, a debate in late 2001 about proposals to legislate against incitement to religious hatred included expressions of concern that members of “cults” would use this law to protect themselves. This line of thought could lead to minority believers finding their human rights disregarded, simply because they belong to an unfamiliar religious faith.

If democratic countries do not actively promote tolerance of the minorities in their midst, not only do their own citizens suffer, but in extreme cases, this type of official intolerance is used to justify much worse treatment. Consider this response of the Chinese government to the UN Special Rapporteur in reference to complaints about the treatment of Falun Gong practitioners:

The Chinese Government has acted just like any other country. In today's world, sects multiply and proliferate like a cancer in society. No responsible government can adopt a laissez-faire attitude to sects which threaten not only the people's physical and mental health but also public order. Throughout the world, countries such as Japan, Australia, Belgium, Germany, France and the United Kingdom are tightening up their legislation and their supervisory mechanisms in order to keep a closer watch on sects. The measures taken by the Chinese Government, in accordance with the law, against the illegal activities of Falun Gong and its leader are such as any country would take.⁴

The recent events in Uzbekistan give another example of the potency of language. According to the website of the BBC, May 17th 2005:

In the capital, Tashkent, the first newspapers have been published since Friday. All lead with a large picture of President Karimov and carry verbatim his speech on Saturday, in which he blamed the violence on a brainwashed criminal sect, seeking to overthrow the government and establish an Islamic state.⁵

Accurate information can help to dispel prejudice.

It is our experience that the intolerance that many people of faith are facing in Europe today has been stimulated by a steady flow of false and sensationalised information about minority groups. A panic about “sects/cults” has been promoted by private organisations such as those that are part of the European Federation of Centres of Research and Information on Sectarianism (FECRIS).

Members of our movement have been victims of this type of misinformation.

In the period from 1990 to 1993, allegations against our members by the French “Association for the Defense of the Family and the Individual”, which is one of the leading associations that takes part in FECRIS, resulted in the authorities conducting armed raids on our communities in France, taking 80 children away from their parents. Subsequent investigations revealed that the accusations had been unfounded; allegations that the children were being harmed in their home environment were found to be without basis in fact and the courts returned them to their parents. Legal actions taken against 21 adult members were closed in January 1999 without ever having gone to court, there being no evidence to warrant a trial.

³ B.A. Robinson, Ontario Consultants on Religious Tolerance. See: <http://www.religioustolerance.org/cults.htm>

⁴ Report to the UN General Assembly by Abdelfattah Amor, Special Rapporteur of the Commission on Human Rights, 17 December 1999.

⁵ <http://news.bbc.co.uk/1/hi/world/asia-pacific/4554165.stm>

In Spain around the same period, similar accusations also led to raids on our communities. Our members were later exonerated in the Constitutional and Supreme Courts of Spain. Judge Adolfo Fernandez Oubiña presiding at the Provincial Court of Barcelona stated in a strongly worded ruling that we were an "attacked group" and described the Catalanian government's action against our members as being reminiscent of the Spanish Inquisition.

Despite legal vindication in both French and Spanish incidents, the trauma of these "raids" had a lasting impact on both the children and adults involved. The role of unqualified and non-scholarly organisations in these incidents should be noted, especially as FECRIS is, at this time, seeking to receive consultative status at the Council of Europe.

We believe that the state should research matters involving religious minorities carefully. Despite the panic about "sects" perpetuated by the media and organisations such as FECRIS, as cited, there is a growing body of serious research which puts the subject into a more fact-based perspective. For instance, the Dutch Government *Study of New Religious Movements* concluded that

In general, new religious movements are no real threat to mental public health. ... [and that] No proof has come up ... that new religious movements would have a serious pathogenic impact on their members.⁶

In addition, a number of reputable social scientists have studied "New Religious Movements" and published extensively on the subject. These individuals, and the organisations they have established, can provide impartial and accurate information.

