



CONFERENCE OF INGOs
OF THE COUNCIL OF EUROPE

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CONSEIL DE L'EUROPE

**Appeal adopted by the Conference of INGOs on 30 January 2014
CONF/PLE(2014)APP1**

Human Rights and Religions

An appeal to the citizens of Europe and International Non-Governmental Organisations (INGOs)

State of play

(A) Violence is infecting community life, and certain religious groups are contributing to the problem even though the religions themselves promote peace. Demeaning or slanderous comments and actions, notably on the ground of religious affiliation, are stoking social tension, creating a breeding ground for sectarianism and exclusion. Some religious leaders are also guilty of using current events and social issues to inflame public opinion.

(B) Such behaviour is an indication of the degree of suffering endured by those who perpetuate it. All violent outrages are an affront to human rights and the dignity of all people, whether children, adolescents, women, men or elderly persons.

Concerns

(C) Troubled by the spread of these acts of violence and by the harsh public stances adopted by representatives of religions in social debate, posing a direct threat to democracy;

(D) Alarmed by the frequency of remarks along the lines of “It’s not our country any more”, fuelled by a lack of regard among certain elites for the rightful place of religion in cultural identity;

(E) Indignant at the fact that in some European countries, the introduction of so-called “traditional” courts shows the danger of cultural relativism which, in pushing for the creation of different rights according to religion, contradicts human rights (cf. the Vienna Declaration of 1993¹);

(F) Alarmed also by the contempt shown for responsibility, which is inextricably linked to freedom of expression;

(G) Alerted to the ongoing erosion of the principle of the equal dignity of every person, which forms the basis of human rights;

(H) Concerned at the manifest confusion indicating the doubts that exist, in all religions, about the priority to be accorded, in everyday life, to religious teachings and human rights, not least with regard to the position of women;

(I) Aware of the prominent role now played by religion in the public sphere;

¹ Link to the Vienna Declaration of 25 June 1993.

[http://www.unhcr.ch/huridocda/huridoca.nsf/\(symbol\)/a.conf.157.23.en](http://www.unhcr.ch/huridocda/huridoca.nsf/(symbol)/a.conf.157.23.en)

For all these reasons,

Representatives of the INGOs of the Council of Europe have decided to tackle these challenging issues, and to provide as much clarification as possible in order to minimise confusion and guesswork.

Determined to safeguard, whatever happens, democracy, human rights and the rule of law, the Conference of INGOs of the Council of Europe is launching an appeal to the men and women of Europe and to NGOs operating on the ground so that, together, everyone can take action at their own level and in their own setting to ensure continued respect for the equal dignity of all individuals and of the values connected with this inviolable principle.

The Conference of INGOs therefore recommends:

Equal dignity of all individuals, as a source of universal human rights

(1) Far from being a privilege bestowed by some external authority or other, human rights are the birthright of all human beings - children, women and men – because they spring from the equal dignity and respect owed to each individual. It is this universal recognition of the dignity of all individuals that makes human rights universal. In ratifying the relevant European and international conventions, states make a commitment to protect human rights.

(2) Because they concern everyone, i.e. each member of the human family, everyone is responsible for the observance of fundamental rights with respect to others.

(3) The recognition that human rights concern each individual as a human being worthy of respect and as an actor in society makes it incontrovertible that no one, whether child or adult, should be discriminated against on the ground that they belong to a particular religious or philosophical community.

Religious pluralism – Freedom of conscience

(4) Human rights necessarily require us to suppose that other persons may be the bearers of a truth other than the one to which we ourselves subscribe, without either belief system being diminished as a result.

Such freedom of conscience,

- paves the way for the lifelong development of beliefs and the right to criticise religions;
- is proof of the inseparable nature of upholding freedoms, equal rights and non-discrimination, whether one is religious or not;
- is directly linked to the separation of state and religion, and state neutrality towards religions and belief systems in a democracy.

(5) The ban which prevents women from holding certain offices reserved for men in many religions shows that equality between women and men on the basis of their equal dignity is still subject to different interpretations and needs to be discussed in inter- and intra-faith dialogue.

(6) The Conference of INGOs, which has no competence in theological matters, observes that religions proclaim the equal dignity of lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender (LGBT) people while failing, however, to grant them access to all human rights.

Many LGBT people who are followers and/or leaders of religions have to keep their sexuality a secret.

(7) Certain assertions considered “truths” by religions on the basis of their founding texts can be mutually exclusive. The secularisation of modern society allows the various truths to be expressed and

to exist peacefully alongside one another. It provides a framework for dealing with the conflicts liable to arise from exclusive assertions of this kind.

Visibility and religious practices

(8) The visibility enjoyed by “newcomer” religions is apt to jar with the cultural concepts derived from the more established religions and beliefs. The new religious buildings challenge traditional ideas while disused places of worship are sold off or demolished. Faced with a changing landscape and seemingly strange religious practices, local communities need to be supported and consulted and given time to adjust.

Educating people, from school age, about religion and the principle of the separation of state and religion is crucial for combating racism, sectarianism and stigmatisation.

Separation of state and religion

(9) Aware of the wide range of situations that exist in Europe, as pointed out in Resolution 1928 (2013)² of the Parliamentary Assembly of the Council of Europe, we affirm the vital separation of religion and politics in order to ensure:

- the exercise of freedom of conscience whenever states formally recognise it. Accordingly, each individual is free to have or not to have a religion and to change religion, provided this does not cause personal injury or mental harm or pose a threat to the state³;
- the protection of human rights in relation to religion and belief;
- the neutrality of public institutions vis-à-vis religions and belief systems, while at the same time organising co-operation between believers and the civil authorities;
- the full exercise of equal citizenship for all, irrespective of a person’s religious, political or social status, and the opportunity to be a fully functioning citizen and, at the same time, to join, or not to join, an organisation, faith-based or other.

