

Meeting with the Intercultural & Interreligious Dialogue Unit of the PPE-Group in the European Parliament, 18-01-2022 Strasbourg

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Presentation of the Interreligious and Interconvictional Dialog Committee (IRICDC), Conference of INGOs – Council of Europe Idea and Perspectives - Dialogue as a challenge and task

Religions - potential for conflict in the history of Europe

Europe has been marked by wars of a different kind for many centuries. Many bloody conflicts of the last centuries have a religious background. And we know there are still looming conflicts like a sword of Damocles linked to religion, e.g. in Northern Ireland or the Balkans. Religion and nationalism often enter unholy coalitions and instrumentalise, mainly where spiritual institutions base themselves on pronounced nationalism. The search for one's identity plays a significant role: nation, culture, and religion are so interwoven and can quickly become a warped argument for exclusive identities. The potential for conflict is considerable.

Religions and their potential for dialogue

On the other hand, religions emphasise solidarity and call for peace. They do not only teach freedom but also contribute to overcoming violence, constructive, non-violent conflict management, or in interrupting violence. Their representatives have always shown in history that they also contain tremendous potential for dialogue, reconciliation, and peace.

Great spiritual personalities such as Martin Luther King, Bishop Desmond Tutu, the Dalai Lama, Mother Theresa have shown a great willingness to reconcile and bring understanding to society in the past and the present. They are initiators of dialogue, mediation and function for many as role models. Grassroot believers are often involved in an exchange on a local or regional level. These dialogues fulfil two functions: Firstly, they enable a better understanding between the religious communities themselves; secondly, they directly impact the political reality of society at the local and national levels. In other words when religious communities publicly engage in dialogue and mutual understanding, it positively affects community.

Religions and faith communities play a role in the public sphere and are therefore responsible for the common good, just as state authorities are responsible for facilitating and promoting these dialogues. In this respect, religious and belief communities have a role to play, as the liberal democratic state depends on the cohesive forces of civil society organisations.¹

The Vision of the IRICD Committee

On the European Buddhist Union and the Conference of European Churches initiative, both participatory members of the Council of Europe, the Inter-religious and Interconvictional Dialogue Committee was established last year at the INGO Conference. Drawing on the

¹Cf Article [Böckenförde dilemma - Wikipedia](#); accessed 12th January 2022.

recommendation of the Parliamentary Assembly of REC 2080 (2015) of the CoE², we wish to contribute to establish a necessary permanent dialogue platform through this committee – which brings together several faith-based NGOs. Such dialogue is essential at the spiritual leadership level and perhaps to an even greater extent at the level of civil society. See terms of references: <https://rm.coe.int/tor-committee-interreligious-interconvictional-dialogue-280421-en/1680a2d982>

The principle of unity in diversity, which we see as a strength and reconciling force, also applies to this committee.

We aim to expand interreligious dialogue, not to cling to the status quo, but to encourage change, e.g., in gender issues, social justice, ecology, for more peaceful coexistence, etc. It is about defining a new "we" that does not exclude and condemn others but learns to value and appreciate others – a mutual learning process and further development without denying one's roots of belonging.

Education as a task of inter-religious and interconvictional dialogue

We look at education in the sense of the German word "Bildung", which includes professional training and fact-based learning and culture, knowledge, and personality development, up to and including critical discernment and a sense of social responsibility.

In this sense, education is not limited to school but is a lifelong activity. Education in the sense of knowledge and the perception of how others think and feel. Education is holistic and concerns the whole human individual. Empathy, respect and self-reflection are essential aspects of this education.

In this sense, education is foremost about learning self-critical analysis of one's positions in relation with others who think and feel differently. For this reason, we consider education to be an essential element of dialogue, especially inter-religious and interconvictional dialogue.

Concrete projects of the committee

The distinction between formal and non-formal education is important because the latter goes beyond school education in terms of age, structure, and scope but is an essential aspect in shaping a democratic society. The importance of such a broad understanding of education is even more evident as the increase in freely accessible digital offerings in recent years has shaped our culture today in terms of information overload and critical debate to an unimagined extent.

Many religious and ideological communities must resort to informal education, as they are often not represented in formal school education programmes. However, religious education – where it is part of the state curriculum – is often not taken seriously and takes second place in the priority of subjects. (*cf. Religious education for all in Hamburg, Germany*).

²Recommendation 2080 (2015). *Freedom of religion and living together in a democratic society*. [PACE - Recommendation 2080 \(2015\) - Freedom of religion and living together in a democratic society \(coe.int\)](https://rm.coe.int/tor-committee-interreligious-interconvictional-dialogue-280421-en/1680a2d982); accessed 12th January 2022.

Therefore, in our current project, we are focusing on informal education programmes offered by religious and faith communities and organisations that meet them at eye level in dialogue and the sense of mutual learning from one another. They all have in common that they not only promote dialogue but deliberately offer tools and strategies against hatred, racism, and discrimination. It is interesting to see how they respond to new phenomena in digital media. In our opinion, there is a great need for exchange and mutual learning in Europe. While there are pretty comprehensive studies on formal education we lack a really good insight into the informal sector, which often lacks quality assessment. Therefore we will concentrate on finding good-practice examples, especially on the grassroots level, to help others create programmes and projects.

