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The religious dimension of intercultural dialogue

Reply to Recommendation[1]: Recommendation 1962 (2011)
Committee of Ministers

1. Parliamentary Assembly Recommendation 1962 (2011) on "The religious dimension of intercultural dialogue" deals with an issue that is topical in a diverse Europe and in today's globalised world: the need for effective dialogue between different individuals, groups, communities and religions. The challenge to be taken up is the development of inclusive societies, within which diversity can make a positive contribution.

2. The Committee of Ministers fully concurs with the Parliamentary Assembly's assertion of the inalienable nature of the right to freedom of thought, conscience and religion, as guaranteed by Article 9 of the European Convention on Human Rights. It also underlines the importance of respect for freedom of expression to enable fruitful exchanges on the aspects of intercultural dialogue linked to religious and non-religious convictions.

3. The Committee of Ministers welcomes the Assembly's positive evaluation of the White Paper on Intercultural Dialogue and of the Exchanges on the religious dimension of intercultural dialogue. It recalls that its primary goal in organising these exchanges is to promote and reinforce the fundamental values of the Council of Europe, so as to foster within European society mutual respect and understanding. The aim is to involve in this goal, through open, transparent dialogue, the representatives of the religions and non-religious convictions, as well as other actors of civil society. In this connection, the Committee of Ministers considers that the Exchanges, in their present form, respond to a certain extent to the proposal of the Assembly. The Committee of Ministers may however return at a later stage, if appropriate, to the idea raised by the Parliamentary Assembly as regards a more stable Council of Europe platform for such a dialogue (paragraph 17 of the recommendation). The policy of the Council of Europe towards neighbouring regions shall be taken into account in this context.

4. Apart from the education system's role in fostering knowledge and understanding of different cultures, to which the Assembly refers, the Committee of Ministers wishes to underline the role played by action in the fields of youth, culture and the media. The Council of Europe has a lengthy experience of cultural diversity and intercultural dialogue among young people. In this context, it works in close co-operation with civil society, in particular youth organisations.

5. Regarding the role of the media, the Committee of Ministers refers, *inter alia*, to the public service media (PSM), which have a particular obligation to encourage intercultural dialogue and foster social cohesion. In this connection, the Committee of Ministers refers to its Recommendation CM/Rec(2007)3 on the remit of public service media in the information society.

6. The positive contribution of the media to the religious dimension of intercultural dialogue was also mentioned at the last two Exchanges, held respectively in September 2010 in Ohrid and, more recently, on 28 and 29 November 2011 in Luxembourg, on the theme "The role of the media in fostering intercultural dialogue, tolerance and mutual understanding: freedom of expression of the media and respect towards

1. Adopted at the 1130th meeting of the Ministers' Deputies (11 January 2012).

cultural and religious diversity". The 2011 Exchange focused in particular on the impact of new media and social networks accessible via the Internet, which offer opportunities for intensifying communication and exchange among cultures.

7. The first theme on which the Exchanges were held was the teaching of religious facts. Discussions were largely based on Recommendation CM/Rec(2008)12 on the dimension of religions and non-religious convictions within intercultural education, as a key element of the normative framework in this field. In this connection, the Committee of Ministers, referring to the Assembly's proposals concerning teaching on religions and denominational education (paragraphs 13 and 14), points out that the above-mentioned recommendation advocates that teaching about the diversity of religions and non-religious convictions is consistent with the aims of education for democratic citizenship, human rights and respect for equal dignity of all individuals.

8. The Steering Committee for Education (CDED) also gives a special place to intercultural dialogue within its programmes, particularly in its projects relating to intercultural education. The issue addressed by the Assembly's recommendation was partly covered by its project "The challenge of intercultural education today: religious diversity and dialogue in Europe", which allowed considerable progress to be made in respect of the conceptual development, content and learning methods of intercultural education in its religious dimension.

9. In this context, the Committee of Ministers also wishes to draw attention to the work of the European Wergeland Centre (Oslo, Norway), which is currently co-operating in the implementation of a project to alert those responsible for education policies in the member States to Recommendation CM/Rec(2008)12. It welcomes the Assembly's interest in this Centre and will bear in mind its suggestions, as well as those concerning the joint Council of Europe/European Commission project on intercultural cities.

10. With regard to the Assembly's recommendation concerning promotion of the accession of Mediterranean Basin States to certain enlarged agreements or enlarged partial agreements of the Council of Europe, the Committee of Ministers points out that a number of these States are already members of the Venice Commission, which is heavily involved in fostering democratic governance in the countries of the southern rim of the Mediterranean. Efforts to dialogue and conduct co-operation activities with countries of the region are also being pursued, particularly in the framework of the North-South Centre, as well as in the fields of education, languages, youth and intercultural dialogue. Following the Committee of Ministers' decision, at its 121st Session in Istanbul on 11 May 2011, to establish a new policy regarding the relations with neighbouring regions, contacts have been developed with the Moroccan and Tunisian authorities, at both political and technical levels, so as to devise action plans laying the foundations for strengthened co-operation. It is hoped that these action plans can be adopted by the Committee before the end of the year, provided the progress of the discussions with the authorities of the two countries so permits.

11. The Committee of Ministers underlines the importance of developing synergies and promoting joint activities relating to the religious dimension of intercultural dialogue. A positive example was the Lisbon Forum 2010 (4-5 November 2010), organised by the North-South Centre in partnership with the Alliance of Civilizations on the theme "Freedom of expression, conscience and religion". This event constituted a follow-up to the conference on "Religious freedom in democratic societies" organised by the Alliance of Civilizations and the European Union (Cordoba, 3-4 May 2010) and the Council of Europe 2010 Exchange on the religious dimension of intercultural dialogue (Ohrid, 13-14 September 2010).

12. Cultural diversity in Europe is manifested not only through recent migration but also through the legacy of the past which is a testimony of the historic presence of different cultures and religions. The active respect for diversity, promoted by the Council of Europe as a common European value, should apply also to historical monuments or places of worship as part of a built heritage of different religions and convictions, also other than those prevailing on a given territory, as suggested by important Council of Europe documents such as the White Paper on Intercultural Dialogue and the Faro Convention on the Value of Cultural Heritage for Society. The heritage dimension of intercultural dialogue could also be explored through the work of the European Wergeland Centre and through the Joint Council of Europe/European Commission projects on intercultural cities and on the rehabilitation of heritage.