

# **Contours of ISLAM in EUROPE**

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## **INTRODUCTION**

I am a member of a team of three Missionaries of Africa (White Fathers) working on a project in Brussels entitled: “Accion para las Relaciones Culturales y Religiosas en Europa” (ARCRE)/Research into Cultural and Religious Relations in Europe. This is a new project whose scope is being gradually determined “As we go along” in the words of the poet Antonio Machado. This paper seeks to define the purpose of the mission that has been entrusted to us: intercultural and interreligious dialogue, above all with Islam. In order to do this, it is necessary to approach the theme of Islam in the context of Europe, and more precisely in the context of the European Union, ground that up to now has been rather unfamiliar to me.

I realize that to outline Islam in Europe one needs to refer to the many varied aspects of its history, its growth and present situation in the world context, that is to say, in reference to the recent events surrounding the “Arab Spring”: the violence, the use and abuse of news broadcast on the means of social communication, the pros and cons that, with and without reason, Islam arouses in many people, the psychology and the prejudices that prompt this reaction, the phenomenon of globalization and the changes that this is causing on all sides.

We are experiencing a process of unprecedented change with the birth of a new world that is generating enthusiasm and disillusionment. The economic crisis has thrown many people into the direst poverty. Society needs to re-adjust in order to adapt, but solutions are not forthcoming. The process we are observing is not uniform; it fluctuates, indeed there are many failures. One does not know which way to turn. The crisis is not just economic it is also cultural and religious. How can one adapt to the new vision of the world that is forming? Indeed, values are at stake such as democracy, Human Rights, peace, brotherhood, the mutual integration of peoples and individuals. The future of the Church, which for centuries dominated the political and cultural scene, is also at stake. The Church now has to confront a plurality of convictions and beliefs: the different religions, Islam, Buddhism, laicism, religious indifference, agnosticism and atheism.... Will the Church be able to continue to identify with and engage in the open dialogue with Jesus in the Incarnation, as a pilgrim community accompanying the whole of humanity, open and ready to dialogue, able to absorb the different races, languages, religions and cultures?

Europe, which is and wishes to be a vital example of a plural and globalized world, seeks to adapt its laws and structures to the presence of what is diverse and different. Europe, with its record of 60 years of a homogeneous and religious culture, has become by the vicissitudes of history a conglomeration of races, languages, cultures and religions. Immigration has brought to Europe people from all races, religions and cultures. Although considered to be foreigners at first, with the passage of time, they have become European citizens. The current problem is how to integrate all the differences into a harmonious vital whole, without exclusion and assimilation. Is it possible? How can the identity and rights of everyone be fully respected?

To conclude this brief introduction, I should like to stress the importance this project, which began as unambitious research, has gained. Islam in general does not enjoy the best reputation among

Christians. In fact, the phenomenon of multi-culturalism is no longer viable. In place of effective multi-culturalism, free and indifferent, it is important to embrace open and respectful inter-culturalism. Our team feels that this project, which is delicate, is important for the Church and for the future mission of the White Fathers in Europe and in Africa. We are missionaries in Africa. However, Africa is also met in Europe.

### **Personal knowledge**

My best resource has been my own experience as a missionary. An African refrain says “nothing denies its *canas*/basket”. I remember with pleasure the four years I spent in Tunisia, 20 years in Burkina Faso, and ten in the Sudan. I could not forget them. Furthermore, I think on the whole that my adventurous life in mission happened in a fruitful although haphazard way in many other African countries: Senegal, Mali, Togo, Niger, Democratic Republic of the Congo, Rwanda, Uganda, Burundi, Ethiopia, Tanzania, Kenya and Algeria. Now, as I said, I am encountering them in Belgium where I have been for the past year. A missionary can never jubilate because being a missionary is a way of being. One must always be a missionary. Mission is defined neither by work nor place, but by the outreach of a heart open to the universal dimension. I hope to be such to my very last breath.

