

Security and Preservation of the Places of Worship and Religious Monuments in Europe

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Your Holiness Karekin II, Supreme Patriarch and Catholicos of All Armenians,

Dear Archbishop Viken Aykazyan, President of the Mother See Committee of the Preservation of Artsakh's culture-spiritual heritage

Your Eminences and Excellencies,

Dear brothers and sisters in Christ and dear friends

I was very pleased to receive an invitation to participate in this *International Religious Freedom and Peace Conference*. I bring you warm greetings from the Conference of European Churches, an ecumenical organization which is promoting dialogue and cooperation between Christians in the wider Europe.

It is difficult to take the floor after these poignant, revolting testimonies, but also with a dimension of hope. Any infringement on religious freedom, or attack to a particular culture, is an infringement on humanity. In this spirit, I would like to start with two

So let me begin by stating two propositions.

1. My first proposition is that **Freedom of Religion or Belief is not without protection of places of worship and free access to holy sites**. When we talk about Freedom of Religion or Belief, we usually think first of **people**, of ensuring them this fundamental freedom and guaranteeing them this basic human right. However, this freedom and right depend on certain conditions. Protecting places of worship and safeguarding free access to them is essential for guaranteeing the exercise of religious freedom. Religious practice cannot be confined to a private space or beset with physical boundaries. It necessarily implies a certain visibility in the public space, to be readily seen in the public domain.
2. The second proposition is that **any attack on any religious community**, whether on individuals who are members of that community or on places related to that community, **is an attack on religious freedom in general**, and therefore an attack on all religious communities. Religious leaders in Europe, and more widely in the world, are becoming increasingly aware of this connection and the fact that they must stand together to guarantee religious freedom.

In discussing the topic *Security and Preservation of the Places of Worship and Religious Monuments in Europe*, I propose to start with an observation on how places of worship in Europe have become increasingly insecure in recent times. Secondly I would then like to enumerate some of the reasons for this development and thirdly discuss what is at

stake. In conclusion I shall outline the ways in which the European Union wants to work on ensuring the security of places of worship.

Insecurity of places of worship in Europe

In most European countries, religious insecurity has become a reality during the last ten years. Places, buildings and people are targeted because of their religious identity. This threat is more than just a feeling as can be shown in the statistics. It has now become a real political issue that the European Union in particular wants to address in order to preserve the freedom and rights of citizens. Indeed, in the recent past across Europe, public spaces, and in particular places of worship or sites linked to religious communities, such as schools or cemeteries, have been confronted with a growing threat, namely the danger of being vandalized or subjected to a terrorist attack.

Furthermore, most of the facilities have been built without any consideration being given to the possibility of a potentially malicious act, certainly not a terror attack. For this reason, security professionals call places of worship “soft targets”, because they are either barely protected – or not at all. Those committing these acts have also understood the opportunity these places present for them to carry out their acts of hatred. Moreover, when a place of worship is attacked there will be wider media coverage – more publicity for the perpetrator’s actions.

Let us look at a few examples to illustrate their great diversity. **The sacking** of the Serbian Orthodox Cathedral of St Nicholas in Karlovac (Croatia) on 14 February 2015; **the attack on participants in a mass** in Saint-Etienne du Rouvray (France) on 26 July 2016; **the desecration** of the Saint Jean-Baptiste **cemetery** in Villeroux (Belgium) on 21 December 2019, the **vandalisation** of the Orthodox Church of St George on the island of Lesbos (Greece) on 2 March 2020; the **murder** of 3 people with knives at the church of Notre Dames in Nice (France) on 29 October 2020, the **burning** of a church in Spånga (Sweden) on 20 and 24 January 2021; **the tagging** of the façade of the church in Aicha (Germany) on 4 April 2021, Easter Sunday.

At first this seems a surprising threat to Christianity. After all, Christians have been at home in Europe for centuries¹. Sociologically a majority religion, Christianity was known to all members of society – not always recognised, notably contested by the anticlerical movement and certain heirs of Enlightenment philosophy – but in any case fully integrated into the social environment. This is no longer the case. European societies have become progressively diversified and pluralised. This results in particular from migration, globalisation and the mobility it brings, but also from secularisation and the crisis of transmission that Christianity has experienced since the second half of the 20th century. As a result Christianity has lost its self-evident character.

However, this insecurity does not only concern Christianity. All religions are confronted with this threat. Examples include the attack on the synagogue in Halle (Germany) on 9 October 2019, the desecration of the Buddha statue in Sweden in 2018, and the vandalism of the offices of the Grand Mufti in Sofia (Bulgaria) on 5 July 2019.

