

Table of Contents

- ***Charleroi: the city might forbid a teacher from wearing a veil***
 - ***Request for loudspeakers on a minaret***
 - ***Belgian Muslim woman fined \$ 300 for wearing burqa***
 - ***To reform Islam without the Muslims***
 - ***Draft law banning religious symbols in public places***
 - ***The European Raelian Movement accuses Belgian public powers of religious intolerance and discrimination at the OSCE***
 - ***Controversial headscarf ban hits Belgium***
 - ***Belgian schools ban Muslim headscarf***
 - ***Bans on headscarf in schools turned down by courts***
 - ***Twelve students away because of headscarf ban***
 - ***Distorted statements and biased clichés about Jehovah's Witnesses rectified in a newspaper***
 - ***Council of State: the wearing of the veil can be prohibited in schools***
 - ***Investigation about the Transcendental Meditation movement***
-

Charleroi: the city might forbid a teacher from wearing a veil

Le Soir (15.12.2009) / HRWF (17.12.2009) - Website: <http://www.hrwf.net> - Email: info@hrwf.net – This Tuesday the court for emergency cases issued a decision doing justice to the City of Charleroi which had forbidden a math teacher from wearing a veil during her class last month.

In its deeply motivated decision, the court recalls that the teacher who works in three municipal schools was told in September last that she would not be allowed any longer to wear a veil in her classroom. She had started her career in 2007 without her veil posing any problem. Last month, the municipal council had confirmed this ban. The teacher had then lodged a complaint before an emergency court.

The court held that the school heads had the necessary power to take decisions on such a ban. The judge quoted several articles from a decree saying that a teacher is bound to neutrality. The court notes that the capacities and religious freedom of the teacher are not at stake in this case.

According to the court, « it does not matter that this was tolerated: it was laxism », clarifies the judge, adding that « the decision taken by the municipal authorities cannot be considered a form of discrimination or a breach of the teacher's religious freedom ». Her request for resuming her classes with a veil was declared admissible but not founded according to Tuesday's court decision.

Translation by Human Rights Without Frontiers

Request for loudspeakers on a minaret

HRWF (17.12.2009) - Website: <http://www.hrwf.net> - Email: info@hrwf.net – The Fatih mosque of Beringen (Limburg) has introduced a request to put loudspeakers on its minaret. The local population fears to be disturbed by the call for prayer.

In Sledderlo near Genk (Limburg), where loudspeakers were put in place 15 years ago, the neighbors are said not to be disturbed by the voice of the imam but only around 30 of the 480 houses are occupied by non-Muslim Belgians. The local Muslim community and the municipal council had decided together how to reduce the disturbance and "the noise threshold was fixed at 55 decibel, the level allowed by the local police regulation on lawn-mowers," according to the Christian-Democrat mayor Jaak Gabriels.

'The police regularly check the noise. I must say that in the last fifteen years I did not get any complaint or just a few. To be clear, they can use loudspeakers to call the foreign population but not to disturb the life of the neighbors, the mayor said to the daily newspaper De Standaard.'

Erhan Yilman (33), the president of the mosque in Sledderlo, told De Standaard that measures had been agreed upon in order not to disturb the local population as the Muslims are called to prayer five times per day. "The imam only speaks and sings for a few minutes during the Ogle (noon prayer), the Ikindi (afternoon prayer) and the Aksam (late afternoon). We never disturb the people in the morning and in the evening," he said.

According to Ali Caglar (37), the Christian-Democrat councilor of Genk for public works, no local Flemish resident complained about the call for prayer.

Belgian Muslim woman fined \$ 300 for wearing burqa

RIA Novosti (10.12.2009) / HRWF (11.12.2009) - Website: <http://www.hrwf.net> - Email: info@hrwf.net – A Belgian Muslim woman was ordered to pay 200 euros (\$300) for wearing a burka, a Islamic outfit that covers everything but the eyes, in a public place, the La Capital paper reported on Thursday.

