



United States Mission to the OSCE

Statement on Facilitating Freedom of Religion and Belief through Transparent and Non-Discriminatory Laws, Regulations, Policies and Procedures

As prepared for delivery by William Cardinal Keeler
to the OSCE Conference on Tolerance and the Fight Against Racism,
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In the United States, the freedom to choose one's religion has long been taken for granted. In my home state of Maryland, the earliest American colonists sought refuge from the religious persecution they suffered in neighboring colonies. For centuries now, Americans have enjoyed the fundamental right to believe as they wish, with no interference from the government and with no fear of persecution or exclusion by those with a different set of beliefs. This is our inalienable right, and it should be guaranteed for people of all nations.

Sadly, threats to such freedom exist still today in various parts of the world. Basic human rights many take for granted -- such as the freedom of expression, freedom of the press and the freedom of religious organizations, organizations of civil society and non-governmental organizations -- fail to exist for countless of our human brothers and sisters.

The challenge for us today and everyday thereafter, is that we move from dialogue to action. We have been successful in moving from indifference to dialogue -- now we must take it one step further by implementing policies and activities that promote tolerance, developing standards and mechanisms to assess the effectiveness of dialogue, and ensuring greater communal and individual religious freedoms for people at all levels of society--national, regional and local.

We should all work to ensure the integrity of the Maastricht Ministerial decision, where all 55 OSCE participating States committed to "ensure and facilitate the freedom of the individual to profess and practice a religion or belief, alone or in community with others through transparent and nondiscriminatory laws, regulations, practices and policies." Governments must therefore work to implement non-discriminatory laws, avoiding those that limit the ability of groups to operate equally. Registration systems should not create unfair tiered systems offering unique benefits and privileges to some and lesser legal status to others, or establish numerical thresholds almost impossible to meet.

I have personally witnessed the ravages and discord that racism brings as well as the hope that comes from dialogue, respect and common action to overcome bigotry and injustice.

The day following the terrorist attacks of September 11, 2001, I called leaders of the Christian, Jewish and Muslim faiths in our city to an inter-religious prayer service the next day for the victims of the attacks, as well as for our people. The service took place

appropriately at the most historic place of worship in the United States, and the universal symbol of religious freedom for Catholics and others -- the Basilica of the Assumption of the Blessed Virgin Mary in Baltimore. Our mayor joined representatives of the various faith communities in prayer as brothers and sisters -- united for that hour in prayer before the All-Holy One.

In the weeks and months following 9-11, fear and confusion spread throughout the country. Millions of Muslim and Islamic immigrants were deeply afraid of a backlash by people who did not understand or could not comprehend how others claiming to be of the same faith could commit such acts of evil.

Not long after, I met with representatives of nearly all the Muslim organizations in Maryland at their request, to assist them in communicating the true hallmarks of their faith and in helping to ensure the tolerance and respect of the people of all religious communities among us.

It is up to each of us -- leaders of religions and leaders of nations -- to not only promote and foster tolerance, greater understanding and dialogue, but to ensure that every person and all religious communities are guaranteed the right to freedom of religion and belief.