



**THE HOLY SEE**  
**Human Dimension Implementation Meeting**  
*Working Session 15: Fundamental freedoms II:*  
*Freedom of thought, conscience, religion or belief*  
**Wednesday, September 30, 2015**

Mr. Moderator,

Respect for religious freedom lies at the very heart of security and stability in the OSCE area. Attempts to eclipse the role of religion in public life represent not only a reductive notion of the nature of the human person, but also stifle the development of authentic peace and almost certainly cause a less just society. Defending a transcendent vision of human dignity that goes beyond the merely immanent and material dimension serves to safeguard the common good of believers and non-believers alike and establishes the basis on which those with the least voice in society are themselves defended by such a vision.

A correct understanding of the nature of freedom of religion or belief appreciates that this pinnacle of human freedom is an inalienable right rooted in the transcendent dignity of the human person which can never be superseded by apparently competing rights. It includes, at both individual and collective levels, not only freedom of worship but also the freedom to follow one's conscience in religious matters and the freedom to live coherently by manifesting one's views in public. Participating States' commitments to pursue freedom of religion or belief certainly includes the duty to protect adequately public manifestations of religious belief.

We note with distress that there are already many warning signs which indicate that freedom of religion lies at risk of becoming more and more limited, while the human rights of those who wish to profess and practise their faith freely, including Christians in particular, are often not guaranteed. We have already heard even from some of the highest instances in society that religious institutions, more concretely the Catholic Church, must change teachings or positions regarding the human person. History already demonstrates abundantly how tragic and ultimately futile similar attempts have proved to be. Christians must be enabled to participate fully in public life on an equal footing with other human beings, be they members of other religions or non-believers.

Far from being a mere concession of the state or society, freedom of religion is an inalienable and universal human right. It should be clear that the state's obligation is only to acknowledge and protect, but not to grant, the right to freedom of religion and its free and full exercise. International law recognizes that freedom of conscience and religion belongs to the essential core of natural rights which positive law can never legitimately deny. The right to freedom of religion or belief derives from the unique dignity of the human person created in the image of God and endowed with reason and free will. One should, also, at all times keep in mind that the right to freedom of religion is intrinsically related to the right to freedom of expression.

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In this regard, it is essential to appreciate that religions are not simply sets of norms or teachings but are living communities based on faith or belief, and their freedom guarantees their contribution of moral values without which the freedom of everyone is not possible. They are not to be considered a foreign body within society, but rather as representing its vital parts. Indeed, recognizing the freedom of religion of individuals or communities does not limit others' freedom. On the contrary, the acceptance of the religious freedom of other persons and groups is the cornerstone of dialogue and cooperation and guarantee of all other freedoms, including freedom of expression and peaceful assembly and association. If freedom of religion is not respected, inevitably many other freedoms will be eroded as well.

Thank you, Mr. Moderator.