

SIX THESES ON ISLAM IN EUROPE

Introduction

A group invited by the President of the Conference of European Provincials gathered to offer reflections on the Jesuit mission in relation to Muslims. Already in March 2001, some Jesuits living among Muslims in Europe had met at Ludwigshafen, and their findings were sent to the government of the Society. Since then various world events have significantly influenced the mutual perception of Muslims, Christians and other groups – especially in Europe. The Society of Jesus and its apostolic works cannot ignore these shifts of perception. Therefore it is important to rethink both our apostolic engagement and the formation of Jesuits. Through the following theses we propose to concentrate on six fields of work:

The challenge of living together within a pluralist society

In the face of the growing ideological, cultural and religious pluralism of European societies, we have to find a means to ensure better social integration:

- Since the mid-twentieth century, the Muslim population in Europe has grown sharply, following important waves of migration. Islam now has a far greater public presence than before: mosques, people dressed according to oriental or Muslim traditions, organisations with a public profile, specific practices with respect to food, education, healthcare, cemeteries etc. More and more Muslims in Europe are European citizens. Simultaneously Christian public visibility has decreased in much of Europe. Secularism has grown in both the east and the west of the continent, and other religious minorities, such as Jews, are also well established.
- Jesuits, our co-workers, and our institutions are engaged by the challenge of living together in pluralist societies. Muslims are our neighbours, our colleagues, our friends, and are often our partners in building a society together at the local and the national level. In fact neighbourhoods are crucial places for this shared engagement.
- Communities and institutions of the Society (such as schools, social centres, institutions for migrants and refugees) should promote ways in which Muslims and Christians can live together and build a new society. It is important to collaborate with associations and families of the Muslim tradition (both religious and secular) in order to educate young people in fundamental values, mutual respect, freedom of conscience and critical reflection.

Examining mutual images

Several sets of perceptions interact: those of Muslims, Christians and other Europeans. Often, these groups regard each other as alien.

- Many such perceptions are prejudices based on historical memory, fear and ignorance. Reciprocal fears touch on terrorism, the concept of violence in relation with religion (jihad and crusades), political Islam, a projected Muslim desire to recapture Al-Andalus (the former Muslim Spain), the accession of Turkey to the European Union, western neo-colonialism in Muslim-majority countries, globalisation, proselytism

(both Christian and Muslim), and the loss of Islamic or Christian or Secularist identity. Such negative perceptions could sometimes be countered by proper formation and the development of a new shared reading of history.

- Other elements of prejudice derive from the foundational sources of Islam and from inherited historical Christian views of Islam. The Church does not recognise itself in the image of Christianity drawn in the texts of the *Qur'an*. Christians have been called to correct their image of Muslims, for example by *Lumen Gentium* Section 16 and *Nostra Aetate* Section 3, and by comparable texts of the World Council of Churches.
- Following GC 34, the Society of Jesus is called to deepen its knowledge of other religions. In our present context, this means to overcome stereotypes of Islam in the formation of Jesuits and of others, and to offer to Muslims a better and richer understanding of Christianity. The Society could promote the necessary relations of mutual confidence through arranging encounters – in Europe and wherever else Muslim communities are present.

Knowing Muslims in their diversity

Islam is one and diverse: diverse sociologically, culturally, linguistically, ideologically, politically, theologically. This diversity has consequences for the coexistence we have urged, and for our shared commitment to build a new society:

- Beyond the great traditional Sunni and Shia schools and the law-schools, one finds in Europe very different manners of understanding and living Islam: many Muslims retain the culture and popular traditions of their country of origin (e.g., Turkey, the Sahel countries, the Maghreb, Pakistan, the Middle East), some seek their roots in reformist movements (Wahhabism, Salafism, the Muslim Brotherhoods, Jama'at-i Islami), others (including secularists and even agnostics) adopt a modernist and western re-reading of Islam and others again follow the spiritual heritage of the Sufis. Further, certain heterodox traditions have to be taken into account, such as the Alevites. New radical Islamist movements and organisations appeal to the younger generation through electronic media.
- Recent experience shows that both in responding to Muslims, and in debating the impact of Islam, it is crucial to distinguish general cultural and geo-political influences from specifically religious characteristics: for example, in matters of gender and family relations, and the recourse to violence.
- The Society should form Jesuits familiar with the diversity we have described, and capable of discerning its significance. Universities and social centres are the institutions best adapted to support this type of research which should result in an effective European network.

The common commitment to Justice and Peace

Both Christians and Muslims are committed in our own ways to social justice and to peace. We share this commitment with many people of good will. A common commitment in social issues could provide an important basis for collaboration:

- We are alike challenged by injustice in international relations and trade.
- Discussion of Human Rights today is often centred on the rights of cultural and religious minorities. Muslims rightly demand the recognition of religious and cultural rights: to religious education, chaplaincies, etc. Certain rights however are contested, and are problematic in the context of wider European moral and legal standards, especially in family law, although those standards are not uniform in the different European countries. For their part, Christians and other non-muslims demand the right of religious freedom and equal treatment in countries where Muslims are a majority.
- The Society of Jesus should engage with other partners in a discernment of such questions, which are focused on our conception of justice rooted in the gospel.
- All Jesuits, co-workers and institutions of the Society should be sensitive to the Muslim adherence of many of those they serve and work with.

Spiritual life as a field of encounter:

The spiritual wealth of our religions offers the opportunity to encounter each other and to practise dialogue:

- Important elements of the Muslim spiritual heritage are embodied in various movements, Sufi orders and literature. The Christian spiritual heritage is likewise often developed by religious congregations, ecclesial movements, and in mystical literature. Both Muslims and Christians have highly developed traditions of spiritual accompaniment, and have great experience in have fostered disciplines and special practices of prayer.
- The Society draws on its own tradition of discernment and spiritual guidance. Its centres of spirituality can open themselves to the spiritual needs of Muslims and all people of good will. Such developments have already taken place in Europe and other parts of the world (specially in India). Such enriching encounters need to be encouraged, with prudence.

To make a commitment at the theological level:

Islam challenges the self-understanding of Christianity, especially since Islam, like Christianity, embodies a universal truth claim. Therefore, we Christians are called to give an account of our faith, of the hope that is in us (*1 Peter 3:15*).

- Giving an account of Christian faith in dialogue with Muslims, and discovering their faith and the work of the Holy Spirit among them, needs serious study and intensive effort. Such encounters, potentially mutually transforming, will not bear fruit without a due spiritual formation, outside a context where justice is respected as a basic value, or without the observance of ‘rules of dialogue’.
- The Christian theology of religions has been consistently developing in recent times. In the context of our present discussion, one key task is to understand the relationship between Judaism, Christianity and Islam.

- Similarly Christian faculties of Theology nowadays include within their basic courses structures the study and theology of religions. Some Christian Theology faculties run courses on Islam to which Muslim scholars are invited. In addition, some Islamic Institutes invite Christian theologians to teach Christianity to their own Muslim students. Such exchanges have proved very fruitful.
- All Jesuits should receive a good general formation in Islam. Further, the Society in Europe is encouraged to form specialists in Islamic Studies. In doing so, the Society should consult such specialised Church institutions as the Pontifical Institute for Arabic and Islamic Studies (PISAI), the Dar Comboni Institute for Arabic Studies, the Oriental Institute of the Dominicans (both in Cairo), the Department for Religious and Cultural Studies at the Gregorian University, and St Joseph's University, Beirut.
- Jesuits with such expertise are called to share it with the Society's own apostolates and with the wider Church.

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