

Council of Europe
Consultation for the White Paper
on
Intercultural Dialogue

Response by International Humanist and Ethical Union
and UK National Secular Society

to
the Council's Questionnaire.

31 May 2007

Questions and background currently shown at

http://www.coe.int/T/dg4/intercultural/questions_EN.asp#TopOfPage

Preface

a. We welcome the opportunity to respond to the questions posed by the Council of Europe on Intercultural Dialogue for consideration in the preparation of the forthcoming White Paper.

b. Our responses to the questions focus on religious and associated aspects, and therefore we have not answered all the questions. The questions we have not answered have been struck through. In particular we highlight the areas where we believe religious demands are made and granted without sufficient thought being given to the effect on others and on Human Rights.

c. We believe however that intercultural dialogue comprises only one aspect of social cohesion and that it is this broader issue that needs urgently to be addressed. Our answers seek to reflect this wider concern, and in some cases challenge assumptions implicit in the questions posed.

d. We also challenge the assertion we have observed being made in meetings of the Council recently: that "Religion is back". If "Religion is back" is meant to signify that the population of member countries are embracing religion in increasing numbers, the reverse is true. We give some independent statistical support for this position in the Statistical Appendix below. It is nevertheless true to say, that despite declining adherence amongst the general population, religious leaders are becoming more assertive and also that the news media are dominated by religious conflicts of various kinds.

e. In this response, and for the avoidance of doubt, we define "secular" as "neutral in matters of religion and belief". We feel it necessary to emphasise this because the churches, in particular, continue to condemn secularism as anti-religious. We specifically refute the charge that secularism is anti-religious. A secular state would by definition safeguard freedom of religion or belief for all, and secular states in practice are far more likely to do so than theocracies.

What is overdue is an acknowledgement that there should be freedom *from* religious belief too. By this we mean the imposition of religious dogma on the majority of the population that does not practise any religion and has no wish so to do.

Recommendations have been highlighted in bold.

The challenge of managing cultural diversity in democratic societies

1. How urgent are efforts to promote intercultural dialogue today? Why are they urgent?

They are urgent because social cohesion in Europe is under the greatest threat since the Council of Europe was formed. Increased intercultural/inter-religious tensions are more likely to arise with high levels of immigration, different demographic patterns for minority groups, and separatism – both physical, cultural and religious. Some, but by no means all, of this separatism is self-imposed.

The extent of the problem varies substantially from member state to state, and indeed within member states. Some measure of the disturbing extent to which this problem has developed in the United Kingdom can be seen in research conducted there. It indicates that young Muslim men are becoming less integrated into the majority culture than the previous generation. According to the reportⁱ *Living apart together - British Muslims and the paradox of multiculturalism*, of 16-24 year old Muslims in the UK:

- “37% prefer sharia law”,
- “36% believe if a Muslim converts to another religion they should be punished by death” and
- “13% admire organisations like Al-Qaeda that are prepared to fight the West”

The numbers are much lower for older Muslims.

Some of the separatism is exacerbated by economic factors. **The incomes of some religious and ethnic minorities are on average substantially less than the national averages, while other minorities fare more favourably. The causes of these disparities need to be better understood, and addressed.**

We have noted above that attempts to achieve better dialogue - while important - form only a part of the work needed to improve cohesion. Moreover some dialogue can itself even be counterproductive. We cite as an example as part of the cultural dialogue, the encouragement of traditionally “respected” partners, such as religious groups, to speak (or at least claim to speak) for large populations, even though many in those populations would not agree with what would be said. Those most likely to be denied a voice and sidelined are women, the young and the non-religious.

Another possible serious adverse consequence of “dialogue”, which is in reality little more than a privileged monologue from religious representatives or leaders, is that it could open the way for the Human Rights of citizens as a whole to be restricted. This could occur, for example, if religious groups were successful in exerting pressure to cause their doctrines, such as those on sexual matters, to be imposed in national or community law. Religious groups frequently seek to act in this way.

2. Which is the most promising overall “vision” for living together in multicultural societies? What is the most suitable model for managing its diversity in a democratic way?

