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OF THE OSCE CONFERENCE ON RACISM, XENOPHOBIA
AND DISCRIMINATION**

Vienna, 4-5 September 2003

Education and belief

I am honoured to have been asked to be among those representing Belgium at this OSCE meeting. I thank its chairmanship for inviting me to introduce a session.

1. Education is one factor among others

Education is certainly a decisive factor in putting a check on racism, xenophobia and discrimination. It is not the only factor, as the current OSCE meeting shows, but at the same time it is decisive.

2. Education as a testimony for those in search of an identity

However, the education we are concerned with here is not primarily the transmission of a body of knowledge, of learning, but – above all – a testimony that enables everyone to verify their personal beliefs and to discern together what is in the common good, in the interest of all. Indeed, at many times of crisis, which impel some to become racist, xenophobic, or agents of discrimination, what is at stake is the quest for a personal identity, or a group identity, providing solidarity with those deemed similar to oneself.

3. Not just knowledge, but beliefs

Among these aspects of identity, knowledge is of course one factor, but there are also factors that I would not qualify as “irrational” or “unreasonable”, but simply as beliefs. How is it possible, in education, to allow each individual to discover his convictions and to instil a taste for seeking what is in the common good, the interest of all, while at the same time studying in depth his own identity, rooted in traditions, or a culture, religion or philosophy?

(a) Role of State institutions

(1) *Encouraging what nourishes identity*

On the one hand, it seems to me that State institutions should encourage the diverse associations that enable the various groups, whether they be religious,

philosophical or cultural, ethnic or linguistic, to live off what nourishes their identity. To be brief, everybody knows that education starts in the family, whatever its form, that the law gives it a framework in teaching establishments, and that it also plays a major role in spheres like sport, large festive gatherings and solidarity in times of hardship.

(2) *Memory of collective hardship*

Remembering a community's collective hardship and qualitative leaps is one of the positive aspects of education. It is an opportunity for those in charge of the various communities to meet, and a chance of communion for their members. Suffice it to recall events commemorating the end of armed conflicts, the signing of peace treaties and the inauguration of memorials.

(3) *Vigilance with regard to all forms of derision*

Extreme vigilance should be brought to bear to denounce systematically anything in the media, such as the light-hearted sections of newspapers, that could wound one or other community, especially when the derision targets historically potent symbols. What comes to mind is the Jewish community during commemoration of the Holocaust, or the Muslim community with reference to specific feast days, and many others.

(4) *Encouraging anything that brings unity*

While the State should not intervene in the strictly religious or philosophical aspects of the various communities, since it is, as a matter of principle, neutral, it seems to me that the State should encourage anything that brings about unity between those communities, and should make it clear that derision aimed at any one of them is intolerable.

This mission can be carried out through teaching, particularly in the subjects that encourage good citizenship, but also in other domains, such as places of public assembly. We may recall the worthy attitude of President Chirac when, before a football match, groups booed the Marseillaise, and thereby the French people. Some gestures and forms of mockery are just not acceptable.

(b) Each community's role

(1) *Transmitting awareness of other communities' riches*

From another viewpoint, each community has the mission of transmitting awareness of other communities. This is the fundamental meaning of history, religion, philosophy, literature and aesthetics teaching, whose aim is to reveal to others the immense wealth of mankind's creation and the quest for meaning by all human beings, whoever they may be.

(2) *Interpretation*

On this subject, I am sometimes aware of a methodology problem. We all have a template for interpretation, a treatise on method with which to apprehend other religious, philosophical, cultural and other systems. And we quickly become accustomed to using the same interpretation template for any sphere approached. We take a kind of comparatist approach. I often plead for use of another method too: one that involves asking another community to present itself. I learned that when studying the Muslim religion. Rather than applying the template worked out by the nineteenth century religious historians, I tried to understand the functioning of a committed Muslim's act of faith. I did not seek to discover the Muslim's shorter catechism – the traditional five pillars – but just what led the Prophet to bear witness of God for those who were eager to know him. That changes the perspective one may have on Islam. It is also a key to understanding the reaction of Muslims to certain assertions or beliefs of non-Muslim communities. Louis Massignon called this method “Copernican re-centring”. Daring to approach beliefs, the cultural datum, religion and philosophy, while assenting to enter the axis of another mentality, is a way of avoiding much disillusionment. This method also has the merit of better “apprehending” the manner in which the other looks upon other communities, including the one I myself am part of. A huge step forward has been achieved once I know how the other perceives me, presents me to his friends, and speaks of me to others.

(c) Each individual has the duty to seek the common good

(1) *Seeking improvement in the condition of all*

Lastly, beyond the role of the State and that of the various communities, I see another facet of education: to nurture in all people a desire to seek in all things the general interest, the common good. But, at the same time, we well know that mentalities change. Practically all States nowadays have a multi-religious, multi-philosophical, multi-cultural population. One of the key factors in education is to recall the merits of living together, while evolving into communities that respect one another, of course, but which seek improvement in the condition of all, progress for all, and solidarity with the weakest members of society.

(2) *Check points: human rights and the building of peace*

Among the check points in the quest for the common good, human rights are obviously an essential one. To this we spontaneously add that of the quest for peace, the building of peace.

(3) *Lucidity in the face of the forces of evil*

As in any human situation, we have to remain lucid in the face of the destructive forces of evil. On this point, depending on the gravity of the consequences, we have to be either firm or merciful. Nevertheless, education has a major role to play insofar as it invites everyone, each conscience, each community, to assess what, in its evolution, can harm others, sometime irreparably.

(4) *Testimony and tradition in the quest for a new identity*

Education is the work of the State's institutions, of communities, and of each human being. It is not just transmission of learning, but above all a testimony meant to enable each individual, each community, to discover – or rediscover – its identity. But, in so doing, something new is produced, something which touches the heart, the more intimate cords of human being. Everyone acquires a fresh experience of how better to live together. If, at certain points in time, many share this experience, those points in time become the subject of tradition, and enter into collective memory. Each community, each State, has traditions of this kind. Let us hope they may be recalled and brought to the fore at every time of crisis.