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The religious dimension of intercultural dialogue

Opinion¹

Committee on Political Affairs and Democracy

Rapporteur: Mr Latchezar TOSHEV, Bulgaria, Group of the European People's Party (EPP/CD)

A. Conclusions of the committee

The Political Affairs Committee takes note of the report by Ms Anne Brasseur on “The religious dimension of intercultural dialogue”, in which the Committee on Culture, Science and Education deals, once again, with an issue on which the Parliamentary Assembly has already taken position. The Political Affairs Committee is in general in agreement with the thrust of the draft recommendation. However, it feels that the text could be made more consistent with past positions of the Assembly.

B. Proposed amendments to the draft recommendation

Amendment A (to the draft recommendation)

In the draft recommendation, paragraph 8, replace the words: “recognise each other” by “recognise each other’s right for freedom to religion and belief”.

Amendment B (to the draft recommendation)

In the draft recommendation, paragraph 8, delete the word “new”.

Amendment C (to the draft recommendation)

In the draft recommendation, paragraph 10, replace the words “accepting the common fundamental values” by the words “abiding by the law”.

Amendment D (to the draft recommendation)

In the draft recommendation, paragraph 10, replace the words “persons with humanist convictions who adhere to these fundamental values” with the words “persons with no religious beliefs”.

Amendment E (to the draft recommendation)

In the draft recommendation, paragraph 12, replace the words “including humanist associations” by the words “including relevant non-religious associations”.

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Amendment F (to the draft recommendation)

In the draft recommendation, paragraph 17.1, replace the words “the religious faiths and the main humanist organisations” by the words “the religious institutions and the relevant non-religious organisations”.

C. Explanatory memorandum by Mr Toshev, rapporteur for opinion

1. Dialogue is always positive for society and should be encouraged, in particular dialogue between different cultural experiences. As Ms Brasseur rightly notes, the Council of Europe dealt with the issue in its “White Paper on Intercultural Dialogue” of 2008.
2. As Europe is multicultural, intercultural dialogue is indispensable for social cohesion. In spite of different historical and cultural backgrounds, the peoples of Europe are united by common universal values: democracy, rule of law and respect for human rights, including respect for cultural diversity.
3. Religion is a dimension of culture, which is valued by many, influencing their approach to the realities of the world. Religion has played an important role in Europe’s history, in particular in the establishment of a system of shared values. The secularism of today’s Europe is not leading towards elimination of the public role of the religions as promoters of values.
4. We must acknowledge the steps taken by various religious leaders to promote peace, tolerance and mutual understanding and to eliminate hate among religious and culturally different peoples. Examples include the Vlatadon Initiative of the Ecumenical Patriarchate of the Orthodox Church, which brought together High representatives of different religions from the Balkan region in 2001 in order to achieve tolerance between different religions; the World Day of Prayer for Peace in Assisi (an initiative taken by the Catholic Church during the pontificate of the late Pope John Paul II) with representatives of different religions; the Open Letter of 2007 signed by 138 eminent representatives of Islam to the Christians; the Theological Dialogue between the Orthodox and Catholic Church and the adoption of the joint Document of Ravenna.
5. In its [Recommendation 1804 \(2007\)](#) on state, religion, secularity and human rights, the Assembly recommended that the Committee of Ministers identify and disseminate examples of good practice in respect of dialogue with leaders of religious communities. In the rapporteur’s opinion, one such example is the active participation of high representatives of the Bulgarian Orthodox Church in the rescue of the entire Bulgarian Jewish community in 1943, during the period of the Holocaust.
6. In the same recommendation, the Assembly reaffirms that “one of Europe’s shared values, transcending national differences, is the separation of church and state”. This is a generally accepted principle that prevails in politics and institutions in democratic countries. In its [Recommendation 1720 \(2005\)](#) on education and religion, for instance, the Assembly had noted that “each person’s religion, including the option of having no religion, is a strictly personal matter”.
7. There is no single European arrangement for relations between states and religious communities. In the member states of the Council of Europe such arrangements include a clear separation between state and religions, a “state church” model, a “concordat” model between church and state, and a “predominant church” model, all of which are compatible with Article 9 of the European Convention on Human Rights. There are also cases of member states with no special arrangement for such relations.
8. The Assembly recognised the importance of intercultural dialogue and its religious dimension and declared itself “willing to help devise a comprehensive Council of Europe strategy in this area.” It considered, however, “in the light of the principle of the separation of church and state, that inter-religious and interdenominational dialogue was not a matter for states or for the Council of Europe”.
9. As any other actors, religions are entitled to express their views on society. Dozens of religious and non-religious organisations are already represented at the Council of Europe by virtue of the participatory status of non-governmental organisations.
10. Freedom of expression is one of the most important human rights, as the Assembly has repeatedly affirmed. The draft recommendation presented by the Committee on Culture, Science and Education indicates in its paragraph 4 that “freedom of religion and freedom to have a philosophical or secular world view are inseparable from unreserved acceptance by all of the fundamental values enshrined in the Convention”. In paragraph 10, it refers to “the need to protect the rights of persons with humanist convictions who adhere to

these fundamental values". As the protection of anyone's rights cannot be subject to an acceptance or an adherence to values, and in order to avoid misunderstandings and to improve clarity, I propose a slightly revised wording.

11. In the same paragraph 10, there is a reference to "persons with humanist convictions". As this could seem restrictive I propose to replace that expression by "non-believers". For the same reason, it would be advisable to replace, in sub-paragraph 17.1, "chief humanist organisations" by "representatives of relevant non-religious associations".

12. Still in paragraph 10, there is a reference to the obligation of states to "ensure that ... any preferential support granted to certain religions does not become disproportionate and discriminatory in practice". To avoid any misunderstanding and for the sake of clarity, it would be better to delete the reference to "discriminatory".