



STATEMENT OF THE HOLY SEE
2018 Human Dimension Implementation Meeting
Working Session 7: Freedom of religion or belief
Warsaw, 13 September 2018

As delivered by Monsignor Fredrik Hansen

Madam Moderator,

It is well known that during the negotiations at the Conference on Security and Cooperation in Europe, which led in 1975 to the adoption of the Helsinki Final Act, it was the Holy See that called upon the participating States to recognize explicitly the right to religious freedom.

Our Delegation had, and continues to have, “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. The Holy See is convinced that ‘belief’ contributes, for both individuals and communities, to respect for freedom of thought, the search for truth, personal and social justice and the rule of law, all of which are necessary if there is to be a just relationship between citizens, institutions and States.”¹

Nevertheless, in certain societies, religions can be perceived, and are perceived, as a source of intolerance rather than of social harmony. They are felt to be a threat to tolerance, peace and security, rather than an enrichment and a contribution to cultural and social development. The situation is dangerous to the extent that by contributing to the creation of a negative attitude towards religions and believers, it will harm the well-being of these persons and communities, as well as of society as a whole. States have a responsibility to promote the common good, social peace and coexistence among the nations. Thus, they have the duty to guarantee such goods by respecting pluralism and protecting the freedom of religion or belief of everyone.

The Holy See affirms that the OSCE – based on the very commitments adopted through consensus by all participating States – is bound to reject what may be called a *reductionist approach to or understanding of freedom of religion or belief*. Such an approach or understanding seeks to privatize religions, to reduce them “to the quiet obscurity of the individual’s conscience or to relegate them to the enclosed

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

precincts of churches, synagogues or mosques”,² revealing not only a failure to appreciate the true sense of freedom of religion or belief, but also the legitimate role of religion in the public square.

The international instruments enshrine not only the inviolability of individual conscience, but also the religious dimension in its specificity as a socially organized phenomenon. Consequently, the right of religious communities to exist as autonomous organizations is already recognized in international instruments and in the OSCE commitments. In this respect my Delegation welcomes again the *Guidelines on the Legal Personality of Religious or Belief Communities*, which represents a benchmark document containing minimum international standards at the disposal of those involved in drafting, reviewing and applying legislation in this field.

Recognizing the positive contribution religion and interreligious dialogue can play in society,³ and in the advancement of peace and security within and between States, is an important step in moving beyond the distorted idea that religion constitutes only a “problem”. The Holy See considers interreligious dialogue, as well as dialogue between religious communities and participating States, as an important means in promoting greater tolerance, respect and understanding between believers of different communities and between believers and non-believers, and in ensuring the stability and security of our democratic societies. My Delegation welcomes the work of the ODIHR in this field and encourages it to continue its analysis and reflection concerning interreligious dialogue and dialogue between religious communities and governmental bodies, keeping in mind the differences between these two forms of dialogue.

Madam Moderator,

One of the main challenges facing those who today stand up for and defend freedom of religion or belief is convincing people that in a secular age religious freedom is an important right worthy of protection. The exercise of religious freedom by all constitutes both an element of personal fulfilment and a contribution to the good of society. Only a robust respect of this freedom can guarantee the free and full development of our societies, since the States, through active promotion of religious freedom, foster the growth of people in freedom and in moral integrity.

Thank you, Madam Moderator!

² Pope Francis, *Evangelii Gaudium*. 255

³ Cf. Madrid 1983 (Questions Relating to Security in Europe: Principles); Vienna 1989 (Questions Relating to Security in Europe: Principles), 16.5, 16.11.