

Commitment to Freedom of Religion – Yesterday, Today, Tomorrow

Interviews with political and civil society experts



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At a glance

- › Twenty years ago freedom of religion was an issue which commanded very little public and media attention. Now, however, it is a matter of almost daily interest especially in connection with immigration. So states and societies have no choice but to address the challenges arising from increasing religious and ideological diversity.
- › Prior to the year 2000 churches and civil society organisations led the way in drawing attention to violations of religious freedom all over the world – and not just that suffered by Christian believers. Since then, however, politicians have shown greater determination to address the issue.
- › Members of the German Bundestag and the European Parliament who had a particular interest in freedom of religion fifteen or twenty years ago have in the meantime been entrusted with other tasks or have retired. The situation in churches and civil society organisations is similar. While the wealth of experience they accumulated may now be missed, parliaments, churches and civil society organisations have definitely not lost sight of the issue.
- › New challenges have arisen from the fact that right-wing populist and nationalist parties – Alternative für Deutschland in Germany, Rassemblement National in France, Lega Nord in Italy, PiS in Poland and FIDESZ in Hungary, to mention just a few – have seized on the issue for their own ends. However, there is reason to doubt that they are genuinely interested in freedom of religion and the concerns of Christians who suffer persecution and discrimination. On the contrary, the issue would appear to be a means of averting immigration in particular, although not exclusively, from the Islamic world.
- › In this publication interviews conducted with civil society experts and members of the German Bundestag and the European Parliament who have shown an active commitment to religious freedom both in their parliamentary work and elsewhere revisit their advocacy of freedom of religion over the past twenty years and assess the current challenges it faces.

Table of contents

Preface	6
Interview with Volker Kauder MP	10
Interview with Heribert Hirte MP	18
Interview with Gyde Jensen MP	22
Interview with Benjamin Strasser MP	25
Interview with Kai Gehring MP	28
Interview with Katja Voges	30
Interview with Dennis de Jong MEP (retd.)	33
Interview with Bas Belder MEP (retd.)	37
Interview with Margrete Auken MDEP	41
Interview with Arie de Pater	46

Interview with Susan Kerr	51
Interview with John Kinahan	57
Interview with Heiner Bielefeldt	65
Abbreviations	71
Interviewees	73

Preface

History and background

Article 18 of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights (UDHR) of 10 December 1948 states:

“Everyone has the right to freedom of thought, conscience and religion; this right includes freedom to change his religion or belief, and freedom, either alone or in community with others and in public or in private, to manifest his religion or belief in teaching, practice, worship and observance.”¹

Ever since the European Convention on Human Rights came into force in 1953 and the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights in 1976 freedom of religion or belief has been a vested fundamental and human right throughout the world.

Nowadays, freedom of religion is something we read and hear about on a regular basis. However, a review of the period covered by this publication – the years from 2000 to 2020 – makes it quite clear that the situation twenty years ago was very different. At that time religious freedom played hardly any role at all in the lives of a large swathe of the population in what was becoming an increasingly secular social environment. Large areas of Western Europe, including Germany, have witnessed a steady decline in the numbers of people who consider religion to be an important part of their lives and who regularly attend church.² This decline in religiousness has been accompanied by a shrinking awareness of the importance of freedom of religion. In Germany many people no longer appreciate that religious freedom is significant for them, too, because it protects their freedom of belief or religion, regardless of whether they are members of a religious community, agnostics or atheists.

Since the turn of the millennium, however, freedom of religion has become the subject of increasing public debate, especially in connection with immigration. Germany’s religious and ideological diversity means that the state and society must devote greater attention to the fresh tasks and issues confronting freedom of religion that have arisen as a result.

An additional consequence of this development has been that right-wing populist and nationalist parties have seized on this issue not just in Germany but throughout Europe. Alternative für Deutschland (AfD) in Germany, Rassemblement National in France, Lega Nord in Italy, Prawo i Sprawiedliwość (PiS) in Poland and Fidesz – Magyar Polgári Szövetség (FIDESZ) in Hungary are just a few examples. It is these parties in particular – apart from the European People’s Party (EPP) – which regularly table questions on the issue in the European Parliament. However, there is every reason to doubt whether they are genuinely concerned about freedom of religion and the situation of Christians suffering persecution and discrimination. The issue would appear to be rather a way of averting immigration in particular, although not exclusively, from the Islamic world.

Outside Europe, too, developments have made it clear how omnipresent the question of freedom of religion is and how urgently its practical implications must be addressed. One need only mention the terrorist attacks of 11 September 2001, the upheavals in the Arab world in the years after 2010 and the partly systematic discrimination and persecution of members of various religious communities throughout the world: members of indigenous religious communities in Latin America, in particular; Ahmadiyya in Pakistan; Shiites in Sunni-dominated countries; Muslims in Myanmar and in the People's Republic of China (Uigurs); Christians and Muslims in India as well as Christians in many countries in the Islamic world. The list could easily be extended. In the past five to ten years there has been a serious worsening of the situation facing certain religious communities in many countries, for instance in the Greater Middle East, India, Myanmar and the People's Republic of China.

In the light of these developments the following interviews examine how freedom of religion has been treated in the German Bundestag and the European Parliament in the period from about 2000 to the present day. Prior to the year 2000 churches and civil society organisations led the way in drawing attention to violations of religious freedom around the world – and not just that of Christian believers. Since then, however, politicians have shown greater determination in getting to grips with the issue. A major role was played in this respect by the setting up of the Committee on Human Rights and Humanitarian Aid in the German Bundestag in 1998 and of the Sub-committee on Human Rights of the European Parliament in 2004. As is the case at present, it was initially only a few members of parliament in the Bundestag and the European Parliament who took a keen interest in the topic.

Members of the German Bundestag and the European Parliament who had a particular interest in freedom of religion fifteen or twenty years ago have in the meantime been entrusted with other tasks or have retired. The situation in churches and civil society organisations is similar. While the wealth of experience accumulated by those concerned may now be sorely missed, parliaments, churches and civil society organisations have definitely not lost sight of the issue. Other politicians and civil society activists have meanwhile taken up the baton – some a long time ago, others just recently.

Interviews

To discuss the challenges facing the global promotion of religious freedom in its confrontation with both secularisation and right-wing populism the Konrad-Adenauer-Stiftung planned to hold a two-day workshop in the summer of 2020 together with the Aston Centre for Europe (ACE) in Birmingham, UK. This workshop was intended to consider how freedom of religion can be ensured a prominent place among the issues to which politicians and civil society in Germany and Europe turn their attention. The topic was to be debated both by active and former parliamentarians, who in course of their duties are or were actively involved with freedom of religion, and by representatives of civil society. The planned workshop had to be cancelled, however, due to the Covid-19 pandemic. The participants who had been invited to attend the debate as well as a number of other representatives of civil society of relevance were, therefore, asked to respond to questions that would have been raised during the workshop in the course of separate interviews.

We are fully aware that interviews are no substitute for a face-to-face conference dialogue, during which all the speakers, listeners and questioners take the floor and then face critical follow-up queries and comments. Nevertheless, we hope that this publication will give added momentum to the public and political discourse on global freedom of religion and ensure that the issue remains in the spotlight.

The publication collects thirteen interviews. The interviewees come from very different backgrounds and have varying degrees of experience. They include current and former members of the German Bundestag and the European Parliament as well as representatives of civil society and research workers. We put the same questions to all of them and asked them – mostly in the form of written questions and in some cases orally – to express their thoughts on how and why freedom of religion has become a political issue in Germany and Europe, how they see their own political role in this context, how they interpret the current challenges in the fight for religious freedom and what steps they consider necessarily to ensure that the issue receives political support. Not all the interviewees were able to answer all the questions. Not all of them were politically active twenty years ago or committed to the cause of religious freedom at that time. A number of them are so young that they were unable to contribute anything from their own experience to the situation of freedom of religion twenty years ago – reference has already been made to a baton change. Nevertheless, their involvement with religious freedom gives cause for hope and the expectation that their interest in the issue will not flag.

The search for interviewees confirmed past experience that it is predominantly Christian Democrats who have a political interest in this topic. It was no trouble at all to find members of the Christlich Demokratische Union Deutschlands/Christlich Soziale Union (CDU/CSU) parliamentary group in the German Bundestag who are regularly involved with questions about religious freedom and were happy to be interviewed, but it was far more difficult to find MPs from other parties. The fact that such a key human right does not engender more wide-ranging political interest must give cause for thought.

Another outcome of the search to find interviewees was that freedom of religion is a largely male-dominated issue. We had to make considerable efforts to boost the number of women among the interview partners. That raises issues which we cannot address in this publication, however. Around the world women are often more religious than men.³ So freedom of religion concerns women at least as much as it does men. How come that in Germany at least women are clearly less actively involved? Does this have something to do with the fact that religion – or at least some interpretations of it – is associated with restrictions on women's rights? Or is it simply a result of the consistently smaller numbers of women active in politics? These questions are certainly important for the wider debate and are therefore raised here at least.

Without wishing to pre-empt the outcome, the interviews make important findings in respect of an active commitment to religious freedom.

The interviewees make suggestions as to how awareness and encouragement of religious freedom as a political issue can be enhanced. There is great unanimity in the interviews that freedom of religion or belief is an individual human right which should

be enjoyed by the members of all communities of religion or belief. For that reason the contributors feel that collaboration between different religions and between religious, atheistic and agnostic organisations is necessary in order to generate greater public support for this human right. It is important, in their view, to explain to the public at large what freedom of religion encompasses and what it does not so as to counteract misunderstandings and stereotypes and foster an appreciation of what a life without or with only limited religious freedom really means. In this connection members of FDP (Freie Demokratische Partei) and Die Grünen emphasised that an active commitment to global freedom of religion can only be credible if its exercise is a matter of serious debate within Germany itself.

All the interviewees stress the interdependence of various human rights, including the right to freedom of religion, which is closely intertwined with other civil rights (e. g. freedom of expression and assembly), social rights (e. g. to education and adequate housing) and group-related human rights (e. g. women's and children's rights). Some of the interviewees were at pains to point out that the protection of religious freedom is not so much a matter of religion as of the protection of human rights as well as of the defence of freedom against authoritarian trends. However, there was no agreement among the interview partners as to whether freedom of religion as such should be highlighted, whether it should be prioritised in the context of international cooperation or whether it should rather form part of a more wide-ranging human rights policy. On the one hand, they said a pronounced emphasis on freedom of religion was necessary, because otherwise there was the danger of it being subordinated to other human rights, particularly in a secularised society. On the other hand, they felt that singling out freedom of religion for special attention entailed the risk of helping to undermine the overall concept of human rights if it enabled various human rights to be played off against each other. Both arguments have something in their favour. The question remains as to how freedom of religion can be promoted without it coming into conflict with other human rights or being subordinated to them. Kai Gehring of Die Grünen in the German Bundestag makes an interesting suggestion in his interview: To avoid the latter happening he says that social bridges must be built which will enable defenders of religious freedom to be active on behalf of the rights of women or of LGBTIQ rights and vice versa. This in itself shows that a commitment to freedom of religion remains an ongoing challenge.

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Interview with Volker Kauder MP

**Member of the German Bundestag since 1990,
CDU/CSU parliamentary group**

Why have German and European politicians started to pay increasing attention to global freedom of religion since the start of the new millennium?

Volker Kauder MP: Long before the new millennium began there was increasing international awareness of the sometimes desperate plight of a number of religious groups. As far back as 1986, for example, a Special Rapporteur on Religious Intolerance was appointed by the United Nations Commission on Human Rights (UNCHR) following the adoption by the United Nations General Assembly (UNGA) in 1981 of a Declaration on the Elimination of All Forms of Intolerance and Discrimination Based on Religion or Belief. In the year 2000 the UN Commission on Human Rights decided to change the title of that mandate to Special Rapporteur on Freedom of Religion or Belief so that the official designation would reflect the urgent need to protect the right of every individual to freedom of religion, to freely change one's religion and to abstain from any religious belief.

At about the same time, a convention of several EU heads of state and government and parliamentarians – responding to an initiative of the German Federal Government – drew up a Draft Charter of Fundamental Rights of the European Union.

However, a great deal had to happen before an active commitment to freedom of religion became an overarching political concern – and even now there is still room to strengthen that commitment.

The many instances of political escalation in which religion has been misused as a means of legitimisation – for example in the conflicts in the Middle East, Iraq and Afghanistan – have made the international community more aware of the considerable potential for conflict that arises from a lack of religious freedom. The increase in religiously motivated violence, not least religiously motivated terrorism, has further underlined the urgent need to tackle the issue. The terrorist attacks of 11 September 2001, the establishment of the terrorist militia Islamic State and the warlike conflicts associated with it have had a major impact on the role of politics in general, security policy in particular and links with the instrumentalisation of religious freedom. The conflicts have undeniably taken on a religious dimension and politicians have had no choice but to address radical religious fundamentalism and associated violence against religious dissidents and religious minorities.

The deliberate oppression and discrimination of Christians and other religious minorities in countries such as China, Indonesia, India and Nigeria remain major concerns for politicians around the world. It is not only the Greater Middle East which has experienced a radicalisation and nationalisation of religion. In India, too, there has been an increase in violent attacks on Christians and Muslims since the turn of the millennium which continue up to the present day. The so-called Hindutva ideology calls for the union of nation, culture and religion, which results in large-scale suppression of all the population and religious groups which do not fit into that union. This ideology is gaining new adherents all the while and has gained a foothold in parliament thanks to the politicians who support it.

Moreover, the increase in migration, globalisation and refugee movements has led to a growth in multi-national and multi-religious societies, which makes integration and mutual tolerance essential for productive social cohesion. The European community of values has realised that the establishment of freedom of religion around the world – and wherever it already exists the preservation of such freedom – is a key element of dialogue and peacekeeping.

Which individuals or what circumstances prompted consideration of freedom of religion?

Volker Kauder MP: It is well known that authoritarian governments and extremist groups, whose numbers have regrettably increased in the recent past, pose serious threats to religious freedom. This, in turn, has an impact on individual lives, national and international security and humanitarian concerns of a more general nature. The disastrous situation confronting religious minorities such as the Yazidis and the Rohingya, who in some cases have experienced genocide, has made tackling the issue unavoidable. Religious oppression restricts human freedom. This, in turn, leads to instability, encourages extremism, generates refugee flows and mass migrations and at the same time threatens other fundamental rights such as freedom of expression, the press and assembly.

To counteract that oppression German and European politicians and their counterparts around the world wished to make their position clear and send out unmistakable signals. I myself raised this issue at an early stage and took a clear stance on freedom of religion in the various political positions to which I was appointed. I was instrumental in bringing together members of parliament from the CDU/CSU parliamentary group in the German Bundestag to form the Stephanus Circle, which has since made religious freedom the focus of its work and has been a driving force in the relevant debates over the past twenty years.

An International Panel of Parliamentarians for Freedom of Religion or Belief (IPPFoRB) was set up in 2014 as a platform for global exchange designed to expand networking among active parliamentarians with expertise in the field. IPPFoRB promotes international relations and organises specific activities intended to draw attention to existing concerns and to initiate changes, for instance in the case of religiously motivated hate speech in social media. In the recent past, political awareness of the situation of members of different religions suffering discrimination and persecution has been accom-

panied by a very active commitment on the part of various NGOs such as Kirche in Not, missio, Open Doors and the Evangelical Alliance.

The negotiations on Turkey's accession to the EU have undoubtedly sharpened the awareness of Europe as a federation committed to values, civil rights and liberties and human rights. Key among these is freedom of religion, which Turkey refuses to accept, however.

What practical forms exactly has this increased political attention taken?

Volker Kauder MP: Freedom of religion has been placed in a broader political context. An important milestone was certainly the Bundestag resolution of a motion tabled by the Christian-Liberal coalition in December 2010. This was the first time that a commitment to freedom of religion was highlighted as a key aspect of German foreign policy.

In August 2018 a new Religion and Foreign Policy Department was set up within the Federal Foreign Office. Similar departments are in place in other European countries, among them Finland, the Netherlands, Austria and Switzerland. This new department contributed to both the content and the organisation of the 10th World Conference of Religions for Peace, a coalition of representatives from the world's religions. The aim of this conference, which was held at Lindau on Lake Constance in Germany in 2019, was to enhance the potential of religions for peace by means of a cross-religious agenda for the assumption of responsibility. The door was thus opened to dialogue not only between states but also between individual sections of society, to which the religious communities belong.

In my time as chairman of the CDU/CSU parliamentary group in the Bundestag I worked to install a Federal Government Commissioner for Global Freedom of Religion and I am pleased to say that this position has in the meantime been set up in the Federal Ministry for Economic Cooperation and Development. The commissioner is mandated to submit regular reports on global freedom of religion for all confessions.

Last but not least, the office of the EU Special Envoy for the Promotion of Freedom of Religion or Belief is a major achievement brought about by the dedicated work of many activists. Such crucial mandates must be made permanent.

Similarly, the founding of IPPFoRB is a sign of the growing global attention that is being paid to this issue in international politics.

Has interest in the issue been present to an equal degree in all the parties represented in the Bundestag?

Volker Kauder MP: In large, broad-based institutions such as the Bundestag and the European Parliament there are varying degrees of interest and involvement in matters relating to freedom of religion. Some hold that other human rights should be given preference over freedom of religion. Most of the violations of this freedom are initially seen as infringements of "more general" human rights, such as freedom of expres-

sion, gender equality and the right to physical integrity. It goes without saying that all human rights are interdependent. However, during the many years I have worked for freedom of religion it has become clear that freedom in general cannot prevail wherever there is a lack of religious freedom. In this respect minorities, the discriminated and the persecuted require special support. The CDU/CSU parliamentary group has increasingly raised this issue in the government coalition negotiations and in everyday political business. In individual cases, such as that of Asia Bibi, our common endeavours have had an effect.

Insofar as there was an interest in freedom of religion, was this limited to individual MPs or were entire parliamentary groups interested and made that clear through their active commitment?