A secular model based on democracy and the supremacy of Human Rights is the only way to ensure fairness for all. Yet, worryingly, even this ideal is not one which all member states would endorse. In nations where one religion is dominant, it is more likely to be difficult to persuade the privileged religious authorities of the value of secularism. This actually strengthens the case for our next recommendation. **We recommend that the secular basis of the Council of Europe be made more explicit. If this is not done now, the opportunity may be lost for ever, with potentially disastrous consequences for Human Rights.**

Even democracy itself seems to be defined ambiguously by the religious. In this respect, we refer to a 2002 Vatican publication, the *Doctrinal Note on the Participation of Catholics in Political Life in connection with the discussion on dialogue with the religious*, which appears to embrace democracy somewhat conditionally.ⁱⁱ In part, it says: "Democracy must be based on the true and solid foundation of non-negotiable ethical principles which are the underpinning of life in society". It is also significant in maintaining (in the third paragraph) that Catholic participation [in political life] cannot compromise on the principle that democracy succeeds only to the extent that it "is based on a correct understanding of the human person". To take just one example of such "non-negotiable ethical principles" and "correct understanding of the human person" we find that "in no way can other forms of cohabitation be placed on the same level as [heterosexual] marriage, nor can they receive legal recognition". Thus the official Catholic "vision for living together" must always be based on a presumption of individual and group inequality - homosexual men and women do not meet the test of "correct understanding". Furthermore we find the instruction both counter-democratic and an abuse of Human Rights that "The state must not interfere, nor in any way require or prohibit these [religious] activities, except when it is a question of public order". Again, the Catholic "vision for living together" is one in which religion would reign supreme above the state. Catholics are, of course, entitled to hold and express such views, but such views, we submit, can never constitute the "most promising overall vision for living together in multicultural societies" nor should they be imposed on anyone by the force of law.

In short, the Doctrinal Note contends that the individual democratic right of representation conveys to the Catholic Church the right to dictate ethical and social policy and the right to be exempt from the democratic principle of accountability to the citizens. We submit that the Council must not permit a dictatorial bastion to be established at the heart of its democratic function.

Undue pressure by the Catholic hierarchy on Catholic politicians can subvert, if not pervert, the democratic process. Such pressure, for example threats to exclude them from communion and pillory them in public, could cause politicians to vote against what they believe to be in the best interests of their constituents or against their own consciences. The likelihood of such conflicts is far from remote. It should not be forgotten that, especially on sexual matters, Catholic orthodoxy is at variance with the views of a substantial minority (and some cases even a majority) of Catholics, as well as the non-Catholic majority of citizens.

3. How do cultural diversity and human rights relate to one another?

The resolution of disputes concerning cultural diversity must take place within a Human Rights framework which will come into play whenever the rights of others are in danger of being infringed.

Cultural practices are often closely interwoven with religious practices and both are steeped in history long preceding the modern concepts of human rights. We suspect that there is some opportunism in claiming whether at a particular juncture a particular practice is religious or cultural. Some Muslims in favour of women being obliged to wear the veil have for example claimed that it is a religious obligation, and therefore beyond debate.

Female genital mutilation, on the other hand, being far more difficult to explain away, is described as cultural. Yet some seeking to inflict this abuse of powerless children appear to be motivated by religious zeal, and it is telling that there is little if any outspoken religious objection to the practice. Indeed in the Jewish religion the genital mutilation of male infants is mandatory. This practically-never-challenged example of “diversity” surely exemplifies the need for us all to do ever more to promote the universality of Human Rights.

4. What can be done to give cultural diversity a more positive connotation than it has today? What should the response be to intolerant, racist and xenophobic tendencies in public debate?

Even though there is, rightly, abhorrence of assimilation and mono-culturalism, and of limitations on freedom of religion, there comes a point past which an increasing emphasis on minority ethnicity and religions starts to undermine cohesion. At the conference of the Council of Europe in San Marino on 23 and 24 April 2007 on the theme “The Religious Dimension of Intercultural Dialogue” Keith Porteous Wood, speaking for IHEU, cited an example of a failed attempt to achieve cohesion. He was referring to the UK and observed that even the government had been forced to re-consider its long-standing policy on “multiculturalism”. Mr Porteous Wood said that the Government there has been continually emphasising the multiplicity of religions that divides us. Instead, we should concentrate on what we have in common, such as our humanity. We endorse this view and caution the Council to resist the pressure they will undoubtedly come under to give resources and power to religions (generally minority religions). The demands will come from the self-appointed leaders of such religions, who will also be the direct beneficiaries. Often the pretext offered for demands for capacity-building in this area is that this will foster cohesion. Not only is this unlikely to be effective, the longer term result is likely to be quite the opposite: the progressive splintering of society.

