



# FAITH & FREEDOM SUMMIT MAGAZINE

## PRACTICING WHAT WE PREACH IN EUROPE

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# The Union as an instrument for freedom or repression. Which way will it go?

**I**s freedom of religion or belief important? If so, why do some consider it one of the most important of rights? And why would it be important to grant this a far greater priority?

Within the European Union setting it is perhaps one of the least emphasised rights. Yes, there is now a Special Envoy for Freedom of Religion or Belief... but only outside of the Union and whilst that is, of course, very good in itself, it is not enough. Are we so perfect within the Union that EU countries should be excluded from scrutiny? To think that we are above examining our own actions is both damaging and arrogant.

So why is there reticence from European States and political appointees in engaging more deeply with this right?

Is it the wide range of constitutional structures that spreads from secular to constitutional monarchies to states that give special privilege to certain churches? Are these structures too conflicting to coalesce into a single European perspective or, as I believe, is it quite possible for these differing structures to be able to work together and still address this freedom and any discrimination where they occur?

Or is it the fear of established churches that are concerned they may lose privileges granted by the state? My view is that we are not looking to deconstruct national constitutional structures where established churches play a legitimate role in their country's social systems and cultures (or indeed reconstruct where they now have no role at all). There is too much history, tradition and social value embedded into

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different cultures to walk down that road. I do believe, however, that these traditional roles have to be justified and inequalities that exist must be addressed. I also believe that there is legitimate involvement by established churches and where they provide a service socially and culturally this can be supported without excluding others.

I cannot fully answer the question why religious freedom has a



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lower importance than it should within the European Union.

But I can explain why a political institution should care about that which is most central to the life of its citizens, their own reasons for existence beyond that of the state itself, their core religious and philosophical *raison d'être*, and why the State may be jealous of (and so underplay) such freedom?

At the core of our rights system and especially the right of freedom of religion or belief is the concept that each individual is a free being and should not be subject to the slavery or domination of another, much less a political structure. Rights also cover freedom of expression and assembly and many others but freedom of religion or belief goes deepest and to the very core of each one of us as individuals. Whether you ascribe such a right to the creator of this universe or whether you consider these to be natural rights inherent in life, the result is the same – you have an ultimate right to freedom of existence. And that existence is



invariably underpinned by your belief system. The only limitation may come from living in society with others where rights are by necessity subject to certain restrictions that are balanced against the rights of others.

Governments and institutions (or rather, perhaps, individuals within them) may be jealous of this right as it puts the individual beyond the reach of the state. This is very clearly manifested through the actions of any totalitarian regime where freedom of religion or belief is at best unduly constricted and very often violently repressed. What better way then, to ensure a free society and to weave into its very structure, than to create a place and position for freedom of religion or belief at the highest level of importance? This must be reflected within its political instruments to make sure it cannot be violated - forever a bulwark against repression and forever a light of vigilance against incursion of individual hope and dignity.

It is for this reason that the European Union must firmly integrate freedom of religion or belief into its political processes - not to judge or discriminate - but to protect and seek out abuses of religious freedom. The State, or in this case, the union of states called the European Union has to fully take on board these principles, to endow within the safeguards it adopts the power and the teeth it needs to ensure them and not simply give them a passing nod.

We sometimes forget that first and foremost in our community of people living together we should be protecting the spirituality of individuals (from a religious perspective) or the individual's utmost integrity (from a non-religious view) above and beyond the dictates of the state and other individuals who have throughout history risen to positions of power within a state and used such structures to restrict and enslave one's fellows.

The State (or Union) is there to protect the individual within it.

It has no other purpose than to make things run smoothly along certain agreed upon lines. It is not the master of our destinies but a tool which we use to create a future in cooperation.

English writer and Christian academic C.S Lewis wrote:

“ *There are no ordinary people. You have never talked to a mere mortal. Nations, cultures, arts, civilization—these are mortal, and their life is to ours as the life of a gnat. But it is immortals whom we joke with, work with, marry, snub, and exploit—immortal horrors or everlasting splendours.*

So let us ensure that our structures are pointed towards the everlasting splendours and are protected against the *immortal horrors* by safeguarding freedom of religion or belief. We have had enough *immortal horrors* in our history to last many a lifetime. ■