

SECULARISATION, INTER-RELIGIOUS DIALOGUE AND DEMOCRATISATION IN THE SOUTHERN MEDITERRANEAN

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WORKING PAPER NO. 4

OF THE

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THEODOROS KOUTROUBAS*

ABSTRACT

The paper discusses the relation between religion and politics in the Southern Mediterranean and its consequences for the democratisation and peaceful co-existence of the different confessional communities of the region. Its aims are to draw attention to the mechanisms responsible for the perpetuation of an “umbilical cord” between religious and political discourse in the region, to highlight the dangers this could mean for Europe’s multicultural society model and to propose secularisation and inter-religious dialogue as a tool for the acceleration of the democratisation process.

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The links between religion and identity in the Southern Mediterranean

Many students of the Southern Mediterranean are intrigued by the close interconnection between identity, culture and religion in the geographical space that has witnessed the emergence of the three great monotheistic faiths. And even though one may be critical of the tendency of several scholars, reinforced by the climate that followed the terrorist attacks of September 2001, to refer to theology in order to explain the region's aspirations or shortcomings,¹ it would be superficial to undertake any analysis of the current political, social or even economic situation in the Southern Mediterranean without taking into consideration the important role religions have played (and continue to play) in the shaping of the identities, values and expectations of its peoples.

The unique links between Islam and the Arab language and culture and those, equally unique, of Judaism with the Hebrew language and culture, are a fact acknowledged by even the most secular intellectuals.² As for the region's smaller, and less well known in the West, Christian component, it is also true that, despite the fact that most of its constituents are today Arabic-speaking and often highlight their communities' contribution to Arab cultural life, especially during the *nahda* period,³ references to the pre-Islamic Coptic, Phoenician, Hellenic or Aramaic past are very common in the discourse of their leaders and intellectuals.⁴ At the same

¹ Jacques Rollet's (University of Rouen) article in the Belgian newspaper *Le Soir* of 09 October 2001, reproaching French political scientists with neglecting theology because they are too much centred in their sociological analysis of the Islamic world is an eloquent example of this tendency. See also the article of Francis Fukuyama in *Le Monde* of 18 October 2001 and the interview of V.S. Naipaul in *La Libération* of 6 December 2001, both viewing "holy war", intolerance and authoritarianism as inherent characteristics of Islam and of Muslim societies.

² Michel 'Aflaq, main theorist and founder of the secular, left-wing, nationalist Ba'ath party, thought that "The Arab nation has been formed by a great historical experience, the creation by the Prophet Muhammad of the religion of Islam and the society which embodied it". According to 'Aflaq, who was born a Greek-Orthodox Christian, "This experience belonged not only to Arab Muslims, but to all Arabs who appropriated it as their own, and regarded it as the basis of their claim to have a special mission in the world and a right to independence and unity". A. Hourani (1991, *A History of the Arab Peoples*, Warner Books, New York, p.405. On the other hand, Izio Rosenman (CNRS) observes that, "The Jewish religion has been throughout the centuries the container of the Jewish identity and memory. It is undoubtedly this millenary tradition, rich in ethical experiences, that continues to inspire today secular and non-secular Jews, as it inspires a part of the Western World as well". I. Rosenman, "Juifs laïques: du religieux au culturel", in *Panoramiques*, Paris, 4th trimestre 1992.

³ See J-P. Valognes (1994), *Vie et mort des Chrétiens d'Orient*, Fayard, Paris and T.Mitri, "Qui sont les Chrétiens d'Orient"? in *Version originale*, Paris, April 1998.

time, most Oriental Christians continue to be more open to influences coming from the “co-religionist” West⁵ than their Muslim compatriots.

It might be tempting, and in fact some succumb to the temptation, to deduce from these evident links uniting religions with the three dominant cultures and identities of the Eastern Mediterranean, that the region constitutes a “world apart”, untouched by the secular tendencies dominating its nearby European neighbourhood and characterised by a unique precedence of the spiritual over the profane in all aspects of life.⁶ However, Southern Mediterranean people are by no means pre-determined to be more spiritual or more religious than their Northern neighbours and co-religionists. Religions, ideas and ideologies do not exist independently from the people who adhere to them, nor can history be explained by theology. A close look at other regions of the planet is sufficient to demonstrate the existence of tight links between identity and religion in several peoples. This phenomenon is often due to a need for self identity and differentiation from a neighbouring “other”, especially in cases where the cultural proximity with this “other” and the competitive relations between the two, can seriously challenge the specificity that a community is used to consider as fundamental of its own conception of “self”.⁷ Identities are in fact social constructions built in order to distinguish the “self” from the “other” and thus they do not exist *per se* but are constantly re-inventing themselves in a framework of an ongoing interaction with the “other”.⁸

⁴ See for example the interview of Georges Rahmé (Lebanese University) in *Solidarité – Orient*, Ath, July – September 1997, and the covering of the 5th Colloquium on the “Syriak patrimony” (Lebanon, August 1997) in the same issue. C.H. Dagher argues that the “Phoenician” historical and cultural claim was the “political embodiment of the national aspirations” of the Maronites “and would span from the founding of “Greater Lebanon” (1920) to the post-independence years and even until the onset of the troubles” (the Lebanese civil war) C.H. Dagher (2000), *Bring Down the Walls: Lebanon’s Post-War Challenge*, St. Martin’s Press, New York, p. 21. See also X. de Planhol (1997), *Minorités en Islam*, Flammarion, Paris, on the tendencies for political autonomy in the past amongst the Maronites and the Copts.

⁵ According to Professor Selim Abou, rector of the famous St. Joseph University of Lebanon, “For Christians, Western civilisation, even in its most secular aspects, remains the inevitable depository of their anthropological and spiritual references”. C.H. Dagher, op. cit., p. 23.

⁶ “Religion is present on this land, it is present in the mentalities, in the traditions, in the collective reactions, more than elsewhere” writes Gabriel de Broglie in the preface of the acta of the colloquium “Le facteur religieux dans les conflits du Moyen-Orient” (Fondation Singer-Polignac, Paris, 1999). Such an approach is not solely adopted by Western scholars or commentators. Many among the spiritual leaders of the three dominant religions of the Eastern Mediterranean take pride in this “central role religion plays in society – in shaping, developing and advancing society”, to quote Dr. Habib Badr, Pastor of the National Evangelical Church of Beirut (“Divinity, Diplomacy and Development”, unpublished manuscript). For several of them, one of the basic points critically differentiating the Southern from the Western coast of the Mediterranean is respect for religion and religion-based traditions: see S. Radi, “L’image de l’Occident chez les prêchers Musulmans et Coptes”, *Egypte – Monde Arabe*, Cairo, 2nd and 3^d trimester 1997.