¹ En témoigne encore, les discussions au début des années 2000 qui visait à intégrer l’héritage chrétien dans le préambule du traité de Lisbonne.

For centuries in Europe, religious insecurity, whether it concerns people or places of worship, was mainly a problem for minorities, especially for Jews. Today it concerns all religions. Perhaps this is because the religious landscape has become fragmented and because in a number of European countries, due to secularisation, all religions have become, or are in the process of becoming, minorities.

It is significant that in the early 2000s, many European institutions and churches were working on issues of identity and integration, in order to think about living together in plural societies. Today, the issue of security has come to the forefront of the political and societal debate. Thus the protection of the faithful, as well as of the buildings linked to a religion, has become a political issue for states and for the European Union.

Multifactorial religious insecurity

I do not wish to go into detail on the causes of this religious insecurity, nor do I claim to be exhaustive, but I will simply mention a few reasons.

First of all, the development of religious insecurity should be placed more globally in the context of the insecurity and violence that exist at the heart of European societies. Violence is itself on the increase, and violence against religious communities is only one aspect of it.

It is also worth mentioning the religious illiteracy that characterises Western European societies, in particular today. A lack of religious culture leads to a profound ignorance about people and their convictions, together with a lack of knowledge of their practices and customs. This in turn generates incomprehension, a lack of understanding, a growth of misunderstanding and sometimes a feeling of anxiety or animosity, even hatred.

Added to this factor is the development of populist and nationalist discourse, which seeks to exploit feelings of fear and insecurity. This makes, that statements of rejection, exclusion and hatred become normal, and thus also acts of violence.

We should also mention the development of radical expressions within religions, which lead many people to consider religions themselves to be the main causes of insecurity, conflict, hate speech and violence.

Finally, it is not irrelevant to mention that geopolitical conflicts, such as the one between Israel and Palestine, are to some extent imported into European societies and can from time to time generate strong tensions between the respective religious communities.

Taken together this means that the religious insecurity of which we are talking expresses both conflict between certain religions and hostility towards religions, and reflects even geopolitical conflicts.

What is at stake?

I would like to consider religious insecurity as a whole, including the examples mentioned above: threats, hate speech, terrorist-type attacks, vandalism, murder, arson, stigmatisation. These different manifestations, it seems to me, undermine three fundamental violations.

Freedom of religion and conscience (an infringement of the fundamental right)

Firstly, religious insecurity undermines the fundamental right of freedom of worship and religious expression because this freedom is only possible when there is no feeling of threat or insecurity. Religious freedom cannot be coerced in any way, by pressure to impose or suppress any practice. I am talking more about religious practice and worship, than beliefs. Beliefs can more easily, if necessary, remain confined to the private sphere.

The integrity of individuals (an attack on their well-being)

Secondly, being aware that one's religious identity or visiting a place seen as being linked to a religion can be in itself a source of danger, breeds anxiety and even fear. Religious insecurity in this way undermines the integrity of people. Even simple acts of vandalism, not specifically targeting a religious community, perpetrated by children or committed out of stupidity without any other motive, can contribute to this religious insecurity and extend its scope. When, as happened in 2019 in a small Alsatian village, two boys aged 8 and 10 soiled the altar of a church with dirty nappies, and knocked over and broke the flowerpots one is justified in asking what they are hearing in their home and the ignorance and worrying cultural developments that this reflect.

The identity of people (an identity and memory/historical wound)

Thirdly, I would like more specifically to address the issue of attacks on places of worship and sites identified as being linked to a religious community. It seems to me that this point is particularly relevant to the case of churches, monasteries and religious heritage sites located in Nagorno-Karabakh, currently inaccessible to Armenian Christians, destroyed or threatened to be destroyed.

Places, bearers of marks and carriers of identity

First of all, some remarks about the link between a holy place and the religious identity of a person or a group. The encounter with the divine always takes place in a place, usually a place of worship. These places bear the marks of the encounter with the transcendent and thus embody its memory. They are part of the dynamic of these places, objects and buildings, which more than anywhere else tell the story of the experience of transcendence, concentrate the evocation of the religious or spiritual experience, and thus contribute to writing a history that is always in progress. Indeed, places of worship do not only tell the story of a bygone past. They contribute to writing the identity in the making of a person or a group, to transmitting this identity by evoking the story of their values and convictions. In doing so, they carry the memory of their experience and build their future.