Volker Kauder MP: There was certainly unity as regards this issue in the CDU/CSU group in the Bundestag. After all, it was from the ranks of the parliamentary group that we founded the Stephanus Circle in 2010. In other groups there are individual members who are both interested and active. However, the CDU/CSU group was and is undoubtedly the leading advocate of religious freedom.

Has there been a clear understanding of the importance of the question in state institutions (ministries, etc.) from the beginning?

Volker Kauder MP: These institutions have paid increasing attention to the issue over the years. When the first debates were held there was little understanding of the relevance of freedom of religion. A major step forward was the development of existing positions and areas of responsibility along with the creation of new ones which can, firstly, achieve a great deal as regards thematic analysis and, secondly, foster cooperation between individual institutes and actors. In addition to establishing the position of a Federal Government Commissioner for Global Freedom of Religion, the Federal Ministry for Economic Cooperation and Development has set up a task force on values, religion and development which pools the findings of the different ministerial working groups, integrates thematically appropriate development policy schemes into an integrated overall system and devises new strategies and concepts. In 2016 the Federal Government published a Report on the Global Situation of Freedom of Religion or Belief, which had long been called for by the CDU/CSU group in the Bundestag. It is vital to go on conducting such broad-based and well-founded analyses and to make the results accessible to the public.

Has interest concentrated on the issue as such (freedom of religion as a human right for all) or was it focused initially on a specific group suffering discrimination (e. g. Baha'is, Christians, Muslims, Jehovah's Witnesses, etc.)?

Volker Kauder MP: Whenever certain disadvantaged or persecuted groups face acute threats they naturally become the focus of attention. During the havoc wreaked by ISIS this was true of both the Yazidis and the Christians in northern Iraq. At the same time it is clear that a commitment to freedom of religion is only credible if broad-

based, preferably international and inter-religious alliances are formed which advocate religious freedom for all and are not more closely involved with certain groups than they are with others. Any involvement in Iran, for instance, must be geared to both the massively oppressed Baha'is as well as the Christians or Christian converts living there. Moreover, it is essential not to lose sight of inner-islamic conflicts, such as those between Sunnis and Shiites. Everyone must have the individual right to believe and live in accordance with their convictions, provided the civil rights and liberties of others are not violated.

What was or is your role in this process? In what ways do you advocate global freedom of religion?

Volker Kauder MP: For me as a Christian it is important to take political action based on the Christian concept of humanity, an important element of which – apart from equality and individual human dignity – is freedom. As a member of parliament in the German Bundestag I have advocated religious freedom for decades now and have been able to express my views in detail in numerous conferences, interviews, articles, contributions to books, and monographies. As chairman of the CDU/CSU parliamentary group, in my current positions of responsibility in Bundestag committees and inside the parliamentary group during discussions on values, religious freedom and opposition to the persecution of Christians I have always been at pains to raise awareness of this important issue and to help bring about improvements through practical measures. That includes several bills and resolutions in the German Bundestag, cooperation on coalition agreements as well as individual cases such as that of Asia Bibi. To that must be added the many journeys I have undertaken to relevant regions and the numerous conversations I have had with those affected, politicians and local dignitaries. This has regularly made it clear to me that the public must be constantly informed of the distress the victims suffer. This indicates to the victims that their suffering is not a matter of indifference to other countries and that they are not forgotten. At the same time the message to those in positions of political responsibility is that their actions are subject to critical international monitoring. The Stephanus Circle I helped to set up does a great deal of valuable work in this respect. At the international, inter-cultural and inter-religious level I was able to help promote the foundation of IPPFoRB, which in the meantime has grown considerably and established many local platforms. I hope that, thanks to the valuable cooperation I have enjoyed with many other members of parliament and the great dedication of the Konrad-Adenauer-Stiftung and its staff, I have succeeded in laying the ground for future generations of active parliamentarians to work for the globally guaranteed implementation of Article 18.

What do you regard as particular successes or outstanding failures? Can you give any examples?

Volker Kauder MP: In its latest annual report on freedom of religion or belief the Pew Research Center noted a decline in inter-religious conflicts and tensions over the past few years. This illustrates the success of the promotion of inter-religious dialogue and of the close collaboration with the different religious communities to encourage peace work as well as a commitment to human rights in general and freedom of religion in

particular. However, the report also revealed that in 52 countries – China, India and Russia, for example – certain religious communities face harsh to extreme repressive measures. Systematic oppressive and restrictive administrative requirements and even laws favouring certain religious communities over others make it impossible for many people living in these countries to live their faith freely. So there is still urgent need for action.

Development cooperation processes in recent years have demonstrated the great influence religious systems and associated cultural traditions have on social systems. Assuming they are used to positive effect, such systems can help to create a common value basis and thus enhance sustainable development. On the negative side, however, religion can also contribute to the exacerbation of conflicts. The promotion of an inter-religious dialogue which values cultural and religious diversity must, therefore, become a firm part of development strategies. An appreciation of this has already found expression in the slogan “religion matters” and has thus gained more and more ground.

Another outstanding success was the provision of a special immigration quota for over a thousand mostly Yazidi, but also Muslim women and girls, their children and a number of men. The federal state of Baden-Württemberg, which was later joined by other federal states, took the initiative in ensuring the transfer of people under special threat as well as in providing care and intensive support for them. In addition the Federal Republic of Germany took part in stabilisation projects in Iraq that involved building schools, installing infrastructure and guaranteeing basic services. This active commitment demonstrated that it is possible to simultaneously combat the causes of migration while taking in those seeking protection and that close cooperation between different institutions holds out the prospect of success. A great deal of more help could be provided by the continuation and extension of comparable projects and the provision of funding by the Federal Government and the federal states.

Dealing with Christian converts from Iran and other countries and their deportation to their home country is an open-ended and laborious process. Iran does not recognise the right to conversion, i. e. to change one's religion and engage in missionary work. On the contrary, conversion entails severe penalties under Sharia law. The deportation of such converts from Germany is not only extremely dangerous for the persons concerned but is also ominous for external perceptions of the process. It indicates that the German authorities are concerned considering that the guarantee of fundamental rights in the countries concerned presents no problems. There is a need here for uniform test criteria and case law as well as close interaction between the Federal Office for Migration and Refugees (BAMF) and the administrative courts.

Would you agree with the assessment that freedom of religion has attracted less interest in the past few years? If so, what explanation would you offer?

Volker Kauder MP: Some people, especially those of a laicist persuasion, fail to acknowledge the crucial importance of religious freedom. They argue that most conflicts are not initially and specifically motivated by religion but by other human rights violations such as the disregard for freedom of thought and expression, socio-structural prob-

lems and a lack of gender equality. The interconnected nature of all human rights means that the boundaries between them can become blurred. However, precisely because of this interdependence there is also a secular interest in the issue, especially since the human right of freedom of religion incorporates the rejection of all faith as well as the right to conversion. Since many people are not aware of this fact there are repeated efforts to block a substantial discussion. You cannot, therefore, talk of a “clash” of human rights. On the contrary, they are mutually reinforcing. In view of the frequent abuse of religion for other interests and its great influence on other human rights and the personal development of the faithful, there is a need in particular for attention and an untiring commitment to global freedom of religion as an individual right.

Do you see any risk of the issue being taken up and exploited by the extreme right? If so, why?

Volker Kauder MP: There is a real risk of this happening. Some groups aim to exploit religion and religious freedom for their own ends, but they deny their universal character and are not prepared, for instance, to grant equal freedom in this respect to Muslims living in Germany. In 2018, for example, the Alternative für Deutschland (AfD) parliamentary group in the Bundestag tabled a motion to impose stricter sanctions on the persecution of Christians. The motion included a demand for sanctions against majority Muslim and in some cases socialist countries. Their proposals ranged from restrictions on trade and the cancellation of development aid to the installation of cultural promotion programmes reserved exclusively for Christians. All the other parliamentary groups emphatically dissociated themselves from this motion and its underlying intention of enforcing “religious freedom” for Christians only. The political objective of the motion was clear. It was to use Christianity as a cover to stir up opinion against other religions and states and to legitimise the party’s own exclusionary attitude by describing religious freedom as an illiberal right. As many members of the Bundestag, including those in the Stephanus Circle, made clear yet again, freedom of religion as an individual right means exactly the opposite. No fundamental religious belief must be played off against another or preferential protection given to it. Solidarity and a commitment to freedom of religion must apply to everyone in equal measure.

What needs to be done to ensure greater political support for freedom of religion?

Volker Kauder MP: It is essential that existing alliances between politicians, NGOs and individual religious communities – including atheistic and agnostic groups – should be consolidated, mutual cooperation extended and practical steps agreed and implemented. For that to happen, not only Germany but the EU as a whole must be seen to be acting in a united manner as a firm community of values. Making such essential positions as that of the EU Special Commissioner permanent would be a step in the right direction. The many officials already at work in Germany, Europe and around the world would benefit greatly from increased networking. At the same time systematic public relations work is needed in order to bring existing problems and current developments to the notice of the international community. Cooperation with the media and the press is essential to that end.

In the recent past, important steps have been taken with regard to global freedom of religion. However, there are still too many countries and areas in which this essential fundamental right has not yet been guaranteed and people sometimes face life-threatening oppression and punishment because of their beliefs. Too many politicians do not have this issue high enough on their agenda. I hope very much that prominent advocates from politics and society will continue to devote themselves to this key issue in the future.

Interview with Heribert Hirte MP

Member of the German Bundestag since 2013, Chairman of the Stephanus Circle in the CDU/CSU parliamentary group

Why have German and European politicians started to pay increasing attention to global freedom of religion since the start of the new millennium?

Heribert Hirte MP: Throughout the 90s there was only little perception of the problems arising from religious intolerance, the persecution of Christians and discrimination on the grounds of religion. That appears completely inexplicable after the massacres which took place in Srebrenica, for example, right on our own doorstep. Regrettably it took even more negative events after that before freedom of religion as such became an issue. One such event was 11 September 2001. Of significance is the increasing attention now being paid to “foreign policy” in Germany as a “soft-power” nation. Another reason is that the Internet makes it easier for everyone to follow what is happening outside Europe. And they can see for themselves that freedom of religion is a huge and complex issue.

Which individuals or what circumstances prompted consideration of religious freedom?

Heribert Hirte MP: I think certain individuals have played a major role. First and foremost Volker Kauder, who has been and remains a passionate advocate of religious freedom. Others I would mention include Johannes Singhammer, Claudia Lücking-Michel, Ute Granold, Wolfgang Thierse and Volker Beck. Obviously, the active commitment of numerous NGOs and other organisations has had a major impact, but it’s impossible to mention them all here, so I won’t try.

Have there been political developments which proved beneficial?

Heribert Hirte MP: I said a moment ago that fatal events paved the way for the focus on freedom of religion. This was accompanied by a distortion of the issues at stake, however, as a result of which freedom of religion became part and parcel of debates on security and identity. That explains why there is so much talk about the alleged threat of Islamisation. As a result we lose sight of the potential for peace that religions harbour. Of course, politicians should steer clear of theological debates or judgments. However, dialogue with religious communities, which are still key civil society players

in most countries around the world, makes it possible to enhance understanding and enables a lot to be achieved.

I personally took a differentiated view of Turkey's accession to the EU. The main arguments were over state structures, the size of the country and its infrastructure – including in relation to the existing Member States – plus the initially latent and now blatantly apparent authoritarian power structure that Erdogan has built up.

What practical forms exactly has this increased political attention taken?

Heribert Hirte MP: Well, just take a look at the large number of talk shows in which Islam has been discussed. And far too often with very little empathy being shown, which I regret. Politically there is no doubt which party has profited most from these discussions. On the other hand, there are positive examples as well. The young girls abducted in Nigeria, Asia Bibi, the fate of the Rohingya and other individual stories have met with a wave of compassion. Overall, however, the going is tough.

Has interest in the issue been present to an equal degree in all the parties represented in the Bundestag?

Heribert Hirte MP: It's hard to make a generally valid statement covering the past twenty years, but I will try nonetheless (*laughs*). Awareness of the issue has increased within the CDU/CSU parliamentary group over the years, beginning with the questions we put to the government in parliament when we were still in opposition right up to our backing for a Federal Government Commissioner for Freedom of Religion, a position now occupied by Markus Grübel. Our eyes have gradually been opened to the problems of other non-Christian religions and beliefs. Our group is now the driving force behind the human right to freedom of religion.

For years now we have seen the importance of this issue dwindle in the ranks of the SPD (Social Democrats), who are our partners in the coalition government. The tendency I have observed is for freedom of religion to be treated solely as a factor of integration – or an obstacle to it – here in Germany. That applies to Die Grünen and Die Linke, although Die Grünen are beginning to move on the issue. In general, those politically more on the left only recognise freedom of religion as a political issue if it relates to minorities. That narrows things down to just the structural hurdles that Muslim migrants face here in Germany, for example – and there is no denying that these hurdles do exist. But, from their point of view, religious matters are a taboo subject among the German population, and at the international level, too, people tend to be largely blind to the issue.

Insofar as there was an interest in religious freedom, was this limited to individual MPs or were entire parliamentary groups interested and made that clear through their active commitment?

Heribert Hirte MP: The Stephanus Circle rests on broad support within the parliamentary group and from our MPs. Of course there is always more you can do. (*laughs*)

Has there been a clear understanding of the importance of the freedom of religion in state institutions (ministries, etc.) from the beginning?

Heribert Hirte MP: I am pleased that this legislative period has seen the establishment of a Department of Foreign Policy and Religion at the Federal Foreign Office, although I know there are some problems of its own making it has to tackle at the moment. On the other hand, Markus Grübel's position is relatively new.

Has interest concentrated on the issue as such (religious freedom as a human right) or was it focused initially on a specific group suffering discrimination (e. g. Baha'is, Christians, Muslims, Jehovah's Witnesses, etc.)?

Heribert Hirte MP: The Stephanus Circle initially focused on Christian groups who were affected. The intention, first of all, was to give their voice more weight in Berlin. But we quickly approached groups of all other faiths as well and in doing so came across the research and discourse being conducted by Heiner Bielefeldt, for example. That, of course, is part of our job: to examine real problems and come up with effective solutions to them.

What was or is your role in this process? In what ways do you advocate global freedom of religion?

Heribert Hirte MP: We are a mouthpiece – straight from the Nineveh Plains, Faisalabad or Chibok into the German Bundestag, if you like. We bridge distances. The reports given by victims make murder, threats and repression tangible. They make human rights crimes visible. Apart from that, we encourage international networking – in my own case through participation in the International Panel of Parliamentarians for Freedom of Religion or Belief (IPPFoRB). And we also make it clear to others – to victims, dedicated NGOs and the people supporting them – that the German Bundestag is watching them.

What do you regard as particular successes or outstanding failures? Can you give any examples?

Heribert Hirte MP: The maintenance of the Special Envoy in the European Commission, the commitment to the issue in the coalition agreement, the position taken up by Markus Grübel and the associated report on religious freedom all constitute tangible successes. I would refrain from talking about failures, but I do frequently wish the German public were more aware of the freedom of religion.

Would you agree with the assessment that religious freedom has attracted less interest in the past few years? If so, what explanation would you offer?

Heribert Hirte MP: No, I wouldn't agree, but as in politics in general and on every individual issue we have rivals for public attention. In social media we compete with the

other political parties, but also with 1. FC Köln football club and “Bibi’s Beauty Palace”. The clash you refer to is first and foremost about the priority given to certain issues, like those I have just referred to or among the other parties. The secular world view is making advances primarily in Western countries, but things are different in Eastern Europe, for example. To say nothing of the rest of the world. And perhaps I can just add that human rights are attracting more and more attention in Germany. Our particular circle is committed to ensure that freedom of religion benefits from this trend.

Do you see any risk of the issue being taken up and exploited by the extreme right? If so, why?

Heribert Hirte MP: No, none whatsoever. After all, that would entail them proposing constructive solutions and dealing in a differentiated way with the varying situations in Pakistan, Syria and other countries, for example. Those on the right divide the members of society up on the basis of their religious affiliation. Why? So that they can stir up fears, for instance of the “immigration of evil religions”. They construct malicious contrasts, “us” against “them” – the classical populist strategy. If you’re looking for a headline, then the extreme right “abuses” freedom of religion. In general, these parties do not have the slightest interest in human rights.

What needs to be done to ensure greater political support for freedom of religion?

Heribert Hirte MP: There needs to be a clear commitment in our foreign policy agenda, for example. Let us declare “freedom of religion” and, above all, the prevention of persecution on the grounds of religious beliefs to be a condition or at least a prerequisite for international cooperation. As it regards our society as a whole, I would like to see an end to this latent or blatant arrogance about freedom of religion. In many countries it is a question of life or death. It is a human right. We should not close our eyes to the suffering, the crimes and the fate of millions of people just because freedom of religion is supposedly not a matter of urgency in our country.

Interview with Gyde Jensen MP

**Member of the German Bundestag since 2017,
FDP parliamentary group**

In what ways do you actively advocate religious freedom?

Gyde Jensen MP: Freedom of religion or belief is a human right. So for me an active commitment to global freedom of religion is of special significance. As chair of the Human Rights Committee in the Bundestag I can raise awareness in the media and urge the government to take practical action. Occasionally there are prominent cases which serve to illustrate not only the fate of the individuals involved but also that of many of their fellow countrymen and believers. Asia Bibi, a Christian woman in Pakistan, is a case in point. Or if new laws dramatically worsen the situation of some religious groups in certain countries, as happened with the Baha'is in Iran early this year. I regularly meet ambassadors from countries in which the human rights situation is far from satisfactory, not to say disastrous, especially when it comes to freedom of religion. In addition, we repeatedly call for freedom of religion or belief in committee statements and open letters as well as in all-party parliamentary initiatives.

What do you regard as particular successes or outstanding failures? Can you give any examples?

