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CSC Briefing on the Religious Dimension of the European Year of Intercultural Dialogue

“the peaceful coexistence of cultures and religions - both in the EU and its relations with peoples of in all parts of the world – is the utmost importance for our shared future”

Hans-Gert Pöttering, President of the European Parliament

“Engaging in constructive dialogue with people of different faiths and convictions is a key element of intercultural dialogue.”

Jan Figel, Commissioner for Education and Culture

ACTIVITIES OF THE EUROPEAN INSTITUTIONS

Even if the European Union (EU) does not have any competencies to act in the field of religion, and therefore this dimension is hardly present at the level of Community policies, the current EU leadership acknowledges the importance of the religious dimension of intercultural dialogue. The EU institutions highlighted that aspect by organising several related activities in the framework of the European Year of Intercultural Dialogue (EYID).

The European Commission and the European Policy Centre jointly organised seven “Brussels debates” of which one (14 May) tackled the religious dimension. More precisely, the seminar looked at how active citizenship can bridge inter-religious divides. On 11 November 2008, the European Commission organised a conference entitled “Intercultural dialogue: a challenge for faith and convictions”. The conference first explored how religion and faith relate to media and education. It called, for instance, on a responsible journalism which, instead of creating stereotypes and divides, serves as a forum for intercultural dialogue. With regard to education, the good ways to teach about religions and beliefs were explored. The last session learned about existing initiatives to conduct inter and intra-faith dialogue. Besides their own work, the representatives of the Church and Society Commission of the Conference of European Churches (CSC-CEC) and the Commission of Bishops’ Conferences of the European Community (COMECE) also introduced the co-operation between the Catholic Church and the CEC constituency.

The European Parliament used EYID as an occasion to invite several distinguished personalities to address the plenary. The invited speakers included religious leaders: the Grand Mufti of Syria; Sir Jonathan Sacks, Chief Rabbi of the United Hebrew Congregations of the Commonwealth; the Dalaï Lama, and the Head of Orthodox Christianity, Patriarch Bartholomew I. Erna Hennicot-Schoepges MEP (EPP-ED, Luxembourg), the parliament rapporteur on the European Year of Intercultural Dialogue 2008, hosted a hearing on “Cultural diversity, Religions and Dialogue” at the European Parliament (Brussels) on 10 January.

The annual high-level meeting between representatives of the three monotheistic religions and the presidents of the European Institutions, held on 5 May, was also considered as an event of EYID. This year the discussion centred around two topics “Climate Change: an ethical challenge for all cultures” and “Reconciliation through intercultural and inter-faith dialogue”. According to the President of the European Parliament Hans-Gert Pöttering the annual meeting provides the European Institutions with the possibility to underline, in a very public manner, their commitment to dialogue with churches and faiths. In his speech on climate change, the President of the European Commission José Manuel Barroso said “thanks to their outreach and role in our societies, religions and communities of belief are well placed to make a valuable contribution in mobilising them for a sustainable future”. The (then) President of the European Council, Slovenian Prime Minister Janez Janša described environment not only as a natural but also as a sacred place. He went on to state “community and loyalty between man, nature and the Creator is a basic principle of Judaism, Christianity and Islam alike.”

The Treaty of Lisbon, if ratified, would provide a legal recognition for the already existing dialogue between the European Union institutions and religious communities. The article 17 (Treaty on the Functioning of the Union) stipulates the following: “Recognising their identity and their specific contribution, the Union shall maintain open, transparent and regular dialogue with” ... “churches and religious associations or communities”. The other major European-level organisation, the Council of Europe (CoE), is equally committed to open, transparent and regular dialogue with religious organisations (see the CoE White Paper on Intercultural Dialogue).

The EU initiative, the European Year of Intercultural Dialogue (2008), greatly profited from the experience of the Council of Europe in working on this issue. The Council of Europe White Paper on Intercultural Dialogue was adopted in May 2008 and its implementation is now being planned. One of the follow-up actions to the White Paper is the annual meeting between Council of Europe representatives and representatives of religious communities. The first gathering took place in April 2008. The meeting in 2009 will have the same theme: teaching of religious and convictional facts. The decision taken by CoE to continue with (religious) education as a long-term issue shows the importance of education for the future of Europe as a peaceful and democratic continent. CSC is involved in the preparation of the meeting in co-operation with those CEC members who have particular expertise in this area, including the Intereuropean Commission on Church and School. The White Paper on Intercultural dialogue is being translated in various languages. Some of these translations will be available already in January 2009.

