

Recommendation 1962 (2011)¹

Final version

The religious dimension of intercultural dialogue

Parliamentary Assembly

1. The Parliamentary Assembly notes the growing interest in questions relating to intercultural dialogue in a European and global context where efforts to establish closer ties and collaboration between communities within our societies and between peoples, to build together for the common good, are constantly imperilled by lack of understanding, high tension and even barbarous acts of hatred and violence.

2. The Assembly welcomes the positive momentum that is developing within the Council of Europe, and which is conducive to an approach mainstreaming the questions relating to intercultural dialogue and its religious dimension. The White Paper on Intercultural Dialogue – Living together as equals in dignity and the annual exchanges organised by the Committee of Ministers on “The religious dimension of intercultural dialogue” represent, in a way, the highest achievement of this approach.

3. Article 9 of the European Convention on Human Rights (“the Convention”, ETS No. 5) secures the right to freedom of thought, conscience and religion. This freedom represents one of the foundations of a “democratic society” within the meaning of the Convention; it is, in its religious dimension, one of the most vital elements of believers’ identity and their conception of life, but is also a precious asset for atheists, agnostics, sceptics or the unconcerned.

4. Assertion of this inalienable right presupposes that all people are free to have (or not to have) a religion and to manifest their religion, either alone and in private or collectively in public and within the circle of those whose faith they share. In Europe, churches and religious communities have the right to exist and to organise themselves independently. Nevertheless, freedom of religion and freedom to have a philosophical or secular world view are inseparable from unreserved acceptance, by everyone, of the fundamental values enshrined in the Convention.

5. These values should bring us together, but it is also important to acknowledge the cultural differences that exist between people of different convictions. Differences, as long as they are compatible with respect

for human rights and the principles that underpin democracy, not only have every right to exist but also help determine the essence of our plural societies.

6. The European model is by definition a multicultural one and it should take into account differences arising from various historical backgrounds. However, common values such as mutual respect, the protection of fundamental rights, democracy, tolerance, the acceptance that differences are normal and the vision of a common future need to be strengthened further.

7. The problem often lies in our attitude to diversity. The Assembly insists on the need for everyone to learn to share their differences positively and accept others, with their differences, in order to build cohesive societies that are receptive to diversity and respect the dignity of each individual. To achieve this, the Assembly is convinced of the importance of the religious dimension of intercultural dialogue, and of collaboration between religious communities to foster the values that make up the common core of our European societies and of any democratic society.

8. The Assembly considers it not only desirable, but necessary, that the various churches and religious communities – in particular Christians, Jews and Muslims – recognise each other’s right to freedom of religion and belief. It is also indispensable that people of all beliefs and world views, religious or otherwise, accept to intensify dialogue based on the common assertion of equal dignity for all and a wholehearted commitment to democratic principles and human rights. These are two crucial conditions for developing a new culture of living together. The Assembly therefore calls upon all churches and religious communities to persevere in their endeavours for dialogue, including with humanist movements, in order to work in unison to attain the goal of effectively safeguarding these values everywhere, throughout Europe and worldwide.

9. States have to establish the necessary conditions for religious and convictional pluralism and to ensure effective respect for freedom of thought, conscience and religion, as guaranteed by Article 9 of the Convention.

10. The Assembly recalls in this connection states’ obligation to ensure that all religious communities accepting common fundamental values can enjoy an appropriate legal status guaranteeing the exercise of freedom of religion, and that any preferential support granted to certain religions does not become disproportionate and discriminatory in practice. States must also reconcile the rights of religious communities with the need to protect the rights of persons with no religious beliefs who adhere to these fundamental values.

11. The Assembly considers it necessary to build up a dynamic, productive partnership between the public institutions, the religious communities and the groups that espouse a non-religious perception. The common starting point for this is the acknowledgement by the

1. Assembly debate on 12 April 2011 (12th and 13th Sittings) (see [Doc. 12553](#), report of the Committee on Culture, Science and Education, rapporteur: Ms Brasseur; and [Doc. 12576](#), opinion of the Political Affairs Committee, rapporteur: Mr Toshev). Text adopted by the Assembly on 12 April 2011 (13th Sitting).

various religious denominations and by non-religious belief systems that human dignity is an essential and universal asset.

