



CONFERENCE OF INGOs
OF THE COUNCIL OF EUROPE

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Speech by the President of the Conference of INGOs at the opening of the high-level seminar on Freedom of religion in Europe: achievements and perspectives, Strasbourg, 28 April 2017

Dear President of the European Court of Human Rights

Dear Chair of the Minister's Deputies

Dear Minister for Foreign and Political Affairs and Justice of San Marino

Dear former President of the Parliamentary Assembly

Dear participants

First of all, I would like to thank the Permanent Representation of San Marino and the Council on International Law and Politics for giving the Conference of INGOs the opportunity to contribute to this important topic. The preparation to this seminar gave me the opportunity to revisit the achievements made by the Conference of INGOs on this issue and link them to some current issues and developments which, I think, are important for the human rights implementation framework and for living together in a diverse society.

In 2013 the Conference of INGOs undertook a long term project. In 2013, we adopted a Recommendation on Human Rights and Religions addressed to Council of Europe member States. In 2014 we launched an appeal to citizens and INGOs addressing more specifically the inseparable nature of the freedom of conscience and religions, equal rights and non-discrimination, whether one is religious or not. My presentation today is inspired by some of the recommendations made at the time and which I will reiterate. I remember that moment well and the very lively discussion between the representatives of INGOs, which, among others, represent the different religious communities and leanings. Already at that time, this work showed that even on such sensitive and potentially conflicting issues, we were able to produce a substantial and consensual document. In 2015, we adopted two reports, the first one entitled Human Rights and Religions and the second one on the Religious Dimension of Intercultural Dialogue.

In history, religions have played a determining role in valuing the recognition of rights. Today, in accordance with this fact, the question about their role and contribution to the respect and implementation of human rights and fundamental freedoms is still relevant. As my colleagues, Gabriel Nissim and Michel Aguilar underlined at that time, "Living together becomes more and more difficult and conflicts that take place in one place have immediate repercussions in the whole world, with sometimes very violent 'fundamentalist' reactions". It is not just that the field of religious difference is not spared, but especially because many political leaders call on religions to 'defend' their national and/or cultural identity. Many people have an irrational feeling that there is a direct threat from the growing presence of immigrants of a different religion. This is particularly true of the presence of Muslims in

Europe as well as regards the presence of Christians in certain countries in the Middle East. (end of quote).

Religion and tradition are powerful and sensitive areas to challenge. But should we lose our religion to obtain more equal society? Or on the contrary, is it our religious or philosophical beliefs, desire for justice and equality that should lead us to a better respect for human rights? The separation of religion from state becomes crucial in the self-same centre of our Europe. The state should remain neutral towards religions and philosophies, in respect for the case-law under the European Convention on Human Rights. This is a condition to guarantee the freedom of conscience and religion of everyone. Religions cannot be an instrument of power which reinforces the discrimination of women's and minorities' rights. In this regard, we remain deeply concerned by discrimination based on behalf of religions and convictions, on sexual orientation or gender identity and the failure to respect the human rights of the LGBT-I persons, also within the religious communities. Some religions have moved in recent years from outright homophobia combined with moral and religious condemnation to the expression of respect and concern with regard to LGBT-I persons. But this progress is far too limited and many members, institutions and leaders of religions continue to refuse to address this issue from the human rights angle. We should give more support to the civil society organisations, including NGOs, which build the bridges between the LGBT-I persons and religious communities from both sides.

Still we observe the discriminatory approach in access to education. Schools should not discriminate children because of their religion. In countries where schools are under the patronage of religious institutions, they exclude children of a different religion if a member of its own faith is looking for a place in that same school. Even if this kind of discrimination may be prohibited by constitution, if schools have certain autonomy to manage their own affairs they very often privilege one group from another. The lack of equitable procedures make the rights of different communities conflictual. Categorisation on the basis of religion is a form of discrimination which can also concern pupils who refuse to participate in religious instruction. The solution should be broader access to secular education through the establishment of non-denominational schools, and the extension of religious programmes integrated in schools, for children of a religious minority or non-believing children.

Freedom of thought, conscience and religion include the freedom of practice of religion, the freedom to have or not a religion but also the freedom to change religion.

In our recommendation from 2013, we underlined the importance to ensure the right to freedom of expression, including criticism, of and by religions, remove the offence of blasphemy and take into account differing perceptions of sacredness, while remaining equally vigilant regarding acts of violence or hate speech and hate crime, against and from, the followers and leaders of any religions. We should combat any discriminatory attitudes or persecution which members of a religion or followers of any other system of belief may suffer on account of their adherence to that religion or philosophy.

Each individual has a full responsibility for the exercise and day-to-day respect and observance of the human rights. However, leaders of religions have a specific duty in the democratic debate in order to shed light on the challenges facing religious communities, putting forward their positions but without seeking to impose them on the whole of society. For the Conference of INGOs the annual meetings between the Council of Europe institutions and the leaders and members of religions and philosophies, and representatives

of NGOs, as well as the project of the platform of inter-religious dialogue proposed by the former PACE President, Mrs Brasseur, have a very important role. The inter-faith and inter-belief dialogue has a crucial role to support peace building, ensuring equality and human rights. We need to understand each other. We should not be afraid of the people whose nationality, religion and system of beliefs are different from our own. To live together in a diverse society is a chance not a danger.

Thank you for your attention.

Text based on the Recommendation [CONF/PLE\(2013\)REC4](#), [CONF/PLE\(2014\)Dec2](#)
adopted by the Conference of INGOs