

**2013 Council of Europe Exchange
on the religious dimension of intercultural dialogue
“Freedom of religion in today’s world: challenges and guarantees”
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Protection of persons belonging to religious minorities, believers and non-believers and their contributions to the fight against intolerance, discrimination and hate speech with regard to freedom of religion.

Ladies and Gentlemen,
Dear Sisters and Brothers,
Your Eminences,
Distinguished Guests,

In the contemporary society human rights are challenged constantly. Human rights exist to protect the rights of all individuals and communities whether they consider themselves as believers or non-believers, belonging to majority or minority communities. To protect human rights is a common task and responsibility for all of us. In the human rights system there is no hierarchy of rights. All rights are equally important as they are interdependent and interrelated as each person does have the same human dignity. We cannot pick and choose which right we would like to respect and which not. Protecting the rights of minorities is reflected in many articles in the European Convention on Human Rights as well as in the Framework Convention for the protection of National Minorities. One more document which serves as a basis for this discussion is the Council of Europe’s White Paper on Intercultural dialogue.

In general, majorities sometimes have difficulties to recognize the rights of minorities. Why is that? In general minorities need to struggle for public space and to be recognized as serious partners in the dialogue. What majority loses? The point is that we can be a majority in certain circumstances, in certain societies, and then in other circumstances changing shoes and be a minority. Sometimes the danger is that we expect reciprocity treatment between the groups/states instead of the full protection of international human rights legal standards no matter in which place/country we find ourselves. The states are obliged to guarantee full promotion and protection of human rights for all people and all nations. Some questions for further debate could be:

- a) How can we ensure the same equal treatment in both contexts for minority and majority groups? Do we behave in the same way when we are a majority and when we are a minority?
- b) Is there a space for self-criticism within the minority and majority groups?
- c) What are the reasons for the hate crimes against minorities?