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**STATEMENT BY MR. COBI BENATOFF,
PRESIDENT OF THE EUROPEAN JEWISH CONGRESS, AT THE
OSCE CONFERENCE ON TOLERANCE AND THE FIGHT AGAINST
RACISM, XENOPHOBIA AND DISCRIMINATION**

Brussels, 13 September 2004

**Role of Governments and civil society in promoting tolerance,
respect and mutual understanding, particularly through dialogue and
inter-faith and inter-cultural partnership**

I should like, first of all, to thank the organizers of this conference for giving me an opportunity to participate and speak at this round table in my capacity as President of the European Jewish Congress, a body that represents European Jewry and co-ordinates the work of European Jewish organizations.

I am here to let out a cry of alarm to Europe, to its institutions, to its leaders and to all its citizens.

Anti-Semitism and prejudice against Jews have returned, or perhaps they never disappeared.

The monster is again among us, and we are increasingly living with feelings of anger, fear and insecurity but also of frustration, because what most concerns and saddens us is the indifference of our European fellow citizens. After the horror of the *Shoah*, during our youth, we thought that the monster had disappeared, blown away by the wind of horror, and that if it were ever to reappear, all our fellow citizens would fill the streets of Europe to make clear their opposition, to cry out against this indecency and to combat it together.

But, on the contrary, it seems, to our great sadness and anger, that together with the increase in the number of instances of intolerance there is also an increase in indifference in the face of these events. It has now become “normal and acceptable” in public opinion that some persons should be the object of violence and exclusion only because they practise a different religion.

Often, such acts of violence are explained or even justified by reference to external conflicts, using for example the policy of the Government of Israel and the Middle Eastern conflict as a pretext for justifying the violence — essentially, that is, blaming the victim for being the cause of the violence he experiences.

This to be sure saddens us, possibly even angers us, but it certainly does not cause us to lose the will to fight this phenomenon and its spread. We are here today to remind each of us, our fellow citizens, that the quality of our democratic life and of our civil coexistence will be gauged by our ability to combat intolerance. For that reason, I am here not only to give a cry of alarm but also to seek together with you a solution of the kind that will enable us to overcome prejudice, fear and lack of understanding and to announce our availability as an organization and as individuals in the work of building together a more equitable and tolerant society.

This is why we believe that now, more than ever before, dialogue between faiths, religious leaders and believers is a vital need, one that is fundamental for our religious experience as well as for the democratic life of our countries.

For some years, now the religious reawakening has been accompanied by false prophets. Very often the name of God is invoked as a pretext for a variety of nationalist, ethnic or political claims of different origin, in which frequently persecution, violence and killing are the instruments used to affirm one's own blind religious fanaticism, exacerbated to the point of denying others the right of their existence as human beings who are different.

As represented by some of its institutions and national States and by certain of its politicians, Europe seems to think that institutional systems can do without the faith-based experiences of its citizens in building the continent and putting into place a civil society in general, thereby confining religion either to the private sphere or, what is even worse, to a status of insignificance. Often, religions are regarded as a retrograde and obsolete phenomenon, opposed to progress, social evolution and the secularism of the State. These are attitudes that, in addition to being reductive, forget the living dimension of religions and their traditions as well as their central role in forming consciences, and that fail to take into account the fact that inter-faith dialogue gives evidence of and value to the nature of identity as diversity.

Recent events throughout the world have provided evidence of the unchanged, and occasionally increasing, geopolitical importance of religious traditions and have also demonstrated the difficulties experienced by leaders in understanding and dealing with this reality. I am referring here to the problems experienced by international, European and national institutions in properly understanding the implications of the religious element as a factor of national and/or ethnic identity. One sees here evidence of a certain sluggishness at the social, cultural and political level that makes clear the difficulty the international and European political class is experiencing in finding and proposing cultural instruments of dialogue for use in overcoming conflicts.

On the other hand, never so much as now have national States, local communities and Europe as represented by its array of institutions and its citizens been in such need not only of laws and norms for punishing those who persecute their own fellow citizens solely because they profess a different religion but also, and above all, of changing the manner and ways of living within European society, from the lowest social level to the highest institutional level so as to make religious acceptance and tolerance values informing not only religious discourse but also civil coexistence.

It is within this area having to do with the education of conscience that the associations and persons with responsibility for inter-faith dialogue have a fundamental task

to perform as actors within civil society and not only as representatives of the world religious community.

We are asking that there should be more opportunities for encounter and dialogue, at all social levels, beginning with the younger generations and the schools and extending to initiatives designed to help people to get to know one another and to familiarize themselves with their own diversity along with their religious or cultural specificity.

Encounter and knowledge alone provide the proper means for sweeping away prejudice and bias, along with false condescension in areas of coexistence, with a view to combating radically and profoundly the increase and spread of fundamentalist doctrines of various kinds.

Only the courage to inject inter-faith and inter-cultural dialogue into civil discourse will enable our societies to combat aggressiveness and ignorance and will make it possible for all citizens to live their differences without fear and without the risk of erecting new walls and building new ghettos.

Inter-faith dialogue and attention to the multi-religious aspect is surely an area in which civil societies can meet for constructive work.

There is also, in addition to the social and cultural value, an ethical and political value in working together with religious representatives — the value of affecting the personal and collective memory of European citizens and of all Europeans. The aim should be not to display the past as a kind of ghost but, on the basis of a shared memory, to experience together reconciliation, to acknowledge one's own responsibilities, personal and collective, in coexistence, and to find in the conflicts, persecutions and extermination carried out against minorities in the name of religious diversity the strength and the will to change a reality consisting of exclusion and intolerance.

The recognition, through inter-faith dialogue, of one's own responsibilities to minorities or different religious groups is also a sign of civilization and democratic growth and not only of inter-faith coexistence.

By way of concluding on a positive note, I should like to suggest a few possible areas of commitment:

- The search for formative instruments for use in educating all citizens and reminding them that the cultural, ethical and spiritual confines of Europe and of the States that now comprise and will comprise it extend beyond their own affiliations and their own horizons as identified with the traditions of western Christianity alone;
- The improvement of the debate between faiths and institutions and the freeing of that debate from commonplaces and simplistic argumentation;
- The education of all citizens, beginning with their school years, in respect for diversity and in tolerance towards migrant groups belonging to religious traditions different from the western Christian traditions;

- Work in the “multi-religious” sector to counter the kind of ignorance that perceives religious diversity as something dangerous or unacceptable to European and western culture;
- The combating in all countries of the fear of losing one’s own monolithic identity through an opening to others, and the provision of the necessary instruments to counter the concept according to which nationalism and religion are inseparable in establishing personal identity;
- A call for respect for all religious traditions as a necessary complement to political and civil growth;
- The creation of comprehensive and reliable instruments of information regarding all religious faiths of a kind that are accessible to all religions so as to reduce ignorance and neglect in respect of different religious traditions (failings that are frequently at the root of immaturity, superficiality and social insecurity), and to explain the diversity of religious rights, dietary laws and calendars.