

Center for Inquiry Defends Freedom of Expression at the U.N. Human Rights Council

The Center holds special consultative status with the United Nations Economic and Social Council, where it focuses on issues of freedom of expression and scientific inquiry in the international community.

New Report Critiques Movement at United Nations that would Prohibit "Defamation of Religions"

United Nations, Geneva (September 17, 2008)—As a coalition of Islamic states leads a movement to restrict freedom of expression that "defames" religion, the Center for Inquiry is speaking at the Ninth Session of the United Nations Human Rights Council in Geneva to defend liberty to doubt, dissent, and blaspheme. At a September 17 briefing at the Council, CFI released a new position paper, which critiques an effort led by the Organization of the Islamic Conference to undermine the universality of human rights.

The Organization of the Islamic Conference (OIC), an umbrella organization of 57 Islamic states, has appropriated the traditions of Islam and Islamic law to contend that so-called "Western" conceptions of universal rights do not apply to their citizens. This effort has penetrated even the Human Rights Council (HRC), the United Nations body charged with defending universal rights.

In place of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, members of the OIC have adopted rival declarations, including the 1981 Universal Islamic Declaration of Human Rights, and the 1990 Cairo Declaration on Human Rights in Islam. Despite official claims that they are "complementary," both undermine equality of persons and freedom of expression and religion by imposing restrictions on nearly every human right based on Islamic Sharia law.

In the HRC, a March 2008 resolution assigned the Special Rapporteur for Freedom of Expression with the task of reporting abuses of free speech that offend religious belief. Non-governmental organizations have been silenced. Meanwhile, the General Assembly has passed yearly resolutions combating "the defamation of religions" and "Islamophobia." However, believers are already protected from dangerous incitement by existing human rights instruments. The new proposals seek nothing less than a blasphemy prohibition to protect belief itself.

"Rights belong to individuals, not ideas," states the Center for Inquiry report, titled "Islam and Human Rights: Defending Universality at the United Nations." It describes the efforts by the OIC and its political allies seek to create a parallel system of human rights, and how some UN agencies are considering the integration of "defamation of religions"

into international human rights law. Such an outcome would be "legally indefensible, morally objectionable, and politically disastrous," according to the report.

RECOMMENDATIONS:

- Permit free discussion of religious matters at the HRC. When states use religion or culture as a justification for either human rights resolutions or transgressions, they must not be granted immunity from criticism, regardless of the sensitivities or cultural particularities involved.
- Restore the original mandate of the Special Rapporteur for Freedom of Expression. The proper limits to free expression and threats to religious liberty are addressed by existing instruments. An official who protects free speech cannot simultaneously limit it.
- Reject the concept of "the defamation of religions." Believers deserve protection. Beliefs do not. Member states must move to stop these resolutions by the General Assembly and prevent the legal entrenchment of the concept of "defamation of religions."
- Clarify the status of Islamic human rights. HRC members and UN member states generally must voice their concerns about the "Islamization" of rights discourse, and its consistency with universal standards.

On Friday, September 19, representatives of the Center for Inquiry will address the Human Rights Council main session on the topic of the defamation of religions. Past interventions by non-governmental organizations in favor of secularism have been interrupted by representatives of the OIC.

The new CFI position paper is online at www.centerforinquiry.net/UN