It should be recognised that the failing appetite for “cultural diversity” has its roots not only in racism and xenophobia (which are of course always to be abhorred) but also because some cultures are in some respects potentially incompatible with established European or Western norms. For example, a culture that can encourage its men folk to beat women in the street for inappropriate dress is (or so we hope) never to be tolerated in member states. Not all aspects of cultural diversity are benign, and to suggest so could in some cases be both dishonest and counterproductive.

The implicit assumption that racism and xenophobia is restricted to being inflicted by the majority culture on minority cultures needs to be challenged. Unfortunately, minority cultures can also be intolerant (including being violent, oppressive or discriminatory) towards other minorities and to the majority too.

On the specific question of violence, it is self-evident from any examination of international news that the majority of violence in the world today is connected with religion, whether or not religion is merely a marker or rallying point for cultural or tribal identity.

Similarly, according to the reports on this from the Vatican (e.g. *Religious Liberty in Africa* and *Religious Liberty in Asia*), religious intolerance is widespread, and much of it is directly or indirectly instigated by other religions or sects.

Penal limitations on freedom of expression are hardly ever justified, beyond those necessary to discourage incitement to violence, or for the protection of public order, safety and security. IHEU condemns racial abuse of any kind, but it is a fine judgment as to the extent to which legal sanctions in this area are fruitful. There is a danger of proscription driving vile expressions underground to fester away from scrutiny. On the other hand, an absence of legal sanctions permits hate speech to be expressed openly, where it can be monitored and exposed to the potentially corrective challenge of public criticism.

The more multicultural and/or multi-religious a society becomes, the greater potential there will be for claims of offence against those exercising their freedom of expression.

The question arises as to whether the sensitivities of those claiming to be offended should be protected by law. If the question is answered in the affirmative, we submit that this will have the effect of reducing freedom of expression to the point that only bland statements would be safe from prosecution. Self-censorship would be endemic and meaningful debate – an essential element of European enlightenment - would be eroded.

The other, more mature, response would be to acknowledge that “offence” is a purely subjective matter and no-one has the right to be protected from it – hence there being no case for legal action against those who allegedly “cause offence”. Obviously legal action would be possible where it were necessary to provide the safeguards on violence and so forth mentioned above.

The question on the extent to which the law should proscribe offence against religion was debated hotly during the session on freedom of expression at the Council of Europe’s Committee on Culture, Science and Education in Paris on 18 May 2006. It was decided, rightly in our view, that no more laws were needed. The most striking aspect of the debate was that speaker after speaker said how we should all respect religious views and sensitivities. Indeed, IHEU does not advocate gratuitous offence of any kind. But such speakers seemed, initially at least, not to have thought through the consequence of what they were implying – that those out of sympathy with or hostile to their ideology should be subject to criminal sanctions. By the end of the debate, when awareness of that distinction had been appreciated more clearly, the balance of the debate moved strongly against tighter laws to curb freedom of expression.

Intolerance is not always as negative as could be (perhaps wrongly) implied by the question. We have a duty to be intolerant of intolerance itself and, for example, of injustice or obscurantism. Nor should our intolerance of abuses of Human Rights be muted because the alleged abuses are, or are claimed to be, religious or cultural in origin.

We would also like to draw attention to one particular form of intolerance that impinges on the human rights of others and that many in the hierarchy of the churches either actively promote or at least do little to discourage. This relates to equal human rights for homosexuals, and in essence to the institutional homophobia of churches - and mosques. Examples are legion, and a dossier can be provided on request.

