

# Remarks by Senior Deputy HR Peter bas-Backer at the 10th Dialogue between the Orthodox Church and the Group of the European Peoples Party and European Democrats

## *Speaking out for the people of other faiths*

Mr Chairman, Mrs Chairman, ladies and gentlemen,

Thank you very much for inviting us to this, for our times, so appropriate gathering.

Within the Office of the High Representative in Bosnia and Herzegovina – Dr. Christian Schwarz-Schilling – I serve as his Senior Deputy to promote reforms for education, the public broadcasting system, but also make efforts to bring the religious communities closer together.

From that perspective the theme of this morning's discussion – Europe through Solidarity for People, Religion and Politics in Action – may be a controversial one.

There is an influential body of opinion, also in Bosnia and Herzegovina, that views the role of religion in politics as being difficult at best and demonstrably destructive at worst.

The logic behind this anti-religion premise is as follows: history shows that denominational *fault* lines can and in the former Yugoslavia states rather tend to become conflict *front* lines: the wars in former Yugoslavia being brutal examples of this. So, the logic goes, if you eliminate the religious

fault lines you can prevent them from turning into conflict front lines.

By keeping determinedly to a path of secularism, confining religion to the private sphere, you achieve this commendable goal.

This reasoning does not seem compatible with the notion that religion and politics can establish any kind of practical solidarity.

Those who advocate such notion that politics and religion can go together often argue that religious belief is widely misunderstood and that its detractors have failed to grasp its power to do good and indeed to *prevent* conflict.

But the facts of recent history compel us to look and think twice.

In 1991 political and religious leaders in the European Union all tried hard and very much hoped to prevent conflict in former Yugoslavia . But they witnessed this country falling apart and slipping into a very violent conflict, at times inspired by local religion.

Let us face these facts, disagreeable though they may be.

The religious fault lines in former Yugoslavia *did* turn into front lines and the religious communities showed themselves ill-equipped and unwilling to prevent this ghastly metamorphosis.

This failure is a bleak reality with which all of us must deal. Yet I do not believe it establishes a hard and fast rule.

Firstly, because politics and religion are present in every civilization, part of the human condition and the heartbeat of society, not the least in Bosnia and Herzegovina .

Secondly, because, religion and politics can be placed constructively in harness. Political parties in Europe with the word "Christian" in their title have successfully melded 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.

In my own country, the Netherlands , for decades the political system with distinctive Catholic, Protestant and Socialist pillars, effectively produced a prosperous social and economic society, functioning along a process of consensual political decision-making. Today, with changing demographics, we are again looking for ways to adapt, within the rules our consensual system.

So there is a European tradition of incorporating the religious impulse constructively in secular politics.

This is not purely a matter of bending the religious to suit the secular. The religious impulse itself is consistent with the prevalent civic values of Europe.

The Christian, Islamic and Judaic emphasis on the integrity of the individual and the primacy of love are core elements in contemporary European culture.

Yet we must ask: are these elements being communicated effectively by – are they at the forefront of the teaching and activity of – the principal religious communities of South-East Europe?

I here only speak of the situation in Bosnia and Herzegovina where 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 1990s.

I believe that 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.

I believe also that there is a way of judging whether religious leaders have succeeded in freeing themselves from communal associations so as to articulate universal truths that are intrinsic in their theology. It is when they speak out for people of other faiths. When Bosnia and Herzegovina's religious leaders lead the way in rebuilding places of worship *other* than their own; when they see themselves as leaders of people and not of a *particular* people, then their influence will be powerful and constructive. Recently, there have been some positive signals in this respect in Bosnia and Herzegovina.

Ladies and gentlemen,

This is not whimsical. In political terms, it is hard-headed. If my neighbour is victimised on account of religion, *my* civil rights are infringed. If my neighbour's place of worship cannot be rebuilt, *my* right to freedom of worship is infringed. If my neighbour cannot go home, *my* security and that of my family is infringed.

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 engagement that religion can play this role *constructively*.

One aim of today's discussion is "to break new ground in generating solidarity for people and in promoting religion and politics in action".

The most convincing religious impulse is inclusive; the communal impulse, particularly in times of fear and uncertainty, can be exclusive.

There is one thing we need most today in Bosnia and Herzegovina – where reconciliation, as a conference in Belgrade showed two weeks ago – is still far away. We need courageous religious leadership which expresses inclusiveness and can generate solidarity for the general well being.

Thank you.