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Civil Society and Education on Human Rights as a tool for promoting religious tolerance

Panel 1

*The best practices of Governments and civil society related to education and training programs as a tool for promotion and the guarantee of religious freedom and interfaith dialogue*

**The Italian Islamic Religious Community**

Yahya Pallavicini

Your Excellency, Minister Giulio Terzi di Sant'Agata, Minister for Foreign Affairs of the Italian Republic, I wish to thank you for your invitation to take part in this event on Religious Freedom which you have promoted. I would furthermore like to consider your project itself and also your invitation as confirmation of the importance of the precious recognition and support which the Italian institutions should offer citizens who represent a religious minority and are united by an organisation which, in Italy and in many other parts of the world, has been operating for over twenty years to safeguard and pass on the universal values and doctrinal teaching of our confessional identity. A lack of such recognition and support would result in our losing the honour and opportunity to convey the idea that the life of the prophets and the work and examples of illuminated intellectuals and true masters of life must continue to inspire the hearts, minds and activities of sincere believers and honest citizens, and promote a distancing from various current forms of instrumentalisation and intolerant fundamentalism.

Your Excellency, Minister Nasser Judeh, Minister for Foreign Affairs of the Kingdom of Jordan, I greet you as the representative of the enlightened Government of the noble Hashemite family. I would like to say that I had the honour to meet His Majesty King Abdullah II and Queen Rania in Rome. In 2010, during a previous meeting of the United Nations, the King of Jordan promoted the organisation of the very important *World Interfaith Harmony Week*, which was unanimously proclaimed by UN General Assembly Resolution A/65/PV.34 and has been actively supported over the last two years also in Italy by the Italian Islamic Religious Community (COREIS).

By way of an example, I would like to recall a presentation in London of the work 'A Sufi Master's Message' written by my father, Sheikh Abd al-Wahid and published by Fons Vitae in the United States and meetings occurring between young Jews, Christians and Muslims in Milan. In February 2013, again coinciding with the World Interfaith Harmony Week, we are organizing a day's seminar in Paris at the premises of the Parliament of the French Republic.

A form of collaboration between the Italian Islamic Religious Community (COREIS) and various authoritative figures of the Kingdom of Jordan was launched even earlier thanks to the generous intervention and friendship of His Royal Highness Prince Ghazi bin Muhammad bin Talal, with whom I shared *The Amman Message* in 2005 and the open letter *A Common Word between*

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*Us and You* in 2007. In 2008, this latter document inspired the first Catholic-Muslim Forum in the Vatican, which I attended together with leading international Muslim scholars and theologians in the presence of Pope Benedict XVI.

The principles set forth in these two documents, which were carefully prepared by a board of international Muslim scholars I am honoured to still be a part of, express and articulate the traditional and orthodox view of Islamic doctrine regarding a question of considerable interest: religious freedom as a fundamental ideal at the level of essential values and in educational activities within each confession and in the promotion of an inter-religious dialogue and concrete action taken to facilitate respectful and peaceful social cohesion.

Your Excellency, Dr Irina Bokova, Director-General of the UNESCO, I am pleased to convey to you the greetings and best wishes of the Director General Abd-al-Aziz Uthman Al Twaijri of the prestigious Islamic Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization.
The ISESCO, with which the Italian Islamic Religious Community (COREIS) signed a bilateral agreement in 1997, has promoted the creation of a Supreme Council of Muslims in the West. I have been confirmed as President of this council, which operates with the intent of safeguarding the authenticity of the religious and cultural heritage of the new generations of Muslims in Europe, facilitating intercultural exchange and collaboration with civil society and the institutions.

I am pleased to present three models that have been successful in inter-religious dialogues and in the formation of a new group of Muslim leaders in Italy and France.

• Imams and Rabbis for Peace. In 2005, at Brussels, the capital of the European Union, a delegation of the Italian Islamic Religious Community (COREIS), led by our founder Sheikh Abd al-Wahid Pallavicini, was invited to represent the Italian Islamic world at a gathering including representatives of Judaism and Islam from other nations. Those present included the Sephardic Chief Rabbi of Israel Bakshi Doron and the Minister for Religious Affairs of the Kingdom of Morocco, Ahmad Tawfiq. Following this event, the Italian Islamic Religious Community (COREIS) began an intense collaboration with the Union of Italian Jewish Communities (UCEI) and the Rabbinical Assembly, jointly organizing a series of public meetings between imams and rabbis in many cities in Italy.
In 2009, the Foundation for Ethnic Understanding (FFEU) invited the Italian Islamic Religious Community to participate in the international program for twinning procedures relating to synagogues and mosques that was initiated in the United States in 2010 and, since that year, we have been participating in the platform of Jewish and Muslim leaders in Europe that was founded in Paris in collaboration with the European Jewish Congress.
In the same year, the President of the Italian Republic, Giorgio Napolitano, donated to young Muslim members of the Italian Islamic Religious Community (COREIS) and to the members of the Italian Union of Jewish Youth (UGEI) a commemorative plaque following the success of the Italian 'Young People and the Future' project implemented within scholastic environments.
Concurrently, the intercultural project aimed at introducing kosher and halal religious certification for food products and which aimed to promote general respect for integration and a process of

internationalization involving Italian enterprises has now reached an advanced stage of implementation thanks to an Inter-institutional Agreement supported by the Italian Minister Franco Frattini that was signed at the Italian Ministry for Foreign Affairs in 2010 (cfr. www.halalitalia.org).

