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# Archbishop Gallagher at the Council of Europe on the Religious Dimension of Intercultural Dialogue

## "In the context of growing multipolarity, religions are an essential subject/actor in the area of intercultural dialogue."

**Vatican City State, June 09, 2015 (ZENIT.org) Staff Reporter | 1051 hits**

Below is the Vatican-provided text of the intervention that Archbishop Paul Richard Gallagher, Vatican secretary for relations with states, delivered yesterday in Strasbourg at the seminar, entitled "Building inclusive societies together: contributions to Sarajevo's exchange on the religious dimension of intercultural dialogue" at the Council of Europe, in preparation for the 2015 Meeting on this issue to be held in the capital of Bosnia and Herzegovina from September 8 to 9:

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Madam Deputy Secretary General,
Dear Ambassadors,
Ladies and Gentlemen,

It is an honour for me to join you as you reflect together on ways to contribute to the meeting on the religious dimension of intercultural dialogue promoted by the Committee of Ministers and due to take place in Sarajevo on 8 and 9 September next, having as its theme "Building Inclusive Societies Together". I wish especially to thank Mrs Gabriella Battaini-Dragoni, Deputy Secretary-General, for having accepted to chair this Seminar, and ask you to extend my gratitude to the Secretary General, Mr Thorbjørn Jagland, who is supporting this initiative.

My presence today comes within the context of the visit made by His Holiness Pope Francis on 25 November last. On that occasion, emphasis was placed on the Holy See's recognition of the Council of Europe's work and the diligence with which it is carried out. I myself can witness to this fact, having lived here in Strasbourg as Permanent Observer of the Holy See from 2000 to 2004.

I have structured my talk around four theses concerning the religious dimension of intercultural dialogue, which I shall seek to present concisely. I offer these thoughts both as a contribution to the discussions with Professor Bielefeldt, UN Special Rapporteur on freedom of religion or belief, and to the debate which will follow our interventions. I would like here to extend a particular vote of thanks to Professor Bielefeldt for having accepted to address this Seminar and enrich it with his experience and expertise.

**First Thesis: In the context of growing multipolarity, religions are an essential subject/actor in the area of intercultural dialogue.**

In his address to the Council of Europe, Pope Francis called for a debate on the challenge of multipolarity, saying: "Today we can legitimately speak of a "multipolar" Europe. Its tensions – whether constructive or divisive – are situated between multiple cultural, religious and political poles. Europe today confronts the challenge of 'globalizing' this multipolarity, but in a creative way […] Creatively globalizing multipolarity... calls for striving to create a constructive harmony, one free of those pretensions to power which, while appearing from a pragmatic standpoint to make things easier, end up destroying the cultural and religious distinctiveness of peoples."

Multipolarity is a reality. It entails the concomitant presence and interrelationship of various actors: states; international organizations; national societies distinctly structured according to their respective countries; national and supranational religious communities; non-governmental organizations and informal social networks. Each of these actors is, in turn, influenced by distinct cultures and world views, which at times can be complementary, but also decidedly conflicting. The same religious communities, on careful examination, are perceived, not as monolithic objects, but as living bodies that enshrine, to a greater or lesser extent, a plurality of expressions. In these circumstances, dialogue among cultures is a *sine qua non* for enabling coexistence, favouring the inclusion of all, and for formulating a shared social project. For such a dialogue among cultures to take place, religions are indispensable actors.

This relatively new context in the history of humanity means that all actors – and to a much greater degree than in the past – must place themselves in relation with others in what can be described as a cross-sectional approach. For some time now states have not only engaged in dialogue with other states, but also with international institutions, with organizations in civil society, and with religious confessions. In turn, these religious organizations form part of an ongoing exchange with the society in which they live, with other religions, and with civil authorities. Here we have the second challenge indicated by Pope Francis in his address to the Council of Europe, namely, that of transversality: "In Europe's present political situation, merely internal dialogue between the organizations (whether political, religious or cultural) to which one belongs, ends up being unproductive. Our times demand the ability to break out of the structures which "contain" our identity and to encounter others, for the sake of making that identity more solid and fruitful in the fraternal exchange of transversality. A Europe which can only dialogue with limited groups stops halfway; it needs that youthful spirit which can rise to the challenge of transversality."

