

**PLENARY MEETING OF THE "CHURCH AND SOCIETY" COMMISSION**  
**CONFERENCE OF EUROPEAN CHURCHES**  
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*Speech by Mr Ulrich Bunjes,  
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Dear Chair,

Dear delegates,

I thank you – also in the name of the Coordinator for Intercultural Dialogue of the Council of Europe, Mrs Battaini-Dragoni – for your kind invitation to attend this Plenary Meeting of the "Church and Society Commission" and to address you on issues of European policy.

This is a very special occasion. The intergovernmental organisation for which I work, the Council of Europe, is not often invited to conferences of Churches or other religious communities. There are many reasons for that, and I will comment on some in the next few minutes.

You have invited me to present the Council of Europe view on intercultural dialogue, and particularly on the religious dimension of intercultural dialogue.

**THE COUNCIL OF EUROPE IN THREE MINUTES**

This morning I will often mention the Council of Europe. Allow me, therefore, to introduce the Council of Europe in three sentences:

- The Council of Europe is essentially an intergovernmental organisation, with currently 47 member states. However, the Organisation also has a parliamentary dimension (the Parliamentary Assembly); a judiciary dimension (the European Court of Human Rights); an body that brings together the local and regional authorities; and an independent Human Rights Commissioner.
- The Council of Europe has three basic goals: the protection of the human rights; the development of democracy; and the strengthening of the rule of law, which it pursues in a range of working areas: legal co-operation, build-up of democratic structures in member states, human right policies and protection of minorities, media guidelines, social coherence, education and training, culture and cultural heritage, youth and sport.
- The Council of Europe is not the European Union. It is older than the Union, geographically wider and therefore politically and culturally more pluralistic.

**"A GREATER UNITY" AND THE DIALOGUE OF CULTURES**

In a way, the Council of Europe has been – from its beginnings in 1949 – a platform for intercultural dialogue. The words had not yet been invented, but organising the dialogue between the cultures was one of his tasks. One of the first European

conventions developed by the Council of Europe, incidentally, was the European Cultural Convention of 1954. It is still valid today, and has been signed by 49 states so far. The agreement obliges each Contracting Party to *“take appropriate measures to safeguard and to encourage the development of its national contribution to the common cultural heritage of Europe”* and mentions particularly studies of the language, the history and the civilization of the other contracting parties.

The term "intercultural dialogue" does not appear in the convention of 1954 (like religion, incidentally). That is not astonishing. The term "intercultural dialogue" has come to be used widely in the political debate not before the 1990's.

### **"INTERCULTURAL DIALOGUE" AS A PRIORITY OF THE COUNCIL OF EUROPE**

The reasons for that are manifold. Just to mention the three most obvious:

- The increasing internal cultural diversity of European societies, caused by strong migration movements as a result of the economic globalization and the political upheavals triggered by the fall of the Berlin Wall
- The increasing perception of international conflicts as conflicts between different cultural value systems, promoted also by the revolution of the communication media
- The increasing self-awareness and self-assertiveness of cultural minorities, demanding the acceptance of their own identity, which can be interpreted also as a reaction to the identity threats posed by economic globalization and European integration process.

There is no generally accepted definition of the term "intercultural dialogue". This certain lack of conceptual clarity did not at all prevent the term "intercultural dialogue" from making a stormy political career, in European politics and at world level, where the United Nations declared 2001 the "International Year of Dialogue of Civilisations".

Following a number of years with programmes on intercultural education, on the integration of migrants, on the protection of minorities (in which context the term "intercultural dialogue" appeared for the first time in an international legal instrument)<sup>1</sup>, on social cohesion etc., the (then) 46 member states of the Council of Europe made intercultural dialogue a political priority of the Organization in 2005. The Final Declaration of the Warsaw Summit of 2005 states, "We (the Heads of State and Government) shall foster European identity and unity, based on shared fundamental values, respect for our common heritage and cultural diversity. We are resolved to ensure that our diversity becomes a source of mutual enrichment."

