

## Imam Arafat: respect for religious diversity



(Vatican Radio, 9 October 2013) The death of several hundred migrants off the Italian island of Lampedusa this month has focused international spotlight on the broader, complex questions of EU policies regarding immigration and integration.

According to one American Muslim leader, the United States model of integration has much to teach European countries at the present time. Syrian-born Imam Mohamad Bashar Arafat is founder and president of the Civilizations Exchange and Cooperation Foundation, which is based in Baltimore, in the United States. The organisation works to promote cooperation, rather than confrontation, between young people of different religions, cultures and backgrounds.

He spoke to Philippa Hitchen about the importance of supporting the religious integration of migrants across the world, in order to prevent extremism and fanaticism.

“America is an immigrant country for 300 years, people came from different parts of the world – in America, the immigrants feel this is home for them. I think as Muslims living in America we have something to contribute to the Muslim community in Europe, and how to succeed in terms of being well integrated with the society.

Today, those immigrants who came from different countries – those who came 30 years ago, and those came and made it through the boats and did not die in the sea – they are feeling lost in the streets of Europe. Not all the mosques have imams competent to help the newcomers integrate from a religious perspective, because these issues are not taught in the religious seminaries in the Arab world, or in Africa, or in Asia. The religious institutions need a lot of reforms, but they don't say it.

I see that imams and religious leaders have to get out of their countries to see the world, and how the world is running. Today, the whole world is changing, but if you lived all of your life in Egypt, if you lived all of your life in Syria, or in Lebanon, or in Morocco, or anywhere, and you have never travelled, to see – what does it mean to be a Muslim living in America, [...] what does it mean to be a minority Muslim, and now, how do you think also the minority Christians living in these majority-Muslim countries should be treated? So we are really reaching a point where the *fiqh*, or the jurisprudence of Islamic law, needs to constantly be re-looked at and reinterpreted based on the changes of the times. You cannot do that if you don't have exchange, if you're not travelling to see how the world is running today.

The society in America respects your presence and would like to see you succeed. It's different from Europe – in Europe still there is a lot of resistance to foreigners. [...] This is an issue which is going to become bigger and bigger day by day, and we have to address it, rather sooner than later.

Our problem is really radicalism, whether it comes from some of the Christians, or some of the Muslims, or some of the Jews, or other religious groups. This kind of narrow-minded perspective is going to hurt all of us. Our biggest threat is religious extremism and fanaticism. So I think it is the religious duty also of the Muslims to join hands with anybody who is advocating respect for minorities, religious diversity, cultural diversity, because that's our only hope for a better life, in Europe and the United States.”