

For a Permanent Platform on Interreligious and Inter-convictional Dialogue at the Council of Europe



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Speech by Michael O’Flaherty delivered at the PACE Side-Event “For a Permanent Platform on Interreligious and Inter-convictional Dialogue at the Council of Europe”, co-organised by the Committee for Interreligious and Inter-convictional Dialogue of the Conference of INGOs. www.coe.int/de/web/commissioner/-/for-a-permanent-platform-on-interreligious-and-inter-convictional-dialogue-at-the-council-of-europe

I really welcome this meeting. It is very important from the point of view of my job. I could not do my job properly, if it was not involving a close and deep engagement with faith communities. Why is that? There are at least three reasons.

The first has to do with something we overlook today, we disregard, perhaps even misunderstand, and that is the profound religiosity of our societies. It is typically much more than people expect.

Gallup conducted a poll in 2009, and that is not very long ago, in which they sought from the general population of Council of Europe member states an answer to the question: Is religion important to you on a daily basis? That is quite a high test. In fifteen Council of Europe member states more than 70% of the people polled said “yes” to that question.

In twelve other member states, it came in at still a high figure of forty percent or more, and it was only in six Council of Europe member states that the figure fell below thirty percent. That is a demonstration of the extent to which religion, religiosity remains important in our societies. That means that if I want to engage with society, if I want to work with members of society to transform those societies, I must engage that religious dimension of who they are and how they identify.

The second of my three reasons has to do with the extent to which there are shared values across faith and human rights communities.

Back in 2017, I conducted an exercise. I brought together representatives of some eighteen faith communities with human rights experts to explore what is that common ground, what is that area of shared values, and among many rich findings of our two days of reflection, we identified five core shared values.

These are human dignity, freedom of the person, the promotion of equality, the expression of solidarity, and the delivery of justice.

These are shared, notwithstanding all the differences that might exist, and they in turn threw up a marketplace of areas where we needed and could work practically together. It is a similar list that we heard from the Patriarch yesterday when he spoke in the plenary of the Parliamentary Assembly. The top areas for this work are migration, combating poverty, tackling the climate crisis, and getting to grips with oversight of technical innovations.

The third reason why I must cooperate very closely with faith communities – and it is very important – is a simple matter of protection. Faith communities need protection. They need protection of their human rights. It is certainly about protection of the freedom of religion or belief, but also, tragically, about physical protection in a constant context of multiple threats. Again, what a remarkable week to have this discussion, because yet another of the notable moments of this week is the commemoration of the Holocaust, and a reminder that antisemitism is as real today as it ever was in the past, a reminder that it can manifest itself not just in hateful words, but in hateful acts, even in threats to life, to well-being, and to property.

There are growing patterns, well attested today, of anti-Muslim hatred in our societies, and there are attacks on other faith communities as well. For example, in the context of the Council of Europe geography, Jehovah's Witnesses will speak of the extent to which their rights are impeded upon, and in some other parts of the world, a very serious concern is anti-Christian hatred.

These are the reasons why I think that whatever form this platform will take, it is a very good initiative.

I do not take a position on how the platform should be set up, how it should function or be resourced, but I would like to leave four considerations to those who would work to set it up.

The first is to learn from the experience of others. This initiative is not unique to the Council of Europe. There have been repeated multiple efforts elsewhere to craft such dialogue spaces.

There are many good lessons to be learned from those experiences such as the "Faith for Rights" framework at the United Nations, the Article 17 dialogues conducted by the European Commission and the European Parliament, and the very important work of the International Dialogue Centre, KAICIID, based in Lisbon.

My second consideration is to use this dialogue space to engage across all the issues of society. Surely, it is going to be about standing up for freedom of religion or belief, but not just that.

I have found too often that when such a space is created for dialogue between an institution and faith communities, it narrows down and exclusively locates itself in a silo of protection issues. However, faith partners should be consulted about everything.

Third, we should recognise that dialogue is extremely difficult. It requires great patience. It requires acknowledgement of differences and managing to continue to cooperate where there is agreement.

Moreover, and this is increasingly clear to me in recent years, it requires recognition of mutual illiteracy. It is too often the case that dialogue partners do not understand each other, that the non-faith actors at the table do not understand the categories and the forms of expression, even the thought frames from the faith side of the table. And similarly, from the faith side of the table, there is an inadequate understanding of human rights as a formal system, how it operates and its institutions.

This is not in any way a criticism of either side of that table, just a recognition that we should invest in learning how to speak to each other and understand each other.

The fourth and final of my consideration is, to the extent there would be dialogue in an institutionalised fashion, do not allow it to become abstract and distant from reality.

I gave some examples of areas of cooperation earlier. Let those be the centre and the concentration of the discussion, not primarily about ideas, but primarily about changing our societies for the better. There is one area where that is enormously important right now, very urgent, and that is artificial intelligence.

Our efforts to tame artificial intelligence lend themselves particularly well to dialogue across the institutional and the faith communities. Why?

First, because artificial intelligence, whether for good or for ill, is going to have – already has – the most enormous impact for human well-being and human dignity.

Second, it is already clear that however we tame artificial intelligence is going to require us to engage deeply and vigorously and constantly with issues of ethics, which play such an important role also in the faith world.

Third, uniquely and maybe for the first time in our history as humanity, artificial intelligence is going to engage questions of who we are as humans, what is our agency as humans, to a degree that we haven't had to tackle before, and that is going to involve all these diverse voices at the table.

Fourth of this list, not only does artificial intelligence engage issues of who we are, how we are, risks, threats, and good elements, it does indeed and will inevitably involve even such extraordinary questions as the survival of the species. And I can think of no more compelling reason than that for us to sit around a table.

Let me wrap up my remarks still on this particular example by saying how very much welcome I see the engagement of the Holy See in this topic. I have been deeply impressed by what Pope Francis has been saying around issues of artificial intelligence in recent months. His speech at the meeting of the G7 in Italy last June is notable for many things, but also for the fact that it is deeply dialogical, and it is highly applied, and it seems to me to serve as a model of how we can carry out this necessary cooperation as we together seek to forge a better future.

Thank you.