⁷ The link between the Arab identity and Islam, for example, can be compared with the one connecting Roman Catholicism to the Polish and the Irish identity, both forged in an historical context dominated by a more powerful and culturally close neighbour (the Russians and the English). Other historical conditions presenting a number of similarities with those that connected Islam and Judaism to the Arab and Hebrew people’s conception of self-identity during the process of nation-making, are those that led to the linking of Greek-Orthodoxy to the Hellenic or the Russian identity.

⁸ See for example the classical work of F. Barth (1969), *Ethnic Groups and Boundaries*, Little, Brown and Co., Boston.

A religion-based political discourse

Notwithstanding the above, it is difficult to deny that religion, as a constitutive element of identity, has unavoidably been and continues to be an important component of the conflict(s) dividing the people of the Southern Mediterranean. At the same time, it is also true that after a period of relative absence, a religion-based discourse, often quite radical, has made a spectacular comeback in the regional political scene, especially after the success of the Iranian Islamic revolution of 1979-80 and the failure of the secular-minded socialist, Ba’thist or Nassirist regimes to fulfil their promises for development, social justice and restoration of national dignity, traumatised by the Arab defeats of 1948-49⁹ and 1967. This comeback of religion has coincided with a reverse of the (already weak) democratic *acquis* and the sclerosis of regimes in several of the Southern Mediterranean states¹⁰ without certainly being the exclusive reason of this evolution. More recently, the frustrations caused by the second Gulf War and the collapse of the Israeli-Palestinian peace process that followed it, along with the continuing socio-economic shortcomings of the region, have gained new audiences for political groups claiming a (more or less) fundamentalist religious adherence, and have further accentuated the centuries-old tendency of local authoritarian regimes to use religion as a means of legitimisation.¹¹

In Europe, and in general in the West, a lot has been written since the beginning of this *sacralisation* of political discourse in the Southern Mediterranean in order to explain the phenomenon and to attempt an evaluation of its possible evolution.¹² In the following pages, we will try to highlight some of the less-often mentioned mechanisms that perpetuate the maintenance of an “umbilical cord” between identity and religion in the region; to stress the impact this link has in local social and political life and in Europe; and to discuss possible ways to use religion as a factor of democratisation and regional integration.

⁹ The 1948-49 Arab-Israeli war is still referred to by many in the Arab world as “Al-Nakba”, the disaster.

¹⁰ Political evolution in Algeria, Tunisia, Egypt, Syria, Iraq, Jordan and even Turkey can provide several examples of the above. Georges Corm, former Lebanese Minister of Finances, argues that the Iranian revolution, “called religious”, has paradoxically served to cement for a period the authoritarian Arab regimes, too scared by the subversive power of the Khomeinist ideology (see G. Corm, 1997), *Le Proche-Orient éclaté – II*, La Découverte, Paris, pp. 34-44.

¹¹ Thus for example, at the level of symbols, the very secular Saddam Hussein has added the phrase “God is the greatest” on the Iraqi national flag, whilst the political discourse on Palestinian liberation is becoming the more and more “Islamised” (see for example: *Le Monde Diplomatique*, March 2001). The fundamentalist views defended by some of the religious parties in Israel and the use of a radical discourse by some of the leaders of the Christian communities (notably the Coptic one) prove that the phenomenon concerns all the national / religious/ cultural families of the region and is not limited to its Islamic constituent.

¹² It would be impossible to mention here all that has been written on the “comeback” of religion in Arab and Israeli societies and especially on the emergence of a radical political Islamic discourse. We believe however that it is interesting to note that not all of this literature adopts a pessimistic view of this evolution. Some of its (Western) analysts have in fact considered the phenomenon as fertile, as an indispensable step towards modernity (see F. Burgat (1995), *L’islamisme en face*, La Découverte, Paris), whilst for some others, the re-Islamisation of Muslim societies is viewed as a culturally different way to reach modernity (see, for example, L. Binder (1988), *Islamic Liberalism: A Critique of Development Ideologies*, The University of Chicago Press, Chicago, and J.L. Esposito (1995), *The Islamic Threat. Myth or Reality?*, Oxford University Press, Oxford).

Most of the analysts of the interaction between religion and politics in Europe's Southern and South-eastern border,¹³ have identified three elements as the principle cause for the (re-) emergence of religion as a key player on local political scenes:

- The failure of the region's secular regimes to combat corruption and ensure decent socio-economic conditions of life for their growing populations;¹⁴
- The excessively authoritarian nature of several of these regimes, in the context of which religion becomes a means of legitimisation for the rulers whilst providing at the same time the most important if not the only available space of freedom for the ruled;¹⁵ and
- A feeling of "collective loss of dignity"¹⁶ due to the humiliation and marginalisation of the Arab world after its repeated failures to assist the Palestinian cause.

At the same time, the ongoing frustration due to the lack of security within the Israeli borders, and the fear of persecution due to the rising popularity of movements calling for the establishment of Islamic governments based on the *shari'a*, could be proposed as (non-exclusive) causes of the re-sacralisation of the Jewish and Oriental Christian political scenes respectively.¹⁷

Notwithstanding how pertinent such analysis might be with regards to the causes of the repositioning of religion in the centre of the regional political debate, it is important to keep in view the fact that Judaism, Islam and Christianity have always been used in the history of the Mediterranean as banners in order to mobilise energies and people, legitimise expansions and wars and boost community loyalties.¹⁸ Being in the very heart of the fundamental myths of

¹³ We are referring of course here to those who have not opted for a theological explanation of the phenomenon.

¹⁴ Burhan Ghalioun eloquently refers to this failure of the secular Arab regimes as "la modernité trahie": B. Ghalioun (1997), *Islam et Politique, la modernité trahie*, La Découverte, Paris. In his recent book on Islam and modernity, Bernard Lewis observes that "these regimes have failed every test except survival" (!), B. Lewis (2002), *What Went Wrong? The Clash between Islam and Modernity in the Middle East*, Weidenfeld & Nicolson, London, p. 158.