• *Caritas in Veritate*. In 2009, the President of the European Commission José Manuel Barroso invited me, as Vice President of the Italian Islamic Religious Community (COREIS), to join other European religious leaders at a meeting on the contribution of ethics in the governance of the financial and economic crisis. This meeting was the starting point of a new Italian Islamic Religious Community working group that produced a comment on the third chapter of Pope Benedict XVI's encyclical *Caritas in Veritate* entitled 'Fraternity, Economic Development and Civil Society'.

Labour, finance, trade and international relations can once again become tools leading to success and allowing for positive intercultural relations if communities and people are capable of recovering the traditional values of solidarity, subsidiarity and sustainability, avoiding individualism and 'virtualism'.

The Italian Islamic Religious Community (COREIS) and the Italian Christian Union of Entrepreneurs and Managers (UCID) have successfully promoted two editions of a seminar of thematic meetings with interlocutors and leading representatives of the institutions and the world of business and the economy with the intention of forming a new managerial class in Italy and abroad capable of developing relations between the two sides of the Mediterranean, between Europe and the Middle East, fully respecting universal values and interdisciplinary relations between faith and science, tradition and progress and prayer and work in accordance with the principle of St. Benedict, *"ora et labora"*.

• Intra-religious collaboration. The Prophet Muhammad said, "The differences in my community are a manifestation of Mercy". The majority of followers of the Muslim faith in Italy today are represented by first-generation immigrants from various regions of Africa and Asia. Even before the recent phase of immigration, the Italian Islamic Religious Community made efforts to prevent the development of nationalistic ghettos and ideological radicalism, coordinating a network of communities of Muslims capable of recognizing in our public work the signs of necessary adaptation to modern times and to the contexts of contemporary Western society.

Showing no oriental-type artifices and with no form of legal revolution, an initial organization of Italian Muslim citizens has begun to collaborate with Muslim brothers and sisters from Morocco, Senegal, Pakistan, Tunisia, Bosnia, Egypt, Turkey and Bangladesh to form a new generation of religious representatives capable of satisfying a need to address shortcomings relating to cultural issues and aspects of worship within the Islamic world in Italy.

In France, at the request of the State, we have taken part in the design and implementation of a training course specifically aimed at imams and public administration officials through a partnership combining the Institut des Hautes Etudes Islamiques (IHEI, www.ihei-asso.org), the *Institut Français de Civilisation Musulmane* of the Great Mosque of Lyon, the University of Lyon and the Catholic University in the same city. On the one hand, this type of training aims to provide operators in public administration and the stakeholders involved with a better comprehension of diversity, especially with respect to Muslim culture, and, on the other hand, to provide religious

leaders and those responsible for Islamic associations with indispensable knowledge of the laws of the Republic and of the French social context.
The originality of this project consists in addressing these needs in a structured and coordinated manner, emphasizing cooperation and complementarity. In addition, the project draws together the academic sphere and representatives of the communities involved and aims to contribute towards consolidation of a French Islamic community determined to fully accept and respect the laws of the Republic and become well integrated in French society.

The Italian Constitution offers every religious confession - without exception and with no form of discrimination - the right to practice and organize religious activities in both private and public contexts. Many religious denominations (Catholic, Protestant and Orthodox Christians, Jews, Buddhists and Hindus) have already acquired or are about to obtain recognition and a specific regulation approved to ensure the highest levels of dignity in the practice of their faith. Unfortunately, the Islamic confession in Italy has not yet acquired such a form of recognition. To achieve this goal the Italian Islamic Religious Community (COREIS) has on the one hand strived to ensure a higher level of awareness on the part the institutions. Secondly, it has taken steps to promote a greater sense of maturity within the Muslim community itself, thereby impeding interferences and curbing the negative intentions of certain popular agitators, who, purportedly acting in the name of Islam, demand that everyone should accept exclusive and formalistic interpretations. Attempts have also been made, in parallel, to curb the actions of a few Italian politicians who would expect Muslims to accept secular rationalist views or, alternatively, a form of social alienation motivated by the pretext of the distance of the Islamic world from a sacred, national ideal.
As a representative of the second generation of Italian Muslims, I can bear witness to the extent to which the universal and timeless vision of the prophets Abraham, Moses, Jesus and Muhammad, together with the example and work of intellectuals and true masters, such as Maimonides, Saint Francis and San Bernard, Averroes and Avicenna, Al-Farabi and al-Ghazali, Ibn Arabi and Jalaluddin Rumi, continues to inspire our sense of responsibility and the lives of thousands of Muslim believers in Italy.
We hope that very soon such a specific representation of ecumenical sensitivity may at least be recognized at the level of historical heritage, the legal system and national culture without any form of diplomatic conditioning deriving from current international crises or confusion stemming from foreign trade interests. It is only this kind of recognition that will allow Muslims in Italy and Europe to instil a spiritual and fraternal orientation in fruitful relations existing between different peoples, between the various faiths and between cultures originating in different parts of the world. We should reflect on the possibility that the earth may be necessarily linked to the heavens and, as was suggested in Shakespeare's Hamlet, "there are more things in heaven and earth than are dreamed of in your philosophy." All beings must naturally honour the Lord of the worlds and the Merciful One, in transcendence and in immanence.

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