We also need to make sure that racism is not being claimed falsely in an attempt to stifle freedom of expression. Criticism of anything concerned with Muslims or Islam is routinely branded as 'Islamophobic' and 'Islamophobia' is claimed to be racism. The Muslim Council of Great Britain defines Islamophobia as "fear of and/or aversion to Islam in general and Muslims in particular". This means that if one questions or criticises (or even fears) the religion of Islam it is the equivalent of criticising or fearing individual Muslims. This insidious definition equates any criticism of Islam with an attack on Muslims.

IHEU defends and respects the right of all adherents of all religions to practise their religion (or not to practise it or to change it) and to enjoy the full protection of Human Rights legislation. At the same time, everyone should be able to be as critical or disparaging of any religious belief or practice that they find offensive, without legal sanction, but subject as ever to the limitations noted above in 4. As noted above we also draw attention to the need for freedom *from* belief: for religious norms not to be forced directly or indirectly on those who are not practising the religion from which the norm derives. So, for example, those who are not Muslims should not be pressurised to observe Muslim edicts.

We commend *The Islamophobia Myth*ⁱⁱⁱ by Kenan Malik. In summary: "The charge of 'Islamophobia' is all too often used not to highlight racism but to stifle criticism. ... And in reality discrimination against Muslims is not as great as is often perceived - but criticism of Islam should be greater." We also need to recognise that exaggerated claims can be made of intolerant and racist behaviour (perhaps after a violent attack) - as part of a strategy to gain more sympathy and privileges. It is an example of the insidious argument from some quarters that it is European (or Western) civil society that must adapt itself in order to accommodate Muslim requirements, rather than the other way around. Examples abound: In 2007 The Muslim Council of Britain (MCB) published^{iv} a document, 'Towards Greater Understanding – Meeting the needs of Muslim pupils in state schools'. This set out Islamic demands that should be met at British taxpayers' expense The UK Government wisely declined to endorse this document.

5. Which measures are necessary to enable cultural minorities, such as migrants and national minorities, to express their cultural identity and to contribute to the cultural richness of the whole society?

We need to bear in mind once more that an over-emphasis on minority expression can undermine attempts to build cohesion. More generally, the word "culture or cultural" is often used by the religious when they mean "religion" or "religious", in the expectation of attracting less examination or criticism.

We should be mindful that culture extends beyond racial, national, regional and religious groups. Women, young and older people and gay people, for example, also have their own cultures and should be given the opportunity to be included in dialogue. **We recommend that religion be de-emphasised in schools as doing so will reduce the likelihood of cultural and religious separatism or even conflict.** A secular school system that acknowledges religious difference but does not encourage its expression during school hours is to be favoured.

Another tension between cultural/religious expression and “cultural richness of the whole society” relates to respect for the scientific method and the discoveries of science. We are concerned that debates about the inappropriateness of creationism in science lessons seem only to take place in relation to Christianity. In other religions we fear such dogma may be accepted in science lessons without question. This could seriously undermine the teaching of science and the cultural richness of society.

The Central Committee of Ex-Muslims (in Germany) oppose the use of Article 4 of the German Constitution [about “freedom of faith, conscience and creed”] to muzzle any criticism of the spread of Islamic norms and practices. They are of the opinion that Islam, as a religion of pre-modern rules and thought, is in conflict with many fundamentals of democracy and human rights. The Central Committee of Ex-Muslims is also opposed to the erection of large mosques in Germany, because they consider these not simply to be “houses of God”, but symbols of a purposeful strategy of Islamisation. “Sow mosques and harvest extremists!” said Mina Ahadi, president of the Central Committee of Ex-Muslims. “A mosque (in Arabic, Masdschid, which means ‘place of submission’) is not merely a place to express spiritual beliefs, as is generally naïvely supposed, but is, above all, a place of indoctrination in religious politics and sometimes in anti-Western conspiracies. It is a regrettable cultural misconception that many Western commentators understand mosques as being essentially “sacred spaces”, like Christian churches.