¹⁵ See for example the interesting article of Fethi Benslama (Université Paris VII) in *Le Monde* of 28 November 2001, in which the author denounces the manipulation of religion by the ruling families of the wealthy Gulf monarchies in order to perpetuate authoritarian forms of government in the Arab world. Also see G. Corm, op. cit.

¹⁶ G. Corm, op. cit., p. 205.

¹⁷ The crucial importance of the religious parties in the Israeli political scene and the raise of the importance of religious leadership within the Maronite and Coptic communities are some of the most visible effects of the re-sacralisation of these communities' political life.

¹⁸ In his very controversial work *The Clash of Civilisations and the Remaking of World Order*, Samuel Huntington observes that "from its origins Islam expanded by conquest and when the opportunity existed Christianity did also. The parallel concepts of "jihad" and "crusade" not only resemble each other but distinguish these two faiths from other major world religions" (S. Huntington (1998), *The Clash of Civilisations and the Remaking of World Order*, Touchstone, London, p. 211). Judaism on the other hand has served as a rallying cry for all the combats of the Hebrew nation, eloquently described in the Bible, for the conquest of the "Promised Land". It has also been extensively used by the secularist Zionists in the struggle for the (re)creation of the State of Israel. Zeev Sternhell (The Hebrew University of Jerusalem), observes in fact, that, even though Zionists have tried to translate Jewish specificity into political and modern (secular) terms, they were still based on a Jewish national, historical, religious identity, in a framework where liberal universalism or Marxism had no significance. Sternhell argues that Zionism is primarily a cultural nationalism, "a nationalism with religious connotation, where secularism has always been very superficial. This explains why the

the Arab, Jewish and at a lesser extent Christian¹⁹ constituents of the local mosaic, religion was in fact the surest means to ensure wide support for causes that rarely had anything to do with spiritual issues.²⁰ The Southern Mediterranean has never in fact experienced movements similar to the great philosophical and revolutionary changes that reshaped dramatically the nature of relations between religion and identity and religion and politics in Europe and the West.²¹

The millet system

Ruled by the Ottoman Empire,²² most of the region has lived until practically the end of World War I²³ under a unique system of government, the basis of which were “nations” (*millets*) defined by their religious affiliation. Members of each of these *millet* were governed by their own religious leaders and laws/traditions as regards to all matters touching their personal and family status, and were enjoying a broad communal autonomy in exchange for their allegiance to the state and their acceptance of the dominant position of the Muslim community (*millet – I hakime*’), along with the limitations and discriminations that this dominant position meant for their own status as citizens/subjects.²⁴

The impact of this system, which was applied without interruption for several centuries in the biggest part of the Southern Mediterranean,²⁵ is still immense in most of the countries that

symbiosis of secular with religious Zionism has seemed to be so natural”, J. Lenglet-Ajchenbaum & Y-M. Ajchenbaum(2000), *Les Judaïsmes*, Gallimard, Paris.

¹⁹ Pre-Christian past (Pharaonic Egyptian, Assyrian, Phoenician) is still quite present in the fundamental myths of the Coptic, Syriak-Chaldean and Maronite communities respectively.

²⁰ A. Hourani, op. cit. argues that, “Whether they lived within the Ottoman Empire or outside its frontiers, those who professed faith in Islam and lived through the medium of the Arabic language had something in common which was deeper than political allegiance or shared interests. Among them, and between them and those who spoke Turkish or Persian or the other languages of the Muslim world there was a common sense of belonging to an enduring and unshaken world created by the final revelation of God through the Prophet Muhammad”.

²¹ The Renaissance, the *Lumières*, socialism, Marxism and the French and Russian revolutions had only a very limited effect in North-African and Middle Eastern societies and states. See B. Lewis (1995), *The Middle East: 2000 Years of History from the Rise of Christianity to the Present Day*, Weidenfeld & Nicolson, London, pp. 305-331.

²² Exactly like the medieval European states, and its own predecessor, the Eastern Roman (Byzantine) Empire, the Ottoman State was officially proclaiming itself to be a religion-based entity, “with the God-given duty of maintaining and applying the Holy Law and extending the area in which it prevailed”. B. Lewis (1995), op. cit., p. 305.

²³ Western-inspired attempts to modernise the Ottoman State, such as the *Tanzimat*, or the (quite secular) constitution of 1876 had only a very relative and short-lived success.

²⁴ B. Lewis (1995), op. cit., pp. 321-322. Besides the Muslim, the Christian (Greek-Orthodox) and the Jewish were the most important of the millets of the Empire. The successive divisions of the Christian communities, however, mainly due to the missionary activity of the Roman Catholic Church (assisted by Western powers) among the Oriental Christians, led to the establishment of new *millets* in order to franchise the members of the “uniate” churches from the authority of the Greek-Orthodox Patriarch.

²⁵ As well as in the European provinces of the Empire. It is interesting to note that the article 42 of the Lausanne Treaty (1923) guaranteeing family and personal status law “in accordance with the customs of (the) minorities” is still applying with regards to the Muslim minority of Western Thrace (Greece), making the latter the only community within the EU borders that still lives under the millet system! See Th. Koutroubas (2001), *Trapped in Enemy Territory or Pilots towards Regional Integration? A*

emerged from the dissolution of the Ottoman Empire. With the notable exception of the Empire's most direct successor, the secular Republic of Turkey,²⁶ variations of the *millet* system continue to apply nowadays in the majority of South-Eastern Mediterranean States, including Israel.

In practice, and in the framework of the local mosaic-like societies, the *millet's* direct consequences are:

- The establishment of inflexible frontiers between religion-based communities;
- The embodiment of religious authorities with a concrete judicial power over their folk; and
- The perpetuation of sectarian loyalties within the society and the functioning of religion itself as the hard core of exclusive identities.

Thus, the system constitutes a major obstacle towards the implementation of a common concept of citizenship based on civic values and encourages the persistence of traditional and potentially conflict-generating forms of identity perception²⁷ as well as clientelistic relations between community and state leaderships. It is obvious that such a system, besides contributing to the further *sacralisation* of political discourse, leaves very little, or no space at all for the dissemination of ideas contradicting sectarian "orthodoxies" or considering religion in general to be a spiritual and private matter rather than a community and political adhesion.

