

World Interfaith Harmony Week 2026
RELIGIOUS FREEDOM IN PLURALISTIC SOCIETIES
Collective Responsibility in Countering Discrimination, Hate, and Intolerance
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Reflections By

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From my experience in European Interfaith Cooperation, what practical institutional partnerships best strengthen religious harmony across diverse societies?

Europe-wide, Religions for Peace Europe is working and advocating intensively for Religious Freedom and against negative movements, like Islamophobia, Anti-Semitism, and hate against immigrants. To comply with this goal, we are working with some important institutions, for example: the Senate of Berlin, different churches, universities in multiple countries, parliamentary groups, etc.

The National Interfaith Bodies, integrated into Religions for Peace Europe, have much more detailed activities. A good example is Religions for Peace Bulgaria (Bulgarian Forum for Interfaith Dialogue and Partnership).

Before the IIWW, Bulgaria was a peace-loving country with friendly coexistence among religious and ethnic communities, and a strong and highly positioned civil society. In 1943, the entire communities of 48,000 Jews and 150,000 Roma Gypsies were saved from deportation during the Holocaust, a unique heroic act of the Civil Society and the Religious Communities.

All religious communities have suffered under the harsh Communist Regime, 1944-1989, with serious limitations and, in some cases, imprisonment or death for some religious leaders. The authorities committed a crime in 1984-1989. The so-called "Revival Process" was a state-led campaign of forced assimilation targeting 800,000 ethnic Turks in the country, drastically changing their names to Bulgarian ones and prohibiting the use of the Turkish language and culture.

It is amazing and nice that we have, after the political changes, a brilliant relationship with the Muslim Community of Bulgaria. They are very helpful, led by their Chief Mufti. This is really an achievement. We maintain the same good collaboration with the other communities in Bulgaria, like the Orthodox Church, the Catholics, the Evangelical Churches, the Jewish Community, and others.

I would like to emphasize the term "Partnership" in our title. As the interreligious members of our Forum are professors, doctors, and in general scientists, we are constantly creating partnerships mostly with universities and the Bulgarian Academy of Sciences. We invite Religious Leaders to our events like Seminars, Webinars, and Round Tables.

We maintain relationships also with other institutions, like Embassies and Ministries: of Foreign Affairs, of Culture, of the Interior, of Education, and of healthcare.

RESPONSES TO THE DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

1. Why is religious freedom essential for inclusive and democratic societies?

By ensuring the sacred right, without any force, to believe, to worship freely, or not to believe, a tolerant society will be promoted where different viewpoints can coexist peacefully. Religious Freedom is a Base for Pluralism and Stability. It supports the Democratic Principles

2. How do discrimination and religious hatred take root within communities?

In a diverse way in the different societies. I will explain the Bulgarian case: The hatred (religious or secular) in the Bulgarian society was created during the Soviet type Communist rule. In every community, group, or working environment, there were always individuals from the Communist Party and from the Secret services available. Religions were limited, and many of the worship services were prohibited. So, in 45 years, the mentality of the people changed negatively and considerably.

3. What roles do families, faith institutions, schools, and civil society play in promoting tolerance?

The most important factors for achieving tolerance are the Families and the Civil Society, because tolerance must be educated. Today, in post-communist countries like Bulgaria, the newly established Faith communities are too young, and there is a lack of experience to educate tolerance, but they are doing their best.

4. How can interfaith dialogue transcend symbolism to influence social practices?

To do that, we must consider religion a practical issue, related to the environment, nature, its beauties, disasters, and fruits, helping human deeds

5. How should public speech be guided ethically in diverse societies?

In a society or group, a speech or narrative creating or conducting to hate shouldn't be allowed.

6. How can societies prevent polarization and extremism?

Liberal democracies are fragile and easily attacked from within. Preventing polarization and extremism requires a comprehensive strategy that combines education, social participation, digital literacy, and a resilient democracy. The focus is on strengthening social cohesion to reduce susceptibility to radical ideologies.