It is not determined by abstract concepts as is Islam. In this article I shall speak of my personal relationship with Muslims. This showed me on the one hand the differences that exist between Islam in North Africa and in Sub-Saharan Africa on the other, the ability of people to manipulate religion, transforming it into an instrument of evil. Indeed, Pope Benedict stated: “We must be on the lookout for these distortions of the sacred. While there is no denying a certain misuse of religion in history, yet ... if God’s light is extinguished, man’s divine dignity is also extinguished..., it is also true that forces of reconciliation and goodness have constantly sprung up from faith in God who became man. Into the darkness of sin and violence, this faith has shone a bright ray of peace and goodness, which continues to shine” (*Homily on Christmas Eve* (24.12.2012)).

Personally, I have encountered the best and the worst of Islam. The best is expressed by the spirituality of the simple people; people with a deep sense of the transcendence of God in their practical life, marked by fidelity to God and to his Commandments: by Muslims who are generous alms-givers, who exercise hospitality, mercy, who maintain good and tolerant relations with believers of other faiths. The worst is expressed in the excesses committed by the Islamic Government in the Sudan which is still in power. Its directors fill the mouth of God with fine declarations about the Clement and Merciful God. However they are incapable of expressing an atom of mercy towards the citizens belonging to other faiths. Religion is turned into pure ideology. When we forget the profound unity between the worship of God and the respect for the human person, religion turns into heartless ideology. Unfortunately, the deformation of religion has always existed in the history of all religions.

I have noticed that Islam has undergone an evolution in perception since my early life as a missionary and now. I am not speaking from the theoretical point of view, but from general observations. The values that I perceived have developed and improved. Relations have changed as much within Islam as in its relations with others. The Islam that I knew in Tunisia between 1960 and 1964, at the beginning of my carrier as a missionary, compared to 1970, seemed to me to be very well integrated and serene. In the 1980s the clouds of fundamentalism and intolerance began to appear following the money put up by petro-dollars that were generously distributed by Saudi

Arabia. The requirement that the Sharia be instituted began to be felt, at first timidly in some West African countries and then more openly, increasingly, as is the case now in Nigeria and in Mali. The same dynamic developed in Sudan: on gaining political power to impose ideological pressure with the application of the Sharia. It is what happened in Egypt. The recent political upheaval that is now taking place in Tunisia, Libya and Egypt, whose interpretation is very complicated, has much to do with the internal strife that is traversing Muslim society between the supporters of the social democratic party, secular and modern, and those who advocate a society based on religion. This discrepancy was unthinkable 20 years ago.

Until a relatively short time ago Islam lived in a protected area which Muslims call “*dar el Islam*” or the Islamic sphere in countries with a Muslim majority. In this sphere the laws, culture and the life-style shield Muslims from foreign influence, from all that is extraneous to Islam and its way of life. The Qu ’ran and the Sharia regulate the life and faith of Muslims. This world is close to disappearing.

Today, our societies are becoming religiously and culturally well integrated, multicultural and multi-religious, governed by democratic principles that function according to laws promulgated by an autonomous civil parliament which respects religions.

### **EUROPE’S HISTORICAL AND GEOGRAPHICAL CONTEXT**

To situate the presence of Islam in Europe requires a broad survey of its history over several centuries. It would be a mistake to think that the arrival of Islam in Europe is the result of the current immigration alone. Islam’s initial exchanges with the Christian West go back a long time to the year around the death of Mohammad, to the year 632 of our era. In the history of Spain, we learn that the invasion of Muslim troops led by Tariq y Musa took place at the beginning of the 8<sup>th</sup> century, and spread rapidly over the territory of Spain, then of France, Portugal and Sicily.

It might seem scarcely ecumenical to say so, but in general this was a history of conflict and intolerance. Nevertheless there were intervals of understanding that led to open relations and the development of science and culture, such as the development of the exceptionally fine school of translators in Toledo, founded by Alfonso X the Wise at the end of the 11<sup>th</sup> century, such moments were indeed exceptional. The Muslims remember the massacres perpetrated by the Crusaders, the re-conquest and the expulsion of the Moors. The splendour of the Al-Andalus abides in the heart of many Muslims as an open and poorly treated wound that calls for revenge. “We shall not forget” the slogans declared in Cairo in opposition to the celebrations for the 521<sup>st</sup> anniversary of conquest of Granada by the Most Catholic Monarchs.

