

Freedom of Religion:  
The EU should set the standard on this central Human Right

In every country where the people's rights of freedom of religion has been violated - and even threatened -, the society itself is at risk. Freedom of Religion is actually an important indicator for assessing the implementation of Fundamental Rights as a whole. The EU should therefore more clearly monitor violations of Freedom of Religion both within the EU and throughout the world. This was the main request put forward by the Church and Society Commission of CEC and COMECE to the European Commission and the European External Action Service on the occasion of the Dialogue Seminar held in Brussels on 30 March.

During a day-long session, the Churches presented their assessment of the recent violations of Religious Freedom. Mgr Coutts, the Archbishop of Karachi and Paul Bhatti, the brother of the assassinated Minister, presented a vibrant report on the situation of Christians and other minorities in Pakistan. Like in a number of other countries, although Religious Freedom is officially granted in Pakistan, the facts show that religious minorities suffer from violence and the exercise of pressure.

Christians and other religious minorities do not claim a special status or protection, but simply access to 'common citizenship', the Bishop emphasized: "they are full citizens of their countries and should simply be granted their legitimate rights as citizens".

The representatives from the European External Action Service shared their intention to enhance the monitoring of Religious Freedom violations through a more systematic and coordinated strategy at the EU level. The Churches fully supported the increase of the EEAS potential in this regard and encouraged the EEAS to develop a 'Toolkit' containing measures and instruments to counter Religious Freedom violations in the world and offered their expertise in the field. To this effect, Canon Dr Gary Wilton from the Church of England offered several best practices such as ranging from human rights education inside and outside the churches to common seminars with police, judiciary and religious representatives from specific conflict zones. He also added that in Trade agreements concluded by the EU with third-countries, the insertion of conditionality clauses relating to respect for human rights are a good tool but that these clauses need to be made more effective, especially with regard to religious freedom.

Concerning countries which intend to join the EU, the European Commission should scrutinise with particular attention the respect for the fundamental right to freedom of religion and its related aspects (property rights, implementation of the rule of law). Clear and unequivocal steps towards the implementation of freedom of religion shall be present before a country is allowed to join the EU.

When it comes to the internal dimension, the main reference point for EU policies on human rights is Article 2 TEU. The right to religious freedom within the EU is based on Article 10 of the Charter of Fundamental Rights. The EU institutions should ensure that it is not simply an individualistic interpretation of this fundamental right which is promoted but that this is also broadened out so as to fully include its social and institutional dimension. Dr Peter Krömer, from the Protestant Church AB in Austria, and of Rev Anthony Peck, Secretary General of the European Baptist Federation, emphasized in their presentations the need to pay special attention to the implementation of the rights of minority Churches and religious communities under the anti-discrimination provisions.

The Churches asked the Fundamental Rights Agency to produce a survey on discrimination based on the grounds of freedom of religion in EU Member States and in applicant countries. To this end, the EU should also encourage the Member States to collect this kind of data at national level and provide the FRA with the relevant information on a yearly basis.

Recent attacks based on religious hatred make it clear that respect for freedom of religion is at the very heart of our living together in Europe and allows the promotion of 'Unity in Diversity'. The role of religion in the public square must be protected from attacks, which constitute a violation of religious freedom. It is important, in this regard, to acknowledge the positive role that religion plays in public life and in society.

Source: [www.comece.org](http://www.comece.org)