

Evangelical Church in Germany (EKD)

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Statement for the consultation process on the preparation of the “White Paper on intercultural dialogue” of the Council of Europe

Introduction

The EKD understands “culture” as „the sum of a framework of meanings in accordance to which people form and communicate their own identity as well as their environment by means of words, signs and images.”¹

On this basis the EKD comments on the statement of the Council of Europe, which reads as follows: „In the international debate, intercultural and interreligious dialogue are sometimes seen as two separate, though interrelated issues; whereas others, like the Council of Europe, stress that religious beliefs and traditions – like agnostic, atheist or secularist convictions – are one dimension of culture.”²

According to the EKD, religion cannot be reduced to “religious beliefs and traditions”, but comprises the whole spectrum of daily and personal life, e.g. charitable activities, artistic forms of expression, celebrating together etc.).

Yet, it seems that the Council of Europe, in its statement cited above, is primarily concerned with the relation between intercultural and interreligious dialogue. It is surely traceable to conceive of religion as one dimension of culture, as the Council of Europe implicitly did in the statement cited above. This thought, however, cannot by no means provide for a comprehensive description of the relation between culture and religion. Moreover, the notion of religion as one dimension of culture becomes flawed if understood in the way that religion was a mere aspect of culture and was completely absorbed in the latter. Religion as a dimension of culture always transcends the realm of culture, forming an in-depth-dimension, which renders a certain perspective on culture as a whole.³ It is in this light that the EKD views the relation between intercultural and interreligious dialogue.⁴

In its statement the EKD concentrates on the areas, in which it has already gathered experiences and worked out concepts. Due to practical reasons the statement follows the order of questions in the main text of the consultation document of the Council of Europe. The answers also cover the slightly questions in the document for the religious communities.

1. How urgent are efforts to promote intercultural dialogue today? Why are they urgent?

The following points underline the importance of the promotion of intercultural dialogue for the EKD:

Especially due to migration, the diversity of cultures and religions as well as the diversity within cultures and religions (e.g. migration churches) has been enlarged considerably. This enhancement invites dialogue as well as cooperation and poses a pastoral, theological, religious and socio-political challenge for the EKD.

¹ See „Räume der Begegnung. Religion und Kultur in evangelischer Perspektive. Eine Denkschrift der EKD und der VEF“, Gütersloh 2002, p. 11.

² See consultations document, p. 7.

³ Cf. Räume, p. 19-21.

⁴ Cf. the differentiation concerning interreligious dialogue in the answer to question 12.

EKD sees intercultural dialogue as an important tool among others to manage cultural diversity in democratic societies. Intercultural dialogue should therefore be seen in a broader context that includes e.g. social, employment and educational policies. Moreover, the different levels of intercultural dialogue should be differentiated (local, regional, national, European and international level, for example).⁵

2. What can be done to give cultural diversity a more positive connotation than it has today? What should the response be to intolerant, racist and xenophobic tendencies in the public debate?

One of the most fruitful attempts is the promotion of opportunities for direct personal encounter as can be demonstrated by the initiative “Weisst du wer ich bin? / Do you know, who I am?”(see examples of good practice): Here, the EKD in cooperation with other Christian churches as well as Muslim and Jewish religious communities helps to discourage xenophobia, racism and violence. Life together of people of different origins is often accompanied by problems and may cause conflicts, sometimes even leading to outbreaks of live-threatening violence. The EKD considers it thus ever more important to point to examples of peaceful and enriching life together.

Keeping in mind that regions of Germany with the least presence of people with migrant background often feature the most significant degree of xenophobia, it becomes apparent that the main problems are caused by the opinions, fears and attitudes of the “locals”, not by the presence of migrants. On the contrary, life together of “locals” and a significant number of people of different origins evidently furthers their capability of getting along with each other. Closer proximity not only creates understanding and familiarity, but also un.masks so-called problems as being no problems at all. “The others” turn into people just like you and I.

It is at this point that the initiative “Weisst du wer ich bin? / Do you know, who I am?” sets in. It starts with the presupposition that personal encounters change attitudes and prejudices. Personal encounters do not eliminate elements of a different culture that might seem disruptive to one’s own culture – on the contrary they sometimes confirm just those. But personal encounters hold the opportunity of getting to know a different culture more thoroughly including its distinct traditions and history in all its appearances – which can prove to be quite fascinating. Moreover, personal encounters make people’s personality and individuality recognizable. Sometimes, the surprising multitude of common questions and shared thoughts even pushes all that is disruptive into the background.

