

Involvement, inclusion, expression and protection

Speaking note - Diane Ala'i

A state must not decide what is a religion and what is not, the Special Rapporteur on freedom of religion or belief clearly stated. And also what is and what is not a minority, the Independent Expert on Minorities and the general comment 23 stressed. There are issues, either linked to registration or to the acceptance only of 'heavenly' religions. When already 'recognized minorities' suffer discrimination and persecution, what is then the case of 'unrecognized' ones?

By creating a space where religious minorities are able to inform others of the tenets of their beliefs, the state will contribute to the dispelling of misconceptions and prejudices.

Often attacks and violence are based on suspicion, ignorance and presumptions. Majorities also have little interest in learning more – which is fostered by religious leaders as well as politicians, often because they believe these religions and beliefs are a threat. Fear of the unknown is a breeding ground for persecution. Moreover, it is interesting to note that the lies that are spread are very well thought through and culturally designed to tap into primordial fears: spy for the enemy, related to sexual offenses, children, blood drinking, and secret societies... And all the persecuted minorities can recognize these accusations.

In turn, by actively contributing to the betterment of society, shoulder to shoulder with other compatriots, members of religious minorities will create confidence-building situations. The Bahá'ís of Iran have been encouraged by their supreme governing body to engage with fellow Iranians in contributing to the betterment of their society, particularly in issues on which they have been working inside the community – such as advancement of women, education, etc.

Furthermore, by allowing freedom of expression, the state will provide an environment where healthy debates regarding different beliefs will improve the level of awareness and be conducive to a heightened social tolerance, thus safeguarding minorities from attacks and persecution. In Egypt, on the issue of denial of ID cards for Bahá'ís, the relative freedom of the media allowed for debates to take place, where people against the Faith could raise their points of view and Bahá'ís, or their lawyers, were allowed to respond, and it was left to the public to decide for themselves. On the contrary, in Iran, the government is using state controlled media to spread all sorts of lies and incite violence against the Bahá'ís. And, in fact, it is not only against the Bahá'ís; but also Sufis and Christians of so-called 'home churches' are subjected to the same slander.

Yesterday, we were able to watch two interesting films, and there was a discussion about the role that each one can have in eliminating prejudice. I would like to add two things:

- It is true that individuals can make a difference: for example, in Iran, a whole set of (Muslim) students did not take an exam in solidarity with one of their fellow students who was barred from the exam, because he was a Bahá'í.
- However, we see a marked change, when a high cleric (Ayatollah Montazeri), but also courageous lawyers and figures that are in opposition but still have enough prominence, say and do things that contribute to dispelling these prejudices (Mrs. Sotoudeh, lawyer, Mr. Nurizad, journalist and Dr. Maleki, former university dean).