After a long and at times difficult period of reflection, the Catholic Church at the Second Vatican Council developed a new framework of norms with regard to "external" relations, that is, with other religions, states and, more profoundly, with present day society and culture. This did not simply involve a change in policy, but rather an authentic renewal, made possible – as always happens with reform processes in the Church – by a deeper theological reflection on her own identity. The result has been a fresh understanding of the Church's relationship with the world, a healthy tension that we still experience today, between the recognition of positive contributions made by our so-called modern society and the ability to identify those things in it that are not coherent with the gospel and right reason.

Against this backdrop, the right to religious freedom is recognised as a civil right which is rooted in the dignity of the human person, as was explicitly expressed fifty years ago in the declaration of the Second Vatican Council *Dignitatis Humanae*. With regard to relations with other religions, it is sufficient to quote the Council's Declaration *Nostra Aetate*, also published in 1965: The Church "regards with sincere reverence those ways of conduct and of life, those precepts and teachings which, though differing in many aspects from the ones she holds and sets forth, nonetheless often reflect a ray of that Truth which enlightens all men" (No. 2). A rich post-conciliar theological reflection has resulted, offering guidance through papal and episcopal magisteria.

How far have we come with this intercultural dialogue in terms of multipolarity? Even if, on the one hand, many positive steps have been taken, on the other there is no shortage of difficulties. On the part of religious confessions, initiatives for interreligious dialogue have multiplied over the last few years. These are important, indeed essential, not only for prominent leaders but also at a local level. Such initiatives are

necessary to ensure greater mutual understanding and trust in relationships, and to facilitate a shared commitment to projects which benefit society. I am thinking, for example, of the promotion of peace and the rejection of every form of violence in the name of God or of religion. The road ahead is long and requires determination on the part of all men and women of different religions to face the troubling signs of an opposite path in which identities are forged that are exclusive and lead to violent extremism.

Contradictory signs are also seen in connections to the dialogue that exists between religious confessions and public institutions. From one perspective, especially that of states, there is the awareness of a pressing need to manage the reality of religion as it appears in multicultural political systems. On the other hand, civil authorities often experience difficultlies, within a deeply secularized environment, in understanding the specific characteristics of the religious dimension.

Open and respectful encounters between religious traditions and between these and the social and political world are fundamental for social cohesion. The religious dimension continues to be a living reference point for millions of people in Europe, affecting their choices and, to a greater or lesser degree, their identity. It is a dimension which is in continuous transformation, due to new religious forms of life and profound changes experienced within religious communities that have long been present in Europe. Within religious communities there are elements of decline but also signs of unexpected vitality. For intercultural dialogue to bear fruit, it must face not only the religious dimension in general, but also interact with **particular**religious confessions with all their historic characteristics.

**Second Thesis: Religions are called to offer a specific contribution to the advancement of a culture of human rights**

The codification of human rights was conceived in Europe as the affirmation of the dignity of each individual human person, regardless of their ideas, religious convictions or traditions. From its inception, this affirmation of the rights of man was based on principles regarded as evident and common to all human beings. It should suffice to recall Article 1 of the "Declaration of the Rights of Man and of the Citizen" of 1789, which states that "Men are born and remain free and equal in rights" and consequently affirms the freedom of thought and religion and the equality of each person before the law. Such principles retain their meaning to date and are still the foundation of a culture of human rights.

We should not, however, underestimate the challenges presented by the contemporary context of multipolarity. If the fundamental internationally recognized principles remain a fortunate common point of reference, their application to the many circumstances of personal and social life is increasingly exposed to conflicting interpretations which reflect the different philosophical and religious perspectives and humanistic interpretations that coexist in our society. I am thinking certainly of the different concepts of marriage and the family, but also of the defence of human life in situations of extreme fragility, the understanding of social responsibility and the challenges posed by immigration.

