Mr Chairman-I am going to confine myself to talking about public campaigning against discrimination and intolerance, mainly on individual cases based on religion or belief. This is a much narrower subject than the title of the session would allow but I think it is worth going into some detail. It is an analytical approach.

The rights guaranteed by Article 9 of the European Convention on Human Rights (likewise by Article 18 of the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights) - the right to freedom of thought, conscience and religion and of course to nonreligious beliefs - is the same right for all of us whether we are religious or not. Moreover, persecution and discrimination are not suffered only by the religious, as is amply demonstrated by the Freedom of Thought Reports published in the last two years by the International Humanist and Ethical Union. This should be a good basis on which to work together.

Nevertheless there are differences that present challenges when we try to work together - which is not of course to say that it is impossible or undesirable. I will identify three such differences and will then move on to look at the different frameworks in which we can cooperate.

One difference lies in the ways we justify human rights and argue for our work against intolerance, with some like me basing our work simply on a naturalistic morality that assigns value to every human being by virtue of his or her being human, while others start from religious injunctions or concepts such as the fatherhood of God and implied brotherhood of mankind.

Fundamentally however we are all trying to reduce suffering and promote freedom and human flourishing.

However, our different beliefs produce differences between us over what the elimination of discrimination would look like. I may hold that a secular state is a neutral one and the best guarantor of freedom of religion or belief - but I know well that some religious people - not all by any means

- see secularism as an attempt to exclude religious perspectives from public life. That is no part of secularism in my view. Some believers also hold that they should have extensive exemptions from general laws against intolerance and discrimination (for example against LGBTI people) on the basis of religious or conscientious objection. People like me find that deeply problematic

A second difference is found in the forms of discrimination typically suffered by believers and by non-believers, differences especially noticeable when intolerance amounts to persecution. This is not about any difference in severity: just that the type of discrimination tends to differ between religious and nonreligious people. I cite three differences:

 (i) The religious tend to suffer as communities - think of the Rohingya Muslims in Burma or the Falun Gong in China - whereas the nonreligious usually suffer, often unnoticed, alone or in small groups. They are the individuals who raise their heads over the parapet. They may be small in numbers but they usually represent many others who are silenced by threat and taboo.

(ii) The religious tend to have physical or organisational infrastructure that can be attacked, for example church buildings or institutions, whereas atheists may be suppressed before it is even possible to speak let alone organise, with 13 countries having the death penalty for atheism.

 (iii) Persecuted religious groups are often ethnically or culturally identifiable whereas atheists tend to be persecuted because of their political moral or social critiques of claims.

So the first two differences between the religious and nonreligious in this work against intolerance are in the justification we give for our work and in the type of discrimination we suffer.

The third difference lies in our views on what we mean by discrimination and intolerance. Humanists hold that criticism is not intolerance. For example, it is not anti-Semitism to criticise the policies of Israel vis-a-vis the Palestinians or to raise health concerns about circumcision. It is not Islamophobia to be critical of some acts undertaken in the name of Islam or to raise questions about its historical origins. It is not anti-Christian to remove historical privileges that Christianity is still enjoys from the time it was near universal and all-powerful.

Nor is it intolerance, of course, to permit things that once were banned on religious grounds - like abortion or divorce or gay marriage. If you do not like such things, remember that no one is compelling you to have gay sex, to divorce your spouse or to have an abortion.

Indeed, if you seek to limit the rights of others by forcing conformity to your standards you are the one being intolerant. It is intolerance to deny others the freedom to hold to and practise their religion or belief, to promote their policies and ideas, to live in the ways they would wish, according to their own standards

Intolerance is also the stirring of unreasoning dislike or hatred of people by virtue of their beliefs; it is seeing people not as individuals but as dehumanised others; and it can lead to irrational discrimination against them that can culminate in persecution such as we see in religious conflicts around the world.