Religious leaderships and political discourse

Vested with powers that far exceed their spiritual authority, religious leaderships in the region are thus called (and are expected) to play a particularly important role at the social and political level. However, with the exception of the Christian communities, which are traditionally organised on a hierarchical basis topped by a clergy and, in most cases, by a supreme head centralising loyalties and guaranteeing the uniformity and the "orthodoxy" of the Churches' teaching and public discourse, neither the Muslim nor the Jewish communities recognise clerics or other leaderships with a claim to a "sacred" legitimacy.²⁸ *Ulama* and rabbis are in fact considered to be simple students and interpreters of the Holy Law without any sacerdotal functions. And even though some among them, like the Imam of the famous Al-Azhar Islamic University of Cairo or the Grand-Rabbis, are enjoying a broader recognition for the "orthodoxy" of their religious views and judgements by the community, their authority

Challenge for Democracy in the South Eastern Mediterranean Region, European University Institute Working Papers, RSC No. 2001/19, Badia Fiesolana, San Domenico.

²⁶ Officially secular, the Turkish Republic continues however to exercise a very active control over ministers of religion and reserves itself the right to veto the investiture of the leaders of its religious minorities.

²⁷ Goncourt award-winner Lebanese author Amin Maalouf calls this reduction of identity to one of adherence as a result of the confessional millet system of "deadly identities". He argues that this concept "installs human beings in a partial, sectarian, intolerant, dominating and often suicidal attitude, frequently transforming them into murderers or partisans of murderers... Their vision of the world is biased and distorted", A. Maalouf (1998), *Les Identités Meurtrières*, Grasset, Paris, p.26.

²⁸ Judaism had a hierarchically organised clergy until the second destruction of the Temple and the suppression of the Jewish revolt by the Roman emperor Adrian (132-135 Common Era). For some scholars, the hierarchical organisation of the Iranian *Shi'a 'ulama*, especially after the establishment of the position of supreme spiritual leader by the Constitution of the Islamic Republic, can be compared to that of a clergy. The abolition of the caliphate by Kemal Ataturk in 1924, deprived Sunni Islam of its only remnant of a personalised supreme authority.

cannot be compared with that of the Christian bishops who possess concrete administrative and sacerdotal power over their fellow clerics and faithful.

In the case of Islam, practice has proved, at least in the years following the collapse of the Ottoman Empire, that this lack of a “sacred” authority, instead of facilitating the evolution of religion into a personal, intimate spiritual conviction, coupled by a never-ending effort to seize its most profound meanings (*ijtihad*), as many say it was meant to do,²⁹ has instead turned it into an easy prey to all kind of authoritarian regimes in need of legitimisation, thus facilitating its manipulation for political purposes. This absence of a central authority holding the power to define religious “orthodoxy” and to sanction “heretical” discourse, makes it in fact impossible to credibly and authoritatively legitimise the labelling of any exegesis of the Koranic message as false, notwithstanding how fundamentalist this exegesis might be. Political opposition groups have quickly understood the rallying force that religion could represent in such a context. At the same time, local governments lacking democratic credentials are using the fundamentalist views of religious-minded political movements as an excuse in order to reinforce their control of the nominations of Muslim preachers³⁰ and to put their sermons and explanations of the holy law at the service of their own strictly profane political causes.

It is interesting to note here that this instrumentalisation of Islam is not without consequences for Europe, where Muslims constitute today one of the largest religious communities, mainly resulting from immigration. The reluctance of European governments to provide Islam with a legal framework similar to that applying to the other religious communities within their borders³¹ and the lack of institutions of Islamic theological formation in Europe, have enabled Northern African and Middle Eastern authorities to extend their control of religious teaching over Muslim communities in the old continent.³² At the same time, this absence of a Europe-based (and Europe-minded) Islamic religious infrastructure has also paved the way for supporters of fundamentalist approaches of religion, the teachings of whom contribute to the continuation of the European Muslim communities’ social marginalisation.³³ The multiple socio-economic issues facing immigrant communities are of course a major cause of the vulnerability of a number of Western Muslims to religion-based radical discourse.

²⁹ See for example B. Ghalioun, *op. cit.*, pp. 197-208.

³⁰ The programme launched by the Egyptian government in 1993 in order to prevent Islamists from using mosques for the propagation of their ideas is an example of this tendency. In the framework of this programme, a law was adopted in order to make it illegal to preach without the authorisation of the Ministry for Religious Affairs. This action was severely criticised by many ‘*ulama*, who noted that traditionally no one needs an authorisation to preach in the Muslim community (see S. Radi, *op. cit.*).

³¹ A reluctance probably due to the thought that the presence of Islamic communities was provisional, their members expected to return to their homelands after a period of working as immigrants. See T. Ramadan, “Les musulmans du Vieux Continent sortent de l’isolement”, in *Manière de Voir* 48, *Le Monde diplomatique*, November-December 1999.

³² See for example *Le Monde*, 30 November 2001, for a description of the attempts of the Moroccan and Algerian governments to continue their control over French Islamic communities after the decision of the French government to create a single body, the Conseil Français du Culte Musulman, to represent Islam to the public authorities.

³³ See for example the interview of the Mufti of Marseilles, Soheib Bencheikh, in *International Herald Tribune* of 30 November 2001, in which he denounces the influence of Islamic fundamentalist groups over Muslim institutions in France, where “the vast majority of the Muslim community is committed to integration into French society on the basis of respect and understanding.”

On the other hand, the extreme fragmentation of the Christian communities made them also easier to control and manipulate in the context of *millet*-like systems and/or authoritarian regimes, despite the highly hierarchical organisation of most of them. And in this case, experience has proved that the modern character of the general provisions of the majority of the regional constitutions, guaranteeing freedom of religion and equality of rights for all citizens, did not prevent the persistence of *millet* practices, such as the right of the State to name, confirm or revoke the investiture of religious authorities.³⁴ Directly answerable to the State, Christian leaderships have to constantly prove their loyalty, and that of their community/Church, to the government, in order to maintain their communities' internal autonomy and their own State-granted position and privileges. Furthermore, the *re-sacralisation* of political discourse, the popularity of movements claiming the establishment of theocratic regimes (with all this signifies for religious minorities) and the need of several regimes to "prove" their religious loyalties as a reaction to the above, has not been helpful for the evolution of minority rights in general in the region. This situation has also accentuated the tendency of several Christian leaderships to provide more secular-minded authoritarian regimes with unconditional support, considering them to be less dangerous for their communities' interests than their fundamentalist opponents.³⁵ At the same time, the guarantees that the perpetuation of *millet*-like systems provide for the privileges and the authority of religious leaders as incontestable community heads made several of them reluctant to work for the system's change,³⁶ and that despite the fact that State confessionalism and segregation on the basis of religious beliefs are officially denounced by "sister" churches in the West.

