



21 Dr. Lazar T. Stanislaus SVD, Former President of International Association of Catholic Missiologists, Mission Secretary of the Congregation of Divine Word



Religious Pluralism and Islam in Europe: Missiological Orientations

The secularization of Europe is an undeniable social fact, and it is progressive though highly uneven. An increasing majority of the European population has ceased to participate in traditional religious practices, at least on a regular basis, while still maintaining relatively high levels of private individual religious beliefs. At the same time, the number of unbelievers is increasing in this continent. In this respect, one should perhaps talk of the *unchurching* of the European population and of religious individualization, rather than of secularization. Grace Davie has characterized this general European situation as "believing without belonging". At the same time, however, large numbers of Europeans, even in the most secular countries, still identify themselves as "Christian," pointing to a hidden, subtle, and submerged Christian cultural identity. They belong to the religious and cultural traditions of the country, i.e. the Church, but they do not want to adhere to the traditional practices in the local Church. In this sense, Danièle Hervieu-Léger is also correct when she offers the reverse characterization of the European situation as "belonging without believing." "Secular" and "Christian" cultural identities are intertwined in a complex and rarely verbalized mode among most Europeans. Some would like to articulate their Christian identity, but most of them not and would like to be free individuals. Apparently, the general trend is to think that just cultural or national identity is sufficient.

1. Challenges to Religious Pluralism

Over the years, Europe has become open to other religions and cultures. Thus there is no longer a single religious identity, and it is becoming more multi-religious in every country. Religious pluralism brings a lot of challenges, and what is mission in this context? John Borelli identified some challenges,¹ and I would like to develop some of these challenges of religious pluralism in Europe: freedom of religio-social expressions of religions, tendency of migrants to keep the structure of religions rather than its life-giving principles, dialogue of life with other religious groups by ordinary citizens and double identity of religions.

2. Muslims in Europe

The crisis of religious pluralism in Europe is reduced to a crisis of Europe's engagement with Islam, a problem related solely to the particularities of Islam and the phenomenon of Muslim migration to Europe. Although other religions do exist, there seems to be no special concern in Europe about this pluralism, though the history of Jews and their struggles cannot be ignored. It would not be correct to say Europe is secular and immigrants are religious. There are many variables. In real life, the Muslim communities are characterized by vast diversity. European Muslims are not uniformly pious, primitive, and fundamentalist. The road to mutual acceptance and accommodation between Muslim communities and European societies is neither free of tensions nor is it uniform and linear. Could Muslims be allowed to keep up their Islamic traditions, religious and cultural, or should they change their mentality and integrate into a secular world view which has Christian heritage? There are many complex questions.

2.1 Discriminations against Muslims

There is a general tendency to equate Muslims in general or even moderate Muslims with Islamic fundamentalists, and to see every Muslim as a "terrorist". This general attitude harms a fraternal relationship with Muslims in Society. Some of these attitudes are developed due to the reports of what Muslim fundamentalists do to Christians and to their enemies, especially in Arab countries. After extensive study on the comparative overview of 15 European countries, Anna Triandafyllidou² says that discrimination is shown towards Muslims, blacks/colored people and the Roma community. All these three groups face the worse

¹ John Borelli "Challenges to Religious Identity in the Twenty-First Century" in *Religious Identity and Renewal in the Twenty-first Century: Christian and Muslim Explorations*, Edited by Simone Sinn and Michael Reid Trice, Leipzig, LWF Documentation 60/2015, pp. 57-76.

² Anna Triandafyllidou, "Addressing Cultural, Ethnic and Religious Diversity Challenges in Europe: A Comparative Overview of 15 European Countries", ACCEPT PLURALISM Research Project, 2011/2.

discrimination and prejudice in most countries in the European Union. All three groups are subjected to widespread discrimination in the labor market, in education, housing and in social life in general.

3. Missiological Orientations

History and traditions are rather different from the present day realities and challenges. Thus, in the changing European situation, some missiological orientations are outlined, though they are not exhaustive.

3.1 Acceptance of Muslims: More than Tolerance?

Faith makes a person change his attitude; faith not just an identity but following a faith makes a difference towards the relationship with other. This is broadly consistent with other findings from European and North American studies of the effect of Church attendance upon prejudice and tolerance. In the complex situation in Europe, with its vast history and with the twists and turns to the growth of Christianity, religious pluralism is not easy to accept.

Most would argue that we need tolerance towards Muslims and their ways of living. What should be required by the European community, as well as by Muslim migrants and other groups, is respect, recognition and to integration with one another. This is more than just tolerance.

3.2 Promoting Harmony

Jesus Christ is continuing his Spirit-filled mission of restoring peace and harmony with God and among humans. In virtue of Christ's Spirit of communion in love, his disciples are called to be effective signs of union with God and the unity of human kind, and to sustain human harmony with commitment to justice, peace and the integrity of creation. Openness to the truth of other religious traditions, their richness of scriptures, their worship patterns and their religious practices are vital in order to relate with them and to dialogue for harmonious living. Pope Francis insists on taking care of migrants and God favors them. He said that we need to work towards protection, integration and long-term solutions. Education is identified as a most important area where action can be taken to foster tolerant and respectful behaviors towards diversity. Schools would to be a good platform to teach harmony and peace and the value of other religions.

3.3 Prophetic Dialogue

In the context of religious pluralism, interculturalism, and even with terrorism and fundamentalism, where one wants to impose truth on others, thrust one's ideas and views on others, dialogue seems to be the better way forward. Dialogue is to offer the vision of truth without forcing anyone. Dialogue is the acceptance of the conviction that we can only propose the truth to others and invite them to share our vision of it, and also to listen to others' articulation of truth and their vision.

Prophetic dimension is inherent to the mission of the Church. She is called to announce the Good News, the Good News of a gracious and compassionate God. She is called to denounce evil. As John Paul II put it, the "gospel of life" is the "good news" that the Church needs to preach with "dauntless courage." But such good news has to be preached and lived out in confrontation with the "culture of death." (*Evangelium Vite* 1).

Steve Bevans who has promoted this paradigm says, "Mission is done in dialogue. Mission is done in prophecy. The two go together. While we can distinguish them to better understand the whole, we cannot and are not to separate them. Mission is prophetic dialogue. It is dialogical prophecy."³ This entails one to adopt to prophetic dialogue with courage and with compassion towards one another.

Conclusion

In the context of religious pluralism in Europe, the mission of the Church is to actualize the Reign of God, bringing peace, joy, freedom, fraternity and unity. There are many variables of beliefs and practices among Christians (Church goers and non-Church goers, believers in the Catholic and other Church traditions, believers in Jesus without attachment to any Christian structure), and there is growing number of secularly minded people. Relating to other religions, or even understanding them, especially Islam, is not easy. The Church must share space with others to live in dignity, growing in dialogical way of life, especially with promoting harmony with other religions and prophetic dialogue. This is a road less travelled in Europe.

³ Stephen Bevans, "Mission as Prophetic Dialogue", www.relforcon.org/sites/default/files/Transform_Wkshp-MISSION_AS_PROPHETIC_DIALOGUE-final.pdf