



EVENT REPORT

Visibility of religion in the European public space: the question of worship places and religious symbols in clothing

29 May 2008

Summary

The second meeting of the series of Dialogue Seminars devoted to Islam, Christianity and Europe took place in the European Parliament (Brussels) on 29 May 2008.

The seminar dealt with the issue of the visibility of religion in European public space, and more specifically with questions concerning worship places and religious symbols in clothing. The construction of mosques and the wearing of veils have acted as a catalyst to public debate about freedom of religion, acceptance of change, respect for difference, relations between different religious communities and the relationship between the religious and the secular.

Full report

Dr. Vincent Legrand, Moderator of the seminar from the Commission of the Bishops' Conferences of the European Community (COMECE), explained that following the longstanding ill-ease about veils, the establishment of new mosques has given rise to heated public discussion in numerous European countries in recent years. He drew attention to the fact that this debate takes place in countries with juridical systems guaranteeing freedom of religion including freedom of worship.

Mr. László Surján, Member of the European Parliament (EPP-ED/HU) referred to a recent initiative by a small number of MEPs to ban religious symbols in the premises of the EU institutions. According to Mr Surján, the good news was that the proposal was only supported by 9 MEPs, when at least half of the 785 MEPs' need to sign an initiative to give it serious consideration. Mr László Surján nevertheless saw this as an alarming sign of a return to 'the catacombs' for Christians and other believers in Europe, an experience Christians from Eastern Europe had endured during the 40 years of Communist dictatorship. He stated that instead of denying their identity, Christians should be free and brave enough to appear in public as Christians and called for freedom of religion for all.

According to **Ms Chantal Saint-Blancat**, Professor of Sociology at the University of Padua (Italy), the building of mosques provides an example on how delicate of a process is the normalisation of religious pluralism in Europe. Prof. Saint-Blancat explained that the debate around mosques and religious symbols varies from country to country and that it is clearly linked to the country's traditional understanding of state-church relations, citizenship and its experience of religious pluralism.

The building of places of worship for new religious communities is said to disrupt what was the traditional and familiar urban space in most of Europe. They clearly and visibly demonstrate the existence of culturally distinctive groups. However, some religious groups are better received than others. For example, in Northern Italy it was relatively easy to establish a Sikh temple while proposals for Muslim mosques are contested. The building of mosques has served as a symbolic catalyst to manifest unexpressed or unavowed fears of the 'Other' related to migration (invasion), intolerance (religious integristism) and terrorism. The way the issue is treated by Muslim communities, the public authorities and the host society living in the neighbourhood of the mosque projects determines conflict vs. negotiation. Overall Prof. Saint-Blancat was optimistic stating that with time and longer presence of Muslims attitudes tend to change towards greater openness. She paid tribute to positive action by religious communities, recognising that many churches and Christian believers have initiated local dialogue with their Muslim neighbours. There is also greater openness on the side of Muslim communities. The younger Muslim leaders know how to handle with the media, have social networks of support and participate at local decision-making. They want to build a national and a European Islam which relate to their local contexts.

Reverend Berit Schelde Christensen, from the Evangelical Lutheran Church of Denmark, shared her conviction that religion is a guide to values and gives meaning and cohesion to human existence and relationships. Making a link with the 1st seminar (17 April 2008), she stated that for economically marginalised Muslims religion can be a means of securing social recognition, but that it is also an integral part of the identity quest of every human being. Rev. Schelde Christensen also reminded the audience that if the religions are not allowed to go public, there is no chance to meet, neither to exchange nor to discuss openly. According to her, what is at stake in the current debate is, on the one hand, the wish and need for the legitimacy of religion in the public space. And on the other hand, the awareness of the responsibility of different religious communities to relate to and contribute to the development of common values and norms so that religion does not threaten but contributes to the coherence of society. The clash between the secular and the religious is potentially very disturbing.

To avoid or overcome conflict religious and secularist citizens are met with a challenge to tolerate what they may personally reject and to enter into a mutual learning process. Rev. Schelde Christensen saw two obstacles for this process: firstly, the lack of comprehension of religious language and the value and the purpose of religious symbols due to secularisation. Secondly, the use and misuse of religious convictions and expressions as political statements either knowingly or unknowingly. Despite difficulties, Rev. Schelde Christensen considered the responsibility of us all as European citizens to offer goodwill and respect to those who are spiritually different. Referring to Jürgen Habermas, she said that in our post-secular society, we should recognise both our shared citizenship and our cultural diversity. The secular virtues, which protect human beings, and religious values, which sustain and nurture human life, should work together in today's Europe.

Rejecting both religious/apologetic/absolutist and secularist/materialist/relativist extremisms, **Imam Yahya Sergio Pallavicini**, Vice-President of the Islamic Religious Community in Italy, called for the development of a culture of religious pluralism and acceptance of religious symbols in the public sphere. According to him, believers should accept symbols of believers of other religions. He, therefore, did not see any problem with Christian crucifixes in Italian public schools acknowledging them as a part of Italy's culture and history, but disapproved of the double standards at work in some communities. Imam Pallavicini led the discussion on reciprocity (which will be tackled more in detail in the seminar of 11

September 2008), by referring to the statement of the former Bishop of Bologna Biffi who had said that before a mosque could be built in Bologna, freedom of religion should be granted for Christians in the Middle East. In the view of Imam Pallavicini it was a legitimate statement, but at the same time he expressed a wish not to confuse the lack of freedom of religion somewhere at the international level with the rights of Muslim minorities to have their own places of worship in Europe. Alongside with claiming their rights in Europe, Muslim European leaders should engage for freedom of religion everywhere, including the Middle East and South-East Asia. Imam Pallavicini went on expressing a wish for a qualified Islamic leadership in European mosques, pointing at the question of the training of imams and at the foreign financing of mosques. He recalled the fact that most of the biggest and architecturally important mosques built in European capital cities were financed by Saudi Arabia, and expressed the wish that mosques remain primarily places of worship and not places of political influence for foreign national agendas and extremist ideologies.

