Parliamentary Assembly
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COUNCIL OF EUROPE
CONSEIL DE L'EUROPE

Recommendation 1556 (2002)[1]

Religion and change in central and eastern Europe

Parliamentary Assembly

1. The Parliamentary Assembly has frequently had occasion to consider questions relating to the preservation and development of traditional religious cultures, and ways of creating the conditions needed for them to interact and develop successfully together. In Resolution 885 (1987) on the Jewish contribution to European culture, Recommendation 1162 (1991) on the contribution of Islamic civilisation to European culture, and Recommendation 1291 (1996) on Yiddish culture, the Assembly expressed its sense of the need to safeguard and develop Europe's shared cultural heritage, in all its richness and diversity.

2. The Assembly has also persistently expressed its awareness of the need to ensure or restore harmonious relations between religious institutions and states. This is an essential part of securing such basic human rights as freedom of conscience and religion, religious tolerance and the protection of individuals and communities against all forms of religious persecution. These issues are specifically dealt with in Resolution 916 (1989) on redundant religious buildings, Recommendation 1202 (1993) on religious tolerance in a democratic society, Recommendation 1222 (1993) on the fight against racism, xenophobia and intolerance, Recommendation 1396 (1999) on religion and democracy, and Recommendation 1412 (1999) on the illegal activities of sects.

3. The collapse of communism has given religious institutions in central and eastern Europe an opportunity, if not responsibility, to renew their social potential and focus on their basic, historical tasks (the spiritual education of the individual, the ethical improvement of society, and charitable, cultural, educational and other projects).

4. More recently, socio-religious developments in the post-communist countries have been marked by the emergence of fundamentalist and extremist tendencies, active attempts to make religious slogans and religious organisations part of a process of military, political, and ethnic mobilisation in the service of militant nationalism and chauvinism, and the politicisation of religious life.

5. The emergence of independent states has encouraged certain national Orthodox churches to seek independence for themselves or to transfer their allegiance – aspirations which are sometimes strongly resisted by the Orthodox centres to which they were previously subject. This has led to a worsening of relations between churches and, in some cases, governments. It is important to exclude all possibility of governmental interference in questions of dogma, church organisation and canon law.

6. The new religious freedom and the removal of barriers to the dissemination of ideas and beliefs, including religious beliefs, have forced the churches of central and eastern Europe to face religious differences. Weakened in the past and never having functioned in a climate of political, cultural and religious pluralism, the traditional churches of the region now find themselves in conflict with newly-arrived foreign missionaries and new religious movements. So far, the problem remains unsolved of striking a balance between, on the one hand, the principles of democracy and human rights, of freedom of conscience and religion, and, on the other, the preservation of national cultural, ethnic and religious identity.

1. Assembly debate on 24 April 2002 (13th Sitting) (see Doc. 9399, report of the Committee on Culture, Science and Education, rapporteur: Mr Baciu). Text adopted by the Assembly on 24 April 2002 (13th Sitting).

7. The disappearance of the iron curtain has made the religious and cultural divide in Europe more apparent, and has even aggravated it. Europe's two Christian cultures – western and eastern – know very little of each other, and this ignorance is a very dangerous obstacle on the path to a united Europe. As Pope John Paul II has repeatedly said, Christian Europe must breathe with both its lungs, eastern and western. Similarly, adherents of the two Christian traditions show little interest in Jewish culture, such an integral part of European heritage, or in Islamic culture, which is becoming increasingly a part of the European scene.

8. The Assembly accordingly recommends that the Committee of Ministers call on the governments of the member states, the European Union, and also the authorities and organisations concerned:

Legal guarantees and their observance

to promote conformity of national legislation with the European Convention for the Protection of Human Rights and Fundamental Freedoms, paying special attention to Article 9, which states that religious freedoms shall be subject only to limitations prescribed by law and necessary in a democratic society, and to the ruling of the European Court of Human Rights (1983) that restrictions on human rights must be motivated by a "pressing social need", and be "proportionate to the legitimate aim pursued";

to guarantee all churches, religious associations, centres and communities the status of legal entities, if their activity does not violate human rights or international law, and in particular to press the Government of the Republic of Moldova to register the Metropolitan Church of Bessarabia according to the decision of the European Court of Human Rights of 13 December 2001;

to take effective action to guarantee the freedom of religious minorities, especially in central and eastern Europe, with special emphasis on protecting them against discrimination or persecution by religious majorities or other groups practising aggressive nationalism and chauvinism;

to activate the normal procedures provided for in national law in all cases where religious freedoms are proved to be abused in a manner harmful to the community, or to the rights, freedoms and health of individuals;

to guarantee to religious institutions, the assets of which were nationalised in the past, restitution of such assets within a certain time-limit or, in cases where this is impossible, fair compensation; due care must be taken to prevent privatisation of nationalised church property;

to offer to mediate between conflicting parties, in cases where the latter accept this, for the purpose of settling disputes, while taking care to ensure that government bodies do not interfere in dogma or other internal religious matters;

to ask the European Convention to include European religious traditions into the preamble of the future European constitution, as the foundation of human dignity and human rights and of the ethical roots of European identity;

Culture, education and exchange

to devise communication strategies and to develop the necessary activities in the field of cultural exchange, making people in different countries mutually aware of their cultural achievements;

to co-operate with the church authorities in identifying and sharing their responsibilities, such as in maintaining historic buildings and in religious education, and in promoting joint discussion of the major social, moral, ethical and cultural issues which modern societies face;

to include information on Europe's main religious cultures and practices in school curricula;

to support the activities of non-governmental organisations working to strengthen mutual understanding between religious groups, and protect the religious cultural heritage;

to take action to secure equal access to the media, education and culture for representatives of all religious traditions;

to encourage the setting up of special centres to promote interconfessional relations, and also the exchange of exhibitions and fairs, centred on cultural heritage, masterpieces of religious art and books, and helping people to familiarise themselves with Europe's various religious cultures;

to promote exchange programmes to give students, research workers and artists a full picture of the ethical, moral and cultural values of Europe's religions;

to encourage the development of cultural itineraries in Europe and linking Europe with neighbouring countries so as to reflect and develop past perspectives and new possibilities of cultural communication;

to provide public libraries with publications, which detail the cultural achievements and beliefs of the various religious traditions;

to promote scientific research aimed at uncovering the shared roots of Europe's various cultures and fostering a better understanding of the ways in which they interrelate and complement one another.