Furthermore, the “symbolic” dialogue or cooperation of leader of religious or ethnic communities⁶ in public can foster a more positive connotation of intercultural dialogue.

3. Which is the most promising overall “vision” for living together in multicultural societies, what is the most suitable model for managing its diversity in a democratic way?

The EKD views itself as part of the worldwide community of Christian Churches, which exists in cultural, ethnic and confessional diversity. This perspective is based on the faith in the gospel of Jesus Christ, which in its varied cultural forms addresses all people of all cultures.

The EKD therefore holds the concept of “reconciled diversity” or “unity in reconciled diversity”. This means that communalities should be sought and openly expressed without neglecting different traditions and profiles. These differences should be seen as an enrichment rather than a impediment to a vivid unity.

⁵ See answer to question 6.

⁶ Cf. Answer to question 6.

From this overall concept, the EKD derives concrete strategies and policies in various fields, e.g. in consensus building on theological questions in EKD, in ecumenical relations and common action with other Christian churches and last but not least in interreligious and intercultural dialogue.

On the practical side of interreligious and intercultural dialogue, the EKD is thus heavily involved not only in conducting many dialogues but also in implementing projects of joint action of interreligious or intercultural nature (see examples of good practice).

4. How do cultural diversity and human rights relate to one another?

The EKD holds that the concept of human dignity is settled right at the heart of the Christian argument for the human rights. Furthermore, human dignity constitutes the fundament of the Basic Law of the Federal Republic of Germany as of many other national constitutions and of international law. Speaking of inviolable human dignity means that human dignity demands respect. Each human being is entitled to have its dignity respected. At the same time, it is demanded of him or her to respect the dignity of every other human being. According to the Christian belief, God has created human beings in his image and likeness, thus endowing them with dignity. Human dignity is therefore independent of human deeds and immune to all strategies to relativize it because it is founded in the transcendental relationship between god and human being. This dignity, which appertains to all human beings in the same way, provides a basis for equal rights (e.g. of men and women), for antidiscrimination and for the protection of minorities. In the theological traditions of both Christianity and Judaism, the concept of human dignity results in instructions for living in freedom, as summarised in the Ten Commandments or – in Christianity - in the Double Commandment to love god and to love your neighbour and lastly in the commandment to love your enemy. Following this tradition the concept of human rights has evolved in the history of law - regrettably at first to a large extent against the churches or in distance to them.

The EKD acknowledges that individuals and communities of different cultures or religions have found their own approaches to the concept of human rights as put down in the Universal Declaration of Human Rights of 1948 and the two Human Rights Pacts of 1966. Those distinct approaches should, however, not be seen as a precondition or be placed over the validity of human rights.

Human rights encloses the protection of cultural diversity as long as the distinct expressions of cultural do not violate human rights of others.

6. How can we best define “intercultural dialogue”?

The Council of Europe offered the following definition in its consultation document:

“Intercultural dialogue is an open and respectful exchange of views between individuals and groups belonging to different cultures that leads to a deeper understanding of the other’s world perception.”

The EKD sees this definition as a good starting point for discussion. In this discussion it should not be forgot to further clarify the concept of “dialogue”. The connotation of “dialogue” in this context cannot be confined to an exchange merely by two alternating speakers, perhaps even at official conferences.

As there lies surely much value in a form of “symbolic dialogue” on the level of heads of institutions or political and religious leaders,⁷ it is the "dialogue of life" that is even more important and should be further explored in theory and practice.

⁷ Cf. Answer to question 2.

