Religion-based reservations to the core human rights conventions and what they tell us about human rights, universality, religion and belief in the 21st Century

13:00h-14.30h on 12th March 2015, Restaurant des Délégués, Pallas des Nations during the 28th session of the Human Rights Council (reception side-event)

Reservations to the core human rights conventions, made at the time of ratification, are often tabled based on concerns about the degree to which certain provisions of those conventions are compatible with the tenets of the world’s major religions. Such reservations can either be general in nature (limiting the application of all the provisions of the convention only insofar as they are compatible with the tenets of a given religion) or can be applied to cover certain specific provisions of the convention. Such reservations are extremely widespread and thus have significant implications both for the level of a given State’s commitment to a convention, and, consequently, to the level of protection afforded at domestic level.

Religion-based or religion-related reservations have been tabled by States from almost all regions of the world and cover a broad set of different religions and belief systems including Christianity, Islam, Judaism and Hinduism. Yet despite the large number of States, treaties, treaty articles, and religions in question, most reservations focus on a relatively small number of ‘frontier issues’ sitting at the boundary of universal norms and religious doctrine. These include, for example, inheritance laws, equality in marriage, blasphemy laws, apostasy laws, and family planning. Reservations are often tabled as a compromise between domestic actors that wish to sign and ratify the international human rights conventions and other domestic constituencies that are sensitive to the ‘frontier issues’ mentioned above.

The issue of religious reservations therefore offers a fascinating lens through which to view the relationship between universal human rights norms and the tenets of major world religions. To consider these and related questions, on 12th March, during the 28th session of the Human Rights Council, the Permanent Missions of Germany, Norway and Tunisia, together with the Universal Rights Group, will host a working lunch reception on Religion-based reservations to the core human rights convention and what they tell us about human rights, universality, religion and belief in the 21st Century.

Programme

13:00h  Arrival and buffet lunch with Norwegian and Tunisian food and drinks
13:25h  Introduction by H.E. Steffen Kongstad, Permanent Representative of Norway and Dr. Ahmed Shaheed, Chair of the Board of Trustees, Universal Rights Group
13.30h  Short presentations:
          H.E. Mr. Walid Doudech, Permanent Representative of Tunisia
          Professor Heiner Bielefeldt, UN Special Rapporteur on freedom of religion or belief
          Dr. Ibrahim Salama, Director, Human Rights Treaties Division, OHCHR