

**Session: Can Europe speak with one voice on FoRB? National traditions and external approaches – What are the opportunities and risks?**  
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Can Europe speak with one voice? My answer is no if we think of the one voice as the voice of a solo singer; yes, if we think of a choir, where different voices sing in harmony.

If we compare Europe with other regions that are at its borders, North Africa, Middle East, Central Asia, I think we can say there is a distinctive European model of freedom of religion and belief, based on three pillars. First, respect of individual religious freedom: nowhere in Europe the apostates, the followers of a minority religion, the atheists face negative consequences on the enjoyment of civil and political rights due to their religious or conscience choices. Second, the distinction of State and religion: nowhere in Europe the legal system of a religion is part of the legal system of the State or religious courts are part of the State court system. Third, the cooperation of State and religious institutions, also in countries, like France, that follow a model of Church-State separation: and this is the main difference between the European and the US system of State-religion relationship. Of course there are exceptions to these rules, some in this very country where we are. But all in all they are minor things if compared to the models of religious freedom and State-Church relations that are in place in the regions that surround Europe.

The existence of this European pattern of freedom of religion and belief explains why it is possible to speak of voices that sing in harmony. But even in a choir different voices can be distinguished and therefore the fact that a European model exists does not exclude internal differences. To assess their importance a preliminary question should be answered. What Europe are we speaking of? Do we have in mind the Europe of the European Union or the Europe of the Council of Europe that includes Russia, Turkey and other States that are a bridge between the West and the East? In the first case we are speaking of countries that, although with different national histories, share a strong common cultural background; in the second case the picture is more complex as we need to take into account inputs coming from different cultural worlds.

However, even focusing on the smaller Europe, the Europe of the European Union, there are differences that depend on its internal religious borders. We all know that European history and culture has been heavily influenced by Christianity, but Catholic, Orthodox and Protestant Christianity are not the same thing. I am not going to explain their differences because it would not be serious to do that in five minutes. But these differences are there and they become increasingly visible. For example in the European Court Great Chamber judgment on the Lautsi case the coalition of States that supported the Italian case for the display of the crucifix in the classrooms consisted of Orthodox and Catholic countries only: no country with a Protestant majority was included. State laws limiting religious proselytism can be found more easily in Orthodox than in Catholic or Protestant countries. More generally, the way most people conceive religion –as a matter of individual choice or as a matter of collective membership- is not the same in countries where the Protestant or the Orthodox religious traditions have been dominant in the last few centuries.

Finally, within the same cultural and religious area of Europe, there are different national histories. Latin and Catholic –or post-Catholic- France has a republican tradition, based on the separation of State and religion and on a strong secular conception of the State. This tradition is unknown in other Latin and Catholic countries like Italy and Spain. The issue of the Islamic scarf is a good example of

this difference. The prohibition of the Islamic scarves, and more broadly of religious symbols, in public institutions can be approved or disapproved but is understandable in the light of the French history of the last two centuries; it would be unconceivable in countries like Italy or Spain, although they share with France the same cultural and religious tradition.

At the end of this short analysis my conclusion is that in Europe, within the framework of a shared conception of the right to freedom of religion and belief, there are many different ways to understand its content, manifestations and limitations. These differences become broader when we bring into the picture the US and Canada. What policy indications can be derived from this conclusion? One in particular: provided we keep in place the common framework I have mentioned, these differences should not be regarded as an obstacle to be removed but as an asset on which to build our international strategy for freedom of religion. They show the richness of the right to freedom of religion and belief, that is not a monolithic right to be imposed everywhere and on everybody in the same way but a right capable to adapt to the specificities of different historical, political and religious contexts . Exploring these differences and discussing how to include them in a shared framework is one of the tasks of this transatlantic dialogue and the best way to answer those who do not believe that, beneath the different husks in which it can be enveloped, there is a universal kernel of the right to freedom of religion and belief.