

EUROPE

LGBT People, the Religions & Human Rights in Europe

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Press Release

HRWF (14.11.2013) - On Wednesday 13 November, the LGBT Intergroup of the European Parliament hosted a seminar on "Sexual Orientation, Gender Identity and Religion: A New Dialogue." Dutch MEP Dennis de Jong introduced the topic, saying that the dominant discourse in the media has sometimes misrepresented the cleavage that exists between those who advocate for the rights of lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender (LGBT) people and those who adhere to religious faith.

In fact, there are many LGBT people who are also religious, seeing no contradiction at all between their faith and their sexuality. The event aimed to explore ways to reconcile these two fundamental aspects of human identities and to discuss these in the framework of European policy-making and human rights.

Imam Muhsin Hendricks spoke about his founding the South Africa based organisation called The Inner Circle (www.theinnercircle.org.za), which addresses questions of sexual diversity, gender and inclusivity from an Islamic theological perspective. Hendricks stated that we cannot isolate issues of faith and sexuality if we are to build a more peaceful world.

"We cannot ignore our fears and lack of knowledge of the other," he said. "Are we ready as a community to experience the other through dialogue?"

He added that "too often, society expects people to only show one facet of their identity. Many conceive religion and sexuality as two different but equally rich aspects of human identities that don't have to be opposed."

Human Rights Without Frontiers (HRWF) also participated in the panel. HRWF Policy Advisor Mark Barwick introduced a paper that the organisation has just released on "LGBT People, the Religions & Human Rights," a human rights-based approach to the recent debate on the relation between sexual minorities and religious faith. It is available from www.amazon.com.

The publication seeks to articulate common values that can provide a foundation on which to build a more constructive dialogue over LGBT people in religion and society. It also lists recommendations for policy makers, religious leaders, the media and others who are entrusted with promoting peaceful and harmonious relations in society.

A further contribution came from Jean-Bernard Bolvin of the European External Action Service. "The EU is committed to the principle of the universality of human rights," said Bolvin, "and reaffirms that cultural, traditional and religious values cannot be invoked to justify any form of discrimination," including discrimination against persons of sexual minorities.

The interchange between LGBT people and the religions has been varied, ranging from genuine acceptance and inclusion on the one hand to outright hostility on the other. Nonetheless, there is hope for reconciliation. In his concluding remarks, Barwick said that "religious, social and political institutions in Europe can together help point the way to a healthier and more inclusive vision for our future. In the end, LGBT people do not ask for special treatment, just to be part of that vision."