

Dialogue on the process towards FREEDOM OF RELIGION OR BELIEF FOR ALL. What the UN, EU, and NL do – 16 June 2016

On June 16, the NVVN and Platform Godsdienstvrijheid Wereldwijd (PGW) organized an event at the Haagse Hogeschool about the mechanisms and dynamics on national, EU and UN level to protect the right of freedom of religion or belief for all.

Prof. Yvonne Donders was the moderator during the evening. In her introduction, she raised three important questions:

- What actually needs to be protected? Religion or people?
- Who should do what?
- Is Law enough to protect freedom of religion or belief? Or are other activities needed, like education and interfaith dialogue?

MEP Dennis de Jong (SP) was the first speaker to address the audience. As co-chair of the EP Intergroup on Freedom of Religion or Belief, he distinguishes various ways in which the European Parliament can address freedom of religion or belief: EP members can raise parliamentary questions or come up with recommendations and amendments in new legislation, there are the dialogues with the European Commission about human rights issues (both formal and informal). But most effective is to make use of the budget in order to influence EU policy.

Within the EU there are many informal structures. MEPs who are interested in a certain topic can form an intergroup. These intergroups don't have a formal status within the EU structures, but for NGOs it is often very beneficial to be involved in them. In 2009, Dennis de Jong organized a successful event on religious freedom or belief in Brussels. He emphasized in his contribution that quite often within the EU, new developments take off after a one-time event. As a result of this event, a working group on freedom of religion or belief was founded, that gave input for the EU Guidelines on the promotion and protection of freedom of religion or belief. Later on, the working group turned into an intergroup, which has a higher standing.

The intergroup publishes an annual report on the state of religious freedom or belief in the world. In 2016, the intergroup suggested a boycott of countries like Saudi Arabia and Pakistan. De Jong warned for two developments within the EU that threatens the protection of freedom of religion or belief. Firstly, the EU seems to move away from universally shared values (international human rights law) towards a focus on solely European values. Secondly, European *values* are increasingly replaced by European *interests* (e.g. the Turkey deal).

The second speaker was **Human Rights Ambassador Kees van Baar**. He stressed the point that freedom of religion or belief is first of all about the protection of individuals, not religion. It also includes the rights of humanists and non-believers. Freedom of religion or belief has been a high priority on the human rights agenda of the Dutch Ministry of Foreign Affairs since 2007. As Human Rights Ambassador, Kees van Baar travels around the world to discuss with political leaders the country's human rights situation. Important input for these conversations is the Universal Periodic Review of the UN Human Rights Council (the 4-year human rights exam for all 193 UN member

states). Kees van Baar emphasized that he is glad with an European Parliament that is quite critical on this topic, in particular the work of the intergroup. He also stressed the fact that within international politics, it is quite difficult to reach agreement between states on this topic. Within the UN, a ritual dance has been going on for a long time between on the one hand states that want to safeguard freedom of religion or belief and on the other hand states that try to protect a particular religion. Because of this, it is highly important to work on the local level (through NGOs) as well, in order to bring people together within societies to promote tolerance. We should not expect everything to happen from the EU or UN.

After the break, the floor was opened for the **audience** to join the dialogue. Yvonne Donders commented that she didn't like the world 'tolerance' so much. It can involve a 'laissez fair' attitude, in which there is no real desire to understand the other person. In her opinion, it is better to talk about respect and the promotion of religious pluralism. An important topic in the discussion was the role of culture and religion. What about cultural traditions under the guise of religion that violate human rights (e.g. female circumcision). The argument that national culture is more important than human rights standards was fiercely rejected by the speakers. When there is a clear human rights violation, this cannot be justified on the basis of freedom of religion or belief. The expression of freedom of religion or belief can therefore be limited. We have to balance out sometimes.

We look back on a successful event in which we could get a better understanding of the motivation and mechanisms of individuals at key positions, states and international organizations to address this fundamental human right.

If you would like to stay updated on future events regarding freedom of religion or belief, please send an email to info@platformgodsdienvrijheid.nl