

Table of Contents

- ***European Muslims prefer mixed areas - survey***
 - ***EU's equality plans will 'silence' Christians, warns legal group***
 - ***Merkel: EU legislation does not curb religious freedom***
 - ***One person's cult is another's true religion***
-

European Muslims prefer mixed areas - survey

Most Muslims do not want segregation, the report finds

By Rob Broomby

BBC News (15.12.2009) / HRWF Int. (16.12.2009) – Email: info@hrwf.net – Website: <http://www.hrwf.net> – The work by the Open Society Institute (OSI), an independent think-tank, looked at the social integration of Muslims in 11 West European cities. It calls for improved efforts to tackle discrimination.

Europe's Muslim population is expected to double by 2025 and could reach 40 million. But data on them is very limited, OSI says.

The report says religious discrimination remains a critical barrier to their participation in European society, and the situation has worsened in recent years.

The OSI says its aim is to promote tolerance and fairness.

Identity issues

Nazia Hussein, who supervised the work, says many Muslims are still seen as outsiders. "The majority of Muslims that we've spoken to across 11 cities feel very strongly attached to their neighbourhood and city, they feel quite strongly attached to their country," she told the BBC.

"But at the same time they don't believe that their fellow countrymen or the wider society sees them as either German or French or English."

The report offers a series of snapshots from: the Netherlands (Amsterdam and Rotterdam), Belgium (Antwerp), Germany (Berlin and Hamburg), Denmark (Copenhagen), the UK (Leicester and London), France (Marseille and Paris) and Sweden (Stockholm).

In the Kreuzberg neighbourhood of the German capital Berlin few Muslims identified themselves with their nation - not because they rejected German values but, it says, because society still sees them as "foreigners".

New laws forbidding the wearing of visibly religious symbols or clothing in schools have had a detrimental impact, it says.

In the Netherlands recent controversies like the assassination of the film-maker Theo van Gogh by a Muslim extremist have "convulsed public opinion". Muslims, it says, have "become scapegoats for public anxieties over security".

Segregation problem

City authorities were "fighting residential segregation", it acknowledged, but educational segregation remains a problem.

Meanwhile in Rotterdam's Feyenoord district, which has a high concentration of immigrants, attempts to create a more mixed society by allocating housing differently have been legally halted on discrimination grounds.

Muslims there say they feel that the bar for measuring how well Muslims integrate is "constantly raised" and anti-Muslim sentiment and even violence has increased across the country.

In Leicester - one of Britain's most ethnically diverse cities - the police were praised for their community understanding. And though ethnic minorities are well represented politically, "racial discrimination is still very much alive" in the city.

The authors conclude that social segregation does matter, but it is of most concern to Muslims themselves.

The findings and recommendations include the following:

- Among Muslims surveyed, 61% have a strong sense of belonging to the country and 72% a strong sense of belonging to the city;
- The majority of Muslims eligible to vote did vote in local and national elections;
- Many Muslims who are not EU citizens remain disenfranchised, particularly in Germany and France;
- Half of Muslim respondents reported experiencing religious discrimination over last 12 months;
- Muslims are almost three times more likely to be unemployed than non-Muslims;
- City officials must strive to maintain areas that are ethnically and religiously mixed, and ensure that discrimination is not a barrier for Muslims when choosing where to live;
- Cities should foster an inclusive city identity - Amsterdam, Antwerp and Copenhagen have run such campaigns successfully;
- The EU should collect accurate data on minorities and encourage equal treatment in education, housing and other services;
- The EU should enable cities to exchange information and best practices about collecting educational data on minority students.

EU's equality plans will 'silence' Christians, warns legal group

A Christian legal group is warning that the EU's proposed Equal Treatment Directive will "silence" Christians and undermine their ability to profess their faith

by Jenna Lyle

Christian Today (18.09.2009) / HRWF Int. (19.09.2009) – Email: info@hrwf.net – Website: <http://www.hrwf.net> – A Christian legal group is warning that the EU's proposed

Equal Treatment Directive will silence Christians and undermine their ability to profess their faith.

Christian Concern for our Nation (CCFON) said the directive had the potential to be used as an "instrument of cultural genocide" and persecution against Christians.

"Its provisions are likely to restrict Christian freedoms to the extent that, in certain cases, we would be silenced and prevented from providing goods or services to the public without violating our consciences, particularly if required to promote other religions or the practice of homosexuality," said director Andrea Minichiello Williams.

The directive seeks to eliminate discrimination on the grounds of religion, belief, and sexual orientation in the provision of goods and services in each of the EU's 27 member states.

CCFON warned that under the directive, businesses and employees risked being sued for harassment if they failed to provide a good or service in instances where it contravened their religious beliefs.

"This will cast a chilling shadow over free speech and freedom of expression for Christians, as it will for those with any views that challenge the prevailing 'politically correct' ideology," said Ms Williams.

She went on to warn that the directive failed to provide protection for the freedom to follow one's religious conscience and balancing mechanisms to arbitrate between competing sets of rights, such as the right of a homosexual to practise his lifestyle against the right of a Christian to refuse to facilitate the practise.

Ms Williams said that the CCFON was already dealing with cases of Christians being suspended under similar equality laws in the UK, including the case of a homelessness officer in London who was dismissed for suggesting to a terminally ill client that she try putting her faith in God.

Christians in healthcare, education, housing, and religious associations all stand to be affected by the directive, which requires a unanimous vote by all member states to be passed.