Gyde Jensen MP: That's difficult to say in this field. My own active commitment is at best a drop in the ocean. I'm involved in diplomatic talks and make public demands and that can perhaps help to nudge things in a positive direction. The cultural genocide inflicted on the Uigurs in Xinjiang is a far from trivial matter. As an opposition politician and committee chair it's not just my job but also my own personal interest to constantly remind the Federal Government that the Chinese government is attempting to brainwash these people out of their religion, as it were. For political reasons the Federal Government often looks the other way when it hears about human rights violations, including violations of religious freedom, in China. I think it's due in part at least to my own persistence and that of my fellow parliamentarians that the Federal Government is now more open in its criticism of these human rights violations – there's a clear trend you can see in this respect over the past three years. But, to be honest, that's not enough for me. I will continue to advocate, in particular, personal sanctions against Communist Party officials who are responsible for these human rights violations in Xinjiang. Examples of encouraging social developments in connection with freedom of religion, in which I am not personally involved, are projects like the House of One in Berlin.

I would like to see many more of these inter-religious meeting places and platforms for discussion both in Germany and elsewhere in the world.

Would you agree with the assessment that freedom of religion has attracted less interest in the past few years? If so, what explanation would you offer?

Gyde Jensen MP: Ever since I have been an MP in the Bundestag and very closely involved with human rights issues – from 2017 on – I haven't felt that interest in religious freedom has tailed off. On the contrary. We know that freedom of religion or belief is diminishing around the world. That's obvious to us from the reports we receive and I notice it in my daily work, too. Which is why the subject is now attracting greater attention again. That definitely has something to do with the fact that over the past few years we have seen terrible ethnic and religiously motivated persecution of huge social groups – the genocide perpetrated on hundreds of thousands of Rohingya in Myanmar, for instance, and the cultural and demographic genocide of over a million Uigurs in the Chinese province of Xinjiang. On the other hand, we know, for example, that Christians in many Islamic countries are more or less outlawed, while in many African countries there have been mass murders of Christians, for instance in Nigeria. In New Zealand a right-wing extremist carried out a terrorist attack on a mosque, while in France Islamists executed worshippers in churches. In the past few years the experience in Western societies has been that time and again freedom of religion or belief can be limited not just by state legislation but within society itself. For instance in Germany when Jews wearing a kippah or going to the synagogue need to keep a lookout for violent anti-Semites on the streets. When refugees, who are atheists, converts or members of a religious minority, are threatened by their fellow countrymen here in Germany. Or when Muslims are racially insulted and denigrated in our parliament – a breach of a taboo which opens up a breeding ground on which not only hate and smear campaigns flourish but violence too. We must make it clear that developments of this kind also have to do with freedom of religion or belief. Legislative solutions are not an adequate response. Federal Government reports on freedom of religion or belief are not enough, even though they are very important for other reasons. Ultimately it is up to us as a society to change things.

Do you see any risk of the issue being taken up and exploited by the extreme right? If so, why?

Gyde Jensen MP: Yes, I do see that risk. From the very beginning the right-wing populists aimed to present themselves as defenders of the “Christian-Jewish West”. There is a debate going on in Germany at the moment about the political dimension of religion – specifically about political Islam. A major challenge we face is to conduct an open and honest discussion and at the same time remain focused and unbiased and not allow ourselves to be distracted by the dubious simplifications and polemics of the right. At the same time the extreme right clearly exploits the global persecution of Christians for its own political ends. The numbers of victims of different faiths are set off against each other. That is a perfidious way of using the very real threat posed by the worldwide decline in freedom of religion and belief to put people of different faiths at each other's throats. That doesn't help us in the slightest in our political work and our efforts to resolve the problem.

What needs to be done to ensure greater political support for religious freedom?

Gyde Jensen MP: As I pointed out just now, we must make it clear that freedom of religion is not just about blasphemy laws and so on but also about the scope for freedom of religion or belief in society. That lends the matter a completely new urgency in our Western societies. I think it's important that there is discussion of this issue especially here in Germany so that different beliefs can be reflected in political representation. Another important aspect of freedom of religion or belief – especially in our secular Western countries – is the ability to exercise the right to negative religious freedom. By that I mean the freedom for atheists and agnostics not to believe. That must play a part in the debate, too. Their right of freedom of religion may not be under threat here in Germany but that is certainly very much the case in other countries around the world. From my point of view, the most important foundation for freedom of religion or belief is a secular state which guarantees the conditions for freedom of religion or belief but apart from that does not intervene in religious issues. That is one of the key things we in the Federal Republic of Germany should focus on in our global fight for freedom of religion and freedom of speech, for instance in development cooperation and inter-religious dialogue.

Interview with Benjamin Strasser MP

**Member of the German Bundestag since 2017,
FDP parliamentary group**

Why have German and European politicians started to pay increasing attention to global religious freedom since the start of the new millennium?

Benjamin Strasser MP: The attacks on 11 September 2001 in New York and elsewhere sent a message to the Western world and its liberal democracies that they were under threat from Islamist terror. That quickly put the spotlight on Islam as a religion and then on the increasing number of countries in which Sharia had become the basic rule of law (e. g. Afghanistan) or where parts of the national territories were under Sharia law (e. g. Nigeria), because supporters of Islamist terror had been identified there. Consequently, the political debate in Germany and Europe encompassed not just the relationship between Christianity and Islam but also global religious freedom.

Which individuals or what circumstances prompted consideration of religious freedom?

Benjamin Strasser MP: I have already mentioned one decisive moment. But the start of EU accession negotiations with Turkey might well have been another occasion for conservative circles, in particular, to put the issue of freedom of religion on the table.

What practical forms exactly has this increased political attention taken?

Benjamin Strasser MP: The issue moved from the arts pages to the political sections of many newspapers and was taken up in one or the other political talk show.

Was there an equal degree of interest in freedom of religion in all the parties represented in the German Bundestag and the European Parliament (both as a matter of principle and as regards specific individuals and religious communities affected by violations of the precept of religious freedom)?

Benjamin Strasser MP: In my opinion, conservative circles were among the first to advocate greater religious freedom for Christians especially in predominantly Muslim countries. However, the Freie Demokratische Partei (FDP) has also advocated free-

dom of religion as part of its commitment to human rights worldwide. The campaign for a free Tibet waged by such prominent Freie Demokraten politicians as Otto Graf Lambsdorff and others led to the People's Republic of China closing down the office of the liberal Friedrich-Naumann-Stiftung in 2008, for instance.

Insofar as there was an interest in freedom of religion, was this limited to individual MPs or were entire parliamentary groups interested in the issue and made that clear through their active commitment?

Benjamin Strasser MP: The entire FDP parliamentary group was interested.

Has there been a clear understanding of the importance of the question in state institutions (ministries, etc.) from the beginning?

Benjamin Strasser MP: As a youngish person – I'm 33 years old – I'm not in a position to judge.

Has interest concentrated on the issue as such (religious freedom as a human right for all) or was it focused initially on a specific group suffering discrimination (e. g. Baha'is, Christians, Muslims, Jehovah's Witnesses, etc.)?

Benjamin Strasser MP: In my view it initially focused on individual groups such as Christians and the Tibetan people.

What was or is your role in this process? In what ways do you advocate global freedom of religion?

Benjamin Strasser MP: As spokesperson on religious policy for the FDP parliamentary group in the German Bundestag I regard freedom of religion as a fundamental human right. Freedom of religion or belief is coming under increasing pressure worldwide. It's time for people in Germany and Europe to redouble efforts to strengthen multilateral organisations advocating global freedom of religion or belief and respect for human rights. After all, defenders of these freedoms also protect human rights. But in Germany and Europe, too, there is still a great deal to be done. Anti-Semitic, anti-Christian and anti-Islamic activities are on the increase in Germany and Europe. We must counteract this trend and fight back.

What do you regard as particular successes or outstanding failures? Can you give any examples?

Benjamin Strasser MP: I haven't been religious policy spokesman long enough to give an answer.

Would you agree with the assessment that religious freedom has attracted less interest in the past few years? If so, what explanation would you offer?

Benjamin Strasser MP: There is certainly still a keen interest, but issues such as the global increase in nationalism, climate change and migration have come more to the fore.

Do you see any risk of the issue being taken up and exploited by the extreme right? If so, why?

Benjamin Strasser MP: The issue is only ever taken up if it promises right-wing extremists short-term election gains. There is no real, long-term interest in it at all. Genuine religious freedom would mean Germany allowing more mosques to be built in the country. The extremists quickly lose interest in freedom of religion when that aspect is raised.

What needs to be done to ensure greater political support for religious freedom?

Benjamin Strasser MP: Live religious freedom credibly in your own country.

Interview with Kai Gehring MP

**Member of the German Bundestag since September 2005,
Bündnis 90/Die Grünen parliamentary group**

In what ways do you actively advocate freedom of religion?

Kai Gehring MP: For years now, I have been clearly opposed as a member of the German Bundestag to any discrimination and persecution of believers, religious communities, religious minorities and non-denominationalists. In my speeches and questions in parliament I have repeatedly referred to the Universal Declaration of Human Rights and the Grundgesetz (Basic Law or constitution) in Germany, both of which grant protection to all discriminated groups.

Moreover, it is my personal conviction that a credible human-rights-based foreign policy begins at home. Anyone who puts Christianity or any other religion above all else here in Germany will find it hard to take a credible stand against the discrimination of Christians in other countries. Of particular concern is the increasing number of attacks on mosques, synagogues, Jews and Moslems in this country.

My response is to take an active stance against any form of persecution and discrimination both at home and abroad. I use my foreign contacts to this end as Deputy Chairman of the Parliamentary Groups for Arabic-speaking States of the Greater Middle East and Central Africa and as a member of the Group for Central America.

Has interest concentrated on the issue as such (religious freedom as a human right for all) or was it focused initially on a specific group suffering discrimination (e.g. Baha'is, Christians, Muslims, Jehovah's Witnesses, etc.)?

Kai Gehring MP: Freedom of religion or belief is under increasing threat all over the world. On the one hand, people are persecuted because of their religion (e.g. Christians in the Middle East, Uigurs in China, Rohingya in Myanmar); on the other hand, religion is abused in the interests of violence and segregation. Concentrating exclusively on a single group is not in the interests of freedom of religion as it is enshrined in the Universal Declaration of Human Rights and in our Grundgesetz. Regrettably, debates here in Germany tend to focus all too often just on the persecution of Christians. Moreover, the right to freedom of religion cannot and must not be seen in isolation: the suppression of religious freedom often goes hand in hand with other restrictions on human rights. Just as no one religion is more valuable than any other, so there are no first-class and second-class human rights. All human rights are equal.

Do you see any risk of the issue being taken up and exploited by the extreme right? If so, why?

Kai Gehring MP: Attempts are certainly being made to do so. In my view, extreme right-wingers are taking up the issue of religion and religious freedom as a way of diverting attention from the inconsistency of their own political agenda. I see this as a major threat to the values enshrined in our Grundgesetz and to freedom of religion.

It is striking how often right-wing populists like the Alternative für Deutschland (AfD) bring up religion and religious freedom. In doing so, however, they play religions off against each other and treat basic freedoms selectively. The only human rights they uphold are those of persecuted Christians. And it is true that in many places Christians are a persecuted religious group. But if the persecution of hundreds of thousands of Rohingya, who are a Muslim minority, is at issue you don't hear a single word from the AfD. This double standard is unacceptable. There are striking parallels in this respect with religious fundamentalists. Both have massive problems in recognising religious pluralism and social diversity and they have no respect for other religions.

Equating Muslims with Islamism is an expression of the dangerous radicalisation of the "new right" which exploits every fundamental Islamist attack for its own racial hatred. And this despite the fact that throughout the world it is mostly Muslims who are the victims of Islamist terrorism. Here in Germany, too, Muslims have to be protected against Islamists.

What needs to be done to ensure greater political support for religious freedom?

Kai Gehring MP: To ensure more political support it is important to preserve the credibility of the demand for freedom of religion. It must be plain for all to see that advocates of religious freedom are obliged to take action against every form of discrimination and persecution of believers, religious communities, religious minorities and non-denominationals.

It must be stressed time and again that the right to freedom of religion is one of many equal human rights and that it cannot be used to justify the violation of other rights. Anyone who does so should advocate respect for human and civil rights and liberties. Social bridges must be built and cooperation undertaken to that end. In other words, defenders of religious freedom must also stand up for the rights of women and LGBTQI and vice versa. In that way we can mobilise broader social support in our diverse society.

In 2018 the Federal Government appointed Markus Grübel as Commissioner for Global Freedom of Religion. That is a random split in the defence of human rights which we Die Grünen in the Bundestag criticise strongly. It would have made more sense to comprehensively reinforce the position of the Commissioner for Human Rights and thereby enhance the protection of all human rights, including the right to freedom of religion.

Interview with Katja Voges

**Expert on human rights and freedom of religion
at missio in Aachen since 2016**

Why have German and European politicians started to pay increasing attention to global freedom of religion since the start of the new millennium?

Katja Voges: Firstly, the issue of religion in general has become more important in both German and European politics. Even before the turn of the millennium there was a growing awareness that there is not a general decline in the significance of religion in Germany and Europe, but that religion does determine people's activities. Moreover, it has assumed a new public visibility – thanks not least to the pluralisation of religion. Secondly, the challenges presented by religious diversity both inside and outside Europe have become all too clear. In many countries religious conflicts have emerged which demonstrate that religious co-existence is crucial for social peace. If you have people of different religions and beliefs living together in a country, negotiations have to be conducted on the implications of different human rights – and freedom of religion is a crucial right.

Which individuals or what circumstances prompted consideration of religious freedom?

Katja Voges: In Germany there is now a greater plurality of communities of religion or belief and of forms of religiousness than there has ever been. In many European countries religious diversity has increased considerably due to immigration. As I said just now, it is not least the practical religious issues that have prompted the general concern with the human right to freedom of religion in the political arena, especially since the start of the new millennium. In Germany and other European countries there is discussion of a wide range of issues: the construction of minarets and mosques, headscarves and crucifixes in public spaces, religious education, blasphemy and religious criticism, kosher butchering and circumcision.

In addition, Europe has had to respond to major crises with a religious dimension such as 11 September 2001 and its political consequences. Islamist terrorism has undoubtedly contributed to the increased significance which now attaches to conflicts with a religious dimension.

My impression is that right-wing populist movements with an anti-Islamic agenda have raised questions connected with that agenda. It is very clear at the moment that they wish to exploit the issue of religious freedom for their own purposes.

What practical forms exactly has this increased political attention taken?

Katja Voges: I lack any personal experience or conscious awareness of relevant developments in the first years of the new millennium.

What was or is your role in this process? In what ways do you advocate global freedom of religion?

Katja Voges: Since 2016 I have worked as an expert on human rights and religious freedom with the International Catholic Mission Society “missio” and in that capacity I have personally advocated freedom of religion both in Germany and abroad. In practical terms I publish national reports on religious freedom, supervise a network of experts on freedom of religion in the Middle East and North Africa, organise conferences at home and abroad, contribute to campaigns and high-profile activities and advise political stakeholders. On the one hand, therefore, my aim is to support our partners in the relevant countries and to strengthen the Catholic Church in its commitment to freedom of religion. On the other hand, my task is to provide information on religious freedom here in Germany and to sensitise and mobilise both politicians and civil society. It is particularly important to me in my work for religious freedom to make it clear that the right to freedom of religion or belief applies to all people in equal measures. Members of all communities of religion or belief must work together to defend this fundamental human right. In that sense, promoting inter-religious dialogue is an important element of “missio’s” active commitment to religious freedom.

What do you regard as particular successes or outstanding failures? Can you give any examples?

Katja Voges: Among the successes I would count the fact that political and civil society stakeholders make systematic use of our expertise on freedom of religion and that the issue is given more space in project work and work in general at “missio”. Practical successes have been achieved by means of targeted campaigns. “Missio” works on behalf of Christians around the world who suffer violations of their religious freedom and are imprisoned or at risk because they stand up for their civil rights and liberties and call for dialogue.

Closer networking with political players outside the CDU/CSU would be very welcome. We’re working on it at the moment, because we feel that freedom of religion should be of equal concern to actors across the political spectrum.

All church stakeholders must consider it a failure that radical confessional movements and organisations with their often anti-Islamic discourse call for freedom of religion and receive broad coverage in the media. Opposing their arguments and pointing out

that freedom of religion depends on cooperation not segregation hasn't always been convincing in practice. We must make it clear, especially from a Christian point of view, that an active commitment to freedom of religion leaves nobody out.

Would you agree with the assessment that freedom of religion has attracted less interest in the past few years? If so, what explanation would you offer?

Katja Voges: On the contrary, my impression is that freedom of religion is an issue that has attracted greater attention and continues to do so. At the same time the human rights interpretation of religious freedom is at risk, because the right to freedom is exposed to a wide range of threats and forms of exploitation. Fundamentalist religious groups in various countries are using their understanding of freedom of religion to undermine LGBT rights and to enforce certain religious concepts of morality throughout society. Islamic groups (not least the Organisation of Islamic Cooperation at the United Nations) have tried to enforce protection of religion in a way which poses a threat to the understanding of religious freedom as an individual civil right and liberty.

Do you see any risk of the issue being taken up and exploited by the extreme right? If so, why?

Katja Voges: Yes, I do see a risk. Right-wing populist movements and parties are already trying to exploit the issue for their own ends. The reason that is dangerous is because religious freedom is put in a false light and there is the risk that support for it will decline. The exploitation of religious freedom for political ends can be seen in the AfD, for example. It has grasped the potential that religious freedom harbours for its own ends and has plans to enforce an anti-Islamic agenda, as has been demonstrated in the course of numerous Bundestag debates in recent years. It is all too easy to link debates on "the defence of the Christian West" and the "Islamic threat" with the demand for special protection for Christians at home and abroad. Of course we must make it quite clear where it is that Christians are exposed to serious threats and work on their behalf. But we must not allow the issue of religious freedom to be abused for what are ultimately anti-freedom objectives.

What needs to be done to ensure greater political support of freedom of religion?

Katja Voges: I feel it is important to draw attention to the relevance of religious freedom for everyone and to counteract any misinterpretation of freedom of religion. This includes incorporating work for religious freedom in a general human rights policy to avoid any impression that it is a "special right". Denominational and secular stakeholders must work together to ensure that their common cause prevails. There is a need to forge broad and intelligent coalitions.

