

THE TANDEM PROJECT

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UNITED NATIONS, HUMAN RIGHTS, FREEDOM OF RELIGION OR BELIEF

THE RIGHT TO FREEDOM OF OPINION & EXPRESSION

Issue: The Right to Freedom of Opinion Expression & Freedom of Religion or Belief

For: United Nations, Governments, Religions or Beliefs, Academia, NGOs, Media, Civil Society

Review: The Special Rapporteur on Freedom of Opinion and Expression presented his report (A/HRC/7/14) in the second week of the seventh session of the United Nations Human Rights Council. The Special Rapporteur in his report refers to the **differences** in perception of Danish Cartoons depicting the Prophet Mohammed. “In recent years, and with increased frequency, particularly due to events that dominated international politics recently, an alleged dichotomy between the right to freedom of opinion and expression and the right to freedom of religion or belief has been purported.” “The Special Rapporteur strongly **rejects** such a view, as it contradicts the clearly established notion and widely accepted principle that human rights are indivisible rather than rival principles. In particular, the ensemble of human rights can only be fully enjoyed in an environment that **guarantees** freedom and pluralism.”

Several United Nations Human Rights Council member states belonging to the Organization of the Islamic Conference (OIC) reject as inadequate the Conclusions and Recommendations of the Special Rapporteur, while supporting the mandate on Freedom of Opinion and Expression. These differences are being discussed in drafting a **resolution** on Freedom of Opinion and Expression to be presented to the United Nations Human Rights Council at their seventh session. Extracts from the Special Rapporteur report are presented here that relate freedom of opinion and expression and freedom of religion or belief. Draft Resolutions on Freedom of Opinion and Expression and Freedom of Religion or Belief were passed by the U.N. Human Rights Council on Friday, 25 March 2008. They passed without consensus. It is important to listen and view this debate by **archived video** on the Human Rights Council Webcast. There are **links** to the Friday 25 March 2008 archived video debate at the end of this Issue Statement.

The Advanced Edited Version (A/HRC/7/14) of the Special Rapporteur on Freedom of Opinion and Expression for the Seventh Session of the HRC is available by clicking on this link:

<http://www2.ohchr.org/english/bodies/hrcouncil/docs/7session/A-HRC-7-14.pdf>

To view the video of the debate on this issue on the floor of the United Nations Human Rights Council, click to open this link to Human Rights Council web cast for Friday 25 March 2008. Scroll down to Draft Resolution (A/HRC/7/L.15) and (A/HRC/7/L.24) as amended to view the archived video:

<http://www.un.org/webcast/unhrc/archive.asp?go=080328>

Excerpts: Excerpts are presented under the Eight Articles of the 1981 U.N. Declaration on the Elimination of all Forms of Intolerance and of Discrimination Based on Religion or Belief. Examples of extracts are presented prior to an *Issue Statement* for each Review.

1. 1 *Everyone shall have the right to freedom of thought, conscience and religion. This right shall include freedom to have a religion or whatever belief of his choice, and freedom, either individually or in community with others and in public or private, to manifest his religion or belief in worship, observance, practices and teaching.*

1. 2. *No one shall be subject to coercion which would impair his freedom to have a religion or belief of his choice.*

1. 3 *Freedom to manifest one's religion or belief may be subject only to such limitations as are prescribed by law and are necessary to protect public safety, order, health, morals or the fundamental rights and freedoms of others.*

2. 1 *No one shall be subject to discrimination by any State, institution, group of persons or person on the grounds of religion or other beliefs.*

EXCERPTS:

The Advanced Edited Version (A/HRC/7/14) of the Special Rapporteur on Freedom of Opinion and Expression for the Seventh Session of the UN Human Rights Council

In recent years, and with increased frequency, particularly due to events that dominated international politics recently, an alleged dichotomy between the right to freedom of opinion and expression and the right to freedom of religion or belief has been purported. In particular, it has been argued that the dogmatic use of freedom of expression as a fundamental human right has undermined people's ability to fully enjoy other human rights, in particular freedom of religion. The Special Rapporteur strongly rejects such a view, as it contradicts the clearly established notion and widely accepted principle that human rights are indivisible rather than rival principles. In particular, the ensemble of human rights can only be fully enjoyed in an environment that guarantees freedom and pluralism.

Practices such as stereotyping and insulting ethnic, national, social or religious groups have serious and damaging consequences for the promotion of dialogue and living together among different communities. To fight intolerance and discrimination and to create a solid basis for strengthening of democracy, broad-based and long-lasting programs and actions need to be developed to promote respect for diversity, multiculturalism and human rights education.

