

Bologna, June 11th, 2017

Dear Colleagues,

I have read the Statement of two respected associations (EASR and IAHR) concerning the European Academy of Religion. They were invited to participate in the Bologna conference. Some of their associates came and will come but these two bodies rejected the invitation. Recently they have published a declaration where they pretend to judge, to censor and to veto the Bologna initiative, whose aim is not to replace any of the existing scientific societies operating in the existing research areas but rather to offer to all of them a new platform and framework for a specific integrating activity.

On that Statement, I would like to express four short personal comments.

1. As the Statement says, EASR is an institution "promoting the academic studies of religions": and by statute it is a federation of the members of 23 national associations within the borders of the European Union.

There is nothing "superfluous" in promoting an inclusive research platform open to all of those who practice a scientific discipline that have engaged with or been engaged by religious experience in its diverse expressions. Each one employs the academic tradition of her/his country, each one with the epistemological criteria of his/her discipline, and in the spirit of the respect for the academic diversity that scholars are used to respect. This attitude explains the presence of thousands of scholars and students in the field of law, sociology, philosophy, history, theology, music, digital studies, holocaust studies, philology, linguistics, etc. which are not asking to be certified by whatever authority of EASR in order to be recognized as a part of an academic community.

2. The signatories of the Statement believe that they can judge who is carrying out research in an "impartial and non confessionally motivated manner", and who is not.

I must say that I found offensive the idea that somebody can judge the "motivation" of a scholar. I think that each research must be evaluated only by its results, and by academic and scholarly discussion: it can be good or bad, innovative or repetitive, bright or stupid – and this does not depend on its motivation and it cannot derive by "impressions" coming from the program. The idea of pre-emptive requirements for scholarship is not acceptable and the presumption to judge a few or many scholars "en masse", simply because they belong to other disciplines, is not acceptable.

3. The signatories remark that the Foundation for Religious Studies, which played a small role in promoting the European Academy of Religion, receives both "public funds and private" grants.

This represents an *ignorantia crassissima* on what fscire.it is. I presume that all or many

institutions to which the members of EASR belong to did receive public and private grants for their research activity. The quality and the interest of an institution like the Foundation for Religious Studies (John XXIII is in its name because it holds the archives of Roncalli within its patrimony) can be judged by our book series in several countries, our academic journal and the few hundred scholars in the world who hosted or sent PhD students in exchange, who promoted scientific conferences with us, who contributed to the history of Vatican II, to Cogd, to Constantinus, to the critical editions of Roncalli's diaries, to the "Dizionario del sapere storico-religioso del Novecento", all of whom can say what independence and scholarship means to us.

4. The Statement turns against "the pursuit of normative theology and engagement in interreligious conversation", but it admits that "the empirical study of such activities is, naturally, a valid topic of research in the study of religions".

The two sentences are in my view based on two wrong presuppositions. The European Academy of Religion is not a space of inter-religious dialogue among religious authorities, but an arena which is open to scholarly discourse and responsibility in the public debate. It considers theologians as members of the academic debate as it is practiced in thousands of universities and research centers all around the world. Besides theology as such, I must confess that for me the history of theological doctrines (a field that I know) is part of history as such and not of a generic "study of religions", where other criteria may apply. And I would be relieved not to be classified extrinsically by scholars who belong to other fields of scientific research.

In conclusion, the purpose of the European Academy of Religion is to add to the usual and specialistic conventions of scholars a platform where they may encounter very different researchers and all of them can speak with a strong public voice, advocating for an open research and open innovation in a large and suffering area of the world. Many scientific societies, sometimes more important and much older than EASR, did acknowledge this opportunity: many important patrons, five hundred institutions, roughly one thousand students and scholars from Europe, the Mediterranean, the Middle East, Caucasus and Russia (and among them some members of the EASR) did that.

I am confident that in the near future the Statement will be forgotten as an "unfortunate" misunderstanding, wounding the scientific dignity, the academic freedom and the reputation of those scholars who deserve the respect of the dissenting ones, and that the signatories and the scholars they represent will find the European Academy of Religion, because of its inclusive nature, a welcoming initiative which is worth supporting.

Yours,

Alberto Melloni