To speak of Islam on the European Continent also requires knowledge of the existence of the ancient and little-known roots of Islam, whose beginnings go back to the incursions and conquests of the Ottoman Empire in Europe. It is the case of countries such as Albania, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Bulgaria and Macedonia....

The relationship between Europe and Islam cannot very well avoid mention of the negative impact of colonialism. The Muslim countries experienced this as a humiliation from which they need to free themselves. The paradox of history is that the process of de-colonisation brought different populations, many of whom were Muslim, in to Europe through immigration: Indians and

Pakistanis to England; Algerians, Moroccans and Sub-Saharan Africans to France and Belgium, Turks to Germany, Indonesians to The Netherlands.

According to the author and sociologist Felice Dassetto, the statistics quote 12 to 15 million Muslims in Western Europe which, added to its ancient roots in Eastern Europe, amount to 25 million, without including Turkey, which alone accounts for over 70 million inhabitants, a figure to keep well in mind in the eventuality of Turkey entering the European Union. It is clear that, as with all statistics, prudence is required in interpreting this phenomenon. The figures do not indicate with precision the degree of adhesion to Islam. We might well discover that many of them have left their religious affiliation, but continue to identify themselves with Islam with reference to their country of origin or to their culture. The classification by religious confession was forbidden in most European countries. In the same way, according to this sociologist, it would be a mistake to speak of European Muslims based on immigration figures, because many of them are now naturalized in Europe and therefore European citizens.

The following table gives a rough estimate of the number of MUSLIMS IN EUROPE

- I. Islam of recent date  
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- II. Islam with ancient roots  
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*Source: UK Foreign Office 1999-2005*

Youth is one of the noticeable demographic characteristics of the Muslim population in Europe. For example it is enough to consult the Town Hall Registers in Belgium to notice the high number of minors with names like Mohammad, Ahmed, Sara, Fatima, etc., to the point that some Catholic schools in Brussels have opened courses in Islamic Studies because of the high number of Muslims who attend their classes. In Belgium this is a topic that arouses much debate.

## **RECENT HISTORY**

Islam's recent history in the context of the European Union has its roots in the phenomenon of immigration. This is an irrefutable sociological and economic fact. This study is interesting because of the way in which it took place as an *escalating* process, not only in number but also in quality. Some speak of this phenomenon in terms of Islamization. This term seems to me to be an exaggeration.

### **The initial stage at the beginning of the 1960's**

It was the period when almost all the African countries gained Independence and the industrial boom was taking place in the countries of Europe. However, labour was lacking and Europe was not slow to enlist it wherever possible. This resulted in the massive immigration of foreign manpower which came mainly from Islamic countries. They were people who came to Europe in search of work, with no intention of settling ... their stay in Europe required no special religious or cultural formalities, only a good bill of health, a regular work permit, lodgings and, at least, a mosque as a place to meet and perform the necessary spiritual rites. They came to Europe and returned regularly to their countries of origin.

### **The consolidation stage**

The initial stage was followed by settlement. The immigrants were no longer satisfied with holidays in their respective countries of origin to the point that taking advantage of family reunion policies, they settled in Europe in a definitive way. The sociologist Felice Dassetto cites the example of Brussels: “the presence of populations of Muslim origin gave rise to *barrios*/ neighbourhoods in which the public area took on a new dimension. In fact, from the beginning of the 1970’s these areas saw the emergence of an ever more visible form of Islam: prayer halls, *halal* butchers, bookshops, sale of religious articles, Islamic libraries, etc. At the same time at the end of the 1980’s various strong expressions typical of the Islamic identity were seen in public areas: the custom of wearing a beard and the *gandourah* among men and the scarf (*hijab*) and at times the veil/*(niqab)* of a strong blue hue, or dark black, typical of the *Salafistas*, for women”, which did not fail to arouse negative reactions in the rest of the population.

### **The Institutional Stage**

This visibility was evident not only in the public arena of the town; it was equally evident in institutions: schools, hospitals, the social services, public administration, etc. The Islamic organizations were ever more numerous and better organized, they unified their efforts to stipulate accords that enabled them to obtain appropriate juridical status in the various countries of Europe. In this way, from an almost private implantation of Islam in Europe, it obtained a recognized public juridical status. An example of this was the Accord drawn up in 1992, between the Spanish State and the different Muslim Institutions established in our country. This treated such delicate issues as: Islamic schools, cemeteries, *halal* food, chaplains in prisons and the Army, mosques, the formation of religious personnel, etc. Obviously, the aim of the Muslim organizations in all the countries of Europe was: to obtain for the Muslim religion equal rights, comparable to those of the other religions.

