



Nazila Ghanea:

“Minority Rights Protections under International Human Rights Law”

Summary

Dr. Nazila Ghanea, who lectures in International Human Rights Law at the University of Oxford, expanded on international normative standards in relation to both freedom of religion or belief as well as minority rights. She commented that the human rights conditions in many parts of the world fell short of these standards. Many states either understood freedom of religion or belief primarily in a purely individual sense, concerned only with private and individual practice of religion or belief. Other states, including a number in the Middle East, have historical systems of recognition of particular religious minorities and give insufficient attention to freedom of religion or belief more generally.

Speaking at a conference on the Future of Religious Communities in the Middle East, hosted by St. Antony's College in Oxford and supported by Christian Solidarity International, Dr. Ghanea addressed the challenges and issues facing religious minorities, including in the Middle East today, and the intersection of these issues with international legal standards.

Dr. Ghanea observed that, in contravention to these international human rights standards, many states do not recognize the broad scope of their nations' religions or beliefs. She noted the observation of the UN Human Rights Committee that freedom of religion should not be limited to traditional religious communities, adding that "sectarianism and polarization risks fuelling this narrow application." Ghanea also recalled international human rights standards regarding minority rights. These uphold the need for religious minorities to "be free to enjoy and practice their language, religion and traditions"; to be "allowed to participate not only in decision-making processes on matters that concern them directly, but also as effective participants in public and economic life."

While some states view religious belief - and individuals' decisions to change their religion or belief - as a "sensitive issue," Ghanea emphasized that international standards uphold the right to change religion or belief and also that the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights does not even allow "freedom of religion or belief to be derogated from even in times of public emergency."