

Dennis de Jong

European Parliament, Member

Committee on Budgetary Control, Member

Committee on the Internal Market and Consumer Protection, Member

Committee on Civil Liberties, Justice and Home Affairs, Substitute

Strasbourg, 11 February 2015

Dear High Representative/Vice President Frederica Mogherini,

I am writing to you in my capacity as a Member of European Parliament and as Co-President of the newly created Intergroup on Freedom of Religion or Belief & Religious Tolerance.

In December 2014 the International Humanist and Ethical Union (IHEU) published its first Freedom of Thought Report in 2014

(<http://freethoughtreport.com/download>). This report describes in particular the position of non-religious believers in the world.

Although according to international human rights instruments, freedom of religion or belief covers theistic, non-theistic and atheistic beliefs, the IHEU concluded that they had 'seen a marked increase in persecution of atheists and humanists.' In particular, three main concerns have been identified: stigmatisation, lack of legal protection or recognition, and criminalisation, for example through apostasy and blasphemy laws.

The IHEU report states that stigmatization of the non-religious believers does not come exclusively from reactionary or radical religious leaders, but increasingly from political leaders, including heads of state. This is in large part due to political leaders, especially those in Muslim majority countries, wanting to prove their Islamic credentials and their religious legitimacy in an attempt to consolidate power.

In many countries the non-religious are denied legal protection or recognition. The report states that there are in many countries 'laws that deny atheists' right to exist, revoke their citizenship, restrict their right to marry, obstruct their access to public education, prevent them working for the state.'

The report also listed 13 Muslim majority countries as having legislation which mandates the death penalty for crimes of apostasy. Although it should be noted that it appears death penalty sentences are rarely applied for apostasy, nevertheless prosecutions for this crime are often mixed in with other accusations, actual executions may be hidden completely, and many states allow "repentance" and participation in "re-education" programmes to avoid a death-for-apostasy sentence, but this only goes to show how severely apostasy is suppressed.

Blasphemy Laws in various countries have also been used to discriminate against the non-religious under freedom of thought and conscience.

It is imperative that more is done to fight the persecution of the non-religious believers in the world. Many of the issues that they face are similar to the issues that religious minorities face. Apostasy and blasphemy laws are used to marginalise and demonise both religious and non-religious minorities.

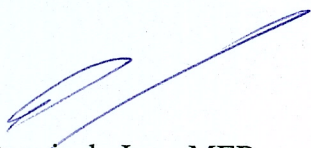
The EU adopted the Guidelines on Freedom of Religion or Belief in June 2013 which set out its commitment to promote and protect freedom of religion or belief in its external relations. The intergroup welcomes these Guidelines, which its predecessor, the EP Working Group on Freedom of Religion or Belief, helped to prepare.

We hope to pursue with you a dialogue on the implementation of these Guidelines. In this respect, I would like to ask your particular attention for the challenges in protecting the rights of non-religious people, as these tend to be less well organised than religious communities. The IHEU may therefore be a welcome tool to make progress also in this regard.

Could you indicate how you will use the IHEU-report in practice? Has the EEAS already taken action to protect non-religious people and if so, what types of actions and in which countries have been undertaken? Do you consider additional actions based on the IHEU-report?

I thank you in advance for replying to this letter and I hope that both the Intergroup and organisations such as the IHEU and the European Humanist Federation (EHF) can count on your continued support for the protection of freedom of religion or belief for both religious and non-religious believers.

Yours sincerely,

A handwritten signature in blue ink, appearing to read 'Dennis de Jong', with a long, sweeping horizontal stroke extending to the right.

Dennis de Jong MEP

Co-President of the Intergroup on Freedom of Religion or Belief & Religious Tolerance