The woman was detained while taking her children to an Islamic school in the Etterbeek municipality of the Belgian capital, Brussels. She was initially ordered to pay a 35-euro fine for violating a local ban on covering faces in public places.

When the woman was caught wearing the outfit the second time, she was fined 200 euros, but refused to pay and went to court.

"The rule is the rule, and we must obey it," local mayor Vincent De Wolf said.

The Belgium Muslim community ranges from 400,000 to 600,000 people.

To reform Islam without the Muslims

Islam: Reform proposals of the Muslim Executive to the Minister for Religious Affairs

Gutierrez Ricardo

Le Soir (08.12.2009) / HRWF (16.12.2009) - Website: <http://www.hrwf.net> - Email: info@hrwf.net - The current Executive of the Muslims of Belgium is slated to disappear. It is on the agenda of the Minister of Justice in charge of Religious Affairs, Stefaan De Clerck (Flemish Christian Democrat Party). The outgoing Executive the existence of which is only guaranteed until 31 December must make renewal proposals. Three projects are on the table but the Muslim community (about 400 000 people) does not have a say.

"Can the renewal of the structures be envisaged without consulting the main people concerned?" Vice-president of the Executive Isabelle Praile fears that the reformed body will not gain more credibility if the Muslim community is not involved.

"The outgoing Executive had four days of meetings and discussions in January, March, May and June but only for restricted circles, without any bid for proposal and without first answering questions about its reform... Must we limit ourselves to the administrative management of the Muslim religion, that is to say the management of the mosques, while hardly 10 to 15% of the Muslim population goes to these places of worship? Shall we go on working with imams "parachuted" from Morocco or Turkey without taking the necessary measures to develop some form of Belgian training of imams? Shall we go on founding our representativeness on general elections based on controversial ethnic categories in which only 10% of Muslims took part?"...

These questions remain unanswered on the eve of the talks that the Minister in charge of Religious Affairs will have with the outgoing leaders of the Executive. Its president, Semsettin Ugurlu from Turkish state Islam (Diyanet) seems to be in a hurry for decisions to be taken: in November, he asked in a letter sent to his community to opt for a renewal of the Executive: general elections in mosques, a representation by delegates from the Muslim federations or a mixed solution which would integrate elected people, teachers of Muslim religious classes, chaplains, minorities and women. Without any further explanation... There were so few responses that the president preferred not to reveal the results.

« Let us not take decisions under pressure of time, Isabelle Praile is pleading. It would not be in the interest of the Muslims and society. »

Three scenarios

The Islam of the federations

On 9 February 2008, outgoing president of the Muslim Executive, Coskun Beyazgül, announced his project to the newspaper Le Soir of entrusting the main federations with the administrative management of their religion on the model of the French Council of the Muslim Religion. The ideal solution for two Turkish federations: Diyanet, a network of about 70 mosques (out of about 350), under the control of the Turkish state, and Milli Görüs, an international network of about 30 mosques in Belgium. The proposal is not in favor of the Moroccan community which is not structured on the basis of federations.

The Islam of the mosques

A counter-proposal to the Turkish solution was made on 26 February 2008 by Abdelghani Benmoussa. He suggested putting in place an Administrative Council for the Muslim Religion on the basis of the state-recognized mosques. Here again, the Diyanet would not be put at disadvantage and nor would the mosques close to the Moroccan authorities. This system would not contribute to the development of an Islam out of reach of foreign influences.

An independent Islam

On Saturday, the Platform of the Muslims of Belgium publicized another proposal, «emanating from a grass-root movement, independent of the countries of origin ». The proposal is sponsored among other people by Mohamed Tojgani, the imam of the Al-Khalil mosque in Molenbeek (Brussels). The new Muslim Executive would be elected on the basis of a general council comprising 350 delegates (one per mosque), with an additional representation by cooptation for converted people, women and civil society.

