



**The 2010 Lisbon Forum :
“Freedom of expression, conscience and religion”**

Preliminary conclusions

Under the chairmanship of Jorge Sampaio, UN High Representative for the Alliance of Civilisations, and Deborah Bergamini, Chair of the North-South Centre Executive Council, the Lisbon Forum examined the relations, interactions and tensions between two fundamental freedoms in a democratic society : the freedom of expression, and the freedom of conscience and religion. Integrated in the follow up of the 2008 session, which dealt with “the principle of universality of human rights and its implementation at international and regional level”, the 2010 Lisbon Forum was also placed in the continuity of the conference on “Religious Freedom in Democratic Societies”, organised by the Spanish EU Chairmanship in Cordoba on 3-4 May 2010, and of the 3rd Council of Europe Encounter on the religious dimension of intercultural dialogue, held in Ohrid on 13-14 September 2010 and dedicated to “The role of media in fostering multicultural dialogue, tolerance and mutual understanding: freedom of expression in the media and respect towards other cultural and religious diversity”.

Conscience is one of the fundamental characteristics of the human being: we all have the ability both to know our own reality – which makes us unique – and to judge the moral value of our actions - which is the foundation for our relationship with others and the world. This is why freedom of conscience, and its corollary, freedom of religion, are an integral part of inalienable human rights. A democratic society must nevertheless authorise, in the name of freedom of thought and expression, an open debate on the matters relating to religion and beliefs. Indeed the freedoms of expression, of conscience and religion are among the fundamental freedoms proclaimed by the Universal Declaration of Human Rights and they are protected by all major international or regional human rights conventions.

In line with the Declaration on human rights in culturally diverse societies, adopted on 1 July 2009 by the Committee of Ministers of the Council of Europe, the Forum :

- recalled that freedom of expression, and freedom of thought, conscience and religion are among the foundations of democratic societies and are instrumental for the pluralism which characterises them. These rights are closely interrelated and equally fundamental in a democratic society;
- drew particular attention to the fact that freedom of expression constitutes one of the essential conditions for the progress of society and for the

- development of every human being, including in the context of culturally diverse societies. Freedom of expression applies not only to “information” or “ideas” that are favourably received or regarded as inoffensive or as a matter of indifference, but also to those that offend, shock or disturb the state or any sector of the population. At the same time, the exercise of freedom of expression is not without any duties and responsibilities, and if it involves in particular incitement to hatred and violence, it will not be protected;
- underlined that when freedom of expression, and freedom of thought, conscience and religion are at stake, states must strive to strike a fair balance between them, while ensuring that any restriction be prescribed by law, necessary in a democratic society and proportionate to a legitimate aim.

Based on a number of concrete case studies, and in light of recent developments which brought these matters both at the forefront of the news and at the top of political agendas, the Forum addressed challenges as well as dilemmas and even contradictions that can arise between the principles of secularism and neutrality of public space and the demonstration of belonging to a culture and a religion, between the principle of individual freedom of conscience and the manifestation of identifying religious symbols, between the freedom of expression and sensitivity of certain religious groups. In this regard, the discussions reaffirmed the importance of banning the use of all expressions that incite hatred and violence and which often occur against migrant or minority populations. During the debate, warnings were given on the danger of falling into the trap of manipulation of religious beliefs for political or other agendas and that these beliefs can be the source of dissension and conflict within democratic societies.

This debate is directly linked to the promotion of understanding different religions, cultures and customs and therefore, intercultural dialogue which is ranking increasingly higher on the list of political priorities at national, regional and international level. The concept of “democratic governance of cultural diversity”, as reminded by Maud de Boear-Buquicchio, Deputy Secretary General of the Council of Europe, when mentioning the White Paper on Intercultural Dialogue (2008), is an important answer. Indeed, cultural diversity should be promoted as a source of mutual enrichment, not tension, with a real open dialogue between cultures. The overall objective of intercultural dialogue should therefore be to preserve diversity in open and inclusive societies by promoting communication and by favouring skills and knowledge necessary for living together peacefully and constructively within societies, among countries in a same geographic area and between different continents.

A true dialogue has as a prerequisite authentic respect and knowledge of other cultures and societies : we must overcome “the clash of ignorance” (President Sampaio). Values such as respect for human rights, democracy, rule of law and responsibility are products of wisdom, of consciousness and of the collective progress of humanity. The objective is to identify the roots of these values in different cultures. In this quest for respect and knowledge of the Other, interreligious dialogue, an essential dimension of intercultural dialogue, takes its place ; the success of this dialogue presupposes the recognition and respect for diverse forms of knowledge and their modes of expression, their customs and traditions. This also means seeking to create, as much as possible, a context of dialogue that is culturally neutral, allowing everyone to express themselves freely. Such a dialogue, to be fruitful, must however be based on universal values, including the fundamental

principle of equality between men and women : "We must practice what we preach, and preach what we practice" (Deborah Bergamini).

Against this background, participants :

- commended the efforts of the UN Alliance of Civilisations and of the Council of Europe North-South Centre to open new avenues for intercultural dialogue and to promote mutual understanding and cooperation at regional and global level;
- noted with appreciation the initiative of His Highness the Aga Khan, in partnership with the government of Canada, to set up a "Global Centre for Pluralism", with a view to promoting pluralism as a fundamental human value and cornerstone of peace, stability and development;
- stressed the importance of the report recently published by the UN Special Rapporteur on freedom of religion and belief, Mrs Asma Jahangir, based on her practice over the past six years, and the need to ensure appropriate follow-up to its recommendations;
- noted with appreciation the crucial work made at international level by the UN High Commissioner on Human Rights and by UNESCO, and encouraged them to pursue their important efforts, taking into account both the necessity to maintain a solid legal foundation for international cooperation in this field and the crucial role of education and youth in this respect ;
- underlined the importance of the caselaw of the European Court for Human Rights and the Inter-American Court of Human Rights, as a sound legal basis for these two continents and as a source of inspiration for other parts of the world;
- recognized the important role played by the OSCE/ODIHR, in North-America, Europe and Central Asia, through its human dimension meetings and its technical assistance to participating States ;
- expressed their appreciation for the communication published by Thomas Hammerberg, Commissioner for Human Rights of the Council of Europe, on the theme "European Muslims are stigmatised by populist rhetoric";
- encouraged the initiative taken by the governments of Italy and Spain, in the framework of the Alliance of Civilisations, aimed at raising awareness on the situation of cultural and religious minorities in different parts of the world;
- noted with interest the setting up of a group of eminent personalities, under the auspices of the Council of Europe and the leadership of Joschka Fischer, former Minister for Foreign Affairs of Germany, and looked forward to the report to be published by May 2011 on "Living together in a multicultural Europe";
- welcomed the adoption by the United Nations, on 20 October 2010, of a Resolution setting up a "World Interfaith Harmony Week" every year in February, following an initiative by the King of Jordan;
- praised the efforts made by leaders of major religions, in particular the three Abrahamic faiths, to promote inter-religious dialogue in a spirit of mutual respect and understanding, and stressed the importance of these efforts in the promotion of human dignity and the building of a culture of peace;
- recognized the commitment and active role of the League of Arab States, on the basis of the Arab Charter on human rights which entered into force in 2008, in the promotion of intercultural dialogue at inter-regional and global level.