

ENGLISH only

**OSCE Conference on Combating Discrimination and Promoting Mutual
Respect and Understanding - Follow-up to the Cordoba Conference on Anti-
Semitism and Other Forms of Intolerance
Romania, Bucharest, 7 - 8 June 2007
Plenary Session 3**

Prof. Roberto de Mattei (rdemattei@yajoo.it)

I am pleased to introduce this session, the theme of which is a matter of great importance for the institution I represent, the European University in Rome, and for me personally. My experience is also based on the results of conferences and workshops organised by the Italian National Research Council of which I am Vice-President.

1. The process of globalisation, in its positive aspects, ought to promote and spread universal rights and values, objectively recognised as such and shared by all. In reality, increasing economic interdependence and the homogenisation of cultures and lifestyles, which are the characteristics of our time, are paradoxically accompanied by a counter-reaction. The age of globalisation is also an age of relativism and fragmentation, in which people who feel that their identity is under threat become exasperated, to the point that they come to reject the other, also violently, thus producing new forms of intolerance and discrimination.

2. Today, many international organisations fight discrimination and intolerance. In order for this work to be effective, it is essential, in my view, that institutions do the following three things:

- a) They should remain within their specific scope and not invade the territory of other organisations;
- b) They should avoid taking on a life of their own, different from that willed by their members;
- c) They should respect the rules agreed between states. Although states are losing or sharing their sovereignty, they remain nonetheless the principal actors in international relations.

All these are of especial relevance for the OSCE which is based on the principle of consensus and whose institutions, therefore, can operate only within the terms agreed between its member states.

3. In order to combat discrimination, some countries have adopted legislation which provides special protection to certain categories of citizens, *de facto* penalising others. This choice entails a risk of entrenching differences rather than encouraging social cohesion. However, it seems important to me to respect the prudent terms of Article 1, paragraph 4 of the "International Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Racial Discrimination" adopted by the General Assembly of the United Nations on 21st December 1965. This article stipulates that any measures of positive discrimination should not "lead to the maintenance of separate rights for different racial groups" and that "they shall not be continued after the objectives for which they were taken have been achieved."

4. The roots of racism, discrimination and intolerance are to be found in prejudice and ignorance, which in large measure are themselves the result of insufficient or wrong education. It follows that education has a fundamental role to play. We are meeting today in a city which, less than twenty years ago, still lived under Communist oppression. In Romania and in other countries in Eastern Europe, Christianity proved to be the principal factor behind the liberation from totalitarianism, not because it undertook direct political action but simply because it remained true to its own mission. It was able to educate its children to a liberty stronger than oppression, and to a love more radical than hatred and intolerance. Therefore Bucharest reminds us that religions, and in particular the Christian religion, have an irreplaceable role to play in teaching people not only tolerance but, even more so, respect - respect not only for the human person but also for the principles and values on which our civilisation is based. Within this framework, it is important that the OSCE also fully appreciate the great contribution to education which religion and confessional schools make in our countries. But religions can teach people to be tolerant only if they themselves are not discriminated against, and only if they themselves are not the victims of intolerance.

5. This brings me to the central point of my speech. I would like to draw your attention to a worrying phenomenon which has recently began to accompany anti-Semitism, namely the phenomenon of anti-Christianism. This is a recent trend on which attention has been drawn by scholars such as René Rémond, the great and late French historian, and by Joseph Weiler, Professor of constitutional law at New York University who is not Christian himself but Jewish. Even the Russian Orthodox Patriarch, Alexei II, denounced also this phenomenon and has encouraged Christians to raise awareness of the issue, also at the international level.

I am thinking of the recurrent episodes of violence in countries where Christians are a minority, such as have recently occurred in Turkey, but also of the increasingly frequent incidents of intolerance which occur in countries where Christianity is the majority religion.

Indeed it would be wrong to think that religious intolerance is confined to countries where the religions in question are a minority, and the OSCE should be careful not to make this mistake.

6. In general, intolerance and discrimination against Christians is expressed in the following ways:

- a) The profanation of Christian Churches and of other sacred places, and the mocking of religious symbols and objects like the crucifix;
- b) 'hate crimes': verbal attacks and threats against lay and clerical representatives of the Christian religion;
- c) offensiveness towards and mockery of Christianity in books, films, songs, advertisements and Internet sites. We must not forget that violence is nourished by hatred and that hatred is in turn nourished by expressions of contempt and scorn towards the ideas and feelings of our neighbours.

I live in Italy. On 17th May, a parade against homophobia in Bologna turned into a demonstration of intolerance against the Catholic Church. The demonstrators, who included some Members of Parliament, prevented a procession of citizens from entering the Cathedral. They shouted insults and blasphemous slogans about the faithful, the Archbishop of Bologna and the Pope. Offensive graffiti and even death

threats against Benedict XVI and against the Chairman of the Bishops' Conference appeared on the walls of many Italian churches.

7. At a large international conference held in Rome on 29th May, sponsored by the National Research Council and the European University of Rome, broad support emerged for the view that widespread secularisation can in some respect represent a threat or an obstacle to the full exercise of religious liberty, and to the freedom of expression of Christians and of members of other religions. Human rights cannot be based on relativism or on subjectivism. They can emerge only from a shared law rooted in human nature itself. If we deny this shared law, only the rights of the strongest will remain, based on the exasperated identity-based demands of individuals or groups.

8. In the light of the above, it is necessary to oppose discrimination against, and intolerance of Christians and members of other religions by fighting hate speech and hate crimes committed for religious reasons. But it is also necessary to oppose the intolerance of the contribution made by religions such as Christianity to social and public life. There exist laws which are neutral by themselves, but which indirectly cause discrimination against - or at least unjustified restriction of - the social and public activities of Christians. Anti-Christianism seeks to remove the public presence of Christians from society, by means of psychological intimidation and even judicial repression.

9. In conclusion, my recommendations concern three points:

- a) First, we need to protect the public dimension of the religious freedom of Christians. In particular, if the Churches or religious communities have reservations about legislative decisions or administrative acts, or if they have alternative proposals, then this should not be considered a form of intolerance or interference. To put it the other way around, it would be an intolerant interference by society or by the civil authorities if they seek to impede or denigrate the free expression of such communities.
- b) Second, we must endeavour to ensure that judicial systems favour an environment free from the phenomenon of aggression, intolerance or discrimination towards Christians or members of other religions.
- c) Third, we must protect the freedom of religion and the moral convictions of those who work in public administration, and we must oppose any pressure exerted on them to force them to act against the dictates of their own conscience. This means protecting conscientious objection whenever it implies the non-acceptance of a public law for reasons based on unwritten religious or moral laws.

10. I am sure that this session will focus on these and other forms of intolerance against Christians, defining appropriate ways and means for examining periodically the problem of anti-Christianism. Freedom is at stake - and, to a large extent, the future of the OSCE and of Europe itself.