

EU Brussels: interreligious dialogue seen as strategy against radicalization



The European Parliament in Brussels

A high level conference was hosted at the European Parliament in Brussels by the German President and Italian Vice-President of the European Parliament, respectively Martin Schulz and Antonio Tajani

LISA PALMIERI-BILLIG, VATICAN INSIDER, 27 MARCH 2015

Not only Pope Francis, not only religious institutions, but now also the world of international diplomacy has come to realize that the most effective method for preventing the radicalization of young people to Islamist ideology and terrorism is interreligious dialogue.

A high level conference was hosted at the European Parliament in Brussels by the German President and Italian Vice-President of the European Parliament, respectively Martin Schulz and Antonio Tajani, entitled “The rise of religious radicalism and the role of inter-religious dialogue in promoting tolerance and respect for human dignity”.

In addition to choice European parliamentarians, speakers included Christian, Muslim and Jewish European religious leaders. There was an ecumenical representation of Christians including Metropolitan Emmanuel of France, Vice President of CEC (Conference of European Churches); Father Patrick Daly, General Secretary of COMECE (Bishops Conference of the European Community); the Anglican Bishop of Europe, Robert Innes; the Auxiliary Bishop of Utrecht, Theodorus C.M.Hoogenboom and Hilde Kiboom, Vice President of the St. Egidio Community. Europe’s Jewish community was represented by the Chief Rabbis of Rome and Brussels, Riccardo Di Segni and Albert Guigui, while the voice of Islam while Imam Hassen Chalgoumi , President of the Conference of Imams of France was the voice of Islam.

In his welcoming speech, Antonio Tajani proposed that the EU promote a project of European integration based on its Jewish-Christian roots, while at the same time enriched by other belief systems and religions such as Islam. Dialogue between Europe’s different cultures has become dramatically urgent today, but the idea dates back to 1992 when Jacques Delors, former President of the European Commission, expressed the need to create an ethical and spiritual dimension to European unity going beyond economic and legal issues. His vision was named “A Soul for Europe”- and took the form of structured dialogue with representatives of religions and humanist organizations.

His initiative, periodically revived , evolved into Article 17 of the Treaty of Lisbon and in 2013 the European Commission developed guidelines for implementing dialogue according

to these principles. Inter-religious discussions are thus becoming pertinent to policy making on the EU agenda.

Tajani stressed the importance of avoiding the demonization of Islam. The greatest number of victims of extremist violence and terrorism are themselves Muslims, he recalled, and take place not only Europe but primarily in the entire Arab world. The fight against religious radicalism, he said, must go hand in hand with “respect for human dignity, the freedom of religion, the separation of temporal and religious powers” .

As other speakers, Elmar Brok, Chairman of the Committee on Foreign Affairs, pointed out that the religious pretext for violence and war is not new historically. The terrible struggle within Islam today (“between Islam and Islam”) has precedents in the battles between different Christian denominations, such as those that scarred Europe in the 17th century. We must beware of making generalizations against Islam “in order not to create additional hate” he said. Nonetheless, “no one has the right to decide the fate of others. Tolerance means to treat others as equals and a democratic state must allow all to live according to their convictions.”

Martin Schulz, President of the European Parliament, recalled the ideological perversions of the first half of the 20th century, particularly the doctrine of German “racial superiority”, subsequently defeated and replaced with glorious new proposals for civilization in the second half of the 1900s. “Now, these vital advances are again being threatened by radical fundamentalism and new nationalisms” he said.

Franz Timmermans, First Vice-President of the European Commission (who, as Schulz recalled, “lives in Holland, only 10 kilometers away from me in Germany, Hollands former enemy”) expressed deep dismay at the return of anti-Semitism to Europe. “When we are in trouble”, he said, “we always look for someone to blame. Traditionally this someone has been the Jews. Seventy years after Auschwitz I would have thought, and hoped, we would have lost this habit.”

Several speakers dwelt on the targeting of Jewish communities in Europe by Islamist radicalism and the consequent growth of anti-Semitism and sense of insecurity felt by many Jewish citizens who are leaving France and other countries because they fear for the future safety of their children. Antonio Tajani said emphatically, “We must protect the right of every Jewish person to live in his home. We will not permit his being forced to leave.”

Many remarked on the nature of fundamentalism and the positive role of dialogue.

Metropolitan Emanuel said Fundamentalism is present in all religions. It brings with it moral puritanism and a claim to possess the Absolute Truth.

Rabbi Di Segni recalled that Fundamentalism is not a new phenomenon. “You don’t need to be a Fundamentalist to be violent, nor are all Fundamentalists violent” he said.

Fundamentalism implies a totally literal reading of sacred texts. Thus a religious Fundamentalist would insist that the Genesis tale of the world being created in 7 days is absolutely true instead of interpreting the story as symbolic, or a metaphor for the evolution of creation over millions of years.

The Conference of European Rabbis has issued a “Manifesto for Combating Religious Extremism” said Rabbi Di Segni with proposals for 1) training courses for religious leaders 2) monitoring money and support flow 3) community, interfaith or state level monitoring and clampdown on extremist tendencies 4) public recognition for religious groups.

Imam Hassen Chalgoumi, President of the French Conference of Imams, pointed out that one of the factors favoring radicalization in Europe is that “14 million young Europeans aged between 15 and 29 are excluded from all forms of employment or schooling” and that all government, religious and social institutions should be coordinating to devise concrete proposals to help these young people build their futures and thus help them resist temptations of radicalization. He also said that travel by unaccompanied minors should be forbidden by law.

Rabbi Guigui pointed out the difference between assimilation and integration. The latter permits citizens to live together in equality while still maintaining diverse customs, religious practices and traditions. Metropolitan Emanuel noted that the exclusion of spirituality from politics leads to the contamination of religions by nationalist ideologies.

Frans Timmermans commented that ““We don’t understand the important role religion plays in our lives. Dialogue implies being able to disagree with respect, and listen to others, not just ourselves”.

In conclusion, the European Parliament’s Vice President Antonio Tajani announced that a follow-up meeting would be held and extended to representatives of philosophical and non-religious organizations, since an integrated European society must be all-inclusive. “This is just the beginning”, he said. “To work for peace, all religions, not just the Abrahamic, must get involved, together with non-believers.”

Representatives of several other religious and inter-religious organizations were among the guests at this conference, including St. Egidio, the Focolare movement, the Brussels Muslim “Dialogue Platform”, Religions for Peace/Europe (which had organized a one-day seminar at the European Parliament last week) and AJC – the American Jewish Committee, which will be holding a Meeting in Brussels next May on combatting radicalization and anti-Semitism in Europe.