

Author of American Government-sponsored religious freedom report says “very aggressive secularism” is rife in Western Europe

Posted: Wed, 1st May 2013

The US-Government sponsored Commission on International Religious Freedom has issued its latest report this week and one of its authors concludes that "aggressive secularism" is rife in Western Europe.

The Commission, which was set up to monitor the state of "religious freedom" round the world, was particularly harsh when commenting on bans on face veils in some European countries. It was also highly critical of attempts to control the ritual slaughter of animals and the practice of circumcising boys for religious reasons. It also criticises Switzerland for its ban on the building of minarets.

Because Western Europe generally has a very good record, "it's easy to overlook the fact that there are some questions and problematic issues emerging there" related to religious dress and customs, commission chair Katrina Lantos Swett told a press conference.

"In some countries a very aggressive secularism is putting people of religious faith in uncomfortable and difficult positions."

"These, along with limits on freedom of conscience and hate speech laws, are creating a growing atmosphere of intimidation against certain forms of religious activity in Western Europe," the report said. "These restrictions also seriously limit social integration and educational and employment opportunities for the individuals affected."

The review also referred to measures against religious groups characterised as "cults" and "sects," saying France has the most extensive restrictions but also mentioning Germany, Austria and Belgium.

"One of the problems with these sorts of laws, that are singling out a particular minority religious group, is that they send a signal that some people may take justified discrimination against members of that group," Elizabeth Cassidy, the commission's deputy director, told AFP.

The report is also critical of "hate speech" laws which it says can be used to silence religious voices. It quotes several of the cases that the NSS highlighted during its campaign to remove the word "insulting" from Section 5 of the Public Order Act. The report was written before this change in the law was made.

It is also critical of the amendments made to the Racial and Religious Hatred Act in order to protect free speech. The National Secular Society was at the head of the campaign to have these changes made.

The Commission also mentions the Eweida and Ladele cases, presenting them as abuses of religious freedom, although the report does not cover the period in which the cases reached the European Court of Human Rights.

Terry Sanderson, president of the National Secular Society, said: "This report seems to start from the assumption that religion can do no wrong and that its 'rights' are paramount and everyone else's must be subservient. It even criticises the French attempt to outlaw the forced wearing of veils, saying it potentially interferes with the rights of parents. Do children and women have no rights to refuse to wear the veil if their community or family insists that they do?

"We agree that there are many religious restrictions around the world that clearly are abuses of human rights – such things as the proliferation of blasphemy laws accompanied by swingeing punishments for falling foul of them. The report rightly draws attention to such infringements.

"But Western Europe is a model of religious freedom. Its human rights charters place religious freedom at the very top of the list.

"We cannot be complacent, of course, and must be ever-vigilant for examples of restrictions on real religious freedom. But we must also be very careful of a newly-defined idea of 'religious freedom' that demands the power to trample on the rights of others.

"This Commission may have the best of intentions, and many of its findings are eye-opening. But it is not balanced and, as far as Western Europe is concerned, it is positively off the beam."

[Read the report here](#) (pdf)

See also: [Scientology still a red flag in Germany](#)

Protest after [prosecutors refuse to stop ritual slaughter of animals](#)

- [Share on What's App](#)
- [Share on Facebook](#)
- [Share on Twitter](#)
- [Share on Email](#)
- [Subscribe to RSS Feed](#)

Tags: [FoRB](#)

Related Campaigns

-

[Freedom of religion or belief](#)

Secularism protects freedom of religion or belief for all.

[Read More](#)

Related Articles

The universality of human rights needs defending

Seventy-five years on from the adoption of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, its promise of freedom and equality remains a distant dream for those living under religious rule, says Stephen Evans. [Read More »](#)

Freedom of religion or belief must include the freedom to 'blaspheme'

The freedom to question and criticise religious ideas in the same manner as any other kind is foundational to a democratic... [Read More »](#)

Established church hinders religious freedom, NSS tells UN expert

The NSS has told a UN expert that lack of separation between Church and state is undermining freedom of religion or belief in the UK. [Read More »](#)

Study: Jurors could be biased against people who don't swear to God

Bias against people who don't swear a religious oath in court may lead to hundreds of additional convictions, researchers... [Read More »](#)

NSS welcomes shelving of Bill of Rights

The National Secular Society has welcomed the government's decision to shelve its plan to replace the Human Rights... [Read More »](#)