These sentiments were expressed to the European Parliament by Dr. Massimo Introvigne, of the Centre for the Study of New Religions based in Turin, Italy, and Dr. J. Gordon Melton of the Institute for the Study of American Religions:

We respectfully direct the attention of the European Parliament to the fact that the notion of "totalitarian sect" or "destructive cult" is not a scholarly acceptable concept, and is unanimously rejected by the international community of sociologists and historians. Whilst it is true that a tiny minority of the hundreds of new religious movements active in Europe have been responsible for common crimes that should not be condoned, any generalisation will violate the basic rights of religious freedom and threaten all religions, old and new, generate unnecessary suffering for the innocent and offer the European Parliament's undeserved support to anti-cult movements that have a well-known agenda of bigotry and hate.

Who, in fact, will define what is a "cult" or "totalitarian sect" and what is a legitimate religion? We urge the European Parliament not to take any action on this extremely delicate subject without hearing the advice of experts recognised by the international academic community of the sociology and history of religions and of their professional associations (which must not be confused with the anti-cult movement).

In conclusion

We all know of the long tragic history of persecution of minority faiths that has existed in Europe. If the situation is to improve rather than deteriorate, then OSCE states need to follow through what was agreed in Vienna in 1989, that to "ensure the freedom of the individual to profess and practise religion or belief", the participating States would "take effective measures to prevent and eliminate discrimination . . . to foster a climate of mutual tolerance and respect . . . to engage in consultation with religious faiths . . . [and] to respect the liberty of parents to ensure the religious and moral education of their children in conformity with their own convictions".⁷

We recommend that to fulfil these commitments, the states should:

- Avoid using pejorative language, such as "cult" and "sect", in its description of smaller minority religions.
- Refrain from establishing, and/or abolish, and/or withdraw if already in existence, any committee, law, publication or list that discriminates between newer and older established faiths.
- Seek out reliable information on "New Religious Movements" from scholars and genuine experts, rather than private organisations that have a particular bias or agenda.
- Contribute to public tolerance by acknowledging the positive contributions that religious believers make to society. Avoid generalisations if problems do occur in a specific religious community.
- Encourage the media to contribute to religious tolerance by dealing factually and not sensationally with the subject of non-mainstream religious groups.
- Open dialogue directly with religious movements if there are concerns about their activities or the welfare of their members.

⁶ Witteveen (1984), p.314 and p. 317

⁷ Vienna 1989, "Questions Relating to Security in Europe" taken from "Thematic compilation of OSCE Human Dimension Commitments."

Examples of some experts on “New Religious Movements”

Organisations

Information Network on Religious Movements

Founded in 1988 by Professor Eileen Barker PhD, OBE, FBA with the support of the British Home Office and mainstream Churches. Based at the London School of Economics, INFORM draws on an international network of scholars and other experts. It is the only English-language organisation in the European Community to receive government funding for collecting and disseminating objective information about religious movements.

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Introducing the Family International

The Family International is a worldwide fellowship of Christian communities. Our goals, simply stated, are to follow Jesus commandments in Matthew 22:37-40, which are to love God and to love our neighbours as ourselves. Our full-time members live and worship in communal homes. We have consecrated our lives to sharing our Christian faith with the world and are also involved in a range of humanitarian projects.

Many of our children are educated at home in keeping with our faith, although parents may choose to send them to outside schools. Our young people take part in outside social activities and are given a well-rounded education. Upon reaching their legal majority, they are free to leave or to stay in the movement full or part-time.

As part of our work for religious tolerance, the European Family Information Department, based in Luton, England, monitors religious-related news in Europe and Central Asia and produce a monthly summary by email. Please contact us if you would like to receive this or information about our movement. A list of independent academic experts and researchers on the minority religion issue is also available.

For more information, please visit:

European website (English, Polish, Czech, Croatian, Italian, Dutch, Portugese, French):
www.thefamilyeurope.org

International Family Web site:
www.thefamily.org/thefamily

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