7. In which political, social and cultural contexts can “intercultural dialogue” play a relevant role?

- Socio-political conflicts: In this area, the EKD has experience in working for reconciliation and in „healing of memories“ (cf. examples of good practice).
- Education – including life long learning: Education is one of the main fields of work of the EKD. In its holistic approach to education based on the God given dignity of every human person the EKD sees education as a safe context for dialogical learning. Generally speaking, intercultural dialogue is a fundamental dimension of every learning experience in today’s globalised world, which gets every human being in contact with more than just one culture. Furthermore, intercultural dialogue plays an important role in specific learning situations, which are characterised by a group of culturally diverse learners and / or by a culturally diverse learning environment (which one could call an institutionalised dialogue situation). In those learning situations it is important, that the different cultures are represented in the contents of the learning experience (cf. examples of good practice).
- Liturgical life: In the liturgical life of the EKD – as in every church or religious community – intercultural dialogue is very much inherent in the many cultural forms that a liturgical event can take, e.g. in religious celebrations, religious holidays and festivals, in regular church services and other liturgies (funerals, wedding services etc.). The liturgical life of the EKD thus reflects the rich cultural history and present religious expression of a wide variety of communities and individuals.

8. Which measures are necessary to enable cultural minorities, such as migrants and national minorities, to express their cultural identity and to contribute to the cultural richness of the whole society?

Minorities have not only to be given the opportunity to organize themselves, but also the resources to enter into a process of dialogue with the whole of society.

9. Which role does the principle of gender equality play in intercultural dialogue?

For a long time the EKD has supported special programs for women and their participation in the area of intercultural dialogue. This issues also plays a prominent role in Christian-Muslim dialogue (cf. examples of good practice).

10. Are there minimum conditions that must be fulfilled in order to make intercultural dialogue at all possible?

The Council of Europe offers in its consultation document the following “enabling factors” for intercultural dialogue:

- Equal dignity of all participants;
- Voluntary engagement in dialogue;
- A mindset (on both sides) characterised by openness, curiosity and commitment, and the absence of a desire to “win” the dialogue;
- A readiness to look at both cultural similarities *and* differences;
- A minimum degree of knowledge about the distinguishing features of one’s own and the “other” culture;
- The ability to find a common language for understanding and respecting cultural differences.

The EKD would like to enlarge this list, e.g. by the following preconditions:

- Religious freedom
- Acceptance of plurality of opinions
- Voluntary abandonment of violence

11. What is the place of religious communities in a policy promoting intercultural dialogue? Which significance has the dialogue among religious communities?

It is said that in modern societies social ties between individual, family, relatives and neighbourhood are weakening or disappearing altogether while individualisation is rising. Apart from the positive consequences of greater individual freedom and mobility, this development also creates more anonymity, separation and uprooting of the individual. Indisputably, a supportive social environment is a key element for personal happiness. Yet it seems that today this environment has more than ever to be actively created. Therefore, minorities in our societies as well as people, who are, due to their heritage, less influenced by modern individualisation, are presented with a special challenge.

To create a positive social climate in our society is an important task for everyone and will be of use to everyone. Undoubtedly, such a climate will also limit conflicts as well as the predisposition for xenophobia, racism and violence.

As a Christian Church the EKD belongs to the - perhaps only few - institutions in our society, which can contribute notably to such a social climate and to shaping our life together in a positive way. The churches are also present in daily life and housing areas and do not pursue the interests of a special social group. Moreover, Christian faith is concerned in a special way with the question of the individual's rootage in his or her material and social living space as well as with the individual's spiritual and mental roots. The relationship towards others, open-mindedness, devotion and commitment to those in need and to the disadvantaged are core topics of Christian faith and at the same time reflections of the relationship between God and human beings. Such a concept includes looking past one's own social environment or - theologically speaking - the willingness for ecumenical openness and global responsibility. Thus, the churches and individual Christians offer through their activities points of contacts, which can prove very effective in constructing life together in the neighbourhood area, especially in neighbourhoods with a wide range of cultural and religious diversity.

The EKD has dealt with those challenges by starting numerous activities, especially since the 1970ies, and has thus become one of the main actors in intercultural and interreligious dialogue in Germany. The "Intercultural Week" - to cite just one example -, which is jointly organised by the EKD, the German Catholic bishops' conference and the Greek-Orthodox metropolis, contains each year in its framework alone more than 3000 events at more than 200 locations.⁸

12. Should the Council of Europe engage in dialogue with religious communities? If yes: how?

The EKD welcomes the interest the Council of Europe takes in interreligious dialogue and the difference it makes between "dialogue among religious communities" and "dialogue (of the Council of Europe) with religious communities".

