



**COUNCIL OF
THE EUROPEAN UNION**



Council conclusions on freedom of religion or belief

*2973rd GENERAL AFFAIRS Council meeting
Brussels, 16 November 2009*

The Council adopted the following conclusions:

"The Council reaffirms the strong commitment of the European Union to the promotion and protection of freedom of religion or belief.

The Council recalls that freedom of thought, conscience, religion or belief applies equally to all persons. It is a fundamental freedom which includes all religions or beliefs, including those that have not been traditionally practiced in a particular country, the beliefs of persons belonging to religious minorities, as well as non-theistic and atheistic beliefs. The freedom also covers the right to adopt, change or abandon one's religion or belief, of one's own free will.

The Council underlines that States have a duty to protect everyone, including persons belonging to minorities, from discrimination, violence and other violations. States must ensure that their legislative systems provide adequate and effective guarantees of freedom of thought, conscience, religion or belief to all without distinction.

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The Council condemns all forms of intolerance against persons because of their religion or belief. The Council deplors that discrimination based on religion or belief still exists in all regions of the world, and that persons belonging to particular religious communities, including religious minorities, continue to be denied their human rights in many countries. The Council is alarmed by reports of recent and increasing acts of extreme violence against persons belonging to religious minorities and expresses its concern about the vulnerable situation faced by them in many parts of the world.

The Council expresses its deep concern that in countries that have legislation on defamation of religions, such legislation has often been used to mistreat religious minorities and to limit freedom of expression and freedom of religion or belief. The Council stresses that international human rights law protects individuals and groups of individuals and, in this regard, reiterates that defamation of religions is not a human rights concept. Recalling that human rights transcend differences between religions, the Council underlines that no restrictions in the name of religion may be placed on those rights and religion may never be used to justify or condone the restriction or violation of individual rights. The EU will continue to reject any attempts to do so.

The Council emphasises that freedom of religion or belief is intrinsically linked to freedom of opinion and expression. Freedom of opinion and expression is necessary to create pluralist, tolerant, broad-minded and democratic societies. By allowing free debate and exchanges of ideas, and by disseminating information on human rights abuses and calling for accountability, independent media, press, television, internet and other new media, freedom of expression plays an important role in the fight against intolerance.

The Council underlines the strategic importance of freedom of religion or belief and of countering religious intolerance, and reaffirms its intention to continue to give priority to the issues as part of the European Union's human rights policy. The Council invites the relevant Council bodies to evaluate existing EU initiatives and to elaborate proposals, as appropriate, for promoting the freedom of religion or belief in bilateral relations and in multilateral context."
