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LIONEL VEER ON DUTCH FOREIGN POLICY AND RELIGION

Interview by Frank Ubachs

Introduction

The last few years have seen a rise of the issue of freedom of religion or belief (FoRB) on the foreign policy agendas of several countries, notably the United States and Canada. In the European Union (EU), the topic received unequalled attention with the adoption of the “EU Guidelines on the Promotion and Protection of Freedom of Religion or Belief,”¹ brokered by the EU parliamentary committee on FoRB and broadly presented at an event in March 2014 in Brussels (co-hosted with the US Commission on International Religious Freedom, USCIRF).²

The Netherlands is one of the EU member countries that have been consistently promoting FoRB (multilaterally³ and bilaterally⁴) for many years. The Netherlands insists on every individual’s freedom regarding religious identity⁵ and the issue remains high on the priority list of its Ministers of Foreign Affairs.⁶

In 2009, firmly embedded within its overall human rights policy,⁷ the Netherlands has initiated a FoRB “pilot program.” Starting with five countries in which FoRB is of special concern (China, Egypt, India, Kazakhstan, and Pakistan), the project was designed to enhance the profile of FoRB issues in Netherlands embassies’ activities.⁸ The Netherlands aims to actively enter into dialogue with the respective governments and support projects with a view to protect minorities

and individuals from discrimination on the basis of religion or belief. The outcomes and recommendations of the program will feed into policy considerations.

Because of its success, the program was expanded in 2011 to include another four countries (Sudan, Nigeria, Armenia, and North Korea). To date, the program has been endorsed by three consecutive Ministers of Foreign Affairs, and activities in the program are financed from the Ministry’s Human Rights Fund.

The main objectives of the current program are (1) awareness-raising of FoRB issues and (2) support for interfaith dialogue. It is left to the discretion of the embassies to decide how to promote these aspects in the context of the country concerned. Dutch parliament and various interest groups follow these efforts closely.

Lionel Veer became the Dutch Human Rights Ambassador in August 2010. This position was created in late 1999 to strengthen the human rights component in foreign policy and make it more coherent. Lionel Veer has worked for the Ministry of Foreign Affairs since 1984, in such policy fields as European affairs, asylum, and migration, and international cultural policy. In recent years he has held the posts of Dutch ambassador in Zagreb and consul-general in Munich.

Frank Ubachs has been trained as a theologian and a diplomat. Recently, he was executive director of The Hague Process on Refugees and Migration, an international multi-stakeholder network with a special focus on business and city involvement in refugee and migration issues. Prior to that, he was policy advisor in the human rights and good governance department at the Netherlands Ministry of Foreign Affairs where he was responsible for the field of intercultural dialogue, religion, and international affairs.

By the end of 2014, the Ministry will evaluate the results of the 9-country pilot program. On the basis of the audit's outcome, the Ministry will decide whether to continue the special program and to adjust its approach if deemed necessary.

The Netherlands Human Rights Ambassador Lionel Veer graciously agreed to answer some questions on the promotion of FoRB from the Dutch perspective. His thoughts on the topic follow here.

Interview

What is your mandate as the Human Rights Ambassador of the Netherlands?

My mandate as Human Rights Ambassador is rather broad and covers every aspect of our human rights policy. In this policy, we see all human rights as connected to each other, but we focus on some to be more effective. Last year, the government sent a policy letter to Parliament entitled "Justice and Respect for All" (in Dutch: "*Respect en recht voor ieder mens*"). In many ways, our basis is still the 65-year old Universal Declaration of Human Rights (UDHR). In our policies we consistently refer to the basic Principles it contains.

Of course, the context, the world, has changed and human rights have taken a central place in international relations. Many treaties have been written and most of them have been ratified by most countries. Freedom of religion or belief (FoRB) is an important part of human rights. During most of my consultations on human rights with other countries FoRB is on the agenda. I always start these talks with explaining that my starting point is freedom for all people to have or choose their religion or belief, to change their religion or belief, and freedom not to be religious or not to believe.

Freedom of religion is not about defending one religion against another, but the right to be free in your choice of religion or belief. This also implies respect among people with different religions. If one has a different religion than one's neighbor and you want him to respect your religion, you have to respect his religion too. This is to make clear that the Netherlands doesn't raise the issue because it is a Christian-majority country, but because we think you need freedom

of religion and belief in order to live together in a country with people with different religions and beliefs. The Netherlands is a multi-religious country. Government protects, guarantees, and defends the right to freedom of religion. But freedom of religion begins with reciprocity: we expect from everyone respect for each other's religion and belief.

