

Speech to conference on the persecution of non-believers

By Keith Porteous Wood, NSS president

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While based in the UK, the National Secular Society has been taking a keen interest in secularism internationally for over 150 years, and we have accreditation at the United Nations. We define secularism as the Human Rights concept of equality for all regardless of religion or belief, and hence there should be no religious or belief privilege. Anything falling short of that equality is not secularism, and qualifying secularism with adjectives such as “hard” or “doctrinal”, implying an atheist stance, simply creates an oxymoron.

I shall now suggest warning signs and areas of special concern for the Special Envoy to consider in relation to those of non-belief and the religiously unconcerned. Many of these also apply to those of minority religions.

Ján Figel will I am sure equally scrutinise states that profess atheism and those with a national or preferred religion or religions. The former UN Special Rapporteur on Religion and Belief told the UN in 2011 that “it seems difficult, if not impossible, to conceive of an application of [state religion] that in practice does not have adverse effects on religious minorities, thus discriminating against their members”.

I also suggest particular scrutiny for states that record citizens’ religion, and sometimes belief, on identity documents. It should be asked whether this information was freely given; and can it be changed at will without adverse consequences, to any religion or belief?

Particular attention should also be paid to states with formal agreements with religious bodies. It is for example little known that the Vatican has many international treaties called concordats, or sometimes to attract less attention, simply agreements. They can sometimes bypass the democratic process and even remain secret, and are unchangeable without Vatican consent.

They aim to secure as much state funding as possible. For example, the concordat with poverty-stricken Côte d'Ivoire is financially very onerous. They also seek if possible state enforcement of Catholic dogma, often far deeper dogma than most liberal Catholics adhere to. The Church is still trying to push the Slovaks to agree a concordat designed to deny everyone, regardless of belief, access to contraception and abortion as well as comprehensive and fact-based sex education.

Special scrutiny is also called for where some or all of the law of the land is in effect codified religious text.

I hope it is asked whether religious tests are applied to the holding of political office or state employment, and whether religious exemptions in legislation are excessive.

Could I commend much more attention being paid to freedom of conscience in publicly funded education? Where there are a high proportion of schools with a religious ethos, students holding other philosophical convictions may be discriminated against in admissions. And those students who are admitted may find their convictions are not respected. This is especially important in: worship; religious indoctrination; education on sex and sexuality; or religious teachings about how the world was created being prioritised over scientific understandings of the world.

And state assisted religious hospitals may deny the non-religious start of life and sometimes also end of life choices that do not accord to religious dogma. States have a responsibility to make adequate provision to equally respect the human rights of the non-religious.

You may think you can't have too much freedom of religion and belief. But we have to remember too that freedom of religion and belief is a qualified right. There must be balance. I have just read in the *New York Times* that over 50,000 students of ultra-orthodox Jewish yeshivas in the city know practically no maths, English, history or science. Some are reportedly even hesitant to seek medical help as their "education" gives them no insight into how their bodies work and what organs are called.

Ten years ago, when on the civil society panel assisting the EU's Fundamental Rights Agency in Vienna, I saw the battle between orthodox religion and Human Rights start to escalate. This has continued with increased frequency and intensity in the EU and the courts including the European Court of Human Rights. The NSS had to intervene at the latter, largely successfully, to prevent religion trumping other Human Rights. The cases were called Ladele, Chaplin and McFarlane. Well-funded American evangelicals remain especially active at the court in Strasbourg.

And I am not sure how long the once-Universal UN Declaration will so remain. There is already an "alternative" for Muslim states, "the Cairo declaration", in effect making it subject to sharia. Some Christians too have attacked the Declaration for giving, as they see it, insufficient religious freedom. Similarly, hard-won equalities in the United States are facing unprecedented threat under the guise of religious freedom.

I conclude that the importance of the EU's role in helping reinforce even-handed Human Rights compliance has never been more important.