

WHEN BUDDHISM MEETS ISLAM: BRUSSELS OPENS A NEW CHAPTER IN EUROPEAN INTERFAITH DIALOGUE



By Stefano Davide Bettera



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At a time marked by identity-based conflicts, geopolitical tensions and growing cultural polarisation, interfaith dialogue remains one of the most valuable instruments for building mutual understanding and fostering peace. It is against this backdrop that the event *“Buddhism Meets Islam”*, held on 9 May in Brussels as part of the General Assembly of the European Buddhist Union (EBU) and the celebrations of Vesak—the most important festival in the Buddhist calendar—takes on particular significance.

The initiative is noteworthy not only for its symbolic value but also for its institutional context. It places Buddhist–Muslim dialogue within the framework of European institutions and the activities linked to Article 17 of the Treaty on the Functioning of the European Union, which governs dialogue between EU institutions and religious communities. Earlier in 2026, the European Muslim Leaders Majlis (EULEMA) had already promoted a number of interfaith meetings at the European Parliament involving Christian, Jewish and Buddhist representatives. For the EBU, meanwhile, the event formed part of a broader focus on religious freedom and the rights of Buddhist minorities in Europe, a central theme of its 2026 General Assembly.

From an institutional perspective, the meeting represents one of the first recent examples of structured cooperation between organised European Muslim leadership and the representative bodies of European Buddhism. Its objective is ambitious yet timely: to create a shared platform addressing religious freedom, dialogue and social cohesion within the European context.

Organised with the participation of EULEMA, the gathering brought together Buddhist and Muslim representatives from across Europe to reflect on the contribution religious traditions can make to contemporary society. Beyond its symbolic importance, what makes the meeting particularly remarkable is its innovative nature. Structured dialogue between Buddhism and Islam has been relatively rare in Europe, where interfaith engagement has historically focused on relations between Christianity, Judaism and Islam.

This emphasis has reflected both the continent’s religious heritage and the challenges associated with the integration of Muslim communities. Buddhism, although increasingly established and recognised within European societies, has often remained on the margins of these conversations. The Brussels meeting therefore marks a genuine milestone: the beginning of a direct dialogue between two spiritual traditions which, despite emerging from very different geographical and cultural contexts, share aspirations towards peace, compassion, ethical responsibility and the alleviation of human suffering.

The choice of Brussels as the venue was far from accidental. As the heart of European institutions and a crossroads of cultures and worldviews, the Belgian capital provides a uniquely appropriate setting for developing new forms of cooperation among religious communities. In this sense, the dialogue between Buddhism and Islam carries not only a spiritual dimension but also a civic and political one. It is not merely about encouraging mutual understanding; it is

also about contributing to a more inclusive European citizenship grounded in respect for diversity and the appreciation of pluralism.

Participants stressed that authentic dialogue does not require individuals to abandon their convictions. On the contrary, it demands a deeper awareness of one's own spiritual identity. Only those firmly rooted in their own tradition can engage openly with others without fear or prejudice. Seen from this perspective, the encounter between Buddhists and Muslims was not an exercise in religious diplomacy but a practical opportunity to recognise one another as partners capable of sharing common concerns and common responsibilities.

Particular attention was given to issues of religious freedom, human dignity and social cohesion. In increasingly fragmented societies, religious communities can play an important role in fostering relationships based on trust, countering both forms of extremism and the marginalisation of minority groups. Buddhists and Muslims, while representing very different traditions, often share the experience of being religious minorities in European countries and face similar challenges relating to recognition, representation and participation in public life.

The Brussels initiative may therefore mark the beginning of a process that will continue to develop in the years ahead. If dialogue among Christians, Jews and Muslims has been one of the great laboratories of coexistence in contemporary Europe, engagement between Buddhism and Islam could open a new chapter in interfaith relations, further enriching the culture of pluralism and freedom that lies at the heart of the European project.