### **WORLD CONTEXT**

This process has not been easy. Two parallel realities have accompanied the process of consolidation of Islam in Europe: the history of Islamic violence and the increase in Islamophobia: two contrary processes, which however stem from the same point of departure: an immature psychology and a mindset with a limited intellectual scope.

Let us review this history of violence, by citing the most significant events in the sphere in contact with Islam, over the past forty years. I shall list them without being exhaustive: the oil crisis, the Revolution in Iran headed by the Imam Khomeini, the *fatua*/sentence against Salman Rusdhie in 1989, for the book entitled “The Satanic Verses”, the protests against wearing the veil in public places. The hundreds of thousands killed during the Civil War in Algeria during the 1990’s, the birth of the Jihadist Movement of Al Qaeda, the attack on the Twin Towers and on the Pentagon in September 2001, then the terrorist attacks in Madrid (2004) and in London (2005), the targeted assassination of Theo Van Gogh in the Low Countries, the violent reaction to the satirical cartoons of Muhammad in Denmark as well as the reaction to Benedict XVI’s Discourse in Regensburg. And even more recently the situation generated by the political-social unrest in the countries that supported the misnamed “Arab Spring”, the civil war in Syria, the interminable emergency in Afghanistan, the wide-spread highly volatile situation in Pakistan and the occupation of North Mali by an undefined group of Jihadists and Islamists.

These events, often interpreted in a biased manner by the media, have contributed to spread a progressive reaction of widespread fear of Islam and of Muslims. The analysis deliberately

unilateral and twisted of these events, supported by national and xenophobic prejudices, has turned what is foreign, and Islam especially, into a threat to Europe. The continent is considered to be the victim of planned Islamization, a dark expansionist design, set in motion by the highest Islamic bodies, such as the Organization of Islamic Countries, and financed by Saudi Arabia. This sense of threat has led to the formation of political parties and far-right movements hostile to foreigners, especially to Muslims. Among these are: the *Vlaams Belang* in Belgium, the *Partij voor de Vrijheid* of Geert Wilders, the Northern League in Italy and the National Front of Marine Le Pen in France.... In the worst cases, these are racist and xenophobic movements that target Islam and Judaism. Unfortunately, they take their inspiration from the least ecumenical Christian past. This propaganda is freely circulated by the multimedia.

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### **A ROUGH DESCRIPTION of ISLAM in EUROPE**

Generally speaking Islam as such does not exist. There are flesh and blood Muslims who belong to many different trends. There are many ways of being and living Islam. Just as there are many ways of being and living Christianity. Putting everyone in the same boat leads to an erroneous perspective. The basic elements of worship; the way Muslims observe and practice the faith, are relatively few. Diversity is one of the common features of Islam. Within the fundamental faith in one God and in the revelation of the Qur'an, Islam allows for very varied interpretations, depending on adherence to one or other of the two major branches of Islam: Shi'ah and Sunnah. Each maintains its own system of thought and its own legal school. Thus, within Sunnism, four juridical traditions have developed: the Hanafi rite, the Shafi'i rite, the Hanbali rite, and the Maliki rite.

I have observed that one of the characteristics of Islam is an enormous permissive-ness of conscience when it comes to religious practice, with guaranteed freedom, provided that it does not set a bad example to the rest of the Muslim community.

Islam has developed in its followers a deep-rooted conviction of belonging to the Islamic community. Indeed, Muslims come from all social classes and conditions: there are practicing and non-practicing, conformists, mystics, scholars and thinkers, traditionalists, retrograde and violent people. This varied landscape of Islam is especially true in the European community. The immigrants' prolonged stay in Europe has turned them into European citizens with a peculiar mindset. Hanifa Touag, a young Muslim undergraduate, who is writing her doctoral thesis on sociology for the Catholic University of Louvain and a member of the *Centre Interdisciplinaire d'Etudes de l'Islam dans le Monde Contemporain* (CISMOC), stated recently that: "young Muslims are increasingly like other young Europeans". She added that Muslims and non-Muslims are formed by the same education at school and university. They are immersed in the same individualistic, lay, independent, computerized, autonomous culture that is far from the official institutions we all know. Surveys show that young people identify with the values of the country in which they live: democracy, freedom of expression, etc. However, this is somehow a contradiction because many of them state that they belong to Islam, although perhaps more as culture than religion. It is difficult to give up the culture in to which one has been born.