For the Netherlands there is no hierarchy in rights. The fundamental rights, all human rights, are in principle equally important. Some scholars would contend that freedom of opinion or freedom of expression is an overarching principle and could include freedom of religion. I think this is easier to accept for a non-religious person, but for a religious person or a believer there is a clear distinction between an opinion and a religion. It should be underlined that religion differs from an opinion. In many ways freedom of religion has a special position.

Often, threats to the two coincide. In countries where there is no freedom of opinion or expression, often, there is also no respect for freedom of religion and vice versa.

How do you see the debate on FoRB within the UN framework?

The debate on freedom of religion is often triggered by violations of the right. In our view we have to focus on the rights of persons to be free to choose their religion and the duty of states to protect these rights of their citizens. In the UN framework there is also a debate on the position of religions. A debate on how religions should be protected against insults, on how respect for religions can be promoted. "Blasphemy" and "defamation" are the key words in this debate. We think this debate should not take place in the UN Human Rights framework. The human rights framework is about people. Religion as such doesn't need protection. People need protection, they are the subject of rights.

The Organization of Islamic Cooperation (OIC) can be seen as one of the promoters of this debate. I think they touch a very sensitive and important issue here and a serious debate on this is needed, but not in the UN. The resolutions that have been tabled on the issue have developed

and I think it is good that we now read more on fighting religious intolerance than on blasphemy. For FoRB you need respect, like I said earlier, but this also implies tolerance. The EU also mentions the necessity to fight intolerance.

How do Muslim-majority countries see the Netherlands?

Talking to officials in Muslim-majority countries I have often been asked whether or not the Netherlands is “Islamophobic”. I always reply that the Netherlands has a long tradition of religious tolerance and that we are an open society. At the same time, I cannot deny that there have been and still are tensions in our society between different groups of people. These tensions have to do with many factors, but also with religion.

The fact that the Netherlands, for decades, has seen an immigration of Muslim people into the country, originally mostly as migrant workers, has of course affected and changed our society. People with a different language, culture, and religion have to learn to live together, but most of the problems are of a socio-economic nature.

Religious tolerance has its roots in the specific Dutch situation. We come from a history of “pillarization.” We have long had a “pillarized” society (different from the concept of *laïcité* in France) when society was organized along religious lines. There were Protestant schools, broadcasting companies, Catholic sporting clubs, and so on. There was division, but also tolerance and respect. For decades these religious lines became less clear, people stopped going to church or decided to live outside their traditional “pillar”. Secularization has been very strong in the Netherlands. With the influx of Muslims two tendencies in our society coincide: secularization on the one hand and the arrival of a “new” religion that added a new “pillar” to our society on the other.

How integrated is the issue of freedom of religion in the Dutch foreign policy establishment? Has its role increased lately?

Has freedom of religion gained in importance in foreign policy? Yes. Worldwide, we have seen a rise in violence between religious groups, based on religious intolerance and radicalization. We have noticed that the knowledge of the

underlying factors for this development was lacking. For this reason we started so-called pilots on FoRB in five countries and later expanded the program. The embassies in those countries study developments carefully and report on this on a regular basis. The embassies, but also policymakers in the Ministry in The Hague work closely with scholars, civil society groups, and religious leaders.

What development do you currently see when it comes to the Netherlands’ commitment to freedom of religion? Are new issues or countries emerging that deserve particular attention?

Our commitment to FoRB has been confirmed in our latest policy document on human rights that was sent to parliament and also in our pledge for a seat in the UN Human Rights Council for the upcoming period 2015-2017. In this pledge we focus on three topics: dignity, equality, and freedom. We expressly mention the fundamental freedoms, amongst which is freedom of religion: “Have the freedom to express their identity informed by religious or other beliefs; which includes the freedom to manifest their belief in teaching and practice and the freedom to change one’s beliefs.”

Violence driven by religious intolerance or lack of FoRB is, unfortunately, still happening. Tragic events, for example, in C.A.R. or Mali have shocked the world and need particular attention. Sadly enough the list is getting longer, not shorter.

Are there voices within the Ministry that question engagement on behalf of freedom of religion?

