

**OSCE Conference on Tolerance and the Fight against Racism, Xenophobia and  
Discrimination**

**Workshop: Freedom of Religion and Belief through Transparent and Non-Discriminatory  
Laws, Regulations, Policies and Procedures  
September 13, 2004  
Introduction by Michael Lieberman, Anti-Defamation League**

Good afternoon.

I hope you are familiar with the work of the Anti-Defamation League. ADL is one of America's oldest human-rights organizations. You may know us as a principal source of information on organized racist, anti-Semitic, and anti-democracy groups. We also work in coalitions to write anti-discrimination, human rights and religious liberty laws for Congress and the States. The plurality of our budget, however, is devoted to making those laws irrelevant -- with anti-bias programs designed to promote acceptance and respect of differences.

It is an honor to help introduce this session on religious discrimination. There are many experts in this room who, I am confident, will help flesh out the nature and magnitude of the problem.

As a preliminary matter, let me say: I am not an academic and not a researcher.

I am an activist, an advocate, a lobbyist.

I understand that progress can be slow and that change is incremental.

But the campaign for human rights, the quest for international religious freedom is a movement. We've got to keep moving ahead.

We've got to continue to make progress towards our goal.

In preparing for this session, I was struck by the many existing declarations, statements, and ministerial decisions this body has adopted on religious freedom.

In 2003, every one of the 55 OSCE participating states agreed to "ensure and facilitate the freedom of the individual to profess and practice a religion or belief, alone or in a community with others, where necessary through transparent and non-discriminatory laws, regulations, practices and policies."

As Ambassador Strohal said at the July 2003 Human Dimension Meeting on Religious Freedom in Vienna, these commitments are "among the most long-standing OSCE Human Dimension commitments."

They are impressive commitments, but they are not self-executing.

It will take concerted actions by governments, working in partnership with NGOs and religious organizations to make progress.

1) The starting point for our discussion should be the goal of government neutrality toward religion.

Neutrality does not mean hostility to religion.

Neutrality does not mean inattention or indifference to the welfare of religion or to the security of minority religions.

In fact, every state's anti-discrimination laws in employment and housing should include protection for religion.

Every state's anti-hate crime laws should include religion.

Many participants at this conference are wearing buttons that say "Data Stops Hate." This button is shorthand for the importance of counting and responding effectively to every hate crime.

In the same way hate crime data is collected, governments should establish public, accessible mechanisms to report and respond to incidents of religious discrimination.

In too many countries, the government is far from neutral.

In too many countries, the government itself is the main instrument of religious persecution.

If a government is the instrument of discrimination and favors some religions over others, how can it teach its citizens to value each other equally?

Burdensome registration requirements that limit the ability of religious groups to operate equally or deny them legal personality are inconsistent with efforts to promote tolerance and fight discrimination. If governments tolerate religious discrimination or religious-based hate crimes, that message will be received loud and clear by both those who would discriminate and those who are targeted. If religious minorities do not see the state protecting them from violence, they will organize to protect themselves. That is a recipe for disaster.

2) Two days ago, we commemorated the anniversary of the September 11<sup>th</sup> terrorist incidents -- purportedly committed in the name of religion against the United States. It is essential for states to take actions necessary for their national security. But any infringement on individual rights -- including religious liberty -- should be narrowly tailored to meet specific security threats.

Broad-scale profiling and stereotyping is not justified and is unacceptable. The very real threat of terrorism cannot be used to restrict religious liberty.

3) These meetings are important and we should not leave Brussels without setting in motion plans for the next series of meetings.

But government officials should meet with human rights organizations and leaders of religious groups regularly -- and not just in the aftermath of an egregious act of intolerance. We need to expand cooperation between human rights organizations, NGOs, and religious groups to leverage our contacts toward shared priorities.

4) Anti-discrimination laws and government neutrality are not enough. Governments must complement these efforts with affirmative anti-bias education and outreach. Studies have shown that a disproportionate number of both perpetrators and victims of hate violence are young people under 18.

Both religious and secular schools must play an essential role in helping all students develop respect for differences.

We should teach the universal lessons of religious tolerance through Holocaust education. We should teach the critical thinking skills necessary to reject stereotypes and prejudiced beliefs.

These skills are necessary for our children to succeed in a society that is, in most cases, far more diverse than the one in which their parents and teachers were raised. Children cannot learn where they do not feel safe, valued, and respected.

The OSCE hosted an important conference in Paris in June on hate on the Internet. Young people have increasing access to the Internet. We should find ways to speak to them in their own language, in their own electronic medium. The Internet is an essential resource in any public education campaign against hate and religious discrimination.

Let me end as I began: with reference to many strong statements by OSCE on this subject.

ODIHR's work in the area, especially through its advisory panel on Experts of Freedom of Religion and Belief, is especially important, and deserves our strong support.

Governments and NGOs and religious communities must back up these commitments with resources.

Michael Lieberman  
Washington Counsel  
Director, Civil Rights Policy Planning Center  
Anti-Defamation League  
(202) 261-4607  
(202) 296-2371 FAX  
[mlieberman@adl.org](mailto:mlieberman@adl.org)