

Annual Article 17 TFEU EU-religious leaders meeting
"Living together in increasingly polarised societies"

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This headline is in a certain way contradictory. Parties, who have been polarized have hardly any common ground or any ambition of being able to live together, as the major goal or wish of either side probably is to convert, sidetrack or even work for the disappearance of the opposite part.

Before a society becomes polarized it may have had a longer tradition of healthy pluralism and variety that may encourage or at least make it easier to live together. Pluralism in a society may be a result of a gradual development, that has made all groups share the same conditions and even see an opportunity to be mutually enriched.

However, there is more than one singular reason for the present situation of many Christians of experiencing discrimination, exclusion, harassment, hatred and violence. One reason is to a large extent the most extreme form of secularization of society in the sense, that there is not supposed to be any room for religion in public space or religious argumentation in politics and public debate. The effects of this tendency may be expressed in deselection of politicians upholding classical Christian views on abortion, euthanasia, marriage and family life or by politicians voluntarily abstaining from voicing their conviction on these issues. Furthermore it can lead to the banning of religious symbols in public premises, prohibition to wear religious symbols and dress, sanctions for voicing classical Christians viewpoints, banning of rooms destined for prayer in public educational institutions and religious gatherings in such places. Even if this meeting is predominately dealing with the situation of Christians, it should be remembered that efforts to curb religious presence and influence are often made to exclude the influence of Islam. Nevertheless they sometimes also serve as a pretext to limit the opportunities of Christian activities in some cases of many years' standing, because classical, even moderate Christian viewpoints are considered a threat to a modern society, an attitude sometimes presented as deference to non-believers or people of other religions.

Even if at this meeting we are dealing with the challenges that Christians in general encounter in today's society, it should not be ignored, that politicians sometimes make a subtle distinction between an established Christian Church and other Christian churches and denominations, not to speak of course other religions. The scope of this distinction by politicians is not primarily to enhance the fullness of classical Christian belief embodied in an established church, but rather to some extent to instrumentalize an established church and its cultural position to marginalize other denominations. Even if the main target of these efforts

very often is Islam, it does affect Christian denominations, as in order to avoid discrimination no denomination is allowed be exempt from legislative initiatives.

Several examples of challenges could be presented of how the above mentioned political approach affects minority Christian communities. Since many Christian denominations are part of a universal body and because of their minority status sometimes dependent of clergy and other personnel from abroad, they often experience obstacles and high financial burdens when they invite such persons, even for very brief visits. Even if these obstacles are partly rooted in a strict immigration policy they do limit possibilities that should be considered an obvious part of religious freedom.

Many modern societies develop and enhance certain “values” naturally rooted in democracy and equality that, however, tend to become symbols of a sort of secular religion. Very often classical Christian principles and virtues are considered in opposition or even a threat to modern society. This sometimes provokes initiatives to limit rights of education according to Christian principles and suspicion towards the rights of parents to form their children according to their own belief. The buzz word is “social control.” Even if such social control in its extreme manifestations does have deplorable negative effects, it is obvious that attempts to legislate against it will infringe the rights of believers without in the end to be of any effect that can justify the negative consequences for religious freedom.

What has been mentioned above illustrates, that many challenges and limitations for Christians in modern societies derive from policies characterized if not by sheer hostility then at least by ignorance and lack of comprehension, both for the positive role of religion in society and the basic need for individuals to live according to their belief and the right to have it secured and protected by civil legislation. Religious literacy (on the nature, core tenets, self-understanding, structures of religious denominations) is crucial and we would like to see more been done on this point.

Another severe challenge for Christians is not rooted in legislation and to a large extend also beyond the influence of it, namely attacks by individuals or groups on Christians and vandalism and desecration of sacred spaces, attacks on persons manifesting their belief and as an extreme consequence in life-threatening attempts like e.g. for converts to Christianity. We appreciate the fact that the European Commission has integrated protection of places of worship in its funding instruments and COMECE has been involved in the activities of various EU-funded consortia addressing the issue. However, we would like to see the relevant policies more explicitly linked with the exercise of freedom of religion. In other words, protecting places of worship is important not just for security reasons - or for their symbolic value - but especially in view of safeguarding freedom of religion, which is primarily exercised in such places. The scope of action should also be as broad as possible and safety of places of worship should not be reduced to acts of terrorism.

Most civil societies will guarantee the safety of sacred spaces and religious activities and prosecute perpetrators, however more ought to be done to show concern for Christians

threatened or attacked because of their faith, i.e. by recognizing danger for persecution as a legitimate reason for obtaining asylum.

Even if expressions of hatred and ridicule by individuals towards Christians may be difficult to foresee or curb, something could have been done by maintaining so-called blasphemy laws, now widely abolished. Even if they might have been difficult to apply in all cases, such laws would be a way of showing, that even a secularized society recognizes what many people consider something sacred to be protected.

COMECE has been strongly advocating for the appointment of an EU Coordinator on combating anti-Christian hatred and we would like to restate this call on this occasion. While acknowledging and not questioning the specificity of Jewish and Muslim communities in the EU - and of the challenges they face more and more reports show the emergence of crimes against Christians and of hatred, intolerance and discrimination towards them within the European Union. It is essential to provide foster protection of the faithful and their sacred places, regardless of whether they belong to a 'majority' or 'minority' religious denomination.