

Symposium at the BYU in Provo, October 2016

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EUROPEAN UNION AND FoRB: A NEW MOMENTUM

Excellencies,

Ladies and Gentlemen,

It is with a great pleasure to be here today. Our symposium is an excellent opportunity to discuss the changing nature of religious rights under international law, as well as recent political development on both sides of Atlantic with regard to the protection of religious rights. Freedom of religion or belief is today an established human right. Since the Virginia Bill of Rights it has been enshrined in numerous human rights documents, including the 1948 Universal Declaration of Human Rights and the 1966 International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights. Nevertheless, despite this strong legal basis, many persons still struggle to achieve a full protection of their freedom of religion or belief. It is then more important than ever to facilitate a genuine legal research and development of faith-related legal frameworks and concepts, in the broadest sense of the word.

It is clear that rather than promoting specific religious norms or traditions, religious freedom shall ensure equal respect for all human beings as holders of profound convictions and faith-based practices. Freedom of religion or belief refers to all human beings and therefor become universal right in the strict sense, as stated by the UN Human Rights Committee, – Article 18 protects theistic, non-theistic, and atheist beliefs, as well as the right not to profess and religion or belief. The European Court of Human Rights has developed a similar line of reasoning.

The above clarification can provide answers to objections sometimes raised by some liberals arguing that the religious freedom is privileging *Homo Religiosus*. Such clarification is necessary and helpful, but not sufficient. Merely rejecting typical misunderstandings does not suffice to win hearts and minds of people and foster their active commitment on behalf of freedom of religion or belief. In the past, as well as today, many liberals, but also conservatives, strongly

supported freedom of religion or belief. These rights have been historically associated with philosophers and authors such as John Locke, Thomas Paine, or Immanuel Kant, to name just a few.

Let's move from these historical and philosophical roots of the freedom of religion or belief to the current praxis in the public sphere. I will speak about my European experience. As you certainly know, Jean-Claude Juncker, President of the European Commission, appointed me as the first Special Envoy for the promotion of freedom of religion or belief outside the European Union in Vatican on the occasion of the award of the Charlemagne Prize to Pope Francis in May this year. I assume this new role for an initial mandate of one year. I understand that you would like to know more about the scope of my function, and my main priorities as well.

On the occasion of my nomination in May, President Juncker said that freedom of religion or belief is a fundamental right which is part of the foundation of the European Union. The persistent persecution of religious and ethnic minorities makes protecting and promoting this freedom inside and outside the EU all the more essential. The European Parliament supported this endeavour and has called for this initiative in its Resolution on Systematic mass murder of religious minorities by the co-called ISIS-Daesh of 4 February 2016. Given the importance of promoting and protecting freedom of religion or belief outside the EU in the context of the EU dialogue and assistance programmes with third countries, the function of the Special Envoy is attached to the European Commissioner Neven Mimica, who is responsible for International Cooperation and Development.

During this initial period of time, my priority will be to promote practical protection mechanisms for anyone that is persecuted and humanitarian aid for those in need in the most badly-affected areas. I will work together with the European Parliament, the European diplomatic service, the Council representing EU Member States, parliaments of the EU Member States and our international partners such as the UN or the Council of Europe to engage in a permanent dialogue on how the EU can best contribute to the promotion of freedom of religion or belief in the world. There are already several European programmes and instruments to promote human rights in general and of freedom of religion in particular, such as the European Instrument for Democracy and Human Rights (EIDHR). We will develop further these programmes. I will also present a report as part of the ongoing dialogue between the European Commission and

churches and religious associations or communities, which is led by the First Vice-President of the Commission Frans Timmermans.

Ladies and Gentlemen,

Not only in our regular dialogue with Churches and religious associations or communities under article 17, but also in our daily interactions with the third countries, are religious leaders our key partners. I would like to stress it as the commitment to support communities and people in their countries and regions that are endangered by violence and destruction, is in line with my approach, as well as with the Resolution of the European Parliament that requested that the EU Humanitarian Aid and Cooperation units fully cooperate in their work directly with the recognised leaders of the targeted ethnic and religious minorities and include them in their plans for, and in the practical implementation and distribution of, the aid, in order to better meet their needs and those of the population in general. Recently, I have received a clear support from the religious leaders of the Middle East countries as well as from our European partners, to implement this method of cooperation. Furthermore, in October, I will meet in Brussels Patriarchs from Syria, and I am looking forward to continue our cooperation with religious leaders also during my missions in the region.

My thematic priority is to work harder for interfaith reconciliation, dialogue and long term peace building. These political priorities should be accompanied by a concrete and efficient support, in particular in the field of education, interfaith dialogue, reconstruction and preservation of cultural heritage, as well as assistance to the refugees wishing to return to their homeland. With this in mind, I would like to stress that we are already, together with the services of the European Commission, preparing missions in some countries such as Iraq and Jordan. Iraq is a strategic country within the Middle East area, from where Abraham, respected by all three monotheistic faiths, was called to accomplish his vocation. This country was, however, wounded by horrific waves of conflicts and wars, and it is our common responsibility to help those who, since centuries, lived together, often in a fragile state of coexistence and peace, to have capabilities to restore peace and live again in their communities.

Ladies and Gentlemen,

Being in America, I would like to finish with an interesting historic example of Alexis de Tocqueville, author of *Democracy in America*, first published in 1835. In his famous report of his visit to America during the 1830s, Tocqueville mentions discussions with American Catholic priests who not only praised religious liberty but even clearly appreciated the secular Constitution. For Tocqueville such attitude was a big surprise, as his native French clergy position was completely opposite to a secular Republic, influenced by the French Revolution. This example illustrates the impact of personal historic experience and clear advantages of freedom of religion or belief for minority populations. The experiences of Roman Catholics in America later also had an enormous impact on the Second Vatican Council and the declaration *Dignitatis Humanae*.

During the 19th century, Catholics used to be a religious minority in America. Today, in a globalised world, there is not a single country, where we cannot find religious minorities. One may think of Muslims in Europe, Christians in India or Pakistan, Hindu in Malaysia, or Christians, Jezidi and Shia Muslims in Iraq. Those who really care for their own religion, usually care for the religious freedom of other believers, in particular if they suffer harassment, discrimination or even persecution. Practising solidarity in a credible and sustainable manner also implies opening oneself up to the problems with which other minorities are confronted. Such a dialogue can become an entry point for commitment on behalf of freedom of religion or belief, here in the United States, in my native Europe, but also in other countries of the world.

Thank you for your attention.