At a time when differences are too often perceived as threats, the meeting between Buddhists and Muslims demonstrated an alternative path: one based on mutual understanding, attentive listening and practical cooperation. It is a path that does not seek to erase differences but rather to transform them into opportunities for shared growth. Perhaps this is the most important lesson to emerge from Brussels: the recognition that peace is not merely the absence of conflict, but the capacity to build meaningful relationships among individuals and communities who choose to recognise one another in the common pursuit of the good. 🧘



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**Saturday
May 9th
17:30**

are glad to invite you to the roundtable

BUDDHISM *meets* **ISLAM**

Venue:
Hôtel de Ville de Saint-Gilles
Place Van Meenen 39,
1060 Saint-Gilles, Brussels

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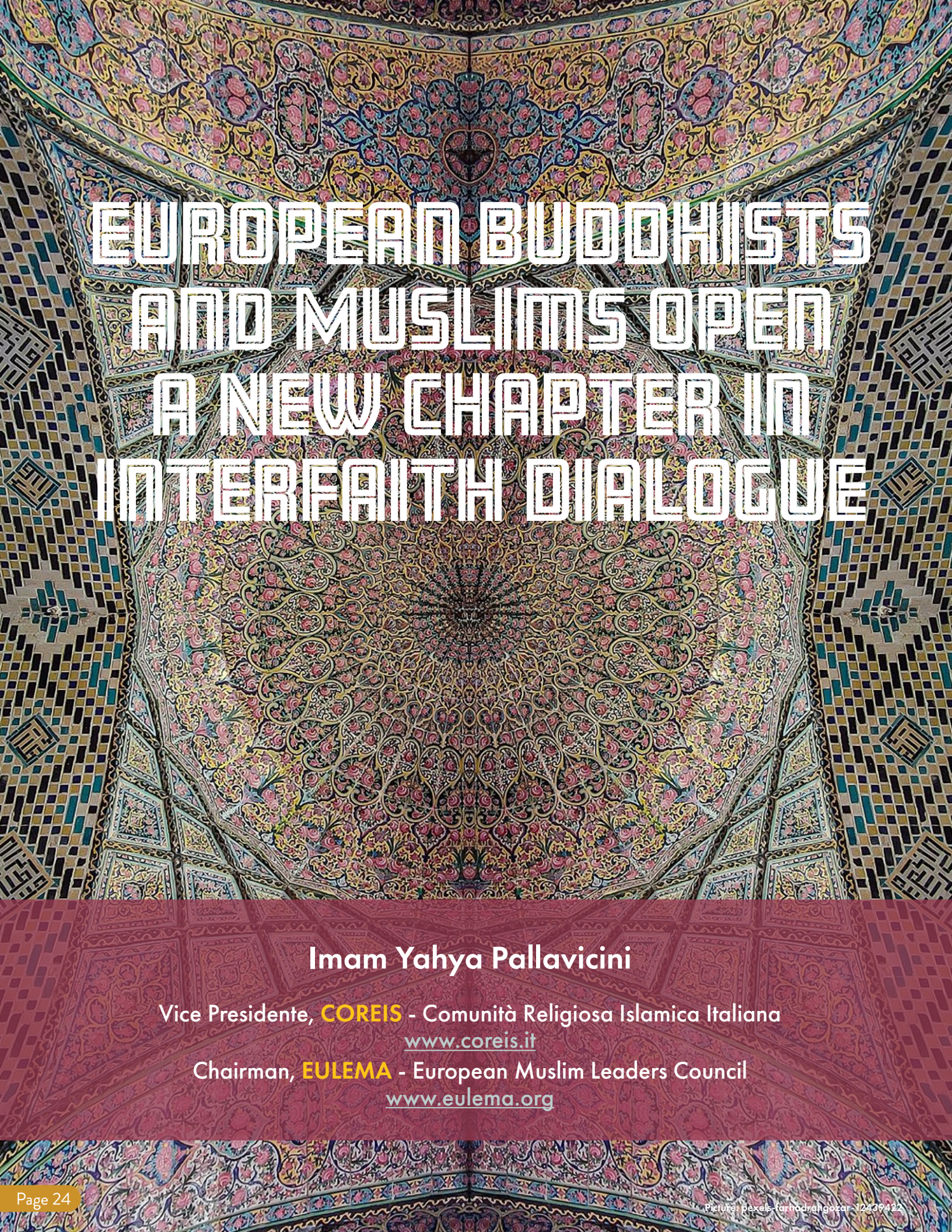
*Member of the Triratna Buddhist
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Katarzyna Kucharska Louaar

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Hassan El Bouchttaoui

President Muslim Council of Belgium



EUROPEAN BUDDHISTS AND MUSLIMS OPEN A NEW CHAPTER IN INTERFAITH DIALOGUE

Imam Yahya Pallavicini

Vice Presidente, **COREIS** - Comunità Religiosa Islamica Italiana
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A landmark encounter took place in Brussels this spring as representatives of Europe's Buddhist and Muslim communities gathered for what may prove to be a historic moment in interfaith relations on the continent.

