



EUROPEAN NETWORK ON RELIGION AND BELIEF (ENORB)

EXPLORING FREEDOMS TOGETHER

**The Interface between Sexual Orientation, Gender Identity and Expression and Religion
and Belief**

REPORT OF JOINT SEMINAR BETWEEN ENORB and ILGA-Europe

**Held at Der Markt Centrum, Brussels
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DRAFT REPORT



**332 Rue Engeland
1180 – BRUXELLES
email: [enor**o**rb@enor**o**rb.eu](mailto:enororb@enororb.eu)
website: [www.enor**o**rb.eu](http://www.enororb.eu)
twitter: [@enor**o**rb_eu](https://twitter.com/enororb_eu)**

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1. Background

The seminar was initially planned during exploratory discussions between ENORB and ILGA early in 2013. It was agreed from the outset, that the equalities issues raised at the interface of Freedom of Religion and Belief (R&B) and LGBT Rights are complex, sensitive, and had led to conflictual positions in both participating organisations. The seminar itself was therefore in an exploratory workshop format event, using methodology of the Belieforama programme. It involved a selected group of members of each organisation, representing the diversity of religion and belief – with participants from Muslim, Hindu, Sikh, Buddhist, Jewish and Christian (Catholic, Orthodox, Protestant) traditions - as well as atheist and non-religious. If successful, it was agreed from the beginning, it would be followed by further joint activities and a joint seminar of a more public nature.

2. Introduction

The fact that this seminar took the form of a workshop, with much of the time spent in group activities and small group discussions, some based on confidential information, and on specific, cases and individual experiences means that it is impossible to write a report which fully reflects the seminar. This report is therefore written to summarise the issues raised, common themes and distinctive views, and tentative conclusions reached. A full report, including an Annex 2, with a detailed record of the workshop process, with points made and conclusions drawn in each session or activity as they happened, is available from enorb@enorb.eu.

The report is designed to bring key issues to the attention of a much wider audience at European level, as well as to member-states, and to civil society networks - religion and belief, LGBT and other equalities. We also hope that the key messages and action points in the summary and final section will serve to stimulate action: first in religion and belief and LGBT communities, including religious hierarchies, especially through the proposed Joint ENORB/ILGA Task Group, but also at the level of European institutions and national governments. The key values and principles highlighted in this report, can hopefully be transformed into practical actions to tackle the discrimination, prejudice and hate-crime which are still found across Europe.

3. Summary

The Seminar objectives were:

- To explore the sources of fear and conflict between LGBT and Religion/Belief equalities
- To promote mutual understanding by exploring common ground, differences, and intersectionality
- To identify practical ways to create together inclusive spaces for all
- To identify methods of working together to fight discrimination and reduce conflict

The **Seminar Process** was successful in allowing these objectives to be met, as set out in this report:

- The methodology allowed members of both organisations first to share their hopes and fears around this initiative and its aims, and to form good inter-personal and inter-organisational dialogue relationships.
- Participants agreed on ground rules for discussing these sensitive topics, and were able to explore their identities in terms both of religion and belief, and of sexual orientation.

- Participants explored some of the conflictual aspects of the interface between religious traditions and institutions, belief and sexuality, both at the level of individual participants and as members of groups.
- Joint Action – in the form of an ENORB/ILGA Task Group to plan action on key issues (see below) – was agreed.

The **Ground Rules** agreed were:

- Willingness to listen to all views
- Honesty and open-ness in all communications
- Respect for all persons and identities
- Confidentiality of everything disclosed in discussion
- Non-judgemental basis: respect for the right of all to express views, whatever they might be, and also not to disclose information they wished to keep private.

Common Ground - some key areas were agreed:

- To each acknowledge the validity of the other's claims to equality, visibility and full equal rights
- That both communities should acknowledge and make public the points of solidarity between the two groups (eg on equalities, human rights and non-discrimination)
- To become better informed about the experience of discrimination in each others' communities
- To work within our own communities and networks (LGBT and R&B) to promote better understanding of the aims of other organisations and
- To combat the 'phobias' within certain sections of each community against the other
- Identify practical methods of working together, and in partnership with the other (eg through a task group on key issues; in academic research; in human rights activities).

