

Bas-Backer: Speaking out for People of Other Faiths

Bosnia and Herzegovina's religious leaders will exert a powerful and constructive influence on society when they see themselves as leaders of people and not of particular people, the Senior Deputy High Representative, Peter Bas-Backer, told a conference on political-religious dialogue in Bratislava today.

Ambassador Bas-Backer said that conference participants must acknowledge that: "The religious communities in former Yugoslavia showed themselves wholly ill-equipped to prevent the ghastly metamorphoses of religious fault lines into conflict front lines" in the early 1990s. But he went on to argue that this "bleak reality" does not establish a hard and fast rule.

Ambassador Bas-Backer noted that parties in Europe that emerged from particular religious groups have evolved into modern democratic institutions by melding "elements of conventional religious social teaching in electoral platforms that appeal to voters outside one religious community. Electoral arithmetic requires parties to find support beyond one community if they want to share power. And what is good for one community tends also to be good for other communities. So there is a European tradition of incorporating the religious impulse constructively in secular politics."

Ambassador Bas-Backer stressed that: "The Christian, Islamic and Judaic emphasis on the integrity of the individual and the primacy of love are core elements in contemporary European culture," and asked whether these elements are "at the forefront of the teaching and activity of the principal religious communities of South-East Europe".

In Bosnia and Herzegovina, he said, "I believe we have to acknowledge that many religious leaders remain trapped in the confining role of community leadership thrust upon them first by the contingencies of the authoritarian era and then by the circumstances of the conflict in the early 90s. They must rise above this essentially limiting role if they are to become authentic exponents of the core values of their faith, and as such make the kind of religious contribution to politics that has proved so constructive elsewhere in Europe."

Ambassador Bas-Backer concluded by saying that: "The most persuasive response to the proposition that religion has no role in politics is not simply to insist on that role by some sort of statutory right; it is to demonstrate through inclusive activism that religion can play this role constructively."

A copy of the full speech can be found at www.ohr.int