

EP Dialogue seminar with Churches and religious communities on  
**"Religion and Human Rights within the EU - A Shared Responsibility"**

**Panel 2 - "Human rights challenges and solutions in the EU"**

*Speech of H.E. Mgr. Theodorus C.M. Hoogenboom*

*President of the COMECE Legal Affairs Commission*

Dear First Vice-President McGuinness,

Dear Mr Chairman, MEP Zdechovský

Distinguished Members of the European Parliament,

Dear Guests and Participants,

While thanking you for the invitation to address this high-level gathering, please allow me to start by underlining the appreciation of COMECE for the inclusiveness of the reference, in the title of this event, to a "shared responsibility". **It is crucial to consider Churches and religious communities, and religion in general, as sitting *inside* the human rights domain and not *outside* it.** Churches and religious communities ensure that human rights (to health, to education, to international protection, freedom of religion, just to name a few) are defended in concrete - even where the State would fail or is failing.

The theme chosen for this Seminar is very fitting, as the Universal Declaration of Human Rights literally defined what "shared responsibility" means with regard to human rights. **Responsibility, including with regard to respecting the rights and freedoms of others, is at the core of the teaching of the Roman Catholic Church, including in confessional schools all over Europe, and of the Church's vision on human rights.** Catholic Social Teaching affirms that human rights are *Universal*, because they are present in all human beings, without exception of time, place or subject<sup>1</sup>.

Focusing on the current human rights context, we see a setting marked by pluralism and secularisation. My question would be: **is the way we speak about human rights**

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<sup>1</sup> John Paul II, Message for the 1999 World Day of Peace, 3: AAS 91 (1999), 379, available at the link [https://w2.vatican.va/content/john-paul-ii/en/messages/peace/documents/hf\\_jp-ii\\_mes\\_14121998\\_xxxii-world-day-for-peace.html](https://w2.vatican.va/content/john-paul-ii/en/messages/peace/documents/hf_jp-ii_mes_14121998_xxxii-world-day-for-peace.html).

**nowadays the fruit of mere dynamics related to prevailing majorities or the fruit of truth?** By truth, I mean objectivity as accessible through reason. Are we still evaluating human rights through *reason*? Cultural relativism seriously puts into question the universality of human rights. If human rights are just the result of legislative dynamics, by which standards can States be judged?

We witness the recognition of goods or desires as "new rights", also as a result of actions by pressure groups. **In accordance with the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, human dignity is the primary foundation of all fundamental human rights.**

**The temptation to expel religion from the public sphere - and/or to stigmatise people for individual religious behaviour or on the basis of stereotypes concerning religious groups - is unfortunately present in Europe.** On what grounds can one restrict the exercise of freedom of religion to the private sphere? Laws, policies, practices or statements that try to confine the exercise of the freedom of religion to the private sphere entail a violation of the right to freedom of religion, which - as underlined by the Charter of Fundamental Rights of the EU - includes its public dimension.

How can society address problems and questions raised in a religious context, if religion is excluded from the public square?

**COMECE is also very clear in defending the promotion and protection of the fundamental right to freedom of religion for all.** We have taken a strong stance during this year against legislative proposals in some European states aimed at criminalising circumcision<sup>2</sup>. COMECE stood side by side with Jewish and Muslim communities.

On ritual slaughter of animals it is at times implied that animal welfare could be placed on the same level as the fundamental right of each person to freedom of religion. The human person must remain at the center of human rights policies.

**Religious illiteracy** sets the stage for the misuse of religious feelings among the population. At times even at EU and national Courts and institutions level there is a

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<sup>2</sup> <http://www.comece.eu/criminalisation-of-circumcision-putting-the-fundamental-rights-system-at-risk>.

deficit of knowledge in this regard. This is a huge danger considering that such entities should promote and protect fundamental human rights.

Furthermore, as underlined in the COMECE contribution on the new Multiannual Financial Framework this year<sup>3</sup>, **Churches and religious communities should be granted the same access as civil society organisations to the EU funding opportunities**, including in the fundamental rights domain.

**We also see the need to get out of the majorities/minorities dynamic: we notice the tendency to present freedom of religion and discrimination on grounds of religion as mostly - or exclusively - of concern for "minorities".** There is an obligation for the EU institutions - as well as for national authorities - to fully apply the right to freedom of religion and the prohibition of discrimination on grounds of religion with regard to all citizens, whether affiliated to so-called "majority" or "minority" religious denominations.

It is alarming that public authorities may rule on the way people can or cannot dress in accordance with their religion (including the wearing of religious symbols), except for when endangering public safety or health. We are obviously concerned as Catholic Church with the outcome of the EU Court of Justice cases concerning the wearing of the Islamic veil at work (*Achbita, Bougnaoui*), which have implications for all religions; as well as about the recent judgments concerning Church employment practices (*Egenberger, IR*).

Finally, please allow me to conclude by stressing that all stakeholders have a responsibility to keep the **importance of human dignity, reason and universality in mind in view of the electoral campaign.**

Thank you for your kind attention and I look forward to a lively discussion with you!

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<sup>3</sup> [http://www.comece.eu/dl/rllLJKKKKlJqx4KJK/COMECE\\_Contribution\\_in\\_View\\_of\\_the\\_next\\_MFF.pdf](http://www.comece.eu/dl/rllLJKKKKlJqx4KJK/COMECE_Contribution_in_View_of_the_next_MFF.pdf).