How can this be aim be translated into practical action? A few months after the Summit, the Committee of Ministers formulated in more detail (in the "Faro Declaration") the fundamentals of a European policy for the promotion of intercultural dialogue. The four cornerstones of this strategy are:

- Every policy for the promotion of intercultural dialogue must be transversal in nature, i.e. it cannot be pursued independently from other policy areas, but must overarch and include these. Intercultural dialogue without the guarantee

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<sup>1</sup> The Framework Convention on the Protection of National Minorities

of human and minority rights, without the guarantee of the fulfilment of basic material needs of everybody involved will fail.

- Intercultural dialogue is certainly the task of the state and public authorities, but it can be advanced only in cooperating with civil society; it will be successful only if as many people as possible accept the necessity – and acquire the necessary skills – to master the cultural variety of our environment productively.
- Understanding another culture does not mean the approval and acceptance of all of their values and practices. For the Council of Europe this means that protecting human rights, securing democracy and the rule of law are essentials that cannot be compromised in the process of intercultural dialogue. Intercultural dialogue does not mean value relativism.
- Intercultural dialogue is a task that cannot be tackled within the borders of our continent alone. Cultures are interconnected at world level.

In our view, therefore, intercultural dialogue must be transversal in nature; it is a task of the whole society; it is not value-neutral; and it has global connotations.

### **THE WHITE PAPER ON INTERCULTURAL DIALOGUE**

How do we implement this strategy? Who must do what, at which level, in order to achieve the objectives? Which methods and programs can be used, in order to promote intercultural dialogue? Who can, who should participate? How do we have to change, how must others change?

These are the questions that are now in the centre of the discussion. We do not have to start at zero with all these issues. For years we have developed numerous

- programmes in the areas of school education and informal education, which help us to accept cultural diversity, to manage it and to use it for our own benefit;
- programmes for the production of school books that do justice to the perspectives of other cultures;
- programmes for police and law officials, which help to protect cultural and minority rights at local level;
- recommendations for the media, in order to reflect adequately the cultural variety;
- guidelines for the work of local and regional authorities, which more and more are confronted with the demands of cultural minorities, and much more besides.

However, more must be done. Everybody involved agrees that more efforts are necessary, worldwide and in Europe. At UN level, a new initiative under the name "Alliance of Civilizations" starts these days. The European Union prepares for 2008 the "European Year of the Intercultural Dialogue".

The Council of Europe is planning, towards the end of this year, to publish a basic political text, a "White Paper", on intercultural dialogue. The document summarises the experience with past programmes, it sketches out a medium and long-term

policy, it offers recommendations and guidelines for all stakeholders, and it provides access to examples of successful practice.

The White Paper, which is currently developed by the Coordinator for Intercultural Dialogue, represents a new approach for the Council of Europe. We are using the preparations of the White Paper for comprehensive consultations with as many stakeholders as possible – governments, parliaments, towns and regional authorities, civil society organisations at European level, minority and migrants’ initiatives, woman federations, cultural organisations, journalists and many others. The White Paper will take account of their experience and their views as well, so as to increase the chances for a widely co-ordinated and broad-based policy for the promotion of the intercultural dialogue.

Among the partners of this "White Paper process" is also a group of organisations, with whom the Council of Europe (just like other international institutions) was not really on speaking terms in the past. I am of course speaking of religious communities, which over the last years moved gradually towards the centre of political attention.

### **RELIGION AS A TOPIC OF THE COUNCIL OF EUROPE**

When looking at religion as a topic of the policy of the Council of Europe, one has to take into account the very pluralistic character of Europe today. Within the Council of Europe, there are three countries (and large geographical areas in some more countries) where Islam is the dominant religion. We have the full plurality of Christian denominations – countries with Catholic, Protestant and Orthodox majorities. We have Jewish minorities in many member states. We have the phenomenon of new religious movements virtually all across Europe.

There are not only different religious traditions, there are also many different ways to organise the relationship between the state and religions: state religions in some countries, different degrees of acceptance and cooperation in others, *laïcité* and other forms of strict separation in others still.

