



EVENT REPORT

The external relations of the European Union with Muslim countries and international responsibility of religious communities

11 September 2008

Introduction

The fourth and last meeting of the series of seminars devoted to Islam, Christianity and Europe organised by the Church and Society Commission of the Conference of European Churches (CEC-KEK), the Commission of the Bishops' Conferences of the European Community (COMECE) and the European Office of the Konrad-Adenauer-Stiftung (KAS) took place on 11 September 2008 in the European Parliament. One of the issues raised was the question of reciprocity in terms of religious freedom. One hundred participants, including MEPs and civil servants of the EU institutions, as well as members of religious organisations and communities, took part in the seminar and in the ensuing debate.

Full report

Ms **Nicole Reckinger**, from the General Secretariat of the Council of the European Union and moderator of this seminar, welcomed the initiative of the three organising parties to examine EU relations with Muslim countries. She, however, expressed reservations about the concept of reciprocity and her preference for the concept of universality of Human Rights, which encompass freedom of religion.

Prof. Dr. Tuomo Melasuo, Research Director of the Tampere Peace Research Institute – TAPRI (Finland) recalled that the terrorist attacks of 11 September 2001 prompted European institutions to become aware of the importance of initiating an intercultural dialogue. After 9/11 this element came to strengthen the three areas of co-operation defined under the Barcelona Process (launched in 1995): international relations and security, economic co-operation and social sector and migration. The importance of religious communities in dialogue between cultures was recognised in 2006 when the first Euro-Mediterranean Award for Dialogue on 'Mutual respect amongst people of different religions or any other belief' was granted by the Anna Lindh Euro-Mediterranean Foundation for the Dialogue between Cultures to Father Paolo Dall'Oglio from Mar Musa Monastery in Syria.

Professor Melasuo welcomed the establishment of a Union for the Mediterranean in the Paris Summit which took place on 13 July 2008. This French initiative re-engaged France in the Euro-Mediterranean co-operation and has given new impetus to the process. Whereas today more mental distance is felt between Europe and Northern Africa, only fifty years ago, in France, some people used to say that the Mediterranean is traversing their country as River Seine does in Paris.

Professor Melasuo stated that the topic of EU relations with the Muslim countries is difficult because the concept of 'Muslim countries' is problematic. Late Maxime Rodinson's definition of 'countries inhabited by Muslims in majority' would be more correct although somewhat cumbersome alternative. Another point is that the European Union is not defining its foreign relations on religious bases. According to Professor Melasuo, with some exceptions (e.g. question of the EU membership of Turkey), Islam or the fact that a country is inhabited by Muslims in majority, is not a decisive factor for EU relations with a third country. Furthermore, the different political approaches with, for instance, the Mediterranean and the Arab world and Central and South-Eastern Asia are, firstly, due to distance, and secondly, due to political, geopolitical and commercial considerations.

Professor Melasuo asked whether Muslims, Christians and Jews have the same God, and continued that the answer to this question is crucial to the dialogue. It is more important than the question of the existence or non-existence of God. He also added that in a certain way monotheism is a problem because the three monotheisms exclude the other religions.

Speaking with an outsider's perspective, Professor Melasuo pleaded religions to foster tolerance towards one another and to communicate with each other, and thus make respect an everyday reality. In European relations with majority Muslim countries, politics and religion have the potential to be mutually beneficial. If the European Union creates good relations where human rights - including freedom of religion - are promoted, religions will follow and vice versa. Besides religions, the secular society plays a crucial role in this work. Professor Melasuo also raised the question of secularism in the Muslim world, inviting to pay also attention to Muslim or North-African Enlightenment and Muslim Humanism.