Joint Action - Some areas for joint action were suggested, which should be undertaken by a joint Task Group of ILGA and ENORB:

- To explore the potential for a joint position and possible action on key areas of agreement:
 - For Freedom of Expression and the right to manifest one's identity
 - Against exclusion and extremist statements – eg by far-right groups
 - On Human Rights and Non-Discrimination in relation to both LGBT and R&B communities
- Joint working group to explore the potential for agreement and action on key policy issues where there is division, eg Education, Family Law (eg adoption, marriage, reproductive issues), Social Services
- To support joint dialogue events in member states, on broad issues of conflict and prejudice, such as homophobia, gender and sexuality, as well as on local policy issues
- To examine ways of making visible the hurt suffered by members of LGBT and R&B groups

4. Report of Seminar Sessions

4.1 Session 1

Introductory sessions on 'Hopes and Fears' and 'Ground Rules'. This session identified various fears which were shared by some participants from both networks, for example: underlying beliefs possibly not reconcilable; possible reluctance to address real issues; reconciling different aspects of identity; issues which affect some LGBT or R&B members eg questioning claims to divine inspiration.

Hopes expressed were largely shared across both groups: developing honesty; a common language and ethical basis; deeper understanding; gaining confidence to take the difficult issues back to our respective communities.

Suggested Ground Rules were also agreed, for example: confidentiality, honesty and respect for all; allow time for all to express views; no judging of others.

4.2 Session 2 and 3

These were sessions in which a group exercise explored different aspects of identity. Discussions focused more on differences and problems than common themes. First, several key themes emerged, which are summarised below. Secondly participants examined, in small groups, the different dimensions of equalities (eg sexual orientation, religion and belief, gender).

(i) Dominant Western Norms such as UN Human Rights and EU Fundamental Rights and Equalities were seen as closely related to the mainstream values of both European Religious and Non-Religious traditions and values. The Christian, Jewish and Muslim religions – each of which have a human rights tradition – and the modern reactions against religion which have led to the development of secular values (eg as expressed in Humanism) – all share fundamental values (eg freedom to express and to live a lifestyle in accordance with your identity). Non-European religions - Buddhism, Hinduism, Sikhism were represented at the seminar - have similar values in their traditions, but these are arrived at and expressed differently.

(ii) Divisions within Religious and Non-Religious Communities are a feature of the history of religion and belief, especially when one religion or belief seeks or achieves political power. In the 20th century, political regimes of both religious and non-religious orientation have legislated against, discriminated against, persecuted and in some cases killed LGBT people. Examples were given from most European countries, including:

- some from notionally Christian regimes, both Catholic and Protestant;
- some from explicitly atheist regimes, mostly communist regimes, as well as fascist regimes;
- some from mainly outside Europe - from Islamic regimes, and examples from Hindu and Buddhist regimes.

Discussion ranged around the strength of the current majority of EU Member-states which at least in principle gave legal recognition to LGBT rights. Would these survive the rise of far right 'populist' parties? The question was also raised as to whether Catholic Europe would follow the apparent new direction of the current Pope or that of his predecessor.

(iii) The Right to Express Ones Identity. Examples were given of the oppression and fear caused by living in countries or communities where LGBT people were forced to live their lives in secret, with the threat of potential or actual violence if they were revealed. There was agreement that such conditions were always a violation of fundamental rights. Similar intolerance was a feature of some religious communities. In some member-states liberal religious congregations and values are the norm, in others, there are few tolerant communities, and in some cases, persecution is encouraged by prominent religious leaders. **Possible Action:** Discussion focused on how to support LGBT people in those countries: eg by organising open dialogue events, by inter-convictional demonstrations of solidarity (examples were given from Christian and Muslim contexts).

Possible Action: A Joint Statement on Freedom to express and manifest identity

(iv) Culture, Religion and Sexual Orientation. It was strongly argued by some participants that anti-LGBT attitudes, legislation etc were more a matter of culture than religion. Two key positions were outlined: firstly the recent rise in persecution in some E.European countries (also beyond the EU in Russia), fuelled sometimes by religious figures, perpetuated cultural norms which had persisted throughout the Communist period as well as the recent religious revival. Secondly, the rejection of same-sex marriage and adoption in some countries, was mirrored in local attitudes to Muslim marriage traditions. In both cases the human rights arguments in favour of these changes were rejected on the grounds that such values were simply 'wrong' according to religious codes.

It was also pointed out by participants from minority religions that many of their adherents were first or second generation migrants from countries where there is strong, sometimes violent repression of any deviation from heterosexual social norms, and oppression on grounds of sexuality or gender may be socially sanctioned.

Possible Action: Discussions should be encouraged in member-states on such issues. A joint statement on extremism, hatred, exclusion etc could be developed .