The Special Rapporteur also emphasizes that existing international instruments establish a clear limit on freedom of expression. In particular, the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights that provides that "any propaganda for war" and "any advocacy of national, racial or religious hatred that constitutes incitement to discrimination, hostility or violence shall be prohibited by law." The main problem thus lies in identifying at which point exactly these thresholds are reached. The Special Rapporteur underscores that this decision which is ultimately a subjective one, should meet a number of requirements. In particular, it should not justify any type of prior censorship, it should be clearly and narrowly defined, it should be the least intrusive means in what concerns limitations to freedom of expression and it should be applied by an independent judiciary. The Special Rapporteur reiterates that these limitations are designed to protect individuals rather than belief systems, guaranteeing that every person will have all of his or her human rights

protected.

The special Rapporteur notes that a broader interpretation of these limitations, which has been recently suggested in international forums, is not in line with existing international instruments and would ultimately jeopardize the full enjoyment of human rights. Limitations to the right to freedom of opinion and expression have more often than not been used by Governments as a means to restrict criticism and silent dissent. Furthermore, as regional human rights courts have already recognized, the right to freedom of expression is applicable not only to comfortable, inoffensive or politically correct opinions, but also to ideas that “offend, shock and disturb.” The constant confrontation of ideas, even controversial ones, is a stepping stone to vibrant democratic societies.

III. Conclusions and Recommendations

On censorship

The Special Rapporteur recommends that Governments adopt legislation that unambiguously prohibits all forms of censorship in media outlets, both in the traditional media and the Internet. Defamation, libel and insult charges, particularly when stemming from public figures and specifically State authorities, do not justify any form of prior censorship.

On defamation offences

The Special Rapporteur strongly recommends that Governments decriminalize defamation and similar offenses, confining them to the domain of civil law. The amount of fines to be paid as compensation should be reasonable and allow the continuation of professional activities. The Special Rapporteur also urges Governments to release immediately and unconditionally all journalists detained because of their media-related activities. Prison sentences should be excluded for offences concerning the reputation of others, such as defamation and libel.

Governments should also refrain from introducing new norms which will pursue the same goals as defamation laws under a different legal terminology such as disinformation and dissemination of false information. Under no circumstances should criticism of the nation, its symbols, the Government, its members and their action be seen as an offence. Elected officials and authorities should accept the fact that because of their prominent and public role, they will attract a disproportionate amount of scrutiny from the press. Governments should also make sure that the right to privacy, especially in relation to family life and minors, is sufficiently protected without curtailing the right to access to information, which contributes to transparency and democratic control of public affairs.

On freedom of expression and freedom of religion

The Special Rapporteur urges media professionals, as well as the public at large, to be conscious of the potential impact that the ideas they express may have in raising cultural and religious sensitivities. The dissemination of intolerant and discriminatory opinions ultimately promotes discord and conflict and is not conducive to the promotion of human rights. Media corporations and journalists’ associations, in cooperation with national and international organizations, should organize regular human rights training programmes in order to enhance professional ethics and sensitivity to cultural diversity of media professionals.

The Special Rapporteur further emphasizes that, although limitations to the right to freedom of opinion and expression are foreseen in international instruments to prevent war propaganda and incitement of national, racial or religious hatred, these limitations were designed in order to protect individuals against direct violations of their rights. These limitations are not intended to suppress the expression of critical views, controversial opinions or politically incorrect statements. Finally, they are not designed to protect belief systems from external or internal criticism.

ISSUE STATEMENT: International Human Rights Standards on Freedom of Religion or Belief are international law and codes of conduct for peaceful cooperation, respectful competition and resolution of conflicts. The standards are a platform for genuine dialogue on core principles and values within and among nations, all religions and other beliefs.

Several resolutions in the seventh extended session of the United Nations Human Rights Council on Friday, 25 March 2008 related to the mandate on the right to Freedom of Opinion and Expression and the right to Freedom of Religion or Belief.

There were contentious and differences between members of the UN Human Rights Council on the **relationship** of freedom of opinion and expression to freedom of religion or belief. (A/HRC/7/L.15) – Defamation of religion passed 21 in favor, 10 against, 14 abstentions; (A/HRC/7/L.24) – Mandate on freedom of opinion and expression with amendments L.39 and Cuba oral amendment, passed 32 in favor, 0 against, 15 abstentions. (A/HRC/7/L.39) – Amendment to the mandate on freedom of opinion and expression “to report on instances in which abuse of the right to freedom of expression constitutes an act of racial or religious discrimination” passed 27 in favor, 17 against, 3 abstentions: Cuba oral amendment to mandate on freedom of opinion and expression adding “and also the importance for all forms of media to report and deliver information in a fair and impartial manner” passed 32 in favor, 0 against, 15 abstentions.

