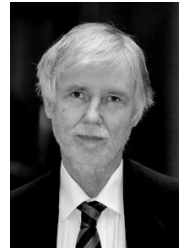


## 3.5 Reconciling Differences

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*As Finland's Minister of Foreign Affairs and President of the European Council, Erkki Tuomioja presented this speech at the public ceremony of awarding Father Paolo Dall'Oglio and the Monastery of St. Moses the Abyssinian in Syria the Euro-Med Prize for the Dialogue between Cultures on 26 November 2006 in Tampere, Finland.*

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In recent years, the search for effective means of reconciling cultural differences has risen to the top of the international agenda. Even in the context of the war on terrorism, it has been acknowledged that international terrorism cannot be opposed by military means alone and that political, social, and economic measures are needed for long-term success.

Reconciling cultural differences is a topical issue not only in the international context – particularly between the Islamic World and the Western World – but also increasingly within societies in different parts of the world, certainly within many European countries. Although the road to reconciliation is very different at these two levels, sustainable solutions can only be found through respecting cultural diversity.

Religious differences are at the heart of cultural differences. Whereas after World War II, religion as a social force seemed to be weakening, since the 1980s and again since the fall of the Communist bloc this trend has reversed. Religion has increasingly become both a political force and a source of identity.

At the international level, much of the mistrust between particularly Western countries and countries in the Middle East which has grown since 9/11, is due to the difficulty of the Western world to see that, as with all other religions, Islam has a number of very different streams, only a few of them violent and only a small minority justifying a confrontational response. I have always stressed that it is our challenge to fight intolerance and fanaticism irrespective of the ideology or religion this is associated with.

In order to start reconciling the differences between Islamic countries and the West, I believe that we need a discriminating strategy that takes account of the diversity of outlooks within political Islamism. Many of the Islamist movements have a strong anti-western agenda, particularly with regard to the present conflicts in the Middle East and how the “War against Terror” is being conducted, but taking a critical view on these issues does not necessarily make these movements anti-democratic. Indeed, there is a diversity of movements that are non-violent, subscribe to democratic processes and methods in politics, and advocate their policies by taking part in elections, where possible.

At the national level, especially in the European context, the greatest challenge for reconciling cultural differences lies in integrating populations of immigrant origin to their new host societies and providing them with equal possibilities.

Contrary to common belief, European populations of immigrant origin have been rapidly and effectively incorporated to their host societies, but this incorporation has not necessarily led to successful integration, as more often than not, migrants have found their places at the margins of the labour market, faced persisting xenophobia, and their offspring (the second and subsequent generations) have partially failed to climb the social ladders of education, professional development and welfare – all signs of the failure of national policies regarding migrants.

Within the past fifty or so years, a new generation of European Muslims has emerged, which has resulted in a new way of thinking and talking about the nature of Islamic communities here. Old concepts that divided the world into two hostile camps – Islamic versus non-Islamic – are outdated and need to be reviewed. Religious principles should not be confused with the culture of origin: European Muslims should be Muslim instead of forever remaining North African, Pakistani or Turkish Muslims. Active citizenship and the development of a European Islamic culture need to be encouraged.

European governments need to create conditions propitious for the growth of Muslim thinking which would reflect the realities of European democratic and egalitarian societies. To achieve this, governments should focus on creating conditions for Muslims to build their human and organisational capacities to represent their own interests democratically and effectively within civil society. European governments should encourage moderate Muslim voices by engaging especially with democratically elected bodies that represent faith and minority groups. In other words, European Muslims should be empowered and anchored in the European reality.

As religious identities in general, and especially Muslim identities, have become politicized, religion has become one of the most important arenas for social negotiations regarding integration and social inclusion, where all kinds of issues are discussed, with or without the use of religious language. One of the greatest difficulties in secular European states has been the acceptance of “religious” demands of immigrants as legitimate, even though they might eventually not be so different, were those claims to be “translated” into secular language. Claims by ethnic and “racial” groups, for example, are more easily accepted.

There are no simple solutions to complex social phenomena, but there are several ways to improve mutual understanding and coexistence. Strong legal means of protecting religions from insults, unless it is a question of hate speech, do not seem realistic alternatives. Calls and cries for dialogue over perceived civilizational, cultural, ethnic and religions boundaries have been many in recent years. There is certainly a need to find a new status quo regarding tolerance and understanding of a changed world through all possible means, including education for combating ignorance, stereotypes and misunderstanding of religions.

Through the Helsinki Process on Globalisation and Democracy, facilitated by the Governments of Finland and Tanzania, we have tried to address this and several other global challenges through multi-stakeholder dialogue, which I believe is the only way to find lasting solutions to urgent problems in our globalised world. During the course of last summer, two roundtables were organised to discuss how to promote political participation as an alternative to extremism, and to explore the role of religions in promoting reconciliation and sustainable peace.

The first roundtable, hosted by HRH Prince el Hassan bin Talal of Jordan, highlighted the importance of developing inclusive governance structures in order to find lasting solutions to the various conflicts in the greater Middle East region. Involving different stakeholders – civil society, the private sector as well as religious actors and organisations – would be crucial in order to work at the grass roots level and engage in constructive dialogue those who dominate the streets of communities and the minds of majorities.

The second roundtable, organised during the World Assembly of the World Conference of Religions for Peace (WCRP), built on the discussions of the Amman roundtable and focused in particular on the role of religions and religious leaders in creating sustainable peace and reconciling cultural differences. The meeting noted that the involvement

of religious leaders and organisations in peace processes may not be an instrument for resolving conflicts in the short term, but they could help in longer term processes such as building trust, breaking cycles of revenge, and preventing religion from being hijacked and mobilized as a weapon in ongoing and future conflicts. The meeting also underlined the important role religious communities could and should have in interreligious education. The work of Father Dall'Oglio and the Monastery of St. Moses the Abyssinian are a living testament to the effectiveness of such efforts.

In my view, these roundtables highlighted several important issues we need to consider. Religious communities need to discuss freedom of expression and respect for religious beliefs within their own community and to pursue a dialogue with other religious communities in order to develop a common understanding of religious tolerance. Also, media professionals and their professional organizations should discuss media ethics with regard to religious beliefs and sensitivities, and develop their own codes of conduct in this respect.

European countries should seek to engage themselves in a dialogue with mainstream Muslims both internationally as well as nationally. If we wish our voice to be heard by the Muslims, we will have to listen to Muslims abroad as well as domestically. In the international fora, in the post cartoon world, we have to seek engagement with governments and intergovernmental bodies, the civil society, religious and spiritual leaders as well as intellectuals. It is also important that we develop a non-emotive lexicon for discussing the issues in order to avoid linking Islam to terrorism.

Many kinds of efforts are needed, but it must not be forgotten that public conflicts and discourse over religion also reflect a reality outside the realm of religion and freedom of expression. Dialogue may be useful, but it does not cure the illnesses of social reality, such as unemployment, feelings of unworthiness and marginalization. Social problems facing many of Europe's migrant populations cannot be changed by discussion, but by deeds.