Translation by Human Rights Without Frontiers

Draft law banning religious symbols in public places

No more crosses at the entrance of cemeteries

HRWF (15.12.2009) - Website: <http://www.hrwf.net> - Email: info@hrwf.net - A draft law banning religious symbols in public places is proposing to remove crosses at the entrance of cemeteries, to forbid public servants and even assessors in polling stations from showing their religious affiliation and to cancel the Te Deum on the national day.

The draft law was introduced by three francophone political parties (Socialist, Liberal and Green) and one Flemish party (Liberal).

Objections against the draft law sponsored by senators Philippe Mahoux (Francophone Socialists), Paul Wille and Jean-Jacques De Gucht (Flemish Liberals) have been raised by the other main political parties in the Flanders. The Council of State also expressed strong reservations. In its advice, it said that it seriously limit freedom of conscience and religion as well as freedom of worship and wonders if the scarf ban is in line with the jurisprudence of the European Court.

The European Raelian Movement accuses Belgian public powers of religious intolerance and discrimination at the OSCE

HRWF (05.10.2009) - Website: <http://www.hrwf.net> - Email: info@hrwf.net - From 28 September to 9 October, the OSCE held its annual Human Dimension Implementation Meeting in Warsaw.

On Tuesday 29 September, 60 NGOs and religious groups from Austria, Belgium, France, Germany, Russia, Belarus, Kazakhstan, Uzbekistan, Tajikistan and many other countries complained about violations of freedom of religion, hate speech and discrimination in the OSCE space. The European Raelian Movement accused the Belgian authorities of creating and maintaining an atmosphere of suspicion and intolerance towards non state-recognized belief or faith groups, although they have never been sentenced by any court criminal court in Belgium. Back in Brussels, the spokesperson of the movement in Belgium was interviewed by Ricardo Gutierrez, a journalist of the leading French-speaking daily newspaper Le Soir. His article was entitled:

Discrimination against the Raelians?

Le Soir (03.10.2009) - The Raelians have denounced Belgium at the United Nations and at the Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe (OSCE). They are ready to file a complaint against Namur, Forest, Verviers, Arlon... At stake: the refusal by their mayors to allow the movement to express its ideas in the public space.

In July, a Raelian delegation lodged a complaint against Belgium with the UN Special Rapporteur on Freedom of Religion on the ground of religious discrimination. Last Tuesday, at the OSCE conference in Warsaw, the followers of Rael denounced the violations of their freedom of assembly and expression they are allegedly victims of in Belgium.

For the first time, on Tuesday, the representatives of the Belgian state in Warsaw started a dialogue with the movement... "Our beliefs may disturb, look strange and even be rejected," commented Eric Remacle, a Raelian priest, "but it is not a reason for forbidding us to meet and express our beliefs or for being exposed to social contempt for which our members pay a high price: the withdrawal of the custody of their children or the loss of their job."

Discrimination? The Raelians have evidence, they say: "We have sent letters to 74 municipalities in Wallonia and Brussels to rent a public hall. We have done it on our real name and on a false name for the same period. Almost everywhere - in Charleroi, Liège, Mons, Seraing, Ans or Waterloo - the answer was positive for the false organization, but negative for us. Double standards although there have never been any criminal proceedings against us or condemnations in Belgium!"

A cult list does not exist in Belgium

This summer, the French-speaking branch of the European Raelian Movement sent other requests to ask for the authorization to demonstrate in the streets of several municipalities. There again, general refusal. Some mayors alleged "risks of public order disturbance" (in Forest) and others "negative advice of the police" (Verviers and Namur) or the wrong argument according to which the Raelian movement is "considered a cult by the Belgian authorities" (in Verviers and Arlon).

"Such a list does not exist," recalls the Observatory of harmful cults (CIAOSN), a center under the authority of the Ministry of Justice which namely gives some advice to municipal authorities confronted with cults.

"We feel defamed by these mayors," Eric Remacle insists. "They have either received alarming news from their police services - a situation of particular concern - or they prefer to follow prejudices rather than the law. They leave us no other choice than to take them to court."