To conclude, an appeal:

In order that human rights may be respected and observed in a harmonious manner, the Conference of INGOs of the Council of Europe calls on all European NGOs and each and every citizen of Europe, whatever their family background, whatever organisation they belong to and whatever their status, beliefs, professional or other responsibilities;

(10) To be guided by the five key principles, namely 1) freedom of conscience, 2) non-discrimination, 3) mutual autonomy and separation of the state and religious institutions, 4) state neutrality in relation to religions and belief systems, 5) education in intercultural dialogue, with due regard for its religious and philosophical dimension.

(11) To take care to ensure that the state and religious institutions are effectively independent from one another, while avoiding any attempts by the two to exploit one another or to form alliances.

(12) To realise that no one can possess the whole truth and that individual progression towards the truth can occur only if there is a willingness to reach out to, and converse with, others in a way that respects the individuals concerned (without necessarily sharing their ideas); note that adopting this attitude does not mean giving way to relativism.

(13) To pursue inter-faith, intra-faith and inter-belief dialogue which helps to promote awareness that people can have the same values, but for different reasons.

² http://www.eu-logos.org/eu-logos_nea-say.php?idr=4&idnl=1928&nea=102&lang=fra&lst=0

³ A threat to the state is deemed to exist in cases where the state is the guarantor of the official religion, with no separation between the two.

(14) To engage or pursue, in the case of believers, dialogue with members and leaders of their respective religions with a view to:

- promoting within these religions acceptance of and respect for human rights to resolve conflicts between rights in society;
- ensuring that, when making public statements, official representatives of religions are guided by the principles of human rights;
- clarifying the position of women within religious institutions;

(15) To rule out any attitudes or language of intolerance towards anyone and combat any religiously-motivated hate speech on the part of members of organisations.

(16) To respect and ensure respect for gender equality in practice and in law.

(17) To refrain from making any statements or adopting any stances that would threaten the lives, health, safety or social participation of LGBT persons and to speak with moderation and tact on issues of sexuality, without judging or condemning individuals, while recognising the misunderstandings and injustices or even violence to which recklessly expressed opinions can lead.

(18) To increase the amount of attention paid by civil society and religious institutions to children's rights⁴.

(19) To oppose all forms of discrimination based on religion or non-religion. To realise that no one can be reduced to their beliefs or religious affiliations alone.

(20) Lastly, NGOs are encouraged to lobby European and international bodies to defend and promote human rights.

⁴ [Link to the Convention on the Rights of the Child](#)

Appendix 1

Information on the Council of Europe and the INGO Conference

(20) Founded on 5 May 1949 by the Treaty of London, the Council of Europe is the oldest European institution. It seeks to safeguard and develop human rights and democracy, and operates smoothly thanks to the complementary nature of its four institutional pillars: the Committee of Ministers, the Parliamentary Assembly, the Congress of Local and Regional Authorities and the Conference of INGOs.

(21) The Council of Europe, notably through the European Court of Human Rights (ECHR) which is a constituent part thereof, is responsible for upholding human rights and democracy Europe-wide, and for creating a common democratic and legal area so that everyone can find their place in a society which practises mutual respect.

(22) If all citizens of Europe are to have the full and equal enjoyment of all of these rights, without any tests as to eligibility, each individual must assume full responsibility for the exercise and day-to-day observance of these rights, both in respect of themselves and in respect of others. This implies the existence of duties as well as rights.

(23) Taking in account the fact that human rights form a coherent and inseparable whole and are the birthright of all human beings, rather than something that is bestowed, the Conference of representatives of civil society (INGOs) contributes, through its numerous initiatives, to the affirmation of these key principles and to the implementation of human rights.

It carries out its work within the framework of the rule of law and democracy, the principles of which are set out in its declaration on genuine democracy CONF/PLE(2013)DEC1⁵.

(24) Condemning the numerous human rights violations and the calling into question of the universal nature of human rights, due in particular to growing cultural and religious diversity, and mindful of the current importance of interaction between religions and human rights, representatives of civil society at the Council of Europe have decided to examine the relationship between human rights and religions, specifically the areas of convergence and areas of tension between them.

(25) This work, which was conducted over three years and features in a report entitled “Human rights and religions”⁶, aims to generate among European citizens faced with the everyday frictions and discomfort engendered by the current changes an informed awareness of the social issues that exist across Europe and indeed worldwide so that we can explore them and act on the proposals made.

Appendix 2

Some key Council of Europe texts

[Doc. 10673 of 19 September 2005 of the Parliamentary Assembly ‘Education and religion’](#)

[Doc. 11298 of 8 June 2007 of the Parliamentary Assembly ‘State, Religion, secularity and human rights’](#)

[Doc. 12788 of 10 November 2011 of the Parliamentary Assembly ‘Combatting all forms of discrimination based on religion’](#)

[Recommandation 1805\(2007\) adopted on 29 June 2007 by the Parliamentary Assembly ‘Blasphemy, religious insults and hate speech against persons on grounds of their religion](#)

[Recommandation 1720 \(2005\) adopted on 4 October 2005 by the Parliamentary Assembly ‘Education and religion’](#)

⁵ [Link to the declaration on genuine democracy adopted by the Conference of INGOs on 24 January 2013](#)

⁶ [Link to the report](#)