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Religions and Human Rights

Proposed avenues of approach and action for members and leaders of religions

(1) The message of religions comprises, in its very essence, the requirement to show respect for every human being on account of the dignity acknowledged to every individual. Furthermore, this message teaches and calls for justice, compassion and love for one another. This respect and love are embodied in countless acts of kindness and services provided to those in need or suffering.

(2) For this reason, several religions, in line with the very message they convey, have throughout their history contributed significantly, and still do so today, to the recognition and expression of human rights, and certain of their members have played a decisive role in the formulation of those rights.

(3) In the current world situation, their role and responsibility in the recognition of human rights is even more important.

On the one hand, by promoting human rights education, since each new generation must reclaim these rights. Despite considerable progress in this field since 1948, there continue to be many serious violations of these rights in the world.

On the other, with regard to the universality of the very concept of human rights, today called into question in the name of the diversity of cultures. Human rights, as enshrined in international texts having a universal scope, come up against many cultural practices and conceptions, themselves frequently rooted in religions as experienced today. Here too, religions, precisely because of their universal vocation, have a vital role to play.

(4) However, all too often, instead of playing a role promoting human rights, it can happen that religions call them into question, in both principle and practice, especially where fanaticism develops. This is why, given the growing role and influence of religions in all social relations, the problem of the **relationship between religions and human rights** has today become a key issue in Europe and in the world.

(5) The **Council of Europe** has addressed this issue on various occasions: it is the international institution which is responsible for the **European Convention on Human Rights**, the major instrument for the promotion and defence of human rights, democracy and the rule of law in Europe.

The international NGOs which together form the **Council of Europe's Conference of INGOs**, (several of which are faith-based or directly linked to religions), therefore also wished to make their contribution to the relationship between religions and human rights by addressing here the **members and leaders of religions** present today in Europe, in all their diverse components, and suggesting **a number of avenues of approach and action in this field of human rights**.

Without any claims to being exhaustive, we shall look at a number of areas of human rights in relation to which religions are more directly concerned:

I. Areas in which they are involved as religions: freedom of conscience, discrimination, separation of the state and religious institutions, violence for which a religious justification is claimed.

II. Two more specific controversial areas: gender equality/parity, and sexuality and sexual orientation.

III. Economic and social rights, given the importance of the contribution of religions in the social and charitable field.

Above all, however, we should not forget the key contribution that religions can make in promoting and defending all human rights without exception:

(6) The members, institutions and leaders of the various religions, as such, cannot, because of the very essence of their message, remain silent and inactive in the face of the serious and repeated human rights violations suffered continuously and in multiple ways by so many of our contemporaries. For while sharing with all human beings the recognition of these rights, followers of religions find in their own tradition a concern for the dignity of all individuals, who most of them recognise as creatures of God.

It is therefore their duty to think long and hard about the religious foundations of human dignity, the fundamental rights that derive therefrom and the extent of those rights so as to make their own specific contribution to respect for and application of those rights. Individuals and communities should, as a priority objective, develop their own motivations in this area.

Such a contribution could then constitute a basis for inter-faith dialogue on human rights, and a basis for dialogue with humanist and secular organisations. A dialogue of this nature would doubtless be a major step forward for human rights in Europe and in the world.

(7) Human rights will not become a reality unless they are recognised and applied on the ground by everyone. This is why, in addition to the necessary legislation, it is essential to educate people so that human rights become a personal conviction. For convictions cannot be taught or imposed, but need to be cultivated. Everyone has the innate capacity to appreciate the dignity of every human being and the human rights that derive from that dignity for each man and woman; but this capacity must very often be awakened and developed: the members, institutions (particularly educational) and leaders of religions could, in line with the very message of religions, make a significant contribution to human rights education among both young people and adults.

I. Areas in which religions, as such, are particularly involved

Freedom of thought, conscience and religion

(8) Freedom of thought, conscience and religion for everyone is a fundamental right, and the members and leaders of religions quite rightly emphasise this. However, one must not forget that this right means everyone has the right to change religion or have no religion. Furthermore, in the current situation of religious and humanist pluralism, those religions which are or have been the majority religion in a country or which are more particularly linked to its culture will have to give some thought to the way in which the members of other religions and beliefs can enjoy that freedom in practice. This presupposes in particular that no religion may impose its doctrine or practices on those who do not share them.

(9) There is no contradiction between this fundamental freedom and the criticism that may be levelled at religions, whether from outside or within. Such criticism derives from the legitimate exercise of freedom of expression. In contrast, this criticism is unacceptable when members of a religion are stigmatised, become victims of discrimination or indeed of incitement to hatred, simply for being members of that religion.