It is worth noting that in the past Europe had often used these communities as an excuse in order to acquire economic and political privileges and influence in the region.³⁷ These

³⁴ The current refusal of the Israeli government to recognise the investiture of Irinaios I as Patriarch of the Greek-Orthodox, Arab-speaking community of Israel, Jordan and the Occupied Territories more than one year after his election, despite the acknowledgement of the legitimacy of this election by all Greek-Orthodox Churches world-wide and by the Jordanian and Palestinian Authority governments, illustrates the persistence of such practises even within the most democratic Southern-Mediterranean states. It is interesting to note that in many countries of the region, Israel and Turkey included, the government also reserves the right to approve the list of eligible candidates for a position of supreme religious leader.

³⁵ The speeches of the Patriarch of the Chaldean Church, Mgr. Rafael Bidawid, representing the biggest Christian community in Iraq, before, during and after the second Gulf war, are eloquent examples of the above: "Your media have demonised him (Saddam Hussein). They have not understood his psychology nor that of the Iraqi people. This man is seeking the good of his country and of the Arab world. ... (Freedom of religion) is better guaranteed in our part of the world than in yours (the West). What rights remain to the believers in Europe, where divorce, abortion and homosexuality are encouraged? Iraq is a secular State. Our leader (rais) goes to the mosque with his court (sic), but he is of Christian origin"!! *Le Vif/L'Express*, 20 March 1998.

³⁶ Pleading for the maintenance of confessionalism in Lebanon, the rector of St. Joseph University, Selim Abou, a Roman Catholic priest himself, argues, for example, in favour of a "differentiated citizenship", based on individual freedom, the equality of citizens and, last but not least "the institutional recognition of the citizens' communal and cultural affiliations" as opposed to a uniform citizenship. C. Dagher, op. cit., p. 23.

³⁷ For a detailed history of Europe's relations with these communities, see J-P Valognes, op. cit. Often secular at home, European powers have played the card of protection of Christian co-religionists in the Southern Mediterranean in order to acquire economic control within the Ottoman space. The ceremonial links of several European consulates in Jerusalem with the local Christian authorities are

interventions of European powers in the Middle East officially aiming to protect Oriental Christians have discredited the latter in the eyes of their Muslim compatriots and have generated distrust and even violence between religious communities.³⁸ Today, several among the Southern Mediterranean Christian intellectuals are warning against the negative consequences the Western-born movement to demand reciprocity of treatment between Muslims in Europe and the Western World on one hand and Oriental Christians on the other hand, would have for the latter, in a socio-political context marked by the rise of fundamentalism and the politicisation of religious discourse.³⁹ At the same time, the intensive and increasing efforts of North American fundamentalist Christian movements to influence US foreign policy in favour of Israel risk discrediting Oriental Christians in the eyes of their Muslim compatriots, further deepening religion-based hatred in the region.⁴⁰

Mainly now limited to Israel, the Jewish communities of the Southern Mediterranean⁴¹ do not face the same problems regarding state control and censorship of religious ministers as their Islamic and Christian counterparts. However, the (non-secular) Israeli state continues to apply the *millet* system exactly as inherited by the Ottoman Empire and conserved during the British mandate⁴² with all the above-described consequences this form of socio-political organisation has for inter-community relations, state-church dynamics, and democracy itself.⁴³ At the same time, and despite of the existence of several progressive schools of thought within contemporary Judaism,⁴⁴ religious affairs in Israel regarding the Jewish community are

nowadays amusing relics of this era, specially in what regards the religious obligations of the Consul of the very secular (and often anti-clerical) French Republic! See *Le Monde* of 16 November 1999.

³⁸ See Y. Courbage & Ph. Fargues (1997), *Chrétiens et Juifs dans l'Islam arabe et turc*, Payot, Paris, pp. 170-181.

³⁹ See for example, T. Mitri, "Justice, Droits de l'Homme, Dignité nationale: Un enjeux pour les Chrétiens et les Musulmans dans le monde", in *Musulmans et Chrétiens, Politiques d'Accueil dans les Terres d'Origine et d'Immigration*, Bajad, Paris, 1999.

⁴⁰ See Bertrand Dufourcq in the acta of the colloquium "Le facteur religieux dans les conflits du Moyen-Orient", op. cit.

⁴¹ One of the consequences of the creation of the State of Israel was the almost complete dismantlement of North African and Middle Eastern Jewish communities who used to be particularly prosperous and creative in the years before World War II. According to Y. Courbage & Ph. Fargues, op. cit., pp. 262, these communities represent today the 56% of the population of Israel.

⁴² See J. Algazy, "Ces hommes en noir en Israel", in *Manière de Voir 48, Le Monde diplomatique*, November-December 1999. See also J-P Valognes, op. cit., p. 575.

⁴³ In an interview published in *Le Soir* of 9 April 1998, Knesset member Azmi Bishara, an Arab-Israeli, describes the absurd situations such a confession-based system can create: "And me, a 'Christian', an atheist, I must discuss in the Knesset the issue of who can be considered a Jew, which law on conversion is the best... Theology, but theology that determines who can become an Israeli citizen." The Nazareth mosque issue, related to the permission granted by the Israeli authorities to Nazareth Muslims for the construction of a mosque in a site very close to the Marian shrine venerated by the Catholic Arabic community of the city, is an eloquent example of the perverse dynamics between state and religious communities created by a millet-like system. In the context of the tension this decision of the Israeli authorities has generated between Muslims and Christians in Nazareth, the leaders of all Christian communities in the country have denounced the government's authorisation to build the mosque as an attempt to divide Israeli-Arabs over confessional issues. See *Le Monde*, 25 November 1999.

