

## **Europe's future and the contribution of faith communities**

**Katharina von Schnurbein, BEPA, Brussels**

I would like to thank Peter Schreiner and the ICCS for inviting me to this important seminar. It is a pleasure to be here with you. I am responsible for the dialogue with religions and philosophical and non-confessional organisations in the team of Advisors of President Barroso. In this dialogue we discuss issues of EU politics with organisations that represent certain religions or beliefs.

For a start, I would like to give you a short overview over what kind of dialogue the EU institutions and in particular the EU Commission holds with churches and religious organisations (and philosophical and non-confessional organisations).

Article 17 (3) talks about a "dialogue *with* churches and philosophical organizations" and not a dialogue *about* religion, theology or philosophy. So, we do not discuss the question of the role of religion or secularism in the EU, rather we discuss EU policies or issues where the EU has a competence. This approach seems relevant also with view to the possible impact that the dialogue may have on EU policy making.

With the Lisbon Treaty good practice has become primary law. Article 17 (3) TFEU speaks about conducting an "open, transparent and regular" dialogue with Churches, religious associations or communities and philosophical and non-confessional organisations.

But in fact the dialogue came into existence long before Lisbon, almost 20 years ago. The fall of the Berlin Wall and the Iron Curtain in 1989 marked a turning point in European history. The then EU Commission President Jacques Delors (in office 1985-1994), sensed the challenges ahead. These included the prospect of EU enlargement and the construction of a political union that would match the ambitions of the economic and later monetary union. He was aware that special efforts would be needed to bring

citizens along on this journey of further integration and expansion of the European Communities.

President Delors believed that Europe is not just about market and economy, but that it needed "a soul". Something to which citizens could relate to and identify with. In fact, much of the discussion today, from the challenges of a European democratic deficit, possible institutional reforms, bringing Europe (again) closer to its citizens, creating a European-wide debate, boils down to creating an emotional link to Europe, and not just simply an awareness of its existence and its benefits.

The starting point back in 1989/1990 involved talks with representatives of organisations active in the fields of science, culture and also religion. Its purpose was to exchange ideas about the meaning and implications of the European integration process and to engage citizens in this process. Consequently, the EU Commission introduced a regular dialogue with the Catholic and Protestant churches, which was later enlarged to monotheistic religions.

Delors' successors, Jacques Santer, Romano Prodi, as well as the current President, José Manuel Barroso, have kept the tradition and developed it further, regarding it as an important instrument of participatory democracy. It was President Barroso who enlarged the dialogue to religions "with a younger presence in Europe" and to philosophical and non-confessional beliefs.

The European Commission's assumption when engaging in "Art 17 dialogue" is that all interlocutors – churches, religious associations or communities and philosophical and non-confessional organisations – share a hard core of fundamental beliefs, i.e. EU values, namely "the universal values of the inviolable and inalienable rights of the human person, freedom, democracy, equality and the rule of law" (Preamble of the Lisbon Treaty).

On national level the status churches, religious associations or communities and philosophical and non-confessional organisations is very diverse and depends on the basis of their respective constitutions and legal systems as well as cultural traditions. From the outset it was clear that the Union would strictly respect this autonomy and diversity and adhere to the principle of subsidiarity with regards to the status of these organisations on national level. This notion is explicitly captured in Art 17 (1) and (2), namely that the Union respects and does not prejudice the status under national law of these organisations.

The European Commission is currently implementing the obligation for dialogue in the following way:

- a. "**open**": all relevant topics of the EU agenda can be addressed in this informal dialogue that is of horizontal nature and commonly agreed.

Dialogue partners can be all churches, religious associations or communities and philosophical and non-confessional organisations that are recognized as such at national level and adhere to European values. In the past the European Commission has invited organisations from different member states and of different size, reflecting the given diversity across the Union.

- b. "**transparent**": EU institutions commit themselves to convey to the public all relevant information about this dialogue. Speeches, lists of participants, programmes about all events taking place within the dialogue are on the web. Press conferences are held after the annual high level meetings with the Presidents of the three EU institutions (Commission, European Parliament and Council). Additionally, each EU institution has a contact point in the realms of their respective President which remains year

round in close contact and exchange of views with "Art 17 interlocutors".

- c. c. "**regular**": It has become good practice to organise once a year two separate informal high-level meetings hosted by the President of the Commission and co-chaired by the Presidents of the European Parliament and of the European Council, one with high-level representatives of churches, religious associations and communities and the other one with high-level representatives of philosophical and non-confessional organisations, usually on the same topic. Further, there are so called Dialogue seminars that take place 5-6 times a year on a working level on certain EU-policy issues, this year we discussed the Question of intergenerational solidarity.

