

**Human Dimension Implementation Meeting
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Working session 13

Fundamental freedoms II

Freedom of thought, conscience, religion or belief

**Intervention
by the Delegation of the Republic of Azerbaijan**

Ladies and gentlemen,
Dear colleagues,

Numerous international documents establish religious freedom as one of the fundamental rights. Freedom of thought, conscience, religion or belief is a cornerstone of OSCE commitments protecting human rights as well. The 1975 Helsinki Final Act declared that participating states will “respect the freedom of thought, conscience, religion or belief, for all without distinction as to race, sex, language or religion”.

Mr. Moderator,

A religion constitutes the essence of our morality and spirituality. We believe that a state is founded on three major pillars: power, morality and spirituality. Morality and spirituality are closely connected with religion. We think that only harmony of these three elements, unity of power, morality and spirituality, creates favorable conditions for functioning of a state itself and for a life of all people. A state or power must create equal conditions for activities of all religions, thus establishing a prerequisite for tolerance between religions and confessions.

Distinguished audience,

Azerbaijan consequently affords great protection to this fundamental human right. As a multiethnic and multi-confessional country, Azerbaijan plans and carries out its national policy in the spirit of traditional tolerance and harmonic coexistence of different ethnic and religious groups. Indeed our strength is based on multi-ethnic and multi-religious nature of our society. The equality of all citizens without any ethnic, national, religious or linguistic definition is guaranteed by the Constitution of the Republic of Azerbaijan. The Law prohibits any obstacles in defining one’s attitude to religion, worshiping, participating in religious rituals, religious education.

The importance given by my Government to guarantying this right is proved by the fact that the Law on Freedom of Religion or Belief was among the first laws adopted after regaining independence. This Law from 1992 is a basic normative-legal act

governing relationship of Government vis-à-vis religion, as well as rights of worshippers and the activity of religious associations.

My Government makes efforts to create all necessary conditions for practicing religion. As you may know, ninety percent of Azerbaijan's population is Muslims. Today, there are about 1300 mosques, more than 40 churches, synagogues and houses of prayers in Azerbaijan. Azerbaijani State Committee for the Work with Religious Associations supervises the observance of relevant legislative acts and is responsible for registration of religious associations.

There are no preferential religions in our state and this proves the existence of religious pluralism in our country. In the meantime we strictly adhere to the principle of separation of church from a state.

Mr. Moderator,

We are convinced that inter-religious dialogue can be of use and the states must provide all possible help to carry on this process because noble ideas enshrined in all religions can have favorable influence on a society. At the same time we would like to point out that currently a religion is often used for other purposes, particularly, for terror and extremism. That is why speaking about freedom of religion and belief we should not forget the negative role played by many religious leaders and factions in the history both of the East and West, who were waging wars on behalf of religions and under the cover of religious slogans. Even today, one can bring many examples of how religious beliefs of people are being exploited for the sake of unleashing wars and conflicts in various parts of the world. While paying great attention to people's beliefs, we sometimes should soundly call into question these beliefs. Not all beliefs, including religious ones, are sincere and serve for the good. Societies must learn to differentiate between good and evil beliefs. We stand for purity of a religion, we think that a state itself has to help its citizens in religious education, as well as in making right choice of faith, providing them with sufficient information about religions. This can be done through schools and universities, and mass media has to play its role in this process.

In conclusion, I would like to once again reiterate that Azerbaijan is committed to closely contribute to the work of the OSCE, particularly ODIHR in realizing the principle of "unity in diversity". We believe ODIHR can play a significant role in promoting inter-religious dialogue and encourage the states to back ODIHR in its endeavors.

Thank you.