

**THE COMMISSIONER
FOR HUMAN RIGHTS**

**LE COMMISSAIRE
AUX DROITS DE L'HOMME**



**Address of Thomas Hammarberg
Commissioner for Human Rights of the Council of Europe
to the Participants of the World Summit of Religious Leaders**

Dear Summit Participants,

I am very honoured to be amongst you here today and to have this precious opportunity to address you. First of all, let me say that the very fact of being here together and to let the voice of Religions be heard in our daily struggle for peace and co-existence between the peoples of the world, is extremely positive and very encouraging.

Each of the major religions, whether Buddhism, Christianity, Hinduism, Islam or Judaism, harbours a body of ethical values, a moral code which for centuries has organised the life of our societies, and has accompanied them through their evolution. This moral code is, in large part, reflected in human rights principles. The countries of Europe turned to these universal human rights principles as they came out of the catastrophe of the 2nd World War, and were looking to forge a greater unity and greater respect for their fellow men.

Our work, following that of our fathers 60 years' ago, has, as far as possible, consisted of ensuring the respect for human rights everywhere in Europe and elsewhere, in order to guarantee the dignity, freedom, and personal development of every individual.

Religious leaders have played an essential role in this task at the heart of their respective communities. One of the most important aspects of this work has been the teaching of tolerance, the respect for one's neighbour and the importance of living together. This message of wisdom is contained in all the major religions.

Religious leaders must be at the forefront of the fight against extremism, fanaticism and exclusion, which today are often practiced in the name of religion. On the basis of erroneous or outdated interpretations of sacred texts, and contrary to the fundamental principles of human rights, the enemies of freedom and tolerance want to lead our societies towards fratricidal conflict. Religious leaders must take an active part in the fight against such criminal behaviour, by rejecting and condemning it in a non-equivocal manner.

Once again I would like to express my gratitude for having been invited to address you. This clearly shows that those international and European Institutions, whose task it is to defend human rights, starting with the Council of Europe, must work together with religious leaders. There is no contradiction between the respect for human rights and freedom of religion. On the contrary: freedom of religion is an important human right. Both constitute an integral part of democracy, of morality and of European culture. We must do everything we can to guarantee the rights and freedoms of our fellow citizens.

In my opinion, one of the most successful means to reach this goal is through teaching about the “others”, about their culture, about their beliefs. Such teaching should begin from the youngest age because children have the right to know not only about their own cultural identity, but also about different cultures and civilizations. Our duty is to open up this world for them, to demystify the unknown.

The Commissioner for Human Rights has been considering these issues for several years and has recently developed these thoughts further during a conference which took place in a town which symbolizes peace and religious tolerance, that is Kazan. I do hope that we will continue to advance together on this path. For we must act together to defend the values we share.