Interview with Dennis de Jong MEP (retd.)

Socialistische Partij, Netherlands – Member of the European Parliament from 1999 to 2019, The Left group in the European Parliament – GUE/NGL

Why have German and European politicians started to pay increasing attention to global freedom of religion since the start of the new millennium?

Dennis de Jong MEP (retd.): Until I became elected as MEP, I worked in the human rights department of the Dutch Ministry of Foreign Affairs. Originally, the principle of the independent and indivisible nature of human rights and fundamental freedoms made it less obvious to pay specific attention to freedom of religion and belief. However, with the rise of conflict at least partially based on religion or belief and the increasing number of violations of human rights of religious and belief communities, gradually ever more national politicians became convinced that a separate survey of such violations would be topical. Eventually, the request from one of the Christian parties in our national parliament prompted the issuing of such a survey. With the help of the then Minister for Development Cooperation I became the first focal point in the ministry for anything relating to religion or belief and foreign and development policies. This anchored the issue in the ministry.

Since the EU's external relations very much depend on what is happening in the Member States' Foreign Offices, such a national trend also extends – with some delays – to the European level. It is fair to say, though, that when I became an MEP, freedom of religion or belief had not yet received so much attention as at national level. However, the EP became a fertile ground for further development of activities in this field.

Which individuals or what circumstances triggered consideration of the question of religious freedom?

Dennis de Jong MEP (retd.): In the Dutch MFA it was primarily pressure from our national parliament. The fact that I had written a doctoral thesis on the subject matter was welcomed, since producing a survey on freedom of religion or belief (FoRB)-related violations would under other circumstances have been very difficult, certainly for a relatively small department and considering time pressure. At the European level

NGOs certainly played and continue to play a very important role in pushing for special attention for FoRB. The EPRID coalition of NGOs existed already when I became an MEP and were a very helpful and stimulating force. The first event I organised in the EP on FoRB and the role of religion or belief in foreign and development policies also brought together representatives from an interested Spanish Presidency as well as from the Quai d'Orsay. The French were one of the first to have a focal point on these issues in their ministry. This and similar events attracted an increasing number of interested MEPs.

Again, in the background the increase of conflicts and violations based at least partially on religion or belief certainly played an important role in drawing the attention of MEPs to the subject matter.

What practical forms exactly has this increased political attention taken?

Dennis de Jong MEP (retd.): Speaking for the EP, the creation of a Working Group, later transformed into a so-called group of interested MEPs. But also the various resolutions of both the EP and the Council.

Was there an equal degree of interest in freedom of religion among the parties in the European Parliament (both as a matter of principle and as regards specific individuals and religious communities affected by violations of the precept of religious freedom)?

Dennis de Jong MEP (retd.): In the EP it was never difficult to find interested MEPs from EPP, ECR and to a certain extent S&D. The EPP even had its own working group on FoRB. ALDE (now Renew Europe) was also interested, but took a particular interest in the rights of non-religious belief communities (humanists, atheists, etc.). The Greens and GUE/NGL gave priority to other human rights, such as social rights and gender. The extreme right has been interested, but only to defend the EU against what they saw was the threat posed by Islam. In the EPP and ECR, the plight of Christians has always been at the forefront, although these political groups did admit that FoRB should be for everyone and thus did not focus solely on Christianity.

Insofar as there was an interest in freedom of religion, was this limited to individual MPs or were entire parliamentary groups interested in the issue and made that clear through their active commitment?

Dennis de Jong MEP (retd.): In the EP, with so many MEPs, you always have specialists who devote more time on an issue than others. That holds for every subject matter. What counts in the end is whether their political group supports resolutions and amendments. In my group (GUE/NGL), for instance, this was always a challenge. My colleagues understood and supported my activities, as they knew that I had taken an even-handed and therefore inclusive approach. Most of them would follow my voting recommendations. However, at other times I noticed that they were cautious. For example, if they considered that the principle of separation of state and religion might

be undermined by giving a role to religious leaders or organisations. For EPP and ECR I think that one could argue that there was more consensus on the issue and their specialists could normally count on their political groups as a whole.

Has there been a clear understanding of the importance of the question in state institutions (ministries, etc.) from the beginning?

Dennis de Jong MEP (retd.): Although some Member States (like France) had a long-standing tradition, most Member States developed their specific interest during the past decade. This resulted in the appointment of a Special Representative on FoRB in ever more Member States (like the European Commission under President Juncker had done, although the current Commission remains hesitant in that respect). I noted that increasingly the Ministries of Foreign Affairs (MFAs) of Member States were very eager to receive copies of the Intergroup's annual reports on FoRB (which contained an analytical survey of violations around the world). Although interest has therefore been growing, there is also an undercurrent in many MFAs (and in the EEAS) that continues to be critical. In their view, one should not single out one particular human right and concentrate all human rights and fundamental freedoms together.

Has interest concentrated on the issue as such (religious freedom as a human right for all) or was it focused initially on a specific group suffering discrimination (e.g. Baha'is, Christians, Muslims, Jehovah's Witnesses, etc.)?

Dennis de Jong MEP (retd.): See above. For Member States it is even more important than for political groups in the EP to be even-handed. That is why the inclusive annual report of the Intergroup was invaluable, as it showed that the situation in individual countries can be very different. In some countries Hindus might be targeted, in others Christians, Ahmadis or Yazidis, and in yet other countries new Protestant (Evangelical) movements might be suffering from persecution or violence. In that respect EU Member States have explicitly resisted the US approach of speaking about "religious freedom", as they also wanted to be inclusive towards non-religious beliefs. If at some point there has been a bias, it was rather because certain violations became big issues in the media, but overall I would say that all minority groups who suffered from persecution or violence could benefit from both national and EU programmes.

What was or is your role in this process? In what ways do you advocate global religious freedom?

Dennis de Jong MEP (retd.): After working at the Dutch Ministry of Foreign Affairs and then in the European Parliament I am now retired and occasionally participate in mostly academic meetings.

What do you regard as particular successes or outstanding failures? Can you give some examples?

Dennis de Jong MEP (retd.): The work of the intergroup, in particular its annual reports, was important for the EP as well as for Member States.

Would you agree with the assessment that religious freedom has attracted less interest in the past few years? If so, what explanation would you offer?

Dennis de Jong MEP (retd.): Overall, I think that interest has not diminished. The Special Representatives of Members States' MFAs increasingly work together and have their own coordination meetings. Also at international level there is a similar coordination group with representatives from the USA, Canada and Australia as well as from the EU and its Member States.

It is regrettable, though, that the European Commission seems rather hesitant when it comes to its own Special Representative. It is yet unclear whether this represents a lack of interest or rather the fact that a Special Representative should be integrated in both the European Commission and the EEAS. From a bureaucratic point of view this is complicated.

In the EP the intergroup has been reconstituted. I have not yet seen any work on a new annual report, but that may also be due to the difficult times the EP is facing due to the Covid-19 crisis.

Do you see any risk of the issue being taken up and exploited by the extreme right? If so, why?

Dennis de Jong MEP (retd.): They will certainly try to do so, but that is nothing new. If they are interested in FoRB, it is mainly to reduce the influence of Islamic organisations and Muslims as such in our societies. This means that they will not easily associate themselves with mainstream human rights meetings and organisations that would always defend the rights of all, irrespective of religion or belief. The two tendencies will therefore move in parallel and are unlikely to merge, let alone that the extreme right could take over the work of the existing fora and institutions defending FoRB.

What needs to be done to ensure greater political support for freedom of religion?

Dennis de Jong MEP (retd.): It remains important to emphasize that attention for FoRB and for the role of religious and belief-based organisations does not undermine other human rights and fundamental freedoms. But at the same time it does concern one's fundamental outlook on life and for that reason alone FoRB deserves a special place.

Interview with Bas Belder MEP (retd.)

Staatkundig Gereformeerde Partij, Netherlands – Member of the European Parliament from 1999 to 2019, European Conservatives and Reformers Group

Why have European politicians started to pay increasing attention to issues of global freedom of religion since the start of the new millennium?

Bas Belder MEP (retd.): I was a member of the European Parliament from 1999 to 2019 and of the Foreign Affairs Committee, which is also responsible for human rights, for four legislative periods. I represented two small Christian (Protestant) parties which have always advocated freedom of religion in general and for oppressed and persecuted Christians around the world in particular.

There was continuity from my point of view, and the monthly plenary debate in Strasbourg on violations of human rights (initially held on Thursday afternoon and later on Thursday morning) certainly helped to highlight the fundamental right to freedom of religion or belief.

Which individuals or what circumstances prompted consideration of freedom of religion?

Bas Belder MEP (retd.): For me, first and foremost as a Christian and then as a historian/journalist/politician, freedom of religion has always been a matter of the heart! I should like to express my gratitude to all the researchers, clerics and others who have supported me over the past twenty years with their tremendous expertise, essential information and advice on EP reports and resolutions. Needless to say, I had regular and valuable contacts with organisations/foundations such as Open Doors, SDOK and CSW. During the last two legislative periods I financed an Arabist and an ethnic Dutch practising Catholic who regularly kept me up to date on the political, social and cultural situation in the Middle East and, in particular, on church life and the social situation of Christian minorities. That was a major source of motivation for my political activities.

There's no doubt that the conflicts in the Arab world (impact of the Arab Spring/ deployment of ISIS) put the spotlight on the defence of freedom of religion. From the very beginning the long-running issue of "Turkey's accession to the EU" provided a legitimate opportunity to confront Ankara with the issue of religious freedom. Dr. Otmar Oehring was a constant source of great assistance to me with his seemingly

never-ending font of expert knowledge. That is no less true of his important publications on the situation of the Iraqi and Syrian churches/Christians. He gave a lecture on the subject in Brussels which aroused considerable interest. In recent years I have, as a Protestant, established excellent, informative ties with the Association of Protestant Churches in Turkey.

What practical forms exactly has this increased political attention taken?

Bas Belder MEP (retd.): It has been reflected in regular reports issued by the European Parliament (for instance the annual reports on Turkey in connection with the accession process), resolutions of the European Parliament (human rights debates) and in lectures/conferences at the European Parliament at the invitation of several parliamentary groups. In addition I was Rapporteur on the state of EU-China relations on four occasions. That position, in particular, helped me to address in plain language and condemn the persecution of Christians and Muslims that has taken place in the People's Republic of China, especially since the party leader and president Xi Jinping assumed office. Regrettably, a working group on the Christian presence in the Middle East only lasted for a few years.

Was there an equal degree of interest in freedom of religion in all the parties represented in the European Parliament (both as a matter of principle and as regards specific individuals and religious communities affected by violations of the right to religious freedom)?

Bas Belder MEP (retd.): My political advisers and I enjoyed excellent and helpful cooperation with committed fellow politicians and their assistants in the EPP. By and large those on the left in the European Parliament were not all that enthusiastic about resolutions dealing with violations of the rights of Christians. They mostly tried to water down resolutions of this kind by drawing attention to many other social groups suffering discrimination. And, yes, compromise is a concept that is tailored for the European body politic, despite the facts/reality.

Insofar as there was an interest in the issue of freedom of religion, was this limited to individual MEPs or were entire parliamentary groups interested and made that clear through their active commitment?

Bas Belder MEP (retd.): The initiative rests with active Members of the European Parliament and certainly at the same time or later on with their assistants. But a proposal for a resolution should come from a parliamentary group. An initiative of this kind must be approved by the parliamentary group executive and then passed in a group meeting. In principle, therefore, the parliamentary group decides on the tabling of a resolution. After that the group endeavours to gain the support of other parliamentary groups with regard to a debate and a general resolution. In my experience there can occasionally be nasty surprises in parliamentary groups if certain MEPs wish to shield a certain country from a tough resolution.

Has there been a clear understanding of the importance of the question in state institutions (ministries, etc.) from the beginning?

Bas Belder MEP (retd.): I would have liked to see a greater understanding/commitment on the part of the European Commission in respect of the fundamental right to freedom of belief. As regards my own experience I can say that, during a working visit as the Rapporteur of the European Parliament on relations with China, the responsible diplomats of the EU delegation in Beijing were really very frank and extremely cooperative in every respect, including freedom of religion.

Has interest concentrated on the issue as such (freedom of religion as a human right for all) or was it focused initially on a specific group suffering discrimination (e.g. Baha'is, Christians, Muslims, Jehovah's Witnesses, etc.)?

Bas Belder MEP (retd.): In the European Parliament I didn't experience any distinction being made between persecuted religious groups. Quite the contrary. It goes without saying that I was keen to make sure the suffering of Christians was reported as objectively and realistically as was that of other religious believers. In this respect I have excellent memories as co-founder of a conference in early 2019 on China's inhuman religious policy. Many parliamentary groups worked together then and the spokesmen represented the various religious communities suffering persecution.

What was or is your role in this process? In what ways do you advocate global freedom of religion?

Bas Belder MEP (retd.): In addition to what I have already said, I have done whatever I could for the cause of freedom of religion or belief around the world (especially in Vietnam, Cuba, Nigeria, Malaysia and Indonesia and within Europe).

What do you regard as particular successes or outstanding failures? Can you give any examples?

Bas Belder MEP (retd.): Many years ago I was informed by a Dutch foundation (Friedensstimme), which monitors the situation of Christians and their communities in the former Soviet Union, that my EP intervention on behalf of an imprisoned Turkmen Christian had led to his release. I could hardly believe it.

In my experience no country in the world likes to see a resolution of the European Parliament in which its government is openly criticised for serious violations of human rights. My basic attitude, therefore, is to raise my voice on behalf of something which is close to my own heart (my faith) and at the same time for all those to whom this fundamental right is denied in whatever way. You therefore have to take due account of the balance between heart and mind in formulating political statements. And also bear in mind that statements should only be released after running through a case study and analysis of the facts.

Would you agree with the assessment that freedom of religion has attracted less interest in the past few years? If so, what explanation would you offer?

Bas Belder MEP (retd.): Gender issues are undoubtedly coming more to the fore in the European Parliament and in EU diplomacy as a whole. But that is a development which has taken place over the past few years. The spirit of the age/a lot of activism/willing media. For years now there has been a group of Members of the European Parliament who are strongly secular and almost anti-religious in their activities. The former EU Commissioner for Freedom of Religion can certainly tell you a thing or two about that.

Do you see any risk of the issue being taken up and exploited by the extreme right? If so, why?

Bas Belder MEP (retd.): That wasn't my experience in the European Parliament.

What needs to be done to ensure greater political support for freedom of religion?

Bas Belder MEP (retd.): There certainly needs to be a more active commitment on the part of the European Commission/diplomacy. No less important is that MEPs should invest time and money themselves in close monitoring of the freedom of religion around the globe. Right now this is a controversial topic here in Europe. What does freedom of religion mean in practice, what restrictions does it encounter?

Interview with Margrete Auken MEP

Socialistiske Partij, Denmark – Member of the European Parliament since 2004, Group of The Greens/European Free Alliance

How did you become involved in the European Parliament's work on religious freedom or belief? What has been your role in the promotion of international religious freedom?

Margrete Auken MEP: Originally, I had been involved in the Bioethics Intergroup, which was very difficult to establish, because then we had no funding and not enough people. It is very hard to set up an Intergroup in parliament, because there are so many demands you have to fulfil, but we did so and that was from 2009 to 2014. We had some very good meetings, but it was more workable as a network, in which we could send warnings to each other, to keep the members aware of what was going on and what was happening in the legislation. When the Intergroup on Religious Freedom or Belief was established in 2014, I was asked to become involved. I agreed to participate, but I didn't hear anything more and I didn't do much for it. I couldn't promise anything, because my church network doesn't work to mobilise in that area.

Their work was not very visible in the parliament?

Margrete Auken MEP: Well, the parliament is big, and things take place in different bodies, so quite good work can be done there without being seen. I wouldn't be the one to say it was not good work. It could have been. I was asked to chair the hearings on the Rohingyas and that was very, very moving. We had very good people from human rights organisations and Rohingyas themselves coming to give testimony. And you can see the outcome of that in the very frequent resolutions on the human rights issue, including freedom of religion. We have had very strong texts against China over the issue of the Uigurs and the Moslems there. They are now very much more in focus than the Tibetans, who were quite dominant for many years. We have had a good text on Africa, which was mainly about the persecution of Christians, and the same is true of the situation in Pakistan. A Roma strategy has been also been passed in parliament. Discrimination against the Roma is the biggest problem in Europe and there is a tendency for them to be forgotten.

Did the attention for the issue initially focus on religious freedom as a human right for all or on specific religious communities?

Margrete Auken MEP: Well, when we had the debates and the resolutions, there was a slight, not very nice tendency only to take care of Christian minorities and to forget about the others, especially the Muslim minorities, who in many places in the world are very exposed to oppression. That leads to a lack of credibility, if you don't look at all of the minorities and just concentrate on the Christians. It's always a little bit embarrassing for me that Christianity should be linked to reactionary ideas. It's as if being against abortion, being against homosexuals and so on turns Christianity into a political ideology. As you probably know, I've been a pastor for more than forty years and I was active until I passed seventy. I provided advice on violations of human rights and violations of equality and was one of the leading voices when I turned my party into a green party back in the seventies. So I was involved very early on in climate issues, too. That was part of my pastoral work, because there were so many young people who were scared and worried about how to tackle these issues. So I also advanced into political, sometimes sensitive areas. But I think that is our job. It's a shame if you are too cautious. I always defended and protected as much as I could back in the Danish parliament. At that time – in the 80s and 90s – it wasn't so difficult. The Moslems weren't really made the scapegoats for everything then. It's worse in Denmark now than it used to be. What is happening with the Uigurs in China is also very bad. The same applies to the Christians in Pakistan and India. You find it in the Moslem world, too, where it is very important that we take up the fight for freedom. Of course, being a Christian means you are a missionary at the same time and so you want others to be baptised. But that should be the outcome of a totally free dialogue on an equal footing. Having a religious dialogue is part of the freedom of religion or belief. Sometimes, however, the dialogue is not polite. It can be a bit tough, too. I remember once saying to both Moslems and Jews that they are too monotheistic, that their religion has turned into a monolith. As Christians we have the Holy Spirit as the core of our belief compared with the other major Middle East religions. We have to translate the message and get it across all the time. But, in my opinion, Christian fundamentalism is a thing of the past.

