

Speech given during an event with Minister Jacob Forssmed, UN Special Rapporteur Nazilla Ghanea and religious representatives in Sweden.

12 October 2023, Villa Bonnier, Stockholm

Honourable Minister Jacob Forssmed, esteemed Professor Nazila Ghanea, distinguished guests,

First and foremost, I wish to express my heartfelt gratitude to the Minister of Social Affairs for organizing this dinner, providing a platform to discuss freedom of religion in our country.

Furthermore, I extend my appreciation to the UN Special Rapporteur for dedicating her time to visit Sweden as part of her noble mission.

In Sweden, a nation known for its commitment to human rights and democratic principles, we see a commendable effort to uphold religious freedom. The dialogue with the government is long-running, respectful and constructive. We are most grateful for this.

In recent years, Sweden has been rocked by different crises. And it is in times of crisis that freedom of religion seems to be ignored if not threatened.

To address the challenges posed by the migration crisis, we see the implementation of new regulations. While we do not inherently oppose this, it is necessary to recognize their negative impact on religious freedom.

The present regulations restrict labour migration from non-EU countries based on wages, disregarding the overall financial circumstances of the individuals. They fail to account for accommodation and other expenses covered by the Catholic Church.

This oversight limits the ability of religious communities to invite priests and sisters who can offer spiritual guidance in their native language and according to their own rites. We recommend a clarification of current regulations to establish criteria for specific professional categories or for the comprehensive assessment of the financial situation of the applicant.

But let me now turn to a different crisis. When Covid-19 hit Sweden, it became obvious that religion has been downgraded from a fundamental aspect of human dignity to an optional hobby. Restrictions were tougher on places of worships than on shopping malls. Freedom of religion was trumped by the freedom to shop.

Covid-19 seems to be behind us, and you may well wonder why I mention it. I believe that the pandemic reveals a slow trend to displace religious freedom from the pinnacle of human rights to a side-issue. We have lost our understanding of the riches of religion socially, and we no longer recognise the protection that religious freedom enjoys under international law.

In a society where religious practice decreases steadily and where solidarity is nevertheless essential, state institutions are trying to find a new balance that is not always mindful of religious freedom.

Some are even tempted to limit it. Former Ministers compared religious schools to anti-democratic theocratic dictatures. A politician would like to ban prayers at a private pre-school. The basic freedom of parents to choose a religious education for their children is questioned and seen by some as a threat to society.

Sweden prides itself with a consensus-driven ideal of “equality”. Yet there is an effort to limit peaceful religious expressions that depart from the secular consensus. And in a country where the state plays a central role for the provision of so many services, this is problematic.

We are receiving reports about municipalities stopping funds to church youth associations because priests and pastors deliver sermons advocating a classic Christian view on matters of gender, sexuality, and marriage.

Honourable Minister, esteemed UN Special Rapporteur, it would be easy to dismiss these issues as local exceptions. Today, the 150,000 Catholics living in Sweden do enjoy a very large degree of religious freedom. The law on independent schools is a major accomplishment.

Yet, freedom of religion and knowledge about the protection it enjoys under international law need to be promoted in Swedish institutions all the way down to the local level. Current challenges related to solidarity and stability in our diverse society should not be met through the imposition of a moral consensus that fails to support all forms of peaceful religious expressions.

Minister Forssmed, I thank you once more for this event and the constructive relation with the Diocese of Stockholm. I respectfully ask you to continue to promote freedom of religion against bureaucratic regulations that unduly limit it as well as all forms of false tolerance.

Dr Ludwig Gelot

Secretary General of the Commission for Justice and Peace, Diocese of Stockholm