



**Centre for
Religion,
Conflict and
the Public
Domain**



Bahá'í
International
Community
Brussels Office

Brussels, 30 May 2017

Mr Ján Figel'
Special Envoy for the promotion of freedom of religion or belief outside the European Union

Dear Mr Figel',

We are writing to you to explore the possibility of reflecting with you about developments within the recent discourse on Freedom of Religion and Belief (FORB) which have attempted to interrogate the concepts of "religion" that are used in policy discussions of religious freedom, as well as the background assumptions about "secularism" upon which these discourses draw.

For many years, leaders of policy and thought have assumed that religion would become less important in European societies as the forces of modernity advanced and that the rest of the world would gradually follow the same course. However, this narrative is becoming increasingly more difficult to maintain.

We therefore believe that the discussion on FORB, whether concerning Europe or third countries, needs to be expanded to include an ongoing investigation of the role of religion in society. When it comes to Europe, our societies have made notable advances in providing freedom of religion and belief to their citizens, but for understandable historic reasons, the FORB discourse has long been wary of engaging questions about religion as a social force. However, a crucial dimension of religious freedom is the freedom to draw upon one's deepest held convictions in order to contribute to the transformation of one's society. In this regard, it is inconceivable for people to feel, on the one hand, free to practice their religion at a basic level, yet, on the other hand, significantly hindered in their ability to express their faith in ongoing efforts to build a better society. Such a scenario seems increasingly to characterize the public life of many European societies today. When it comes to European engagement on FORB issues in other parts of the world, a deeper understanding needs to be gained as to the functioning of societies where religion plays a very public role.

In light of dynamics that are becoming increasingly more complex, it is important to create spaces in which an exploration of the role of religion in society can proceed. Toward this end, the Centre for Religion, Conflict and the Public Domain at the University of Groningen, the Conference of European Churches, and the Bahá'í International Community decided to organize a first symposium on the role of religion in European society which was held in Brussels on 2nd December 2016.

The symposium gathered a range of European Commission and External Action Service staff, practitioners, academics and representatives of civil society and Faith based organizations. The discussions were organized around questions such as: How is the concept of religion used in European discourse today? Are there ways we can think meaningfully about religion's constructive potentialities and move beyond the increasingly prominent discourse on religion as either "victim" or "oppressor"? Do the different forms of secularism view religion in different ways? To what extent do distinctions between "secular" and "religious" actors hinder the goal of creating a pattern of public discourse to which all people can meaningfully contribute?

We would be most pleased to share some of the insight gained at the symposium and to further explore with you how the conversation on the role of religion in society can advance.

We hope this is of interest to you and remain at your disposal for further questions.

Yours sincerely,

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