Even if within the Christian tradition, following the words of the Apostle Paul, believers do not doubt that it is precisely the believer who constitutes the temple of God and that his/her body is the dwelling place of the Holy Spirit (1 Corinthians 3:16; 6:19), it is still always the case that believers live out their faith in the places where they meet.

Religious and spiritual life is not without places of encounter, exchange and prayer. In addition to the sacred or desecralized understanding that one may have of a place, a building or an object, a place of worship nonetheless bears the mark of the encounter with the divine, and is therefore the object of a significant, even essential, identity attachment. This memory of the encounter with the divine and the attachment to the place that bears the mark is particularly expressed in life stories, when moments of

passage experienced in the Church are evoked, at the time of a baptism, a confirmation, a marriage or a death. Indeed, every religious experience is inextricably linked to a place.

Moreover, the aesthetics and architecture of a religious building express far more than this memorial function. In fact, monasteries, churches and cathedrals express the theological options and the spiritual culture of the religious community through their aesthetic and architectural choices. As a general rule, the religious building is an extension of the spirituality that is lived there. More than an element of individual identity, the place of worship embodies a dimension of collective identity. Thus the history of the Church has left its marks on the buildings dedicated to worship. They represent much more than the stone and wood of which they are made. They represent our common good.

Identity and memory wounds

Because religious buildings and sites are bearers of religious identity, damaging a place of worship is a real violence against the personal and collective religious identity of believers. What is more, this identity wound is likely to turn into a memorial wound, particularly if it is not recognised, or if protective measures are not taken and the place continues to be exposed to acts of vandalism or to the threat of destruction.

This concept of memorial wound was inspired by Olivier Abel, professor of ethics and philosophy at the Protestant theology faculty of Montpellier. He wants to express through it the humiliation that an identity wound produces in the long term and how it is transformed into a long-lasting resentment, even into violence and hate.

"And of course, there is still this memorial wound, these peoples who remain humiliated from generation to generation [~~by Europe~~], with this terrible time lag that the descendants of the guilty are not really guilty, and do not feel so, whereas the descendants of the victims are still often victims, or feel so. Humiliation, [~~let us say,~~] is much more serious in the long run than pure and simple violence, and this is what poisons violence, when the enemy is held in contempt.²"

Beyond the wound it represents, the lack of access to the Christian sites of Nagorno-Karabakh, and the destruction of religious and cultural heritage seems to me to entail for Armenian Christians the conditions of a memorial wound, adding to the one that Armenians have carried within them for more than a century.

Security and protection of places of worship (SASCE)

Developments show that places of worship and religious sites need free access, security, and that this security is a condition for social cohesion and peace, and where applicable for geopolitical stability. Aware of the challenges linked to religious insecurity, the European Commission has published an 'Action Plan to Support the Protection of Public Spaces'. And because synagogues, churches, mosques, ... are part of the public space, the European Commission has launched a call for projects to develop the protection of places of worship. Entitled *Safer and Stronger Communities in Europe* (SASCE), this project has an allocation of 20 million euros and aims in particular to unite the strengths and skills of the various member states and religious partners.

² Cf. Olivier Abel, *Le vertige de l'Europe*, Labor et Fides, Genève, 2019, p. 91.

The primary aim of the SASCE project is to improve and increase security in and around places of worship, as well as within and between religious communities. CEC applied for the grant as part of a consortium and is now implementing the project together with European Jewish Congress (leading applicant), Faith Matters (Muslim) and the European Buddhist Union. The project runs from March 2021 to March 2023.

Building on the best practices for security in public spaces recommended by the European Commission, and relying on the knowledge and expertise of local religious communities and security groups, this consortium will:

- develop content, e.g. videos, brochures, guidelines, training material
- based on such communication train the trainers on the use of this content
- disseminate content in and around religious communities and with authorities
- monitor attacks taking place on places of worship, holy sites and religious monuments and report to the European institutions

We see this project as a concrete example of CEC working on behalf of our Member Churches, doing ground-breaking work that will benefit particularly smaller churches which have less human and financial resources and are not always capable of handling these issues individually.

In this regard the CEC SASCE team can offer the Armenian communities training to make secure and protect their places of worship. We can also offer the Apostolic Church of Armenia support in drawing attention to the fate of their cultural heritage as well as acting as a channel in your advocacy work towards the EU institutions.

Conclusion

Places of worship are meant to be places of peace, wisdom, and spirituality. They need all religions and all political and civil institutions to act together in solidarity and to cooperate in order to safeguard their purpose.

Thank you for your attention.