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Mr. President,

The ECLJ is a nongovernmental organization based in Strasbourg, France, that specializes in the defense of religious freedom. However, I wish today to intervene in support of freedom of expression in religious matters.

Indeed, in recent years a growing number of journalists is subject of death threats - in Europe - because they dared to make a critical appreciation towards certain aspects of Islam. It is the for example in France, Italy, the Netherlands and Turkey.

In this context, it is particularly necessary to reaffirm the legal principles governing the relationship between freedom of expression and religion. The principles established by the European Court of Human Rights are instructive and useful in this respect.

Freedom of expression is an essential foundation of democratic society. Freedom of expression is not only a guarantee against the state but also a fundamental principle for life in democracy. Freedom of expression is not an end in itself; it is a means for the establishment of a democratic society. Its guarantee reveals the existence of such a society. Freedom of expression applies not only to information and ideas that are favorably received or regarded as inoffensive or indifferent, but also to those that offend, shock or disturb the State or any sector of the population.

Similarly, freedom of thought, conscience and religion is one of the foundations of a democratic society and is in its religious dimension, one of the most vital elements contributing to form the identity of believers and their conception of life.

The protection of conscience or religious sentiment does not preclude criticisms against religions and belief. Only the way religious beliefs and doctrines are subject to opposition or to denial may be liable to the author of the criticism. The state may also be liable, in its obligation to ensure that those who profess these beliefs have a peaceful enjoyment of their right to freedom of thought, conscience and religion.

In this regard, we should emphasize the State's obligation to fight against the anti-religious stereotypes, especially when they are spread in the media. On this point, the ECLJ is particularly concerned about the increasing spread of anti-Christian stereotypes, and their impunity.

Finally, it should be recalled that freedom of religion also protects the freedom of the public expression of religious feeling and religious doctrines. Consequently, public expressions of faith or religious morality should receive a superior level of protection of free speech. Such is the case for example, for the religious sermons of ministers. Effectively, the public expression of faith or religious morality should not be liable to prosecution because of their opposition to certain ideas or practices morally objectionable, since it is expressed peacefully.

In conclusion, the ECLJ invites the OSCE to work towards a better understanding of religion by the media in order to fight against the anti-religious stereotypes.

The ECLJ also calls on the OSCE Member States to object to the sociological concept of "defamation of religion". Indeed, this concept has upset the balance between freedom of expression and freedom of religion, by threatening the freedom of expression – most often of the minorities – in favor of an abusive protection, not of the rights of third parties, but of a particular religion.