Waiting for the Elohim

HRWF (05.10.2009) - Website: <http://www.hrwf.net> - In a complementary article entitled "Waiting for the Elohim", Ricardo Gutierrez described the origin and the extent of the movement. He stressed that "No public power has found necessary to seize the Cult Observatory with an official request for advice on the movement."

He also quoted the Cult Observatory (CIAOSN) concerning their opinion about the Raelian Movement. In an ambiguous language, the Observatory says that the movement does not encourage pedophilia but contributes to relativize, if not to facilitate it." Interviewed by Human Rights Without Frontiers, Eric Remacle denied any encouragement to pedophilia and stressed that they were systematically denouncing pedophile priests.

"In Warsaw, we asked the Federal Cult Observatory to be suppressed because it creates more problems than it solves and it encourages hate speech," Eric Remacle added. "In an answer to a parliamentary question asked by Senator Alain Destexhe in 2006 (*), the then deputy prime minister and minister of the interior answered that "According to the CIAOSN and the state intelligence services, no illegal activity has ever been committed

by the organization on the national territory." In the same answer, it could also be read that the European Raelian Movement had never been prosecuted and sentenced on criminal charges.

(*) Questions et Réponses. Sénat de Belgique. Session 2005-2006. Question nr 3-4143 de M. Destexhe, 16 janvier 2006 : European Raelian Movement - Légalité des activités de l'association.

Translation of the article from Le Soir by HRWF.

Controversial headscarf ban hits Belgium

ITN (15.09.2009) - HRWF (15.09.2009) / Email: info@hrwf.net - Website: <http://www.hrwf.net> - Muslim schoolchildren in northern Belgium have been banned from wearing headscarves.

The Dutch-speaking region of Flanders proscribed "the wearing of all religious and philosophical signs" in all schools last week.

Up until now, each school in Flanders has had the right to decide whether or not to allow the scarf.

The Royal Athenaeum Hoboken is one of the schools where the ban had already been imposed, triggering protests by Muslim students.

The school's headmistress said the ban was necessary because non-Muslim students, or Muslim students who do not wear the scarf, had felt under pressure to conform with the majority.

Mina Chebaa, of Free Choice, a women's group opposing the ban, said Muslim schoolgirls had expressed fear of being "excluded" and were considering home-schooling.

In French-speaking southern Belgium, the decision is left to individual schools.

In neighbouring France, a 2003 law banned public school students from wearing clothes and accessories with religious connotations.

Belgian schools ban Muslim headscarf

AFP (11.09.2009) - HRWF (14.09.2009) / Email: info@hrwf.net - Website: <http://www.hrwf.net> - Dutch-language public schools in Belgium will ban the wearing of Muslim headscarves in classes, school officials in the Flanders region announced Friday.

The ban affects 700 schools in the northern region of Flanders, including some in Brussels.

It follows protests after two schools in Antwerp this month joined other schools where the Muslim headscarf, which covers the hair but does not conceal the face, is already banned.

Responding to a complaint by a student at one of the schools, Belgium's highest administrative tribunal ruled on Tuesday that schools could not take such decisions on their own.

The tribunal will rule on the student's appeal next Tuesday -- prompting the community's education board to make public its unified stance on Friday.

Belgian schools have previously enjoyed autonomy in such decisions, with one third authorising the wearing of Muslim headscarf, another forbidding them and the remainder giving no formal guidance.

The Flemish school board said the ban in communal schools would be introduced gradually to give time to those establishments which have not banned the scarf to do so. Schools in Flanders that are financed by other Belgian communities -- mostly Catholic schools run by municipalities -- are not bound by the order.

School authorities in the main Flemish town of Antwerp announced a ban on the headscarf from the start of the next academic year.

A similar debate is underway in Belgium's French-speaking Wallonia, and the Brussels capital region.

Controversy has raged in a number of European countries in recent years over the wearing Muslim headscarves and other religious garments in state or public institutions.

