

Opening speech of Prof. Aslan on the Conference “
“Jewish-Muslim Relations in Europe: Past, Present and Future Perspectives“

Dear Guests, Ladies and Gentlemen, Dear Colleagues,

This is the 9th International Conference that we have organized with our colleagues from different European countries on various topics. Last year’s conference took place in Romania, where we dealt with radicalization and tolerance. Unfortunately, we did not managed to have the publication from that conference ready in time to present in Cordoba, but it will be available in January 2018 at the latest.

This year we would to deal with Jewish-Muslim relationships and traditions in Europe. This topic was chosen out of our desire to make the contributions of these religions to European civilizations and cultures visible. We wish to highlight the history, but even more importantly the relevance of the meaning of such conditions for the present. Because Europe, through its embrace of diversity, has become what it is today, and its future depends on how we not only preserve, but also strengthen this diversity, as well as develop it for a sustainable future.

In times of rising nationalisms and racisms, this work is of particular importance, because the expanding nationalist interests can not only endanger this diversity, but they can also divide Europe. I would like to point out that the future of Europe is not necessarily dependent on strengthening the Euro, but rather on protecting diversity and plurality.

The nationalist interests and divisions also have enormous consequences for the people with migration backgrounds, because they are mobilized from within and outside the countries where they reside by groups that are more interested in isolating them, or by societies that are increasingly working together against another.

Europe needs people who can identify with European values, as if they are truly the values to live by. Within the Muslim community, which I am a part of, I am encouraged to promote a theology that does not necessarily want to see Islam become part of Europe. This theology considers the identification with European values to be contradictory to Islam and seeks to prevent Muslims from embracing it. Not only is this divisive theology being propagated, but professional structures that seek to institutionalize it are also emerging in accordance with it.

Thus, we are faced with the task of deciding how young people can be convinced that Europe is now a safe home for all religions and that it has successfully left behind the painful conflicts among different religions, which are currently taking place in many countries of the world. Europe’s past experiences, and what it has learned from them, is what truly constitutes Europe's special richness and bears witness to its particular democratic maturity. Examining the historical contributions of religions to the emergence of Europe demonstrates that Islam has always had an influence and presence and made an important civilizational contribution, offering young people, particularly Muslims, an opportunity to better identify themselves with Europe. From this another message should emerge, which reveals that the present must also be dependent on the contributions of religions, if we want to preserve peace and prosperity in Europe.

Unfortunately, we have not been able to convince young people in many European countries of the idea of a new Europe. This is the only way to explain why so many young people who were born and have gone to school here in Europe can be so thoughtlessly operate slave trade in Syria or Iraq, conceive of killing arbitrarily and under cruel circumstances people who think and live differently, and take possession of, steal from, and destroy their dwellings. They do not remain there, but instead bring their hatred and anger back to Europe to harm even more innocent people and spread fear and terror among the people living here.

In this process, the Muslim-Jewish relationship plays a central role. If the Jewish citizens of France want to leave Europe because of the attacks against them, Europe loses not only its citizens from a small community, but also part of its future. When Muslims feel discriminated against because of their presence in Europe, and anti-Islamic rhetoric is repeatedly spread, it is high time that we promote the fact that Europe wants and needs to protect its diversity.

It would be very short-sighted to believe that young people can only be controlled by special security measures. It is not simply a question of deradicalization. The broad social debate should not simply be about demonizing radical religious ideas, but instead about how we can convince young people to embrace democracy, human rights, and the fundamental values of Europe and awaken their enthusiasm for them. Is it not serious that incessant flows of young fugitive Muslims in the millions are striving to come to Europe, and some Muslims living here want relationships that others are fleeing from?

I hope that in this conference we will be able to reveal the common roots of European values that everyone can identify with and contemplate with satisfaction. Europe needs its religions, races, and yes every individual who is willing to hold these values together and confidently. Europe has learned from its own very painful history that these values are not self-evident. Without the contributions of each individual, this self-evidence can very quickly slip away.

I would like to thank my colleagues in Cordoba and Madrid who agreed to organize this conference in Cordoba. Cordoba is a special city for us because it is possible to learn from its great and glorious past that religions can exist together peacefully and with mutual respect and can make important contributions to science and culture.

Despite various tensions, Andalusia bears witness to the fact that Europe today reveals traces of the religions that have lived together peacefully. The history of Andalusia also offers an example of how all religions can embrace the opportunity to regain their place in Europe, to be proud of their contributions to European civilization, and, most importantly, to be aware of the fact that Europe remains dependent on these achievements for its future.