

Tal 10 december 2009

# **Speech by Minister Ewa Björling at the Permanent Representation of Sweden to the EU in Brussels in connection with the European launch of the 'Muslim Peace Agents' adult education project**

Excellencies, dear colleagues and friends,

There are certain things we as governments can do in order to promote good relations between different religious and ethnic groups - domestically, as well as internationally.

Most important, perhaps, is to ensure sustainable infrastructures - legal and economic. Thereby we can provide basic social security which, I believe, is the best safeguard against fear, and the consequences of fear: mutual prejudice, marginalisation, extremism, and - in the worst cases - unrest and violence.

One might have thought that, by now, more than fifty years after the end of World War II, our European welfare societies would have achieved a state of affairs, where fear was eradicated and harmonious relations would prevail. However, this is, regrettably, not quite the case, as we see time and again. Just as majority populations in Europe have harboured strong prejudice against the Jewish people, many are now equally prejudiced against Muslims.

It is alarming, that in many EU member countries, political parties have risen to parliamentary prominence with programmes based on xenophobia. One has reason to be alert, especially in case their inflammatory agitation against the presence of Muslims in Europe begin to influence legislation and political decision-making.

And the prejudice is mutual, unfortunately. As Minister for Trade, I have visited many Muslim countries like Morocco, Tunisia, Egypt, Oman, Saudi Arabia, Syria and Jordan, just to mention a few.

And I know that a lot remains to be done in terms of overcoming misconceptions and misunderstandings between us, e.g. as regards the meaning and purpose of human rights, of gender equality, and of democracy.

However, there is a limit to what governments can do, proactively. Positive action by Muslims themselves, and by sympathetic civil society, can exert influence on public opinion more effectively than legislative measures. A fine example is the topic of today's seminar:

how young Swedish Muslims - equally conscious and equally proud of their national and religious identities - have initiated the project "Muslim Peace Agents" and begun to launch a number of bridge-building, educational events all over Sweden.

These Muslim Peace Agents have to overcome several obstacles, however. One such obstacle is the suspicion among many North Europeans against openly professed and clearly articulated religious faith.

Some people go so far as to claim that religion causes more violence and suffering than poverty or natural disasters do. They refer to war in the name of God, to religious extremist terrorist groups, to antagonisms between adherents of the same religion, and so on.

But there are others who argue that the world's great religious traditions all carry a common message to humanity: of justice, peace and reconciliation. In other words: practised correctly, every religion is a path to peace.

Mohandas Gandhi, who with his ideology of self-restraint and non-violence led India's struggle for independence from colonial rule, went even further. He said: "There is no way to peace. Peace is the way".

Today - after two World Wars, genocides with religious connotations, and many devastating armed conflicts - we can see that people from different religions have built global peace networks, such as the World Conference of Religions for Peace (WCRP) and the International Fellowship of Reconciliation (IFOR), both of which have member organisations in Sweden.

We may also regard the United Nations as an international peace movement, where disarmament and common security issues have been on the agenda from the very beginning.

It is therefore logical that religious groups - or faith-based organisations (FBO's) as they are called in UN-speak - have become increasingly involved in different sectors of the international community's activities.

One example is the Forum for Faith-Based Organisations, which was launched by the UNFPA in October 2008. The launch took place in Istanbul, attended by representatives of all the major religions: Hindus, Buddhists, Jews, Christians, Muslims, Sikhs and Baha'is. Interregional UNFPA meetings are now organised on a regular basis together with religious leaders as well as various NGO's, for instance the forum for Europe and Central Asia (in Minsk in August 2009).

Another interreligious programme - primarily between Christians and Muslims - is co-ordinated by UNESCO. The aim there is to encourage producers of school textbooks to give a fairer image of "The Other"- or of each other - for example, the image of Islam and Muslims in Swedish and German history books, or the image of Europeans in Arabic textbooks and teaching materials.

In July 2008, the Muslim World League organised a major inter-religious conference in Madrid, and invited not only those sometimes called the Children of Abraham; Jews, Christians and Muslims - but also Buddhists and Hindus. There have since then been several sequels to that conference, most recently in Geneva, end of September this year.

On 12-13 November 2008, the UN General Assembly, at the request of Saudi Arabia, dedicated two whole days to discussions on how religion and politics can co-operate to fulfil the purpose of the UN: peace and common security for all the peoples of the world. The theme was 'Culture of Peace' and the speakers were not only heads of state, politicians and diplomats, but also religious leaders, including Sheikh Tantawi from al-Azhar in Cairo and Cardinal Tauran from the Vatican.

There is, nowadays, a permanent platform for such discussions, namely the Alliance of Civilizations, a network launched in 2006, under the umbrella of the UN. The Alliance now comprises of more than 90 nations and 18 international partner organisations, and promises to be an important tool for resolving intercultural and interreligious clashes, which lie beyond the scope of international law and regular political bodies such as the UN Security Council.

All of this may seem far removed from the local reality of European suburbs. But in fact it is precisely the opposite. Because those who think globally must, nevertheless, act locally. International solidarity is about the commitment, sacrifices and perseverance of individuals in their own daily life.

It is against this background that I view the project "Muslim Peace Agents" and the new NGO, 'Swedish Muslims for Peace and Justice'. They offer a testimony to the will of the younger generation to systematically tackle major and difficult challenges. Moreover, this Muslim peace movement sets a good example to the entire Muslim world, since its members come from both Sunni and Shi'a families.

It deserves mentioning that the Muslim peace movement has established close co-operation with the Swedish branch of the International Fellowship of Reconciliation; the Christian Peace Movement. It is a welcome confirmation that peacemakers from different backgrounds can work together towards a common overall goal.

In the same tone, it was together with the Christian Educational Association SENSUS, that Swedish Muslims launched the bold 'Muslim Peace Agents' project in June 2006 - right at a time when the division between Western and Islamic culture appeared to be deeper than ever before. It was only a few months after the Swedish Embassy in Damascus had been burnt down - one of many violent reactions among Muslims to the so-called "cartoon crisis".

I am impressed with the way young Swedish Muslims have breathed new life into what is sometimes called the 'Swedish model', not only by establishing a Muslim peace movement but also a Muslim study association, Ibn Rushd - a name that is closely linked with the rich cultural heritage that unites people north and south of the Mediterranean.

Dear colleagues and friends, it is my hope today, that we shall be able to inspire similar projects in other EU member countries. There can be no doubt as to the need for such initiatives. Rest assured, that we in Sweden, are ready to co-operate and to share our experiences with you. At the same time, we know that in the field of interfaith and intercultural dialogue there is a wealth of experience in your countries - and, indeed, considerable expertise here in Brussels - from which we are eager to learn and profit.

We have yet to chisel out the modalities of a project aiming at training European Peace Agents over the next few years. However, our goal here and now is to set this process in motion.

Every generation has its challenges. The message of peace must be expressed anew so as to reach people in the present day. I believe that the Muslim Peace Agents have a special vocation to promote the idea of peace among their contemporaries in Europe, on both local and national level, among Muslim youth as well as others. They can do this being deeply rooted in their Muslim faith and in their respective European societies. This makes them uniquely equipped to build bridges and bring peace.

Thank you!