“This points up a basic flaw in the present debate”, says Arzu Toker, vice president of the Ex-Muslims. “Many commentators judge Islam on the basis of their experience with a Christianity that has been tamed by the Enlightenment. But a lot of things cannot simply be transferred [from one culture to another] and this leads again and again to serious misjudgements.” Toker, who criticises the mosques as “bastions of a rigid separation of the sexes and patriarchal prejudice”, asserts “that only a small proportion of the so-called Muslims living in Germany want to attend the mosque regularly, so that actually there is no need to build more mosques”. Toker maintains that erecting mosques is not a pressing concern of the immigrants living in Germany, but represents an aim of the conservative Islamic associations, in order to increase the religion’s importance. “If politicians want to help the integration of immigrants, they shouldn’t support the building of mosques, but instead change the laws governing asylum and offer people more help in integrating”, said Toker. The attempt of the Islamic associations to increase the social impact of religion through mosque building won’t contribute in any way towards solving the issue of integration in Germany, but will only make the present problems worse.^v

The concept of intercultural dialogue ▲

~~6. How can we best define “intercultural dialogue”?~~

~~7. In which political, social and cultural contexts can “intercultural dialogue” play a relevant role?~~

~~8. Are there minimum conditions that must be achieved in order to make intercultural dialogue possible?~~

A respect for the Human Rights of *all*, that goes beyond mere lip-service.

~~9. What is necessary for moving from intercultural dialogue to joint action? See 10 below~~

10. Which role does the principle of gender equality play in intercultural dialogue?

Women are vulnerable in many minority cultures (and to a lesser extent in the majority community). Manifestations of that vulnerability include restrictions on freedom of conscience, movement, association and expression, and the right to work and to a family life of their choosing. Factors which combine to oppress women include family hierarchies, male chauvinism and economic poverty; but even more powerful are the group or institutional effects of culture and religion. **Cultural and religious over-sensitivity by the authorities and lack of support from religious bodies can lead to under-reporting, under-investigation and under-prosecution of, for example, forced marriages, female genital mutilation and “honour” killings. Especial efforts also need to be made to enable women’s voices to be heard, their viewpoints listened to and actions taken to address injustices and inequalities.**

A subservient role for women is not confined to minority cultures however. Even today, some leading Christians would point to Christian scriptures as justifying female subservience; the current resistance to female clergy is just one manifestation of this in practice. Both doctrine and practice have for centuries given powerful discriminatory signals, which today still permeate societal norms beyond religious circles. It should perhaps be remembered that although Christian clergy interpreted scripture as justifying the slave trade for 200 years, they eventually came to realise that it was unsupportable, no longer advocated it, and have apologised^{vi} for it. In like manner it is to be hoped that the vast majority of Christians will come to reject the Christian doctrine which relegates women to an inferior status. The Council should continue to emphasise the equality of the sexes in all matters.

We hope the Council can give stronger leads in these areas such as the Human Rights of women, homosexuals and younger people where intercultural dialogue could be most fruitful by raising consciousness of the problems, providing a forum for the oppressed to speak to the oppressors, raising awareness of human rights and making sure the oppressed have access to assistance, including affordable legal help.

We regret that there is no equivalent question about the young and homosexuals – and most of the points above also apply to youth and homosexuals.

11. How can formal, informal and non-formal education promote intercultural dialogue and prepare individuals for living in a multicultural society?

A danger of formal religious education is the reinforcement of oppressive stereotypes and roles. **We recommend that state schools should not teach pupils to believe any religion (so-called ‘confessional’ teaching), and leave such teaching to the home and place of worship.** When “religious education” is mooted in schools, there is a tendency for religious leaders to be invited or invite themselves to become involved. Where this happens, religious education is much more likely to become proselytising, either actively or passively (the latter being through repetition, rote learning or psychological pressure on the very young). To quote the Vision for Europe^{vii} “Parents have the right to impart their own values and religious beliefs to their children but states have no obligation to support them in doing so”. **We recommend that all education about religion should remain academic and in the hands of the academic authorities, although this is no guarantee in itself that proselytisation will not be attempted. There should be no formal involvement of religious authorities in religious education in state sponsored or state funded schools. Teaching of ethics should be promoted (also noting non-religious sources of ethics) and concentrate on citizenship, democracy and human rights.**

Research has shown that school is by far the best place for children to get to know each other across cultural and religious barriers. This should start at primary school, and instead of emphasising differences of culture and religion, these should be downplayed during school hours. Children should be able to make friendships with their class mates from all cultures without being constantly reminded of their differences. Research^{viii} by Professor Irene Breughel in London shows that children in primary schools do not recognise cultural differences until they are pointed out. By constantly emphasising that people are different from each other, the potential for the formation of lasting inter-cultural friendships will be undermined. As Professor Brueghel noted, such friendships spread to the parents of the school children too. Schools should be neutral spaces, free from religious and cultural emphasis.