The organisms called upon in specific situations to judge in respect of human rights – the European Court of Human Rights, in the first place – find themselves daily facing an arduous task, such as when problems arise over the common understanding of values, or indeed concerning the shared understanding of rights. From this point of view, if the task proper to judges is essential, no less important is the care which should be given to building and maintaining a robust common culture of human rights, from which no one should feel excluded. Such a common culture is today difficult yet necessary. A religious understanding of the human person can and must make a specific contribution to this common culture, in dialogue with philosophies of man that tend to exclude any reference to transcendence.

I am speaking of the particular contribution given by religious perspectives on the human person, in the sense that without these the entire culture of human rights, even those of non-believers, would be greatly impoverished. I cannot claim to speak in the name of other religious cultures; but I believe that the specific contribution of the Catholic Church to a common culture of human rights may be seen in concrete ways and I will limit myself to offering a few examples, which are by no means exhaustive. First of all,

there is the awareness of a radical equality and fraternity between every human person created in the image and likeness of God. Secondly, the recognition of the worth of the least among us, of the poor and the marginalized, of the dignity of every human life no matter how weak or precarious, from conception through natural death. Thirdly, the capacity to transmit a religious identity which is both firm and respectful of others, open to dialogue with other religions and world views. As can easily be seen, these are universal values, and while they are not exclusive to the Catholic Faith, the latter has offered and continues to offer a unique contribution.

Every religious tradition can and must make its own particular contribution, even when it becomes important to find a way to relate honestly to one another, embracing the good that exists in all traditions and also inviting sincere discussion on the perceived limitations of every tradition of thought, be it religious or not. But how is it possible truly to meet at the crossroads of culture, how is it possible to face the challenge of "globalizing multipolarity in a creative way", of achieving a "constructive harmony free of pretensions to power", which Pope Francis spoke of in his address to the Council of Europe?

The Catholic Church has always indicated that the instrument which enables this common search, this dialogue among cultures, is human reason, with which we are all endowed. Reason, however, must also open itself to the entirety of human experience. Pope Benedict XVI, reflecting on dialogue between cultures, said: "In the Western world it is widely held that only positivistic reason and the forms of philosophy based on it are universally valid. Yet the world's profoundly religious cultures see this exclusion of the divine from the universality of reason as an attack on their deepest convictions. A reason which is deaf to the divine and which relegates religion into the realm of subcultures is incapable of entering into the dialogue of cultures […] It is to this great *Logos*, to the breadth of reason, that we invite our partners in the dialogue of cultures" (*Meeting with the Representatives of Science, University of Regensburg*, 12 September 2006).

The dialogue generated within this "great *Logos*" is healthy for religions and for reason itself. In the case of religions, this is so because being committed to dialogue within democratic societies and open to argumentative reason is an antidote to all forms of fundamentalism. In the case of reason, it is healthy because openness to the transcendent, which remains a constitutive reality for many cultures and for the life of a great proportion of humanity, helps reason to avoid simplistic forms of reductionism. In reality no one has a monopoly on the culture of human rights. To deny or to conceal differences serves nobody. What is important, however, is to make concerted efforts to rediscover that which we hold in common, without forgetting that the ability to recognize each other's distinctness in a shared nucleus of fundamental human values is the condition for the survival and genuine advancement of each society.

Concluding this thesis, "building inclusive societies", and building them "together", as stipulated in the title of the Sarajevo meeting, is an arduous task, but one from which we cannot escape. For this very reason, in dialogue focused on matters of human rights we must avoid the temptation to exclude arbitrarily cultures or worldviews that are religious, or to accuse them of not respecting determined standards, or to reduce the understanding of the human person to the lowest common denominator. To give into this temptation would be a failure to incorporate the religious dimension into the important themes being discussed. A pluralism that does not include the challenges offered by world religions to secularist perspectives will never be authentic pluralism, and will instead risk falling into a uniform single-mindedness, the enemy of freedom.