You imply you found it a bit embarrassing how the debates in the European Parliament on religious freedom went. But do you also see some successes or something that you think worked really well?

Margrete Auken MEP: We have had successes, but they were more about human rights than religion. We had quite a good resolution in parliament – back in 2007 or 2008 I think it was – on the Dalits in India, for instance, which involved a very deeply rooted cultural problem. We have had some strong mobilisation on the Rohingyas in Myanmar and the problems there. We have also had resolutions irrespective of which religion was being oppressed or persecuted. But there is not much of a real debate on the issue in Europe. Of course, it came up after the latest enlargement with the Orthodox Church coming into Europe. We had it with Greece before, but now it's more difficult with Bulgaria. You need to be a historian or theologian to appreciate the differences really. It is complicated. We have had discussions between Catholics and Protestants, too. But to me it has been less a religious discussion and more a debate

on political positions. I think the issue of Europe's position and its security strategy is important now and will probably remain so in the future. As Ole Weber, a very famous professor in Denmark said ten or fifteen years ago, Europe should understand that Moslems are as scared of secular fundamentalism as we are of Islamic fundamentalism. So Europe should think about its own spirituality, to use that word, and about playing a greater peace-creating and security-creating role.

Are you implying that, because much of the work by the European Union on the promotion of freedom of religion or belief focuses on third countries, there is an emphasis on external relations? Should Europe first come to terms with its own religion and values before looking at others?

Margrete Auken MEP: We have to do both and we will then come to a better understanding of what's going on in the Third World and other places. There is a need to accept that we, too, have problems with a lack of freedom of belief and religion, which is the case in many places. There is sometimes what I would call an almost aggressive secularism which, as Ole Weber said in his famous speech in Denmark, can be equally dangerous. There is a fear of our lack of understanding. Let me give you an example. I was out of parliament in the beginning of the 1990s for three or four years. At that time I was asked to be the Protestant, the Lutheran pastor at a Danish Catholic School, where most of the students were Protestants. What was interesting was that when we had common services, when the Catholics and Protestants were together, I could see how many Muslims were present – girls with scarves and so on. And immediately I understood why: the parents wanted to send their children to a school where they had respect for religion. They preferred, in fact, to have them in a Catholic school than to have them in a very aggressive secular surrounding.

You mentioned earlier the issue that in debates religion often becomes a political ideology. Do you see the risk that the work on religious freedom is hijacked by the far right in the European Parliament?

Margrete Auken MEP: The problem is us. That we are not strong enough to address that. Because normally it is quite demanding to make theological arguments. In my Green group we had strong church members, too. But we did not really have the time to raise the issue. How can we make the opposition to this here? The ignorance about Christianity is sometimes without doubts. It is really bad that there is so little knowledge about what Christianity is about. That kind of taking on a right-wing agenda is incredible. For example, if you take a question on homosexuality. Christian love has never been about having children. It is about the relation between two people which is different to all other kinds of love, and that is protected in the Christian marriage. It is not in order to protect children, it is to protect that specific love. And now, as we know so much about homosexuality, why shouldn't they have the right to happiness and legal protection of their love? These kinds of argument are not that difficult to put forward. They turn it into a question of moral, and in a very immoral way, by excluding people and punishing them. But sometimes, when you are fighting polluting industry, when discussing how to use chemicals, how to protect biodiversity, sometimes it just becomes too much.

What, in your opinion, would be necessary to raise political attention and support for the topic of religious freedom or belief? Are there additional efforts needed to make this a more effective dynamic policy field?

Margrete Auken MEP: I think there are two places where this is clearly needed. Firstly in the parliamentary discussion of LGBT issues, where in some respects good work is being done. We were surprised, for example, when Petra de Sutter was appointed minister in Belgium two weeks ago. She was openly transsexual – and nobody could doubt it, because it was clear she had changed sex when she was an adult. But that has never been her main identity. She is a fantastic medical doctor. I have been working with her and, you know, that's the way I've been thinking of her. Of course, we have our troubles with Poland here and there, but I think they will be solved, as they have been with Ireland, where it was more about defending Christianity than the rights of the people. I am so embarrassed when Christianity is used for reactionary politics. We should use it as a source of encouragement in the battle against climate and nature devastation, because that is so clear. The church should work to preach, to inspire, to help and give people hope. As I said earlier, I think it would be very important to have a general debate on EU security and the EU's role in the world.

Is there anything you would like to add that I didn't ask which you think it would be important to emphasise?

Margrete Auken MEP: I would like to raise the question of mobilisation from outside parliament, because so many people in parliament are busy. They have so many items to cover and I think that a big part of the work should be done from outside, although I don't know exactly how that could function. During my first mandate we had several excellent and inspiring inter-religious debates arranged by the Catholic Church in the European Union (COMECE). The Conference of European Churches and Church in Society were much more active in my first period than they are now. I don't know what they are doing. I haven't heard from them for a very long period – not a single word. At that time we had Rüdiger Noll arranging conferences and so on, as was COMECE. I don't know if they still are, but I think not. I haven't really seen that kind of mobilisation from outside recently. We should have some discussions to widen the perspective, as I said, on the security issue, for instance. That is what happened earlier in CEC and in Church and Society – not so much in CEC from Geneva but in CEC as the Church and Society from Brussels.

And one last thing. In the beginning of the 80s I was involved in a peace campaign in the United States arranged by the big transnational church organisation which included the Friends Service Committee, Clergy and Laity Concerned, Riverside Church and Aktion Sühnezeichen. They arranged a tour, during which I was sent to Los Angeles and Hawaii. But I also met people in Washington, where we were in the beginning, and in New York. I encountered a very, very progressive American church. There was some fantastic solidarity work done at that time with Nicaragua and in Central America. They had the whole sanctuary movement taking place. They did some excellent work, too, in the anti-nuclear and peace movement. Episcopalians were involved, as were the Presbyterians, to some degree the Baptists and to a large degree the Meth-

odists. What has happened to them all? Where are they now? I wonder whether this strong voice in the debate in the United States has been silenced.

Yes, that's definitely an important question: where are the progressive voices from the religious communities? And how much capacity and power do they have to make their voices heard?

Margrete Auken MEP: And to give hope and to give strength to the people. That's what we're here for. That's what it's about.

This interview was edited by Anne Jenichen.

Interview with Arie de Pater

Brussels representative of the European Evangelical Alliance (EEA)

Why have European politicians started to pay increasing attention to global freedom of religion since the start of the new millennium?

Arie de Pater: In December 2020 the EU adopted the Charter of Human Rights. In 2004 the European Union welcomed ten new member states. Italian candidate-commissioner Rocco Buttiglione was rejected by the European Parliament for his conservative Christian worldview. In 2005 we had the fierce debate on the reference to Christianity in the preamble of the Constitutional Treaty.

The adoption of ten new member states, among them some more conservative societies, forced the European Union as a whole to find a new power balance. The new members had to establish themselves among the old-boys network. The instability that comes with this enlargement provided a breeding ground for new alliances with their own priorities. I guess it would be fair to say that overall, with the addition of countries like Hungary and Poland, conservative/Christian voices in the EU gained influence.

The more liberal voices, wary of a return to the dark Middle Ages, started to defend themselves. I'd say that the rejection of Rocco Buttiglione as EU Commissioner and the fierce debate on the reference to Christian influence in the history of Europe in the Preamble of the Constitutional Treaty are illustrations thereof.

The new conservative coalitions, including Italy and Poland, Austria and Hungary, strengthened the emphasis on Europe as a Christian continent against Islamic influence in Turkey and the Middle East, leading to an increase in Freedom of Religion or Belief.

Which individuals or what circumstances prompted consideration of global freedom of religion?

Arie de Pater: The influence of non-governmental organisations is largely dependent on trends and support in society. Of course, there will always be some MEPs riding their hobby horses whether that's electorally interesting or not, but generally speaking they will only spend their time and effort on topics that are of interest to their constituency.

It is obvious that Turkey would be the first Islamic country that would enter the EU. Until today I am not quite sure whether that was the main reason why some countries and

parties opposed EU membership of Turkey or whether religion was just a convenient and potent argument that went down well with the electorate. So far the EU had been an economic project rather than a religious/cultural one and there were and are valid economic reasons to defend an invitation to Turkey to join this economic undertaking.

What practical forms exactly has this increased political attention taken?

Arie de Pater: This would require some digging in EU papers and Parliamentary discussion as I don't recall any particular incidents that would illustrate this. The only thing I do recall is that when I was discussing establishing an NGO platform, back in 2003 or 2004, we eventually called it the European Platform against Religious Intolerance and Discrimination (EPRID). Of course, that's a platform defending and promoting Freedom of Religion or Belief, but in the early 2000s we felt that it would not be acceptable to refer to that directly.

Was there an equal degree of interest in religious freedom in all the parties represented in the European Parliament (both as a matter of principle and as regards specific individuals and religious communities affected by violations of the right to religious freedom)?

Arie de Pater: In the European Parliament it was mainly Christian Democrats and Conservatives who were open to discuss Freedom of Religion or Belief and Freedom of Religion or Belief violations.

Insofar as there was an interest in the issue of religious freedom, was this limited to individual MPs or were entire parliamentary groups interested and made that clear through their active commitment?

Arie de Pater: Even for the Christian Democrats and the Conservative groups in the European Parliament it was merely individuals that were actively defending and promoting Freedom of Religion or Belief.

Has there been a clear understanding of the importance of the question in state institutions (ministries, etc.) from the beginning?

Arie de Pater: There have been individuals in the ministries with a keen interest in Freedom of Religion or Belief. However, they were bound by the priorities and policies of their governments. The latter were partly led by the media. When the Dutch Ministry of Foreign Affairs was revising its human rights policy, the minister at the time, Frans Timmermans, claimed that Freedom of Religion or Belief would remain a priority, but he also clearly stated that other topics with more public support in society, like women's rights, would be easier to defend and promote in his foreign policy.

Has interest concentrated on the issue as such (religious freedom as a human right for all) or was it focused initially on a specific group suffering discrimination (e. g. Baha'is, Christians, Muslims, Jehovah's Witnesses, etc.)?

Arie de Pater: I am tempted to say that defending non-Christians has been easier for a while than defending Christians persecuted for their religious convictions. In the European Parliament many had the reflex to add other religions to draft resolutions just to avoid the accusation of being interested in one group only. That has changed in the last few years where the European Parliament adopted several resolutions explicitly condemning the persecution of Christians.

What was or is your role in this process? In what ways do you advocate international religious freedom?

Arie de Pater: As one of the founding members of the European Platform against Religious Intolerance and Discrimination (EPRID) we have always been active in defending and promoting Freedom of Religion or Belief. The platform has been actively engaging the European External Action Service in the drafting process of the EU Guidelines on Freedom of Religion or Belief. Together we have issued several statements related to violations of religious freedom and we have organised several events in the European Parliament highlighting the importance of Freedom of Religion or Belief.

EPRID has also lobbied for the appointment of an EU ambassador at large for religious freedom. This eventually resulted in the appointment of Ján Figel' as the first EU Special Envoy for the Promotion of Freedom of Religion or Belief outside the European Union.

What do you regard as particular successes or outstanding failures? Can you give any examples?

Arie de Pater: The adoption of the EU Guidelines on Freedom of Religion or Belief and the appointment of the EU Special Envoy for the Promotion of Freedom of Religion or Belief outside the European Union were warmly welcomed and clearly linked to the active lobbying of a coalition of NGOs.

Would you agree with the assessment that religious freedom has attracted less interest in the past few years? If so, what explanation would you offer?

Arie de Pater: We have seen some pushback over the last few years, e. g. with the Own-Initiative report assessing the implementation of the EU Guidelines on FoRB and the mandate of the EU Special Envoy for the Promotion of Freedom of Religion or Belief outside the European Union. A strong lobby from some secular MEPs led to a watering down of the resolution linked to the report.

It took a lot of effort to get the new European Commission to decide to renew the mandate of the EU Special Envoy on FoRB and even though the renewal of the mandate has been announced in Italy no candidate has been appointed yet.

All human rights are universal and inalienable. Indivisible, interdependent and inter-related. No human right is absolute. Therefore, the implementation of any human right is always a balancing act with other human rights. The balance is in practice dependent on the common opinion in society. So, when society changes, so does the balance and the interpretation of human rights.

Quite often politicians and NGOs focus on just one or two priorities and make that their sole reason of existence. Christian politicians use 'persecution' of Christians in election campaigns, while secular politicians might embrace women's rights or LGBTQI+ rights as their main cause. In practice these rarely go together and, although it is obvious that these rights can create tensions, making them part of political profiling and campaigning produces both winners and losers. As a result, finding a compromise gets difficult if not impossible and all lose.

Do you see any risk of the issue being taken up and exploited by the extreme right? If so, why?

Arie de Pater: The (extreme) right tends to celebrate the past when their country was allegedly better and more powerful or influential. They cherish their independence. In many European countries history is often linked to religion and Christianity more in particular. This is a convenient argument against Islamic immigrants or those presumed to be Muslim. In their worldview Europe is a Christian continent that should be defended. Europe therefore has a duty to protect Christians elsewhere in the world. This leads to a selective interpretation of Freedom of Religion or Belief.

In 2010, the then Italian Minister of Foreign Affairs, Franco Frattini, responding to the publication of the Open Doors' World Watch List, advocated for an EU working group (exclusively) supporting persecuted Christians.⁴

This emphasis on the Christian past of the European continent fed the rhetoric of the Muslim Ulema and complicated the discussion on Freedom of Religion or Belief and Freedom of Expression at UN level. In 2011 the UN Human Rights Council adopted resolution 16/18 in an attempt to reconcile the two, but under the surface the tension between individual freedom and the urge to protect religion against defamation still exists.

For the full implementation of Freedom of Religion or Belief it is important that people realise that this right, as part of the right to freedom of thought, conscience and religion, is crucial for all and not just for the religious. A one-sided interpretation of FoRB as just protecting Christians and a ploy for the (extreme) right is seriously undermining this precious human right.

What needs to be done to ensure greater political support for religious freedom?

It is important that both political and (non-)religious leaders express their full support for Freedom of Religion or Belief as a precious human right for all people. All faith-based and philosophical organisations should join forces and speak up against all violations of this right and not just for those affecting their own group.

Defending and promoting Freedom of Religion or Belief is not about religion but about human rights.

Both politicians and civil society should work together to illustrate the importance of FoRB not as a privilege but as a human right to increase awareness and public support.

Interview with Susan Kerr

Concerned with freedom of religion or belief in the non-profit sector since 2013

Why have European politicians started to pay increasing attention to issues of religious freedom around the world since the start of the new millennium?

Susan Kerr: There are several factors that could explain why European politics started to increasingly deal with questions of international religious freedom at the start of the new millennium.

This was in line with international trends and normative pressures, in particular from its former Cold War ally and global leading hegemon, the US. In 1998, the US passed the International Religious Freedom Act. This created the United States Commission on International Religious Freedom (USCIRF), an Office of International Religious Freedom in the US State Department, headed by an Ambassador-at-Large for International Religious Freedom, and placed a Special Adviser on International Religious Freedom with the National Security Council. As the EU has sought to increase its international profile and be more than just a *paper tiger*, pragmatically, it has had to deal with religion, and normatively, religious freedom in line with its commitment to democracy.

Certain religions – and particularly Islam (viewed as a monolith) – came to be seen by some political leaders as a danger to European societies and elsewhere. 9/11 and other subsequent attacks on Western soil were indicative of a paradigm shift to highly unpredictable security environments in which violence has increasingly been perpetrated by trans-national networks of sub-state actors. Across Europe there was increasing fear that random, religiously motivated attacks could occur anywhere and that the nation state could not tackle religious radicalism and violent extremism alone. Questions also arose about the speed at which globalisation and other phenomena had changed the social fabric of European countries with greater levels of religious and cultural pluralisation in much of Western Europe than a century earlier. The thesis of a clash of (religious) civilisations emerged which challenged the promise of an end to history, as religious actors from inside and outside of Europe seemed to be challenging European values and the promise of modernity.

To counter what has been portrayed as *bad* or *dangerous* religion, it has been in EU Member States' interests to support the growth of peaceful religions within civil society. The mobilisation of civil society including faith-based actors to promote human rights had anyway been developing since the third wave of democratisation in the 70s.

Relatedly, in the formerly communist EU accession countries (some of which are now Member States) where there had been religious repression, there was some religious revival after 1989. *Good* religious actors had played a significant role in the civil society resistance movements that brought about the Velvet Revolutions. Thus, a secular, non-confessional set of EU institutions had to deal with religion.

Which individuals or what circumstances prompted consideration of freedom of religion or belief?

Susan Kerr: When I began working in the European Parliament in 2003, a handful of civil society organisations were actively lobbying MEPs to act vis-à-vis FoRB violations in non-European countries and had been doing so for several years.

Looking at the political environment, Europe has responded reactively to a number of events that have been framed in religious terms in public discourses. These include, for example, 9/11, the Danish cartoons, the attacks in Madrid, London, Paris, Nice, Brussels, Vienna or in Norway, rising religious fundamentalism, the radicalisation of Europeans, some of whom went to fight in the Middle East for Da'esh, rising hate crimes and hate speech, the refugee crisis, individual murders on the basis of religion, including of a British Ahmadi shopkeeper or a French school teacher, and debates over religious symbols and dress in the public sphere.

The EU is, of course, the sum of its Member States and does not have jurisdiction to manage their religious affairs. Disagreement in the 2000s over the possible mention of Europe's Christian roots in the (eventually rejected) Treaty establishing a Constitution for Europe showed the difficulty of finding a common voice. Religious freedom, whilst it should not become shorthand for religion more generally, offers a rule-based and consensual way of approaching certain challenges linked to religion. It has already been subscribed to by EU Member States in other international fora such as the UN and more recently the OSCE as part of the human dimension of security.

