



SOVEREIGN MILITARY HOSPITALLER ORDER  
OF ST. JOHN OF JERUSALEM OF RHODES AND OF MALTA

PERMANENT OBSERVER MISSION TO THE UNITED NATIONS OFFICE  
AND OTHER INTERNATIONAL ORGANISATIONS IN GENÈVA

***Human Rights Council –31<sup>st</sup> Session – Item 3***  
***Interactive Dialogue***  
***Freedom of Religion or Belief***  
***Statement by H.E. Ambassador Marie-Thérèse Pictet-Althann***  
***Permanent Observer of the Sovereign Order of Malta***  
***Geneva, 9<sup>th</sup> March 2016***

Mr. President,  
Mr. High Commissioner,  
Excellencies,  
Distinguished Delegates,

My Delegation thanks Professor Heiner Bielefeldt for analysing and addressing the complexities in the relationship between ***the right to freedom of religion or belief and the right to freedom of opinion and expression***. The world witnesses daily that the denial of these rights leads to hatred and violence engendering suffering and destruction. At the same time excessive and irresponsible use of freedom of expression can result in threats and verbal abuse leading to discrimination and intolerance. In our ever more pluralistic world there is an urgent need to combat these tendencies by implementing these rights through dialogue, thus promoting mutual understanding and respect which contributes substantially to peaceful coexistence. There are many ways of breaking the impasse between extreme

positions, i.e. through education - including in faith literacy -, communication, interfaith and intercultural dialogue and mobilisation of all stakeholders.

The Special Rapporteur highlights the positive interrelatedness of this by explaining that *“the two rights mutually reinforce each other in practice”*. He underlines the importance of focusing on human beings as rights holders *“who should be able to exercise them free from fear and free from discrimination”*. In pluralistic societies an individual’s values are safeguarded while different groups take an active part in their quest for the common good. Ideally, religious diversity and shared citizenship should be allowed to proceed hand in hand. National governments have a clear responsibility in this context and need to play a productive role by taking appropriate measures to encourage civil society to establish a fair relationship between freedom of expression and freedom of religion which need to co-exist so as to ensure the respect of the inherent human dignity and the rights of every person.

Mr. President,

In concluding I wish to commend the Special Rapporteur for underlining the *“peacebuilding potential of interreligious communication”*. It is a fact that faith-based organizations and religious communities play an increasingly important role in prevention, reconciliation and resilience, in particular in times of crisis and conflict. Through its worldwide humanitarian action, the Order of Malta, is engaged in facilitating a comprehensive approach by promoting inter-faith cooperation in local communities together with the respect for the standards and principles of human rights and international humanitarian law.

Thank you.

*Check against delivery*