There are Muslims who adopt radical positions, however they are relatively few. Sociologists, who analyze the situation, state that radicalism arises especially in the contexts of poverty and social

marginalization: overcrowding in poor neighbour-hoods, the lack of job prospects and of a personal, family and social future.

### **HOW IS THE THEME OF ISLAM APPROACHED IN EUROPE?**

It is an important question. The most difficult issue of Islam's encounter with Europe is primarily due to a cultural crisis, a deep malaise, which stems from the particular difficulty Muslims have in adapting to the changes of modernity. Primarily it is a matter of integration, of mutual co-inclusion. This general affirmation needs explanation.

Until relatively recently, Islam existed in protected areas, "territory of Islam"/"*dar el Islam*" or Islamic sphere, in countries with a Muslim majority, where the laws, culture, lifestyles shielded Muslims from external influences. The sphere which Muslim jurists call "*dar el harb*" means "territory of potential conflict", i.e., areas considered to be hostile. The term "*harb*" in Arabic means war. In other words, "*dar el harb*" refers to non-Muslim countries. In Islamic countries, everything helps Muslims to be well integrated in their religion and culture. This world has disappeared. In Europe, most Islamic jurists have dropped this terminology and use other expressions - the fatwas - to respond to the specific problems of the faithful who want to faithfully observe the precepts of Islam in the European context.

Mohammed Charfi, a Tunisian lawyer, describes well the process experienced by Muslim societies and the difficulties they encounter in order to adapt to modern changes. Charfi says that this process takes as its starting point the difference between the modern State and the former State. Formerly the Muslim State was of a religious type; formed of Muslims. Those who were not Muslim had a special status as foreigners. The Head of State was a caliph of the Prophet and prince of believers. His mission was religious and his aim was to fulfill the law of God. Instead, the modern State in the West is national which gathers within it all the citizens, both Muslim and not. Its mission is confined to the civil sphere, i.e. to organize the coexistence of all by promulgating laws for everyone.

The debate on the Reform of Islam has continued for over two centuries. It is an internal problem in Islam between Muslim traditionalists and progressives. One Muslim who fights hard to get Islam to adopt a conception better suited to modern times is the French philosopher Abdennour Bidar. He states: "the majority of Muslims refuse and object to the right to discuss what tradition established a millennium ago: rites, principles, ways that in no way correspond to the needs of the present time".

In today's world, uncontaminated religious or cultural areas no longer exist or are about to disappear. We live in a world replete to satiety: tourism, immigration, modern technologies, the media, the Internet, economic exchanges have transformed the face of the earth. The world has become the common house of all, the home of all convictions and of all religions. We live in a globalized and plural world at the same time. The diverse events that occur in the most remote places on earth can be viewed in real time, anywhere in the world: the pilgrimage to Mecca, the ceremonies in the Vatican, funerals of politicians, the election of a Head of State, the Olympic Games, etc. The world has changed. We must learn to live in this different world socially, culturally and religiously. The problem is not how to assimilate technology, computer science, how to work a washing machine or a car. Skill in handling techniques can be combined with a genuine faith. The problem is much deeper. It concerns the mentality, the way of establishing a relationship with

people, with the "other" who is different: with people whose money, power, sex, laws, religious laws are different.

Antonio Gramsci, an Italian politician of the late nineteenth century, declared that: "when what is old does not die and the new cannot be born a crisis occurs". When I say that Islam is in crisis I do not mean to say that it is a question of an identity crisis of faith. It is important to state this. In this sense there is no crisis. Mostly Muslims are secure in their faith. My experience of encounter with Islam, both in Sudan as in Burkina Faso and other countries in the world, allowed me to observe the strength and rootedness of the Muslim faith. The sense of belonging to the large Muslim community, the *Umma*, is a sentiment that has deeply permeated people's minds. Islam is a religion and at the same time a culture, a tradition, that is not abandoned, even when it is hardly practiced. I have observed this many times. This is the reason why to forsake the faith and convert to another religion is something that very rarely occurs among Muslims.