Many more mosques are, however, built in former warehouses and garages. This has further strengthened the image and reality of Muslim communities as a part of shadow society. We have to follow the example of Jews and Christians, he said, whose worship places are part of their quarters. We need to have small mosques where Muslims live and where they can pray in a very peaceful and natural way. Imam Pallavicini regretted the French response to incidences of violence against non-veiled Muslim women by Muslim men. Instead of tackling the question as a crime the authorities saw it as an issue relating to freedom of religion. This approach of the authorities did not solve this type of crime nor enhanced freedom of religion.

Finally, **Mr Joël Privot**, architect and co-founder of *Expert-is*, a consultation agency specialising in the construction of mosques, presented an intercultural and participatory approach to building such places of worship. According to Mr Privot, the key is to team up residents, local authorities and members of the religious community in order to conceive and embed mosques as a shared and appropriated project in the local context. Mosque building should be carried out according to high architectural and environmental requirements and mosques should be open and welcoming to all the residents of neighbourhoods where they have been built. Besides societal concerns Mr. Privot has sought to promote the development of European Islamic Architecture. Showing images of mosques all around the world, Mr Privot explained that wherever Islam has settled in history, new Islamic architecture had developed related to the local context. Mr Privot regretted that this architectural contextualisation had not take place in Europe. According to Mr Privot an intercultural approach requires that mosques are not built on the basis of a 'copy and paste' method of reproducing the architecture of the original countries of the migrant population but the projects should provide a metaphor of adaptation of Islam in Europe with respect to its traditions.

Discussion

Responding to a question from the audience concerning common worship places, **Joël Privot**, recognized the existence of such places (in the United States?). In the subsequent discussions, both the Christian speaker, **Rev. Schelde Christensen** and the Muslim speaker, **Imam Pallavicini** stressed the importance of maintaining separate worship places, first and foremost, as places where the faithful can worship their religion. They both rejected syncretism of rituals and symbols as unacceptable and confusing. When entering a worship place a faithful person enters a narrative of life she or he is a part of. It was nevertheless highlighted that worship places of distinctive religions can serve as places to meet people from other religions.

One participant said that acceptance of mosques goes hand in hand with acceptance of Muslims. **Prof. Saint-Blancat** responded with the following paradox: in Northern Italy Muslim migrants are welcome to take vacant job positions, but are refused worship places. This indicates that discrimination can be found at different levels.

Mr Andrew Stephen Reed, from the UK Independence Party, appreciated the discussion on architecture as particularly encouraging because architecture conditions our environment and ourselves in an important way. Following Mr Privot, **Mr Fayçal M'rad Dali**, from the Belgian Section of the World Council of Religions for Peace (WCRP), said that mosque building participates in urban renovation.

Dr Karim Chemlal, from the Federation of Islamic Organisations in Europe (FIOE), highlighted the East-London example where a synagogue and a mosque stand near one another. This is a way to show acceptance for other religions while preserving one's own character. He joined Prof. Saint-Blancat in believing that 2nd and 3rd generation Muslims living in Europe are more open for intercultural dialogue. He saw that the 'xenographs' of the first mosques in Europe reflect the settlement of the migrants of the 1st generation.

The presentation of impressive (and supposedly expensive) architectural projects for mosques by Mr Privot was received with interest by **Mr Serafettin Pektaş**, from the Intercultural Dialogue Platform. He noted that this issue raises the question about the extent to which governments in Europe are willing to finance such architectural projects. Or, in other words, the extent to which states should intervene in religious matters. Concerning the cost of mosque building, **Mr Privot** answered that the same amount of money can be spent either on good architectural work or on bad quality. He also pointed out to the possibility of public funding from the local to EU level.

According to **Mr Mohamed-Raja'i Barakat** the financing of mosques by foreign actors is a consequence of disrespect of the European states towards the rights of Muslims. The financing of mosques should be guaranteed by the State, the same way Christian and Jewish worship places are financed through fiscal systems.

Ms Dorsaf Ben Dhiab, from the European Forum of Muslim Women, demanded the right for European Muslims to decide for themselves and to manage their own worship places (in France public authorities still want to continue to control this). She shared Imam Pallavicini's concern about foreign influence. Furthermore, she invited Europe to accept Muslims as full European citizens instead of considering them as second-rank citizens considered as foreign or as minorities. Instead of using the expression 'Islam *in* Europe', which reflects the neo-colonial management of European Islam, one should speak of Islam *of* Europe. She considered the French position on the headscarf erroneous and described the French law on the visibility of religious symbols in the public space as 'liberticide': forbidding the veil follows the same logics of imposing the veil.

Mr Christel Ngnambi, from the European Evangelical Alliance, reminded the seminar that the French law does not forbid all religious symbols in public space but only *ostentatious* religious symbols. He nevertheless added that he is of course aware that it is not clear what is meant by ostentatious. He congratulated Imam Pallavicini for having signed the open letter of 138 Muslim religious scholars to the highest authorities of Christianity named 'A Common Word Between Us and You'¹ and deplored that this important document was not well enough known among the wider public.

Several speakers emphasized that worship places of different religions are also communal centres of exchange. **Mr Levi Matusof**, from the European Jewish Public Affairs' organisation, highlighted this aspect with regard to synagogues. In his intervention Mr Matusof also stressed that the recognition of the legitimacy of the presence of the 'Other' is not only a question of time, but also the product of religious leaders teaching the faithful to participate in intercultural dialogue.

¹ www.acommonword.com

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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