**Third Thesis: Religious Freedom is a key element in the development of a democratic society**

Religious freedom is not only a fundamental right for every person, but the juridical context which allows religious communities to contribute actively to democratic debate and to the promotion of a shared culture of human rights.

If one of the pivotal points of democracy is the presence of a civil society characterized by the active participation of all, individuals and communities, then we cannot forget the role that religions play. They

offer a direct contribution when educating consciences and shedding light on human situations, or indirectly, when they inspire the creation of many organizations and associations that work for society as a whole. Even if religions are not generally considered as protagonists of "civil society", they are nonetheless the foundation of numerous organizations which work within society, and they also create a network of informal associations and support groups which are not secondary to the fabric of society.

To value civil society means, even here, to accept its multipolarity: for each religion it means agreeing to share one's freedom with other religions, and with those men and women who do not recognize the transcendent; for society it implies recognizing religious communities as subjects participating, with every right, in the building of that same society.

The Holy See attaches great importance to religious freedom and hopes that states and international organizations may embrace its political value as a developer of freedom. During the negotiations at the "Conference on Security and Cooperation in Europe" which led in 1975 to the adopting of the Helsinki Final Act, it was the Holy See which called upon the participating states to recognize explicitly the right to religious freedom, seeing in this fundamental right the protection of freedom and democracy as well as a way of accepting one's own responsibilities in the face of oppressive socialist regimes.

Religious freedom is like a barometer which indicates accurately the true level of freedom within a society. Despotic systems in every age have always aimed to gain strict control over Churches and, as there are no authoritarian regimes which espouse authentic religious freedom, so too all restrictions of religious freedom lead to a weakening of the democratic fibre of society.

In today's context of multicultural societies, respect for religious freedom is one of the fundamental factors by which the health of a given democracy can be evaluated as being truly a home for everyone. Promoting religious freedom appears particularly important in averting and countering the phenomena of extremist violence and radicalization, against which governments and international organizations are currently engaged, among them the Council of Europe. Religious freedom, however, is a demanding principle, both for religions and for civil authorities.

For religions, the recognition of religious freedom as a fundamental right entails fully acknowledging the other as he or she is. It means, on the basis of our shared human dignity, opening a space not only for tolerance, but for a common belonging, for sharing our most deeply held convictions with those who are different from us, without compromising our respective beliefs. It means not only respecting the personal ideas of the other, but also recognizing the right of communities and confessions different from our own to be present in the same territory and to cooperate in building up our society. It means, finally, admitting that there can never be an absolute identification between ethnicity or a people on the one hand, and religious affiliation on the other.

For civil authorities, and in particular for the state, the principle of religious freedom represents an inherent limit to the exercising of the state's power, a power which is necessary but which is often, by and large, invasive. It is to the historical credit of Christianity that in separating that which belongs to Caesar from that which belongs to God, it created the possibility for the existence of the secular state. The term "secular state" is not to be understood as a state which is indifferent to religion, or, worse still, as an agnostic state. Rather, it implies a state which, being aware of the value of religious belief for many of its citizens and of the important role of religious communities in society, allows each one to live according to their own religious conscience, both individually and communally, while equally respecting those who do not profess any belief system.

As already noted, international instruments enshrine not only the inviolability of the individual conscience, but also the religious dimension in its specificity as a socially organized phenomenon. Consequently, the rights of religious confessions to exist as autonomous organizations is already recognized in international instruments, something rightly highlighted in numerous decisions of the European Court of Human Rights.

In recent years, respect for the right to religious freedom has come into question on the international stage for a variety of reasons. In the first instance, due to the spread of fundamentalism and the continued existence of authoritarian and non-democratic states, there has been a disconcerting diminishing of respect for religious freedom in many countries, a deterioration which in more than one place has unfortunately reached proportions of outright persecution, where Christians are frequently among the first victims. In the second instance, in many countries of ancient democratic tradition, religion tends to be viewed with a certain suspicion: because of the challenges posed in a multicultural context, but also because of a deeply secularist view of the world according to which religion represents a vision of human beings and of society in direct competition with the full affirmation of the rights of men and women, religion is seen as a residue of the past which must be overcome.

