



# EVENT REPORT

## 'Christian Europe' and Islam in Europe

3 July 2008

### Summary

How does 'Christian Europe' receive Islam in Europe? How to address the fear of 'Islamisation' of Europe and what are the chances for 'Europeanisation' of Islam? These were the questions addressed during the third meeting of the series of seminars devoted to Islam, Christianity and Europe organised by COMECE, the Church and Society Commission (CSC) and the Konrad-Adenauer-Stiftung (KAS) on 3 July 2008 at the European Parliament.

In Europe many people fear Islam and that fear must be taken seriously, and challenged. Much of the fear could be countered if Europeans improved their knowledge of Islam, its history and interpretations and if the media would provide a more varied - and fairer - picture of Muslims and Islam. For Churches, coming to terms with Islam requires reflection on their mission as Churches and as missionary churches. The seminar made it clear that there are no religious reasons that would justify Christians and Muslims to mistreat one another. It also highlighted that Islam and Christianity have much more in common than it is often recognised, including common roots, values and concerns, like social justice. Even if it is Christianity, which has been the frame of reference for the development of European juridical and political structures, also Islam is 'European' in its roots and historic development, and contributed to Europe in the fields of science and culture. 'Europeanisation' of Islam is a fact due to the progressive social integration of Muslims in Europe. This process should not be artificially boosted by an enforced programme of 'Europeanisation' of Islam.

### Full report

**Dr Peter R. Weilemann**, Director of the European Office of the Konrad-Adenauer-Stiftung (KAS), introduced the seminar by highlighting that in Europe Islam is sometimes perceived as a threat, not only because of fundamentalist terrorism but also because it seemed foreign dominated. Against this backdrop the term Euro-Islam has gotten its own significance. In structural terms, the discussion surrounding the term reminds us on a debate in the seventies and eighties on Euro-Communism. Two of the key questions being then: Can it be reformed to be compatible with Western values ? And can we trust those who plead for reform ?

According to **Sara Silvestri**, Assistant Professor at the City University in London and a Research Associate at Cambridge University, the European context is increasingly secularised but a shared religious heritage will be a crucial factor for the future of Europe. Islam's legacy in Europe is evident in its contribution to science and culture even if it is Christianity which has served as the frame of reference for the development of European

thought and culture, and social, juridical and political structures. The fact that Europe's political and legal structures were both inspired by and created to accommodate Christianity is today a problem for the integration of Islam, which is traditionally organised in a completely other way (without clear clerical hierarchy). Silvestri continued that Europe's suspicious attitude towards Islam is symptomatic of an underlying more general hostile attitude towards religion as well as of a crisis about Europe's identity. Not to speak about the terrorist attacks, which have hurt both Muslims and non-Muslims and have made life more difficult for Muslims living in the West.

Muslims in Europe are no longer temporary migrants, but have become European citizens. According to Professor Silvestri, we should rid ourselves of the false perception that identities are fixed once and for all and that Muslims belong to a monolithic category. This is not true albeit that Muslims throughout the world identify themselves as part of the global Muslim community, the 'Ummah', and believe that being a Muslim is an all-encompassing life experience. Firstly, this trans- and supranational point of reference for Muslim identity does not differ much from the notion of 'Universal Church' in Christianity or from the status of Jewish identity for the diverse Jewish communities all over the world. Secondly, in reference to the feared mixture of the public and private spheres by Muslims (and of politics and personal life), Professor Silvestri added that every faith has a link between the transcendent message and immanent life, and that to be involved in social reality is part of any religion not just of Islam. Moreover, she noted that certain concepts are common to Islam and Christianity, such as concern for the well-being of every person and the holiness of every life. She recalled that Europeans, as much believers as non-believers, share common values and preoccupations such as social justice.