12. Which underlying values are important for the policy of promoting intercultural dialogue? Are “new” values needed?

Please also refer to our answer to question 10. One objective of intercultural dialogue which the Council should resist at all costs is relativism on Human Rights and the adoption of “new” diluted values brought about by the insidious and growing assertion that Human Rights are a “Western construct”. The Council must remain steadfast in opposing calls for Human Rights to be applied selectively.

Much of this pressure emanates from religious or religiously-influenced sources, and not just minority religions. The Council’s values must remain those of Universal Human Rights. Group rights should not be allowed to prevail over individual rights nor should beliefs be accorded special protection, which history has shown the religious have a tendency to abuse (for example, blasphemy, heresy and apostasy laws). **We recommend that more emphasis be applied to protecting the right of freedom of individual conscience, especially the right to abandon or change religion or belief, still a capital offence in some theocratic states.**

13. *Are there “natural” limitations to what intercultural dialogue can achieve? What are the possibilities of dialogue with those who do not share our world view, have a different interpretation of shared values or refuse to engage in dialogue?*

One of the most intractable limitations arises from what adherents regard as supernatural: the existence of doctrine regarded by the religious as divinely inspired or revealed truth. Since such doctrines are believed by many adherents to be unalterable, regardless of modern evidence or thought, there can be no room for compromise on the core of the issue at stake. Sometimes civil society cannot accommodate religious demands, and the religious are unable/unwilling to compromise. When this happens Human Rights, democratic values and the rule of law must prevail.

Let us consider what is perhaps the most obvious example. Throughout the ages, and terrifyingly so still today, killing is often carried out by those who have been taught that it is their religious duty to do so, frequently with the promise of reward in some afterlife. There are many similar conflicts between religious belief and modern civil values. Unless we accept (as we must) that there are limitations to dialogue, our essential values based on Human Rights will be put at risk.

Dialogue with those that the West considers extremists – the ones most at odds with the Council’s central values of Democracy and Human Rights – will surely be next to impossible. We hope that the Council is mindful that those who represent a religious perspective and who engage with the Council are unlikely to be representative of all shades of opinion, especially of the extremists. **Extremists, by and large, will not come to Council debates or Colloquies and those religious representatives who do come are usually moderates. We recommend that the Council be vigilant about not being lulled into a false sense of security by the voices of moderate religious representatives, because concessions made to their religion could run the risk of enabling the more extreme elements to use them to undermine the Council’s fundamental values.**

14. *Which dialogue methods are specifically suited for promoting intercultural understanding?*

We draw attention to the above, especially questions 10, 11 and 13.

~~**15.** *What are the expected political and individual “results” of intercultural dialogue? How can they be “measured”?*~~

16. *How can the capacity of individuals, groups and institutions for intercultural dialogue be enhanced?*

We recommend that some method is found for empowering those voices that are unheard in these formal surroundings, including women, young people and those deprived of educational opportunities. There are dissidents who feel alienated by the Council’s structures. Undemocratically appointed religious leaders claim to speak for huge populations, but as the Council is concerned with individual human rights, it must somehow reach out beyond the “representative bodies” and

their leaders and find a new way to engage. Our answer to question 24 includes some specific recommendations.

~~17. What makes a practical example of intercultural dialogue an “example of good practice”?~~

Organising intercultural dialogue

~~18. How can civil society organisations be encouraged to strengthen their commitment to intercultural dialogue at international, national and local levels?~~

~~19. What is the responsibility of political parties in promoting intercultural dialogue? Which specific role can they play?~~

One growing trend of political party activities which works against cohesion is the opening up of splinter groups within political parties aimed at particular religious, geographical or ethnic minorities. The objective may be to increase the share of voters, but it also serves as a power base for the minorities to make demands for privileges or preferential treatment.

