



Statement of H.E. Archbishop Ettore Balestrero, Apostolic Nuncio,
Permanent Observer of the Holy See to the United Nations
and Other International Organisations in Geneva
at the 55th Session of the Human Rights Council
Item 3: Interactive Dialogue with the Special Rapporteur on freedom of religion or belief
Geneva, 6 March 2024

Mr. President,

In the words of Pope Francis, “Religious freedom certainly means the right to worship God, individually and in community, as our consciences dictate. But religious liberty, by its nature, transcends places of worship and the private sphere of individuals and families. Because religion itself, the religious dimension, is not a subculture; it is part of the culture of every people and every nation.”¹

Nowadays, anti-religious sentiments are alarmingly prevalent.² Nearly 4.5 billion people are living in countries where religious freedom is severely restricted. This means that approximately 57% of the world’s population does not enjoy religious freedom.³ Statistics also indicate that Christians are the most persecuted group of believers, with an estimated “one out of every seven Christians experience[ing] persecution.”⁴

Mr. President,

Unfortunately, religion may be instrumentalised and abused to promote hatred. However, true religion never promotes hatred of the other. As it is well known, there is no compulsion in religion.

In that context, it is important to exercise particular caution when discussing religious hatred. The term “*hate speech*” is generic and susceptible to subjective, diverse and potentially biased interpretations. On one hand, as the Report rightly acknowledges, there is no universally accepted international legal definition of hate speech. On the other hand, as recognized by Article 18 of the UDHR, the right to freedom of thought, conscience and religion includes the right “*to manifest his religion or belief in teaching, practice, worship and observance*”. Hence, legitimate expression of religious convictions and the teaching of religious and moral principles should never be equated with hate speech.

Undoubtedly, we must reject the instrumentalization of religion for hateful purposes, but we must also be careful that the rejection of hatred on the basis of religion does not become an excuse to oppress or restrict the freedom of believers and of religious beliefs.

Thank you, Mr. President.

¹ Pope Francis, Meeting for religious liberty with the hispanic community and other immigrants, Philadelphia, 26 September 2015.

² Cf. Aid to the Church in Need, *Religious Freedom Report 2023*.

³ Cf. Fordham’s Pope Francis Global Poverty Report 2023.

⁴ Pope Francis, *Address to Members of the Diplomatic Corps accredited to the Holy See*, 9 January 2023.