Discrimination

(10) Any form of discrimination based on individuals belonging or not belonging to a religion, in particular a minority religion, must be firmly fought against, and first and foremost by the members and leaders of religions. More and more frequently, these forms of discrimination can become persecution: members and leaders of religions must therefore ensure that they do not take action only to support persecuted members of their own religion, but should protest just as much whenever anyone is a victim of persecution on account of his or her religious or humanist beliefs.

Separation of the state and religious institutions

(11) Independence from each other and separation between the state and religious institutions are an advantage for everyone and a requirement of democracy. Such separation can clearly take on a variety of forms depending on national traditions and cultures, but members and leaders of religions must always take care to avoid any attempts to exploit one another or form allegiances, especially in the case of the majority religion in a country and even more so in the case of a state religion.

However, this should not prevent members and leaders of religions from playing an active part in democratic debate in order to shed light on the challenges facing society on the basis of their principles, putting forward their positions but without seeking to impose them on the whole of society.

Violence for which a religious justification is claimed

(12) No use of violence can ever be justified in the name of any religion whatsoever. Members and leaders of religions must therefore firmly distance themselves from any form of fanaticism, explicitly condemn the violence, hate speech or calls for murder from extremists and resolutely combat all forms of violence for which a religious justification is claimed.

II. Controversial areas

II-1. Gender equality/parity

(13) The question of gender equality/parity still raises heated debate within religions themselves, with each having both supporters of keeping women in a secondary position and supporters of gender equality in access to positions of responsibility, including holding offices in religious organisations.

In this area, possible avenues of approach and action are:

(14) To give women a say in religions so that they themselves can voice their expectations in terms of their role and respect for their dignity within religions and society.

(15) To build on the commitment of women both in religions and in society, by underlining how decisive their role is for the well-being of all. To seek ways of not forgoing the skills and assets which women could contribute to the discussions, action and life of religious groups and of society if they were granted the full role to which they are entitled.

(16) To reconsider their traditions regarding the position of women in religious institutions and society and reinterpret them on the basis of the issues arising in this area today; to foster dialogue within religions between the various tendencies and positions on issues of gender equality and parity both in the religious and in the social and political fields.

II-2. Sexuality and sexual orientation

(17) It is to be welcomed that the official stance of some religions has moved in recent years from outright homophobia combined with moral and religious condemnation to the expression of respect and concern with regard to lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender (LGBT) persons. However, this undeniable progress is still too limited. More broadly, it is the overall attitude of certain religions in the area of human sexuality that is called into question here. However, many members, institutions and leaders of religions continue to refuse to address this issue from the human rights angle.

In this area, possible avenues of approach and action are:

(18) To pursue the progress achieved regarding respect for and attention given to LGBT persons and to make more widespread effort to combat the discrimination, violence and disregard which are still prevalent in religions and in society with regard to these individuals.

(19) To speak with moderation and tact on issues of sexuality, without judging or condemning individuals, while recognising the misunderstandings, injustices, exclusions or indeed violence to which the statements of religious leaders can give rise, particularly with regard to LGBT persons. To refrain totally, therefore, from making any statements or adopting any stances which would endanger their lives, safety or health.

(20) To continue and step up dialogue within religions themselves on sexuality as a fundamental human reality, taking care to involve all members of religions who wish to take part and feeding the debate with dialogue with other people who reflect on these issues in contemporary society.

(21) To initiate or continue the same dialogue with more specific regard to the situation of LGBT persons, giving LGBT persons themselves the first say and remembering that they also number among the ranks of the members of these religions.

III. Economic and social rights

(22) For centuries and right up to the present, followers of religions and religious organisations have done a tremendous amount to assist the victims of injustice or those in a situation of suffering, poverty or destitution. The practical aid they provide, and more importantly the awakening of people's conscience in the field of mutual assistance and solidarity, are inestimable. Largely as a result of their influence, society has realised that situations of poverty are a violation of fundamental human rights, which have now been extended from the civil and political sphere to the social and economic field. This is why, alongside the European Convention on Human Rights, the Council of Europe drew up the European Social Charter guaranteeing social and economic rights.

(23) Followers of religions are therefore called upon today to view their action in the charitable and social sphere from this angle: above and beyond the immediately imperative assistance-based approach, it is essential to recognise situations of poverty and destitution as violations of fundamental rights and to put forward ways of remedying them, also in a structural way.

(24) The action pursued in this area should be geared to involving the victims themselves in the steps taken, enabling them to once again partake in the enjoyment of their fundamental rights, in particular through political action by the public authorities and, in many cases, through a joint learning process involving the people experiencing these situations and the public services. Such action should be taken further, as is often the case, by means of co-operation in the international institutions and advocating the case for defending and promoting economic and social rights and the democratic participation of the most vulnerable.

(25) It is therefore to be hoped that the major religious charitable and social organisations, over and above the provision of the necessary assistance, sensitise members and leaders of religions to the need to make the human rights of the victims of poverty and injustice the ultimate goal of all action in this area.