



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 25<sup>th</sup> Session of the Human Rights Council  
Item 3: Report of the Special Rapporteur on Freedom of Religion or Belief  
*Geneva, 12 March 2014*

Mr. President, as current conflicts show, the right to freedom of religion or belief is in urgent need of protection. It is often misinterpreted, as has become evident in certain judicial decisions. The Report of the Special Rapporteur on freedom of religion or belief helps in the analysis of their role and use in society and highlights their contribution to social cohesion, education and peaceful coexistence. It focuses on collective religious hatred and the Rapporteur seeks to find an understanding of the causes of that hatred, which seems to be generated by religion, and to identify in particular the responsibility of the State to prevent it.

Religious freedom should be protected not only in order to ensure a peaceful society, but also, primarily, because the human “transcendent dignity must be acknowledged and protected as a universal good, essential to the building of societies directed toward human flourishing.”<sup>1</sup>

However, religions are incarnated in societies and cultures that may manipulate the religious message for specific and immediate goals such as group identity, political power, personal interest. In fact, certain actors may take it upon themselves to use religion, its symbols and language, for objectives other than their original purpose. In this context the State has the duty to prevent violations of human rights and incitement to hatred. It needs to act with justice and equity toward persons and religions without necessarily becoming itself areligious. As the legitimate authority aimed at fostering the common good of society, States hold a privileged position of responsibility to defend the freedom of religion and belief. Indeed, as the conclusion of the Report highlights, “States must take an active role in promoting respect for everyone’s freedom of thought, conscience, religion and belief”.<sup>2</sup>

In this context, my Delegation raises a word of caution regarding what the Report seemingly takes for granted, or assumes, that the position of the State in questions of religious liberty is “neutral” or “disinterested”. It would be naïve to deny or ignore those all too common cases in which a secular “authority” exercises judgment, indeed imposes its ideology, on situations that deal essentially with questions of religious liberty. Such an ideology is really nothing less than a pseudo-form of “religion” or “belief” that limits the freedom of religious expression of others. Here arises a paradox: the “disinterested”,

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<sup>1</sup> Cfr., Pope Benedict XVI, Message of Peace, 2011, n.2.

<sup>2</sup> Report, n. 69.

“areligious”, governing authority, in attempting to neutralize any “traditional” religious expression, enters - intentionally or not - into an area that infringes upon religious freedom. Hence, we see cases in which people are punished and their fundamental rights violated by the so-called “neutral” State authority in the name of non-discrimination because of a presumed infringement of religious tolerance in the way they express themselves, dress or wear religious symbols. These occurrences are becoming more common as courts and the State promote an ideological approach that sees religion more as a problem than as an essential element of human freedom.

Any sort of ideological imposition is reprehensible and poses an insidious threat to the very freedom of religion that should be fostered and defended. There is grave danger lurking when authorities ostensibly responsible for monitoring religious tolerance become completely intolerant to those who do not share their position.

“In many parts of the world, there seems to be no end to grave offences against fundamental human rights, especially the right to life and the right to religious freedom.”<sup>3</sup> The Report rightly confirms such offenses linked to collective hatred manifest in various forms, whether through physical violence, torture and abuse, or through disregard of the freedom of religion and religious institutions and their values and beliefs, and justified through a religious or ideological language.

The Holy See continues to insist upon respect for religious liberty and the autonomy of individuals to express freely their beliefs, in accord with just civil legislation and always with mutual respect for other convictions especially today in pluri-religious cultures and societies. This, however, does not entail reducing “religious freedom” to a “least common denominator” of practice and belief. On the contrary, it is desirable that religions interact among themselves, present their doctrines and sacred texts, accept constructive criticism. Freedom of conscience is based on reliable information provided by freedom of expression and personal formation. In this sense, the person should be free, in the civil realm, to follow his or her conscience in deciding matters related to profession of religion or belief.

While eradicating religious and ideological hatred is a noble goal, one must also realize the root cause is much more complex than what is proposed in the Report. “Fear” is an important dimension underlying such hatred, but so too are ignorance of other religious beliefs and cultures and the simple reality of malice in the hearts of some who, notwithstanding efforts to find mutual understanding and trust, do not compromise in their obstinacy and hatred of others.

Facing today’s numerous international problems, many of which have some religious component, the way forward is to find non-violent solutions through continued communal dialogue and patient efforts in view of reaching a greater mutual understanding.

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<sup>3</sup> Pope Francis, *Message*, World Day of Peace, 2014, § 1.

Thank you, Mr. President.