

OSCE Conference on Racism, Xenophobia and Discrimination: National Statement

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. We 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 so many of our human brothers and sisters.

The point made just now about all of the hate messages on the Internet is a point very well made. Somehow, these hate messages have to be countered with messages that help us to understand one another and not make divisions worse. Also, I have a great concern about the marginalization of religion today. The trend to put faith to the side is a dangerous one and needs to be combated by those in government as well as those in the private sector.

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 protections 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 non-discriminatory 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 seen at first hand the upheaval and the discord that racism brings as well as the hope that comes from dialogue.

The day following the terrorist attacks of September 11, 2001, I invited leaders of the Jewish, Christian 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, architecturally the worldwide 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. Following the service the Muslim Imam was interviewed on television and able thereby to transmit to our whole community ideas of reconciliation and peace.

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