



PERMANENT MISSION OF THE HOLY SEE
TO THE ORGANIZATION FOR SECURITY
AND COOPERATION IN EUROPE

**STATEMENT OF MONSIGNOR MICHAEL W. BANACH,
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AT THE SUPPLEMENTARY HUMAN DIMENSION MEETING ON
FREEDOM OF RELIGION OR BELIEF
Vienna, July 9 and 10, 2009**

Session I: From commitments to implementation

1. Religion reflects an essential dimension of the human person, openness to transcendence: it is therefore, an irrepressible need of every person, in every place and time, and a key factor for the growth of individuals and also for the security and stability of nations. Indeed, “the common sense of awe and respect for the universal, for the absolute and for truth,” have impelled many different religious peoples to converse with one another (*Pope Benedict XVI, Address at the meeting with organizations involved in interreligious dialogue at the Auditorium of Notre Dame Center in Jerusalem, 11 May 2009*). However, the “ideological manipulation of religion, sometimes for political ends, that is the real catalyst for tension and division, and at times even violence in society” has obscured the very nature of religion as “a builder of unity and harmony, an expression of communion between persons and with God” (*Pope Benedict XVI, Address at meeting with Muslim Religious Leaders, Members of the Diplomatic Corps and Rectors of Universities in Jordan, 9 May 2009*). In response to such a distortion of religion, awareness should be raised and strengthened of the constructive contribution of religion in history and to the educational, cultural, social, charitable sectors of civic society as well as to the personal lives of individuals and communities at large. Such a positive approach to religion would also favour increased dialogue with the many immigrants in OSCE area, especially in Europe, who have strong religious beliefs.

2. From this perspective, and based upon OSCE commitments, respect for the full exercise of religious freedom should be encouraged and strengthened. The Holy See considers religious freedom as *pre-eminent* among the fundamental rights and its defence as the “litmus test for the respect of all other human rights” (*Pope John Paul II To Members of the Parliamentary Assembly of the OCSE, 10 October 2003; L'Osservatore Romano English*

edition, 22 October, n. 1, p. 10). Historically it was one of the first human rights to be claimed, and other fundamental rights are uniquely connected with it. "Wherever religious freedom blossoms, all other rights germinate, develop and flourish; when it is threatened, they too are weakened" (*Address of Cardinal Tarcisio Bertone to participants of the Congress on "Religious Freedom, the Milestone for Europe," 19 Oct. 2007, n. 1*). In the event of a conflict between rights, religious freedom should not be considered inferior; all measures should be taken to avoid - in increasingly secularized societies - discrimination of religious believers for their identity, religiously motivated behaviours or opinions.

A healthy concept of secularism is inclusive and respectful of all authorities, and encourages constant dialogue between institutions (e.g. local, regional and international) and religious communities, recognizing the latter's identity, self-organization and structure, and specific contribution. "This dialogue is necessary, among other things, in order to respect the principles of an authentic pluralism and to construct a true democracy." (*Address of Cardinal Tarcisio Bertone to participants of the Congress on "Religious Freedom, the Milestone for Europe," 19 Oct. 2007, n.5*)

3. Religious freedom includes freedom of expression in religious matters. The latter has closely interrelated and complementary "individual and community aspects, private and public," that is, freedom of the individual believer as a member of a Church or a religious community and freedom of Churches and religious communities through their leaders (*cf. Message of Pope John Paul II on Value and Content of Freedom of Conscience and of Religion, 14 Nov. 1980, n. 4*). In specific regard to the public dimension, the individual and community are free to publicly evaluate daily events on the basis of the religious vision to which they adhere. Indeed, the OSCE commitments expressly recognize and endorse the participation of individuals and religious communities «in public dialogue, including through the mass media» (Vienna Concluding Document 1989).

It follows that in regard to complex spheres of human activity such as medicine, bio-ethics and education, no person should ever suffer from professional setbacks due to his or her religious conviction and conscientious objection, according to each person's freedom of religion should be guaranteed and safeguarded by anti-discrimination laws.

As regards the relationship between religious freedom and freedom of speech, there is no right “not to feel offended” by the expression of deeply held religious convictions. To grant such a right would restrict the freedom of expression of individuals and groups, including religious individuals and groups, and constitute discrimination against those persons expressing a differing viewpoint through such convictions.

4. In recent years it has become especially urgent to promote religious education in all its forms and to respect the fundamental right and primary responsibility of parents to educate their child according to their religious tenets. Therefore, when a course offering offends the religious and moral principles of parents, the ability to opt out of the course should be guaranteed in public as well as in private schools. It is also necessary to respect the specific agreements that have been undertaken in the field of religious education by Government Authorities and leaders of religious confessions.

5. Participating states and the ODIHR should also recall that problems are not only faced by minority religious communities but by majority religious communities as well, to whom the OSCE standards also apply. During recent OSCE meetings and events, awareness of this fact has been repeatedly stressed. No focus on minority religions should reduce attention and subsequent action in favour of members and communities of majority religions. Similarly, no initiatives for minority religions should attempt to artificially treat all religions the same, since they greatly differ in their historical, institutional, social and identity profiles.

6. Finally, the Delegation of the Holy See wishes to emphasize that, in recent years, problems regarding participation of religious believers in public life have been repeatedly brought to the attention of the participating States. Such problems are encountered by religious believers even in democratic countries. In this regard, last March, during the “round table” discussion on the intolerance of Christians, many States criticized a kind of political correctness that downplays incidents of intolerance and discrimination against Christians.