I understand that many of you are involved in education and thus I will try to give you also some food for thought as to the importance to engage young people in the European project.

They are the future of this continent and a sense of responsibility will be key to shaping the Europe in which we and they will want to live.

I know that the reference to the WW II and the peace and stability that the founding of the European Union has brought to this continent is not a very popular narrative these days. We tend to look at the rising tensions between rich and poor, East and West, fundamentalist, religious and secular, tensions that certainly exist. But I would like to take a step back and emphasis the value of this sui generis construction "European Union", that has indeed created a European Way of life over the past decades. We might be a heterogeneous country, with many different languages, customs and traditions, but the quality of life in Europe is

unique and we often take it for granted. And by the way, from outside, Europe looks much more homogenous than one might think and it remains one of the most attractive places.

Europe has become the wealthiest region in the world. 8% of the world's population created 25% of the world's GNP. We value the rights of the individual as well as of our environment and nature. Despite all challenges and defeats, we live in a participatory democracy with a social market economy, a high degree of personal freedom and security. When we think about Europe's future, we cannot ignore its past and the enormous change that has taken place over the past sixty years.

And here is probably where our hope lies: Europe is a continent capable of managing change. We do not like change, adjusting old structures and creating new ones can be a painful process. The European Union is experiencing the deepest crisis since its foundation in 1957 and European leaders have to put into place measures with painful effects on citizens.

The re-election of a government has become an exception, almost every day there are demonstrations somewhere in Europe against austerity and reform. But the status quo is not an option. Reforms are painful, but necessary if we want to set the parameters for a sustainable future. Obviously, we can discuss the way in which reforms are shaped and implemented, but this does not take away the fact that we need reform.

Our challenge is threefold: We need to find short-term answers to remit the economic and financial crisis. This means the creation of new instruments of early warning, control and restructuring. To implement these instruments new institutions are needed and have to fit into the overall structure of existing institutions in order to guarantee efficiency. Also, we have to find solutions for the side

effects of the crisis, like the rise in poverty and unemployment or more generally, the challenges for social cohesion.

Secondly, the Lisbon Treaty came into force in December 2009 with several important changes of which the strengthening of the European Parliament and National Parliaments are one of the most important developments as well as the creation of a European Foreign Service. The implantation of the Treaty co-insides with this time of crisis and adds to the challenges.

At the same time, thirdly, we must look to the future and keep an eye on the horizon - not in order to shy away from the immediate problems, but in order to stay on track. Only with the big picture in mind can we set the switches now in a way that will enable us to keep the train on the rails and thus hopefully keep our "European Way of life" and develop it further.

This year is the European year for active ageing and solidarity between generations. Within the art 17 dialogue we have discussed the different aspects of the challenges ahead with religious leaders and secular representatives.

Often, the question of Europe's demographic future is seen mainly through the prism of the economy: We know that in the future fewer people of working age will support a greater and greater number of pensioners – the result of people living longer due to medical advances and better health.

Europe has to face up to this demographic and economic challenge which is unprecedented in its scale.

But another essential question is what the demographic shifts mean for our society, for social peace and what we might call the 'intergenerational contract'. How can we create a sustainable system with regard to public finances, energy, natural resources, the environment, agriculture – which does not threaten the future well-being of those who

come after us – the next generation? Here the dialogue with communities of religion and belief is important for the Commission.

Respect for the elderly, protection of the family and motivation for the young are key fundamentals of all religion and many beliefs. These values cannot be imposed by institutions or law. They need to grow and be nurtured naturally within societies, and – as you know better than I do – education at home and in school lays the foundation.

Finally, allow me a few personal words about religion and Europe. In my opinion, religion will continue to play an important role in Europe. Not because we foster it or because the European Union paves the way for it, but simply because it plays a role in peoples lives.

It would be a mistake to condemn the practice of religion and belief to private life because it is an integral part of the life of many European citizens. Instead of reducing the expression of faith to ones private life – as some request – we need to find ways of peaceful co-existence. That is a debate that needs to be conducted right across Europe. Where does my freedom end, where does the freedom of my neighbour start and how do we go about if the rights that we claim overlap?

While I would argue that such a debate is essential and necessary, I would also argue that it is not for European institutions to steer such a debate and as I mentioned earlier, the question of "competing rights" is not part of Article 17. Rather, such a discussion must come from within society.

I look forward to our debate!