

ISLAM IN EUROPE COMMITTEE

Letter to the Churches in Europe

The education of young Christians and Muslims in a pluralist Europe

Cultural and religious plurality has become an essential fact in most European countries. Other religious traditions, including Islam, are present in them. The encounter between religions may be a chance, an invitation to think over one's own convictions in order to welcome the truth about God and about mankind. Most Churches in Europe are aware of pluralism as of a fundamentally positive fact.

Some of them have yet to take position on this issue.

Within the framework of this plurality, it is fitting to study and to evaluate in particular the challenge this means to youth (both Christian and Muslim) in order to take it into account in considering the education of youth.

Description of the current situation

Christian perspective

In general, many Christians wish to think in depth about their faith, which no longer relates simply to social matters, but to their own serious personal conviction. Motivated believers meet together in dynamic parishes or base communities. They seek a spirituality founded on a firm and open-minded theology.

It is nevertheless true that in most European countries - except some in which traditional religion still carries weight - secularisation has penetrated more or less everywhere. Moreover, key tenets of the Christian faith are no longer accepted by some people who still declare themselves to be Christian. Sometimes they live without any reference to Christ.

For others, ideological emptiness leads them to seek sources other than those of Christianity (cults, Buddhism, New Age...)

While priests, ministers, religious men or women, and laypeople work hard to educate believers, there is a definite lack of leadership.

Muslim perspective

For a long time, the presence of Muslims was rather discrete. Nowadays, while seeking integration in society, the Muslim community wishes to retain its bond with the values of its culture and religion, and thereby becomes more visible. It organises religious practice. More Muslim associations are founded to help believers live their faith, and particularly young people, most of whom have given

up all religious practice.

It is therefore Islam, with its organisations and the diversity of its component elements, which we meet today.

Muslims do not form a unified community. The Muslim community is divided because of a variety of countries of origin, difference of generation and differing religious or political affiliation.

Though they are still a minority, groups of young Muslims are forming new societies to rediscover the Muslim faith without having inherited it.

The climate of religious indifference - in some European countries - is bound to have some effect on people and families of Muslim origin.

Some people adapt to the secular environment in which they live and keep their religious practice a private matter, while others, in search of identity, react by holding on to a religious identity.

On the other hand, some of these societies are often connected with fundamentalist movements (1), and often hold the public stage. In addition, they are often in conflict with each other.

In most countries, they are free to organise their religious curriculum in the absence of an established authority which might take decisions and fix common rules for the whole community. In some countries, Islam is organised in an official way and publicly recognised. These communities have the advantage of good structures. Many young people in search of identity live with them and find in them an education according to their tradition.

In cases where the young Muslims belong to the first generation of immigrants, there are problems of micro-criminality which do not leave any place for educational efforts. Again, this situation differs from one European country to another.

There are also Islamic preachers influencing teenagers who have grown up in religious indifference.

From this the young people learn the elements necessary to consolidate their faith. Unfortunately, some set these young people against the faith of others (giving them the basic elements) and against the West, considered as lost because of its moral freedom. They can be very active in the Da'wah (call to Islam).

Other movements, related to Sufi movements (2), take care to educate young

people to be open to dialogue and be respectful of different religious traditions.

Given these facts, what are the needs of youth education, and in what spirit should they be educated?

Confronted with the different situations described above, it is clear that both Christian and Muslim leaders have the same problem of caring for their youth.

On the Muslim side, few leaders are prepared to meet the problems of their youth and their way of living their faith in Europe.

Granted young Christians have lost their points of reference, what can the Churches do to grow more aware of these problems?

This is a new challenge to consider.

If the Church invites them to strengthen their Christian identity, how can they make the Christians aware of this need to think about their faith in depth, without setting up barriers with respect to other religions?

The Church should study the means of helping young people to live their faith and to affirm it, while respecting the faith of others and avoiding sectarian attitudes which generate racism, division or exclusion. It should therefore also study the possibilities for offering appropriate pastoral help in Christian communities in places where the Muslim presence is strong.

Recommendations to Church leaders

1. Education to faith

Young Christians today live among young people of different religions. They need to be equal partners in the dialogue with young Muslims, who are well prepared. The encounter can only happen between Christians and Muslims who have clear convictions on both sides.

We have a pastoral responsibility towards them. We must help them to become aware of the particularity of their Christian faith and offer them a more coherent theological, biblical and patristical education, as well as stable life communities where they can find answers to their questions and support for their faith, where they may find points of references and values.

2. Educating and financing pastoral workers

It is important to support young people with able leaders and well trained teachers in schools and universities, youth groups (JOC, scouts...), work

in hospitals, prisons and with social problems, the very areas where more and more Muslims are finding their place.

The Churches must therefore take to heart the task of training clericals and laypeople in the theological, philosophical and pastoral fields. They should not hesitate to invest important resources in terms of personnel and finances.

3. Interreligious training

The Churches should organise serious teaching about other religions and in particular Islam for Christians and pastoral workers in order to help dispel prejudice, avoid obstacles and fears which hinder dialogue, set up barriers and fears, provoking isolation and violence. Christianity can be enriched by contact with Islam, and while the contents of the faith should not be changed, it might be challenged in terms of how the faith is taught and religion is practised.

The Churches should help to introduce this formation into churches themselves and schools, according to the systems established in each country.

A different concept of schooling should be promoted and Muslim culture should be considered a part of history, literature, etc... Associations should be helped to encourage cultural diversity and Muslims should also be helped to do the same.

4. Encounter and dialogue

From this starting point, young people must learn to meet each other and dialogue without fear of differences and without compromising the Truth. A deeper and more personal acquaintance with others might be made in other ways, such as literature or music, to gain further knowledge of theology, the Bible and the culture of the Koran.

We must also underline the expectations of young people as regards spiritual meetings. These may lead them to reflect further on their respective faiths.

Christians and Muslims living in the same society may share the same concerns about ethical, economical, political and social problems. They should be invited to work together for a more fraternal world, to guarantee the great human and spiritual values, each starting from their own religious traditions.

N.B.

- The Churches may help Islam to find its status and its place in society and

- defend religious freedom. The Muslim community must be able to create educational facilities for Muslim teachers with a curriculum adapted to pluralistic European society in order not to fall victim to interference and ideological manipulation.
- A number of groups of various types have emerged into the public forum and there is no option but to enter into dialogue with these too. It is important to distinguish the characteristics of these groups.

Notes:

1. Muslim fundamentalism is a politico-religious ideology which wishes to return to the true Islam, the religion of the first Muslims, and aims to set up an Islamic State governed by the chari'ah (koranic law) and to reunify the Umma (or nation of Islam)
The Islamic movements swing between literal loyalty to tradition and the aspiration to renewal through religious, moral, social, and political reform, or even through revolution. They are more or less open to the modern world and the progress of the West in different degrees; most come from the trauma of colonial and post-colonial exposure to the modern world and westernisation.
2. Like other religions, Islam, which is centred on devotion to God and submission to his will, has given rise to a mysticism (Sufism) which is often organised in brotherhoods.

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