



THE HOLY SEE
2013 Human Dimension Implementation Meeting
Working Session 2: Tolerance and non-discrimination II:
Review of the implementation of commitments on promotion of
mutual respect and understanding
Tuesday, September 24, 2013

Mr. Chairman,

My delegation wishes to use this opportunity to express a concern reflected in the words of His Holiness Pope emeritus Benedict XVI who, addressing the representatives of British society at Westminster Hall said: *Religion is not a problem for legislators to solve, but a vital contributor to the national conversation. In this light, I cannot but voice concern at the increasing marginalization of religion, particularly of Christianity, that is taking place in some quarters, even in nations which place a great emphasis on tolerance. There are those who would advocate that the voice of religion be silenced, or at least relegated to the purely private sphere. There are those who argue that the public celebration of festivals such as Christmas should be discouraged, in the questionable belief that it might somehow offend those of other religions or none. And there are those who argue – paradoxically with the intention of eliminating discrimination – that Christians in public roles should be required at times to act against their conscience. These are worrying signs of a failure to appreciate not only the rights of believers to freedom of conscience and freedom of religion, but also the legitimate role of religion in the public square.*” (Address of His Holiness Benedict XVI at Westminster Hall, 17 September 2010)

Mr. Chairman,

The Pope’s words are based on realities which affect many Christians and members of other religions on a daily basis. While not experiencing violent persecution in the OSCE region, Christians encounter discrimination in various forms, while acts of vandalism against churches and cemeteries have become all too frequent. It has become symptomatic, especially during last few years, that Christians are often reminded by different instances of society or even warned by some more radical voices in the public arena (and increasingly even in the courts), that they can believe whatever they prefer in the private sphere, and largely worship as they wish in their own churches, but they simply cannot act on those beliefs in public. This is a deliberate misrepresentation and curbing of what religious freedom actually means. It is not the freedom that is enshrined in international documents, including those of the

OSCE beginning with the 1975 Helsinki Final Act, stretching through the 1989 Final Vienna Document and the 1990 Copenhagen Document, and including the 2010 Astana Summit Commemorative Declaration.

Forcing religious believers to keep their convictions to themselves, while those who don't have such belief are under no such restriction is, in fact, an expression of religious intolerance. This is no way to achieve social harmony among citizens in a free, democratic and pluralistic society. Such an approach of forced "privacy of religion" is a thinly veiled way of curbing the freedom of religious believers to express their convictions publicly.

Mr. Chairman,

Religious schools are reported as potential discriminators. If they want to preserve their religious character they are suspect institutions, acting close to the limits of unlawful discrimination. There are even some who question the teaching of religion itself to children, calling it 'religious indoctrination'. This would consequently mean that millions of religious parents are indoctrinating their children and therefore 'abusing' their parental rights. It is certainly legitimate to ask what would such people expect the law to do?

Supporting natural law principles has increasingly and aggressively been depicted as equivalent to racist bigotry. Catholic adoption agencies have been forced to close. Christian couples can no longer foster children. The logic of this is that anyone who follows the laws written in the heart of every human being is not a fit parent.

It has happened when Catholic bishops very mildly express their reservations about certain law proposals, they are accused of "interference" and of "intruding" on "matters of State". Furthermore, they are advised to "stick to the spiritual needs of their flock".

Thus, not only can religious values have no bearing on the law of the land, but symbols of those values cannot be seen in public spaces, especially spaces controlled by the State. Nor, in some instances, can private individuals wear the symbols of their religion to the work-place or express their values in the work-place.

There are those who say that the public display of religious symbols makes certain people uncomfortable; societies are growing more and more multi-ethnic than they were before and the public display of a majority religious groups is offensive to minority groups. However, what is interesting is that this argument is rarely made by those religious and ethnic minorities. Rather it is made by those who reject all religion.

Tolerance toward one view should not lead to intolerance towards others. Intolerance in the name of "tolerance" must be named for what it is and publically

condemned. To deny religiously informed moral argument a place in the public square is intolerant and anti-democratic.

Mr. Chairman,

Another sensitive issue is conscientious objection. In those countries where some morally controversial issues, in particular those related to life and sexuality, are legally permitted, conscientious objection is necessary to safeguard effectively the freedom of religion. In recent times, however, sharp criticism to conscientious objection have been raised and a request for strict regulation of this right has been advanced with a view to guaranteeing the full protection of individual freedom of choice in matters which are sensitive and controversial from the ethical point of view.

At times, believers are being legally compelled to exercise their profession without reference to their religious or moral convictions, and even in opposition to them. This occurs when laws, dealing with issues linked to the dignity of human life and the family, are promulgated and limit the right to conscientious objection by health-care and legal professionals, educators and politicians.

Mr. Chairman,

These acts of intolerance, as well as many other not mentioned here, in an area where religious freedom is generally guaranteed, are worrying and should make us reflect more profoundly on the relationship between this fundamental freedom and discrimination against Christians and members of other religions. One can rightfully ask how is it that contemporary legal discourse hints that freedom of religion – the first and most fundamental of human rights – is an impediment to other human rights? Or how is it that human rights are invoked to limit freedom of religion and to put it under strain?

My Delegation is of the opinion that in order to prevent violence and discrimination based on religious grounds, it is very important to promote and consolidate religious freedom since it is from the poisoned ground of the denial of religious freedom and discrimination of religion that, in the end, violence is almost always born. It is, therefore, of crucial significance that a global awareness of the problem be raised everywhere. The celebration of an International Day against persecution and discrimination of Christians might prove to be an important sign that Governments are willing to deal with this serious issue.

Thank you, Mr. Chairman!