

Preamble

We, the European Council of Religious Leaders, meeting in Vienna in May 2013, express our warm thanks and appreciation to the Organisation for Security and Cooperation in Europe (OSCE) and in particular to the Ukrainian Chairmanship and the OSCE Office for Democratic Institutions and Human Rights (ODIHR), for their generous welcome and hospitality. We warmly welcome the contributions of the OSCE to the shared common vision of a Europe at peace with itself and contributing to the wellbeing of the world.

As religious leaders, our motivation is rooted in our understanding of God and the Divine or the sacred and it is this which shapes our understanding of religious freedom and the rights and commitments which underpin it. Last year we looked back over the ten years since our inaugural statement in 2002 in which we said: *“We are members of religious communities with profound visions of the dignity of the human person.... as European religious leaders, we are committed to working together to end conflicts, to re-affirm religious condemnations of terror, and to promote justice and peaceful coexistence among the diversity of peoples, religions and traditions in Europe”.*

In summing up the work of our first decade, we referred to the concept of the ‘wholesome society’ with its connotations of health, organic wholeness and vitality. We said that in such a society different perspectives are respectfully and vigorously debated and held in mutual respect within the frameworks provided by the Universal Declaration of Human Rights.

In line with this understanding, and as a further contribution we make the following declaration:

- We believe that freedom of religious speech and practice in public and in private is a fundamental element in human freedom generally, derived as it is from our understanding of the divinely mandated dignity of each human being. We consider that the rights and responsibilities which this freedom brings need further emphasis and we have attended to this in our discussions this year.
- In doing so, we recognise and appreciate the connection made in the framework of the OSCE between religious freedom and lasting peace: the one is an integral and necessary part of the other. No lasting peace is possible without full recognition of human dignity from which all freedom, including religious freedom, flows.
- As we have seen throughout history, freedom of religion or belief, particularly of minorities, has been limited by the State, or threatened by individuals or groups whether secular or religious. We will stand together against threats to the full

enjoyment of religious freedom. As religious leaders we recognise a particular obligation to speak out against threats to the religious freedom of others when they come from within our own communities.

- Last year in Sarajevo, we said that *“a healthy society will always be aware of the human tendency to pursue forms of power which distort and corrupt the good. Critical self-scrutiny of motive and practice to counter those impulses which can even be found within religious traditions and which do not further the human dignity to which religions are committed, is an essential component of a wholesome society.”* We continue to believe that this insight is important to all in our societies.

- The fundamental freedom which follows from human dignity has been expressed in many international conventions and agreements, including the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights, the European Convention on Human Rights, the UN Declaration 36/55 against Religious Intolerance and Discrimination¹ and commitments adopted by the OSCE. We note also the 2011 UN General Assembly resolution 66/167 on combating intolerance. The exercise of these freedoms and rights, including the religious freedoms and rights set out below, is subject only to such limitations as are prescribed by law and are necessary to protect public safety, order, health or morals or the fundamental rights and freedoms of others.

Taking our inspiration from these solemn pledges and from our own declarations and commitments and building on these principles and convictions, we as leaders of religious communities in Europe, pledge ourselves:

- (I) To work individually and collectively for the advancement of religious freedom, understood as the freedom to have or to adopt a religion or belief of one’s choice, and the freedom, either individually or in community with others and in public or private, to manifest one’s religion or belief in worship, observance, practice and teaching.
- (II) To stand together when religious freedom is threatened, whether by States’ excessive restrictions, actions or lack of action in the face of violence or threats of violence against religious communities.
- (III) To speak out together in full solidarity against hate crimes which target religious, belief or other communities.
- (IV) To take a clear position when any State denies a religious community its religious freedom, including especially the right of religious and belief communities to:

¹ Declaration on the Elimination of All Forms of Intolerance and of Discrimination Based on Religion or Belief A/RES/36/55 25th November 1981

- be recognized as having legal personality in the constitutional framework of each State.
- freely establish and maintain accessible places of worship or assembly.
- organize itself according to its own hierarchical and institutional structure,
- select, appoint and replace its personnel in accordance with their respective requirements and standards.
- solicit and receive voluntary financial and other contributions.
- train their religious personnel in appropriate institutions.

In addition, we will speak out, individually and collectively, in favour of the following vital aspects of religious freedom, whenever they are threatened by States, individuals or groups:

The right of everyone to give and receive religious education in the language of their choice, whether individually or in association with others;

The liberty of parents to ensure the religious and moral education of their children in conformity with their own convictions;

The right of individual believers and communities of believers to acquire, possess, and use sacred books, religious publications in the language of their choice and other essential items related to the practice of religion or belief;

The right of religious communities, institutions and organizations to produce, import and disseminate religious publications and materials;

The right of religious communities and their representatives, in groups or on an individual basis, to establish and maintain direct personal contacts and communication with each other, in their own and other countries, inter alia through travel, pilgrimages and participation in assemblies and other religious events;

In the above context and commensurate with such contacts and events, **the right of those concerned** to acquire, receive and carry with them religious publications and items related to the practice of their religion or belief.

We commit ourselves to co-operate amongst ourselves and with other religious groups, governmental and inter-governmental institutions, in promoting understanding, respect and co-operation amongst all religious communities for the peace and wellbeing of all.

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Freedom of Religion - rights and commitments

The European Council of Religious Leaders – Religions for Peace (ECRL brings together senior religious leaders of Judaism, Christianity and Islam together with Buddhists, Hindus, Sikhs and Zoroastrians. ECRL has participatory status with the Council of Europe. ECRL is one of five regional Interreligious Councils within the Religions for Peace network.

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