"We believe that member states should veto the directive," said Ms Williams. "Please pray that it will not be passed and encourage a Christian campaign across Europe to 'say a loud no to the EU Equal Treatment Directive' before it's too late."

Merkel: EU legislation does not curb religious freedom

Christian Telegraph (24.08.2009) / HRWF Int. (24.08.2009) – Email: info@hrwf.net – Website: <http://www.hrwf.net> – German Chancellor Angela Merkel has reassured evangelical Christians that European anti-discrimination legislation will not curb their freedom of worship and religious expression, reports Wolfgang Polzer, special to ASSIST News Service.

In an interview with three German evangelical media organizations she emphasized that EU anti-discrimination laws were only meant to prevent any disadvantages for specific groups. For example, older people should have the same opportunities as younger persons; women should have equal rights as well as people with special needs.

Anti-discrimination legislation is meant to strengthen equality, said Merkel. She was interviewed in Berlin by leading journalists of Evangeliums-Rundfunk (Gospel Radio), the media association KEP (Conference of Evangelical Publicists) and the news agency "idea", all stationed in Wetzlar.

Merkel, raised in a vicar's family in East Germany, called on Christians to refrain from despondency and put their trust in God. The power of their faith would enable them to weather difficult times and face the future with confidence.

The 55-year-old politician is also leader of the Christian Democratic Union in Germany and faces general elections on September 27. As she explained, the "C" in the name of her party serves as a foundation for operative politics.

"We regard every individual as God's creation equipped with freedom and responsibility," said Merkel. Politics was meant to create conditions in which the individual can develop his or her talents. The "C" was also a reminder of the need to preserve the integrity of creation.

Merkel emphasized the German obligation to protect the integrity of the state of Israel. The German government is also striving for progress in the peace effort. Merkel's government supports a two-state-solution. This requires compromises on both sides, she said.

As the chancellor explained, a task force in the Foreign Office is working hard to bring light into the fate of a German Christian family abducted in Yemen in mid-June. Every effort was made to find out where the parents and their three children are and how they can be set free, said Merkel. She expressed her respect for volunteers helping to alleviate human suffering abroad.

One person's cult is another's true religion

From Falun Gong to the Jehovah's Witnesses, the label 'cult' has been used to disparage, and sometimes to justify discrimination, around the world

Eileen Barker

The Guardian (29.05.2009) / HRWF Int. (02.06.2009) – Email: info@hrwf.net – Website: <http://www.hrwf.net> – In popular parlance, a cult is a religion I don't like; or it is a cult rather than a religion – either way, it is a group or movement of which I disapprove.

No one is likely to say that they themselves belong to a cult – what makes it a cult is that other people call it a cult. We know it's bad and wrong, but we don't know exactly what it is that is bad or wrong, which can vary quite dramatically between individuals, from place to place, and from time to time. The Chinese have banned Falun Gong as an evil cult, while in England it is generally accepted as a perfectly benign variation of a qigong spiritual exercise. In Russia one finds the Catholic church described as a cult; in Catholic Belgium a government report listed the Quakers and the YWCA (though not the YMCA) as cults – or, rather, sects, the concept of a cult being reserved in the French language for more acceptable religions.

There are those who provide lists of what it is that cults do which is criminal, antisocial or just plain bad (be it heretical beliefs, brainwashing, authoritarianism, involvement in political intrigues, financial skulduggery and/or sexual perversion). The trouble is that there is no behaviour found in the so-called cults that cannot also be found in mainstream religions.

This is certainly not to suggest that "cults" never do "bad things". On its files, Inform has information about well over a thousand groups that have been or might be called cults, and some of these have undoubtedly engaged in heinous criminal activities – but the vast majority have not. Their crimes tend, however, to be more visible than those of "normal" parishioners. The media are far more likely to report that a cult member has committed suicide than to mention that an Anglican has done so.

Sociologists sometimes use the term in a technical sense, usually signifying that a cult is a group in tension with the rest of society. However, because using a negative label can obfuscate rather than increase our knowledge of the group (as opposed to our knowledge of the labeller's values), we have tended to use the term "new religious movement" to describe the groups that became visible in the west during the past half century. But this label also has its problems; several of the movements deny (or it is denied by others) that they are religions, and some movements deny that they are new – indeed, while new to the west, several have existed in other parts of the world for centuries or even millennia.

But although it is impossible to generalise about the characteristics of so-called cults – every generalisation can be refuted by at least some of their number – the concept of newness can give us pointers as to some characteristics sometimes found in some of the movements. For example, first-generation converts tend to be more enthusiastic, even fanatic, than those born into their religion; charismatic founders are frequently unencumbered by rules and tradition, making them unpredictable and unaccountable to anyone (except, perhaps, God). New religions often make much sharper distinctions than older religions do between right and wrong, good and bad, as well as between "us" and "them". They do, however, tend to change more rapidly and fundamentally than more established religions.

Perhaps most significantly, throughout history new religions have been treated with fear and suspicion – they are, after all, challenging the status quo with their new beliefs and practices. Early Christians were thrown to the lions, Cathars were burned at the stake, and Jehovah's Witnesses were gassed at Auschwitz. Today, Krishna devotees are imprisoned in Kazakhstan, Falun Gong practitioners are being re-educated in China. And, one might argue, unpopular religions can be discriminated against with relative ease throughout the world when they are labelled, and thus made into, "cults".
