

State-sponsored religions are undesirable, says UN

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State-sanctioned religions risk alienating minorities and discriminating against members of other faiths, an independent United Nations human rights expert warned this week.

Speaking at the UN Human Rights Council in Geneva where he presented his latest report on freedom of religion or belief and recognition issues, Heiner Bielefeldt urged governments around the world to ensure that 'official' religions do not discriminate against communities of other faiths within their jurisdictions.

"It seems difficult, if not impossible, to conceive of an official 'State religion' that in practice does not have adverse effects on religious minorities, thus discriminating against their members," said Mr. Bielefeldt, who also cautioned against the use of 'official' religion for purposes of national identity politics.

The new report explores the key issues affecting the right to religious freedom around the world – from the limits imposed on communities of faith by strict registration procedures to the potential risk that official State religions pose to minority groups.

In addition, it distinguishes between three separate meanings of the concept of State 'recognition' of religion to avoid any potential misunderstandings which could affect freedom of religion or belief or even undermine it as a universal human right.

"Respect for freedom of religion or belief as a human right does not depend on administrative registration procedures, as it has the status of a human right, prior to and independent of any acts of State approval," added Mr. Bielefeldt, who has served as the Special Rapporteur on freedom of religion and belief since August 2010.

He also called on States to offer "quick, transparent, fair, inclusive, and non-discriminatory" options for religious communities to achieve the status of legal personality, which is frequently necessary for a community to fully enjoy its freedom to worship.

Keith Porteous Wood, Executive Director of the National Secular Society, said: "We will be sending a copy of this report to Baroness Warsi, the Communities and Local Government Secretary Eric Pickles, and the Queen who have all recently claimed that Britain is a Christian country. It should be an object lesson to them that such labelling immediately puts other faiths and non-believers at a disadvantage. The UN rapporteur knows full well the dangers of trying to make multi-faith nations into single-faith nations – it inevitably leads to discrimination at best and persecution at worst.

"We hope that the Government is listening to the UN and makes a start on modernising Britain's democracy by disestablishing the Church of England. We need a proper written constitution that does not favour any particular religion, a constitution that will serve us well as the demographics of our nation change in the coming century."

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