SOME EXAMPLES ON ACTIVITIES OF THE RELIGIOUS COMMUNITIES

As a part of their contribution to the Year, CSC together with COMECE and the Konrad Adenauer Stiftung (KAS), in association with Muslim partners, organised four seminars under the overall heading of "Islam, Christianity and Europe". The seminars, which were hosted by the European Parliament, discussed some of the burning issues of contemporary Europe in relation to religion.

The seminar "Intercultural dialogue: response to which problems? Christian and Muslim perspectives" (17 April) stressed the importance of intercultural dialogue as a way to foster social cohesion in Europe and peace and solidarity in EU foreign relations. Intercultural dialogue as well as inter-religious dialogue were seen as ways to improve knowledge and understanding and thereby help overcome the fear and hostility on which discrimination feeds. Beyond its value as a means to tackle problems, intercultural dialogue should be seen as an element of civilized culture. The seminar concluded that the main challenge for intercultural and inter-religious dialogues is to involve those who in the first place object to dialogue.

On 29 May some hundred people from the European institutions and NGOs or representing religious communities and the academic world gathered for a dialogue on "the visibility of religion in the European public space: the question of worship places and religious symbols in clothing". The construction of mosques and the wearing of veils have sparked a 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 worlds. The seminar called for the development of a culture of religious pluralism and acceptance of religious symbols in the public space. One of the barriers on the way is the lack of comprehension of religious language and of the value and purpose of religious symbols due to secularisation. The religious communities must be able to convince the secular society that religion does not threaten but rather contributes to the coherence of society. This is particularly challenging with regard to Islam as there are many examples of mosque building being used as a symbolic catalyst to manifest unexpressed fears of the 'Other' related to migration, intolerance and terrorism. To overcome the anxiety related to Muslims and mosques, new architectural - intercultural and participatory - approaches are being developed. The seminar learned about a Belgian model that combines high architectural and environmental standards with an architecture that creates spaces which are open and welcoming for the residents of the entire neighbourhood.

The seminar of 3 July discussed the place of Muslims in Europe under a provocative title: "'Christian Europe' and Islam in Europe". The seminar concluded that 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. According to Metropolitan Emmanuel of France, who expressed the Christian view on the theme, for churches to come to terms with Islam requires a 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 mistreating one another. It also highlighted that Islam and Christianity have much more in common than 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, Islam too is "European" in its roots and historical development, and contributed to Europe in the fields of science and culture.

The most heated dialogue took place on 11 September in the seminar on “the external relations of the European Union with Muslim countries and international responsibility of religious communities”. The concept of reciprocity raised major concerns among Muslims who felt that it tended to be used by the dominant side as an argument not to grant Muslims their full freedom of religion in Europe. The understanding of reciprocity by those Christian participants who defended the use of the notion was different. Reciprocity should not mean retaliation – which is the negative way of using the term – but be embedded both in the 'Silver Rule' (“Do not do to others as you would not have them do to you”), as well as in the 'Golden Rule' (“Do onto others as you would wish them do onto you”). It was argued that fundamentally any relationship, from a moral point of view, necessarily implies reciprocity. The seminar concluded that 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.

The four seminar all contributed to respond to a relativist secular liberalism that rejects the existence of a religious truth, and sought to advocate a pluralist liberalism which allows the public sharing of values, including religious ones. These values represent the foundation of a dialogue which is a source of hope for our multicultural societies.

Furthermore, besides the four seminars, another (related) co-operation body of the Christian churches in Europe, the Committee for Relations with Muslims in Europe (CRME) of the Conference of European Churches and the Council of European Bishops' Conferences (CCEE) took part in the European Year of Intercultural Dialogue. CRME organised a European Christian-Muslim Conference entitled “Being a Citizen of Europe and a Person of Faith: Christians and Muslims as Active Partners in European Societies” on 20-23 October in Belgium. The meeting served the development of a dynamic European identity based on mutual tolerance of convictions and the acceptance of cultural plurality. It was also an action towards peaceful co-habitation. The final statement of the conference set concrete recommendations for the future cooperation between Christians and Muslims in Europe.

