

Sophie in 't Veld MEP

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Sophie in 't Veld MEP is the only member of European Parliament for the Dutch party D66, a social-liberal party. She believes in a Europe that is based on the values of the Age of Enlightenment. She has spoken up for secular issues in the EU.

Sophie won the Irwin Prize for Secularist of the Year in 2011.

An excerpt from Sophie's speech at the 2011 World Humanist Congress on 13 August 2011:

Freedom of religion is one of the key freedoms: the freedom of every person to hold their own thoughts and beliefs is a corner stone of any democratic society. Like other fundamental rights, freedom of religion is an individual right. However, in practice it is often interpreted as a collective right of a religious group to get certain exceptions and exemptions from the law. People are defined as member of a (religious) group, not as an individual citizen of the state. The whole concept of the UN "Alliance of Civilizations" is based on this notion, as is the EU "Intercultural dialogue". Society is organized as a permanent trade-off of collective interests and privileges, rather than a community of individual citizens and their individual rights, protected by state institutions. But in a society built on collective, rather than individual interests, there is greater potential for conflict between groups.

Defending and promoting freedom of religion in EU external policies, most often is about protecting religious minorities against persecution, rather than promoting humanist or secular values. Protection of minorities is certainly essential, let there be no mistake. But the focus should be first and foremost on promoting a secular democracy, based on individual citizens' rights, as the best guarantee for freedom of religion (as well as freedom from religion) for all.

In this regard it is essential that the EU insists particularly on gender equality in the new [Arab Spring] democracies. Without full participation of all citizens, men and women, a democracy is not complete. Strengthening the position of women in society is not a luxury extra, it is fundamental. It is part and parcel of democracy and good governance.