The contribution of **Father Prof. Dr. Edouard Divry**, Dominican Doctor in Theology and Diocesan Delegate for the Interfaith Dialogue in Montpellier (France), to the discussion on the external relations of the EU focused on reciprocity in religious freedom in international exchanges. According to him the concept of reciprocity is embedded in the 'Silver Rule' ("Do not do to others as you would not have them do to you"), but also in the 'Golden Rule' ("Do onto others as you would wish them do onto you"). Fundamentally any relationship, from a moral point of view, necessarily implies reciprocity. The ethics of international relations should therefore examine the reasons underlying calls for reciprocity in terms of religious freedom.

For the Catholic Church freedom of religion is based on the dignity of the human person and the call for reciprocity is clearly based on its Social Teaching: religious reciprocity has been a permanent request of the Catholic Magisterium during the last decades. Father Divry proceeded in pointing to the risk of two extreme interpretations of the international virtue of reciprocity: retaliation and passivity. Reciprocity, when underpinned by a Christian vision, is not a call for retaliation. The Christian vision of forgiveness is opposed to reciprocity conceived as a threat of reprisal. But there is also the temptation towards passivity which often relegates religion to a mere private belief devoid of public rights within or outside the State. This is a passivity which could also more generally prevent Christians - or indeed Muslims or Jews - from claiming equal treatment. The Christian reality (and reciprocally the Jewish and Muslim realities) should be protected. Father Divry reminded of two cases.

H.H. Pope Paul VI did not oppose the building of the big mosque of Rome and had responded to those who had reacted in saying that he should have asked for reciprocity that the Church would not humble itself to such a low level. In contrast, the former Archbishop of Algiers Henri Teissier had stated in the beginning of the Islamist turmoil that one should ask for reciprocity in Saudi Arabia and everywhere else where Christians are deprived of freedom of worship. Thus the Catholic Church has evolved in asserting reciprocity as an urgent issue while opposing both laicist passivity and retaliation. Father Divry concluded in calling for an increase in exchanges in order to gradually allow the “political virtue of religious reciprocity” to appear in international relations.

Imam Dr. Abduljalil Sajid, Chairman of the Muslim Council for Religious and Racial Harmony (UK) and President of the task force for the European Year of Intercultural Dialogue 2008, began his intervention by stressing the importance of distinguishing between "Islam" and "Muslims". The word "Islam" should be used exclusively for the “Way of Life” based upon divine sources: Qur’an and Sunnah. “Muslims” as human beings free to abide by and deviate from Divine Guidance as they feel fit according to their own conscience.

He refuted the concept of reciprocity (understood in a restrictive way), arguing that Muslims living in Europe as citizens or residents have the right to practise their religion. The problem of lack of freedom of religion in Mecca is not the problem for Muslims living in Europe. Rights of Muslims in Europe should be respected without expecting something in exchange. The values which should guide us are rather those of equality, equity, and justice for all citizens and residents of the EU Member States. From their part Muslims living in Europe, have the duty to respect and abide by all laws of the land and to work for the common good.

Imam Sajid also disagreed with those who consider that the equilibrium reached between Christians and Muslims in Europe will be disrupted because of immigration and called for openness to welcome Muslims. Imam Sajid also reminded the seminar that Prophet Muhammad had respected Christians' religious rights: Christians were allowed to pray in mosques following their own beliefs and rites in strict equality and mutual respect. The mosque was considered as God's home – as the home of the same God.

Concerning the external relations of the EU with Muslim countries, nothing will be achieved by coercion, domination and imposition; more effective would be the application of the rule of law and international justice. This also applies to European countries, which should practise what they preach.

As many times noted in the previous seminars, Imam Sajid too underlined the Muslim contribution to European history. Europe does not only have Judeo-Christian roots but also Islamic ones. In former times Westerners' tutors were Muslims. Unfortunately, this is not a fact recognised enough in European history.

Discussion

Reacting to the comment on reciprocity of **Imam Sajid** who saw it as a negative – and therefore unacceptable - concept maintained by the dominating groups, **Father Divry**, reiterated his understanding of reciprocity as a virtue of general justice. He also disagreed with an intervention from the floor which claimed international relations and responsibilities to be solely a matter for states and other actors recognised by international law, not for individuals. According to Father Divry we should go beyond passiveness. Besides individuals religious communities – not to forget the international status of Vatican – too bear international responsibility.