Besides activities and networking directly related to EYID, there are many actors who promote and organise inter-religious dialogue at different levels on a permanent basis.

The above-mentioned Committee for Relations with Muslims in Europe helps the European churches in their theological reflection on Muslims in Europe. In the past, the Committee issued documents, for instance, on the education of young Christians and Muslims in a pluralist Europe, on meeting Muslims and on possibilities for a common prayer. At the moment, the Committee is working on two documents: one on Violence and a second one on the training of Clergy and Pastoral Workers for relating to Muslims in Europe.

The European Council of Religious Leaders brings together high-level representatives of Judaism, Christianity and Islam as well as a representative of Buddhist, Hindus and Sikh and Zoroastrians. The Council is committed to cooperating on conflict prevention and transformation, peaceful coexistence and reconciliation. In its annual meeting, held in Berlin at the beginning of March 2008, the European Council of Religious Leaders adopted a “Berlin Declaration on Inter-religious Dialogue”. The Declaration, an excellent guide for inter-religious dialogue, emphasises that a full understanding of inter-religious dialogue includes common action – diapraxis. Inter-religious dialogue should aim at mustering the resources of varying religious traditions to take up the challenges which Europe faces today (e.g. poverty, abuse of women and children, discrimination of migrants and environmental problems).

The most remarkable Muslim initiative to promote dialogue worldwide is the open letter "A Common Word between Us and You" of (138) Muslims to the leaders of all the world's churches and to all Christians everywhere. The letter, which declares the common ground between Christianity and Islam, has since its publication in September 2006 been signed by 271 Muslim scholars, clerics and intellectuals.

The Alliance of Civilisations, established at the initiative of Spain and Turkey under the auspices of the United Nations, aims to improve understanding and cooperative relations among nations and peoples across cultures and religions and, in the process, to help counter the forces that fuel polarisation and extremism.

The United Religions Initiative (URI) is an example of an international grassroots network. The Oslo Coalition on Freedom of Religion or Belief brings together representatives of religious and humanist communities, NGOs, IOs and academic world worldwide.

LINKS:

The hearing on Cultural Diversity, Religions and Dialogue on 10 January 2008.

http://www.epp-ed.eu/Activities/pday08/day002_en.asp

The Council of Europe "White Paper on Intercultural Dialogue", 7 May 2008.

http://www.coe.int/t/dg4/intercultural/Source/White%20Paper_final_revised_EN.pdf

Brussels Debate "New horizons: active citizenship to bridge inter-religious divides", Brussels 14 May 2008. <http://www.interculturaldialogue2008.eu/408.0.html>

The Annual meeting of the Presidents of the EU institutions with religious leaders, Brussels 5 May 2008:

European Commission Press Release:

<http://europa.eu/rapid/pressReleasesAction.do?reference=IP/08/676&format=HTML&aged=0&language=EN&guiLanguage=en>

Speech of the President of the European Council, Janez Jansa:

http://www.eu2008.si/en/News_and_Documents/Speeches_Interviews/May/0505_Janez_Jansa.html

Speech of the President of the European Parliament Pöttering:

<http://www.europarl.europa.eu/president/defaulten.htm?functions>

Photos:

http://www.eu2008.si/en/Media_Service/Photo_Archive/May/0505KPV.html

Islam, Christianity and Europe - seminars:

<http://www.cec-kek.org/content/Projectislam.shtml>

The Committee for Relations with Muslims in Europe.

http://www.cec-kek.org/content/islam_eu.shtml

The European Council for Religious Leaders: <http://www.rfp-europe.eu/>

The Berlin Declaration on Inter-religious Dialogue: <http://www.rfp-europe.eu/index.cfm?id=185825>

The European Interreligious Directory: <http://www.rfp-europe.eu/index.cfm?id=208949>

The official website of A Common Word: <http://www.acommonword.com/>

The United Religions Initiative (URI) <http://www.uri.org>

The Oslo Coalition on Freedom of Religion or Belief: www.oslocoalition.org

This website contains links to numerous, in principle grassroots, initiatives to promote inter-religious and intercultural dialogue (see “the examples of best practice”):

<http://www.cec-kek.org/content/interculturalresponses.shtml>



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