

OSCE

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Supplementary Human Dimension Meeting

**Freedom of Religion or Belief: Issues, Opportunities, and the Specific Challenges of
Combating Anti-Semitism and Intolerance and Discrimination against Christians,
Muslims and Members of Other Religions**

22-23 June 2017

Hofburg, Vienna

Distinguished delegates,

Ladies and gentlemen,

The right to freedom of religion or belief is a fundamental human right protected by international, regional, and domestic law provisions. It is a human right that goes beyond recognising people as political and economic entities. Indeed, religion and belief set up moral foundations for our everyday lives and prescribe certain behaviours. Religion and belief further affirm that there is a higher authority than the government and so sets up moral limitations to its work.

Religious liberty is beneficial for all communities. Churches and religious groups provide public service. They contribute to the economic prosperity of the local community and provide direct economic benefit to the local area – by creating jobs and supporting local businesses, bring additional revenue to local establishments.

Churches and religious groups help to decrease crime and social disaffection by teaching the gospel and by providing support to most vulnerable, including individuals struggling with alcohol or drug addiction or gambling, etc.

Religious communities are actively involved in voluntary work across many sectors. Religious communities volunteer in prison ministries, suicide prevention centres, drug and alcohol rehabilitation and treatment centres, hospices, hospitals, homeless shelters, food banks, and much more that are initiated or run by churches and religious groups.

Churches and religious groups provide social benefit with economic value by helping poor and vulnerable people and social benefits by way of social programmes for children, youths, adults, etc. In 2015, the time spent by churches, mosques, synagogues and religious groups in the UK had been valued at £3 billion. The 219,889 social action projects that run in 2015 were reported to have benefited over 47 million people in the UK.

Nonetheless, religion is sometimes being driven out of the public square which has a negative impact not only on those who wish to manifest their religious liberty, but also those who benefit from services provided by religious groups (predominately on a voluntary basis). The right to freedom of religion or belief must be protected not only because it is a fundamental human right but also because of the positive impact of the enjoyment of the right of communities.

One of the ways the states can protect the right to freedom of religion or belief is by the mechanism of reasonable accommodation.

Reasonable accommodation is a principle that recognises that in the same way a law designed for the majority can negatively impinge upon the interests of a minority, a law intended to protect one minority may negatively impact another minority group. The solution to this problem is to apply the law in a way that makes space for and reasonably accommodates the other protected characteristic.

Reasonable accommodation already exists in UK law on disability. In other countries such as Canada reasonable accommodation has been extended to include many protected categories such as religion, disability, gender, national origin and age. Likewise, in the United States, reasonable accommodation was used to accommodate religious liberty in employment law before the concept was applied to disability. Furthermore, reasonable accommodation does not necessarily have to place additional burdens on employers. There is no empirical data to suggest that if people of faith were given such an option, this would have constituted a significant burden for others to access the services.

Failing to accommodate the right to freedom of religion or belief and continuous pressure on the right will have a chilling effect on religious groups and so an adverse effect on communities that often rely on the services provided by religious groups. States must implement the right to freedom of religion or belief to its fullest.

Thank you.