*Laïcité*, or the separation of the sacred and the profane, the spiritual and the secular, is however the model that underpins the policies of all international organisations, also of the Council of Europe. This “European *laïcité*”, as one could perhaps call it, has three fundamental principles:

- The principle of the freedom of thought, conscience and religion
- The principle that every citizen has equal rights and duties, regardless of his religious or philosophical affiliations
- The relative autonomy of the state and of religious communities vis-à-vis each other

This model is not implemented in an ideal way everywhere in Europe, some societies are closer to the ideal than others.

Against this background, naturally, religion always played a role in the policy of the Council of Europe. Over many years, the Council of Europe dealt with religion

specifically under two aspects: the protection of human rights, and the care and protection of the cultural heritage.

Article 9 of the European Convention for the Protection of Human Rights and Fundamental Freedoms consists of two sentences. They read: "*1. Everyone has the right to freedom of thought, conscience and religion; this right includes freedom to change his religion or belief and freedom, either alone or in community with others and in public or private, to manifest his religion or belief, in worship, teaching, practice and observance. 2. Freedom to manifest one's religion or beliefs shall be subject only to such limitations as are prescribed by law and are necessary in a democratic society in the interests of public safety, for the protection of public order, health or morals, or for the protection of the rights and freedoms of others.*" The European Court of Human Rights has developed case-law in over 900 judgements, most recently for instance in a case regarding the official recognition of "Scientology" as religious community in the Russian Federation.

The human right of religious freedom has led to the principle of non-discrimination on religious grounds, which can be found in many other conventions, e.g. in the conventions on cyber criminality, nationality, adoption rights, mutual recognition of educational diploma, legal status of the migrant workers, data security, fight against terrorism, and in the European Social Charter.

The second aspect, which is the treatment of religion as part of the European cultural heritage, is much less developed and lesser known. Examples are the appreciation of the Jewish cultural heritage by the Parliamentary Assembly in 1987; the colloquium of the Secretary General on the contribution of the Islamic culture to the culture of Europe; and a number of intergovernmental programs in the context of the Cultural Convention mentioned before.

### **THE COUNCIL OF EUROPE AND THE RELIGIOUS REALITY**

The protection of the freedom of religion, and the acknowledgment of the contributions of religions to the European cultural heritage, are important but they refer perhaps only to a small segment of the religious reality of Europe.

The Council of Europe has denied dialogue with religious communities for a long time. One may interpret this as an expression of "abstentionist *laïcité*", as it has been called recently – a strict neutrality of the state that is marked by a certain suspicion and by non-dialogue.

Charging political conflicts with religious meanings, beginning in the 1990, and the strong emergence of Islamist tendencies also in Western Europe probably did not really help here, but rather produced the opposite result. Religion was kept at bay, outside the political discourse. As a case in point one could mention the "Declaration on cultural diversity", adopted in December 2000 by the Committee of Ministers of the Council of Europe, which neither includes the word "religion" nor the term "religious communities".

## **RECOGNITION OF THE ROLE OF RELIGION AND "INTERRELIGIOUS DIALOGUE"**

Only recently has the Council of Europe begun to deal with religion and religious communities in a political way. The third Council of Europe Summit, 2005 in Warsaw, expressed itself more comprehensively than ever before on the role of religions. The Summit used –for the first time – the formulation of *"Europe's cultural, religious and human inheritance"* and committed itself to the promotion of *"political, intercultural and interreligious dialogue"*, in order to make cultural diversity a source of mutual enrichment. Elsewhere the Final Declaration says, *"We shall systematically encourage intercultural and inter-faith dialogue, based on universal human rights, as a means of promoting awareness, understanding, reconciliation and tolerance, as well as preventing conflicts and ensuring integration and the cohesion of society."*

This text from the third Summit in Warsaw shows three things quite clearly. Firstly, the Council of Europe is ready to go beyond its past approach, particularly in connection with the dialogue between cultures, and to accept religion as a component of culture. Secondly, the value basis of the Council of Europe - human rights, integration, cohesion - applies also to the dialogue between religions and cultures. And thirdly, the Committee of Ministers (like the Parliamentary Assembly before it) expresses itself for the first time on a question, which supposedly concerns only the religious communities themselves: interreligious dialogue.