Two resolutions passed **without** consensus were; (A/HRC/7/L.15) defamation of religion, and (A/HRC/7/L.24) the mandate on freedom of opinion and expression as amended. The differences were principally between the European Union (EU) and member states that are also members of the Organization of the Islamic Conference (OIC). The EU believes Article 19 and Article 20 of the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights are sufficient human rights instruments to cover protection against discrimination on incitement to racial and religious hatred. For the EU, reporting **restrictions** placed on freedom of opinion and expression is tantamount to a violation of the foundational principle of democracy.

The OIC believes caricatures, cartoons, films and other media issues in some EU and other countries is Islamophobia; a fear of Islam or an abuse or defamation of religion and reporting restrictions must be placed on the media when such **abuse** of any religion is involved. Canada, the main sponsor of the original draft resolution on freedom of opinion and expression responded by saying; “Requesting a Special Rapporteur to report on abuse of this right would turn the mandate on its head. Instead of promoting freedom of expression the Special Rapporteur would be **policing** its exercise.” Canada then said if this amendment is adopted as proposed by the OIC they would withdraw sponsorship from the main resolution. Canada’s **position**, according to one NGO source, was “echoed by several delegations including India, who objected to the change of focus from *protecting* to *limiting* freedom of expression.”

In the week HRC resolutions on defamation of religion and restrictions on freedom of opinion and expression were approved a film, “*Fina*,” was released over the Internet by a Dutch Member of Parliament, Mr. Geert Wilders associating Muslims exclusively with violence and terrorism.

The Dutch Government had a fast and **balanced** reaction to the film saying the “vast majority of Muslims **reject** extremism and violence;” as the Government **defends** the right to freedom of opinion and expression as a foundation of democracy. Three UN Special Rapporteurs issued a joint statement on 28 March 2008 critical of the film. The High Commissioner for Human Rights joined the condemnation saying she urges all those who understandably feel profoundly offended to denounce its hateful content by peaceful means saying, “There is a protective legal framework, and the controversy that this film will generate should take place within it.”

STANDARDS: http://www.tandemproject.com/program/81_dec.htm

The Tandem Project: a non-governmental organization founded in 1986 to build understanding, tolerance and respect for diversity, and to prevent discrimination in matters relating to freedom of religion or belief. The Tandem Project, a non-profit NGO, has sponsored multiple conferences, curricula, reference materials and programs on Article 18 of the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights – Everyone shall have the right to freedom of thought, conscience and religion - and 1981 United Nations Declaration on the Elimination of All Forms of Intolerance and Discrimination Based on Religion or Belief.

The Tandem Project initiative is the result of a co-founder representing the World Federation of United Nations Associations at the United Nations Geneva Seminar, *Encouragement of Understanding, Tolerance and Respect in Matters Relating to Freedom of Religion or Belief*, called by the UN Secretariat in 1984 on ways to implement the 1981 UN Declaration. In 1986, The Tandem Project organized the first NGO International Conference on the 1981 UN Declaration.

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The Tandem Project is a UN NGO in Special Consultative Status with the Economic and Social Council of the United Nations

Goal: To eliminate all forms of intolerance and discrimination based on religion or belief.

United Nations Secretary General Ban Ki Moon, at the Alliance of Civilizations Madrid Forum said; “never in our lifetime has there been a more desperate need for constructive and committed dialogue, among individuals, among communities, among cultures, among and between nations.” Another writer in different setting said; “the warning signs are clear, unless we establish genuine dialogue within and among all kinds of belief, ranging from religious fundamentalism to secular dogmatism, the conflicts of the future will probably be even more deadly.”

Challenge: to reconcile international human rights standards on freedom of religion or belief with the truth claims of religious and non-religious beliefs.

Did God create us or did we create God? This question calls for inclusive and genuine dialogue, respectful and thoughtful responses, discussion of taboos and clarity by persons of diverse beliefs. Inclusive and genuine is dialogue between people of *theistic, non-theistic and atheistic beliefs, as well as the right not to profess any religion or belief*. These UN categories embodied in international law promote tolerance and prevent discrimination based on religion or belief.

Inclusive and genuine dialogue is essential as a first step in recognition of the inherent dignity, equal and inalienable rights of all members of the human family, and a foundation for freedom, justice and peace in the world. Leaders of religious and non-religious beliefs sanction the truth claims of their own traditions. They are the key to raising awareness and acceptance of the value of holding truth claims in tandem with human rights standards on freedom of religion or belief.

To build understanding and support for Article 18, International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights – Everyone shall have the right to freedom of thought, conscience and religion - and the 1981 UN Declaration on the Elimination of All Forms of Intolerance and Discrimination Based on Religion or Belief. Encourage the United Nations, Governments, Religions or Beliefs, Academia, NGOs, Media and

Civil Society to use International Human Rights Standards on Freedom of Religion or Belief as essential for *long-term solutions* to conflicts in all matters relating to religion or belief.