We will organise seminars and webinars to help interested parties on this path. The following online event we plan for in spring this year is: ***Identity Formation in Europe by Mutual Recognition in Interreligious and Interconvictional Dialogue (Interreligious dialogue, paths to mutual recognition: crises, chances, means, benefits)***

Diversity and Inclusiveness

In Europe, it was above all the Abrahamic religions that played a role in identity foundation and preservation of tradition. Therefore, it is an added value that the EBU plays an essential role in this committee. It brings new aspects to the European debate, as Buddhism is basing itself on partly very different philosophical fundamentals. At least in Europe, Buddhist communities are not involved in classical cultural and national identity building. So it can bring new insights without the usual package of historical burdens.

The committee is not limiting itself to religious belief systems but is open to other worldview communities and the dialogue with Western secular and religious philosophies. So this dialogue shall also include humanists and non-believers of all kinds.

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Roman Catholic friar in the Dominican order

Some Examples:

Become a hero, France – EUL Protestant Youth Organisation in Alsace

"Become a Hero" is an interactive exhibition for young people aged 12 to 18. In response to the temptations of xenophobic and racist drifts, and more generally, in response to the

stigmatisation of minorities, the exhibition proposes a journey of experiences, feelings, and reflections, opening onto a search for information and dispassionate debate.

This educational tool leads young people to question their way of life, with others and in the world, by offering them “training” for heroes. Their journey is based on the conviction that to change the world, it is not necessary to wait for “superheroes”, but that we can become an everyday hero by committing ourselves against racism and discrimination. To this end, each visitor is invited to develop five powers that they can use in their daily lives.

EMOUNA - Amphi of religions

A constructive response to the religion-based attacks in Paris to help prevent them in the future. It is a training programme at Sciences Po, which results from an initiative by representatives of the major religious communities present in France. In the current context, they felt the need to strengthen the ties that unite them by offering a joint training programme that would promote better knowledge and mutual dialogue, so that, respectful of the laws of the Republic, religions can assume their full place in a French-style secularism rich in cultural references. Through proven pedagogical methods, Emouna aims to strengthen the knowledge and skills of its participants by providing them with objective knowledge on religions and secularism, improving the dialogue between religions and society as a whole. (<https://www.sciencespo.fr/emouna/emouna-lamphi-des-religions/>)

FDCW – Foundation for Developing Compassion and Wisdom

FDCW believes it is as to take care of your inner needs and development as taking care of your physical and material needs. They offer resources, courses, and training that explore and develop qualities such as kindness, patience, and courage - essential for meeting the challenges of the world we all share.

FDCW proposes training, courses, and resources based on Universal Education. A system of inner learning to transform challenging emotions, build better relationships and bring more stable happiness. It is presented using contemporary language and methods suitable for people of all traditions and cultures and encourages a non-dogmatic and experiential approach. This programme is an interesting new approach to a more holistic education, which imparts knowledge and stimulates and conveys the formation of inner values. The courses and resources offered are partly free, and participants can donate according to their financial means. See: <https://www.compassionandwisdom.org/resources-2020>

Cultivating Emotional Balance (CEB)

CEB emerged during a Mind & Life dialog between behavioural scientists, a neuroscientist, a monk, a philosopher and the Dalai Lama in 2000. The 2000 meeting in Dharamsala featured many Western experts in different fields of science who spent a week in dialog with the Dalai Lama on “Destructive Emotions”. Cultivating Emotional Balance (CEB) is a 42-hour, secular, evidence based, emotion and mindfulness skills training designed to help participants improve emotional life by cultivating constructive emotional experiences, decreasing destructive emotional experiences and developing mental balance. The training consists of overarching conceptual knowledge and experiential exercises drawn from Western scientific research on emotions and traditional Eastern attention focus and contemplative practices. Internet: <http://cultivating-emotional-balance.org/>

CEB-Teachers manual: <http://cultivating-emotional-balance.org/wp-content/uploads/2016/06/ceb-manual-2015-final.pdf>

G3I - Spread the practice of interconvictionality

The Group International, Intercultural, Interconvictional (G3i) is an Association in French Law. It is a working group, composed of men and women of different nationalities and a range of culture, religion and philosophy. It seeks to contribute to the development of European citizenship and society by promoting the better-founded operation of the ground-breaking concept of interconvictionality.

Concept of interconvictionality <http://joomla.g3i.eu/interconvictionnalite>

- **House of Religions** – Dialogue of Cultures in Bern: <https://www.haus-der-religionen.ch/en/>
- **Academy of World Religions**, Hamburg : <https://www.awr.uni-hamburg.de/>
<https://www.awr.uni-hamburg.de/website-content/pdfs-flyer/redi-flyer-englisch.pdf>
- **Weltkloster** : <https://weltkloster.de/>
- **Achtsame Hochschulen** : <https://achtsamehochschulen.de/informationen/>

And many more.....