What practical forms exactly has this increased political attention taken?

Susan Kerr: The growing political attention for the issue expressed itself in a number of ways. Within the European Parliament concerned MEPs have taken different courses of action from letters to embassies, parliamentary questions, hosting events on specific topics, raising FoRB in committee work, and discussing international FoRB violations in plenary speeches to forming coalitions to work on the issue.

In 2012, a European Parliament working group on FoRB was launched. Its co-chairs, two MEPs, Dennis de Jong and Peter van Dalen, came from opposite ends of the political spectrum (in terms of EP groups they belonged to GUE/NGL and ECR (later EPP) respectively). In 2015, this working group had enough MEP support to become an intergroup (the EP Intergroup on FoRB and Religious Tolerance).

In 2013, the EU adopted its first set of guidelines on the promotion and protection of freedom of religion or belief. The European External Action Service (established in 2011) has a desk officer who follows FoRB and the implementation of the FoRB guidelines.

In May 2016, Commission President Claude Juncker appointed Ján Figel' as the first EU Special Envoy on FoRB outside of the EU. This post came as a surprise to actors inside and outside of the EU institutions. It was unusual for several reasons: i) it seemed inconsistent for the EU to seemingly elevate one human right over the others; by announcing the new role at the Vatican (as Pope Francis received the Charlemagne Prize), it gave the impression that it was a gift to the Pope/a Catholic initiative coming from a secular, *religiously neutral* institution; ii) the institutional post was not placed within the EEAS, as one could have imagined, but instead it was placed within the Commission as an advisory role to the international cooperation and development commissioner. The contents of the mandate were defined only months after the post was established, but there was an initial emphasis against radicalisation and on the Middle East and the threat of Da'esh vis-à-vis religious minorities; iii) this post was initially established for a period of twelve months, which made it seem impermanent and exploratory, but it was then extended. The Special Envoy was allocated staff from within the European Commission to help with this work, which has helped to reinforce the Commission's human-rights-based approach to development.

Over the past few years, FoRB has appeared in more EU documents, has been discussed in more meetings and statements and there have been greater efforts to mainstream it across activities. For example, in 2017, the Commission added a FoRB category to its Lorenzo Natali Media Prize for outstanding reporting on FoRB outside the EU.

Has there been a clear understanding of the importance of the question in state institutions (ministries, etc.) from the beginning?

Susan Kerr: The content of parliamentary questions in the European Parliament shows a visible rise in political interest in religious freedom over the past twenty years by political parties and groups. In the parliamentary term 1999–2004, only 87 parliamentary questions containing the term religious freedom were posed; the majority were posed by a non-attached member, Maurizio Turco. In the last parliamentary term 2014 to 2019, by comparison, twenty-five times more questions containing this term were posed, totalling 2,178 questions, by MEPs from a wide range of parliamentary groups. This trend is not unique to the European Parliament and reflects political trends in a number of European countries.

Has there been a clear understanding of the importance of the question in European/state institutions (e. g. the European Commission, in ministries) from the beginning?

Susan Kerr: Mechanisms to address religious issues were not foreseen when the EU institutions were established. Under Jacques Delors' presidency the European Commission began a dialogue with religious representatives and this was later institutionalised in the Lisbon Treaty. A 2017 study by François Foret indicates that EU Member States had been trying to find good approaches to deal with religion in their own diplomatic practices since the 90s and that these people formed a *like-minded group* which was useful in establishing common practices. He also indicates that some of these people later moved to the EEAS to input into supranational practices, but that

the risk-averse culture of the EU institutions has led them to defer to states and favour a legal approach vis-à-vis religion more generally.

Has interest concentrated on the issue as such (religious freedom as a human right for all) or was it focused initially on a specific religious communities?

Susan Kerr: There has been a mixture of both approaches. Whilst some have focused on FoRB as a human right for all, others have undoubtedly either appropriated the term for their special interest or chosen to focus on one religious community. Indeed, in the mid-2010s, with the rise of Da'esh, a number of initiatives emerged to assist persecuted Christians in the Middle East.

However, there has been awareness in the European Parliament of issues affecting other groups, too. Looking at European Parliament questions containing both of the words *persecution* and *Christians*, there were no such questions in 1999 to 2004, but 720 in 2014 to 2019 from across the parliamentary groups. Similarly, there were no questions containing both of the words *persecution* and *Muslims* in 1999 to 2004, but these totalled 631 during the 2014 to 2019 parliamentary term.

What was or is your role in this process? In what ways do you advocate international religious freedom?

Susan Kerr: I have advocated for freedom of religion or belief since 2013, when I began working at Christian Solidarity Worldwide in their Brussels office. During this time I was also an active member of the European Platform against Religious Intolerance and Discrimination. Currently, I am involved in a reference group assisting NORFoRB to develop training resources on FoRB and gender.

How to advocate for FoRB is a very broad topic, but the following are important when advocating for FoRB.

1. Clarifying what is meant by FoRB and what it entails and does not entail as a right. This includes reiterating at every opportunity that the right is for all and that it begins to unravel when it is seen as purely freedom *for* people to believe and not freedom *from* religion.
2. Creating partnerships with other like-minded groups to pursue specific issues together.
3. Providing credible research/information on FoRB violations to people in positions of *power* with relevant and realist recommendations.
4. Helping to connect policy makers with those who have suffered FoRB violations to better understand the circumstances in which such violations occur and think about ways to promote FoRB.

5. Showing the inter-relatedness of the human rights. Where FoRB is violated, it is often not only FoRB that is violated but also other rights. This, too, is important when considering possible ways forward.

What do you regard as particular successes or outstanding failures? Can you give any examples?

Susan Kerr: There are a number of successes and failures that could be emphasised and much depends on the specific process being referred to in the question.

At an EU level, one clear success was the adoption of the EU guidelines on FoRB. Given that the EU is a multi-layered and multi-confessional entity, and that there are differing views on FoRB, it was a significant achievement to reach consensus on a text that provides a good overview of the right and commitments to take action where FoRB violations occur.

There have of course been successes and failures *via-à-vis* implementation of the guidelines. The EU and its delegations have different levels of influence in different countries and differing political priorities in different countries/regions. While some delegations are actively applying the guidelines, the staff in others may not have even read them.

At a civil society level, one area of success has been the establishment of partnerships across religious and confessional differences to advocate with a common voice for human rights. Some even joined together to form platforms that specifically address either religious freedom or the role of religion in society such as the European Platform against Religious Intolerance and Discrimination (EPRID) focused on FoRB issues outside the EU, and the European Network on Religion and Belief (ENORB), focused on dialogue and human rights issues within the EU. These platforms have at different points provided information and resources to actors within the European institutions.

Would you agree with the assessment that freedom of religion has attracted less interest in the past few years? If so, what explanation would you offer?

Susan Kerr: I would not agree that attention for the topic has decreased over the previous years within the EU. This said, it is increasingly difficult to advocate on the right today, given a rise in anti-democratic populism. In this context, religious freedom is often reduced in scope or interpreted in a way that undermines principles of non-discrimination and thereby creates unnecessary tensions with other rights.

Do you see any risk of the issue being taken up and exploited by the extreme right? If so, why?

Susan Kerr: I think that this is more than a risk. 'Religion' is already being used in anti-democratic, far-right, populist narratives to divide societies. Such groups receive significant shares of the votes in a number of EU countries so that this has had a chilling

effect on liberal democracy and on human rights more generally. In the area of FoRB this manifests itself in attempts to only protect *our own*, domestically and overseas. FoRB only works if it is applied to all, whereby mankind is *our own*. Populism divides into categories of *us* and *them* and when used anti-democratically the former is inherently good and the latter becomes inherently bad and a convenient scapegoat for social ills. In such a scenario, religions as an identity marker can position a person depending on whether they belong to the *bad* or *good* religion as defined by the populist.

In Europe, the *us* is often defined as the *Christian*. In *Is God a Populist?*, a book I edited in 2019 with the Norwegian think tank Skaperkraft (www.isgodapopulist.com), authors discuss how right-wing, anti-democratic populists have appropriated Christian rhetoric and symbols to increase political support across Europe. This has been a successful strategy, as the rise of far-right populism has occurred against a backdrop of rapid changes in the European social fabric, with widening socio-economic inequalities leading to a sense of what Mexican philosophers refer to as *zozobra*⁵, that is a sense of anxiety linked with an inability to make sense of what is happening. They can capitalise on distrust of politicians, especially where these appear to be out of touch, and woo voters by nationalist promises of a return to a mythical time when things were more cohesive, making everywhere *great again*.

In this vein, a revival of Christian *values*, as defined by the populist, even if those who subscribe to them don't practise Christianity or believe in God, can provide some of the social glue, creating an *imagined community* in which people mostly unknown to each other are nonetheless imagined to be homogeneous at a time when people feel uncertain about their futures. Following 9/11, *the other* has tended to be the Muslim, who is portrayed as not belonging and as unable to integrate. This sentiment can be seen in political debates on domestic issues related to religion and/or religious freedom, including on refugee and asylum, minarets, burkinis or face veils.

What needs to be done to ensure greater political support for religious freedom?

Susan Kerr: This is a very broad question, as the EU is of course made up of different institutions and different member state actors with their own agendas. I think that there is still some interest among politicians to act on FoRB, whatever they deem this to be. In this vein, I would say that a greater awareness of what FoRB is and why it matters – as well as what it is not – should help to garner more support for this right. I think that if people understood better what the right is, and what it means to live with an absence of FoRB, they would be more likely to lobby for it. Then there is a question of political will. At a time when democracy is in global decline, it will take more effort to promote and protect FoRB.

Interview with John Kinahan

Editor, FORUM 18

Why have European politicians started to pay increasing attention to issues of global freedom of religion since the start of the new millennium?

John Kinahan: After the terrorist attacks of 11 September 2001 “religion” became the focus of increased political interest – and political concern – in Europe and other parts of the world. This took place against the backdrop of a widespread lack of understanding that “religion” as such is not the same as the freedom of religion or belief which is enshrined in international human rights standards.

Partly fuelled by previous neglect of freedom of religion or belief, the call was raised by some actors for separate consideration of the freedom of religion or belief for their own religious community. That call was echoed from the ranks of politicians – primarily, but not exclusively, from the political spectrum right of centre. For actors with a religious background that was occasionally, although not always, bound up with a concern about a loss of influence within European societies. This concern was seized upon by protagonists on the extreme right because it suited their agenda.

These calls for action came from a variety of political and religious players who sometimes were not aware of the exact definition of the freedom of religion or belief as a human right and of the context of its violations. Specifically this meant that some of them ignored the principle formulated in 2019 by Professor Sir Malcolm Evans, Nazilas Ghanea and Ahmed Shaheed, the current UN Special Rapporteur on Freedom of Religion or Belief: “One of the key ways to improve the effectiveness of interventions on behalf of freedom of religion or belief is to ensure that no one is excluded. In countries where freedom of religion or belief is violated it would not be credible to establish a legal and social framework to ensure respect for the rights of one community of religion or belief without creating the conditions for the protection of the rights of all.”

This increased the pressure on Member States as well as internationally to address issues concerning freedom of religion or belief at the political level. Whenever extremely serious violations of the freedom of religion or belief occurred, it was mostly because in the past the matter had not been addressed with the requisite political urgency.

Increasing political concern and growing public anxiety together with a lack of knowledge about freedom of religion or belief meant that confusion arose in respect of global freedom of belief or religion. Some players were concerned primarily about

their own country, and issues of global freedom of religion or belief served merely as a pretext in the pursuit of their own domestic policy objectives. There was one Member of the European Parliament, for instance, who initiated a debate on this issue in the early 2000s and, after being questioned, admitted that he had never heard of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights and had never studied in detail the wording of its interventions. The players involved said that they worked exclusively for one influential religious community in their country because they hoped this would result in advantages for themselves and the local community.

It was obvious that a thorough, evidence-based analysis of specific violations of the freedom of religion or belief could often be ignored. Rather, it was important to create the impression of doing something which could be presented as progressive, even if in practice it had very little effect. Moreover, there were players – for example, those whose main interest was in trade agreements – who refused to address human rights issues and will still not do so, let alone tackle questions of freedom of religion or belief.

But there were also players – from very different diplomatic, political, academic, civil society and religious backgrounds – who clearly recognised the need to strengthen freedom of religion or belief for everyone without exception, enshrined as it was in international human rights standards. These players realised that an evidence-based understanding of global reality includes freedom of religion or belief as well as other human rights. They appreciated that something had to be done: to counteract ignorance of the issue, the lack of knowledge about what freedom of religion or belief entails, and the violation of this freedom. The work of these players was not reflected in the political agenda until about 2009.

Which individuals or what circumstances prompted consideration of freedom of religion or belief?

John Kinahan: The players in Europe who deserve credit for ensuring that freedom of religion or belief as enshrined in international human rights standards was placed on the agenda occupied various positions in politics, institutions and civil society. They were politicians (in the European Parliament and the national parliaments) from parties to the left and right of centre, religious and non-religious actors, researchers (above all specialists in international law) and players from civil society (especially those who in their work advocated respect for the human rights of everyone), diplomats and members of the European External Action Service, the European Commission and the foreign ministries of the Member States (particularly diplomats in the Dutch Ministry of Foreign Affairs) as well as members of staff of intergovernmental organisations such as the United Nations and the Organisation for Security and Cooperation in Europe.

All these players shared the following fundamental positions: freedom of religion or belief must apply to everyone; this freedom is a right, and violation of it calls for an evidence-based analysis and the appropriate classification; and there must be a focus on practical measures. In addition, these players adopted a cooperative approach and were agreed that the fight against violations of freedom of religion or belief and of other human rights called for several actors to work at various levels. Over and above

this it was clear to them that practical steps to counter violations of the freedom of religion or belief needed to be taken primarily by the foreign ministries and the European institutions and that this might not be to their personal advantage.

They concentrated their activities inter alia on the process which led to the adoption of the EU Guidelines on the Promotion and Protection of Freedom of Religion or Belief, to the establishment of the Intergroup on Freedom of Religion or Belief and Religious Tolerance and to civil society initiatives such as the learning platform on freedom of religion or belief.

The now retired MEP of the Dutch Socialistische Partij, Dennis de Jong, was responsible for the annual reports of the Intergroup, for which he drew on the strictly evidence-based monitoring and analysis of violations of the freedom of religion or belief (provided by various civil society organisations) and used the opportunities to exert influence that the EU enjoyed. This approach gave support to the work of EEAS staff dealing directly with freedom of religion or belief and related issues.

What practical forms exactly has this increased political attention taken?

John Kinahan: In addition to the points I have just raised there was an increasing number of decisions taken by the European Council and of questions in the European Parliament on this issue. In addition an increasing interest was shown by representatives of the Commission and – following its establishment in 2010 – by the EEAS. From about 2009 the topic was also addressed by the foreign ministries of the countries which had previously largely ignored it. This resulted in more and more contact persons being appointed within the foreign ministries.

Has interest in the issue been present to an equal degree in all the parties represented in the European Parliament?

John Kinahan: Generally speaking it was political groups from the non-socialist spectrum which documented a certain interest in freedom of religion or belief, especially for Christians. For the most part it was individual politicians from different parties in the European Parliament and the national parliaments who urged that political action be taken in the interests of freedom of religion or belief as a human right for everyone, including Christians.

Insofar as there was an interest in the issue of religious freedom, was this limited to individual MPs or were entire parliamentary groups interested and made that clear through their active commitment? Who were these people?

John Kinahan: As I said earlier, it was first and foremost individual politicians from various parties across the spectrum from left to right within the European Parliament and the national parliaments who actively advocated freedom of religion or belief as a human right for everyone. Common to them all was a personal dedication rooted in various religious beliefs and other persuasions, to which everybody has a right.

A further crucial factor was the firm conviction that open and consistent action must be taken against violations of this freedom. In some cases this conviction was reinforced by a personal interest in regions of the world in which freedom of religion or belief and other human rights are subject to serious violations.

One obstacle many MEPs encountered if they wished to persuade members of their own party to join them – not least if it involved a willingness to cooperate with members of other parties – was the fact that some players resorted to unsubstantiated allegations. Another deterrent for some was that certain actors pursued anti-human rights agendas under the mantle of freedom of religion or belief.

Let me just refer by way of example to the willingness of some to support the activities of governments such as that of Viktor Orban in Hungary or the religious tolerance called for by Kazakhstan and Azerbaijan (occasionally in private without making their support known in public) or at least to the impression they gave of doing so. The willingness to arouse even the impression of supporting such governments ignores the fact that these governments trample freedom of religion or belief and other human rights underfoot. As a consequence some people came to view freedom of religion or belief with suspicion.

Has there been a clear understanding of the importance of the question in European/state institutions (e. g. the European Commission, in ministries.) from the beginning?

John Kinahan: Within the European institutions and the Member States there is now a greater preparedness to address issues of freedom of religion or belief. Certain institutions offer a shining example in this respect, one being the Dutch Ministry of Foreign Affairs, because many of its diplomats have taken an active stand on behalf of freedom of religion or belief over the years.

This preparedness increases whenever officials and politicians in European and Member State institutions recognise that the formulation, implementation and evaluation of a realistic and effective policy for freedom of belief or religion – as an indispensable first step – rests on a thorough, accurate and truthful analysis of the state of freedom of religion or belief for all people in every context. If these people take a close look at the facts, especially if they come from a source to which they attribute an unrestricted and consistent commitment to freedom of religion or belief, they will come to appreciate the importance of freedom of religion or belief (and the interlinked human rights) for an effective discourse with third countries.

However, not everyone in the European and Member State institutions is as yet prepared (and occasionally this is true of the institutions as such) to engage in a serious examination of issues pertaining to the freedom of religion or belief. This is glaringly obvious whenever priority is given to trade, or freedom of religion or belief is incorrectly associated with negative developments that have ensued in response to other matters.

