

Seventy per cent of World Population Live in Countries with High Restrictions on Religious Beliefs



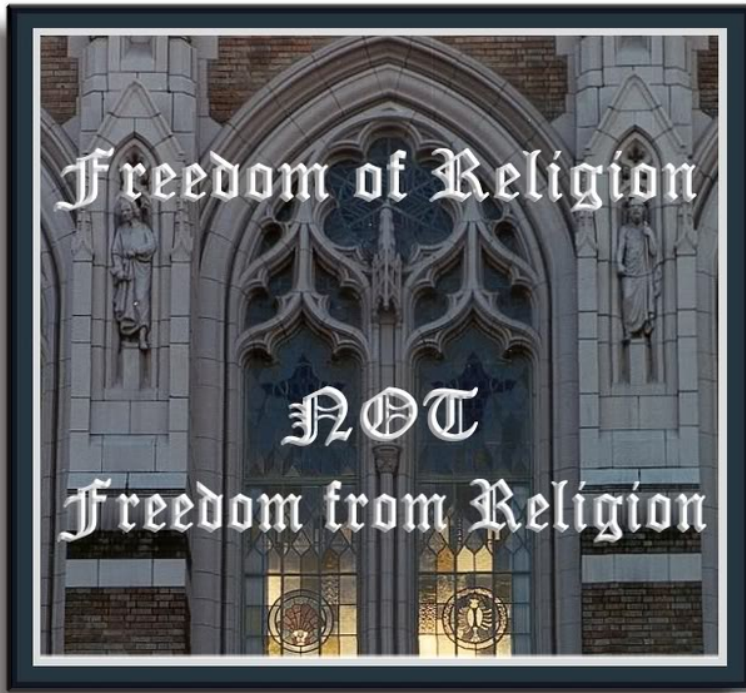
"Terrorist attacks on Christians in Africa, the Middle East and Asia increased 309 per cent between 2003 and 2010. Approximately 70 per cent of the world's population lives in countries with high restrictions on religious beliefs and practices, and religious minorities pay the highest price". These words were pronounced on 1 March by **Archbishop Silvano M. Tomasi C.S., permanent observer of the Holy See to the United Nations** at Geneva, during the course of the nineteenth ordinary session of the Human Rights Council.

Speaking English, Archbishop Tomasi recalled how, "in general, rising restrictions on religion affect more than 2.2 billion people. Those affected have either lost the protection of their societies or have experienced some government-imposed and unjust restrictions, or have become victims of violence resulting from an impulsive bigotry".

Among the causes of this phenomenon, the archbishop mentioned "the evolving political situation, wrong perceptions of the role of religion, expediency, and subtle ambiguities in the understanding of secularism". In the current situation, **it is vital for the international community "to assure the protection of people in their exercise of freedom of religion and religious practice"**.

In this context, the Holy See observer noted that States must guarantee all their citizens the right to religious freedom, at both the individual and community level. Freedom of religion is not a derived or granted right, "but a fundamental and inalienable right of the human person. ... **The task of government is not to define religion, ... but to confer upon faith communities a juridical personality so that they can function peacefully within a legal framework.**

"Respect for the religious freedom of everyone may be at stake in places where the concept of "State religion" is recognised, especially when the latter becomes the source of unjust treatment of others, whether they believe in other faiths or have none".



The archbishop went on: "Above the institutional considerations, the critical problem facing the promotion and protection of human rights in the area of religious freedom is the intolerance that leads to violence and to the killing of many innocent people each year simply because of their religious convictions. The realistic and collective responsibility, therefore, is to sustain mutual tolerance and respect of human rights and a greater equality among citizens of different religions in order to achieve a healthy democracy where the public role of religion and the distinction between religious and temporal spheres are recognised. ... **But to achieve this desirable goal, there is a need to overcome a culture that devalues the human person and is intent on eliminating religion from public life**".

"Religions are not a threat, but a resource", he said. "They contribute to the development of civilisations, and this is good for everyone. Their freedom and activities should be protected so that the partnership between religious beliefs and societies may enhance the common good. ... The educational system and the media have a major role to play by excluding prejudice and hatred from textbooks, from newscasts and from newspapers, and by disseminating accurate and fair information on all component groups of society.

"But lack of education and information, that facilitates an easier manipulation of people for political advantages, is too often linked to underdevelopment, poverty, lack of access to effective participation in the management of society. Greater social justice provides fertile ground for the implementation of all human rights. Religions are communities based on convictions and their freedom guarantees a contribution of moral values without which the freedom of everyone is not possible. For this reason", Archbishop Tomasi concluded, "it becomes an urgent and beneficial responsibility of the international community to counteract the trend of increasing violence against religious groups and of mistaken and deceptive neutrality that in fact aims at neutralising religion".