

Table of Contents

- ***German professor named UN's top expert on religious freedom***
-

German professor named UN's top expert on religious freedom

German human-rights expert Heiner Bielefeldt has been named the new UN Special Rapporteur on the Freedom of Religion or Belief. He starts the job in August

www.dw-world.de (21.06.2010) / HRWF (23.06.2010) - Website: <http://www.hrwf.net> - The 52-year-old German philosophy professor Heiner Bielefeldt was named to the post after Malaysian candidate Ambiga Sreenevasan was deemed unsuitable by several Muslim countries due to her sometimes critical stance on Islam.

Big shoes

Since September 2009, Bielefeldt has held the newly created interdisciplinary Chair for Human Rights and Human Rights Policy at the University of Erlangen-Nuremberg. He will be taking over the UN post from Pakistani lawyer Asma Jahangir, who is leaving at the end of her term.

Bielefeldt said Jahangir left him a pair of "especially large shoes" to fill. For example, he said, in the controversy over the Mohammed caricatures, Jahangir stuck to principles of "unbeatable clarity" on the issue of religious freedom. In addition, she clarified the "innate ties between religious freedom and freedom of expression."

Freedom to choose one's religion and world view is one of the basic foundations of human rights. But this freedom is breached around the world, so the UN Special Rapporteur for the Freedom of Religion is one of the 40 current special mandates of the UN Human Rights Council.

Challenges from weak regimes

Human rights are often abused in conjunction with the limitation or suppression of religious freedoms, "especially in regions with weak governments, where minorities are threatened and excluded," Bielefeldt said.

He sees particular challenges in countries like Iran, where religion is a major part of the state identity and regime. It is also relevant in Europe, where an attempt to create a culture led by Christian values comes into conflict with freedom of religion.

On the subject of integrating Muslims in Europe, Bielefeldt - who studied Catholic theology and history as well as philosophy - has published numerous books and papers.

His academic career contained stints at the universities of Tuebingen, Mannheim, and Heidelberg. In 2003, he was named founding director of the Institute of Human Rights in Berlin after that body was created by the German parliament, the Bundestag.

Pro-integration, anti-exclusion

In that post, he had to deal with the issue of the right of Europeans to criticize Islam, and warned against defamation and exclusion of Muslims in European society. He urged Muslims to use the opportunity offered by Germany's secular, constitutional state to integrate into European society.

There are some in the Human Rights Council who say they want to see Islam depicted as a cultural identity before which other religions and the principles of human rights would have to take a secondary position, but Bielefeldt's response to that is clear. He says: "Over and over again, the important thing is defending the freedom and rights of individuals."

Author: Ulrike Mast-Kirschning (jen)

Editor: Michael Lawton
