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Session II: Inter-cultural, inter-faith and inter-ethnic partnerships as a tool to counter stereotypes and prejudice and to promote mutual respect and understanding in public and political discourse

The OSCE Tolerance Implementation Meeting on Promoting Inter-Cultural, Inter-religious and Inter-Ethnic Understanding
Almaty (Kazakhstan) 12-13 June 2006

Mrs. Moderator,

For some time now the OSCE has been working to promote tolerance and fight discrimination. The organization is also seeking to collaborate with the United Nations on the project "Alliance of civilizations".

Even though some objectives have been achieved, there is still a long way to go in fully eradicating prejudice and stereotypes and establishing inter-cultural, inter-ethnic and inter-religious partnerships.

The purpose of this Meeting and, in particular, the proposals that may come out of this session are conditioned by the recent events related to the publication of the satirical cartoons regarding Prophet Mohamed and the grave offense of religious sensibilities caused by them.

As can often happen, the consequences of such acts not only cause reactions among the affected religious group in question, but they can also lead to a chain of consequences regarding other religious traditions.

The recent murder of a Catholic priest in Turkey, the aggressions and threats to other Christians, episodes of violence in Iraq, Lebanon and other parts of the world are clear examples of the consequences of the dissemination of such caricatures. They imply not a single effect, but a chain reaction that draws into it people of other faiths.

At the same time, the question is raised about the appropriateness of religious symbols and religious identity displayed in the public sphere. What used to be a simple exercise of freedom of expression is now called into question. These trends offer us an opportune moment to focus on the issue of religious identity and its place in society in the context of freedom of speech and religious distinctiveness.

In order to counter actions like the satirical caricatures and the sad events that followed their publication, the OSCE should continue its struggle against discrimination and intolerance, not only affecting Moslems and Jews, but also Christians. This wider approach would allow for a more

effective way to address serious and persistent problems concerning inter-religious and inter-cultural partnerships. It would also be an occasion to show how democracies can respect and protect religious communities and their religious liberty in their specific plurality.

Discrimination and intolerance of Christians is not only evident in media that work in OSCE member countries, but also in the general cultural environment. This should in no way be overlooked or not taken seriously by the OSCE and by ODHIR's programmes, if an effective inter-cultural and inter-religious partnership is to be promoted by this Organization.

Some examples may illustrate the importance of this issue. A few months ago an animated cartoon series containing a satire on the life of the Pope in the Vatican was broadcast. The series not only ridiculed specific aspects of Christian faith, but also presented Church authorities as criminals involved in different kinds of malicious activities. Even though many Christians protested against this cartoon series, the TV production has been broadcast in several countries and its distribution on DVD has increased due precisely to the protests of different religious entities.

A few months earlier, in the context of a variety show, a TV channel broadcast what was supposed to be a comedy satire showing a housewife explaining how to cook a Crucifix as if it where a kitchen recipe programme.

Recently, five Web sites where closed down due to their offensive contents against the Catholic Church, using vulgar vocabulary against different aspects of the Catholic faith. The websites also offered the distribution of t-shirts and clothes with blasphemous writings on them.

The mockery of Christian faith is not only present in the mass media or on the Internet. Unfortunately, this kind of religious disdain is also reflected in the arts. Recently a stage play ridiculed Christ's message as if it were something absurd and ridiculous for the contemporary man. The organizers defended themselves affirming that "Humour is a part of Social Debate". Another stage show mocked Christian liturgy, making fun of Christian symbols and their significance. The title of this play itself constitutes an insult to those who believe in One true God.

Recently, it was reported that in the course of an official visit some politicians joked about the passion of Christ with one of them placing a crown of thorns over his head while other members of the committee took photographs and made sarcastic remarks.

These examples of discrimination and intolerance towards Christians reflect a general atmosphere in which there is a tendency to disdain

Christian symbols and institutions. Even though such discrimination is often disguised under the concept of "humour", we must remember that language is performative. This means that when we say something, we are at the same time doing something, even if its only provoking.

This takes us to the core of inter-religious and inter-cultural dialogue that relates also to the use of language. We tend to believe that when we talk about religious and cultural issues we operate with the proper terminology. But the fact is that the common misuses of certain expressions are at the base of prejudice and discrimination. For example the use of an expression such as "Western culture" in contrast with "Islam" often creates great confusion since it combines a geopolitical term with a religious identity. Apart from sowing the seeds of a clear cultural prejudice, expressions like these tend to give religious terms an ideological nature.

Another example would be the common confusion we find in popular language when, for example, someone says "Islamists" when they mean "Muslims", or when someone uses the adjective "papist" to refer to "Catholics". As naïve as it may seem, these kind of expressions contribute to the consolidation of numerous prejudices that remain in the popular mind and contribute to the widespread misunderstanding of the religious other.

The problem of vocabulary is directly connected to the issue of public discourse and its place in democracy. Freedom of speech, freedom of information, and freedom of the press represent the heart of democracy. A responsible public and political discourse recognizes the vital necessity of the free flow of information and the impact it has on shaping public perception. A responsible public and political discourse is mindful of its ethical responsibility to the public and its need to respect and defend human rights. It does not, therefore, fuel or engender discrimination based on ethnicity, religion or cultural traditions. It builds partnerships, by avoiding discriminatory or denigrating references to cultures, ethnicities and religions. But if the main vocabulary and its common use are contaminated with deviations of sense, we find ourselves with the roots of discrimination and prejudice. Public discourse, then, inevitably needs some kind of monitoring in order to assure respect and tolerance. And such monitoring should come from civic authorities.

This brings us to the subject of civic authorities and their part in the abolition of religious and cultural prejudice. For a long time inter-religious and inter-cultural dialogue have stressed the role of religions and cultural groups in dialogue. Nevertheless civic authorities should commit themselves to support a responsible public and political discourse that does not refer to religions or religious institutions in a prejudicial, biased

or pejorative context, not only regarding Judaism and Islam, but also regarding Christianity.

If, in the name of a mistaken interpretation of freedom of expression, state or civic authorities allow offences against religious sentiments of individuals or entire communities, this state of affairs would not only fail to contribute, but would rather risk to jeopardize the "Alliance of civilizations" and dialogue among different cultures and religions.

At the same time, if participating states ignore the place of religion in society and forbid its public expressions, they endanger a fundamental right of the individual and of religious-based communities.

Respect and promotion of the fundamental rights of expression and religious liberty are guaranteed through a conscious balance that seeks to safeguard the real exercise of both rights. Such a balance is only possible if based on the sensitivity and respect of the media and public discourse and in recognition of religious particularities. This balance, in fact, presupposes not only a respect for others, but also our knowledge of them and their particular sensibilities.

In this context people of other faiths and cultures should express themselves in their uniqueness without demeaning the cultural identity of others through verbal or nonverbal communication. At the same time, journalists and politicians should be particularly careful about the political and social consequences of their actions.

In conclusion, a direct dialogue between religious and civic authorities is a fundamental path towards the implementation of effective and successful partnership in the OSCE participating States. The responsibility of civic authorities in assuring respect in public discourse and the task of religious and cultural traditions explaining properly their identity in the public sphere constitute a central challenge for this purpose. No partnership can be built if religious stereotyping and hatred are not avoided and eradicated.

It is my earnest wish that these considerations may help the tolerance agenda of the OSCE in the promotion of inter-religious and inter-cultural respect and understanding in public and political discourse.

Thank you Mrs. Moderator.