In the context of a highly secularized society, public displays of faith are quickly seen as problematic: there is the temptation to restrict the right of religious freedom in the workplace, in institutions of learning or in health facilities. With increasingly frequency, those who wish legitimately to work according to the principles deriving from their religious beliefs run the risk of being accused of discrimination. This is attracting increased international attention: Special Rapporteur Heiner Bielefeldt dedicated his interim report of August 2014 to the theme of religious freedom in the workplace, maintaining, among other things, the usefulness of applying the principle of "reasonable accommodation". Many other interesting ideas also emerged from research compiled by the United Kingdom's Equality and Human Rights Commission, published in March 2015 under the title "Religion or belief in the workplace and service delivery".

In a multicultural context, the coexistence of different religious affiliations requires a substantial effort on the part of civil authorities and actors in society. The principle of "reasonable accommodation" can be applied in many areas of public life. This process requires much reflection and patience, but it can bear fruit by more effectively promoting greater inclusiveness.

**Fourth Thesis: The promotion and protection of the right to religious freedom is a basic task of states and international organizations.**

Religious freedom is not to be understood as something extrinsic: just as with every basic right, there is a strict and vital connection between it and other basic rights, which form a coherent whole reflecting the intrinsic dignity of the human person, who is in turn the subject of these rights. In his 2013 interim report, "Freedom of Religion or belief and equality between men and women", Special Rapporteur Bielefeldt emphasized the value of a holistic understanding of human rights, such as those recalled in the Vienna Declaration adopted in 1993 during the World Conference on Human Rights. The Vienna Declaration affirmed that "All human rights are universal, indivisible and interdependent and interrelated. The international community must treat human rights globally in a fair and equal manner, on the same footing, and with the same emphasis".

It is true that at times there can be tensions in the exercise of one as opposed to another of these rights, for example, in the tension between the right to freedom of expression and the right to respect for one's own religious convictions, as has recently returned to the fore. In some cases, it is unavoidable that the state has to identify solutions trying to strake a fair balance. However, the perception that fundamental rights could be in direct conflict with each other would be erroneous. If individual human rights are the expression of the dignity of the human person, then human rights cannot be opposed to each other. Rather, it is persons, the subjects of these rights, who need each day to learn to understand the rights that they hold in common with others. Borrowing words from the motto of the French Republic, freedom and equality – *liberté et egalité* – cannot be effectively promoted without accepting the challenge of fraternity – *fraternité*.

International institutions are thus called not only to combat all discrimination against religious beliefs, but also, from a positive perspective, to promote religious freedom. In a particular way, the protecting and promoting of religious freedom, at the same level as all other basic rights, is a task proper to an institution

such as the Council of Europe, which in safeguarding and promoting human rights establishes its very *raison d'être*.

Religious freedom is, in fact, closely linked to very many other aspects of the safeguarding of human rights: I am thinking of themes such as non-discrimination; areas of education at school and in the family; bioethics; democratic citizenship. I am thinking of fields such as the prevention of radicalization and terrorism; the treatment of prisoners; the delicate relationship between freedom of expression and respect for religious sensibility; and many others besides.

In effect, protecting the right to religious freedom has been the object of attention on several occasions in a variety of institutions of the Council of Europe. Suffice to recall here the rich body of law of the European Court of Human Rights in this regard, along with numerous acts of the Parliamentary Assembly. There are also important efforts currently being promoted by the Steering Committee for Human Rights (CDDH), such as the "Guidelines of the Committee of Ministers to Member States on the Promotion and Protection of Human Rights in Culturally Diverse Societies", and the "Compilation of Council of Europe Standards Relating to the Principles of Freedom of Thought, Conscience and Religion".

We might ask if this is sufficient, confronted with the growing challenges arising from multipolar societies. The Holy See, on the basis of the principle of the indivisibility and interdependence of basic rights as indicated above, and being aware of the importance of the role of the Council of Europe, is convinced that the right to religious freedom ought always to be an object of particular attention; at the same time, it should be mainstreamed and integrated into all the most important activities and reflections concerning human rights. It would be useful to begin a reflection on this theme.