~~20. How can the equal participation of men and women in intercultural dialogue be ensured? (See 10)~~

We recommend that instead of involving religious representatives (who are almost invariably older men), more effort should be made to reach beyond them to find the women, including younger women, in communities whose voices are traditionally unheard. It will be difficult, but an effort should be made not only to find such women but then to engage them, and to obtain answers which have not been unduly influenced by other family members. One mechanism that could be employed would be to commission surveys of women (and young women) in which they can be invited to reply to carefully-tailored questions and reply confidentially. The internet should be exploited imaginatively using for example women’s and alternative/dissidents’ sites. It should also however be remembered that many women will not have access to the internet and even where they have, they may be unable to give frank replies, so some surveys will have to be on leaflets perhaps accompanied by reply-paid envelopes or coupons with post-free addresses.

~~21. How can intercultural dialogue be promoted in the local community?~~

Certainly not by giving undue influence to religious community leaders who have a vested interest in buttressing the influence of their faith and maintain its power over local populations. **We recommend that the first priority in promoting dialogue in local communities is to actively work towards widening community engagement beyond the church, mosque, temple or synagogue, and encourage other community leaders especially for women and young people.**

22. How can intercultural dialogue be promoted through measures at the national level?

One of the greatest barriers to intercultural dialogue is the lack of a unifying language. Without a shared language there can be no dialogue of any kind. Countries with large immigrant populations should put extra resources into teaching (one of) the nation's majority language(s) to immigrants. This is particularly important for women, who are often isolated with no prospect of breaking out of their enclosed community because of the inability to function in the majority community. **We recommend the establishment of a system of "mentors". Such mentors would help immigrant families integrate into the host country culture by focussing on the language issue. They could be based at local community centres and offer language help at home wherever such arrangement is appropriate, free of charge. Some urgency needs to be applied to this problem.**

We recommend that preachers should also be encouraged to learn the host nation language and efforts should be made to strongly encourage religious observance to take place in the national language. The security implications of not doing so are self-evident.

23. What is the place of religious communities in a policy promoting intercultural dialogue? Which significance does the dialogue have among religious communities?

The starting point for any improvement in intercultural dialogue must be a common view of the genuine equality of all individuals. The unavoidable, intractable problem for most religions is that they believe their adherents to be special, uniquely gifted in some way, or even superior in some respects to all other individuals, whether of different religious belief or no religious belief. Such attitudes, whether actively taught or simply implied, inevitably creates barriers and suspicion. We recommend that religious communities should engage with each other and with the community at large in the language of the host nation and promote very much more rigorously the adoption of Human Rights as the common currency of respect between the different communities.

24. Should the Council of Europe engage in dialogue with religious communities? If yes, how?

We recommend that the Council of Europe must make explicit its intention to remain a secular organisation that, while acknowledging religion and its importance to a significant number of people, does not engage on religious terms.

We recommend that in dialogue with the Council, religious leaders should not be permitted to:

- 1. engage in privileged dialogue which would result in a disproportionately high influence relative to the influence which should be accorded to civil society, or**
- 2. act in a representative capacity.**

We of course welcome all attempts to resolve conflicts, but any breaches of the above would be deleterious to the Council's commitment to Human Rights.

We ask the Council to bear in mind that the vast majority of people who are likely to be adversely affected by the demands of the religious are not, and can never be fairly represented by the religious—even though they may claim to do so. These potential victims of religious demands include atheists, humanists, other non-religious people, the “don't knows”, the “new agers” including those who regard themselves as “spiritual” rather than formally religious – and even many barely/nominally practising or not practising a religion.

To allow religious representation within the Council of Europe would be to listen to those with the loudest voices (and often the greatest self-interest to protect). Such representation would build into the consultation process both a bias and a deficit. One way of avoiding this is to have robust and adequately funded research programmes undertaking surveys of individuals designed to reflect society as a whole. The cost need not be high if technology were well harnessed.