⁴⁴ Notably those of Reformed and Conservative Judaism, to which belongs the majority of the numerous American Jewish community. See J. Lenglet-Ajchenbaum & Y-M. Ajchenbaum, op. cit., pp. 256-262.

administered by the ultra-conservative orthodox rabbinate. The latter stands for a very exclusive definition of Judaism and uses its public authority in order to condone practises aiming to give the state a completely theocratic character, and to encourage discrimination against “heretical” Jews and non-Jewish citizens alike.⁴⁵ The rise of the importance of political parties claiming adherence to radical forms of Judaism and the use of religious discourse by state authorities in order to support national causes,⁴⁶ proves that despite the incontestable exercise of democratic freedoms severed elsewhere in the region, the state of Israel does share the same problems with the rest of the Southern Mediterranean as regards the rise of religious fundamentalism and the *sacralisation* of political discourse. This general *sacralisation* of political discourse in the region, in the context of sectarianism, inter-community animosity and mistrust characterising *millet*-based societies, is further embittering the ongoing violent conflict between Israelis and Palestinians since the launching of the second intifada,⁴⁷ thus weakening chances for its resolution.⁴⁸

A threat for Europe

The recent increase of violent incidents between religious and ethnic communities in the West, especially after the events of September 2001 and the escalation of horror in the Middle

⁴⁵ See J. Algazy, *op. cit.* The long battle (11 years) of women for the right to hold group services at the Western Wall (under official regulation, carrying a penalty of up to six months in prison, they were only allowed to pray there individually), and the reactions provoked among the orthodox religious establishment by the Israeli Supreme Court’s decision to grant this right, is an eloquent example of how influential the position of the orthodox rabbinate can be within the state of Israel. See *International Herald Tribune*, 23 May 2000.

⁴⁶ The welcoming speech of Israeli President Weizman to Pope John-Paul II during his official visit to Tel Aviv in March 2000 is an example of the tendency of Israeli secular authorities to use religious discourse in order to support national causes: “Many generations have passed since the beginning of our people’s history, yet they seem to us like a short time. Only 200 generations since the emergence on the stage of history of a man called Abraham who left his home and native land and went to a place which is today this, my country. Only 150 generations have passed from the pillar of the fire that signalled the redemption of the Exodus from Egypt until the pillars of smoke that signalled the destruction of the Holocaust. Your Holiness, you are arriving this evening in Jerusalem, the city of peace, the capital of the State of Israel... it is the city of the judges of Israel, the kings of Israel and the prophets of Israel, the capital and source of pride of the State of Israel”. See the web site of the Franciscan Custody of the Holy Land (www.custodia@netvision.net.il).

⁴⁷ It is significant that even the name of the second intifada (*Al-Aqsa*) has a strong religious connotation (the “Dome of the Rock”, one of the major holy shrines of the Muslim religion). See *Le Monde diplomatique*, March 2001, *op. cit.*

⁴⁸ Yasser Arafat’s frequent references to the second intifada as a *jihād* (see for example *International Herald Tribune* of 13 November 2000, “Arafat Extols ‘Noble Cause’ of Holy War”) and the declarations of Israel’s public authority-vested chief rabbis forbidding the giving up of Israeli sovereignty over the Temple Mount (*International Herald Tribune*, 5 January 2001), are examples of the impasse such a *sacralisation* of the conflict leads to. See also the interesting article of Mouna Naim in *Le Monde* of 14 October 2000, in which the author argues that the *sacralisation* of the conflict doesn’t serve any of the parties involved because it makes difficult the discussion of the strictly political causes of the intifada. Supporting this view, the former Minister of Finance of Lebanon and well known analyst of the region Georges Corm fears that “The religious and mystical Muslim and Jewish exaltation directly leads both populations to suicide”, *Le Monde*, 23 May 2001.

East,⁴⁹ has unfortunately proved that the situation in the region is not without consequences for the European secular multicultural societies.

Terrorist attacks and images of atrocities in the Occupied Territories are contributing to cement mutual stereotypes that have been nourished by centuries of competitive, often conflictual co-existence and by a mutual ignorance of the other. Despite their long history of interaction, religious and cultural communities of the two sides of the Mediterranean are in fact still quite ignorant of the fundamental values and beliefs of their neighbouring “other”.⁵⁰ In Europe, such stereotypes are actively promoted and manipulated by the extreme right-wing or populist parties who find in them an easy way to multiply their electorate. Besides the evident danger the raise of popularity of these parties represents for European democracies, their xenophobic and anti-Islamic⁵¹ discourse is further cementing anti-Western feeling among Muslim communities in Europe and elsewhere, thus creating a potentially explosive vicious cycle. On the other side of the Mediterranean at the same time, and in Europe itself in mostly its Muslim immigrant community, preachers from all three confessional families of the region⁵² and groups claiming a religious adherence, advance and propagate such ideas, reinforcing them with theological vocabulary and religion-based arguments.

The characteristics of public discourse of both European extreme-right wing politicians and Southern Mediterranean preachers or self-proclaimed “men of religion”, and the reasons pushing this public to give credit to their discourse, have been the object of extensive analysis during the last years. However, it is interesting to point out that, even in the European context, where the propagation of hatred and racism is often punishable by law, intolerant or hateful discourse is much more difficult to contain when it is pronounced under the coverage of religion and/or by religious ministers, and this because of the evident difficulties to clearly define the limits of the freedom of religion.

⁴⁹ It is interesting to note that inter-community violence in Europe is often targeting places of worship or religious ministers.

⁵⁰ See for example S. Hanafi, “La Mise en Cause Conjoncturelle de l’Occident” and J-N Ferrié, “Usage et Petits Usages de l’ ‘Occident’ en Egypte”, in *Egypte Monde Arabe*, op. cit. The indifference of Western publishers to works on Islam written by Muslim Middle Eastern authors is an example of the persistence of ignorance on the other side (*International Herald Tribune*, 18 October 2001, “Islam’s Books Go Unread in the West”). See also the preface of Marcello Pacini (The Giovanni Agnelli Foundation) in the issue of *Egypte Monde Arabe*, op. cit., and J-N Ferrié, “Les Visions de l’Occident dans le Monde Arabe”, in the *Egypte Monde Arabe*, op. cit., on the mechanisms that generate stereotypes about the West in Southern Mediterranean societies.

⁵¹ Often also anti-Semitic.

⁵² See S. Radi, op. cit. In this very interesting comparison of the sermons of Muslim ‘*ulama* and Christian Coptic priests in Egypt, Saadia Radi (CEDEJ, Cairo) observes that religious ministers from both confessions are accusing the West in their sermons of a lack of respect for religion, immorality, sexual promiscuity and a distorted use of liberty. It is worth noting that, according to S. Radi, sermons from priests and ‘*ulama* are almost identical when it comes to denouncing the defaults of Western civilisation. In Europe, police and secret service inquiries launched after the shock of the September 11, 2001 attacks and the discovering of links between fundamentalist groups and the terrorist networks in many countries of the Union, have recently revealed that preachers have been inciting their congregations to intolerance and even violence in numerous mosques in the UK, the Netherlands and Italy. (See *The Economist*, 10-16 August 2002).