Bans on headscarf in schools turned down by courts

HRWF (10.09.2009) / Email: info@hrwf.net - Website: <http://www.hrwf.net> - The First Instance Court of Verviers (Wallonia) ruled on Tuesday 8 September that three Muslim girls could wear a scarf in the municipal schools of Dison (*) despite the internal regulation prohibiting it and their dismissal by the city council which had adopted a decree banning any headgear from 1 September on. On 9 September, the girls were not allowed access to their schools. On request of their lawyer, a bailiff registered the refusal.

In Antwerp, a Muslim girl enrolled at a local grammar school lodged a complaint with the Council of State against the headscarf ban. In an emergency ruling, the Council of State held that such a ban cannot be issued by the school but falls within the competence of the Flemish Community and must apply to all the schools - 700 - it is in charge of. Up to now the Flemish Community had been pragmatic and had left the choice to each of its schools according to the local situation. On 11 September, the Council of State will release its first instance decision. The situation on the ground currently looks as follows: a third of the schools have banned the headscarf, a third have explicitly tolerated it and a last third have not taken any position.

(*) Various public authorities are in charge of school education in Belgium: cities, provinces, the Flemish Community and the French Community. Faith-based schools (Catholic, Jewish and Protestant schools) are financed by the state; they have their own management structures and their own internal regulation. Catholic schools are more numerous than the various public schools all together.

Twelve students away because of headscarf ban

Volkskrant (01.09.2009) - HRWF (03.09.2009) / Email: info@hrwf.net - Website: <http://www.hrwf.net> - Twelve students have de-registered from Antwerp Koninklijk Atheneum, a grammar school, in response to the headscarf ban which came into force on Tuesday 1 September. This was the first day of the new school year in Belgium. Sixty

Muslim women - students, mothers, sisters and alumni of the school - gathered outside the school gates to protest against the headscarf ban.

Initiator of the protest was Baas Over Eigen Hoofd! (BOEH!), an action platform of various feminist groups. BOEH! had called on all students to go to school with a "stupid headgear" such as a pirate hat or an inverted colander to address the absurdity of the ban.

The police presence was discreet and did not have to intervene.

Call from Muslim community

Following the publication of the headscarf ban at the grammar school, several voices within the Muslim community urged the Muslim students to massively change school. "We have currently not noticed much impact of that call," said director Karin Heremans. "The number of registrations has remained stable in comparison with the previous years and the number of de-registrations because of the headscarf ban is currently limited to twelve. That number may however still increase because we are only aware of a de-registration when the student is enrolled elsewhere. On Thursday we will make a final assessment."

Despite the protest, the director goes on supporting the decision. "Because of the pluralism that we actively pursue, we could not but take this measure," she told news agency Belga. "In the last three years, the number of Muslims in our school has increased from 50 to almost 80 percent. Behind this is a conservative group that makes the wearing of a headscarf compulsory."

Distorted statements and biased clichés about Jehovah's Witnesses rectified in a newspaper

HRWF (19.08.2009) / Email: info@hrwf.net - Website: <http://www.hrwf.net> - Cases of defamation by some Belgian media and state institutions have already been successfully taken to court by minority religious or belief movements and their members after rights of answer or requests for rectification have been ignored by the accusers but some newspapers sometimes accept to publish a right of answer before a complaint is lodged.

On 23 July 2009, the daily Catholic newspaper "La Libre Belgique" published an article entitled "3 Questions to Henri de Cordes. Jehovah's Witnesses under supervision" (1). The Belgian "Christian Congregation of Jehovah's Witnesses" asked its lawyers to have their position published about some biased and wrong information contained in the incriminated article.

Right of answer: No tithe no collection

On 10 August 2009, the newspaper published the following statement:

"In answer to the accusation of sectarian destabilization, we want to specify that a recent Belgian study about contested religious movements concluded: 'Unlike the common idea that persons belonging to religious movements are allegedly destabilized (...), it has appeared (...) that these people do have beliefs that are essential for their adaptation to the world and for their well-being (...). Their beliefs are even present at a higher degree than the average people.'

The European Court has stated that Jehovah's Witnesses are 'a known religion'.