Has interest concentrated on freedom of religion as a human right or was it focused initially on specific religious communities?

John Kinahan: Since the start of the new millennium the focus has shifted away from the freedom of the followers of other religious or non-religious beliefs towards the freedom of religion or belief of Christians. Every now and then attempts have been made to concentrate exclusively on the adherents of other beliefs. As a result of these efforts to focus on just one group other similar violations of the right affecting the followers of other convictions often attract only passing interest. Moreover, there is a tendency in such cases to imply that the perpetrators of these violations are motivated to carry them out by some conviction. Their motives can vary, however. A perpetrator might wish to enforce government control, for example, and need not necessarily act out of some conviction or belief.

Attempts of this kind to focus on a certain belief ignore the fact that it is mostly followers of various beliefs who are affected by serious violations of the freedom of religion or belief – including those who profess the respective majority belief. As Asma Jahangir, the former UN Special Rapporteur on Freedom of Religion or Belief and Pakistani lawyer who defended Christians against the accusation of blasphemy, said in 2006: “Whenever I am asked which community is persecuted the most, the answer I always give is: human beings.”

Those keen to concentrate attention on just one group often tend to ignore the concomitant logical contradictions. You cannot protect the freedom of religion or belief of one community without protecting the freedom of the followers of all beliefs, and you cannot protect the freedom of belief or religion without protecting all the other human rights.

I should point out, however, that there are certainly people who work mainly for the freedom of one particular group while nevertheless demonstrating a genuine commitment to the freedom of all. These people are sometimes overlooked, because they generally concern themselves more with the victims of human rights violations than they do with presenting themselves as advocates of the aims of such violations.

Nonetheless, it would certainly be true to say that, compared to the early 2000s, there is now a better understanding of the fact that freedom of religion and violations of it affects the followers of many religious and non-religious beliefs.

What was or is your role in this process? In what ways do you advocate global freedom of religion?

John Kinahan: Forum 18 provides first-hand, truthful, detailed and accurate monitoring and analysis of violations of freedom of thought, conscience and belief in Central Asia, Russia, the Southern Caucasus, the Ukrainian territory occupied by Russia, and Belarus. We occasionally also publish analyses on Turkey and offer briefings and statements (e. g. universal periodic reviews) on freedom of religion or belief in the regions we monitor.

If you wish to address violations of the freedom of religion or belief, you have to be quite clear in your mind as to wherein they consist and in what context they occur. That is indispensable for the formulation, implementation and evaluation of effective policy or advocacy. Forum 18 uses monitoring and analysis to establish this basis for the fields in which we operate. If the fight against violations of the freedom of religion or belief and of other human rights is to prove effective, it must take the form of a cooperative process in which several players collaborate at different levels and employ varying methods. For that reason Forum 18 is happy to cooperate with a variety of other players who seriously oppose any violation of human rights.

What do you regard as particular successes or outstanding failures? Can you give some examples?

John Kinahan: One success has been the increasing number of actors since the early 2000s who attempt to ensure reliable, accurate, evidence-based, detailed and truthful monitoring and analysis of violations of freedom of religion or belief and of the reactions to these violations.

As a rule, this goes hand in hand with the continuation of the work (often involving actors cooperating in networks) to strengthen freedom of religion or belief and its incorporation in international human rights standards by actors in many political, institutional and civil society positions. They include politicians from various parties, religious and non-religious actors, researchers (especially experts in international law), actors in civil society (above all those whose work focuses on all human rights for everyone), diplomats and staff of European institutions, the foreign ministries of Member States and inter-governmental organisations.

The realisation which has gained ground since the early 2000s is that a reliable, nuanced, detailed and precise understanding is indispensable for any effective and realistic advocacy of the freedom of religion or belief. This provides an excellent starting point for the work to be carried out in the future – including diplomatic work addressing the associated international issues of religion, politics and society. This makes it clear that work on one topic (such as freedom of religion or belief) can and should provide momentum for work on other issues.

Despite the excellent work that has been done by many people, there is still a lack of awareness in many areas that it is well nigh impossible to investigate serious violations of the freedom of religion or belief by which members of just one religious community are affected. Addressing freedom of religion or belief and violations of that freedom by looking exclusively or primarily at the adherents of one particular faith without earnestly examining the overall context will inevitably lead to non-recognition of the violations of the freedom of religion or belief in a certain context. This may well conceal the fact that serious violations of the freedom of religion or belief regularly occur in a context in which many human rights are violated at one and the same time. This non-recognition can lead to the built-in failure of political action or of the responses it triggers.

The lack of an awareness of this kind prompts some heads of religious communities to make statements and issue “reports” which demonstrably reveal little understand-

ing of the freedom of religion or belief as such in the context of international human rights standards. They also show a lack of sensitivity to political and diplomatic reactions and to violations of the freedom of religion or belief in the context of human rights and fail to quote the alleged sources correctly.

This blatantly deliberate ignorance results not only in a greatly distorted concept of reality but also in recommendations which, were they to be followed, could well prove dangerous for the victims of violations of the freedom of religion or belief. Such ignorance may well stem from the recognisable wish of the initiator to present himself in a positive light vis-à-vis his domestic audience and could be underpinned by the erroneous belief of others that high-ranking religious representatives know what the freedom of religion or belief means. All this can have serious repercussions, not least for the victims of violations of the freedom of religion or belief and for the fight against such violations.

There is a belief in some circles that governments which trample democratic principles, the rule of law, the freedom of religion or belief and other associated human rights underfoot can nonetheless be useful for the freedom of religion or belief. You often come across this belief in actors from who are the authors of the above “reports” and statements. They can assist the efforts made by governments such as that of Orban in Hungary and in countries like Azerbaijan and Kazakhstan to conceal serious human rights violations with their talk of the “persecution of Christians”, “religious tolerance” and other empty phrases. The EU Guidelines on the Promotion and Protection of Freedom of Religion or Belief state that religious tolerance and intercultural and interreligious dialogue must be promoted in a way which ensures respect for freedom of religion or belief, freedom of expression and other human rights and fundamental freedoms.

A refusal to accept reality can be observed in actors who give trade and related areas priority over other issues and completely forget in the process that the comprehensive fulfilment of international legal obligations in respect of human rights and other issues provides a stable foundation for trade and associated areas of activity.

One problem which greatly detracts from the commitment to the promotion of freedom of belief or religion is the inadequate use of existing instruments such as the EU Guidelines on the Promotion and Protection of Freedom of Religion or Belief. The good work carried out in this respect by many members of the European External Action Service and by national foreign ministries, which has certainly been a success, must be taken up by other members in official positions and given political backing. That could be a decisive step forward in ensuring that formal obligations concerning the freedom of religion or belief can lead to practical, concrete steps towards the promotion of this freedom and other freedoms.

Would you agree with the assessment that religious freedom has attracted less interest in the past few years? If so, what explanation would you offer?

John Kinahan: Some circles have concentrated on freedom of belief for certain groups, which undermines freedom for all, including the alleged beneficiaries. That facilitates the misuse of the topic by people with aims which are at odds with the freedom of religion or belief (see above). This, in turn, leads to misunderstandings of what freedom of

religion or belief really is as an integral aspect of international human rights standards, and that creates confusion with regard to the actual situation in certain areas.

In some circles there are also clear endeavours to play down the fundamental significance of the rule of law, democracy and the implementation of all human rights in internal European contexts and in foreign relations and, indeed, to call it completely into question.

That prevents politicians from concentrating on specific steps to usher in practical improvements in the freedom of religion or belief and other freedoms for all.

Do you see any risk of the issue being taken up and exploited by the extreme right? If so, why?

John Kinahan: As I pointed out earlier, the issue is misused by some actors for their own purposes. The main reason is that many people do not realise that those who talk about freedom of religion or belief may well be pursuing an agenda which for a number of reasons runs counter to the consolidation of this and other freedoms for everyone.

What needs to be done to ensure greater political support for religious freedom?

John Kinahan: The following steps would be useful:

- › Recognition of the fundamental significance of the rule of law, democracy and the implementation of all human rights in inner-European contexts and in the EU's foreign relations in the form of practical measures with a specific impact.
- › Prioritisation of the reliable, accurate, evidence-based, detailed and truthful monitoring and analysis of violations of the freedom of religion or belief of all people and of the reactions to such violations as the basis for the formulation, implementation and evaluation of all political measures to strengthen the freedom of religion or belief.
- › Opposition to any violations of the freedom of religion or belief and of other human rights as part of a cooperative process involving players whose work is marked by a strong commitment to existing international human rights standards and is underpinned by expert knowledge. Political, diplomatic and civil society (including religious) actors who are active in various ways and at different levels must play a part in this cooperation.
- › Generation of political and diplomatic interest and support at the national and European level for a demonstrably practical implementation of the EU Guidelines on the Promotion and Protection of Freedom of Religion or Belief by national and diplomatic players of the European External Action Service and other EU human rights instruments.

Interview with Heiner Bielefeldt

UN Special Rapporteur on Freedom of Religion or Belief from 2010 to 2017

Why did German and European politicians start paying increasing attention to global freedom of religion some ten years ago?

Heiner Bielefeldt: In my view, the failure of the Arab Spring ten years or so ago was a political turning point. The 2000s were largely marked by optimism on human rights issues. In 2002 the International Criminal Court began its work; in 2005 the United Nations committed to take measures against serious human rights violations in line with the “responsibility to protect”; and the United Nations Human Rights Council established in 2006 was designed to give human rights policy fresh credibility. The expectation of continuous progress in human rights came to an abrupt end, however, with the crushing of the democracy movements in parts of the Arab world. The regional war in Syria waged in disregard of international law, the terrorist regime of the so-called Islamic State in Iraq and elsewhere, the disastrous NATO mission in Libya – events such as these sharpened the focus on religious minorities, who are always hardest hit by violence: Christians, Yazidis and others. Then there was the violent expulsion of hundreds of thousands of Muslim Rohingya in Myanmar. Violations of the freedom of religion in China have attracted growing public interest in recent years. Among those worst affected by repression are members of the Falun Gong movement, members of Christian underground churches, Tibetan Buddhists and Muslim minorities in the west of the country such as the Uigurs.

In my estimation there has been a clear increase in the interest shown in freedom of religion over the past few years. It would be wrong to conclude, however, that it was previously a neglected issue. In the decade that followed the start of the new millennium, for instance, there were regular clashes in UN bodies over the interpretation of freedom of religion, which a number of states – proclaiming to oppose “religious defamation” – distorted into protection of the honour of certain religions. Freedom of religion was a highly controversial issue when the Universal Declaration of Human Rights was drafted in 1948. The formulation of this human right with its strong focus on civil rights and liberties, which logically included the right to change one’s religion, met with resistance at the time – and even today is fought, corrupted and obscured. In short, freedom of religion is a political issue and will remain one.

What practical forms exactly has this increased political attention taken?

Heiner Bielefeldt: Paradoxically, the increased political interest in freedom of religion has found expression in the form of new initiatives both to promote this human right and to express fundamental criticism of it. There are many different instances of new initiatives, for example the International Panel of Parliamentarians for Freedom of Religion or Belief (IPPFoRB), the Intergroup on Freedom of Religion in the European Parliament and the appointment in Germany in 2018 of a Federal Government Commissioner for Global Freedom of Religion. These examples could easily be extended. There has also been greater media coverage of violations of the freedom of religion which, given the diversity of reporting formats, is naturally not without its contradictions. At the same time there has been a renaissance in fundamental criticism of the freedom of religion which comes very different quarters. Whereas religious and political traditionalists take exception, in particular, to the formulation of religious freedom along egalitarian lines and with a focus on civil rights and liberties, there is also criticism from the secularist and liberal camp, especially from those who fear that freedom of religion will serve as a kind of Trojan horse to pave the way for a counter-enlightenment. So a great deal of confusion reigns.

Has interest in the issue been present to an equal degree in all the parties represented in the Bundestag and the European Parliament?

Heiner Bielefeldt: In my experience there is often a very keen interest in issues relating to freedom of religion among Christian Democratic parties. That has been apparent in recent years in both the Bundestag and the EU Parliament. However, we need to be careful not to over-interpret this tendency. If we look a little closer, a complex picture emerges. One of the driving forces up to the end of the last term (2019) in the European Parliament Intergroup on Freedom of Religion was Dennis de Jong, a Dutch MEP of the European United Left. I always found him to be on the best of terms with Peter van Dalen, a Christian Democrat and fellow Dutchman. The International Panel of Parliamentarians for Freedom of Religion or Belief (IPPFoRB) was set up in October 2014 in Oslo by Elizabeth Baroness Berridge, a Tory lady from the British House of Lords, together with the liberal Norwegian MEP Abid Raja; that again was a remarkable double act. Markus Grübel, the Federal Government Commissioner for Global Freedom of Religion, is a member of the CDU, and it is no secret that his parliamentary group made a special effort to obtain this office. In recent years Margarete Bause, a Green MP, has repeatedly spoken out publicly on freedom of religion in China, while Gyde Jensen, a Freie Demokraten MP, has a keen interest in freedom of religion in Vietnam. All democratic parties and parliamentary groups should take up the issue of freedom of religion. The good news is that is now happening to a certain extent.

Has there been a clear understanding of the importance of freedom of religion in state institutions (ministries, etc.) from the beginning?

Heiner Bielefeldt: When it comes to freedom of religion you often experience reservations – not only in NGOs but also in state institutions such as ministries and even in the jurisdiction. Questions relating to religion, religious rights and religious sen-

sitivities are generally regarded as delicate. Even professionals in state institutions often keep them at arm's length. Therefore, I think it is important to point out again and again that freedom of religion is a *secular human right* which is structured in the same way as other human rights. Almost thirty years ago now the European Court of Human Rights noted that freedom of religion applies not just to believers in different religions. It was, the court said "at the same time a valuable asset for atheists, agnostics, sceptics and the religiously indifferent". The relevant passage of the judgement ends in the statement: "Pluralism, which is indissolubly linked to a democratic society and has been painstakingly achieved over centuries, depends on it." That sentence might help to further understanding of the meaning of freedom of religion and its significance for a pluralistic society and a secular constitutional state.

Has interest concentrated on the issue as such, i. e. religious freedom as a human right, or was it focused initially on specific groups?

Heiner Bielefeldt: I think it's perfectly normal that practical steps should be taken to broach an issue of fundamental significance. Whenever partnerships result in church communities from Germany being confronted with human rights issues in communities in India or Colombia, for example, they can generate considerable motivation, which is wonderful. It is also perfectly okay if a church community is initially introduced to freedom of religion via what has happened to oppressed Christians. But it would be good if they were to move on from there to address the fundamental issues involved in freedom of religion. Otherwise the impression that arises is one of patronage, which is a far from rare phenomenon in the field of religious freedom. Let me give you a positive example to the contrary, though. A hush once descended at a meeting of the UN Human Rights Council when, of all people, the representative of the Baha'is drew attention to the increasing pressure Shiite minorities were facing in many countries in the Middle East and South-East Asia. It is well known that the Baha'is in Iran suffer more than any other minority under the country's Shiite "theocracy". That a representative of this minority was magnanimous enough to speak up on behalf of Shiites persecuted elsewhere made a tremendous impression.

What was or is your role in this process? In what ways do you advocate global freedom of religion?

Heiner Bielefeldt: In my capacity as UN Special Rapporteur on Freedom of Religion or Belief from 2010 to 2016. I regularly worked at three levels on what I call the three c's: cases, countries and concepts. Individual case work is directed above all at clarifying the facts of a case, not primarily at a legal appraisal. Case work of this kind takes place in a confidential procedure organised by the permanent representations of the states concerned at the United Nations in Geneva. The country reports on religious freedom were the outcome of time-consuming fact-finding missions I carried out in very different parts of the world, e. g. in Paraguay, Sierra Leone, Jordan, Lebanon, Kazakhstan, Bangladesh, Moldova, Vietnam and Denmark. I have always considered my personal vocation in particular as being to provide conceptual clarification. This remains an important factor when it comes to freedom of religion. For that reason I am still actively involved, even though the United Nations arena is no longer at my disposal for that purpose.

In the face of old and new misunderstandings it must be made clear that freedom of religion follows the logic of human rights in every respect. Like other human rights it focuses on human dignity, freedom and equality. This opens up a wide range of specific entitlements to freedom within the context of the freedom of religion. We are talking here, for instance, of a religious search for meaning, of the freedom to believe and to doubt, the freedom to change religion and bear religious witness, communal worship, the religious socialisation of children, religious education at school and a guarantee of freedom from compulsory attendance, the installation of religious infrastructure (synagogues, churches, temples, mosques, cemeteries, etc.) and much more besides. Freedom of religion, which incorporates the freedom not to have a religion or belief, is much broader than is generally assumed. There are occasions, however, when you have to explain what is *not* meant by freedom of religion. It is not about authoritarian religious policy, the protection of the “honour” of a religion against blasphemous talk or the preservation of religious and cultural hegemonies. The nature of freedom of religion as a right must be stressed time and again in view of stubbornly resilient misinterpretations and strategies aimed at sowing confusion. Strengthening the link between freedom of religion and other human rights is, therefore, an ongoing task. Regrettably it is often the case that freedom of religion is played off as a kind of counter-human right to freedom of opinion and freedom of artistic expression or against gender equity concerns. While not wishing to deny or play down existing conflicts, I do think it is important to rigorously reject such anti-liberal distortions of the freedom of religion. Freedom of religion cannot flourish as a kind of counter-right to other human rights.

What do you regard as particular successes or outstanding failures? Can you give any examples?

Heiner Bielefeldt: It depends on what you mean by success. Anyone eager to achieve swift and clear-cut successes in human rights policy will either end up depressed or succumb to chronic hubris. The establishment of an effective human rights infrastructure is a long-term task; it takes decades, not years or months. Apart from which, you are never immune to reverse developments. The crisis of multilateral politics we have experienced over the past few years has resulted in human rights obligations being played down by some governments more aggressively than in the past and even being completely ignored. I never cease to be impressed by people who refuse to let such negative experiences drag them down. I consider it a great privilege to have been able to learn from many such outstanding figures. I often ask myself how people who have suffered repression for years or even decades manage to keep up their courage and not become embittered. There are many more “great souls” in the world than we generally realise.

