



# CONFERENCE REPORT



**KAS EUROPEAN OFFICE BRUSSELS**

## “Religion and Politics in the European Union – New Challenges, New Responsibilities”

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Martin Niemetz**

### **Conference Report**

The President of the European People's Party (EPP), Wilfried Martens, opened the conference on religion and politics by giving a historical record of the EPP's central role in the European project and emphasized its continuing commitment to the process of integration. While initially the EPP was composed solely of Christian Democratic parties, it today includes not only other like-minded parties, but individuals with a plurality of religious backgrounds. This plurality helps the EPP, Martens said, to play a leading role in fostering interreligious dialogue. This is especially important in respect to the European Union's enlargement and the steady inflow of immigrants from all parts of the world. Martens continued by stating his belief in the principles of Christian Democratic thought. Freedom, responsibility, fundamental equality, the rule of law and solidarity among peoples were and still are indispensable premises for the success of the European project. Martens concluded his speech with the statement that Christian Democracy is currently in a perfect position to play an essential role in the European integration process.

The first panel discussion “Christianity, Islam and the changing role of the interreligious dialogue” was moderated by Mario Mauro, Vice-President of the European Parliament. The other panellists were Senaid Kobilica, President of the Islamic Council of Norway, Erna Hennicot-Schoepges, Member of the European Parliament, and Emilio Platti, Professor of Islamics at Leuven University and at the Institut Catholique de Paris.

Senaid Kobilica began his speech by mentioning that the unique characteristics of religions may be employed to further peace, reconciliation and intercultural understanding. Today, we often witness how feelings of frustration and injustice, which in the 19<sup>th</sup> and 20<sup>th</sup> century were expressed by national, racial and class hatred, are now expressed in the language of religious hatred. The fact that religions might either become catalysts of international conflicts or bridges over global gaps, should be a sufficient reason for us to see the interreligious dialogue as one of the most important tasks of our times. Kobilica continued by using the “Cartoon Crisis” as an example of how dialogue can make a difference. Whereas in Denmark the crisis was amplified by a lack of communication, in Norway existing structures for dialogue helped mitigate the detrimental effects of the cartoons. Therefore, Kobilica urged the European institutions to give more

direct attention to religion in general, and interreligious dialogue and platforms in particular.

Being the European Parliament's Rapporteur of the European Year of Intercultural Dialogue, Erna Hennicot-Schoepges recalled the resistance she had experienced in her struggle to include the concept of interreligious dialogue in the final report. Even though eventually she was successful with this, this episode illustrates the sensitivity of the subject. Hennicot-Schoepges stressed that religions are key components of our identities and therefore have to be part of any effort to understand and accept diversity. Furthermore, she said that it should be our common ambition to end this year with a concrete outcome, in order to create a set of tools and instruments which we can continue to use in the future.

Emilio Platti elaborated different definitions of religions and their practical implications. Basically, we must differentiate between two concepts of religion. One is the static, essentialistic concept, as associated with Thomas Aquinas, and the other the spiritual interpretation. This leads us to the question of the nature of Islam. Platti argued that the Koran contains two key elements that make a spiritual definition of the Islamic religion possible. Firstly, it contains a universal objective and secondly, it includes the concept of the common good of humanity as an overarching principle. Platti reasoned that this would make constant reinterpretation of the Koran possible and would thereby enable interreligious dialogue.

The second panel discussion "Religion, Politics and the Reform Treaty: What do we expect?" was moderated by Alojz Peterle, Member of the European Parliament. The other panellists were Emmanuel of France, Metropolitan of France, Monsignor Noël Treanor, Secretary General of the COMECE, and Dr. h.c. Gerrit Noltensmeier, Member of the Council of the Evangelical Church in Germany.

His Eminence Metropolitan Emmanuel of France began his speech by recalling the progress that has been made regarding the relationship between religion and politics in the EU. Nonetheless, he expressed his disappointment about the lack of any reference to the Christian heritage of Europe in the preamble to the Reform Treaty. Article 16 C he deemed to be very encouraging, however, for it confirms the intentions of the EU to maintain an open, transparent and regular dialogue with the churches. Emmanuel claimed that religious freedom must be safeguarded not only as an individual right, but also as the right of traditional Churches and Religions.

Furthermore, he stated that the Churches do not want to make political decisions, but want to be able to give their opinion and advice. There should be no interference in each other's business, but the relationship between Church and State should be guided by the "principle of symphony".

Monsignor Noël Treanor spoke about some of the more practical issues that will have to be addressed concerning Article 16 C. First of all, there is the question of the subjects of the dialogue. The article does not give any clear indication as to who is in charge of the dialogue. Who are the participants on

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the side of the Churches and religions and who will present the Union? Secondly, Treanor expressed his hope for a consensually established agenda for the meetings. Thirdly, he stressed that it is important that there will be a truly “open, transparent and regular” dialogue. Finally, with regard to the different levels of dialogue, Treanor called for more meetings on the “working level”, enabling a more informal exchange of viewpoints.

Dr. h.c. Gerrit Noltensmeier started his speech, by talking about the role religion should play in the EU. He stated that the Churches should not make politics, but instead should make politics possible. According to Noltensmeier, the Churches have the responsibility to exert their peaceful influence especially in debates on immigration, social justice and bioethical topics. Furthermore, he expressed the Churches’ disapproval of a “single-entry-point” into the political process of the EU. Instead, the Churches desire continuing flexibility and the possibility to contact the respective institutions directly. Concluding his remarks, Noltensmeier enunciated his hope for the success of the Lisbon Treaty’s ratification process.

The key note of the conference was given by Jan Figel, Member of the European Commission. Figel acknowledged that religions represent a positive force in strengthening morals and citizenship in Europe. The EU recognizes this in the Lisbon Treaty. He brought attention to the fact that in the last 30 years the EU has successfully proved the possibility to live in diversity. The EU really is a “Superpower of Diversity”. However, this ability to live together peacefully should not be taken for granted, as it has to be relearned by every generation. This, Figel said, is why dialogue is so important. What counts here is not so much the differences between cultures, but the divides amongst individuals. He called upon the audience to help bridge these divides and thereby eliminate space for fanaticism. Furthermore, he expressed his belief that the unconditional respect for the human dignity must be the basic and nonnegotiable common value of all.

In his closing remarks, Dr. Peter R. Weilemann, Director of the European Office of the Konrad-Adenauer-Stiftung, stated that religions are indispensable for the creation of the fundamentals for a just order. He stressed that religions are not a part of the problem, but a part of the solution.