It should be pointed out, however, that the Council of Europe does not always define the term "interreligious dialogue" in an unambiguous way. Sometimes the term refers to the dialogue among religious communities themselves; at other times, it refers to something completely new, i.e. the dialogue between the Council of Europe on the one hand and a range of religious communities on the other.

## **DIALOGUE BETWEEN THE COUNCIL OF EUROPE AND RELIGIOUS COMMUNITIES**

I will conclude this part by asking, to what extent religious communities are actually involved in the work of the Council of Europe.

There is no uniform line on this. Religious communities do not have a specific status with the Council of Europe. The Catholic Church is –through the Holy See– observer of the Council of Europe. The Conference of European Churches has had for some years "participatory status", just like several hundred other non-governmental organisations, and can thus participate in the work of the Organisation. Other churches and religious communities, mainly Muslim communities, have practically no access at all.

The individual units of the Council of Europe have advanced quite differently so far, regarding dialogue with religious communities. The Commissioner for Human Rights of the Council of Europe began in 2000 a series of annual discussions with representatives of the three large religious communities traditionally present in Europe. The topics focused the basic values of Europe: What can religious communities contribute to peace and reconciliation in Europe? How can the mutual understanding between cultures be promoted? How is the relationship between religion and state to be organized?

The Parliamentary Assembly has increased its efforts, in recent years, to promote the dialogue with representatives of religious communities. Earlier this year, the Ecumenical Patriarch Bartholomaeus I spoke before the Parliamentary Assembly. In February 2007, the Assembly organized a hearing with religious communities on the topic of relations between state and religion.

The Committee of Ministers of the Council of Europe, finally, only last month opened the way towards an open and regular exchange of views with religious communities. In the first half of 2008, a first "Annual Exchange of Views on the religious dimension of intercultural dialogue" will take place on an experimental basis. According to the preliminary planning, some twenty to thirty representatives and civil society organisations of the three religious communities traditionally present in Europe will be invited to participate, together with the representatives of the member states. The theme of the "Exchange of Views" has not yet been decided, but it is clear that the emphasis will lie on the priorities and objectives of the Council of Europe – human rights, democracy, peace, solidarity, understanding, integration, cohesion. –

I conclude this fast review of the history of intercultural and interreligious dialogue as elements of the policy of the Council of Europe on an optimistic note. Europe is facing new challenges, it must find new answers. The promotion of intercultural dialogue is one of the answers, and we have accepted - like all large international organisations - this challenge.

At the same time the significance and the role of religious communities are recognised more strongly than was usual in past decades. The aims of the Council of Europe can be achieved only together with the religious communities, not against or without them. This can only work if the religious communities are ready to dialogue.

### **THE CONTRIBUTIONS OF RELIGIOUS COMMUNITIES TO THE WHITE PAPER PROCESS**

Over the last few weeks, I am happy to say, we have had ample proof that religious communities are indeed strongly interested to participate in this dialogue and to contribute to the formulation of European policies.

The case in point is exactly – intercultural dialogue. During the consultation process for the White Paper, we also had invited religious communities to share with us their views on intercultural dialogue. The response has been very strong, very well reflected, very far-reaching in its intellectual scope. What is most important to us is the degree of support, encouragement and inspiration that the Council of Europe has received from all three major religions. We are grateful for the agreements – but also for the criticism, which will hopefully help us to develop our position.

The Church and Society Commission of the Conference of European Churches, together with the Churches' Commission for Migrants in Europe (CCME), has forwarded to us an impressive amount of individual contributions that the CEC has received from its members. I thank all of you who helped to bring about this rich contribution; I have to apologize for the fact that we have not yet had time to evaluate all individual position papers.

However, together with these individual contributions, the CEC and CCME have sent us the “consolidated response”, which we could evaluate at least in a preliminary way. As I speak, our consultant expert Jean-Paul Willaime – arguably the most prominent expert in the sociology of religion in France – is studying the entire set of papers, and preparing a more substantiated analysis for us. So please accept the following comments as preliminary.

