



EVENT REPORT

Intercultural dialogue: response to which problems?

Christian and Muslim perspectives

17 April 2008

Summary

Intercultural dialogue is a way to foster social cohesion in Europe and peace and solidarity in EU foreign relations, was the conclusion reached in the first of the four seminars organised by COMECE, the Church and Society Commission (CSC) and the Konrad Adenauer Stiftung (KAS) in the framework of the European Year of Intercultural Dialogue 2008. Intercultural dialogue as well as inter-religious dialogue are ways to improve knowledge and understanding and thereby help overcome the fear and hostility on which discrimination feeds. Beyond its value as a means to tackle problems, intercultural dialogue should be seen as a part of civilized culture. In addition to intercultural and inter-religious dialogue, the seminar underlined the importance of intra-cultural and intra-religious dialogue. The main challenge for all of these dialogues is to involve those who in the first place object to dialogue.

Full report

“The European Union must be more than just an economic space,” **Rev. Rüdiger Noll**, Moderator of the seminar and Director of the Church and Society Commission of the Conference of European Churches (CEC) emphasized in his introduction. “The European project must be a project of and for its people, it must be a project based on commonly shared values. This is why the European Year of Intercultural Dialogue is so important”, he added.

Professor Dr. Ural Manço, sociologist of religions at the Facultés Universitaire Saint-Louis (Brussels), opened the seminar by depicting the situation of Muslims in Western Europe who came to Europe in the course of the last fifty years. This group of people has gone through a double shock. The migration of Muslims to Western Europe started in the 60’s when post-war Europe needed manual work force. The “good years” ended with an economic depression of mid-70’s. No longer needed, Muslims who had settled in Europe lost the legitimacy of their presence.

The second shock came when the children of these migrants, whom their parents had hoped would become well educated and well integrated in the job markets, were unable to achieve social promotion. Many of them ended up having no qualifications and therefore either into low-level jobs or unemployed.

In this precarious situation, for some Muslims religion has become a way to regain the recognition which could not be obtained through professional merits. Professor Manço explained that this phenomenon takes place in the overall context of the post-industrial era, where the individual is supreme and people feel the need to constantly affirm themselves and their identity. The demand for recognition has translated into a call for rights such as freedom of religion. Even if the Muslims do not enjoy full freedom of religion in Europe – an issue which needs to be addressed – many Muslims are ready to admit that in Europe they are able to live their religion in a better way than they would in their country of origin.

Imam Tareq Oubrou, the Principal of the Al-Houda Mosque of Bordeaux and a chaplain of Gradignan prison addressed the seminar expressing a Muslim view on the issue. Imam Oubrou started by stressing that inter-religious dialogue is about meeting between individuals, not between “religions”.

According to Tareq Oubrou, there is a huge lack of dialogue between religions but at the same time an intra-religious dialogue which should aim at addressing each religion’s specific problems is needed. The real challenge in both cases is to include those who are hostile to dialogue in the first place.

Imam Oubrou said that he represents the orthodox Islam, which supports a theological dialogue between Christianity and Islam based on the numerous passages in the Koran mentioning diversity and tolerance. As a believer, he saw ‘differences’ as signs of God on which one can build. Imam Oubrou regrets that Muslims have not done their theological homework concerning theology of openness and believes that Christianity can teach a great deal on secularism and modernity to the Muslims.

Ignace Berten, Dominican Father and Director of the Brussels-based association “Espaces – Spiritualités, cultures et société en Europe” provided a Christian reflection on the theme. He started by welcoming the European Year of Intercultural Dialogue as an attempt by the European Union to reduce the gap between the values and objectives of the Union as stated in the founding treaties and the reality. Inside the European Union, intercultural dialogue contributes to social cohesion. In the EU’s relations with the rest of the world, intercultural dialogue contributes to peace and solidarity.

Father Berten outlined the different approaches some European countries have taken to deal with migration. According to the French model, all citizens are – in principle - equal and treated in the same (undifferentiated) way. The English model favours coexistence of different cultures. The Dutch model allows high tolerance for all differences considered as personal choices. Belgium and Germany have not adopted a specific model but hope that with time the newcomers will find their place in the host society. None of the models has been entirely successful.

Father Berten highlighted five elements to be considered in order to achieve harmonious relations. First of all, the integration (not assimilation) is easier if its starts at an early age. The role of school is crucial as many migrant families belong to socially-disadvantaged groups where parents have little capacity to promote this process. Secondly, serious reflection is needed on how much the host societies should change in order to accommodate newcomers and, on the other hand, to what extent the Muslims should accept to change their traditions. Thirdly, new spaces must be created for meeting. Father Berten mentioned examples like street parties, meetings at school for parents and meetings linked to religious festivities. He

also suggested that specific inter-religious dialogue should be promoted as well. Fourthly, a major work should be conducted to read History from a critical perspective taking into account the point of view of the other (e.g. Ottoman Empire). Finally, dialogue between cultures is also necessary for world peace, and here the European Muslims are in a key position to mediate between the different cultures.

