

6th session of the Forum on Minority Issues

IV. Promotion and protection of the identity of religious minorities

Prof Mr Heiner Bielefeldt, presenting on “The rights of religious minorities”

Thank you very much, madam chairperson,

Ladies and gentlemen, distinguished delegates, now that I have listened to many narratives being told here. I have changed my manuscript and I will speak in a less academic fashion than I thought I would. But first of all, I would like to extend my gratitude to Rita Izsák-Ndiaye in particular for having invited me to be part of this forum, I am happy to be here. And Rita and I became (...) we share a history in corporations, in particular this year she has produced a report on religious minorities presented in the GA only recently. And I also have reported on religious minorities, so that is an indication of corporation, a corporation which is urgently needed. I mean and that is something that I think we all have realised also when listening to the various stories told here in the last hours. And of course, I cannot respond to all these stories, but I mean, obviously minorities, religious minorities and all its members suffer of prosecution, not only by state agencies, but also by non-state actors, harassment, stigmatisation, co-opting mechanism, paranoia, indoctrination of children, discrimination, and let me, at least, mention a dimension which was only briefly touched upon intersectional discrimination also, particularly affecting women from religious minorities. I mean just to reflect about them, without going to any details.

Obviously, the most important work is always made on the ground, I mean we have to have a multi-level approach and the UN has to play a role in coordinating efforts, in setting standards, in establishing the best practices, in helping to build a sufficient infrastructure in the ground. So, it must be a multi-level approach, but the important work, all the important significant changes, are always enacted by actors working on the ground, in the situations.

And let me now point to maybe four aspects, briefly, that I consider to be particularly important:

First of all, in order to protect the rights of religious minorities and its members, what we need is an open inclusive infrastructure, of public institution, an open inclusive constitutional framework, which implies, among other things, a disentanglement of state authority and religion. This disentanglement, I personally do not use a language of separation often because it sounds negative. The positive purpose is to create space, I mean, only by disentangling religion and state authorities you can create space, public space, provided by public institutions, operated in the service of everyone, public space that allows religious diversity to unfold freely, in particular, free of discrimination, free from fear. So, this is very important. Public institutions operating in the service of everyone, disentanglement, and religious communities. If the state utilises religion for purposes of narrow identity politics, I mean the obvious victims are minorities. But we should not forget, in the long run, this will also damage majority religions, this will undermine their credibility, its persuasiveness, its spiritual values, its effectiveness, its possibility. So, working on behalf of minorities is also, in behalf of majorities. There we have to make a connection, which I found very important.

Second point, communicative outreach. I have had two very moving experiences this year. One was in the Sierra Leone, possibly one of the poorest states, economically. A state that has just overcome a brutal civil war. Maybe it is economically poor, but I was really amazed by the cultural of interreligious communication, and also, intrareligious communication. In which Muslims who are the majority, Christians were together, Sunnis, Shias, (...), Evangelicals, Orthodox, Catholic, Christians, I mean a culture of communication that helps to reshape a nation (...) civil war, and affected by various serious problems. But it is amazing what people can do when communicate. And the other very moving experience has already been told yesterday. Cyprus, a country also (...) by a protective conflict. And now, due to the efforts of people working on the ground, like (...) yesterday it was reported about some successes, it was possible to build trust. I mean, it was an enormous investment, building trust, it means that you also have to address difficult, maybe traumatic histories, it is not easy, and it requires ample efforts. But some breakthrough was achieved in Cyprus, and I think that again, testifies to the meaningful (...) communicative outreach possible possibilities.

Third, second last point. Responding very clearly to incitement to hatred, incitement to in particular acts of hatred, not only hate speech. Acts of hatred. And now we have the (...) earlier this year, which also points to the risk of responsibilities of different actors, states but also religious leaders, their responsibilities, but also their potential to make a difference by speaking out very clearly. I mean, entrepreneur of hatred, very typically, pretend to speak in the name of the silent majority, here the majorities also, the majorities need it, it is important that the majority does not remain silent. Speaks out against those propagating the nasty, spinful messages of fear, paranoia, and contempt. So, speaking out actively is very important.

Final point, legitimacy. And here is important to see that minority rights are no privileges. There is still a misunderstanding, it is one of the most typical misunderstanding that it is means singling out some groups, privileging some groups. No! The idea is, minority rights are human rights, they are based on the idea of all human rights because they are human rights of all human beings. But this has never prevented us from paying additionally attention to the specific vulnerabilities, to the increasing vulnerabilities of certain people who are, for instance, exposed to increasing risks of assimilation, therefore, giving additional attention is not privileging minorities, its working on behalf of everyone, it is part of the universe of human rights agenda.

Thank you very much.