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Osservatorio per la Tolleranza e la Libertà Religiosa
"Giuseppe Dossetti"
Observatory for Religious Tolerance and Freedom

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Freedom of Religion or Belief
Fostering Mutual Respect and Understanding
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Session II: Creating the conditions for meaningful and sustained interreligious dialogue in order to ensure stability and security in the OSCE Region

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Before speaking about the conditions for meaningful and sustained dialogue between religions and with religions, let me note how much dialogue is important in fostering mutual respect and understanding. In fact, having a dialogue means recognizing the other part as an interlocutor at the same level and with the same dignity, as well as allows a greater understanding of the respective points of view.

Let me also preliminarily remark that interreligious dialogue and dialogue between religious communities and governmental bodies should be kept distinct. The first one is properly speaking an internal matter of religious communities, which are free to decide if and when start this dialogue as well as to decide with which communities and on which issues conduct it, while the dialogue between religious communities and governmental bodies has different premises and goals.

Moreover, I would also underline the interrelation and interdependence of these forms of dialogue and the inclusion of religious communities in public dialogue and debate. In this respect attention should be drawn to the denial of religions' public role and to the attempt to exclude believers from public discourse. According to Principle 16 of Vienna 1989 Concluding Document and Ministerial Council Decision No. 3/13 participating States are requested to include religious communities in public dialogue, even through the mass media. Consequently they should welcome the interventions of representatives of religious communities that give their view – based on moral convictions deriving from faith – about everyday's life and, in particular, on legislative and administrative provisions of their Countries.

One of the main obstacles to the dialogue between religions and with religions are certain expressions, which create and reinforce patterns of intolerance and discrimination. As we all know, there is no consensus at international level about how, and exactly where, the frontiers of freedom

of expression should be drawn but, anyway, participating States have an interest to find an appropriate balance between the right to hold and express an opinion on one side, and the aim to facilitate a respectful dialogue between religious communities on the other side. Therefore they should be encouraged to create an atmosphere of mutual respect through a suitably narrow notion of incitement that will allow some regulation and even criminalization, but that will continue to allow robust discussion that sometimes may shock and offend.

If it is difficult to draw a legal limitation, anyway every person should be encouraged to exercise responsibly her or his freedom of expression, with due consideration for the believers' feelings. In particular the media have the responsibility to promote knowledge and understanding of religions, to give a fair and accurate account of religious beliefs and to ensure that members of religious communities are given the chance to express their own views. To this end, the Representative on the Freedom of the Media and the ODIHR may develop specific guidelines for voluntary professional standards and self-regulation.

A special attention should be paid to the Internet, and especially to the social networks, which play a big role in spreading disparagement of, or incitement against religions and religious communities as well as in showing irreverent treatment or provocative portrayal of religious symbols. Internet service providers and social networking services should be encouraged to adopt standard form contracts providing termination clauses and penalties in case of intolerant conducts of people using their services.

All these measures will allow the public opinion to develop in a correct, mature way and they will foster a climate of mutual confidence and respect between religious communities as well as between believers and non-believers, which is an essential precondition for meaningful and sustained interreligious dialogue.