I would like to summarise my reaction in five points. Allow me to leave aside for now the aspects that directly refer to the integration of migrants, which is a related but distinct topic.

1. The response is very helpful and supportive of the Council of Europe position on intercultural dialogue. It emphasises a number of important aspects and drives the reflection process further, for instance with regard to the following issues:

- The anthropological value of dialogue
- The dignity of every person as the guiding principle of intercultural dialogue action
- The dual impact of intercultural dialogue on minorities and majorities, and the need for a shift in the thinking of majorities
- The role of the socio-economic factors
- The “added value” of Council of Europe action, its role in intercultural dialogue and the exemplary character of the White Paper process.

Your support on these and other key points is very welcome.

2. You underline that “*equality needs to complement diversity*” (page 2), in order to achieve social cohesion. This point merits reflection. Our position is that a balance needs to be found between the promotion and protection of diversity on the one hand, and factors strengthening social cohesion – e.g. shared values – on the other.

I say this for two reasons. One: equality does not necessarily lead to social cohesion. Multicultural societies can safeguard equal access to rights, without achieving cohesion. The second reason: equality before the law, access to education, employment and services may not be enough. The European Court of Human Rights has already prepared a paradigm shift towards the equal enjoyment of rights, by stating that the right to enjoy the rights guaranteed under the Convention without discrimination is also violated if without justifiable reasons the signatory states do not apply different treatment to persons whose situation is significantly different from those of others.<sup>2</sup>

I assume that you would probably agree with us on this point, since you are favouring positive discrimination (p.4) yourself.

3. Another point where at least at first sight we seem to agree concerns the nature of culture today. I take a passage on page 6, where you formulate that intercultural dialogue is necessary in order to reflect upon “one’s own cultures.”

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<sup>2</sup> *Thlimmenos vs. Greece*, 6 April 2000, § 44.

This is a point that the Council of Europe, UNESCO and others have made ever so often: that in our own, individual identity we all are carriers of cultural diversity, since we integrate elements of different cultures into our own personality. We are discussing that under the title of “multiple belonging” or “multiple affiliation”; the often used term “multiple identities” is less well suited.

Because of this creative element in culture, we argue that one should not treat cultures as static and finite, but as a dynamic and infinite concept. That cultures are constantly created afresh, as hybrids of existing cultural modules. Some go as far as saying that we are entering an age of “transculturality” (you use the term “transcultural society” on page 2, but maybe in a different sense).

If you agree with that proposition of culture as a dynamic concept, then let us discuss your suggestion that on the whole, (cultural?) “*diversity is rather decreasing than increasing*” (page 7). I sense a certain tension here. What exactly do we mean by “culture” in each case?

4. A clarification on culture and religion. I think the Council of Europe will readily agree that religion cannot be exhaustively described with a reference to culture alone (page 7). It was never our intention to reduce religion to culture, neither to reduce it to social provision or identity building, which are important other aspects.

However, according to the third principle of “European *laïcité*”, the Council of Europe will never express itself on theological questions. It is just the cultural dimension – one dimension among several – that interests us at this point in time.

5. Lastly, I would like to thank you for your suggestions regarding follow-up action to the White Paper (pages 11-14), and particularly your detailed comments on the question of the “Annual exchanges on the religious dimension of intercultural dialogue”. I think we will evaluate this part of the responses in a more detailed way for the preparation of the first of these “Annual exchanges”, which will start immediately after the summer break. I cannot comment on the very detailed suggestions and requests, which mostly concur with our thinking in the Secretariat. Preparation and follow-up is obviously essential for the success of these meetings. The guideline of the Committee of Ministers for the selection of participants (page 12) – and here you are right – may lead to some difficult discussions, if it is taken at face value. I am sure, however, that through a flexible approach we will find a satisfactory solution. The mutual trust will grow quickly, I am sure, and with time, the dialogue itself will render these safeguards superfluous.

Thank you for your attention.