

CAN I start by thanking Mairead and Jan Figel for having us here today. I think you should know that it's very important to us, and that we value the chance to come here and speak to you about these important issues. As Ján Figel said, we value the partnership with the European Union very closely, and we're grateful to him and his team for the cooperation that we've had on these important issues. And it's also very good to know that someone reads our reports as well.

Let me explain the context. I am the Chief Executive of the International Humanist and Ethical Union, which is a global umbrella body for atheist, humanist and non-religious organisations. We have over 150 national organisations in over 60 countries around the world. What we do is to represent the diverse viewpoints of our members at the United Nations, the African Commission, and the various different international and regional bodies around the world. And of course along with our partners in the European Humanist Federation, we seek to represent and engage with the European Institutions.

I'm grateful, as I said, for the chance to come and speak at this event. I'll try to keep my remarks quite short so that we have some chance to discuss the issues. And I also I just want to preface this by saying that the sense of partnership we feel with the European Union is very strong, but we don't often get the chance to come and speak to such an important organisation. So if my comments sound critical they're the comments of a critical friend, and are meant to be constructive. The sense that I have when I do get the chance to speak to international delegates, members of parliament and so on, is that there's somehow a controversy, or at least an anxiety, about recognising the rights of atheists and humanists.

The rights of religious people, both in a majority or a minority, are considered completely within the confines of normal discourse, yet when it comes to the issue of atheists, apostates, and liberal reformers of religions, there's somehow a feeling that this is a taboo subject that we have to be careful about and that has to be moderated very closely. I don't think this is justified. I don't think we need to have this anxiety, and I hope to convince you in the next few minutes to agree with me.

So, let me first of all give you a broad overview of what we see as the position in terms of the rights of atheists and humanists around the world. As Ján Figel mentioned, we release this report annually, which is the *Freedom of Thought Report*. We launched the latest in December 2017 here at the European Parliament. It covers every single country in the world and it gives an assessment of the legal and policy framework, in terms of how atheists and humanists are treated in terms of human rights.

What we identified in 2017 is a trend. We highlighted seven countries in particular: Pakistan, India, the Maldives, Malaysia, Saudi Arabia, Sudan and Mauritania. In at least these seven countries there was an active persecution of atheists and humanists, and in many cases this was condoned by the governments of those countries. There is also a total of 85 countries which we categorise as showing 'severe' discrimination against non-religious individuals. And again the number of colleagues that we saw murdered in 2017 was quite disturbing.

I'm sure I don't need to explain to everybody in this room the tides of populism and nationalism that are growing in different parts of the world. Ján Figel mentioned India. I was moved to go to India in January this year to visit some colleagues. India is one of the most active countries in the world in terms of humanist, atheist, rationalist non-religious organisations. It was one of the founding members of the IHEU and about 20% of our members are based in India. So it's a very important country for us. But if you listened to the discourse coming from Indian politicians, and the Prime Minister, you would imagine that India is a completely Hindu country and that the rich historical diversity of freethought simply doesn't exist there.

I guess the message that we try to convey with these reports is that there is a different India that lurks beneath the surface. Our colleagues are doing great work in areas such as anti-caste discrimination and promoting women's and children's rights. Yet sadly while there I had the rather onerous duty of unveiling a portrait of six of my colleagues who had been murdered in the last few years. So these issues are real, and they're happening today.

The situation is therefore that atheists, humanists and our colleagues suffer from what we call invisibility. In many countries, including Saudi Arabia and Pakistan, there is simply no category for our colleagues to exist. They are not able to register themselves or to identify themselves in line with their philosophical belief commitments.

There is also a second level of invisibility, and this is the situation we have with the Bangladeshi bloggers, hacked to death because they were atheists. Not only in many countries is it impossible for you legally to exist but also you face the death penalty if you are open about your beliefs. Secondly there is the invisibility caused by thugs and gangs and, in many cases, state-sponsored harassment if you identify yourself as an atheist or a humanist.

So there are two forces at work here which cause the invisibility of our friends and colleagues in these countries. And that is what makes this a very important, but also difficult, subject to talk about because in many countries around the world we simply don't know how many atheists and humanists there are, and it's caused by this problem of invisibility.

Again, it creates a vicious cycle into this anxiety and confusion or controversy that people have to talk about the issue, and I hope that this meeting and the good work of Ján Figel and the External Action Service, is a beginning of the process to de-stigmatise conversation about non-religious people.

Also, the language matters. I note that Mairead and Jan used the very important term 'freedom of religion or belief', and they made an explicit point to mention the 'B' for belief part. It's really important, I think, that people know that this means a lot to those of us who are engaged in this process. Freedom of religion or belief is a complicated right, it's been further explained by the United Nations and so on, and it's a qualified right, of course. You know we don't have a right simply to expose our views in any way that comes to mind. We have to be mindful of the rights and duties of others, but we have to ensure that freedom of religion or belief does not simply come down to the common denominator of religious freedom. It has to include the right to dissent, the right to reform, the right to object, the right to criticise, and also – something we should say – the right to have no opinion at all, the right for a large group in society who are not inclined one way or the other about this important debate, and that's their right.

So, those are some of the issues. What do I think the European Commission, the External Action Service, and all of you important people, can do more? Ján Figel mentioned blasphemy laws, and the impact that they have in many countries around the world.

Do you know that there are about 10 countries in the European Union which still have blasphemy laws? One of them Greece actually still applies and prosecutes people for blasphemy... [laughs] and yes, I don't have to mention to Mairead that Ireland is one of the EU members with a blasphemy law. And in my country of Scotland we still have a blasphemy law. Obviously there is not a grave situation facing atheists and humanists in Europe, as has been said. And the blasphemy laws, where they still exist, are mostly dead-letter laws in practice. But let me say this.

Why don't we make a commitment to call upon European governments to repeal their blasphemy laws? Not because we're trying to pretend that humanists in Europe are going to be locked up – let's not pretend that – but to show moral leadership for the rest of the world. We can show that we stand with atheists and humanists who are being murdered, censured, and put in jail. Why don't we say that? Why don't we call upon European governments to repeal these laws? There's one suggestion.

Also, to Ján and his team, and to other people from the European Commission, when you meet delegates from other countries, including some

of the countries we've mentioned, ask them about atheists, ask them about humanists, and remind them that in many cases these people are invisible, lurking beneath the surface, unable to identify themselves.

Make sure that, owing to some idea of controversy or because you want to be sensitive, you don't simply turn a blind eye to this. Because my colleagues are there, they are real, they are at threat and they need your help. These are some things that we can do.

I think I'll leave it there for now, but again, thank you for the invitation.