

**OSCE Supplementary Human Dimension Meeting
Freedom of Religion or Belief**

**Issues, Opportunities, and the Specific Challenges of Combatting Anti-Semitism
and Intolerance and Discrimination against Christians, Muslims, and Members
of Other Religions**

Vienna, 22-23 June 2017

**Session IV: Interfaith and interreligious dialogue and cooperation and creating
the conditions for peaceful and secure societies in the OSCE region**

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At the outset, allow me to underline how much dialogue is important in fostering mutual respect and understanding. In fact, having a dialogue means recognizing the other part as an interlocutor at the same level and with the same dignity. It also allows a greater understanding of the respective points of view.

Let me also preliminarily remark that interreligious dialogue, on the one hand, and dialogue between religious communities and governmental bodies, on the other, should be kept distinct.

Inter-religious dialogue may take place in four essential different forms: the dialogue of life, the dialogue of common action, the dialogue of religious experience and the dialogue of theological exchange. All these forms represent different dimensions of a familiar human experience, the everyday encounter with another person, which opens up new vistas and new possibilities. People of faith begin by living alongside one another, learning to accept each other as neighbours. They start engaging with each other in shared projects that express their common concerns. They become interested in each other's religious texts and traditions; the familiarity of places of worship generates a willingness to listen in silence or even to experience for themselves something of the other's meditative practices. Such dialogue may eventually lead to conversation about the coherence of their images of ultimate truth and their hopes for the humanity they share. One type of dialogue almost inevitably leads to, or implies, at some level, one of the others, but it is up to religions and believers to decide how and if develop such a dialogue.

In interreligious dialogue, the major ethical and political issue is how to give difference its proper place without risking a disintegration into competing, or even warring,

factions. The approach, in multi-faith societies, aimed to establish a basis of supposedly “common values” can be subtly coercive, concerned more to avoid conflict than to encourage positive contributions to the national culture. Moreover, exhortations towards a tolerant multiculturalism not only fail to touch the life-giving heart of a religious faith, but may actually do violence to the wider fabric of story, ritual, devotion and custom, on which faith depends to give it real energy and motivation.

The more demanding challenge is to work within and between the living traditions, not to seek to extract from them some supposedly timeless ethical essence, but to enable them to “re-read” their own stories and to learn from each other. But, for this to work, communities have to be given sufficient space and encouragement to reach down into their own fund of collective wisdom and to rediscover their own strengths and sources of energy.

The dialogue between religious communities and governmental bodies relies on the premise that State and religions have specific tasks, which are not interchangeable, and that each time the “two powers” have tried to encroach upon the competence of the other, it is human consciences that have suffered.

In this respect, it should be avoided the risk that such form of dialogue is interpreted as a right of the State and its organizations – under the guise of consultation – to interfere with the freedom of the religious communities. Vice versa, it is essential to promote mutual respect between religious communities and State authorities. This mutual respect presupposes the independence and autonomy of both the one and the other in their own fields of activity. It is a question of improving their relationship in order to encourage real cooperation for the good of society overall. To do this, there must be dialogue. In this perspective, the dialogue of public authorities with religions is mainly aimed to achieve a better understanding of the requirements of religious freedom

Finally, I would underline the interrelation and interdependence of these forms of dialogue and the inclusion of religious communities in public dialogue and debate. In this respect attention should be drawn to the denial of religions’ public role and to the attempt to exclude believers from public discourse. According to Principle 16 of Vienna 1989 Concluding Document and Ministerial Council Decision No. 3/13 participating States are requested to include religious communities in public dialogue, even through the mass media. Consequently they should welcome the interventions of representatives of religious communities that give their view – based on moral convictions deriving from faith – about everyday’s life and, in particular, on legislative and administrative provisions of their Countries.