

OSCE Human Dimension Implementation Meeting 2019
Working Session 7 –Statement by the Delegation of Canada, delivered by Counsellor Daniel
Barbarie, Thursday, September 19, 2019

Moderator,

Canada's approach to promoting and protecting freedom of religion or belief is grounded in our efforts to foster greater inclusion and respect for diversity, both within Canada and abroad. As a human right, freedom of religion or belief aims to facilitate the free search and development of faith-related identities of human beings, as individuals and in community with others. The right to freedom of religion or belief does not, however, shield religious traditions or religions against criticism. Nor does it protect members of religious communities from critical questions.

The freedom to believe or not believe, and to choose one's religious beliefs freely, is a central component of diversity and inclusion. Societies that embrace diversity and protect freedom of religion or belief are typically more inclusive, resilient, prosperous, and peaceful. Individuals who are free to express their identity and practice their faith, or withhold from practicing a faith, in safety and security, are also free to contribute to the economic, cultural, and political developments of their country. In short, we are collectively stronger when people can freely believe or not believe without fear of repression or oppression.

The reality, however, is that religious persecution continues to grow globally, including in the OSCE region. This persecution is multi-faceted, but includes directed government intervention, in the form of favouritism of religious groups, limits on religious activities of minority groups, and the fanning of religious intolerance for political gain.

In light of this reality, and as participating States, we must work together through our multilateral institutions to ensure religious minorities are protected. At its core, this means continuing to staunchly defend universal human rights as well as the integrity of the rules-based international order.

We are proud to have supported the establishment of the International Day on Commemorating the Victims of Acts of Violence Based on Religion or Belief. Canada has been

a longstanding advocate for the rights of religious minorities. In 2015, we launched the International Contact Group on Freedom of Religion or Belief. Diverse participants contribute to this nimble platform to facilitate joint advocacy, policy, and programming responses.

Canada is not perfect, however, as discrimination and hate exist in our society too, amongst those who reject others' beliefs or religions. We must be willing to stand up to the growing discrimination and xenophobia facing many of these communities. We are working to combat this scourge of intolerance, and will speak in greater detail to our efforts towards countering discrimination in Working Session 13 next week.

In conclusion, moderator, we would like to propose the following three recommendations for this session:

- 1) That ODIHR expand its training on its 2015 *Guidelines on the Legal Personality of Religious or Belief Communities*, in order to assist participating States in overturning the onerous and opaque state registration procedures found in many parts of the OSCE region;
- 2) That participating States ensure that legislation pertaining to the registration of religious organizations embraces the principles of Article 18 of the ICCPR; and that legislation is not used to obstruct and curtail activities of religious communities as seen in the case of Jehovah's Witnesses in Russia and some parts of Central Asia;
- 3) That participating States respect the right of those individuals who wish to change their religion or belief, hold no belief, or ascribe to so-called "non-traditional" religions.