From a means for division to a factor of unity in diversity

As was demonstrated by the above, the *sacralisation* of political discourse, the politicisation of religious sermon and the persistence of antiquated confession-based forms of social organisation in the Southern Mediterranean on the one hand, combined with negligence in providing a modern legislative and institutional framework for the Islamic communities in the West on the other, have contributed to turn religion into a major factor of division, intolerance and conflict, both in Europe and in its Northern African and Middle Eastern neighbours. This manipulation of religious teachings and discourse goes hand-in-hand with the perpetuation of authoritarianism and the rise of fundamentalism in the Southern Mediterranean, as well as with the marginalisation of Muslim and in general immigrant communities and the rise of extreme right-wing parties in the West. The use of religious discourse by the authors of the terrorist acts of September 11, 2001 in the United States has dramatically highlighted the catastrophic consequences the *sacralisation* of political issues can generate for world peace, democracy and in fact the Western way of life.⁵³

Conscious of that, different bodies within the European Union are studying ways to revive the parts of the Barcelona process of the Euro-Mediterranean partnership⁵⁴ relating to democracy, human rights, culture or the civil society,⁵⁵ whilst several European countries are reviewing ways to deal with Islam as an organised religion within their borders.⁵⁶ At the same time numerous religious leaders, intellectuals and decision-makers are launching various initiatives aiming to promote better understanding between confession or culture-based groups and to

⁵³ The mistrust that the attacks have created in the West towards the Muslim community was rejected by a considerable number of intellectuals in Europe and the West who have denounced the demonisation of this community and have called for better understanding between confessional groups. See for example the article of Umberto Eco in *Le Monde* of 10 October 2001, the interview of Edward Said in *El Pais* of 2 December 2001, or the contribution of Jean-Noel Ferrié (CEDEJ) and Baudouin Dupret (CNRS) in *Le Soir* of 23 October 2001, entitled “Le déni de commune humanité” and that of Robert Malley (The Council of Foreign Relations, US) in *International Herald Tribune* of 12 October 2001, with the eloquent title “ Look harder: Violence Isn’t Islamic and Islam Isn’t Violent”.

⁵⁴ Barcelona Declaration adopted at the Euro-Mediterranean Conference - 27-28/11/95, available from http://www.europa.eu.int/comm/external_relations/euromed/bd.htm. The site in question also contains a wealth of information on the evolution of the Euro-Mediterranean partnership.

⁵⁵ The Declaration provides for the setting-up of a partnership in social, cultural and human affairs. To this end, the signing parties have reaffirmed that “dialogue and respect between cultures and religions are a necessary precondition for bringing the peoples closer”, and they have expressed “their intent to promote cultural exchanges and knowledge of other languages, respecting the cultural identity of each partner, and to implement a lasting policy of educational and cultural programmes”. The partners have also undertaken “to adopt measures to facilitate human exchanges, in particular by improving administrative procedures”. These provisions have unfortunately been among the less implemented of the Declaration.

⁵⁶ The creation in 1998 of a single official body (Exécutif des Musulmans de Belgique) in order to represent the Muslim community of Belgium vis-à-vis the federal authorities, recognise imams and teachers of religion, etc., and the establishment of an analogue body in France (Conseil Français du Culte Musulman) in 2001, are examples of the recent effort of European governments to create conditions for the emergence of a “local” Islam, less dependent on foreign input.

emphasise the call for peace and brotherhood present in all the three monotheistic sacred books.⁵⁷

Notwithstanding the fact that the result of these actions and those of the Barcelona process regarding democracy and human rights, are rather limited and, in the case of inter-religious dialogue, relevant only to a small group of intellectuals, such initiatives constitute a step in a good direction.⁵⁸ The ambition (and necessity) to “turn the Mediterranean basin into an area of dialogue, exchange and cooperation guaranteeing peace, stability and prosperity”,⁵⁹ requires in our view, not only “sustainable and balanced economic and social development, (and) measures to combat poverty”,⁶⁰ but also a real effort to re-organise Southern Mediterranean societies on a non-confessional basis, hand-in-hand with a strengthening of democracy and respect for human rights. We argue in fact that democracy and respect of human rights cannot flourish in societies based or segregated on the basis of confessional affiliation, where state authorities are tempted to draw legitimacy from theology and not from the freely expressed public approval of their political programmes, where the (only sometimes existing) opposition is also tempted to use religion-based discourse and exegesis instead of political argument, and where religion means belonging by birth to exclusive sectarian communities in constant unease with each other and not freely chosen adhesion to a faith and/or a set of moral values.

Breaking centuries-old forms of social organisation and defining new limits between the religious and the profane is certainly not an easy task. In the previous century, several of the countries of the region experienced attempts of secularisation from above.⁶¹ However, the top-down scheme and the superficial character of such attempts, along with the authoritarian nature of their political initiators, have quickly compromised their chances to succeed. Furthermore, the maintenance (and often strengthening) of state control over religious affairs, and the partial (and often unfair for religious minorities) application of the reforms,⁶² have contributed to the discrediting of the concept of secularisation in the eyes of the public, who

⁵⁷ See for example: *Conseil Pontifical pour le Dialogue Interreligieux* (1998) and *Le Dialogue Interreligieux dans l'Enseignement Officiel de l'Eglise Catholique* (1963-1967), Editions de Solesmes, Paris, for a full collection of all Holy See documents and Papal speeches on inter-religious dialogue. Less than a month after the terrorist attacks of September 2001, an Islamic-Christian Summit for Peace was organised in Rome, at the initiative of the lay Roman-Catholic community of Sant'Egidio (*Le Monde*, October 7-8 2001). The latter is one of the most active organisations for the promotion of understanding between confessional communities. See also the works of Michel Lelong, a Catholic priest, highlighting the community of values between Christianity and Islam (for example: M. Lelong (1991) *De la Prière du Christ au Message du Coran*, Tougui, Paris), and the yearly review *Islamochristiana*, published in Rome by the Pontificio Instituto di Studi Arabi e d'Islamistica.

⁵⁸ The initiation of a Christian-Jewish dialogue and the sincere efforts of the Roman Catholic Church since the Second Vatican Council to eradicate anti-Judaism among its ranks have, for example, considerably improved relations and mutual conceptions of the “other” between these two communities. See H. Tinq (1993), *L'Etoile et la Croix*, JCLattès, Paris.

