

Religions for peace – challenging terrorism and extremism (Birmingham Statement)

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Statement from the European Council of Religious Leaders/Religions for Peace, Birmingham, United Kingdom, 12-14 February, 2007

The European Council of Religious Leaders – Religions for Peace gathered in Birmingham 12 to 14 February 2007 explored the issue of the situation of Muslims in Britain, convinced that experiences in this country have relevance for many other European contexts. Muslims are the largest religious minority in Britain, as in many other European countries. Whereas some of the challenges facing the Muslim community are unique, others are shared by all religious minorities. Our meeting was generously hosted by the Sikh community Guru Nanak Nishkam Sewak Jatha, and we also had the honour of visiting the local Hindu community. We appreciate and learn from the many local initiatives for dialogue, both formal and informal.

Developments since the terrorist attacks in London in July 2005, and the arrests of nine terrorist suspects in Birmingham at the end of January this year and their effects on community relations have formed a background for our discussions. As religious leaders we condemn any and all acts of terrorism, particularly when they are carried out in the name of religion, and we affirm the rule of law. We do not, however, accept that the actions of a few individuals be used to stigmatise an entire community. In the wake of terrorism and allegations of terrorism follows a breakdown of trust between individuals, neighbours and communities. We have listened to Muslims who explain how they are now seen as potential terrorists even before they have the chance to present themselves. This stereotyping also spills over on other minority groups. Political leaders must not exploit these stereotypes, and they should work together with religious leaders to counter them. Politicians should also address the social, economical and political causes of extremism. The media too have a key role in countering prejudice.

The grave challenges facing us as religious leaders today require all of us to engage anew with our own religious traditions. All our religious traditions promote peaceful living, but we also recognise that they can be exploited to bring about hatred and aggression. We need to

understand when this is happening, and confront those who abuse religion. We recognise an urgent need for intra-community discussions on these difficult issues.

In the Muslim community in Britain there have been calls to develop theological reflection which takes their minority situation into account as this situation often differs from the context in which most Muslim thinking first evolved. This call is relevant for all religious communities today as Europe is developing into a multiethnic and multireligious society. We believe this can happen within any of our religious traditions without prejudice to their integrity. Secular claims that exclude the role of religion in society should be confronted.

Religious education of young people, or lack thereof, is a topic under debate in most European countries today. Whereas the time has gone for one religious community or world view to monopolise the education system, we are convinced that religion can, when properly taught, give a sense of identity and self confidence which can protect against influences of extremism. It is important that young people learn to know their own religious tradition. At the same time they need to learn about the traditions of their neighbours in order to understand the world in which they live and be able to engage meaningfully with others and respect them.

Islam's strengthened presence in many European countries today has contributed to a renewed interest in the role and place for religion in the public space. For example, in Britain the recent debate about the veil that some Muslim women wear (niqab) has prompted discussions on religious symbols worn by any religious community. Although such debate can be healthy, we believe it should not lead to religion being forced away from the public sphere. All our religions influence the social fabric and lifestyles of our communities and therefore cannot be understood as only belonging to the private sphere.

As religious leaders we must think carefully about the role of religion in the broader society. When those who represent religions address issues that are of genuine concern to people of today, religion can and should have a healing effect. We urge both religious leaders and those representing political authorities to recognise the healing potential that religions have and to give room for that.

Assimilation or integration of migrant communities have for a long time been the expressed expectation of the majority communities; we believe it is more important to facilitate their full participation in all spheres of society. Every form of isolation and marginalisation must be avoided whether it is imposed by the majority or it is the groups' own choice.

Our meeting in Birmingham has been a truly dialogical experience. Too often dialogue has been a banner under which a series of monologues have been held, but genuine dialogue creates an arena on which we can explore issues of the greatest importance, and thus build trust and confidence between various groups. In dialogue we should gain confidence to address the most difficult issues, and it is the only way whereby we can explore the otherness of the other. Only through recognising the other, and genuinely respecting this otherness, we can also appreciate our shared humanity.

European Council of Religious Leaders/Religions for Peace (ECRL) is a body of senior religious leaders of Europe's historic religions including Christianity, Judaism, and Islam, with Buddhists, Hindus, Sikhs and Zoroastrians in Europe who have committed themselves to cooperating for conflict prevention, peaceful co-existence and reconciliation. ECRL is a participating body of the World Conference of Religions for Peace.