(v) Diversity as a Fundamental Characteristic of Modern Societies. The dominant political discourse, in most countries and contexts, which mainly reproduces heterosexual social norms, was discussed. Mainstream politicians often appeal to 'traditional values' as opposed to the complex realities of modern societies, outside as well as inside Europe, which are multicultural, multi-faith/belief, with significant minority populations, both religious and LGBT groups. In addition, conformity with prejudice based on tradition is often rewarded by the political and social structures, media representation and even employment prospects.

The view that religions, or belief systems, are monolithic in character - that there is a 'Religious Agenda', a 'Catholic or Christian Agenda' or a 'Gay Agenda' was argued to be factually wrong. There may be solidarity on some issues within *and* between religion/belief minorities, and among LGBT minorities, on certain issues, while on other issues there may be deep divisions, eg education, marriage, religious belief .

There was agreement that sexuality is a complex issue in all societies, but politicians generally preferred simple positions which could be 'sold' to populations especially where there were still strong prejudices. There was discussion over whether it is possible, even in principle, to promote positive attitudes towards complexity and diversity. Could these ever be 'popular' (still less populist) agendas?

Possible Action. Joint work by ILGA and ENORB could explore the potential for consensus positions and statements on such issues which recognised complexity but emphasised tolerance.

(vi) Conflict between Equalities policies over R&B and LGBT Issues. There are certain aspects of implementing equalities policies – eg on same-sex marriage or parenting – where traditional values in religious and some non-religious are in conflict with equalities. Some statements, eg from certain religious leaders, can be viewed as homophobic. All religions have certain rules, regulations, norms on gender relations, celibacy, divorce, marriage and sexual freedom (both before and after marriage). It was agreed that in modern plural societies, there is a large area for discussion and debate about the rights of religions and LGBT groups to express their views. Some areas were explored and some basic areas of agreement emerged from discussion:

- EU citizens of whatever religion, belief or sexual orientation should be able to express their religion and belief, and their sexual orientation freely.
- This freedom should apply both to public spaces, and to practice within specific groups, such as Religion or Belief Communities and LGBT groups.

- The prevailing norms in those societies where freedom of expression is limited should be challenged both by LGBT groups and religion and belief groups such as ENORB, wherever possible through joint action.

Possible Action: Work towards joint statement on Equalities

(vii) Education in Diversity: religion, belief, sexual orientation. The position is complex: on religion/belief, education, the various secular/political settlements between Church and State across Europe which underpin modern European societies have developed different way of funding and providing (or not providing – as in France) religious education. It was agreed that the teaching of religion in schools needs to reflect today's diverse and plural Europe rather than reflecting the dominant religion or non-religious belief system, to the exclusion of other minority perspectives.

Sex Education however is still only part of the formal school curriculum in a minority of EU countries, and sex education which includes teaching and open discussion of different forms of sexual orientation is provided only in a minority of member-states. Sex education was agreed to be a complex issue which required further consideration by the two networks working together.

But education for diversity was seen by participants as central to young people's education in order to understand contemporary culture, as well as to their spiritual and moral development.

Possible Action: Joint working group (see viii)

(viii) Human Rights (including LGBT) and Religion and Belief. The broader area of relations between the state, human rights, religion, especially the church(es) and non-religious beliefs was agreed as an essential topic for dialogue in every member-state. Participants welcomed the existing diversity of forms of secularism in Europe, and agreed that the principle that European fundamental rights, and the values on which they are based, should be applied without any hierarchy. But it was recognised that these principles raised complex, and, in the case of certain religious perspectives, conflictual issues, which it was the responsibility of both state and religion/belief institutions to address. This was seen as a positive priority for the two organisations, ENORB and ILGA, especially ENORB members to take back to their member-state governments and religious authorities and communities – to open up discussion of these key issues. These should include homophobia in some sections of religious communities (including hierarchies). Some members also wanted to raise similar issues on religion and belief – that governments should also be challenged which took a restrictive line on R&B issues, such as which religions could be recognised, or which had the right to manifest their religious affiliation freely. Key areas were education (see vii), family law (eg adoption, marriage, reproduction), social services.

Possible Action: Joint working group to explore the key areas and seek consensus.

4.3 Session 4

Examining and Confronting the Issues This session drew on the work of earlier sessions, first to explore and brainstorm key issues raised: what are the points of mutual interest, the potential risks and obstacles, and the areas which need greater attention, and secondly to reach some conclusions, and decide on next steps.