⁵⁹ Barcelona Declaration, op. cit.

⁶⁰ Barcelona Declaration, op. cit.

⁶¹ Kemal Ataturk's Turkey is the most often-used example of such a secularisation attempt. Syria, Egypt, Tunisia and Algeria have also experienced, to a lesser extent, some form of a state-imposed secularisation.

⁶² Even though it is undoubtedly the most secular of the Southern Mediterranean states, Turkey offers such an example of state control over religious affairs and unfair application of the secularisation reforms (regarding its Christian communities). See J.P. Valognes, op. cit., pp. 810-832.

associated it with its initiators and their broken promises of progress, freedom and prosperity. This experience of the past saw that in order to take roots in society, secularisation should go hand-in-hand with a general programme of democratisation, stressing respect for human rights, effective exercise of fundamental freedoms and the rule of law. It is important to note here, that religion-inspired ideas do not need to be excluded from such a secularisation process. The successful co-existence of European Christian-democratic parties with secular socio-political systems can be a fruitful example of how persons of strong religious convictions can make an enriching contribution to the progress of modern societies without changing the a-confessional character that constitutes one of the major warrants of citizens' equality in the eyes of the law.

In such a context, we believe that it would be productive to propose as examples (always bearing in mind that no society is identical to another and consequently there can be no one-fits-all paradigm) some of Europe's own models of secularisation, especially those taking into consideration the historical role a specific religion has played in the making of the nation.⁶³ Proposing Europe's own experiences as a potential source of inspiration for secularisation and democratisation in the Southern Mediterranean could be combined with actions for raising awareness about the values and ways of life prevalent among the peoples of the Union, in an effort to combat ignorance-based stereotypes and promote understanding and productive co-existence.

These actions could take forms such as:

- Educational seminars targeting different society groups (youth, students, pensioners, women, teachers and trainers, etc.);
- Conferences and workshops aimed at the academic and/or the broader public;
- Reading material and schoolbooks;
- Mutual exchange programmes at various levels; and
- Mass media-covered debates and information programmes.

Initiatives and actions like the ones mentioned above should ideally involve regional partners such as institutes of education, municipalities, organisations of the civil society, public administration staff and interest groups. Citizens of Southern Mediterranean states residing in Europe should also be targets of projects like the ones mentioned above. In their case, and in the case of their compatriots who have already acquired European nationality, the credibility of the actions will highly depend on the improvement of the general socio-economic conditions of their lives and the containment of xenophobic or racist discourse and political groups. In parallel, awareness-raising programmes on the historical experience, the multiple realities and the values of the Southern Mediterranean peoples could contribute to combat prejudices and xenophobia among European populations, thus limiting the effects of extreme right-wing or populist political discourse.

At the same time, Europe should encourage initiatives analogous to those above in order to improve understanding, support civil society organisations promoting secular views, and build trust between the three cultural families of its southern and south-eastern border. The role of

⁶³ In a number of European countries such as the Netherlands, the Scandinavian states or Spain, the maintenance of some ceremonial references to the religion historically connected to the making of the nation (i.e. the constitutional obligation of the monarch to profess a specific religion, etc.) has probably made easier the acceptance of secularisation of the state by conservative public members without having any significant effects on the results of the general *de-sacralisation* process.

the Union at that level should however be much more discreet. In order to become credible and acquire legitimacy in the eyes of the broader public, trust-building initiatives between local communities need to come from local bodies without a too obvious “Western” encouragement.

Having recognised that “dialogue and respect between cultures and religions is a necessary precondition for bringing the peoples closer”,⁶⁴ the Union could further encourage inter-religious dialogue initiatives. This dialogue could in fact assist the efforts to de-sectarianise Southern Mediterranean societies by contributing to raise awareness among religious authorities and confessional communities in the region on the state of freedom of religion and the conditions under which confession-based communities and institutions operate in the European secular context. Bringing inter-religious dialogue to the faithful by means of initiatives at the level of the local church mosque or synagogue could help eradicate religion-based prejudices, and render fundamentalist and radical views less credible. In the context of the ongoing and ever-escalating Israeli-Palestinian conflict in particular, the spread of religious dialogue initiatives and the active engagement of religious leaders to the cause of peace and justice could be an effective means to limit the use of theological discourse for the support of intransigent political positions and prevent an inflammation of feelings in the wider Arab-Islamic world against the West, often perceived as a monolithic Judeo-Christian whole.⁶⁵ At the same time, such actions should stress the important role religion can play in the development of the Southern Mediterranean after the achievement of peace and the progressive *de-sacralisation* of conflictual discourse. For centuries in fact, the important flows of pilgrims from all three monotheistic communities world-wide had functioned as a permanent stimulant for tolerance, collaboration and peaceful, often-productive, co-existence in a land widely recognised as being “Holy” and occupying a privileged place in the hearts of many.

Transforming religions again into a factor of collaboration for development through tourism, investments and education (and thus into a major job-creating force), and giving the region a vocation of permanent inter-faith dialogue laboratory for world peace is not so unrealistic an ambition. We believe that it is certainly a cause worth trying to achieve.

⁶⁴ Barcelona Declaration, op. cit.

⁶⁵ It is interesting to note in this context that the efforts of John-Paul II to prevent the second Gulf War, his repeated positions against the embargo on Iraq and the sympathy he has demonstrated for the Palestinian cause have contributed to prevent the degeneration of the anti-Western and anti-American feeling widespread in the region into a general anti-Christian feeling. Such an evolution would have been particularly explosive for the European multi-confessional, multicultural societies counting a considerable number of Muslim faithful, and for Oriental Christians, easily suspected to sympathise with their Western co-religionists. The high appreciation the Pope enjoys in the Muslim world can be demonstrated by the number of Islamic countries (almost all) who have established diplomatic relations with the Holy See. At the same time, Vatican initiatives such as the Pope’s acknowledgement of the Catholic Church’s weaknesses during the horrible times of the Shoah, or his visit to Israel and his repetitive calls in favour of the Hebrew State’s right to live in peace within its internationally recognised borders had a positive effect on Christian-Jewish relations both in Europe and in the Southern Mediterranean. The success of inter-religious dialogue in promoting peaceful co-existence and understanding in this case must be considered in comparison with the negative effects the continuation of hatred spread by preachers of all three major religions in the region still has in the framework of the ongoing Palestinian-Israeli conflict.

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