Referring to her recent field studies, Ms Silvestri explained that many ordinary Muslims are very respectful of Christian Churches and even prefer, instead of Muslim schools and possible ghettoisation, sending their children to Christian schools. Most Muslims do not seem to be concerned with the clash between Muslims and Christians but rather deplore the little role religion has in the public sphere: it is the loss of values and spirituality in our secularised societies that worries Muslims. Thus, the research proves that the clash between the religions is more an intellectual construction than a reality. She concluded by explaining that there is a considerable amount of positive interaction between Muslims and non-Muslims. There is a convergence, for instance, in political movements. Many Christian, secular and Muslim organisations supported the 'Make Poverty History' campaign, which was launched in the UK in 2005. Similarly, in 2003, the anti-Iraq war demonstrations gathered people of all denominations and beliefs.

Representing the Islamic community of Serbia, Sheikh **Abdullah Nu'man** said that we have to distinguish between the 'pure Islam' and ordinary 'everyday Islam' and warned against false interpretations of Islam which, taken from the Koran, are overlaid with a number of cultural traditions which result in misunderstandings. He stated that from a theological and demographical point of view 'Islamisation of Europe' is in many ways an impossible notion: Firstly, because the Islamic law, 'Sharia', only applies to Muslims and, secondly, because belonging to the Islamic religion can only be voluntary. At the same time, Islam should not be seen as a visitor to Europe or a stranger in Europe, as Islam has a long-standing history of being an indigenous religion of Europe.

Unfortunately, the acceptance of Islam in Europe is mixed and Islamophobia is used as a convenient phrase to allow racial and religious discrimination against Muslims and belittling of Islam. Europe should not be afraid of Islam, but on the contrary, should be open to receive migrants from Muslim countries and recognise the citizenship rights of all its citizens. In comparison to women who suffer from a glass ceiling, many Muslims are faced with a concrete ceiling.

Sheikh Nu'man deplored that the few verses on Jihad in the Koran imprint Islam instead of the countless references to love. He also regretted that there are imams who use the religion as a way to wage war. No religion is immune to manipulation and all religions can be instrumentalised. For Abdullah Nu'man, Muslims "love humanity because it proceeds from God and love God because he created us". As a Muslim for whom Islam is a religion of love, visiting a mosque means visiting an oasis, which cleanses and brings peace of mind. "Religion is not a disease; it does not kill, but when you catch it, it makes you happy".

**Metropolitan Emmanuel of France**, representative of the Ecumenical Patriarchate to the EU, suggested that interreligious challenges are part of Europe's multi-faith societies and appear in all spheres of society, be it education, work or civic life. In a culturally diverse Europe it is vital that we engage in authentic and sincere dialogue, built on respect for the dignity of every human person created, as we Christians firmly believe, in the image and likeness of God. According to Metropolitan Emmanuel, as Abrahamic religions, Christianity and Islam are not in competition but offer together the basis for faith, religious guidance and life planning. However, there is a problem of perception and reception of Islam in Europe. There is a failure to distinguish between Islam as one of the three monotheistic religions, on equal footing with Judaism and Christianity, and Islamisation as an extreme political ideology.

In Europe many people have unreflected, but historically shaped fear of Islam, which must be taken seriously, and challenged. Inherited images of the past such as 'the Turks before Vienna', the 'Holy War' and recent events, like 9/11 have contributed to this. The concept of Christian Europe as a conveyor of values and common heritage emerged with the spread of the third monotheistic challenge - Islam. This fear is promoted by stereotypical and partial representation of Islam in the media and by the general lack of knowledge about Islam. Consequently, it could be countered if Europeans improved their knowledge of Islam, its history and interpretations and if the media would provide a more varied - and fairer - picture of Muslims and Islam. A new start could be made by more equal treatment of religions in the media and by teaching of all religions at school. It is also essential that the fear of Islam, whether rational or "felt", must be taken seriously by the Churches. Christians engaged in interfaith dialogue should draw attention to commonalities of Islam and Christianity, which include common roots. For Churches coming to terms with Islam requires reflection on their mission as Churches and as missionary churches.

