



Organization for Security and Co-operation in Europe

3rd Congress of Leaders of World and Traditional Religions

Opening Remarks by the OSCE Secretary General Marc Perrin de Brichambaut

Astana, 1-2 July 2009

Mr. President,
Leaders of World and Traditional Religions,
Distinguished Guests,
Excellencies,
Ladies and Gentlemen,

This meeting is unique. An assembly of eminent Leaders of World and Traditional Religions meets a central need of the international community and testifies to the vision and leadership of Kazakhstan in Astana City of the future.

As we move into the 21st century, such an inclusive assembly in the spiritual field sends a strong message for establishing better understanding and mutual respect between societies and communities. There are, indeed, few questions of greater importance for world peace today than to ensure an open spiritual and moral climate among all the communities that are involved in the globalization of security, of economy, of information.

The dialogue of cultures and inter-faith co-operation stands high on the agenda of the Organization for Security and Co-operation in Europe. It could not be otherwise.

The OSCE is the world's largest regional security organization. The Organization brings together 56 participating States, and encompasses major world religions and cultures. OSCE States and their societies are all different, but they have proved able to work together to promote stability and security.

In so doing, they have elaborated an ambitious body of commitments based on the inherent dignity of the individual. Already in the 1975 Helsinki Final Act, our participating States committed themselves to ‘recognize and respect the freedom of the individual to profess and practice, alone or in community with others, religion or belief acting in accordance with the dictates of his own conscience.’ This is the OSCE’s starting point.

The OSCE has always recognised the role that religions and their leaders effectively play in building healthy societies and States. Your teachings are vital for promoting social harmony, and they are a powerful factor for maintaining security and stability and holding governments accountable to ethical and moral standards. In situations of crisis, we have seen time and again the unique contribution of religions to conflict prevention, post-conflict community building and protection of vulnerable minorities. Religions are a natural ally of the Organization in promoting security and co-operation across the OSCE area. In this respect, we should also add a note of caution about the risk created by some through abuse of religions as a cover to spread extremism, discrimination, denial of basic human right, and ultimately conflict.

On these foundations, the OSCE acts concretely at four levels.

First, the OSCE has made freedom of religion or belief a core commitment of its participating States. Freedom of religion or belief, including for religious minorities, constitutes a precondition for religions to fulfil their role as vehicles for the promotion of dialogue and mutual respect and understanding. Every year, the OSCE organizes specific meetings devoted to the implementation of the right to freedom of religion or belief in the OSCE area.

Second, the OSCE works actively on international efforts to promote dialogue among religious faiths, institutions and organizations as well as with religious communities. Religious faiths, institutions and organizations are a constant presence in meetings and conferences held in the OSCE context.

The OSCE has organised five high-level conferences devoted to promoting tolerance and non-discrimination. Three Personal Representatives of the OSCE Chairman-in-Office have been appointed to combat different forms of intolerance and discrimination (anti-Semitism, intolerance and discrimination against Muslims, Christians and members of other religions). It is important that the current Greek Chairperson-in-Office appointed Ambassador A. Akhmetov as her Personal Representative on Combating Intolerance and Discrimination against Muslims. These steps build on the multiple activities undertaken by the OSCE Institutions, field operations and the Secretariat.

In 1997, the Office for Democratic Institutions and Human Rights established an Advisory Panel of Experts on Freedom of Religion or Belief and supporting inter-religious dialogue. The Panel is composed of experts from more than 30 participating States which reflect different expertise and religious and non-religious traditions. The Panel is a living example of interfaith dialogue.

Third, the OSCE has declared its firm intention to fight against intolerance and discrimination, and to promote mutual respect and understanding. In this context, the OSCE works to secure the engagement of religious communities in the prevention of intolerance and discrimination.

Particular attention is devoted to combating the root causes of intolerance and discrimination by contributing to improved understanding in a world of increasing religious diversity – an objective underlined also in the Declaration of the 2nd Congress of Leaders of World and Traditional Religions in 2006 and by the United Nations Alliance of Civilizations. We look forward to further activities on tolerance during the year 2010 when Kazakhstan will be chairing the OSCE.

Finally, the OSCE acts as a regional platform of support to international initiatives relevant to tolerance and non-discrimination. Please note in this respect the mandated OSCE contributions to the Alliance of Civilizations initiative, and to the important work this initiative is undertaking in the field of tolerance and non-discrimination throughout the world.

Mr. President,
Leaders of World and Traditional Religions,
Excellencies,

In this world of globalization and diversity, intercultural and inter-faith dialogue is needed more than ever. The 3rd Congress of Leaders of World and Traditional Religions is an excellent preview to the vision that Kazakhstan will bring to the OSCE Chairmanship next year.

Just yesterday, on the eve of this Congress, Kazakhstan hosted as Chair of the OSCE Contact Group with the Mediterranean Partners for Co-operation a Seminar on Tolerance and Non-Discrimination.

Under the leadership of Kazakhstan, I am confident that the OSCE will draw from the experience gained by three congresses of World and Traditional Religions and continue to promote inter-religious dialogue, tolerance and non-discrimination, and freedom of religion or belief in support of security and peace.