At the same time, the Holy See has always supported occasions for dialogue – both directly and at the institutional level – between civil authorities and religious leaders. This applies at state level, but also at the level of local authorities and indeed international organizations. Such a dialogue can contribute to the pursuit of a constructive harmony free of all constrain, of which Pope Francis has spoken. Recognizing the proper role that religions play in intercultural dialogue, and maintaining with religions an open and transparent dialogue, is important even from a merely political point of view. In the context of multipolar societies, if religions are not part of the solution, they can easily become part of the problem.

From this perspective, intercultural encounters organized in recent years on the religious dimension of dialogue offer a useful contribution, even if these ought not be the only occasions in which dialogue among religions and cultures, and discussion of human rights, takes place. In the Recommendation 1962 of 2011 on the religious dimension of intercultural dialogue, and promoted as Rapporteur by Mme Brasseur, there was, among other things, the suggestion to the Council of Ministers for the creation of a space for dialogue. This envisaged a working group composed of members of the Council of Europe and representatives of various religions and non-confessional organizations, with the goal of placing existing relations on a more stable and formally recognized platform. Her hope has not yet become reality, although it still has much to recommend it.

**Conclusion: An invitation to rediscover the political value of religious freedom as a factor contributing to reconciliation between peoples and as an initiative for constructing an inclusive society.**

In September 1994 John Paul II wished to make a visit to Sarajevo. The trip had to be cancelled, owing to the conflict then underway, and it was only possible to make the visit three years later. But on 8 September 1994 the Holy Father celebrated a Mass in Castel Gandolfo which was broadcast live in Sarajevo, during which he affirmed: "*The history of men, people and nations is replete with reciprocal rancour and injustices. How important the historical expression of the Polish Bishops to their German counterparts is: "We forgive and we ask your forgiveness!" If in that region of Europe peace was possible, it seems that it may also come thanks to the effective attitude expressed in the words I have just*

*cited*".

It is not insignificant that John Paul II, addressing a Sarajevo scarred by war, recalled the words of a memorable 1965 letter sent at the conclusion of the Second Vatican Council from the Polish bishops to their German brothers. Karol Wojtyła himself contributed to that letter which exposed the Polish episcopate to criticism from their own government and from some of their own faithful. While it is true that the history of Europe has at times been marked by religious conflicts, more recently religious confessions have contributed significantly to reconciliation between peoples. From this point of view, it is of great importance that the next meeting on the religious dimension of intercultural dialogue will take place in Sarajevo.

Last Sunday, another Pope, this time Francis, travelled to Sarajevo with a message as clear as that of his holy Predecessor. Pope Francis at an Ecumenical and Interreligious Meeting said: "Interreligious dialogue here (in Sarajevo), as in every part of the world, is an indispensable condition for peace, and for this reason is a duty for all believers." And a little later in the same speech the Holy Father added: "Dialogue is a school of humanity a builder of unity, which helps build a society founded on tolerance and mutual respect."

"We forgive and ask your forgiveness": these are courageous words, ones which the Catholic Church still speaks today and helps her faithful to say. It is not an appeal made lightly. We well know how many Christians throughout the world are paying a very high price for fidelity to their beliefs. But we also know that even today dialogue between religions can make a great contribution to reconciliation. That which seems hopeless can yet be realized with the help of God. This is how it was in recent history - we have only to think of the founding of the Council of Europe - so too it can be today in healing the wounds of this continent and those still festering around the world.

Finally, religions also have a role to play in the construction of a democratic societies that are genuinely inclusive. Understanding the meaning of this role is a sign of political wisdom on the part of states and international organizations. A common culture of human rights cannot serve as the mere sum of protecting the lives of individuals: this culture owes its existence to a vision of human person's dignity which must be open to the contribution of all parts of a multipolar society, united by a shared yearning and search for truth.

[Original text: English]



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