Objectives:

1. Use International Human Rights Standards on Freedom of Religion or Belief as a platform for genuine dialogue on the core principles and values within and among nations, all religions and other beliefs.
2. Adapt these human rights standards to early childhood education, teaching children, from the very beginning, that their own religion is one out of many and that it is a personal choice for everyone to adhere to the religion or belief by which he or she feels most inspired, or to adhere to no religion or belief at all.¹

History: In 1968 the United Nations deferred work on an International Convention on the Elimination of all Forms of Religious Intolerance, because of its apparent complexity and sensitivity. In the twenty-first century, a dramatic increase of intolerance and discrimination on grounds of religion or belief is motivating a worldwide search to find solutions to these problems. This is a challenge calling for enhanced dialogue by States and others; including consideration of an International Convention on Freedom of Religion or Belief for protection of and accountability by all religions or beliefs. The tensions in today's world inspire a question such as:

Should the United Nations adopt an International Convention on Freedom of Religion or Belief?

Response: Is it the appropriate moment to reinstate the drafting of a legally binding international convention on freedom of religion or belief? Law making of this nature requires a minimum consensus and an environment that appeals to reason rather than emotions. At the same time we are on a learning curve as the various dimensions of the Declaration are being explored. Many academics have produced voluminous books on these questions but more ground has to be prepared before setting up of a UN working group on drafting a convention. In my opinion, we should not try to rush the elaboration of a Convention on Freedom of Religion or Belief, especially not in times of high tensions and unpreparedness. - *UN Special Rapporteur on Freedom of Religion or Belief, Asma Jahangir, Prague 25 Year Anniversary Commemoration of the 1981 UN Declaration, 25 November 2006.*

Option: After forty years this may be the time, however complex and sensitive, for the United Nations Human Rights Council to appoint an Open-ended Working Group to draft a United Nations Convention on Freedom of Religion or Belief. The mandate for an Open-ended Working Group ought to assure nothing in a draft Convention will be construed as restricting or derogating from any right defined in the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, the International Covenants on Human Rights, and the 1981 UN Declaration on the Elimination of All Forms of Intolerance and of Discrimination Based on Religion or Belief.

Separation of Religion or Belief and State

Concept: *Separation of Religion or Belief and State - SOROBAS.* The First Preamble to the 1948 United Nations Universal Declaration of Human Rights reads; “*Whereas recognition of the inherent dignity and of the equal and inalienable rights of all members of the human family is the foundation of freedom, justice and peace in the world.* This concept suggests States recalling their history, culture and constitution adopt fair and equal human rights protection for all religions or beliefs as described in General Comment 22 on Article 18, International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights, UN Human Rights Committee, 20 July 1993 (CCPR/C/21/Rev.1/Add.4):

Article 18: protects *theistic, non-theistic and atheistic beliefs, as well as the right not to profess any religion or belief.* The terms belief and religion are to be broadly construed. Article 18 is not limited in its application to traditional religions or to religions and beliefs with international characteristics or practices analogous to those of traditional religions. The Committee therefore views with concern any tendency to discriminate against any religion or belief for any reasons, including the fact that they are newly established, or represent religious minorities that may be the subject of hostility by a predominant religious community.

Article 18: permits restrictions to manifest a religion or belief only if such limitations are prescribed by law and necessary to protect public safety, order, health or morals, or the fundamental rights and freedoms of others.

Dialogue: International Human Rights Standards on Freedom of Religion or Belief are international law and universal codes of conduct for peaceful cooperation, respectful competition and resolution of conflicts. The standards are a platform for genuine dialogue on core principles and values within and among nations, all religions and other beliefs.

Education: Ambassador Piet de Klerk addressing the Prague 25 Year Anniversary Commemoration of the 1981 U.N. Declaration said; “Our educational systems need to provide children with a broad orientation: from the very beginning, children should be taught that their own religion is one out of many and that it is a personal choice for everyone to adhere to the religion or belief by which he or she feels most inspired, or to adhere to no religion or belief at all.”¹

1981 U.N. Declaration on Freedom of Religion or Belief

5.2: Every child shall enjoy the right to have access to education in the matter of religion or belief in accordance with the wishes of his parents, and shall not be compelled to receive teaching on religion or belief against the wishes of his parents, the best interests of the child being the guiding principle.” With International Human Rights safeguards, early childhood education is the best time to begin to build tolerance, understanding and respect for freedom of religion or belief.

5.3: The child shall be protected from any form of discrimination on the grounds of religion or belief. He shall be brought up in a spirit of understanding, tolerance, and friendship among peoples, peace and universal brotherhood, respect for the freedom of religion or belief of others and in full consciousness that his energy and talents should be devoted to the service of his fellow men.