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Working session 13

Freedom of thought, conscience, religion or belief

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Mr. Moderator, ladies and gentlemen,

Every one can easy understand that the fundament principles of a democratic state should be the freedom of thought, conscience, religion or belief. Those principles should be implemented by the State in every level of the public administration as well in governmental and state institutions for the benefit of all its citizens.

Imagine a country where Church and State have not been institutionally separated.

According to article 3 of the preamble of the Greek constitution.

**“The dominant religion in Greece is the religion of the Eastern Greek
Orthodox Church of Jesus Christ ”**

The expression “dominant religion” its not simply a declarative statement. It dominates in practice. A few examples:

The dogma of the Greek orthodox religion is involved in the educational system as an obligatory subject in public elementary and secondary schools. Moreover, every single day, students must begin the day at school with an obligatory eastern orthodox prayer.

This occurs all over Greece, even in schools with children of immigrants who are of a non- Greek orthodox religion.

Another example of the Greek Church's interference in the education system is the frequent visits of the Greek orthodox priests to public schools. During these visits, which by the way are legally permitted, children are strongly encouraged to confess their sins to the priest during school hours. We find this practice to be unacceptable and we strongly support the recent initiative of the Greek Ministry of Education and Religious Affairs to ban this practice. Furthermore we call upon the government to reform this Ministry and not to include religious affairs within its competence.

Reform is also needed to other areas of public life. In the judicial system, court judges at their swearing in ceremony, are obliged to give an oath before the Greek orthodox Archbishop. An example of this occurred recently with the swearing in of new judges to the Appeal Court. So the question here is, in such a situation how can a citizen of a different religion or having no religion for that matter, feel equal before the law knowing that the judge has taken an oath before an official representative of another religion. This practice must also end.

To conclude, in the current debate to revise the Greek constitution, despite the fact that they have been many expert opinions on the need to separate Church and State the Greek government has indicated that there will be no change in the current status. Therefore the Greek Church will continue to play a dominant role in all spheres of public life.

Thank you for your attention