

**STATEMENT BY MR. OLIVIER ROY, MODERATOR OF SESSION 4,
AT THE OSCE CHAIRMANSHIP CONFERENCE ON INTOLERANCE
AND DISCRIMINATION AGAINST MUSLIMS**

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Dialogue of civilizations, religious freedom and citizenship

The theory of the clash of civilizations has one point in common with the theory of the dialogue of civilizations: both associate religious identity with cultural identity. Thus, when Islamophobia is discussed, ethnic discrimination and religious discrimination are lumped together. This raises problems, because religious identity and cultural identity, for various reasons, do not necessarily correspond: an immigrant of Arab origin in Europe does not necessarily define himself as a Muslim, and a European Muslim is not necessarily of foreign origin or the representative of another culture. Moreover, many non-Muslim Europeans do not regard themselves as representing a Christian culture, and many Christian believers feel that the dominant, secularized European culture is hostile towards them. In “Christian” Europe there is a growing dichotomy between the Christian religion and a culture that is secular. The assimilation of culture and religion does not take into account the trend observable today towards a growing separation between religion and culture. This applies also to Islam, in spite of all the statements about a supposed characteristic of Islam being that it makes no distinction between culture and religion: it is enough to travel around the Muslim world to see that Islam can find expression in a wide variety of cultures. To see in every Muslim the representative of a specific culture, and particularly to assume that any person coming from the Muslim world is a believer, may run counter to individual freedom to choose, or indeed not to choose. People of Muslim origin are assigned a cultural identity that they do not necessarily claim for themselves, either because they are no longer believers or because they wish to express their faith outside a precise cultural context.

I consider that it is a mistake to systematically link religion and culture for three reasons:

1. Religions tend today to express themselves in varying cultural contexts and not to identify themselves with a particular culture. Emigration reinforces this separation. Many Muslims today consider that religious obligations (for example, regarding “*halal*” meat) can be observed perfectly well in Western cultural contexts (the “*halal*” fast food restaurant). Girls who want to be free to wear headscarves at school do not necessarily wear them out of loyalty to a traditional culture that may do so to express their personal faith.
2. To identify religion and culture means assigning to all believers a culture to which they do not necessarily lay claim; conversely, it means imposing on all the members of an

“ethnic minority” a religion which they do not necessarily profess. The assimilation of religion and culture goes against religious freedom, because it ignores those who change their religion or declare themselves atheists. Today, in Europe and elsewhere, conversions in both directions take place; there are people of European ancestry who convert to Islam and who do not necessarily decide to wear turbans, eat couscous or talk Arabic. There are also people of Muslim origin who convert to Christianity, which, incidentally, raises a human rights problem in countries that do not recognize the right to abandon Islam (such as Malaysia and Iran). Lastly, there are people of Muslim origin who declare themselves atheists. In short, individual freedom must be respected and collective identities must not be imposed.

3. To identify religion and culture is to see in European Muslims a Middle Eastern diaspora concerned above all about the conflicts in the Middle East. Linking the situation in the Middle East to the status of Muslims in Europe makes no contribution to resolving these conflicts; in addition, it supports the idea that European Muslims remain “foreigners” and amounts to importing these conflicts into Europe, precisely something that one is afraid of. Perhaps it is worth pointing out that none of the young people who demonstrated in November 2005 in France against racist discrimination held up Palestinian flags. The question of Islam in Europe must be disconnected from the Middle Eastern question.

4. We must try, then, to promote the recognition of Islam in the West as a universalist religion like Christianity, rather than as the identifying characteristic of an ethnic minority. That will be more consistent with the principle of citizenship, which does not recognize categories of citizens, and with the separation of Church and State. It will also be in conformity with the nature of Islam, which sees itself as a universalist, world religion and not as the expression of a cultural area or ethnic group. Consideration of Islamophobia should be limited to the question of the treatment of Islam as a religion, while discrimination based on ethnic origin or “facies” should be dealt with under the heading of racism. Religious freedom, which is an individual right, is a basic principle which must not be confused with the rights of minorities, nor approached in any collective way.

The integration of Islam in Europe requires, firstly, that each Muslim should be recognized as a citizen with full rights and, secondly, that Islam should be given its due place as a religion.