

Intervento di chiusura al Seminario “Promoting Religious Freedom and Peaceful Coexistence. International Workshop with academia, think-tanks and media representatives”

(Roma, 11 febbraio 2013)

Ladies and Gentlemen, distinguished Guests,

I hope the workshop has been a fruitful experience for everyone. To conclude, I would like to summarize the main points that came up in today’s debate.

(Text of the Conclusions of the workshop)

Freedom of religion and belief (FORB) is a right that must be defended every day. Its respect cannot be given for granted. Discrimination, intolerance, and religious persecutions are not disappearing; on the contrary they are gaining ground in many parts of the world.

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While extremist interpretation of religions can generate political violence and conflicts, religious inspiration can promote dialogue, civic engagement, and reconciliation. We shouldn't forget the positive role religion can play in modernizing societies, promoting education through better understanding of fundamental values of traditions and cultures and, at the end of the day injecting in the political discourse the relevance of human dignity and equality among all people.

I believe that today we agreed that academics, diplomats and journalists share the duty to raise public awareness on the fact that religious freedom is a key human right. During this morning debate, I heard of a report which proves how much restriction of freedom of religion and belief brings about violence and repression, and vice versa.

How to attain social cohesion and political consensus on the freedom issue is therefore central to our work. On one hand we can build on a sound foundation provided by the international human rights instruments. On a global base, the Universal Declaration of Human Rights (UDHR) and

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the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights (ICCPR) offer a set of legal provisions. On the other hand we can rely on the Resolutions proposed by the European Union and the Organization for Islamic Cooperation at the Human Rights Council and General Assembly of the United Nations, and adopted by consensus. Regionally, the European Convention for the Protection of Human Rights and Fundamental Freedoms (ECHR) can also be taken into account.

This framework of rules must be implemented. It can contribute to protect religious freedom for both individuals and communities, including minorities that are most exposed to acts of intolerance and persecution.

“If implemented” is the key phrase here. Some steps forward have already been made. A few States –and Italy is among them- are at the forefront of the international debate around FORB. The European Union is developing new guidelines. However a need for better coordination among these national initiatives (also with the appointment of a UN special rapporteur on FORB) is widely felt. The

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multilateral approach should be reinforced. Equally important – and I should say, after today’s discussion even more important - is the involvement of civil society. Its role is of fundamental importance in addressing intolerance and fundamentalism. The same cultural role belongs to academia.

The resurgence of religions in foreign affairs is not unrelated to major, tectonic shifts occurring towards the East, to the emerging of the BRICs, to the quest for democracy and freedom in large parts of the world. We should try and build a new consensus on sensitive questions, such as the boundaries between freedom of religion and freedom of expression. As it was stated today the need for a new approach is widely felt among politicians, academics and representatives of international organizations.

The role of the media has acquired an unprecedented, extraordinary weight since the advent of “new media” transformed all news-users into news providers.

(end of text of the Conclusions of the workshop)

I would like to conclude by thanking the Convitto Nazionale “Vittorio Emanuele II” for its involvement in this workshop. The active engagement of young people is the best way to connect education with human rights. I would like to mention the paper written by the a young student, Giulia Janni. Her work has been selected following a competitive process, promoted on my facebook page, which has allowed hundreds of young students to expose their personal ideas and suggestions on the issue of freedom of religion. As she reminds us that “Ignorance feeds discrimination and ultimately leads to violence”, we get the sense of the power that the media and academia have in promoting concretely human rights. And of our responsibility to contrast ignorance and religious hate.

Thank you.