The EKD underlines this difference by its opinion that interreligious dialogue (meaning dialogue among religions or religious communities) must stay in the sole responsibility of the religious communities themselves.

⁸ Cf. examples of good practice.

Furthermore, the EKD encourages the Council of Europe to more actively engage in dialogue with churches and religious communities. For the Council of Europe it would be an important step to begin maintaining an open, transparent and regular dialogue with churches and religious communities – while respecting and not prejudicing the status under national law of churches and religious communities in the member states.

13. How can the capacity of individuals, groups and institutions for intercultural dialogue be enhanced?

From the experience of the EKD, the capacity of individuals, groups and institutions for intercultural dialogue can be enhanced first and foremost by opportunities in training and public relations.

14. How can the equal participation of men and women in intercultural dialogue be ensured?

To ensure the equal participation of men and women in intercultural dialogue, projects which are reserved for the participation of women exclusively should be offered in addition to projects with equal access for both men and women (cf. answer to question 9 and examples of good practice).

15. Which dialogue methods are specifically suited for promoting intercultural understanding?

As space is too limited to describe the variety of suitable didactical settings in detail, which the EKD has successfully tried in practice, just one example shall be cited for the “symbolic dialogue” and the “dialogue of life” as defined in answer to question 6.

For the “symbolic dialogue” the dialogical conference structure has been specifically suited for promoting this kind of intercultural dialogue. The dialogical conference structure is a method which emphasises a balanced and dialogical structure of the exchange between two cultures by ensuring that each input is followed by a reply from the other culture. After that reply each round of exchange is concluded by a reflective evaluation.

For the “dialogue of life” it has become clear from many of the examples of good practice that action oriented initiatives play an important role.

16. What is necessary for going from intercultural dialogue to joint action?

The most important preconditions are:

- mutual trust,
- stable structures of cooperation which aim not only at the short term but at a long-lasting and reliable form of working together
- a common responsibility for shaping our life together.

Sometimes it can be useful to underline those preconditions by common statements to the public or by a formal agreement of cooperation.

17. What are the expected political and individual “results” of intercultural dialogue? How can they be “measured”?

One could summarise the idea of evaluating intercultural dialogue by firstly observing the position which the other culture possesses in one’s own thinking and acting. Secondly one has to assess, if this positions has changed throughout the dialogue until the evaluation and if so, how it has changed.

To make this assessment, extensive surveys and evaluations are needed. This corresponds with today’s standards to evaluate projects and their objectives scientifically in an ongoing

process until their completion. By this evaluation process the quality standards of the project are improved continuously.

18. Which underlying values are important for the promotion of intercultural dialogue? Are “new” values needed?

Values that might be needed cannot easily be invented or taught. They need to be lived or exercised in community with others. Moreover, it seems difficult to have values without beliefs. Faith and knowledge are complementary areas. They need to be more closely related so as to foster processes of mutual learning.

Having said that, the EKD believes that the acceptance of plurality would be one important “value” in this regard. Furthermore, “tolerance” should be named in this context – more specifically the concept of “active” rather than “relativist” tolerance. The concept of active tolerance is threefold: It begins with personal, convinced tolerance, which comes from freedom of conscience. This personal tolerance means that one is free to form one’s convictions and to follow them. Societal tolerance, which results from personal tolerance, does not aim at abandoning convictions and ways of life but on the contrary it aims at reciprocal respect for different convictions and ways of life. Political tolerance, finally, enables societal tolerance and provides space where convictions can be formed and followed. Naturally, these “values” have to be lived and exercised together anew in every individual dialogue setting. In doing so, these “values” serve as enabling factors for providing human beings with the opportunity to form a mature and flexible identity.

19. Are there “natural” limitations to what intercultural dialogue can achieve? What are the possibilities of dialogue with those who do not share our world view, have a different interpretation of shared values or refuse to dialogue?

See answers to questions 1, 2 and 10.

20. How can formal, informal and non-formal education promote intercultural dialogue and prepare individuals for living in a multicultural society?

The promotion of intercultural dialogue clearly includes the contribution of formal and non-formal education which can complement each other.