The statement according to which Jehovah's Witnesses are to give 10% of their income is totally wrong as no collection or tithe is organized as it is the case in other religions. The functioning costs of their congregation are covered by voluntary donations."

Right of answer: Jehovah's Witnesses condemn pedophilia

In a separate right of answer concerning their position on pedophilia, the Belgian "Christian Congregation of Jehovah's Witnesses" expressed their position as follows:

"Jehovah's Witnesses vigorously condemn all sorts of misbehaviors committed against children. They favor both prevention and aid to the victims. For several decades, their magazines have presented pedophilia as a danger against which parents and children must be warned.

The idea according to which Jehovah's Witnesses would purposefully conceal acts of sexual aggressions from the authorities is absurd and unacceptable.

Their guidelines are clear: victims must be protected and assisted; culprits must be prosecuted, without any exception.

In 1997 already, Jehovah's Witnesses asked publicly to 'denounce the culprits to the authorities.' In reality, the religious ministers of their religious movement systematically reveal to the authorities attacks which would not have been denounced by the victim or by his/her relatives."

(*) Henri de Cordes is the director of the Sect Observatory created by the Belgian Parliament after the Sect Enquiry Commission in 1997.

Council of State: the wearing of the veil can be prohibited in schools

HRWF (20.04.2009) - Website: <http://www.hrwf.net> - Email: info@hrwf.net - The schools of the French community of Belgium have the right to prohibit the wearing of the veil, the Council of State ruled in a case opposing the MRAX (Movement against racism, anti-Semitism and xenophobia) to two secondary schools in the province of Hainaut.

Two schools in Vauban and Gilly had provided in their internal rules that any headgear conspicuously revealing a religious or political membership in school was forbidden. In October 2005, the MRAX lodged a complaint to have these internal regulations cancelled. On 17 March 2009, the 11th Chamber of the Council of State, which is the highest administrative jurisdiction, dismissed the complaint. It estimated that by doing so the schools reinforced the principle of equality and fraternity.

According to a survey carried out in 2006, the veil is forbidden in 90% of the schools run by the French Community of Belgium. Another survey organized by the Centre of Psychology of Religions (Catholic University of Louvain/UCL), 53.4% of the people think that the veil is "not compatible with modernity" and 50.3 think that "it should be forbidden in some places" while 44.6% share the opinion that it has a "disturbing effect at school."

The board of directors of the MRAX will meet on 22 April to decide whether or not to take the case to the European Court in Strasbourg.

Investigation about the Transcendental Meditation movement

HRWF (20.04.2009) - Website: <http://www.hrwf.net> - Email: info@hrwf.net - The Federal Information and Advisory Center on Harmful Sectarian Organizations (CIAOSN) which depends from the Belgian Ministry of Justice has been seized by a request for information from Olivier Maingain, mayor of Woluwe-St-Lambert (a commune of Brussels), because the Transcendental Meditation movement wants to create a spiritual center in his commune.

In France, Belgium and Germany, the movement is considered a cult.

In Belgium, a prisoner who wanted to receive some teaching about transcendental meditation several years ago was denied it on the basis of a negative report provided by the Federal Information and Advisory Center on Harmful Sectarian Organizations (CIAOSN).

The movement already tried to settle in several cities but the local municipal councils refused to grant them the requested authorization.

On 4 April, Ringo Starr, Paul McCartney, the Beatles who are still alive, and many other famous singers played in a concert in New York to promote the teaching of transcendental meditation in schools. This was an initiative of the famous film-maker David Lynch who created the Foundation for Consciousness-based Education and World Peace.

This spiritual movement was launched in 1957 by Maharishi Mahesh Yogi, a student of guru Brahmananda Sarasvati. He was followed by a number of American celebrities: Mia Farrow, the Beatles, Sheryl Crow and others. Maharishi Mahesh Yogi died in The Netherlands in February 2008.

(*) In Belgium, the movement has premises in Brussels, 60 Rue Archimède. Website: <http://globalgoodnews.com>
