

Break-out Session 1: Addressing rising restrictions on religion: law matters

Panelists:

Brian J. Grim, Senior Researcher PEW Research Center's forum on religious and public life

Trond Bakkevig, Pastor Lutheran Church of Norway and Convener of the Council of religious institutions of the Holy Land

Mustapha Ben Jaafar, President National Constituent Assembly of Tunisia

Rabbi Arthur Schneier, Founder and President Appeal of Conscience Foundation

Heidi Rautionmaa, Coordinator, Religion for Peace – European women of faith network

Father Nabil Haddad, Executive Director Jordanian interfaith coexistence research center Amman

Moderator:

Heiner Bielefeldt, Professor University of Erlangen-Nuremberg

Session Summary

Three Quarters of the world's population are living in countries with high or very high restrictions on the freedom of religion. Especially in the Middle East and Northern Africa persecution of religious minorities can be perceived often and in a radical manner. Father Nabil Haddad wants state diplomacy to adopt an interfaith approach. Furthermore he criticised the stagnation of moderate voices in religious dialogues. Mustapha Ben Jaafar described the drafting process of the new Constitution in Tunisia and the essential role of freedom of religion, religious practices and beliefs for the individual in order to achieve a progressive, democratic and pluralistic state. The new Constitution will provide the same rights and responsibilities for all Tunisians, no matter what religion they affiliate to, said Ben Jaafar.

As a Holocaust survivor, Rabbi Schneier expressed his personal concern for the topic of religious freedom. He claimed that responsible religious leadership is characterized by unifying the people.

Due to increasing migration processes religious problems become a border-crossing issue. According to Heidi Rautionmaa training for teachers on the necessity of an interfaith dialogue shall be ensured to guarantee the inclusion of inter-faith elements as well as the corporate principles of ethics in religious education. She additionally mentioned the importance of a focus on gender equality and interfaith activities among women to fight discrimination of women in the name of religion.

Trond Bakkevig outlined the importance of guaranteeing and protecting the free access to religious sites and places of worship shared by religions.

The panelists agreed that an international good will and a strong partnership to work together are needed in order to ensure the freedom of religion. Furthermore, a culture of understanding and respect are essential to guarantee this freedom and effectively address restrictions on it.

Quotations

Trond Bakkevig:

“The State is there for everybody; religion is there for those who want to belong to it.”

“Religions themselves have a special responsibility, which is to learn to speak for each other.”

Rabbi Arthur Schneier:

“As a child in Vienna, I was persecuted being a member of a religious minority. [...] I feel the pain of any community that is oppressed; for me, it is not theory, it is recall.”

“Children are not born with hatred. They are educated to hate.”

Mustapha Ben Jaafar:

“Tunisian citizens have the same rights and responsibilities, no matter what religion they have.”

Heidi Rautionmaa:

“States and municipalities should support interfaith work and respect of religious diversity.”