The crisis concerns the difficulty Muslim societies have in general - but the same is true of other societies - of how to combine faith and reason, faith and science. Secularization in Muslim societies is less obvious externally, but it occurs. The explanation of the world is no longer the monopoly of religion. Science offers explanations that contradict what religions say. The education young Muslims receive in schools and European universities and the teaching in Mosques do not correspond. There are issues and explanations that do not tally. Issues such as the origin of the universe and of life, the revelation, the foundations of ethics, relations between faith and reason.... The sociologist Felice Dassetto also notes the inability of European Muslims to deliver a speech without reference to their countries of origin, most of which are still governed by criteria respectful of Islamic law.

The point of reference of modern societies is neither religious dogma nor the moral code proposed by religion, but the laws drawn up democratically in an autonomous way for the common good of all who live in a country. We live in global, pluralistic, multicultural and multi-religious societies. The vision of social life in Europe is built on a vision of man and society based on the autonomy of civilians with regard to the clergy.

Islam has entered Europe with its own worldview. The integration of Islam in Europe does not seem that easy, but it is possible. Learning to co-exist calls for debates, agreements and commitments to uphold the justice and reason that we all require. The integration of Islam in Europe does not mean assimilation nor exclusion, but co-inclusion and respect for differences. To put it into practice requires plenty of common sense. It is especially difficult in law suits in which it seems that the identity of each party is not respected. Hence, disagreement about the Islamic veil, the laicity of the State, freedom of expression, freedom of conscience, the right to religious education, medical care, the problems concerning bioethics, food taboos, *halal* food, the right to work without discrimination based on sex or religious convictions, traditions and religious rites, such as circumcision, prayer in public, the right to political representation, etc. How far can concessions be made? The sentences delivered differ depending on each State's laws. The UK supports the jurisdiction of Islamic Courts in matters concerning personal status, for example on issues such as divorce and inheritance.



I wish to add a few other findings. It has hardly been a year since our small team of White Fathers settled in the capital of Europe with the task of following the cultural and religious evolution that is taking place in Europe, an evolution of which Islam irreversibly forms a part. I shall note some of the findings that affect me personally.

My first observation was that Europe has changed very much compared to three or four decades ago. The Europe I knew before I left for Africa the first time is no longer the same. I can hardly understand what has been happening. I note that Europe is another world. When we left for Africa for the first time, missionaries were respected, admired and loved by most people, even the least practicing. We were a reference point, an example. I do not mention this because I feel any nostalgia for it, but to underscore the cultural change that has taken place in Europe. Religious culture has disappeared. It is hard for us to admit this is a sign of the times.

This observation has led to others. On mission, missionaries play a prominent leadership role. Our relations with the people were easy and close. What we said was considered important. We were listened to. We were respected as experts in inter-religious dialogue. We had many years of experience in Africa. This experience is precious and is still valid, at least to some extent. However, the debate in Europe is not of a religious order, but social. Rights refer not to religion but to the person and the common good of the whole of society. Rights and duties have arisen whose administration is the responsibility of the State.

The debate takes place in urban areas, on the streets, in institutions, in the political arena, in the economy. The best interlocutors are the intellectuals, jurists, sociologists, politicians and economists, civil society and the State. Here religions are an ethical and spiritual complement, which is not always well received. A humble attitude is necessary to find our place in a multi-cultural and multi-religious society.

Inter-religious dialogue passes through this societal process. We have to get used to distinguishing between the values rooted in the Gospel and ideologies or claims of the Church as a sociological group. Dialogue with society requires careful attention to human rights, justice, equality and freedom. Gone are divine rights, prerogatives, privileges and exemptions. All religions are equal before the law. When will we understand this?