Democratically organised educational systems and dialogue oriented education that emphasises the learner's situation and his/her active meaning-making capacity are to be encouraged. Educational activities should promote intercultural competence which includes:

- Communication based on intercultural knowledge and attitudes.
- Self-reflectiveness enabling individuals to change their systems of reference.
- Empathy that recognises culture based action and facilitates flexible reaction.
- A change of perspective facilitating understanding of the other culture and acceptance of difference and disagreement.

Development of intercultural competence should begin at the outset of formal education. The process should encourage a sense of reflective self-identity, awareness of others and development of appropriate attitudes for life together in society. These tasks address the whole setting of educational institutions and not just the content or subjects of learning and teaching.

Within religious communities, educational activities should encourage dialogue with members of other faith communities. It should aim at the presentation of one's own position, the preparedness to learn from that of others and respect for their commitment. All should come to accept their common responsibility to promote life together in a plural society.

Involvement in intercultural dialogue requires a minimum understanding of religion. Those without religion as well as believers should respect the contribution of different traditions.

21. How can the awareness be strengthened that intercultural dialogue is not “just” a cultural issue, but needs systematic supportive action in other policy areas?

See answer to question 1.

22. Which institutional arrangements must be put in place to ensure a better coordination of the different policy areas concerned – at international, national and local level?

See answer to question 1.

23. Where should the policy of “mainstreaming” intercultural dialogue begin, which policy areas should have priority over others?

See answer to question 1.

24. How can intercultural dialogue be promoted in the local community?

According to the experience of EKD, many people are ready to get involved in intercultural dialogue, especially on the local level. Unfortunately, they are often discouraged by the lack of a supporting environment. They could be encouraged by the following measures:

- Opportunities for training
- Integration of intercultural dialogue in curricula of vocational training for jobs related to intercultural dialogue
- Supporting encounters and offering appropriate financial funding

25. How can intercultural dialogue be promoted through measures at national level?

At National level intercultural dialogue could be promoted by supporting intensified cooperation of institutions already active in this field and fostering their quality improvement.

26. How can international organisations, such as the Council of Europe, support local and national initiatives for the promotion of intercultural dialogue?

The Council of Europe could support local and national initiatives for the promotion of intercultural dialogue by the fostering the exchange of experience between the initiatives and by supporting the sharing of good practices.

27. How can civil society organisations be encouraged to strengthen their commitment to intercultural dialogue at international, national and local level?

Civil society organisations as well as churches and religious communities could be encouraged to strengthen their commitment to intercultural dialogue through increased financial support of their activities in the field of intercultural dialogue.

The application for funds should be extremely simplified.

28. What makes a practical example of intercultural dialogue an “example of good practice”?

- Evaluation of learning progress and learning objectives
- Quality of contents
- Qualified evaluation and self-reflective continuous improvement

As a church with a long lasting history and experience in evaluation and assessing projects in the fields of intercultural dialogue the EKD was surprised to learn that in its consultation document the Council of Europe does not refer to contents of examples of good practice.

31. How can examples of good practice (in the area of intercultural dialogue) be publicised in the best way?

Some of the methods the EKD has used so far are:

- publicised on websites
- published in booklets
- organised meetings to establish contacts between project members of different examples of good practice
- rewarded with a prize for which examples of good practices could apply

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Annex:

-Good Practices

-Publications of EKD in related fields

- Demokratie braucht Tugenden. Gemeinsames Wort des Rates der Evangelischen Kirche in Deutschland und der Deutschen Bischofskonferenz zur Zukunft unseres demokratischen Gemeinwesens, Gemeinsame Text Nr. 19, hg. v. Kirchenamt der EKD und Sekretariat der Deutschen Bischofskonferenz, 2006.
- Klarheit und gute Nachbarschaft. Christen und Muslime in Deutschland. Eine Handreichung des Rates der EKD, EKD Texte 86, 2006.
- Zusammenleben gestalten. Ein Beitrag des Rates der EKD zu Fragen der Intergration und des Zusammenlebens mit Menschen anderer Herkunft, Sprache oder Religion, EKD-Texte 76, 2002.
- Räume der Begegnung. Religion und Kultur in evangelischer Perspektive. Eine Denkschrift der Evangelischen Kirche in Deutschland und der Vereinigung Evangelischer Freikirchen, Gütersloh 2002.