So let me turn to the topic that we are exploring today - the contribution that religious and nonreligious beliefs can make to combating discrimination and intolerance and violence. It is a huge subject but I want to focus mainly on the frameworks in which we as followers of one or another religion or belief can make our contributions. There are four frameworks in which we can do so:

(a) as individuals supporting organisations that are themselves not linked to any religion or belief;

(b) separately in our own religion or belief organisations;

(c) by collaboration of our organisations, and

(d) together in joint organisations or formal alliances of religion or belief organisations.

(a) The first - working as individuals - is undoubtedly the most common and probably the most valuable contribution we all make to the struggle against intolerance and discrimination. We are individually inspired by our beliefs to campaign against hate speech or to defend civil liberties - for example, supporting Amnesty International or Human Rights Watch. And we take up as individuals cases of persecution regardless of the religion or belief of the victims: we write letters in support of Pastor Nadarkhani in Iran or Meriam Ibrahim in Sudan, for example, or we protest (as I and many others have) at the arrests of Leyla Yunus, the director of the Institute for Peace and Democracy and her husband Arif Yunusov, a head of department in the same Institute here in Azerbaijan - a country with one of the worst human rights records in Europe but ironically currently hosting us here as chair of the pre-eminent European human rights organisation.

So in this framework the focus is not on our separate beliefs but on the plight of those suffering violence or discrimination.

(b) The second framework of my four, working separately in our own religion or belief organisations, is the most comfortable. If we work only with people with whom we agree, our own convictions are unchallenged, indeed are constantly reinforced. Common motivation makes collaboration easier. We can direct our work towards helping those who share our beliefs. The risk is that we drift into thinking that our community is disproportionately or uniquely afflicted.

But such work is valuable and widespread. Examples are to be found in the work of œ the Church and Society Commission of the Conference of European Churches; œ Christian Solidarity Worldwide, which has been in the field for over 35 years, and œ the International Humanist and Ethical Union with its long record of work for an open and tolerant secular society including at the UN Human Rights Council.

(c) My third framework covers a wide range of activities where our separate organisations cooperate - and that cooperation can extend from supporting each other on particular cases right through to forming ad hoc alliances for joint action. Christian Solidarity Worldwide has taken up cases like that of Alex Aan, an Indonesian atheist persecuted for his atheism, while the International Humanist and Ethical Union includes religious cases in its Freedom of Thought reports and raises cases of religious persecution at the Un Human Rights Council in Geneva when dealing with issues such as blasphemy or apostasy. Ssimilarly the European Humanist Federation protested Hungary’s restrictive laws on registration of religions - laws replicated, I gather, here in Azerbaijan.

Such work sometimes extends to joint action in informal alliances. This has happened in the Parliamentary Assembly of the Council of Europe where the humanists and religious organisations have worked together productively in the interest of defeating intolerant and discriminatory resolutions.

Similarly in the INGO conference of the Council of Europe organisations representing many different beliefs worked with good results on a policy on religion and human rights, producing the resolution and statements included in our conference packs, and a new working group is looking at hate speech.

(d) My final variety of cooperation is the most difficult to start and to sustain: it is the joint organisation or formal alliance of religion and belief groups. The wider the alliance, the greater the difficulty. It requires time for negotiation of common positions and tends to be exploratory and concerned more with finding policies than with joint action. Examples include the 3Is Group, G3i, run by Francois Becker, and the European Network on Religion and Belief.

None of this collaborative work comes easily. It can seem an unwanted distraction from our own central purposes. Why should we care about each other's problems when we have so many of our own? It takes time and energy to understand each other and reach common positions - which will inevitably be expressed in carefully neutral terms that are less appealing to our own constituencies.

But if we do work together it can be very rewarding, and joint or shared action can be more impressive and effective than mere sectional pressure.

Moreover, each time we do it, it becomes easier the next, not least from the building of trust and the accumulation of agreed positions.

David Pollock

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