In Europe, we can say that the law guarantees everyone respect for individual rights, equality, regardless of sex, race, religion or culture, the right to the freedom of conscience and freedom of worship and expression. It is not just about rights but also duties. The plural European society requires that everyone, atheists, agnostics, Muslims and Christians assume their responsibilities as citizens, and enacts laws that consider the identity of all those who form part of it, and ensures they operate in order to live in peace and harmony. In this globalized world it is obvious that one cannot have a mentality of conquest, based on the superiority of one religion or of one culture over another or the desire to control and exert any kind of hegemony, whether religious, political, cultural or economic. Society is made up of all who compose it.

Andrea Riccardi, Founder of Sant'Egidio and Chairman of the Collège des Bernardins in Paris, spoke at length on this theme, saying in his inaugural speech that Europe's problem is not so much "the secularization of society, but globalization: The Church has spoken much about secularization". Riccardi thinks we should stop exacerbating this concept which has won us the

attribute of pessimism: "Today, in this globalized world, people, men and women, live as though they were out of orbit with feelings of physical insecurity ... European Catholicism is tormented with feelings of failure. The idea is that the more we modernize the further we move from religion: on account of an ineluctable law. However, the problem is not so much secularization, as Christianity becoming private and so leading it to the margins of social life, but globalization". Rather, Riccardi thinks that the phenomenon of pluralism is a type of "kayros", an opportunity for missionary outreach to the universal: "Today, the distant has become close: however, only physically. We need this physical closeness to become spiritual. The spirituality that we need to create is one open to all, ready to respond to the challenges of the global man today and establish closeness between different worlds. In former times, cultures differed from one another because they did not know one another and did nothing to gain reciprocal knowledge. Today, we have more contacts and better knowledge, but we have to face the peril of confrontation".

Conflicts exist and will always exist. Their solution is not an angry reaction nor physical violence, but understanding, the will to co-exist, with mutual appreciation and respect, through an appropriate education for life in society. To learn to live together in multicultural and multi-religious societies is a necessity in the world today. Criteria based on the predominance of one religion, race or culture, do not serve. Democracy, equal rights, freedom of worship and conscience, without privileges and exclusion, are the conditions needed to guarantee life in peace and harmony. A good mutual integration obviously does not preclude the appreciation of one's identity, acquired through a long history. Respect for that identity is fundamental for mutual understanding. The one who receives requires reciprocity.

We convene in Brussels, the capital of the European Union. In Brussels the future of a new diverse and plural Europe is being forged from many points of view: cultural, religious, political, economic and racial; a Europe that does not exclude, is free and democratic, offering access to all who wish to benefit from it. Nevertheless, Europe still exists as a process. The Nobel Peace Prize has been awarded to Europe by way of recognizing that this process is valid and legitimate. In its crucible a new vision of the world, ever to be perfected, is being formed. There is a long way to go. To accompany this process is the work we propose to the members of our team, by contributing our missionary experience; an effective "plus" that I think is very significant. We know what respect means for other cultures and religions. Our experience is valuable and we offer it to those who are interested. There are also limitations. Perhaps in Europe we lack the personal contacts that we appreciated very much in Africa. However, we are not working alone or in isolation. We are working with the local Church, the clergy, the religious congregations, civil society, and the Catholic and non-Catholic institutions, with the aim to be salt and leaven in society.

As in all things, in this area too, our point of reference and way of acting is the deeply spiritual universality of Jesus, open to God and to the universal brotherhood. From the vantage point of our website ([www.arcre.org](http://www.arcre.org)), one can see which issues attract the most attention and interest of the European society in which we live.

## **CONCLUSION**

Jean Rostand, biologist and moralist, says something very important in his book: "Concerns of a Biologist": "I do not care to know what the cities of tomorrow will look like, neither the architecture of the houses nor the speed of vehicles. What I would like to know especially, is what will give zest

to life, the reasons to love and act. I wonder from which well we will draw 'water welling up to eternal life'? (Jn 4:14). Greater love is worth more than knowledge ... I prefer to love like the intelligentsia".

I shall quote another reference which encourages me in my task. The Founder of Sant'Egidio, whom I quoted earlier, said: "We are meeting on the threshold of an era to explore an historical moment of the world which Antonio Gramsci, a Marxist thinker of the last century, defined as 'big, beautiful and terrible'". Good luck and God's grace.