

Speech by High Representative and EU Special Representative Valentin Inzko At the Islamic Faculty



Promoting Dialogue and Mutual Respect among Communities

Ladies and Gentlemen,

I am very pleased to have this opportunity to visit the Islamic Faculty and speak with students and staff. In the recent past, I have had fruitful and inspiring meetings with Catholic and Orthodox theological faculty members, and I have also had meetings with representatives of other religious groups recently. I hope that, in the same vein, our discussion today can contribute to a continuing and productive dialogue

Let me start with one basic yet crucial observation regarding religious beliefs and religious practice: The more closely we examine any given theological tradition the more we recognise complex patterns of belief and practice. It is also true that these patterns intersect in creative and constructive ways.

This, however, isn't well understood in Bosnia and Herzegovina, where religious affiliation is routinely used simply as a rough and ready designation of social or political outlook.

But the religious impulse is infinitely more complex – and infinitely more important – than that, as I think everyone in this room would agree.

Since it is such an important and such a frequently misunderstood element in society, the way that religion is perceived in Bosnia and Herzegovina needs to be examined in more detail. The issue can usefully be broken up into three areas:

- First, denominational fault lines in society
- Second, inter-denominational relations and relations between organised religions and the state; and
- Third, underlying messages of faith that can have a positive impact.

Denominational fault lines

Let's look at denominational fault lines.

The late Alija Izetbegovic observed that in Bosnia and Herzegovina “everyone has to be something.” This is generally taken to mean that everyone has to be either a Croat or a Serb or a Bosniak, either Catholic, or Orthodox or Muslim.

But this is a very minimalist interpretation of what “being something” means.

For a start, Bosnia and Herzegovina, like every other country in modern Europe, has a sizeable number of citizens who profess no religion at all. In addition to this, a large part of the population comes under the category of “Others”, acknowledging no formal affiliation with any of the three main Constituent Peoples.

Even more importantly, within each of the ethno-religious categories there is a world of diversity.

It is no secret, I think, that I am a Catholic. Well, let me tell you that any Austrian politician who happens to be Catholic cannot be assumed to speak for me just because we tick the same box when asked to state our religion.

I am constantly conscious of how infuriating it must be for citizens of Bosnia and Herzegovina – of whatever group – to have it assumed that politicians of the same group are their default spokespeople; we are all much more complex beings and no one factor can or should be allowed to define us as individuals.

Relations among denominations and with the state

Let me now move to the second point – the relations among denominations and the appropriate relationship between organised religions and the state. The present situation in Bosnia and Herzegovina is obviously a direct consequence of recent history.

During the war, religious figures often found themselves thrown into the role of community spokespeople and community organisers. In wartime conditions, pastoral activity involved attending to the immediate material needs of the community, and often meant speaking up for people who would otherwise have had no voice.

In the post-war period one school of thought holds that the clergy should return to their proper sphere – and leave politics to politicians.

Another school holds that the moral shortcomings of the political elite are so glaringly obvious that religious leaders are honour bound to take an active role and try, within their sphere, to positively influence and to mitigate the negative effects of political failure.

Well, I believe that every citizen should take a hand in reversing the political failure of the last two decades.

And that includes people of faith, whether they happen to be religious leaders or simply members of religious communities.

It also includes people of no religious persuasion – and people from all walks of life, from every profession, from every class, from every educational background.

If there is a particular and specialised role for religious leaders in public life it seems to me that this would surely be to promote dialogue and mutual respect among communities.

In this area the Inter-Religious Council, for example, can play an important role.

The Primacy of Love

But there is, I believe, a more profoundly influential role that religious believers can play in public life, and this brings me to my third point – the underlying messages of faith.

I am very conscious that I am speaking to a group of scholars who are devoting their intellectual endeavours to a greater understanding of the complexity and treasures of Islamic thought. It can only be painful to witness this heritage alluded to in the media and in other public fora in a reductive and clumsily superficial way.

Much that is attributed to Islam ought not to be.

I can identify with this because I am Catholic and much that is attributed to Catholicism ought not to be.

This short-hand use of religious labels in public and political discourse is inaccurate and unhelpful, but that's

not all. The travesty of religious belief which is often taken as the real thing regularly obscures the insights and inspiration that the real thing can bring to public life.

I do not believe that anyone in this room needs to be reminded that underpinning each of the religious traditions that have taken root in Bosnia and Herzegovina is the primacy of love.

Some people say that Bosnia and Herzegovina needs less religion – well, it certainly does *not* need less love.

We are well into campaigning for the October elections, and already we are hearing the familiar mantras of ethnic chauvinism and exclusion. Imagine how different these elections would be if people of faith actively renounced the social and political labels that are attached to them. Imagine how revolutionary these elections would be if people of faith came into the public sphere advocating unashamedly and with conviction the primacy of love and true respect for others.

This is a prospect that I look forward to discussing further with you today.

Thank you