

Impressions from the OSCE Supplementary Human Dimension Meeting on Freedom of Religion and Belief

by Vera Pegna and Hans Christian Cars

This conference was held at the Hofburg, Vienna on 9-10 December 2010.

The selection of introducers included a few academic professionals not (openly) affiliated with any particular religion, some representatives of Christianity and Islam, but no representative of any non-religious group. However two of them, Professor Robert Jackson and Professor Bülent Şenay of Turkey spoke of equality between believers and non-believers and of freedom from religion.

With the exception of one of the introductions - given by a Russian “scientist”, who spoke about Islam - presentations were generally well balanced, interesting and of high quality.

Although the list of participants included a fairly large number of human rights and other not-typically-religious NGOs, the debate in the plenary was overwhelmingly dominated by the religious ones, mainly pursuing their own individual interests rather than defending the freedom of religion and belief as a matter of principle. Two of them even suggested that one of Professor Jackson’s recommendations in his summary report that dealt with freedom from religion should be dropped on the ground that the issue had not been discussed during the session.

We did not hear any concerns regarding the rights of non-believers expressed by any of the participants whose main preoccupations were the rights of their specific religions and the violations of these rights.

Regarding education, the focus was on the rights of parents to have their children educated in the religion of their choice. The possibility of opting out from religious instruction was generally recognised but there was little or no discussion of the negative consequences of this kind of discrimination against children who opt out. The fact that they may get a feeling of being somehow different and not belonging to the majority and also that they would not get any real education about their own or any other religions did not seem to bother anyone. This right of all children (irrespective of the lifestance of their parents) to receive an unbiased education about religions was not emphasised by any of the NGOs. However, the difference between “religious instruction” and “education about religions” was highlighted by one of the introducers and two of them also spoke favourably about the Toledo guidelines. No one else did.

Concerning religious symbols, the emphasis centered on the need to facilitate rather than to limit the display of such symbols and the Holy See condemned the removal of crucifixes from public buildings as an expression of “false secularism”.

Our general impression of it all was very depressing, although there were more enlightened official speakers than usual. However, when things are bad we must not despair, but learn from them. We have made some suggestions to the EHF Board which we hope they will take up.

V.P., H.C.C.