No. It is important to add that in our human rights policy FoRB is not treated as an isolated issue. Our foreign policy is based on two principles: (1) fundamental freedom comes first, and (2) the principle of non-discrimination—when someone is being discriminated against on the basis of his religion, the rights of that person are being violated. So our engagement on FoRB is a rights-based approach.

Do you think that FoRB should be seen mainly as an individual right?

Yes, but individuals are not isolated atoms, they are part of a group and groups form a society.

Human rights are there to protect the rights and freedoms of humans and are in that sense dealing with individual rights.

Do differences between European countries as to the separation of state and religion influence European collaboration on freedom of religion?

I wouldn't know about that. The European Union conducts many human rights dialogues with countries in which freedom of religion is included. Of course, there can be variation in the extent to which it is being addressed bilaterally. But on the European level that really makes no difference. The approach is always from the human rights framework: freedom and non-discrimination, i.e. to rise against repression whether by authorities or non-state groups.

Is there a specific Dutch color to the subject?

Well, one might say so as far as the FoRB pilot program is concerned. Probably, at the

time, there were questions from the smaller Christian parties in parliament that have spurred the initiative. Christian parties are asking for specific attention to the fate of Christians. From a human rights perspective it is important to pay attention to freedom of religion for all people not just people with a particular religion.

Is there a “value added” in terms of the difference FoRB makes to traditional pillars of foreign policy?

If you see security as a traditional pillar of foreign policy, I think it is obvious that extra focus on FoRB has great added value. Most of the threats to security are, one way or another, linked to radicalization of religious groups or violence that is legitimized on religious grounds. So the need for respect of FoRB is stronger than ever. ❖

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1. The EU “Guidelines on the promotion and protection of freedom of religion or belief” were adopted by the Council of the EU in June 2013. These EU guidelines are not legally binding, but because they have been adopted at the ministerial level, they represent a strong political signal that they are priorities for the Union. Guidelines are pragmatic instruments of EU Human Rights policy and practical tools to help EU representations in the field better advance the EU’s Human Rights policy. See http://eeas.europa.eu/delegations/un_geneva/press_corner/all_news/news/2013/20131126_forb_en.htm.
 2. Announced at <http://www.eprid.eu/docs/EPWG%20on%20FoRB,%20USCIRF%20and%20EPRID%20Event%20poster.pdf>.
 3. In 2013, the Netherlands financed, once again, a policy adviser on FoRB with ODHR (OCSE), *Human Rights Report 2013* (in Dutch: *Mensenrechtenrapportage or MRR*), 37, retrieved at <http://www.rijksoverheid.nl/bestanden/documenten-en-publicaties/rapporten/2014/04/24/mensenrechtenrapportage-2013/b65-623935-a4-mensenrechten-highres.pdf>.
 4. The mandate of the Human Rights Ambassador (HRA) is crucial in this respect. During most of his consultations with other countries on human rights, FoRB is on the agenda.
 5. “The Netherlands stands by the principle that every individual must have the freedom to express his or her identity, as informed by religious or other beliefs: this includes the right to hold theist, non-theist, or atheist convictions and the right to change one’s faith. The government holds fast to an inclusive approach to human rights, without the exclusion of any specific group.” In *Justice and Respect for All* (JRFA) 3.6, 35, retrieved at <http://www.government.nl/files/documents-and-publications/notes/2013/06/14/justice-and-respect-for-all/b49-619083-respect-en-recht-en-web.pdf>.
 6. The Netherlands’ priorities have been incorporated into the EU Guidelines on FoRB, to the contents of which it has contributed. Priorities are: the freedom to choose or change one’s faith or belief or have none; freedom of expression; support for human rights activists; engaging civil society.
 7. “The Netherlands champions the separation of church and state, and opposes any restrictions imposed on the rights of children, LGBT people, or women in the name of religious or traditional values” (JRFA 3.6, 35).
 8. For each country, an analysis has been devised on the basis of which projects to promote FoRB have been selected. In Armenia, for example, religious tolerance has been promoted by hosting meetings, gathering high representatives of various religions and civil society. In Egypt, projects have been developed to facilitate interfaith dialogue, gathering Muslim and Christian leaders. In Nigeria, journalists and government and security forces spokespersons have been trained regarding responsible journalism in the framework of ethnic and religious conflict.

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