

**Council of Europe Committee of Ministers,
Annual Encounters on
The religious Dimension of intercultural Dialogue
Erevan 2 & 3 September 2013.**

Liberty of Religion in today's World : challenges and guarantees.

Messieurs les Ministres,
Madame la Représentante du Secrétaire Général,
Eminences,
Ladies, Gentlemen,
Dear Friends.

First of all, let me convey to you a message of gratitude to the Committee of Ministers on behalf of Buddhist leaders in Europe for inviting the Representative of Buddhists in Europe to these encounters for the third year in succession. It is fitting also to thank the Armenian authorities for their very generous hospitality.

Whether one is a simple European citizen or a person with civil or religious responsibilities, when a person mentions "liberty of religion", do we think of tolerance... with the innuendo of being watched over ... with the innuendo of release on bail, are we thinking of respect or do we genuinely think of the recognition of full and entire freedom to enjoy a conviction other than that of one's interlocutor?

Contemporary changes in the religious landscape are without precedent and they are quite amazing. Places of religious practice dedicated to historic religion are sold or demolished, while the landscape is littered with buildings of which the architecture is very unlikely because they form a home for religious practice recently imported from the East : Mosques, Hindu Temples, Pagodas and Buddhist Temples. At the same time public rooms, rented out every week, are a home for other religious practice that has arrived in the West. The number of beliefs on offer is more diverse and it causes religion to explode to such an extent that there are barbed remarks about a market of religious practices. This situation is coming to an end because religions that are falsely described as "new" have moved on from a state of being scarcely identifiable in the public space to one of institutionalised religions¹. This is an unheard of situation.

1. Challenges and guarantees are two sides of the same coin. We refer to three processes that are taking place before our eyes:

When religious organisations are connected to political power (the present situation is a cruel reminder that this also concerns the Buddhists), local religious minorities are not equally treated with the same entitlement as the dominant religion. That is a challenge for the establishment of substantive democracy; it is a sure cause of systemic tension which, sooner or later, will find a way of at least giving free expression to their grievances or at worst turning on their oppressors.

The growth in the number of religious movements, of which the sole aim is to give hope to the disinherited, compels religions that have handed on their uninterrupted tradition over the centuries or even the millennia, to look again and again at the balance between the protection of their precious tradition and adapting to the changing world. The challenge is the premium of hope, the guarantee is to seek as far a balance as possible between tradition and the situation today.

¹ Cf travaux d'Henry Laurens, historien français du monde arabo-musulman.

With the spread of self governing religiously or syncretistically orientated movements, of which the second offers "a lifestyle for the upper middle classes", there is a question about the relationship that these city communities, who hold their faith sincerely, wish to support or not with organised confessional movements, and more widely with civil society. At a time when all kinds of minorities claim equality of status, we may well be wary of a ghetto mentality. The guarantee: historic religious organisations are constantly being driven to come back to the heart of their structure to base themselves on their essential messages.

2. Freedom of religion

Is it possible to envisage substantial freedom without constraint? If not where should there be controls to guarantee freedom of religion? And if the only constraint was none other than the encouragement of the maintenance of freedom of religion?

A major constraining factor on the enjoyment of freedom of religion arises from the fact that States and religions work in solidarity to guarantee this freedom over the years. The opposite of this constraint is to engage in multimodal dialogue, that is to say intrareligious dialogue, interreligious dialogue, dialogue between convictional movements (whether confessional or not), dialogue between religions, dialogue by religions with public authorities and other mediating bodies.

Secularisation of society through the separation of politics and religion is a determining factor for freedom of conscience and religion. We should, nevertheless, remark that *laïcité* also contributes to individualism, therefore to personal self-determination. It then comes back to each person to control individualism with wisdom so as to be free from egoism.

The separation of politics and religion entails that the state neither forbids nor gives privilege to any religion. It is equal treatment that guarantees freedom of religion and, from that, the religious liberty without which freedom of religion remains incomplete.

These three points: substantive freedom, constraint and separation of powers define the challenge: the obligation to come back again and again to the dialectic between possessing THE truth and living together with other beliefs in truths that offer an alternative to those to which one is committed oneself. If this approach is badly conducted or absent, there is a risk of a hierarchy of beliefs.

3. The position of European Buddhists on Freedom of Religion.

As a religion recently established in the West, Buddhist practice has everything to gain from the separation of Churches and the State.

Buddhists, who do not proselytise, do not have to persuade their fellow human beings to convert but rather they can encourage every individual to engage in a spiritual journey or philosophy that he or she finds acceptable, thenceforward Buddhist doctrine will become one of the possibilities. There are many proposals, individual awareness is diverse, each person has the task of finding the best adapted path and to acknowledge that (s)he has found the way that is most comfortable for him or her. As a result there is no need for relations between individuals about belief and non belief to become violent or even to be placed in a hierarchy.

Let us suppose that we come to an agreement at this point on the precision with which the question of freedom of religion bears witness to the suffering experienced by many consciences.

4. Three conditions for freedom of religion.

Emphasis on intrareligious dialogue to enable the achievement of the best balance between maintaining authentic tradition and adapting to the current situation.

Emphasis on interreligious dialogue with a view to the fact that historic and newly arrived religions for the first part and ancient religions that have recently arrived for the second part refrain from diabolising each other, for greater flexibility in their relations. The progress from discussion to conversation when this happens is a sign of the transformation of reciprocal relations into relations of mutually recognised freedom.

The common voice of religions for quality teaching about religion as a fact in the school curriculum. Last year it was emphasised at Dürres that knowledge is a way of diminishing undeveloped ideas or presuppositions.

A possible conclusion:

Some sociologists of religion² already talk about post-secular society; Europe is distinguished from the other religions of the world by progressive cultural divorce from religion in general³. The context of religious freedom has not yet ceased to experience transformation.

The fragmentation of diasporas has turned the north/south missionary movement upside down, while destabilising collective imagination about freedom of religion.

The establishment and maintenance of democracy in a geographical area requires the strength to protect this treasure against being sidetracked by expropriation and greed of power. Movements of conviction guided by a tried and tested ethic have a major role to play.

Thank you very much.

Michel Aguilar

² In particular the German Sociologist of religions Jurgen Habermas.

³ Cf recent work by Danielle Hervieu-Léger : exculturation means leaving religious culture dans la constitution of contemporary cultural reference.