Common Ground: Points of Mutual Interest These included the underpinning principles shared between ILGA and ENORB, and all the EU equalities and fundamental rights networks; freedom of expression; freedom of assembly; freedom to manifest one's identity in public; equal treatment before the law; and non-discrimination in employment. As fellow humans, as

members of LGBT minorities, and as members of R&B minorities, we all share certain individual experiences which can form a basis for increasing our mutual understanding, including:

- The need to feel free to express and make visible our identity
- Experiences both of feeling vulnerable, and of the search for happiness and fulfilment
- Moments of 'coming out' with some aspect of our identity.

In addition, there was common ground, for the two communities, LGBT and R&B, around the following needs:

- To acknowledge the validity of the other's claims to equality and visibility
- To make visible and public the points of solidarity between the two groups
- To become better informed about the shared experience of discrimination in each others' communities
- To work within our own communities and networks to promote better understanding of the other
- To combat the 'phobias' within certain sections of each community against the other
- Identify practical methods of working together, and in partnership with the other (eg in joint statements, academic research; in human rights activities).

Participants then identified some risks and obstacles to working together, some of which need greater attention and joint exploration in smaller groups:

- Detailed work is needed in both R&B and LGBT communities to explore difficult areas – for example:
 - Where is the boundary between homophobia, and freedom to express a position based on belief?
 - Is there a need for repentance on the part of some churches/R&B communities?
 - What are the deep assumptions and beliefs on both sides?
 - How can we publicly acknowledge the deep and legitimate sense of hurt experienced by LGBT communities

Participants then identified some ways to overcome these obstacles:

- There is not always conflict between the two groups. Some sections of our communities may be loud in their negative statements, but they do not represent all. We must set up mechanisms to support the positive voices.
- Some leaders do not have the support of the people they supposedly represent
- We should aim higher than for tolerance or a minimum core of agreement
- We need to create space for dialogues such as this which include more strongly opposed voices in R&B and LGBT communities
- We agree to work together to encourage greater knowledge on both sides in order to build mutual trust
- First Steps should be undertaken by a joint Task Group to take action on the key issues identified in this report.

5. Conclusions and Next Steps

During the seminar, participants shared views and experiences on highly sensitive topics and the process worked well. The experience provided participants with a new confidence that there is great potential for working together on some activities which will have practical results. These could also lead to outcomes which could be available to the wider public. There is a need first however for participants to go back to their communities and grassroots where there are more conservative/reluctant voices, and to share with them what they have learnt

and experienced. There is also a need to go a bit deeper on some issues where there is division and find out which issues we can agree on, and on which issues some of us may have to agree to disagree.

It was agreed that a Task Group could be set up to explore what joint action was needed, and how the conclusions could be put into practice. Several representatives of member organisations, along with ILGA and ENORB, agreed to join the Task Group.

Annex I Programme

Interface between Sexual Orientation, Gender Identity and Expression, and Religion and Belief Joint Seminar – ENORB and ILGA-Europe - 19 September 2013

Agenda

Venue: Demarkten place in Oude Graanmarkt, 5 1000 Brussels. Conference Hall 2.

10:30	Registration and coffee
<i>Building the foundation for mutual understanding and mutual learning</i>	
11:00	Welcome and Introduction – why are we doing this? Reconciling religion and LGBTI movements. Defining Intersectionality. <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Evelyne Paradis, Executive Director of ILGA-Europe - Alan Murray, President of ENORB Introduction of participants
11:30	<i>Mutual understanding</i> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - What are your hopes and fears for dealing with the issues of religion, belief, sexual orientation and gender identity? - Questions that you never dared to ask - Establishing ground rules for discussions
13:00	Lunch break
<i>Identities</i>	
14:00	<i>Multiple identities and intersectionality</i> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - What are the common themes relating to sexual orientation, gender identity, gender expression and to religion and belief? - Examples of intersectionality and their impact.
15:30	Coffee break

<i>Examining issues</i>	
15:45	<p><i>Key issues</i></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - What are some key issues that we face and our different perspectives about them?
<i>Confronting Issues</i>	
16:45	<p>Creating inclusive and safe spaces for all, the way forward</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - What are the points of mutual interest in the equality agendas of LGBTI and religion/belief movements? - What are the areas that deserve greater attention to reconcile points of opposition? - What are the risks and obstacles which we may face in our efforts towards reconciliation? How can we overcome them?
17:45	Conclusions by Alan Murray and Evelyne Paradis.
18:00	End of the event