Discussion

MEP Margareta Auken (Greens-DK) expressed sadness over the Cartoon Scandal; the negative atmosphere it created among the Danish population and the loss of Denmark's reputation as a tolerant country. Like many others, she called Europeans to tackle the fear related to Muslims and Islam.

It was also pointed out that the West should acknowledge that it is also regarded as a threat by others: Europe is characterized by a fundamentalist secularism.

An attendee said that the perception of migrants had changed since 9/11: before they used to be considered as Arab or Turkish migrants, now they are – unfortunately - perceived as Muslims. Migrants are labelled according to their religion, unlike the host society which is not labelled as "Christian".

Dr Karim Chemlal from the Federation of Islamic Organisations in Europe (FIOE) disagreed with Professor Manço's analysis on religion as a way to gain recognition. According to Dr Chemlal the religious quest should not only be viewed as the product of economic and social marginalisation, but also as an integral part of the identity quest which is natural for each human being. He also stressed the importance of emphasising the contribution of the Muslim civilisation to the European civilisation.

The importance of education, i.e. of knowing one's own and others' religion and history was several times pointed out in the discussions.

Nicole Rückinger from the Council of the European Union questioned the usefulness of the "islamophobia" notion which is potentially harmful as it reinforces the victimisation of Muslims and the image of this population as a monolithic entity. The fight against religious-based discrimination applies to all religions, while intercultural dialogue is also a tool to fight against religious intolerance. With some other attendees, she reminded us that European societies are strongly secularised societies and that, in this regard, intercultural dialogue should be extended to the secular humanists and non-believers.

Professor Manço agreed that "islamophobia" was a rampant phenomenon as well as a problematic term. While inviting not to dramatize the situation, he nevertheless underlined that there *is* a problem of perception and reception of Islam in Europe. He invited to a reflection on the social use and misuse of 'Islam', which sometimes functions in the Western world as a means to avoid to critically questioning oneself by pointing to 'problematic' Islam. "Ignorance (physically!) kills!", he said, adding that we needed to mobilize the 15 million Muslims living in Europe to help them create bridges with their countries of origin so as to fight against ignorance on both sides.

Responding to questions concerning dialogue between religions other than Christianity and Islam and with non-believers, **Imam Oubrou** said that all those dialogues were a necessity. He also expressed the hope that non-believers would not see the religious encounter as a threat to them.

Imam Oubrou's endeavour to have Islam understood as a religion embracing diversity was welcomed by **Mr Seraffetin Pektas** from the Intercultural Dialogue Platform. Mr Pektas said

that the Islamic theology of diversity had been lost for the last 2 to 3 centuries and should be revitalised. Mr Pektas further stressed that the Muslims themselves should take the initiative and not only consider themselves as victims.

Synthesis

Ms Ramona Nicole Mănescu (ALDE-RO) opened her concluding remarks with a story she heard from a Muslim friend. As a child, that friend had once asked an old Christian man why people went to two different places to worship as there was only one God. The old man had replied that one day when Jesus felt exhausted he had asked his friend Muhammad to help him and to take care of the other half of the world. MEP Mănescu was struck by this story as the simplest explanation of religion she had ever heard and re-stated that this kind of approach and attitude could give hope for dialogue and friendship between the two communities.

While stressing the importance of good relations between Christians and Muslims, Ms Mănescu said that she understood if difficulties met by Muslims living in Europe fed anti-Western sentiments. Besides facing social problems, Muslims lack full freedom of religion even if this freedom is in principle provided for in the Constitutions.

Europeans should learn to value the full contribution of Islam to our culture. Ms Mănescu emphasised the role of individual citizens, associations and churches in this necessary work. She also called for more commitment on the part of Muslim women. Women, in general, are capable of empathy, a quality very much needed in dialogue.

Ms Mănescu concluded by insisting on the common ground between Muslims and Christians, quoting Imam Tareq Oubrou who had said: "If the "heaven" separates us, the earth provides us with a common destiny and challenges".

Background

The European Union has declared the year 2008 "European Year of Intercultural Dialogue". The initiative aims at reinforcing social cohesion and civil peace in Europe. It stems from the acknowledgement that Europeans must learn to live together in the diversity increased by the circulation of people and ideas. An important aspect of this increased diversity is the growing number of people of Muslim origin in a traditionally majority Christian geographical area. With regard to the EU's external policy, the year 2008 seeks, among other things, to develop the EU's relations with Mediterranean partner countries, anchored in the Arab-Muslim civilisation.

As a part of their contribution to the European Year of Intercultural Dialogue, the Commission of the Bishops' Conferences of the European Community (COMECE), the Church and Society Commission (CSC) and the Konrad-Adenauer-Stiftung (KAS), in association with Muslim partners, will organise a series of seminars under the overall theme of "Islam, Christianity and Europe". The four seminars, which are hosted by the European Parliament, will discuss the following themes: Intercultural dialogue: response to which problems? Christian and Muslim perspectives; Visibility of religion in the European public space: the question of worship places and religious symbols in clothing; 'Christian Europe' and Islam in Europe; and The external relations of the European Union with Muslim countries and international responsibility of religious communities.

Further information

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