

OSCE High-level Conference on Tolerance and Non-Discrimination

ENGLISH only

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*Intolerance and discrimination against Christians*

Introduction by Dr Massimo Introvigne – Summary

Intolerance and discrimination against Christians and members of other religions may occur when religious liberty is either not granted or misunderstood. My comments are based on the persuasion that Catholic social teaching, particularly recent documents by Pope Benedict XVI – which are based on arguments of reason and not only of faith –, may be of general interest, including to non-Christians and non-believers, and offer some help.

Principles of religious liberty are generally affirmed by the constitutions and laws of the OSCE member states. There are, however, three possible areas of misunderstanding.

The first is the status of religious liberty. Freedom of religion is more than just another item in a long list of rights and liberties. It is the cornerstone of a social life where all the other freedoms may truly flourish. Speaking in Washington D.C. on April 17, 2008, Benedict XVI quoted a secular French thinker, Alexis de Tocqueville (1805-1859), who taught that «religion and freedom are “intimately linked” in contributing to a stable democracy». When religious liberty is regarded as a secondary or minor right in comparison to others, freedom in general cannot be truly guaranteed.

The second is the extension of religious liberty. The *Instrumentum laboris* for the forthcoming Special Assembly for the Middle East of the Synod of Bishops mentions that in some countries «freedom of religion customarily means freedom of worship and not freedom of conscience, that is, the freedom to believe or not believe, to practice openly one’s religion, privately or publicly, or to change one’s religion for another [...]. To change one’s religion is perceived as a betrayal of the society, culture and nation, which are founded, for the most part, on a religious tradition». But a true religious liberty should include freedom to preach and to convert.

Thirdly, in some countries freedom of religion is considered by some with suspicion, as if it involved relativism and denial of a country’s religious heritage. The Catholic Church faced the same problem when confronted with the interpretation of the declaration on religious freedom *Dignitatis humanae* of the II Vatican Council. Some within the Church were afraid that proclaiming religious freedom may induce relativism and indifferentism. In fact, as Pope Benedict XVI clarified, religious freedom and a firm defense of one’s own religious identity against relativism can and should coexist. Religious freedom deals with the believer’s individual and corporate immunity, when shaping and announcing his or her religious experience, from any coercion of the modern secular State. It does not mean that the believer has no right or duty to exert an «adequate discernment» between different religious proposals, as the Pope said in his 2009 encyclical *Caritas in veritate*: «Religious freedom does not mean religious indifferentism, nor does it imply that all religions are equal» (n. 55).

With reference to where OSCE has its headquarters, we can say that these misunderstandings generate problems both east of Vienna and west of Vienna. East of Vienna, problems with the extension of religious liberty and a fear that freedom of religion in the Western sense may create relativism and a betrayal of traditional cultures may induce forms of regulation which affect Christian churches and communities. They include the denial of legal registration and tax-exempt

status, and the refusal to grant entry visas or resident permits to missionaries or permissions to build places of worship. In some countries inflammatory anti-Christian propaganda led to actual acts of violence.

West of Vienna, too often we see a marginalization of Christians, whose rights to fully participate in the social conversation and to announce their faith are limited in the name of secularism. Speaking at the United Nations in New York on April 18, 2008, Benedict XVI stated that «it is inconceivable (...) that believers should have to suppress a part of themselves – their faith – in order to be active citizens. It should never be necessary to deny God in order to enjoy one's rights. The rights associated with religion are all the more in need of protection if they are considered to clash with a prevailing secular ideology (...). The full guarantee of religious liberty cannot be limited to the free exercise of worship, but has to give due consideration to the public dimension of religion, and hence to the possibility of believers playing their part in building the social order». The cause seems to be the first of the three misunderstandings I mentioned. Religious liberty is regarded as just one among many different rights, and its crucial importance is systematically downplayed. To make the problem worse, some of the rights which are invoked in order to limit religious liberty, are – according to the words of *Caritas in veritate* – «alleged rights, arbitrary and non-essential in nature», and even «rights» «to transgression and vice» (n. 42). Recognizing the rights of religious minorities is a very important achievement of many contemporary legal systems. On the other hand, the rights of minorities should not be used in order to deny the rights of religious majorities. Majorities also have their rights. Christians as a cultural majority are particularly targeted by those who would prefer a fully secular and non-religious society and culture.

Time only allows me to mention two examples. The first includes a large number of incidents in Europe where Christian preachers, including street preachers, and institutions have been prosecuted for criticizing sexual lifestyles that they regard as sinful. Parents have also been fined for refusing to let their children attend classes of so called anti-discrimination education, which they perceive as indoctrination into lifestyles they do not approve of. In this as well as in other respects at the very least the right of conscientious objection should always been recognized. Law proposals which would punish criticism of alternative lifestyles as hate speech are perceived by many Christian communities as a serious threat to their freedom to preach.

The second example deals with the 2009 decision *Lautsi v. Italy*, where the European Court of Human Rights ruled that the presence of crucifixes in Italian public schools violate the rights of parents and pupils which are either non-believers or members of one of the religious minorities which exist in Italy, a predominantly Catholic country. The case will be re-examined by the European Court's Grand Chamber on June 30. Polls have confirmed that a large majority of Italians (82%: see Franco Garelli - Gustavo Guizzardi - Enzo Pace [eds.], *Un singolare pluralismo: Indagine sul pluralismo morale e religioso degli italiani*, Bologna: il Mulino, 2003, 146-147) – including, significantly, a solid majority of those Italians who regard themselves as atheists or non-believers – is in favor of keeping in their public schools the crucifix, a beloved symbol of benevolence and love, as well as of the nation's history and identity. This seems to be a clear case of the rights of a large majority being ignored in the name of the rights of a minority, or of the opinions of a very limited number of active secular humanists.

There are of course many other examples of discriminations against Christians, both east of Vienna and west of Vienna. I believe these cases are however sufficient to confirm that intolerance and discrimination against Christians are a serious international problem, which deserves the full attention of this Conference.