12. The Assembly therefore recommends that the public authorities at local and national levels facilitate encounters organised in the framework of inter-religious dialogue and encourage and support projects jointly conducted by several communities, including humanist and non-religious associations, that seek to consolidate social bonds by such means as the promotion of inter-community solidarity, care for the most vulnerable and the fight against discrimination.

13. The Assembly reiterates the importance and the function of the education system for knowledge and understanding of the various cultures, including the beliefs and convictions which identify them, and for the learning of democratic values and respect for human rights. It recommends that states and religious communities review together, on the basis of the guidelines provided by the Council of Europe, the questions regarding teaching on religions, denominational education, and training of teachers and of religious ministers or those with religious responsibilities, according to a holistic approach.

14. The Assembly emphasises that the principle of state neutrality applies to religious education at school and that, according to the case law of the European Court of Human Rights, it rests with the national authorities to pay strict attention that parents' religious and non-religious convictions are not offended.

15. In the Assembly's view, the challenge today is to reach the agreement and the balance necessary in order that teaching on religions provides an opportunity for encounters and for mutual receptiveness. It recommends that state authorities and religious communities make concerted efforts in that direction and invites states to commit the resources required so that statements lead to achievements on the ground. It would be highly advisable that every teacher, irrespective of type and branch of education, take a module during training that familiarises him or her with the major currents of thought.

16. The Assembly recalls that the internal autonomy of religious institutions as regards training of those with religious responsibilities is a principle inherent in freedom of religion. Nevertheless, this autonomy is limited by fundamental rights, democratic principles and the rule of law, which we hold in common. Therefore, the Assembly invites the religious institutions and leaders to study, if possible together and in the framework of inter-religious dialogue, the appropriate way to better train the holders of religious responsibilities in:

16.1. knowledge and understanding of other religions and convictions, as well as in openness, dialogue and collaboration between religious communities;

16.2. respect for fundamental rights, democratic principles and the rule of law, as a common basis for such dialogue and collaboration.

17. The Assembly recommends that the Committee of Ministers:

17.1. promote a genuine partnership for democracy and human rights between the Council of Europe, the religious institutions and humanist and non-religious organisations, seeking to encourage the active involvement of all stakeholders in actions to promote the fundamental values of the Organisation;

17.2. establish to this end a place for dialogue, a workspace for the Council of Europe and high-level representatives of religions and of non-denominational organisations, in order to place existing relations on a stable and formally recognised platform;

17.3. develop this initiative in concertation with the interested parties, closely associate the Parliamentary Assembly and, as far as possible, the European Union, and invite the United Nations Alliance of Civilizations and, if appropriate, other partners to contribute;

17.4. continue, in this context, organising dedicated meetings on the religious dimension of intercultural dialogue.

18. The Assembly further recommends that the Committee of Ministers:

18.1. promote the accession of the Mediterranean Basin states to the European Commission for Democracy through Law (Venice Commission), the Partial Agreement on Youth Mobility through the Youth Card and the European Centre for Global Interdependence and Solidarity (North-South Centre);

18.2. invite all member states to support any targeted project that the North-South Centre may conduct in order to amplify the positive forces at work in the religious dimension of intercultural dialogue beyond the boundaries of the European continent, at the inter-regional and/or global levels;

18.3. increase the resources allocated to the project on intercultural cities, in which the religious dimension of intercultural dialogue should be explicitly incorporated;

18.4. offer more support for the work of the European Wergeland Centre in Oslo, particularly for building its capacity to collaborate with the Council of Europe member states on projects concerning the intercultural and inter-religious dimension of training for teachers and educators.

19. The Assembly invites the European Union, in particular the European Parliament and the European Commission, together with its Agency for Fundamental Rights, to engage in joint programmes with the Council of Europe on education for democratic citizenship and human rights education, with reference to the Charter which the Committee of Ministers adopted on 11 May 2010 (Recommendation CM/Rec(2010)7), and on intercultural and inter-religious dialogue.

20. The Assembly invites the United Nations Alliance of Civilizations to deploy joint programmes with the Council of Europe aimed at increasing the synergies in their respective action in Europe.