Coming on to my personal commitment, I always see it in a larger overall institutional context. Certain “successes” (to pick up that term but with the requisite caution) have come my way wherever civil society organisations paved the way for them down on the ground. By way of an example let me mention an initiative in Cyprus which was designed to improve relations between the religious communities there. This enabled some dilapidated or ruined churches to be rebuilt in the Turkish Cypriot part of the island; access to cemeteries in restricted military areas was extended; and permission

was given for pilgrimages to be made across the “green line” which divides the island. Those were very practical improvements in everyday life to which I was able to make a contribution. One of my worst experiences was in Vietnam where the government attempted to massively disrupt the previously agreed independence of our investigations. In the end I had to terminate the mission to avoid jeopardising the safety of the Vietnamese people we talked to. But that did not stop me writing a harsh report about Vietnam and reading it out to the UN Human Rights Council in Geneva.

Would you agree with the assessment that religious freedom has attracted less interest in the past few years? If so, what explanation would you offer?

Heiner Bielefeldt: No, I would definitely not agree. Naturally, all public debates are overshadowed at the moment by the Covid-19 epidemic, but it would be wrong to conclude that there has been a decline in interest in freedom of religion as a result. It is true that there are occasional conflicts between this freedom and other human rights concerns. But no general antagonism can be derived from such conflicts. On the contrary, there are considerable parallels between LGBT rights and freedom of religion which could provide the starting point for new cooperation projects. For example, asylum seekers are sometimes expected to simply keep their sexual orientation or their religious belief to themselves so that they can live an untroubled life in the country they come from. The EU Court of Justice has clearly contradicted this minimalism – in the interests of both LGBT rights and freedom of religion. I can also see a good deal of common ground between feminist concerns and freedom of religion, for instance an interest in overcoming clichés. Ultimately, feminism does not really stand to gain a great deal if the reduction of gender stereotypes is accompanied by cliché-like attributions in respect of women who wear headscarves. But the reverse is also true. Those who take freedom of religion seriously must also see it quite clearly through the eyes of women; at the end of the day it is a human right, not a man’s right. Let me say a few words, if I may, about secular beliefs. It is a well-known fact that freedom of religion entails the freedom to have a non-religious view of the world. This human right is not about a dispute between belief and unbelief; it is a dispute between freedom and authoritarianism. In the USA I have attended meetings at which pious Mormons and convinced atheists worked together for human rights, especially for freedom of religion. I find such alliances good, not least because they help us to get rid of cliché-like attributions.

Do you see any risk of the issue being taken up and exploited by the extreme right? If so, why?

Heiner Bielefeldt: I definitely see the risk of the freedom of religion being taken up by people on the right for their own ends. President Bolsonaro of Brazil, for instance, likes to present himself as a defender of religious freedom. He is a member of the International Religious Freedom Alliance which the US Secretary of State, Mike Pompeo, launched early in 2020. The alliance does not consist solely of right-wing governments, but it is a club with a definite list to one side. Germany keeps its distance for good reasons. But this is just one example of many. In recent years Russia has supported several initiatives which link human rights to completely vague

“traditional values”, thereby obscuring existing normative standards. There is always a strong whiff of incense in these clouds of mist. Seen in systematic terms, this has nothing to do with freedom of religion, but the issues are often intertwined. That’s why clarity is so important.

What needs to be done to ensure greater political support for freedom of religion?

Heiner Bielefeldt: Those interested in strengthening freedom of religion are well advised to see it in the overall context of human rights and to highlight this overall context. Addressing religious freedom in isolation will not only have little effect but may well run the risk of doing a disservice to the cause. Attempts are already being made to relativise human rights from within, as it were, by picking out a favourite right – say freedom of religion – in order to deprive other human rights of their legitimacy. In the end this destroys the meaning of religious freedom itself. As I pointed out a moment ago, Russia likes to invoke an anti-liberal, twisted form of religious freedom so that it can counteract achievements in the gender sphere. There were astonishingly similar tendencies within the US Administration under Donald Trump. Others play religious freedom off against freedom of speech – especially against the freedom to adopt positions critical of religion – and in doing so obscure the essence of both human rights as freedoms. During my time as UN Special Rapporteur I tried to hammer home one and the same message time and again: “Place commitment to freedom of religion in the context of human rights as a whole.” Directed at many single-issue organisations with an exclusive focus on the freedom of religion, the message was: “Look beyond the end of your own noses! Only then can you serve the cause of religious freedom.” In respect of other organisations – like Amnesty International or Human Rights Watch – which have a broad approach to human rights but occasionally appear to have a phobia about freedom of religion, the wish I expressed was: “Integrate freedom of religion more systematically into your work!” Humans are complicated beings who search for meaning and can arrive at fundamental convictions. There must be room for this existential experience in the overall context of human rights. Without freedom of religion human rights would ultimately not be human in the full sense of the word.

Abbreviations

ALDE	Alliance of Liberals and Democrats for Europe
BAMF	Federal Office for Migration and Refugees
BMZ	Federal Ministry for Economic Cooperation and Development
CEC	Conference of European Churches
COMECE	Commissio Episcopatum Communitatis Europensis (The Bishops' Conferences of the European Union)
CSW	Christian Solidarity Worldwide
ECR	European Conservatives and Reformists
EEA	European Evangelical Alliance
EEAS	European External Action Service
ENORB	European Network on Religion and Belief
EPP	European People's Party
EPRID	European Platform against Religious Intolerance and Discrimination
GUE/NGL	The Left group in the European Parliament – GUE/NGL
KAS	Konrad Adenauer Stiftung
LGBT	Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual and Transgender
LGBTQI+	Lesbian, Gay, Bi, Trans, Queer and Intersex
MENA	Middle East & North Africa
NGO	Non-governmental organisation
OSCE	Organisation for Security and Co-operation in Europe
PR China	People's Republic of China
SDOK	Stichting De Ondergrondse Kerk (Underground Church Foundation), Netherlands

Abbreviations

SG	Staatkundig Gereformeerde Partij, Netherlands
SP	Socialistische Partij, Netherlands
S&D	Group of the Progressive Alliance of Socialists and Democrats
UDHR	Universal Declaration of Human Rights
UN	United Nations
UNGA	United Nations General Assembly
UNRISD	United Nations Research Institute for Social Development
UPR	Universal Periodic Review
WEA	World Evangelical Alliance

The interviewees

Margrete Auken is a Danish politician of the Socialistisk Folkeparti. She was a member of the Danish parliament from 1979 to 1990 and from 1994 to 2004. She has been a Member of the European Parliament since 2004. She has served on various committees, including Environment, Public Health and Food Safety (from 2014), Transport and Tourism (2004 to 2007), Development (2005 to 2009) and Petitions (from 2007), as well as of several Intergroups (Welfare and Conservation of Animals; Seas, Rivers, Islands and Coastal Areas). In the 9th term of the European Parliament she was one of the Vice-Chairs of the Intergroup on Freedom of Religion and Belief and Religious Tolerance.

Bastiaan Belder was born in 1946 in Ridderkerk in the Netherlands. He studied Eastern European History and 20th Century Chinese History at the University of Utrecht. He subsequently worked from 1969 to 1984 as a history teacher at Johannes Calvijn School in Rotterdam. From 1984 to 1999 he was foreign editor/commentator with Reformatorisch Dagblad in Apeldoorn. From 1999 to 2019 he was a Member of the European Parliament, from 1999 to 2019 a member of the Foreign Affairs Committee, from 2009 to 2019 deputy chair of the Israel delegation of the European Parliament. In addition he was Rapporteur on relations between the EU and the PR China (four reports), the EU and Russia, the EU and the Western Balkans, and the EU and Iran. He is currently again working as a journalist for Dutch newspapers contributing articles on China, Taiwan, Iran/Israel, Turkey and the Middle East, on anti-Semitism and, not least, freedom of religion.

Dennis de Jong served as a Member of the European Parliament from 2009 till 2019. He was Vice-President of his political group (GUE/NGL) and coordinator in the Internal Market and Budgetary Control Committees of the EP. Moreover, he was substitute member of the Civil Liberties Committee. In that capacity he was, inter alia, Rapporteur on the directive on legal aid. He was one of the co-founders and vice-chairs of the EP Intergroup on Freedom of Religion or Belief and Religious Tolerance. Before he entered politics De Jong worked for the Netherlands Ministry of Foreign Affairs, as Special Adviser on Human Rights and Good Governance. Before his work for the Ministry of Foreign Affairs De Jong organised the Global Forum on Fighting Corruption and Safeguarding Integrity II on behalf of the Netherlands Ministry of Justice. In the 1990s, De Jong worked for the European Commission as temporary agent on immigration and asylum policies, and subsequently became Justice Counsellor at the Netherlands Permanent Representation to the EU. In 1978 De Jong obtained his Master's Degree in Law and in 1979 his Master's Degree in Economics at Erasmus University of Rotterdam. Also in 1979 he obtained his MA in International Relations at the New School for Social Research in New York. In 2000, he got his doctoral degree in (international) law at the University of Maastricht on the basis of his thesis *Freedom of Religion or Belief in the United Nations*.

Arie de Pater is the Brussels Representative of the European Evangelical Alliance (EEA). Since May 2017, he has been the face and the voice of the EEA in the European institutions and related networks in the European capital. De Pater comes to the job with almost twenty years of advocacy experience. He has been defending freedom of thought, conscience and religion at national, EU, OSCE and UN level. Over the years he has gathered a lot of theoretical knowledge on the right to Freedom of Religion or Belief. In addition, he met many people who had this precious human right violated. He has worked closely with the UN team of the World Evangelical Alliance (WEA), both in Geneva and New York, and has served the WEA as a member of its Religious Liberty Commission for over a decade. Although De Pater continues to defend and promote Freedom of Religion or Belief for all, his work for the EEA also includes Freedom of Expression, artificial intelligence, human dignity and the plight of refugees and migrants. Arie was one of the founding members of the European Platform against Religious Intolerance and Discrimination (EPRID) and the Dutch Platform. He prefers to work in broad coalitions fostering Freedom of Religion or Belief.

Heiner Bielefeldt, born 1958, studied Philosophy, Catholic Theology and History in Bonn and Tübingen. Having been awarded a PhD and completed his post-doctoral degree he taught at several universities. From 2003 to 2009 he was director of the German Human Rights Institute. Since 2009 he has held the chair of Human Rights and Human Rights Policy at Erlangen-Nuremberg University. Bielefeldt has long been interested in freedom of religion, devoting particular attention to this issue as a member of the German Justice and Peace Commission (1999 to 2020). From 2010 to 2017 he was UN Special Rapporteur on Freedom of Religion or Belief, in which capacity he compiled country and thematic reports on this human right. His texts have been translated into several languages. Bielefeldt's latest book – co-authored by Michael Wiener – is entitled *Religious Freedom Under Scrutiny* (Philadelphia 2020).

Kai Gehring, born 1977, has a degree in Social Sciences. Having done his community service as an alternative to military service in the Protestant student community in Essen (1997 to 1998), he studied Social Sciences at the University of Bochum (1998 to 2003). He has been a member of Die Grünen since 1998. He was a co-founder of the association Grüne Jugend in the federal state of Nord-Rhein Westphalen (NRW), a member of its executive committee from 1999 to 2002 and its spokesman from 2000 to 2002. From 2002 to 2006 he was a member of the executive committee of Die Grünen in NRW. He has been a member of the German Bundestag since September 2005. From 2005 to 2011 and from 2011 to 2013 he was education and university policy spokesman for his parliamentary group and from 2013 to 2017 university, science and research spokesman. Since 2018 has been research, science and university spokesman.

Heribert Hirte has been a directly elected member of the German Bundestag for the Cologne II constituency since 2013. He is the deputy and currently acting chairman of the Committee on Legal Affairs and Consumer Protection and chairman of the Subcommittee on European Law. He is also a full member of the Committee on the Affairs of the European Union and a substitute member of the Finance Committee. Furthermore, he is a member of the Brexit Working Group of the CDU/CSU parliamentary

group in the Bundestag. As chairman of the Stephanus Circle, a union of 80 CDU/CSU MPs concerned with religious policy, Heribert Hirte actively supports Christians and other faith groups facing difficulties or persecution because of their religion or belief. Prof. Dr. Heribert Hirte is also managing director of the Seminar for Commercial, Shipping and Business Law at the University of Hamburg.

Anne Jenichen, born 1975, Dr. rer. pol. (University of Bremen), is Assistant Professor of Politics and International Relations at Aston University in Birmingham, Great Britain. Before taking up this appointment she coordinated an international research project on religion, politics and gender equality for the Heinrich Böll Foundation at the United Nations Research Institute for Social Development (UNRISD). She was a research assistant at the University of Bremen and compared European and US foreign policy approaches to the protection of religious minorities as part of her fellowship at the Transatlantic Academy in Washington D. C. Her research focuses primarily on international and European human rights policy, especially in the field of women's rights and the freedom of religion.

Gyde Jensen, born 1989, grew up on the Schleswig-Holstein coast. In 2017 she was elected for the FDP to the Bundestag where she was the youngest female MP. She heads the Committee for Human Rights and Humanitarian Aid and is her party's spokesperson on human rights. She studied English and International Politics in Kiel and, after periods of employment in Geneva and Washington D. C., has worked latterly as a consultant for a political foundation.

Volker Kauder, born 1949, is a lawyer and has been a member of the German Bundestag since 1990. After studying at the University of Freiburg (1971 to 1975) he worked in the state administration, including as deputy district administrator (Tuttlingen district) from 1980 to 1990. From 1991 to 2005 he was honorary General Secretary of the CDU in Baden-Württemberg. From 2002 to 2005 he was First Parliamentary Secretary of the CDU/CSU parliamentary group in the German Bundestag and in 2005 also General Secretary of the CDU in Germany. From 2005 to 2018 he was chairman of the CDU/CSU parliamentary group in the German Bundestag. Since 2018 he has been responsible in the CDU/CSU parliamentary group for values, religious freedom and the non-persecution of Christians. He is married to a physician, Dr. Elisabeth Kauder, and is a Protestant.

Susan Kerr holds a PhD from the University of Bradford in peace studies, an MBA from Durham University and MA degrees from the University of Edinburgh and the Free University of Brussels. Additionally, she has over fifteen years of European public affairs experience from both within the European Parliament and the non-profit sector. Susan has been working on issues related to the human right of freedom of religion or belief since 2013. She has also recently edited the book *Is God a Populist? Christianity, populism and the future of Europe*. (Oslo Frekk Vorlag, 2019).

John Kinahan works for Forum 18 (www.forum18.org). Forum 18 provides truthful, detailed and accurate monitoring and analysis of violations of the freedom of thought, conscience and belief of all people – whatever their belief or non-belief. It publishes reports on Central Asia, the Southern Caucasus, Russia, Belarus, Russian-occupied Crimea and Donbas, and also publishes occasional analyses on Turkey. The name Forum 18 comes from Article 18 of both the Universal Declaration of Human Rights and the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights. John has worked on freedom of thought, conscience and religion issues since 1997 and was until 2013 a member of the Organisation for Security and Cooperation in Europe (OSCE) Panel of Experts on Freedom of Religion or Belief. The comments in this publication of the Konrad-Adenauer-Stiftung reflect his personal views.

Otmar Oehring, born 1955 in Saulgau, lived in Ankara, Turkey, from 1955 to 1971; studied Middle East Culture and History and Law at the University of Munich 1975 to 1981; scholarship holder in Istanbul, Turkey 1981/1982; PhD in 1983 at the University of Munich with a dissertation on *Turkey Caught between Ideological Extremes (1973 to 1980)*; from late 1983 desk officer in the Foreign Affairs Department of missio – International Catholic Mission Society in Aachen initially with a focus on “Islamic countries”; 1991 to 2000 head of the Africa/Middle East section; from 1 January 2001 head of the Human Rights Unit. Oehring has worked for the Konrad-Adenauer-Stiftung since October 2012; from December 2012 to July 2016 he headed its office in Amman, Jordan; since August 2016 expert on international religious dialogue, currently in the Social Cohesion Department of the Analysis and Consulting Division in Berlin. Otmar Oehring has worked as an expert witness in asylum proceedings since 1981. He has been a member of the OSCE/ODIHR Advisory Panel of Experts on Freedom of Religion or Belief since 2009.

Benjamin Strasser, born 1987, studied Law at the University of Konstanz (2006 to 2012). Since June 2016 he has been a lawyer in Ravensburg, since October 2017 a member of the German Bundestag, since February 2019 Chairman of the FDP parliamentary group in the Home Affairs Committee of the German Bundestag, since May 2019 spokesman for Churches, Religious and Belief Communities as well as Anti-Semitism Commissioner of the FDP group in the German Bundestag.

Katja Voges, Dr. theol., born 1985, studied French, Catholic Theology and Sport at the University of Münster. After her second state examination in 2013 she taught at the local grammar school until 2015. In 2015 and 2016 she took a certificate course on intercultural and interreligious dialogue in Rabat and a licentiate at the Institut Catholique de Paris with a focus on interreligious dialogue and the theology of religions. Since December 2016 Katja Voges has been desk officer for Human Rights and the Freedom of Religion in the Theological Research Department of missio in Aachen. She wrote her theological dissertation on *Freedom of religion in Christian-Muslim dialogue. Options for a Christian-motivated and dialogue-oriented commitment.*

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 - 3 Pew Research Center (2016), The Gender Gap in Religion Around the World, <https://www.pewforum.org/2016/03/22/the-gender-gap-in-religion-around-the-world/>. [last retrieved: 20 May 2021].
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In this publication interviews conducted with civil society experts and members of the German Bundestag and the European Parliament who have shown an active commitment to religious freedom both in their parliamentary work and elsewhere revisit their advocacy of freedom of religion over the past twenty years and assess the current challenges it faces.