



## Info

# Grand Mufti of Syria: a single civilisation unites us all

In a speech to MEPs on Tuesday on the subject of intercultural dialogue, the Grand Mufti of Syria, Ahmad Badr Al-Din Hassoun, stressed the value of culture as a unifying rather than a dividing force. Dr Hassoun was addressing a formal sitting of Parliament as the first speaker in a series of visits by eminent religious and cultural leaders in 2008, which has been designated European Year of Intercultural Dialogue.

Opening his address, the Grand Mufti stressed that "really there are no separate cultures, there is but one single culture" in the world, namely "the culture of mankind". Indeed, he said, "we, in our region, do not believe in a conflict between cultures".

If a clash did exist, it was "where there is ignorance, terrorism and backwardness". Stressing the universality of culture, he said that the Soviet and American space agencies, in sending men to the moon, had built on the civilisation founded by Europeans before them. In addition, "those who built the pyramids are our great-grandfathers". These examples showed that "civilisation is one".

### No such thing as holy war

The Grand Mufti then asked "Does civilisation have a religion?". His answer was that there is no Islamic, Christian or Jewish civilisation. "Religion gives civilisation its moral values but culture is something that we built", he stressed, adding that religion "is the work of god" whereas civilisation is created by mankind.

"We do not believe, in our region, in the multiplicity of religions", said the Grand Mufti. "Abraham, Moses, Jesus and Mohamed came with one single religion". Therefore "there is no holy war, because a war can never be holy: it is peace that is holy." Later he said it was wrong to use religion to justify killing.

### Separation of religion and state

Turning to education, Dr Hassoun said, "Let us teach our school pupils that what is sacred in the world is man" since man "is the creation of the creator". If we want peace, starting for example with Palestine and Israel, he suggested that rather than building walls, "let us build bridges of peace". He also argued that "we must create states on a civil basis, not a religious basis", adding "I don't impose my religion on you, nor do you impose your religion on me".

The Grand Mufti also spoke on the subject of women, saying that in his country women were valued and respected, though they may face injustice because of the actions of men. Still, he maintained, women participate in all fields of society in Syria.

Closing his speech, Dr Hassoun praised Europe today as embodying a "miracle" in

overcoming two world wars and bringing down the Berlin wall without bloodshed. Seeing the European Parliament as a model, he called on the EP "to help us build a universal parliament". And since Damascus is this year the Cultural Capital of the Arab World, he asked the EP, as a practical gesture, to agree to hold "a meeting for cultures" in Damascus "to say that the world is at one".

## **EP President Pöttering sees tolerance as the cornerstone of dialogue**

In his introductory speech, European Parliament President Hans-Gert Pöttering said "peaceful coexistence between cultures and religions, both in the European Union and in relations with peoples in all parts of the world, in particular on the other side of the Mediterranean, in the Middle East, is both possible and essential". He added "we must build an intellectual and cultural bridge across the Mediterranean, one founded on mutual enrichment and shared values". He stressed that "Tolerance is central to intercultural dialogue. But tolerance does not mean indifference. Tolerance means defending one's views, hearing out others and respecting their convictions."

Lastly the president said "The fact that the Grand Mufti has been accompanied here today by senior religious leaders offers clear evidence of that successful coexistence". Before starting his own speech, the Grand Mufti took the hand of Bishop Antoine Odo, President of the Chaldean Bishops of Syria, and together the two men faced the assembled MEPs, who responded with a warm round of applause.

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