

Archbishop Nikitas at an Interfaith Programme Symposium in Austria



Today, 30 October 2019, His Eminence Archbishop Nikitas was present and addressed an interfaith programme in Vienna, Austria. The symposium entitled “The Power of Words: The Role of Religion, Media and Policy in Countering Hate Speech” was sponsored by KAICIID Dialogue Centre.

Below is a key note of the presentation of His Eminence.

“Hate Speech in its various forms has been well-documented over the decades by scholars and activists who were interested in combating this form of violence. The debates about the hate speech took a more acute dimension in contemporary Europe as we witness a shift in the manner hate speech operates.

This discursive shift can be understood as part of the socio-political changes related to the surge in the right-wing populism in many countries around the world. The hate speech is no longer only about race, but incorporates other characteristics such as religion, ethnicity, language, culture, and politics to name a few. The new forms of hate speech, as often reproduced in the media and political discourse, allude to how various ethnic, religious, cultural or linguistic groups transcend the norms and values of the societies where they live. It is not random that various

ethnic, cultural and religious entities (such as the Roma, the Jews, the Muslims, the refugees) have become scapegoats in the right-wing narratives to account for the various social problems, such as lack of jobs, economic decline, social instability or loss of national autonomy and traditions.

While hate speech has become more subtle and sophisticated in contemporary discourses, the hostility and intolerance towards 'the other' are not on the decline. We witness ongoing camp evictions and deportation of the Roma migrants across Europe, continuous scapegoating of immigrants, refugees and Muslims around the world. Hate speech is an extreme form of violence, because not only words can turn into action, but they also shape how we think and how we see the world. Ultimately, hate speech is dangerous because it may lead to the normalization of racism, anti-Semitism, Islamophobia, and various forms of religious intolerance.

The challenge is – what does a religious leader do to change the tide and build bridges between faith groups and communities.

1. Language as a tool for hate speech

Words are powerful tools. They express what lies in our minds and our conscience. They are learned expressions – most of which we adopt and incorporate into our speech patterns. Some come from our families, some from our schools, other from our community, and certainly some come from faith and religious communities and even the leaders. It is imperative that religious leaders help promote “healthy” language patterns and style. Vocabularies need to change. One of the Saints of the Orthodox Church reminds us that babies learn many things from adults, including languages, expressions, discrimination, and even hate. Religious leaders cannot be the ones to promote and validate hate speech, crimes, violence, abuse and much more. It is up to the religious leaders to set boundaries of language appropriateness

2. Sin

Speaking from a Christian understanding, we can only see hate speech as a horrible sin. It is a violent attack upon “the living icon and image of God”. To hate is evil and in clear contradiction with all true faiths. After all, we speak of harmony, cooperation, tolerance, acceptance and the like. Hate speech has no place here. To hate another is to hate God.

3. Deconstruction and questioning

Faith leaders should encourage people to engage in dialogue – to look at the other, question and try understanding the other and his/her identity. Derogatory names

are not acceptable. This is in clear opposition to the rightwing narratives and language that are on the rise in Europe and other places. Ignorance promotes the fear, distrust, and even hate of the other. Religious leaders need to stand together, make public statements together, and much more. Schools need to teach the true values and essence of religion and faith traditions. It may be a good thing to visit schools and talk to young people. After all, our goal is true friendship...

We, as the leaders, need to visit each other in the “sacred space” of the other. Perhaps, we need to form a new religious holiday and bring all faiths together and make it an annual celebration – a global celebration for humanity and truth.

Because of time constraints, I will end here. Thank you.”



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