Citing the words of Ecumenical Patriarch Bartholomew, Metropolitan Emmanuel underlined that the conflicts between Christians and Muslims that are mentioned in history have their roots in politics, not in religion. He also stressed that there are no religious reasons that would justify a violent conflict of the Christian and Muslim cultures.

Metropolitan Emmanuel underlined that Islam was and still is European through its roots and suggests that there is less a need to "Europeanise Islam" than to revise the perception of the existing values and traditions in all their diversity. He also explained that the multiple faces of Islam in Europe make it difficult to speak of a European Islam.

## Discussion

**Bishop of Croydon Nicholas Baines**, from the Church of England, commented the speeches, reminding the seminar that what we are facing is not only an ignorance of Islam but also an ignorance of Christianity and religion in general.

**Sheikh Abdullah Nu'man** suggested non-Muslims to explore Islam and Muslims by spending a day with a Muslim. He explained that if you tell a Muslim woman not to wear a veil she will wear it, because like children we like to do what we are told not to. According to Abdullah Nu'man, wearing a veil must be possible for those who wish to do so voluntarily.

Several participants pointed to the fact that beyond discussing the situation of Muslims in Europe, we also have to consider the situation of Christians in the Muslim world and raise the issue of reciprocity in religious freedom.<sup>1</sup> **MEP Maciej Giertych** (NI - Poland) mentioned that in the Western world - where Christianity predominates - there is tolerance towards Islam as well as the right of conversion, which in his opinion does not

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<sup>1</sup> The theme of reciprocity of religious freedom for Muslims in Europe and Christians in the Muslim world, will be discussed more in depth on 11 September 2008 at the seminar entitled "The external relations of the European Union with Muslim countries and international responsibility of religious communities" (see the last paragraph on background information).

exist in Islam. **Stephen Biller**, from 'Al-Sharatan' Society, echoed this describing the poor situation of Christians in Turkey. **Jesuit Father Carlo Sorbi** reported that the state of Qatar has financed the building of a Catholic Church but that in Saudi Arabia the Church is not authorised. Father Sorbi also regretted that in Islam women do not have the same rights as men and that this includes education and inheritance. **Sheikh Abdullah Nu'man** answered that his son and his daughter will have equality in inheritance and explained that in the time of the Prophet, inheritance rights were founded on the fact that women were dependent on men. Also polygamy was explained by the fact that widows were considered as orphans.

**Imam Mustafa Kastit**, from the Cinquantenaire Mosque in Brussels, stated that the presence of the Jewish, Christian and Islamic religions was not something negative in our secularised societies which too often lack spirituality and moral values. Renouncing the attitude of self-victimisation among the Muslims, Imam Kastit called for consideration of Muslims in Europe – now at their 4<sup>th</sup> generation – as citizens with full rights and duties.

**Aristotelos Gavriiadis**, from the European Commission, said for his part that there was no monopoly for the Christian and Islamic faiths. In our secular societies everyone is searching for their truth. Mr Gavriiadis expressed his satisfaction that at the European School, his children can choose between the course of religion and the course of secular moral education – something which does not exist in his country, Greece.

Concluding the debate, **MEP Margrete Auken** (Greens-Denmark) who is also a pastor of the Lutheran Church of Denmark, referred to the rise of right-wing populism in Denmark and underlined that it should be understood that this clash is not religious but political. The Cartoon Scandal illustrates how Islamophobia also derives from the lack of knowledge of each other's sensitivities. Quoting a Lutheran pastor of Bethlehem (Palestine), Ms Auken stated that we often have too much of religion and not enough spirituality. Finally, Ms Auken invited us to listen and learn from each other in order to overcome misunderstandings and highlighted that in this context, dialogue with religions as prescribed in the Lisbon Treaty, is “both an obligation and a privilege”.

## **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 European Office of 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 (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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