



Comité économique et social européen

Cultural and religious pluralism in democratic societies : Muslims in India and the European Union

EESC, Brussels, 18 May 2005

A contribution to the work of the India-EU Round Table

Opening speech

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Mr Co-president of the India-EU round table,
Excellency,
Professors,
Dear Colleagues,

It is a great pleasure for me to welcome you here today for this seminar on “Cultural and religious pluralism in democratic societies”, in which we will consider the place of Muslims in India and the European Union.

I would like to thank our guests from India, France and the United Kingdom for having found the time and taken the trouble to be with us here today.

In this introduction I believe it is useful to set the broader scene of why we have organised this seminar and will leave it to our rapporteur, Suhkdev Sharma to

present the more specific context of the topic.

At the EU-India Round Table meeting in London last December we decided to look into the issue of cultural and religious pluralism at the next Round Table meeting, which will be held in India this coming September.

I am delighted therefore that we have been able to bring together such a distinguished group for our discussions this afternoon and tomorrow morning.

Let me begin with a question: Why should the European Economic and Social Committee, the home of European organised civil society, be looking into cultural and religious pluralism?

In the work programme for my term of office as President, which I presented to our plenary session in December 2004, I highlighted the need for us to understand the importance of culture as part of our common values and identity:

“We live today in an enlarged Europe which must face the global challenge. We therefore need appropriate aids to identify ourselves as Europeans without relinquishing our identity in the immediate surroundings in which we live.

However, Europe's citizens will not be made into Europeans by rational arguments – they must also be motivated emotionally: they must want to make an active contribution to this process and be able to feel the personal benefit”¹.

¹ AMS work programme add doc. ref

As you know, Europe is at a cross-roads and is facing a particularly important challenge as we engage in the debate about the Constitutional Treaty and our future here and in the global world.

I decided that, above and beyond our mandatory work to advise the European institutions on draft legislation, it was also necessary for us to discuss the underlying questions of who we are as Europeans and what it is that binds us together.

We have instigated a series of regular lectures from eminent European thinkers to discuss these issues.

We are also organising thematic events to celebrate the diversity of Europe's manifold cultures.

There are already two conclusions that I feel we can draw from this ongoing process:

firstly, there is unity in our diversity and secondly, in our European identity there are multiple identities. The criteria for defining identity can and do cut across local, national, linguistic and religious divides. In this sense, we can see that our European principle of subsidiarity also applies to identity.

I am Austrian, I am Viennese and my religious background is Roman Catholic, yet I can and do feel European in a similar way to, for example, Dutch Calvinist or Italian Jewish colleagues from Amsterdam or Milan, whose language and religious heritage are quite distinct from, yet intertwined with mine.

And for the younger generations, for the future social and political cohesion of Europe, we must endeavour to understand what it means to be a second or third generation Algerian, Tunisian or Moroccan in France; a Turkish German or a British Indian or British or French Afro-Caribbean.

We must not forget that, following the devastation of the Second World War, European economic reconstruction and development relied heavily on migrant labour from these and other countries.

As you know, the European Economic and Social Committee is very active in its relationships outside the European Union:

not only do we enjoy an excellent relationship with India in the framework of the round table;

we also have wide-ranging contacts in particular with the African, Caribbean and Pacific countries of the Cotonou Agreement, with China, with Latin America and, nearer to home, with Russia, Ukraine, the Balkans, Turkey and our southern neighbours in the Euro-Mediterranean Partnership.

Last month in the context of a visit to Jordan, arranged as part of our Euromed work and in conjunction with the International Labour Organisation, I had the honour and pleasure to meet with Prince El Hassan bin Talal, brother of the late King Hussein and uncle of the present King Abdallah the Second.

I mention this meeting as Prince El Hassan is Director of the Jordanian Royal Institute for Inter-Faith Studies and is very much occupied with the kind of questions that we are considering here today.

I was very encouraged to hear him say that in today's turbulent world we need to highlight what we have in common, in terms of shared values and common identity, rather than what differentiates us.

Europe's cultural and religious background is predominately Judeo-Christian, but that is not to say that we cannot or should not encourage and include other philosophical and religious traditions in our heritage.

I am thinking particularly of the importance of Islam in this respect.

I would like to conclude by saying that one of the most important elements of culture is education and to express the hope that our exchange of views will enable us to learn from each other and that we will continue to do so in our ongoing dialogue across linguistic, cultural, religious and national boundaries.

Thank you.