

The recognition of Buddhism in Belgium

Status June 2010

Background

The Belgian Buddhist Union unites different Buddhist associations. The objective of the BBU is to obtain an official recognition for Buddhism in Belgium and to act as an interlocutor towards the Belgian government.

In Belgium the role of religions and philosophies in society are seen as highly important. Therefore the State recognizes them and financially supports their organization and activities.

Two terms, used in article 181 of the Belgian constitution are used to denote these activities. In Dutch: 'eredienst' en 'morele dienstverlening', in French: 'culte' and 'assistance morale'. 'Eredienst/culte' have their place in constitution since the beginning of Belgium. 'Morele dienstverlening/assistance morale' was added later to allow equal rights to atheist philosophies such as the now recognised freethinking philosophy.

'Eredienst/culte' can be translated in English as worship, 'morele dienstverlening/assistance morale' as moral service or assistance. The common term in the Dutch terminology is 'dienst' which means service. The service in 'eredienst' however is directed upward to a God. The service in 'morele dienstverlening' goes to human beings. When asking for the recognition of Buddhism we had to choose between one of the two.

The Lord Buddha never asked people to worship a god nor worship him as a god. Even though he is highly respected and venerated he is not a god but a teacher, who taught us how to lead a happy life. In his own words: he taught only about suffering and the cessation of suffering. Monks and teachers after him have continued this teaching. This activity of teaching comes much closer to 'morele dienstverlening/assistance morale' than 'eredienst/culte'. So we unanimously chose the first on philosophical grounds.

There turned out to be another good reason for this choice, we realised. The legislation concerning 'morele dienstverlening/assistance morale' is much more recent than the legislation on 'eredienst/culte' which dates from the time of Napoleon with numerous later changes and additions. Therefore it is much more straightforward and suited to our purpose.

History

March 20 th 2006: official demand to recognition of Buddhism, addressed to the Minister of Justice Mrs. Onkelinx.

March 30th 2007: communication to the press of Mrs. Onkelinx with following conclusion: "After analysis of the dossier, no objection was found to start the recognition procedure for the religion of Buddhism in Belgium.

November 20 th 2008: publication of the Royal Decree concerning the subsidization of the non-profit association "Boeddhistische Unie van België" – "Union Bouddhique Belge".

December 20 th 2008: The BBU organises the first "General Directory of Buddhism" to which attended over 400 persons from all Buddhist traditions within the BBU to think about the themes of restructuring and social impact of Buddhism in Belgium.

November 18 th 2009: Answer of Minister of Justice Mr. Stefaan Decleek to a question of Mrs. Mia De Schampheleere in the Chamber of Commission for Justice in which is referred to the working party of experts that is responsible for the reformation of the legislation of ceremony and non-confessional philosophical associations.

Current situation: Monthly consultation of BBU and FOD Justice for the preparation of the structuring and final recognition.

For more information, please contact:

Edel Maex
Secretary General of the Belgian Buddhist Union

Tel: 0496 24 74 53

edel.maex@buddhism.be

www.buddhism.be

Appendix

Belgische Grondwet, nederlandstalige versie:

Art. 181

§ 1. De wedden en pensioenen van de bedienaren der erediensten komen ten laste van de Staat; de daartoe vereiste bedragen worden jaarlijks op de begroting uitgetrokken.

§ 2. De wedden en pensioenen van de afgevaardigden van de door de wet erkende organisaties die morele diensten verlenen op basis van een niet-confessionele levensbeschouwing, komen ten laste van de Staat; de daartoe vereiste bedragen worden jaarlijks op de begroting uitgetrokken.

Constitution Belge, version francophone:

Art. 181

§ 1er. Les traitements et pensions des ministres des cultes sont à la charge de l'État; les sommes nécessaires pour y faire face sont annuellement portées au budget.

§ 2. Les traitements et pensions des délégués des organisations reconnues par la loi qui offrent une assistance morale selon une conception philosophique non confessionnelle sont à la charge de l'État; les sommes nécessaires pour y faire face sont annuellement portées au budget.

Source : <http://www.senate.be>