Article 17 dialogue seminar with non-confessional organisations, chaired by First Vice President Mairead McGuinness
“Discrimination and Persecution of Non-Believers around the World”
European Parliament, Brussels
11th of April 2018

I would like to begin by thanking President Tajani for his continued support for the official European Parliament dialogue with religions and non-confessional organisations, within the framework of Article 17 of the Treaty. He had planned to be with us this afternoon to officially open the proceedings, but a last minute re-scheduling meant he had to travel on official business.

It has now been over a year since I assumed this function and I have already reported to the European Parliament’s Bureau on my first full year of Article 17 activity. The President, the Bureau and the Secretary General continue to give the highest level of commitment to this dialogue, including in the provision of resources to try to respond adequately to the expectations of our dialogue partners.

One of the points endorsed by the Bureau in February was the deepening of the dialogue so that it is more closely related to our parliamentary work, both of our Committees and Delegations. In that respect, I am delighted that our programme today includes two panels, respectively chaired by a Committee Chair, Mr Panzeri, and a Delegation Chair, Ms Lambert.

Indeed, it was following our last Article 17 dialogue seminar in December on EU foreign policies that I was invited to speak with the Conference of Delegation Chairs so as to explore how to better integrate issues of religion or belief into our discussions with third countries.

I believe that there is a growing interest and awareness of the need for “religion or belief literacy” across the House, and therefore a greater willingness by various parliamentary bodies to engage in Article 17-style dialogue. This is welcome. It is as the treaty obligation intended - to inform policy decision-making. But this is also a necessity if we want to shape good inclusive legislation and policies.

In implementing Article 17, the Parliament has enjoyed excellent cooperation with the European Commission, and I am delighted to have with us today the Special Envoy for
Freedom of Religion of Belief Mr Figel’s mandate is directly related to the topic before us today, Discrimination and Persecution of Non-Believers around the World.

For today’s seminar, we have invited a number of speakers from philosophical non-confessional organisations, the first time that I host these groups here at the Parliament, though I have already exchanged with you on the Future of Europe at the Commission last year.

The overall subject chosen, as well as the focuses for the panels, reflect consultations with non-confessional partner organisations. It is good that we enter into dialogue on issues which are of concern to you, and on which you can contribute policy suggestions.

It is important to me that each of the dialogue seminars hosted by the Parliament be an open forum for discussion and exchange on European policies. This is why I insist that our programmes provide ample time for questions and answers, for general discussion. It is great that, once again, so many additional Article 17 dialogue partners - both religious and non-confessional - have registered to participate in today’s dialogue.

If we are here discussing discrimination against and persecution of non-believers around the world, it is because there are some serious problems identified in this area; problems which Parliament’s Human Rights Committee, and our regional Delegations, need to hear about to see what they can do to address them. On these matters, the EP works in close cooperation with the Special Envoy for FoRB, and the External Action Service.

For each of our seminars, the European Parliamentary Research Service provides background briefing notes and reflection papers to help us situate our discussions. You will find in your folders a number of such publications and I would like to highlight one in particular which was prepared specially for today’s seminar. It is entitled: “Freedom of Conscience around the World” and usefully summarises some of the issues at stake.

Article 18 of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights - for which we are celebrating the 70th anniversary this year - 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 private, to manifest his religion or belief in teaching, practice, worship and observance.”
What is not stated explicitly in the UN Declaration, but which was always implicit, is that freedom to believe, includes freedom not to believe. In many parts of the world, this freedom is sadly restricted, despite the commitment that the governments of those countries have entered into by adopting the UN Declaration.

We are fortunate within the EU to live in societies where law and practice guarantees that we are free to choose any religion or none. The number of non-declared, non-believers, or people who do not feel an affiliation to any one particular set of beliefs is quite significant in many EU Member States. In one or two, it probably constitutes the single biggest category.

We are equally fortunate that one of the core principles of our European democracies is the neutrality of the State towards our choice of religion or belief, or none. Of course, each of our Member States, due to its own history and circumstances, has a slightly different arrangement. Earlier this week President Macron of France made an interesting speech where he explored different interpretations and understanding of secularism.

Beyond these differences of emphasis - and Article 17 clearly provides for subsidiarity in this area - there is a common shared commitment to defend the inherent right of each and every person to choose their own life stance, their own world view. For many, this choice will be one outside formal religious structures. As a core European value, we must be prepared to defend and promote FoRB outside the EU too.

The Foreign Affairs Council of the EU adopted Guidelines for Freedom of Religion or Belief five years ago. These are intended to form the basis for active engagement with third country authorities by EU diplomats whenever there are breaches of this fundamental right. It is important that in such engagement the EU is consistent and emphasises the “B” of FoRB as well as the “R”. No doubt, we will hear from Jan Figel about his efforts in this regard in various countries.

According to EPRS research, more than 40 countries in the world have an official state religion and a further 40 have a favoured status for one particular religion. This is not necessarily problematic for freedom of conscience in itself, as we can see from the experience of certain EU Member States in this category, like the UK. However, it is an indication of the level of religiosity across the world and does call for close scrutiny and attention.

Our second panel this afternoon will allow us to move from general legal and philosophical considerations down to the particular situations pertaining in certain regions and countries of
the world. I am most grateful to the Chair of the South Asia Delegation, Jean Lambert, for agreeing to chair that session.

Hers is a delegation that is responsible for Parliament’s relations with Pakistan, Bangladesh, Sri Lanka, Nepal, Bhutan and the Maldives; all deeply religious societies where not belonging to the majority religion can lead to difficulties. We have witnessed a recent rise in both Hindu and Muslim nationalism, with the consequences this can have for those outside the mainstream.

In particular, we would like to throw some light on places where apostasy and anti-conversion laws are in place, laws that can be used to justify discrimination, or even persecution of non-believers. The Annual Report of the International Humanist and Ethical Union - one of the organisations presenting today - lists more than 30 countries that perpetrate serious violations of freedom of conscience.

This goes back to the basic principle contained in the UN Declaration: that freedom of religion or belief is not simply a private matter. We also have the right to publicly declare what we do or don’t believe, and to form associations with like-minded persons who share our beliefs.

Colleagues, ladies and gentlemen, we have a great opportunity here this afternoon to conduct a constructive dialogue between representatives of philosophical and non-confessional organisations on the one hand, with EU policy makers on the other hand. I am looking forward to a very lively and interesting seminar.

Thank you for your attention.