

Dialogue and Communication as a tool in protecting freedom of religion or belief

Good, thank you very much and good afternoon to you all. We have talked a lot in the last few days and I not going to talk a great deal more. We've talked about legal and religion, we've talked about history and religion, philosophy and religion, sociology and religion, and now I'm going to talk about talking: what do I mean? I mean dialogue, interfaith dialogue. And, you know, we've seen, I think, that legal can hold the line against further incursion of discrimination, where it does (and sometimes it doesn't), and legal can also be incredibly slow, but it attempts to enforce basic principles to be adhered to, though it doesn't solve everything by any means.

So I just wanted to lay down a few basic principles to do with dialogue. And in spite of all the barriers and problems and stops that come along with it, it's very simple. And first of these is that communication is essentially always possible and communication can resolve things. The second assumption, if you're going to enter into dialogue, is that people on the whole are willing to communicate and will do so and there's only a relatively small number of people who will not communicate. Now I'm not really addressing the people here in this hall: you're all here, you're willing to communicate, you want to exchange ideas, you want to listen, so I'm really talking about a broader way of approaching interfaith and dialogue with governments which applies to both minority and majority religious groups.

You know, communication it's essential to your life, it's essential to all our lives. You have to communicate with others to live. And through communication you will gain a greater liking for others, a greater reality on what or why they do what they do, and a greater understanding about them. And these same basic principles apply to religions. Whether it is between religions, whether it is within a religion, whether it is between a religion or religions and governments - dialogue is vital. It does not mean that you have to compromise on your religious beliefs, but it means that you do have to accommodate others beliefs. Sometimes religions are concerned about having to compromise their beliefs, but I don't believe that is what dialogue is about, it's about accommodating your beliefs with others. Now I'm coming from - I didn't say this but - I'm coming from a group called the "All Faiths Network" which is based in the UK. The "All Faiths Network" is part of a network of interfaith groups, which is called the "Interfaith Network" and the "Interfaith Network" has government funding and it's, I would say, it's recognized by the government and is some kind of interface. I'll come back to that in a bit.

I was going to go into problems, issues, barriers to communication, but due to the time left for this session I'm only going to address something that I think is, perhaps, the most insidious aspect of dialogue and interfaith dialogue, and that is: pretended, false or no dialogue. And what do I mean by that? Well for a start, someone said yesterday that human rights is for minorities, it's there to protect the minorities. I think you could say the same that dialogue is also there to protect the minorities. A majority religion in a country doesn't 'need' to dialogue, because it's already in a position of power, but it should. So, what I want to explore here is the problems that come about when you have a false dialogue. I'll give you first an example, a French example.

During this conference we've heard about the About-Picard law and at the time this was being discussed, it was 15- 20 years ago now, the government assured it was "in dialogue" with the majority religions in the country and assured them that it would not affect them, it would not be a problem, it was only for the "dangerous sects" and they would be okay. However, what do we have now, 20 years later in France? This law was an attempt to target religious minorities which was not very effective but never-the-less was a legislative instrument that eroded freedom of religion and opened the doors to further legislation or governmental decree. And what do we have now. we have then a situation where the major religions at that time rarely spoke out about the potential discrimination against religious minorities, and whilst not directly related to the About/Picard law we now see that Christians cannot wear crosses as teachers or public servants, you cannot have an expression of your religious faith as a public servant, children who wear turbans cannot go in schools, full face coverings are not allowed. There's a whole range, of erosions of religious rights that have come about in France which I think would have been stopped had the majority religions taken a principled stand against this law and other social and cultural actions that went along with it years ago. If we leave that or allow that to continue, where we will be in another 20 years?

The religions, or rather the major religions did not speak out then and so we have the same situation repeated (though on a lesser scale of course) as exemplified by pastor Niemoller's quote referring to the Nazi regime that has often been quoted which I paraphrase here: "I did not speak out and then they came for me." This is just an example of what I would have said is false dialogue or false assurance between government and religion, and this case is the responsibility of the major religions in France who did not do enough to stop the erosion of rights in the country.

I give you another example: in the UK. I'm part of what is called the "Interfaith Network". Five years ago this Interfaith Network which is an umbrella group of different religions and religious associations - any religion could join it - but only eight major or named traditional religions could be on the board of the Interfaith Network governing council. That was discriminatory, particularly as the Interfaith Network as a group was receiving government funding. Dialogue was going on pointing this out to the board of the Interfaith Network and it wasn't working, so what what happened at that point? A conference was organised where legal expertise was given and a dialogue occurred that demonstrated that it was discriminatory for the Interfaith Network, which was receiving government funds, to limit which religions could actually be managers of the organization. This brought about a change in the statutes of the organization before it was necessary to enter into any kind of further legal activity. This was at least something being done about the problem that existed.

Perhaps a final example is that it is often very difficult for minority religions to enter into dialogue with majority religions. And so we have a problem of dialogue between religions, to get an engaging conversation going with, for example in the UK Church of England ministers or senior hierarchy, or Russian Orthodox priests, by minorities. It's a very difficult thing to do because they are not really willing to enter into open and frank dialogue. So we have this ingrained discrimination within religions too. So what can we do about this? What I'm trying to say is this is part of the problem, it's a problem within religions, it's a problem between religions and governments, yet we have to persist and we have to communicate, in a range of different ways and try to resolve that.

So what does "dialogue" mean? What does it mean? Well on a grass roots level, it means "opening up to your neighbors, go to their service" or maybe not even that, "go to their events", you know, visit them, communicate, talk. This is often something that is often not done, but should be done in order to develop the communication. And I would say that it is a vitally missing part of interfaith work, between many religions.

Now, what is it that we can do with regards to our communications? And I think here that we also need to understand that our communications - when I say our communications - I especially mean those minority religions that are having a hard time, they need to understand more about communication. And, on the other side, majority religions need to be open and accepting of dialogue from those religions that they either consider false, not religions or dubious or whatever they may consider. What I'm really calling for and what I would say - and again not to you, but to religious groups that are having difficulties - is that you need to be clear and precise in your communications, you need to be friendly, you need

to lay out your case with relevance. And if that is not done adequately it creates barriers to communications and with interfaith dialogue. It is also the responsibility of those religions that are the majority religions to speak out for others, and to engage as we are doing in this conference. But again it is part of, shall we say the responsibility of our community here to pull in those people who are resistant to dialogue, who are not willing to dialogue and to find ways which may be clever or may necessarily be somewhat forceful. I don't mean violent but I mean forceful in one's communications, to get them around the table. And so, I've seen this to be successful too. I've seen it to be successful where people have had an extremely negative reaction to a particular religion and then when you go in and you explain it and you enter into dialogue then it resolves the problem and it opens the door for further trust to be built.

So, what I'm calling for here is, besides all the legal aspects of freedom of religion, there is another facet for this community to be aware of it - I'm sure it is already aware of it - but it is to bring up awareness of these points to those who have contacts with major religions in other countries, to bring them in to this kind of a conference or to help set up other kinds of dialogue because the bottom line of it all is that: if you do not communicate, you will not get a solution. And so the best way to communicate is to communicate precisely, clearly with relevance, honesty and openness and with friendliness towards others. And that's all. Thank you very much.