



Statement by His Excellency Archbishop Silvano Tomasi, Permanent Observer of the Holy See to the United Nations and Other International Organizations in Geneva at the 19th Session of the Human Rights Council – High Level Segment
Geneva, 1 March 2012

Madam President,

The implementation of human rights is a difficult challenge today, particularly with regard to the fundamental and inalienable right of every person to “*freedom of thought, conscience and religion or belief.*” Among other elements, the evolving political situation, wrong perceptions of the role of religion, expediency, and subtle ambiguities in the understanding of secularism lead to intolerance and even outright persecution of people because of their faith or religion. The freedom to manifest one’s religion or belief in teaching, practice, worship and observance, which is guaranteed by human rights law and international instruments, is disregarded in several places in the world. Such stifling policies and practices place at risk the contribution of many citizens to social life and progress in their respective countries. The Holy See appreciates the regular attention of the Human Rights Council to this major issue as well as the related efforts and decisions taken by Special Procedures.

In many countries, however, the gap is growing between widely accepted stated principles, and their daily application on the ground. Serious research provides reliable data on current and repetitive patterns of gross violations of the right to freedom of religion. Christians are not the only victims, but terrorist attacks on Christians in Africa, the Middle East and Asia increased 309% between 2003 and 2010. Approximately 70% of the world’s population lives in countries with high restrictions on religious beliefs and practices, and religious minorities pay the highest price. In general, rising restrictions on religion affect more than 2.2 billion people. The affected people either have lost the protection of their societies or have experienced some government-imposed and unjust restrictions, or have become victims of violence resulting from an impulsive bigotry.¹ The evidence shows that additional efforts are required from the international community in order to assure the protection of people in their exercise of freedom of religion and religious practice. Such actions are urgently required since in several countries the situation is worsening and since the factual reporting of such violations is underplayed,

¹ Ayaan Hirsi Ali, “The War on Christians,” Newsweek, February 13, 2012, p. 30 Cfr.

<http://www.pewforum.org/Government/Rising-Restrictions-on-Religion.aspx> Also, Portes Ouvertes : Index mondial de Persécution des chrétiens, 2011

despite the fact, it should be highlighted in the pertinent Reports.

The Universal Declaration of Human Rights points to respect for the human dignity of all people as the foundation on which the protection of human rights is built. In the present circumstances, it is worth recalling that States should ensure that all their citizens have the right to enjoy freedom of religion individually, within the family, and as a community, and to participate in the public square. Religious freedom, in fact, is not a derived right, or one granted, but a fundamental and inalienable right of the human person. A religious belief should not be perceived or considered as harmful or offensive simply because it is different from that of the majority. The task of the Government is not to define religion or recognize its value, but to confer upon faith communities a juridical personality so that they can function peacefully within a legal framework. Respect for the religious freedom of everyone may be at stake in places where the concept of “State religion” is recognized, especially when the latter becomes the source of unjust treatment of others, whether they believe in other faiths or have none.

Above the institutional considerations, the critical problem facing the promotion and protection of human rights in the area of religious freedom is the intolerance that leads to violence and to the killing of many innocent people each year simply because of their religious convictions. The realistic and collective responsibility, therefore, is to sustain mutual tolerance and respect of human rights and a greater equality among citizens of different religions in order to achieve a healthy democracy where the public role of religion and the distinction between religious and temporal spheres are recognized. In practical life, when managed in the context of mutual acceptance, the relations between majority and minority allow for cooperation and compromise and open the way for peaceful and constructive coexistence. But to achieve this desirable goal, there is a need to overcome a culture that devalues the human person and is intent on eliminating religion from the public life. Pope Benedict XVI has clearly described this situation when he writes: “Sadly, in certain countries, mainly in the West, one increasingly encounters in political and cultural circles, as well in the media, scarce respect and at times hostility, if not scorn, directed towards religion and towards Christianity in particular. It is clear that if relativism is considered an essential element of democracy, one risks viewing secularity solely in the sense of excluding or, more precisely, denying the social importance of religion. But such an approach creates confrontation and division, disturbs peace, harms human ecology and, by rejecting in principle approaches other than its own, finishes in a dead end. There is thus an urgent need to delineate a positive and open secularity which, grounded in the just autonomy of the temporal order and the spiritual order, can foster healthy cooperation and a spirit of shared responsibility.”²

Madam President,

² Pope Benedict XVI, Address to the Members of the Diplomatic Corps for the Traditional Exchange of New Year Greetings, Monday, 11 January 2010

Religions are not a threat, but a resource. They contribute to the development of civilizations, and this is good for everyone. Their activities and freedom should be protected so that the partnership between religious beliefs and societies may enhance the common good. A culture of tolerance, mutual acceptance and dialogue is urgent. The educational system and the media have a major role to play by excluding prejudice and hatred from textbooks, from newscasts and from newspapers, and by disseminating accurate and fair information on all component groups of society. But lack of education and information, that facilitates an easier manipulation of people for political advantages, is too often linked to underdevelopment, poverty, lack of access to effective participation in the management of society. Greater social justice provides fertile ground for the implementation of all human rights. Religions are communities based on convictions and their freedom guarantees a contribution of moral values without which the freedom of everyone is not possible. For this reason, it becomes an urgent and beneficial responsibility of the international community to counteract the trend of increasing violence against religious groups and of a mistaken and deceptive neutrality that in fact aims at neutralizing religion.

Thank you, Madam President.