
Barrios Prieto (COMECE): Strengthening the values underpinning European democracies

(Berlin) The Council of Europe calls on religious communities to work together to safeguard and secure democracies in Europe today. This was the theme of a one-day conference held in Berlin on 14 May, organised by the German Federal Ministry for Economic Cooperation and Development under the auspices of Liechtenstein's presidency of the Committee of Ministers of the Council of Europe. The event brought together religious and political leaders in Europe, together with academic scholars and other experts.



) stressed the importance of working with “faith communities to combat the democratic backsliding we now see across Europe”, but also, he added, addressing the religious leaders, “how we can learn from you - from your experiences - in applying the method and practice of interfaith dialogue to promote a spirit of dialogue and compromise.” “We need you,” the Deputy Secretary-General continued, because we need the “extraordinary skills and talents” your religions are bearers of, to defend democracy itself. **Deep roots.** **Heiner Bielefeldt**, former UN Special Rapporteur on Freedom of Religion or Belief, said: “Clarity, commitment and in-depth analysis” are three ingredients expected of religious leaders. Clarity “in supporting democracy. This has not always been the case for religions. Today, many religious leaders support autocratic leaders,” Bielefeldt added. That's why a “commitment” is needed, which means that “It is important that communities use their religious freedom to speak out in defence of democracy, together with religious and non-religious organisations.” Finally, “there is a need for in-depth analysis. A serious crisis” such as the one facing democracies today “requires in-depth responses. Marketing strategies are not enough. We need to understand the root of the problem. Religious education can give deep roots to the respect for the dignity of the human person, which is essential for democratic life.” **European values.** The representatives of Christianity, Islam and Judaism in Europe welcomed the initiative and raised a number of fundamental questions and issues during the debate. “None of us can say that their religion does not inherently embrace European values,” said **Moché Lewin**, Chief Rabbi of France. While values and principles cannot be sacrificed for geopolitical interests, religious leaders have a responsibility to “show that Europe offers the conditions for harmonious living”, he said, urging everyone to “increase efforts in view of June's European elections”. The Rabbi of Strasbourg, **Mendel Samama**, sent a blunt message to “those

who gain access to positions of power only to use the democratic rights that ensured their election to manipulate religions in order to weaken democracies.” **For the common good.** The Orthodox Archbishop of Athens, **Grigorios Papathomas**, offered a comprehensive historical reflection on the relationship between ecclesiality and democracy in search of common ground. “Hellenic philosophy, biblical ecclesiality and Roman law are the common sources that have helped to bring together democracy and ecclesiality for the common good,” and the themes of dialogue and openness to pluralism are as fundamental to ecclesiality as they are to democracy. **A crisis of coexistence.** If democracy is fragile, argued **Jean-Christophe Peaucelle**, adviser on religious affairs to the French Minister of Foreign Affairs, it is because we are experiencing a crisis “of coexistence, of relationships. It is precisely for this reason that religions, which at their core embody the bond between man and God and between people themselves, can make a great contribution.” According to the Dominican Father **Jean-François Bour**, director of the French Episcopal Office for Dialogue with Muslims, “interreligious dialogue promotes humility, because there is still a long way to go” and when “democratic institutions ask for our help, we must tell them that dialogue must be conducted with humility”, that dialogue, like democracy, “is a beautiful but arduous process that needs to be sustained.” Faiths can help inspire courage to sustain democracy. Among the critical aspects highlighted by participants was a remark by the Mufti of Sarajevo, **Nedžad Grabus**: religions today find it difficult to “adapt to secularised contexts and norms”, he said. **Open and continuous dialogue**. Granted, the relationship between democracy and religion is extremely complex and multifaceted. While religions have often been seen as part of the problem, the Berlin meeting presented them as “part of the solution, a strategic resource for the healing of democratic culture.” The emphasis was on “an important change of perspective on the part of governments and international institutions”, noted **Fabio Petito**, Professor of Religions and International Affairs at the University of Sussex. Speaking to SIR at the end of the meeting, Borge gave a positive assessment of the meeting, expressing his satisfaction with the “excellent debate” marked by “a genuine desire to contribute, to participate and to understand how to face such fundamental challenges”. In the framework of intercultural and interreligious exchanges, dialogues with religious groups and communities have been taking place at the Council of Europe for many years. But the dialogue with religious leaders must be developed; it is the wish of the Council, but it was also called for by many speakers in Berlin.”



Secretary General of the Commission of the Bishops' Conferences of the European Union. He mentioned two in particular to SIR: “There is a very important aspect of interreligious dialogue that deserves recognition, which, although not explicitly aimed at strengthening democracy, can lead to the strengthening of values that are fundamental to democracy, such as respect for our fellow human being and the recognition of otherness.” According to Fr. Prieto the dialogue of religious communities and leaders with civil authorities and institutions is a different matter, but it must be given greater emphasis. A “constant, ongoing dialogue, not only when things go wrong” would also benefit the Council of Europe, as stipulated in the fundamental treaties of the European Union. The second interesting aspect of the Berlin conference concerns the contribution of religions to today's democracies: “Religions can support democracies by reviving the basic, founding values of democracy, such as human dignity, solidarity, respect for others, - values that are being challenged today.”

