

# First Woman To Address European Parliament On Religious Matters Will Do So Today

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A historic precedent was set at the European parliament today. The United Nations Special Rapporteur on Freedom Religion or Belief, Mrs Asma Jahangir, addressed the European Parliament, much as religious leaders such as the Pope and the Grand Mufti of Syria have done.

Sophie in't Veld MEP, Chair of the European Parliament Working Party for the Separation of Religion and Politics, said: "I welcome the European Parliament's invitation to Mrs Jahangir. The religious leaders who have addressed the European Parliament have all been men, and so are not representative of their religious groups, far less of the population as a whole.

"They have not been asked to answer questions, hardly the open dialogue envisaged by the Treaty of Lisbon.

"It is essential that the European Parliament, and indeed all parliaments, remain secular institutions. Mrs Jahangir has bravely defended those of all religions and none to believe as they wish. This invitation to her goes some small way to redress the worrying drift away from secularity by the EU institutions.

"With this invitation, the European Parliament shows that intercultural dialogue should be inclusive and representative for Europe as a whole, and provide a broad platform for religious, secular and humanist voices alike."

Keith Porteous Wood, Executive Director of the (UK) National Secular Society, added: "Mrs Jahangir is a woman of great vision, integrity and courage. I hope that the Parliament listens to and heeds her sage words. Religious leaders tend to be much more extreme in their views than their flocks, which are rapidly diminishing in size in most parts of Europe. Religious leaders therefore represent the views of only a tiny minority of the European population yet are given disproportionate prominence in the European Parliament and Council of Europe.

A [recent poll](#) in the UK showed that the Catholic bishops' and the Vatican's hard line on abortion law was shared by only a seventh of the population, including less than a quarter of Catholics. Had the same questions been asked about contraception, homosexuality or cohabitation, the views of religious leaders would be even more out of step with the population."

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