

Cardinal Scola advocates Christian-Muslim dialogue on fundamental issues



The Oasis international Conference in London

Cardinal Scola told members of the British Parliament and civil society that it is vitally important to promote good communication between Christians and Muslims in Europe

GERARD O'CONNELL, VATICAN INSIDER, LONDON – 18 November 2012

On a 24-hour visit to London, Cardinal Angela Scola emphasised the urgent need for substantial conversations between Christian and Muslims in the UK and other European countries on issues that are fundamental to their living together in peace.

He suggested that this would enable them to cooperate and contribute together, from their respective religious traditions, to the building of a more human, integrated and pluralist society in Europe, and help counteract the prevailing secular culture.

The Cardinal, who is archbishop of Milan, stimulated a welcome discussion on this topic and raised important questions when he addressed members of the Royal Family and the British parliament, as well as Christian and Muslim scholars, religious and lay leaders at the House of Lords and London University's Heythrop College, on November 15.

At a briefing in Westminster Palace, chaired by Lord David Alton, for members from the House of Lords and the House of Commons, and representatives of Britain's Christian and Muslim communities, the scholarly cardinal said he was convinced that "it is crucial today that we show the contribution that religious communities have to offer towards the construction of a good life both personal and social", particularly, though not only, in the West.

He said his direct encounter with "the Muslim world" in recent years had led him in 2004 to found the Oasis project to promote greater understanding between Christians and Muslims in the various fields of human endeavour. He came to London to present this project, hoping it could also make a contribution here.

He noted how “the Muslim presence poses, much more than others, a challenge to the current status quo in the West”, because “they pose the problem of the co-existence of different universal world visions in the public sphere”. Indeed, over recent years, he said, “conflict has increased and “a pragmatic approach” to the mixing of cultures and peoples in the West has proved to be inadequate, and something much deeper is needed. He advocated a type of “communication” that leads Christian and Muslims to “mutual recognition” and to “an enriching co-existence” that enables them to contribute together, from their respective religious traditions, to the building of a more human society in Europe.

He expressed his conviction that today, “we have moved from a vision in which religions were part of the problem, to another in which they are seen as part of the solution.”

He developed these ideas later that day at London University’s Heythrop College, at a gathering hosted by its Jesuit President, Fr. Michael Holman, and attended by 200 guests including members of the Royal Family, Cardinal Murphy O’Connor and Archbishop Mennini, the Apostolic Nuncio, and the British Ambassador to the Holy See, Nigel Baker.

There, he argued that the mingling (“métissage”) of different cultures and peoples in Europe today as a result of immigration has led to one of those periods in history “when cultures and religions” and especially Christians and Muslims, “are constrained, almost in spite of themselves, to converse with each other.”

He indicated four “universally relevant questions” around which that conversation could fruitfully take place between Christians and Muslims in Europe: truth and freedom; the economic and financial crisis, and more generally “the grave crisis of political culture”; religious practice and secularisation; ethical questions.

He recalled how the recent “revolutions” in the Arab world had revolved around these issues too, and argued that “despite the danger of an ideological drift which is becoming more and more evident in them, we cannot overlook the fact that they did begin with a series of demands (work, dignity, freedom) which are in full accord with the current evolution of the West.”

He asserted that the current situation in Europe is pushing Christians and Muslims alike to face the present-day problems “without any longer distinguishing” between “our” world and “theirs”.

Commenting on the cardinal’s intervention, the eminent British Muslim scholar, Timothy J. Winter (Abdel Hakim Murad) who lectures at Cambridge University, praised the Oasis initiative and agreed with the importance of the issues raised. He said Cardinal Scola “has a good ear for Muslim voices and concerns”, and well understands that “serious Christians who wish to engage with serious Muslims will always know that the language must be theological” and “any attempt to reduce Muslim-Christian ties to the merely sociological or journalistic will alienate most Muslims, and dissuade them from involvement in any serious dialogue.”

Lord Brennan, President of the Catholic Union of Great Britain, agreed with Cardinal Scola that it is vitally important for Christians and Muslims to dialogue today, because both religions “have a great deal to contribute” to a Europe that “is suffering fatigue” in the political, economic, cultural and social fields.