

Religion or belief: A new direction for the European Union

Press release from Faith and Freedom Summit Coalition

Faith & Freedom Summit (12.04.2019) – <https://faithandfreedomsummit.eu/> – For the second year in a row **the Faith & Freedom Summit** met on April 2 in the European Parliament, to forge the way forward with concerned European politicians, administrators, NGOs and individuals to ensure that the key fundamental human right of freedom of religion or belief is not left behind and reduced to a second-tier right. The well-attended Summit pointed out that right now this right given little importance within the European Union compared to other rights. The principle at stake is whether or not European countries and institutions will live up to their human rights commitments in the area of religion or belief in the same way it is insisting that countries outside the EU do.

“The credibility of the EU and Europe is at stake”

One of the keynote speakers was the **EU’s Special Envoy for the Promotion of Freedom of Religion or Belief outside the EU, Jan Figel**. He told the conference, ***“The credibility of the EU and Europe is at stake,”*** and that the EU needed to ***“face up”*** to the numerous cases of discrimination that occur against religious minorities within its own borders. **He also supported the need for extending existing European instruments, such as his own office and that of the Parliament’s Intergroup on Freedom of Religion or Belief outside the EU to having a role within the EU itself.** He also supported another proposal of the organisers to use the upcoming European elections in May as a

perfect opportunity to raise awareness of the threat to freedom of religion or belief.

The Faith and Freedom Summit is [a coalition of 19 NGOs](#) which have come together to promote religious tolerance, particularly within the European Union. It is a non-partisan body with no political affiliation though it has been supported by the Alliance of Conservatives and Reformists in Europe (ACRE) who have recognised the importance of this principle, as well as by MEPs from all over the political spectrum.

Also attending and speaking in support of the initiative were **Kishan Manocha**, Senior Advisor on Freedom of Religion and Belief, OSCE and **Archbishop Thomas Schirrmacher**, President of the International Society for Human Rights.

Bashy Quraichy, Secretary General of the European Muslim Initiative for Social Cohesion, told the conference that they are a *“powerful movement against religious discrimination”* and they appeal to the EU, especially the European Parliament, *“to be more proactive in order to warn those countries who commit acts of oppression against religious minorities.”* He added that he believes Europe needs to act in an *“inclusive fashion”* and not be *“selective as to who to put pressure on and who not”* whilst pointing out that populists and others were *“spreading hatred”* against Muslim communities, and noted that the number of hate crime incidents directed at Muslims had *“jumped many fold...This, in turn, is breeding violence, murders and property damages.”*

“Government interference in religion or belief can be blatant or subtle. It can come in many forms from covert administrative blocks, delays and denials to overt legislative and policy statements that implement undue restrictions on religious

expression or practice”

Martin Weightman, Director of the All Faiths Network, told participants that, “*Government interference in religion or belief can be blatant or subtle. It can come in many forms from covert administrative blocks, delays and denials to overt legislative and policy statements that implement undue restrictions on religious expression or practice. Raising these issues within the EU institutions will not be easy but without any communication between all the relevant players – EU officials and politicians, belief groups and the wider public – then we go nowhere – or rather we go down.*”

The President of the Netherlands-based NGO the Gerard Noot Foundation, **Hans Noot**, told reporters that the aim of the EU’s policy should be to include minority groups, saying, “*This applies not just to faith groups but all minorities, including refugees and the lesbian and gay community. We should be striving for a more inclusive society but, at present, minorities like asylum seekers and refugees are demonised and portrayed as the “bad boys” if anything goes wrong.*”

Mr. Eric Roux, Vice-President of the European Office of the Church of Scientology for Public Affairs and Human Rights outlined the list of initiatives that the Summit have called for implementation:

- ***MEPs to sign a pledge supporting freedom of religion or belief***
- ***Extend the remit of the EU Special Envoy on Freedom of Religious Belief or belief outside the EU, to within the EU.***
- ***Parliamentary Intergroup to investigate and raise instances of discrimination based on religion or belief within the EU, at European Parliament.***
- ***FRA (Fundamental Rights Agency) task force to tackle the topic of discrimination.***
- ***Academics EU resources should finance a full research***

project carried out by academics already known and experienced in the area of discrimination based on religion or belief in the EU.

- **Create an open platform** gathering members of the FRA, members of the EU Parliament, civil society partners, members of the EU Commission, religious stakeholders, that will be in charge of monitoring discrimination based on religion or belief issues in EU Member states.
- **Article 17 TFUE** (Treaty on the Functioning of the European Union to dialogue with religions and philosophical organisations) adequately manned task force in the EU Commission to implement article 17 TFUE
- **Create EU guidelines** to protect EU citizens against discrimination based on religion or belief that will be approved and adopted by the Council.
- **A Faith and Freedom Award** to award MEPs and other worthy individuals that are active in promoting various aspects of freedom of religion or belief within the EU.

Other key speakers at the Summit were:

Kristina Arriaga de Bucholz (President – Oxford Society of Law and Religion and Commissioner of the US Commission on International Religious Freedom)

Willy Fautre (Director – Human Rights Without Frontiers International)

Massimo Introvigne (scholar and President of CESNUR)

Ms. Ines Mazarrasa (Directora Fundacion Pluralismo y Convivencia – Foundation Pluralism and Coexistence)

Laurentiu Rebeca MEP

Alfiaz Vaiya (Coordinator – European Parliament Anti-Racism and Diversity Intergroup)

Marco Ventura (Professor of Law, University of Siena)

Jan Zahradil MEP (President of ACRE)

The meeting ended with attendees agreeing to work on all the above initiatives and meet on a regular basis to implement them.

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