Professor Melasuo agreed. Even if from the point of view of law, European citizens including Muslims enjoy their rights without responsibility concerning the rights of others, a strictly juridical perspective is insufficient. Individuals and communities do have a international moral responsibility. He gave as an example the case of the moral international responsibility of the Danish journalists in the 'Cartoon affair', which had tremendous effects on a world-wide scale.

Even if **Imam Sajid** disliked the concept of reciprocity, and would like to see individuals relieved from responsibility over freedom of religion in other parts of world, he did call politicians to encourage – but not impose - the leaders of Muslim countries to embrace democracy. The Universal Declaration of Human Rights of 1948 – he said - is an excellent document that is not respected by many Muslim countries. Imam Sajid also raised his concern about the misuse of freedom of expression in the West to insult and hurt others.

The speech of Father Divry also sparked a discussion on the relation between politics and religion. **Imam Mustafa Kastit**, from the Cinquantenaire Mosque in Brussels, disagreed with Father Divry who had mentioned the political dimension of mosques (in contrast with simple "musallas"). Imam Kastit stated that "musallas" are places of worship where no sermons are made, in contrast with mosques. Even if there are mosques that are regrettably instrumentalised for political purposes, mosques do not have a political dimension. **Father Divry** responded saying that according to his knowledge in Islamic theology a mosque is a place of religious-political expression. Unlike in Christianity ("Give to Caesar what is Caesar's, and to God what is God's (Matthew 22:21)"), there is no separation of politics and religion in Islam.

Stefan Lunte, interim Secretary General of COMECE, observed that Father Divry had tackled the issue of reciprocity in a very subtle way devoid of any intention of retaliation and that Imam Sajid had rejected it. He expressed his interest in Professor Melasuo's view on the perspectives to further freedom of religion in the new process (the Union for the Mediterranean) in case reciprocity as an approach is rejected. **Professor Melasuo** believed and confirmed that this issue is being promoted as part of the human rights agenda without the mentioning of this word¹. He stated that the issue of freedom of worship is fundamental, but that it would be better to use other tools and concepts than reciprocity. One voice that Professor Melasuo was missing in the current debates over this theme was that of Christians living in the Middle East in countries like Egypt, Palestine and Iraq, who have a field experience from which we might learn.

Synthesis

In concluding this last seminar, Ms **Eija-Riitta Korhola**, MEP (EPP-ED- Finland), a trained philosopher and theologian, indicated that the approach towards reciprocity is a part of social justice but must not be applied in a restrictive way. Rights of Muslims in Europe should not be diminished and these citizens and residents should not feel guilty about violations committed elsewhere. The use of religious rights – she said - is an indicator of the respect for human rights. Faced with a relativist secular liberalism that rejects the existence of absolute truth, she advocated a pluralist liberalism which allows the public sharing of certain values, including religious values. These values represent the foundation of a dialogue which is a source of hope for our multicultural societies.

¹ In the final declaration of the Paris Summit to launch the Union for the Mediterranean (13 July 2008), the Heads of States and Governments confirmed that "they are determined to do everything in order to promote human rights, (...) to enhance intercultural understanding and guarantee the respect of all religions and beliefs."

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 geographical area of traditionally Christian majority . 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) of the Conference of European Churches (CEC-KEK) and the European Office of the Konrad-Adenauer-Stiftung (KAS), in association with Muslim partners, organised a series of seminars under the overall theme of “Islam, Christianity and Europe”. The four seminars, which were hosted by the European Parliament, discussed the following themes: Intercultural dialogue: response to which problems? Christian and Muslim perspectives (17 April 2008); Visibility of religion in the European public space: the question of worship places and religious symbols in clothing (29 May 2008); ‘Christian Europe’ and Islam in Europe (3 July); and The external relations of the European Union with Muslim countries and international responsibility of religious communities (11 September).

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