



THE CATHOLIC CHURCH
IN THE EUROPEAN UNION

RELIGIOUS FREEDOM

EU'S COMPETENCES
CHURCH'S VISION
COMECE'S CONTRIBUTION

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EU's competence

The legal foundation of the obligation of the EU and its member states to respect the right to freedom of religion is set out in Article 10 of the [EU Charter of Fundamental Rights](#), based on Article 9 of the [European Convention for the Protection of Human Rights and Fundamental Freedoms](#). The EU Charter also recognises the right of parents to educate and teach of their children in conformity with, amongst others, their religious convictions (Article 14.3) and prohibits any discrimination based on, *inter alia*, religion (Article 21). Moreover, the EU is obliged to respect, *inter alia*, cultural and religious diversity (Article 22 of the EU Charter), and religious rites and cultural traditions in Member States when setting up rules on welfare of animals (Article 13 TFEU). The ECJ has also contributed through its [judgments](#) to reinforcing religious freedom in diverse areas (e.g., religion as a ground for granting asylum). Concerning the internal dimension of religious freedom, the [case-law of the European Court of Human Rights](#) has a particular impact.

The EU has incorporated a human rights' dimension into its external relations, that generally include clauses on the respect for basic rights, including the right to freedom of religion. The [EU Guidelines on the promotion and protection of freedom of religion or belief](#) are aimed at strengthening religious freedom in the EU external policies. The EU also [finances human rights activities, including the promotion of the right to freedom of religion worldwide](#).

The European Parliament has been very active during recent years denouncing violations of the right to freedom of religion in different parts of the world. Recently, the [European Parliament Intergroup on Freedom of Religion or Belief and Religious Tolerance](#) (Intergroup on FoRB & RT) was created.



Church's vision

In 1965 Pope Paul VI promulgated the Declaration "[*Dignitatis Humanae*](#)" adopted by the Vatican Council II, which asserts: "*The human person has a right to religious freedom. This freedom means that all men are to be immune from coercion on the part of individuals or of social groups and of any human power, that no one is to be forced to act in a manner contrary to his own beliefs, whether privately or publicly, whether alone or in association with others, within due limits.*" The **fundamental and inalienable right to religious freedom**, founded in the very transcendent dignity of the human person and his obligation to seek the truth, is to be recognised in the constitutional law whereby society is governed, within the limits of the common good and public order ([*Catechism of the Catholic Church, 1738*](#)). All dimensions of this right (individual and collective; private and public; and institutional, e.g., recognition of legal personality) should be properly and fully protected. It includes, amongst others, the right of people freely to hold meetings and to establish educational, cultural, charitable and social organisations, under the impulse of their own religious sense, and the right of parents to educate their children in accordance with their religious convictions.

Furthermore, COMECE pays also attention to the **inter-religious dimension of intercultural dialogue**. The Church "*intends to promote the unity of Christians and a fruitful cooperation with believers of other religions. Differences of religion must not be a cause of conflict; the shared quest for peace on the part of all believers is a vital source of unity among peoples*" ([*Compendium, 516*](#)). The Church "*exhorts her sons, that through dialogue and collaboration with the followers of other religions, carried out with prudence and love and in witness to the Christian faith and life, they recognise, preserve and promote the good things, spiritual and moral, as well as the socio-cultural values found among these men.*" ([*Nostra Aetate, Vatican Council II, 1965*](#)).



COMECE's contribution

In May 2010 the Bishops of COMECE welcomed a report made by its secretariat under the title "Religious Freedom, Pillar of the Human Rights Policy in the External Relations of the European Union". While rejoicing at the growing awareness of the EU as to the importance of the right to religious freedom (part 4), the report: reaffirms the obligations and the duties of the European Union in the field of protection and promotion of Human Rights (part 1);- gives a definition of religious freedom and its scope within Catholic Social Teaching (part 2);- provides an assessment of the violations of the right to religious freedom and of religious persecution in the world. (part 3);-and concludes with a series of recommendations for the attention of the EU in order to engage in the world in this field.

A [Dialogue Seminar on Freedom of Religion](#) was held in March 2012, co-organised with CEC and the European Commission (BEPA).

The COMECE Secretariat has published a compilation of nearly 100 documents adopted by the European Parliament and the European External Action Service (EEAS) on religious freedom (2010 to September 2012). It has also published the book entitled *International Perspectives on Religious Freedom. Proceedings of Conferences on Religious Freedom* (EPP Group & COMECE, Brussels, 2013).

COMECE continues to be concerned about the discrimination and persecution of Christians in different parts of the world and remains vigilant. The Secretariat has organised several events analysing and denouncing those situations: conference on "Persecution against Christians" (European Parliament, October 2010, co-organised with EPP and ECR), seminar on "Freedom of Religion in the European Neighbourhood: What role for religious actors and EU external action?" (European Parliament, October 2010, co-organised with KAS and CEC), seminar on "Intolerance and Discrimination against Christians in Europe" (European Parliament, March 2011), debate on "Christian Churches in Maghreb and Mashreq" (April 2011), conference on "Christians in the Middle East" (Beirut, November 2011), seminar on "Christians in the Arab World: One Year after the Arab Spring", (European Parliament, May 2012, co-organised with EPP and ECR), and a seminar on "Discrimination of Christians in Europe" (European Parliament, October 2012, co-organised with EPP and ECR). In some cases COMECE has been forthright in its denunciation of infringements to religious freedom.

More recently, the [COMECE Secretariat contributed](#) to the Public consultation on "*Tolerance and respect: preventing and combating anti-Semitic and anti-Muslim hatred in Europe*" (May 2015), a preparatory step towards the First Annual Colloquium on Fundamental Rights organised by the European Commission (October 2015).

It is important to note that staff members of the COMECE Secretariat regularly participate as speakers in international *fora* on religious freedom. COMECE is actively involved and participates in ecumenical and inter-religious dialogue.



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