



**STATEMENT OF THE HOLY SEE**  
**2019 Human Dimension Implementation Meeting**

*Working session 7: Fundamental freedoms I, including: Freedom of thought, conscience,  
religion, or belief*

**Warsaw, 19 September 2019**

Mr. Moderator,

Our Delegation has “a particular duty to insist on the centrality of the freedom of religion or belief, not because it ignores other freedoms, but because the freedom of religion or belief is the litmus test for the respect of all other human rights and fundamental freedoms.”<sup>1</sup> It is the hallmark of all other human rights, since it concerns the most intimate realm of the spirit. It is a question of respecting the most sensitive area of a person’s autonomy, allowing her/him to act in accordance with the dictates of conscience both in private and public life. In this way, religious freedom is like a barometer which accurately indicates the true level of freedom within a society. Despotic systems in every age have always aimed to gain strict control over faith and religious communities, and thus even the beliefs of the individual, since there are no authoritarian regimes which espouse authentic religious freedom. All restrictions of religious freedom lead to a weakening of society.

Ever since it was explicitly mentioned in the VII Principle of the Helsinki Decalogue, and evidenced by the fact that it has been re-affirmed and detailed in many other subsequent commitments, the protection of religious freedom has continued to occupy a central place in the comprehensive approach of OSCE to security. This explicit structural link between human rights, and in particular freedom of religion or belief, on the one hand, and security, on the other, represents a unique feature of OSCE. It heightens awareness of freedom of religion or belief not only as a universal human right to be protected for itself, but also as a fundamental factor for the building and well-being of our societies, as well as for the creation of security within and between the participating States.

The sum of the commitments adopted during the years demonstrates that freedom of religion or belief encompasses not only the right to manifest one’s religion or belief, on the individual and collective levels, through worship, teaching, practice, and observance, but also to follow one’s conscience in religious matters and to live coherently by manifesting one’s beliefs in public, without being coerced to conceal them.

OSCE commitments enshrine not only the inviolability of individual conscience, but also the religious dimension in its specificity as a socially organized phenomenon.

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<sup>1</sup> Statement by Archbishop Paul Richard Gallagher, Secretary for the Holy See’s Relations with States, at 22nd OSCE Ministerial Council.

Consequently, the right of religious communities to exist as autonomous organizations is recognized in OSCE commitments. In this respect, my Delegation welcomes again the *Guidelines on the Legal Personality of Religious or Belief Communities*, which represent a benchmark document at the disposal of those involved in drafting, reviewing and applying the relevant legislation. While the establishment of registration mechanisms for religious communities, enabling these communities to function within the administrative and legislative parameters of a given State in accordance with the rule of law, are clearly in line with this OSCE commitment, States should be vigilant that such mechanisms do not become in and of themselves a violation of the freedom of religion or belief. Moreover, it should always be kept in mind that in the regime that governs access to legal personality, participating States must also respect the autonomy of religious or belief communities.

The concrete consequence of a failure to understand freedom of religion or belief, as well as attempts to circumscribe what this fundamental freedom actually is, indicates the ever-increasing presence of a reductionist approach to, or understanding of, freedom of religion or belief. This worrying phenomenon seeks to limit the freedom of religion or belief. The result, by limiting it to that which takes place in the internal, private, unseen sphere, is to limit or indeed silence any public involvement based on religious faith or morals, again striving to confine it to the internal sphere. Furthermore, by limiting religious freedom contrary to international law, the results are seen under some guise of “political correctness”. Such discomfort or opposition to religion labels faith and its moral tenants as hostile, even offensive, and therefore, in need of elimination.

On the contrary, a society that grants freedom of religion or belief is a society that unleashes for its own benefit the potential for active and constructive engagement, as well as the advancement of the common good that is to be found in the work of religious communities. Religious freedom then becomes the juridical context which allows religious communities to contribute actively to democratic debate and to the promotion of a shared culture of human rights. Although some concepts of “civil society” – a word so often in use – deliberately exclude faith communities, others include them, also in recognition of the numerous associations of religious inspiration that work in and for society, as well as the network of informal associations and support groups within faith communities that form an integral part of the fabric of society. To value civil society means to accept its multifaceted nature: for each religion, it means recognising the freedom of other religions, and of those men and women who do not recognize the transcendent; for society it implies recognizing religious communities as subjects participating, with every right, in the building of that same society. In today’s context of multicultural societies, respect for religious freedom is one of the fundamental factors by which the health of a given democracy can be evaluated as ensuring truly a home for everyone.

Thank you, Mr. Moderator.