

Paris Recommendations

United Against Violence in the Name of Religion: How do Freedom of Religion and Freedom of Expression Coexist in Europe? 15-16 June 2015

In Paris, France on 15 and 16 June 2015, the International Dialogue Centre (KAICIID), based in Vienna, held the European Media Forum on the universal human rights of freedom of religion and freedom of expression, which gathered European religious leaders, journalists, as well as civil society organisations. This forum is part of the implementation of the Vienna Declaration “United against Violence in the Name of Religion”, which was adopted in November 2014 and was followed up by the May 2015 conference in Beirut, Lebanon on preserving religious and cultural diversity in Syria and Iraq.

Organised with the support of KAICIID Board member and Metropolitan of France, His Eminence Metropolitan Emmanuel, and attended by KAICIID Board members Swami Agnivesh, Father Miguel Ayuso, Dr. Seyyed Ata'ollah Mohajerani, Reverend Kosho Niwano, Chief Rabbi David Rosen and Dr. Mohammed Sammak, the meeting brought together religious leaders from European Buddhist, Christian, Jewish, Hindu, Muslim communities, as well as leading civil society organisations such as Article 19, and the International Press Institute, and media organisations such the BBC, European Broadcasting Union, El País, Reuters, Religion News Service and others.

The following organizations supported the European Media Forum: the World Council of Churches; the Conference of European Rabbis; the Hindu Forum of Europe, the European Buddhist Union; the Islamic Cultural Centre of the United Kingdom; a Jewish Contribution to an Inclusive Europe; the Blanquerna Observatory on Media, Religion and Culture; the Ethical Journalism Network; and the Religion Newswriters Foundation.

Recommendations

General recommendations: Engage in Dialogue and Bridge Building

Generally, there was recognition that there needs to be increased dialogue specifically among and between religious leaders and media professionals and, at times, with the inclusion of policy makers and human rights actors.

Specific recommendations given are:

To engage in dialogue for mutual understanding to fill the various gaps in knowledge by:

- Sharing information about each other’s mandates, codes of conduct and ethics;
- Learning about working procedures and structures;

- Building respect;
- Exchanging expertise and information on past and current developments of topical issues;
- Building an alliance to defend freedom of expression and freedom of religion and belief, which are interdependent;
- To build a lasting and constructive cooperation and action among religious leaders and media professionals and beyond;
- To engage EU, UNESCO and other regional international organizations in these dialogues;
- To work towards ensuring that incitement laws are in line with international standards; and
- To work towards rescinding blasphemy laws.

Important Issues:

There is a need for religious terminology that is appropriate for media usage, with explanation if necessary. The use of appropriate language and terminology needs to be considered seriously.

There is a need to distinguish between social problems within religious communities from religious identities and beliefs.

Recommendations for the media professionals:

Generally there were recommendations to make the coverage of religion in media more accurate and avoid bias and stereotypes.

Specific recommendations given are:

- To strengthen religious literacy among journalists and media practitioners;
- Media should seek to build their audiences' religious literacy;
- To train journalists and media practitioners in preventing hate speech/incitement etc. so that comments can be better moderated without being censored;
- To be knowledgeable about using religious terminology.

Recommendations for religious leaders:

Religious communities need to take responsibility for engaging the media more effectively by:

- Considering how European and national interreligious councils can be resources for media;
- Strengthening media literacy;
- Explaining and challenging the use of religious terminology by the media;

- Considering how institutional hierarchies affect the ability of religious voices to communicate with the press. Improve communication within religious institutions and empower local-level voices;
- Promoting solidarity between religious leaders;
- Understanding that news media prefer sources (interviewees) who are:
 - Competent
 - Reliable
 - Relevant
 - Confident
 - Available (on short notice)
 - In regular contact with journalists (i.e. initial contacts before a crisis; avoid firefighting)
- Journalists need not just a talking head, but also someone who can speak with them in depth “on background” or “off-the-record”
- Clarity, humility, transparency are the best ways to deal with sensitive questions;
- Being proactive with various forms of media, as well as producing their own news, otherwise silence can be misunderstood because it often leads to negative assumptions or suspicions;
- Understanding that religious leaders, also on a local level, are interesting voices because they are influential, have knowledge on both religious and social issues.
- Understanding that news media must prevail in a highly competitive environment, so if religious leaders are approached by several media at once, they can be selective;
- Considering creating a “code of conduct” or guidelines for religious voices speaking with media.
- Religious communities need to improve their communications capacity by:
- Improving the capacity of religious leaders to better understand how media works;
- Developing web sites and tools that make their information more accessible;
- Designating a spokesperson;
- Developing more effective messaging and story-telling;
- Giving background briefings to journalists;
- Developing relationships with journalists;
- Providing qualified lay-experts who will interest journalists (not just clerics);
- Linking religious representatives to journalist associations;
- Inviting regularly media professionals to events and celebrations;
- Making more effective use of social media (bearing in mind both its risks and opportunities);
- Increasing religious communities’ private and public acknowledgements of accurate, positive or fair coverage to leadership of media outlets;
- Organizing interreligious initiatives that demonstrate solidarity in real time response to crisis.
- Religious communities need to take a proactive and innovative approach for generating events of public interest (i.e.: thinking outside of the box) by:

- Organizing events with bloggers and social media actors that cover religious and social matters;
- Engaging with popular culture, celebrities, comedians, actors, story-tellers, etc. (ex. Soap opera script writers).

Recommendations for KAICIID

Specific recommendations for KAICIID were to:

- Provide media literacy and communications training for religious leaders;
- Provide religious literacy training for journalists;
- Create dialogue between religious leaders and journalists;
- Create rapid response mechanism for interreligious initiatives and media to collaborate at times of crisis in particular;
- Bring faith-based news media and non-religious and mainstream news media closer together;
- Convene an international meeting of bloggers and social media experts;
- Convene an international meeting of religious broadcasters;
- Become a facilitating entity in the Istanbul Process (ex: KAICIID needs to organize a media panel to Santiago, Chile, where the next Istanbul Process meeting is taking place);
- Create a handbook for journalists about sensitive terminology in religious reporting, first highlighting existing resources to avoid duplication and then adding any missing dimensions;
- Ensure that events include more women and youth, as well as take into account non-believer communities.