The meeting, organised jointly by the European Buddhist Union (EBU) and the European Muslim Leaders Council (EULEMA), brought together religious leaders and scholars from Belgium, Denmark, Finland, France, Germany, Hungary, Italy, Norway, Poland, Sweden and the United Kingdom. Hosted in a prestigious venue provided by the City of Brussels, the event coincided with the EBU General Assembly and offered an unprecedented opportunity for dialogue between two spiritual traditions that have rarely engaged one another in a structured European context.

Reflecting on the occasion, Imam Yahya Pallavicini, Vice President of the Italian Islamic Religious Community (COREIS) and Chairman of EULEMA, observed that the organisers may not have fully realised the significance of what they were creating. The practical demands of service, coordination and hospitality perhaps overshadowed the awareness that something both spiritually meaningful and historically significant was taking shape.

The gathering raised important questions. How often have Buddhists and Muslims met in Europe to exchange views in a spirit of mutual respect and learning? What forms of cooperation might emerge from such encounters, and how could they contribute positively

to European society? Equally important is the need to ensure that public discussions about Buddhism and Islam are informed by authentic knowledge rather than by ignorance, stereotypes or ideological distortions.

To illuminate the potential of meaningful dialogue across traditions, Pallavicini pointed to the example of the Chinese Muslim scholar Liu Zhi (1660–1739). Liu sought to explain the Five Pillars of Islam through the categories of Confucian moral metaphysics, demonstrating how religious teachings can be communicated across cultural boundaries without compromising their integrity.

According to Liu's interpretation, the profession of faith, prayer, fasting, almsgiving and pilgrimage guide believers along a path of spiritual return to their original nature. Prayer becomes a journey towards that return; fasting weakens attachment to worldly concerns; almsgiving uproots selfishness; and pilgrimage fulfils the divine command while directing the believer towards ultimate reality. These practices were presented within a broader vision of harmony between heaven, earth and humanity, enriched by the cosmological principles of Yin and Yang and the Five Elements.

Liu's work remains a remarkable example of intellectual openness and cultural translation. Yet, as Pallavicini emphasised, such efforts should never lead to artificial syncretism or confusion between distinct religious traditions. Rather, they demonstrate the possibility of recognising shared spiritual and ethical principles while preserving the integrity of each faith. ►

In contemporary Europe, this message carries particular relevance. Both Buddhists and Muslims are frequently viewed through the prism of geopolitical conflicts, ideological struggles or historical prejudices. Buddhism is often simplistically associated with China, while Islam is sometimes reduced to the actions of radical movements. Such narratives obscure the reality that millions of Buddhists and Muslims are integral members of European societies.

The Brussels dialogue highlighted a different perspective: Buddhists and Muslims not as outsiders, but as European citizens contributing to the common good. Together, they can help promote a richer understanding of European citizenship—one that fully respects religious pluralism while remaining rooted in shared civic values. Such an approach avoids confusing questions of religious identity with foreign policy, multicultural ideology or anxieties about national sovereignty.

Beyond political considerations, both traditions offer a deeper contribution to contemporary society. They encourage a renewed appreciation of the symbolic and spiritual dimensions of life at a time when aggressive forms of secularism often seek to reduce human existence to purely material concerns. In doing so, they remind Europeans that genuine unity cannot be achieved through uniformity, but through harmony rooted in respect for diversity and transcendent values.

The Brussels encounter between European Buddhists and Muslims may therefore represent more than a successful interfaith event. It may mark the beginning of a broader conversation about spirituality, citizenship and coexistence in twenty-first-century Europe—a conversation grounded in mutual respect and animated by a shared commitment to peace.

As Imam Pallavicini concluded, there remains confidence that the disciplines leading to liberation, enlightenment and true peace will ultimately prevail over the arrogance of those who seek to manipulate minds and souls.

Peace be with you. ﷻ

Yahya Pallavicini



Imam of al-Wahid central mosque in Milan. Vice President of COREIS, the Islamic Religious Community of Italy (www.coreis.it). Chairman of EULEMA, the European Muslim Scholars Council (Brussels, www.eulema.org). Advisor for Italian Islam to the Minister of the Interior of the Italian Government from 2005 to 2018, and Ambassador to ICESCO, the Islamic Organisation for Education, Culture and Science (Rabat, 2014 - 2023). Member of the G20 Religion Forum in Italy, the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia and Indonesia (2020-2022) and of the WEF World Economic Forum, Global Council on Faith in Action.