

Human Rights Without Frontiers International

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Working Session 16: Promotion of tolerance, non-discrimination, and mutual respect and understanding

Statement about interreligious tolerance and mutual respect

The OSCE is concerned about the issue of discrimination and intolerance by state and non-state actors in its member states and it is certainly a positive step to have put this topic high on the agenda of this meeting. If the issue of intolerance towards Jews, Muslims and Christians must certainly be addressed, there is however another dimension of the religious intolerance that has not properly been addressed up to now, it is the intolerance between the various communities of faith inside the same religion, and in particular in Christianity.

I will give a few examples to illustrate my introductory remark. **In Ukraine**, the multi-dimensional conflicts between several branches of Orthodoxy, the conflicts between Orthodox Churches and Greek-Catholic Churches, the harsh and insulting language regularly used by the Ukrainian Orthodox Church Moscow Patriarchate (UOC-MP) in its magazine *Mir (Peace)* against new religious movements. The August issue of this magazine contained an article entitled "All the sects are going to be our guests!" which criticized the revision and the more liberal orientation of the religious legislation. The magazine "Peace" also vehemently attacked the Ukrainian Ministry of Justice, the Institute of Philosophy of the National Academy of Science of Ukraine and some foreign academic institutes for organizing in May of this year in Kiev a conference which aimed at promoting some form of interreligious dialogue on the legal and political aspects of the interaction of state and religious communities.

In 2005-2006, senior leaders of the UOC-MP repeatedly alleged that supporters of the UOC-KP attacked their clergy and seized a number of their churches in a number of places in cases in which priests and Orthodox communities had legally switched their allegiance from one patriarchate to another and, vice versa, the UOC-KP accused the UOC-MP of acts of violence and physical assaults.

The transfer of the headquarters of the Ukrainian Greek-Catholic Church from Lviv to the capital Kiev in 2005 was perceived by the Orthodox as a Vatican-sponsored crusade against Orthodoxy and as aggressive proselytism. It was followed by demonstrations and attempts to bar the access to their headquarters.

Evangelical Protestant leaders complained about the activities of the group "Dialogue," which they and human rights groups characterized as a front for the UOC-MP that promoted hostility toward non-Orthodox Christians.

In **Moldova**, the dominant Moldovan Orthodox Church (MOC) was the main stakeholder that was behind the public administrations denying the registration to

the Bessarabian Church until Moldova was condemned by the European Court in Strasbourg. It is also the same church that uses its privileged position to instrumentalize the public authorities so that new religious movements are denied registration and legal personality.

In **Romania**, the historically dominant role of the Romanian Orthodox Church in society has contributed to its reluctance to tolerate other religions, not only new religious movements but also the Roman Catholic Church and the Greek-Catholic Church. Orthodox clergy has spread a culture of religious intolerance among the population and has resorted to violence in many places. Mormons and Jehovah's Witnesses have complained about verbal and physical abuse, in particular by some Orthodox priest, and about the indifference or complicity of the law enforcement authorities.

In **Greece**, the Orthodox Church has an anti-heretical department that targets members of non-Orthodox religions, mainly Protestants and Jehovah's Witnesses. Until the judgments of *Kokkinakis v. Greece* and *Manoussakis v. Greece* at the European Court of Human Rights, non-Orthodox Greek citizens and communities were victims of insults and of acts violence perpetrated by Orthodox priests with the passive complicity of the police. In the second half of the 20th century, thousands of non-Orthodox believers went to prison because they were engaged in faith persuasion with Orthodox. Dozens of non-Orthodox faith communities were denied the right to legal personality and even the right to existence because of the opposition of the Greek Orthodox Church.

In the **European Union** member states, where the Catholic and the Lutheran Churches are prevailing religions, these have adopted a conciliatory language and attitude in their relations with the other historical churches. They have however proved to be intolerant towards new religious movements and have sometimes made common cause with the state to combat them.

In conclusion, I would say that no religion is immune against intolerance, especially when it is in a dominant position and wants to neutralize competitive actors.

Recommendations

Human Rights Without Frontiers Int. recommends to the OSCE/ ODIHR:

- first, to organize a structured dialogue with the highest leaders of religious denominations or their legitimized representatives about the most fundamental individual and collective rights related to freedom of religion and belief with the assistance of its Advisory Board and NGOs having some expertise in these issues;
- secondly, to elaborate a **Declaration of Interreligious Tolerance and Respect** listing a number of priority rights and open to signature by religious leaders, such as the individual right to have a religion or not, to change one's religion or beliefs, to manifest one's faith publicly, to express one's religious beliefs publicly, to try to share them with other people and to engage in faith persuasion without harassment; the right for a religious community to exist and have access to legal personality, to worship, to enjoy freedom of assembly and all the rights entailed by the freedom of associations; to solve any interreligious or interdenominational conflict peacefully and to sanction the rebellious clerics;
- thirdly, to put in place mechanisms of evaluation of the progress of the implementation of the **Declaration of Interreligious Tolerance and Respect** by the signatories and monitoring mechanisms of the religious communities which have not adhered to the Declaration.