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INSTITUTE ON RELIGION AND PUBLIC POLICY

The experience regarding the publication of cartoons depicting the Prophet Mohammed and the subsequent violent reactions across the Islamic world raised the attention of the global community to the misconceptions and lack of educated awareness within the media on matters relating to religion and belief.

In all societies, there is a need for the media to act with sensitivity and responsibility when addressing issues of special significance for the adherents of any particular faith.

We fully uphold the right of free speech. At the same time, we understand the reasons behind the widespread indignation in the Muslim world regarding the cartoons. We believe freedom of the press entails responsibility and discretion and should respect the beliefs and tenets of all religions.

Co-existence requires a climate of mutual respect. All parties must refrain from any form of violence and to avoid fuelling hatred. States must promote the interrelated and indivisible nature of fundamental rights and freedoms and advocate the use of legal remedies as well as the pursuance of a peaceful dialogue on matters which go to the heart and spirit of all multicultural societies.

The Institute on Religion and Public Policy has been working in close cooperation and interactive partnership with religious communities, non-governmental organizations, diplomats and members of the media to draft, develop, and advance a **Charter On Freedom Of Expression and Journalistic Ethics in Relation to Respect for Religion or Belief**.

As I stated at the recent Supplementary Human Dimension Meeting on Freedom of the Media in Vienna, this draft charter was created by taking into account over 40 national journalistic ethics codes, more than 300 professional journalist codes, and relevant documents articulating OSCE, Council of Europe and UN standards. We also incorporated suggestions and concerns articulated by NGOs and diplomats in meetings we held to discuss the Charter.

In the opinion of the Institute, there is a compelling need for a Universal Charter for the media as no such universal standards linking journalistic ethics, the right freedom of religion or belief and the right to freedom of expression exist. Indeed, most national and journalistic society codes barely address ethical measures in the area of religion and beliefs.

In light of the grave importance of an issue such as this one, I have brought copies of the Charter for your review. They are available on the NGO table. I firmly believe that the direct input of the OSCE would be invaluable in developing constructive and universally applicable standards that would support both the right to freedom of expression and religion and assist in creating an environment of religious tolerance and non-discrimination.

Reactions to religious images perceived as containing inaccuracies and stereotypes transmitted through the media have engendered widespread debate about the interaction between respect for religious beliefs and freedom of expression. Questions have also been raised on the issues of media responsibility, self-regulation and self-censorship.

The Meeting Manual of the 2006 Human Dimension Implementation Meeting even encourages that “Voluntary professional standards are deemed to promote mutual respect and understanding while protecting freedom of expression. Capacities to administer such self-regulation, and thus ensure a free media, should be established when non-existent and reinforced when not strong enough.”

Indeed, in Resolution 1510 passed recently by the Parliamentary Assembly of the Council of Europe entitled “Freedom of Expression and Respect for Religious Beliefs”, the Assembly invited media professionals and their professional organizations to discuss media ethics with regard to religious beliefs and sensitivities and encouraged the creation of press complaints bodies, media ombudspersons or other self-regulatory bodies, where such bodies do not yet exist and which should discuss possible remedies for offences to religious persuasions.

As the United Nations Special Rapporteur on freedom of religion or belief, Asma Jahangir, and the Special Rapporteur on contemporary forms of racism, racial discrimination, xenophobia and related intolerance, Doudou Diène, presented in their report entitled “Incitement to racial and religious hatred and the promotion of tolerance,” “Legal measures may be supplemented by a number of non-legal measures, including self-regulatory measures by media bodies, media outlets or journalists’ associations to prevent the dissemination of harmful speech. In many countries, media sectors, in particular newspapers and journalists, have formed self-regulatory bodies to promote professional standards and in some cases to provide the public with a complaints system for reporting which fails to meet minimum standards... A juridical response is undoubtedly immensely significant in countering the impact of hate speech and of incitement to hatred and violence, but it cannot be the only or even main response. Incitement is a reflection of the growing global challenge of managing pluralism and fostering harmony. It is, therefore, crucial [to] search for lasting solutions to better knowledge and understanding across cultures and religions in the pursuit of a more tolerant world.” This would have to be accompanied by a lot of thinking on the need for inter-religious, inter-ethnic and intercultural dialogue, something that the OSCE, through its human dimension sessions and politically binding commitments relating to the human dimension, should be instrumental in fostering.

I am very pleased to announce that shortly the Institute on Religion and Public Policy will launch MediaCharter.org to address these important issues. If you are interested in more information about the Charter, to adopt the Charter, or to offer your endorsement, please contact the Institute on Religion and Public Policy or visit www.mediacharter.org in the days ahead.

The **Charter on Freedom of Expression and Journalistic Ethics in Relation to Respect for Religion or Belief** can serve as the impetus to such a dialogue within the OSCE to further advance the cause of media and religious understanding.