25. *How can awareness be strengthened so that intercultural dialogue is not “just” a cultural issue, but needs systematic supportive action in other policy areas?*

In the face of increasingly vocal religious demands we seem to have become reticent in the promotion of the European system and values that emerged following the horrors of the two World Wars. One of the key driving forces has been an unwavering determination to concentrate on commonalities and not differences. Thus we have seen the slow but sure coalescence of legal systems (not through unification, but through adoption in national law or regulations agreed at EU level).

We have seen in some countries, such as France, the principle that state schools should be of a uniform character. We have seen the spread of national health systems all designed to ensure the equal treatment of patients. And yet today we face calls (generally from minorities themselves) for dual legal systems: civil and religious. In some countries, such as the UK, we see increasing fragmentation of the state schools system along religious lines, which can be tantamount to ethnic lines. We see demands (also from minority religious leaders) for different styles and even parallel systems of healthcare provision to accommodate religious sensitivities. These are all examples where, in the name of respecting diversity, we are promoting difference. The fact must be faced that the promotion of difference can give rise to conflict or at best destroy opportunities for working together. The key component is sharing. The sharing of traditions, experiences and knowledge in food, art, music, literature, architecture and science genuinely advances intercultural dialogue. When individuals share, regardless of race, gender or sexual orientation, then we have respect. But religion is rarely a “shareable” concept. Almost all religions have their own inviolate, non-negotiable doctrines that are by definition irreconcilable with any other. Where religious demands for differing treatment (in law, education, health and others) are acceded to, a necessary consequence is the fragmentation of society. Intercultural dialogue will be more than just a cultural issue when we have been brave enough to promote our common values (democracy, civil law, democracy) such that the differences that cause conflict are slowly relinquished for the overall common good.

We recommend much greater awareness of the dangers to cohesion of acceding to demands (generally allegedly on religious or cultural grounds) for differential treatment in education, medicine, fiscal measures or justice. We strongly advise that any proposed changes in the law in these areas which would provide differential treatment on religious lines be subjected before implementation to careful and impartial Human Rights scrutiny and full public debate.

26. Which institutional arrangements must be put in place to ensure a better coordination of the different policy areas concerned – at international, national and local levels?

All publicly funded institutions should announce themselves to be secular, i.e. neutral between religion and cultures; institutions that will listen to everyone who has something to say on an equal basis. No privileges should be extended to anyone – including religious voices – and none should suffer discrimination – and this refers to religious voices, too, as well as non-religious or even anti-religious voices.

27. Where should the policy of “mainstreaming” intercultural dialogue begin, which policy areas should have priority over others?

The promotion of language skills among immigrants is paramount. If people cannot speak to each other, there can be no dialogue.

28. How can international organisations, such as the Council of Europe, support local and national initiatives for the promotion of intercultural dialogue?

We recommend that as a starting point for open intercultural dialogue the Council should encourage state-sponsored and shared institutions such as schools, hospitals, social services and service provision to declare themselves to be secular. Whether or not religion is involved as a partner in the state (such as in the provision of services), there must be no discrimination of any kind against service users or in the employment of personnel. Care needs to be taken that non-discrimination is taken seriously. The absence of both direct and indirect discrimination needs to be monitored and enforced and there need to be realistic and effective penalties and sanctions for infringements.

29. How can cultural industries, including journalists and media organisations, be encouraged to develop approaches that more effectively promote intercultural dialogue?

Any attempt to pressurise journalists to “slant” their copy to create more positive images is doomed to failure. Journalism free of interference is one of the great assets of a democratic society. It should remain totally independent and free from pressure of any kind to impart an ideological message. Where journalists behave irresponsibly, they are and should be called to account. This occurs through application of the law, self-regulation, and adverse criticism.

We believe strongly that the Council of Europe has no right to ask journalists to be part of any kind of attempt to change the nature of society. It is a journalist's job to reflect society, not change it. For example, journalists have been censoring themselves, partly out of fear, not to express themselves in ways which could be perceived as critical of Islam. This self-censorship has done a disservice to conflict resolution.

30. *How can examples of good practice (in the area of intercultural dialogue) be publicised in the best way?*

In the same way that all success stories are publicised. There are endless ways to communicate in the modern world. Journalists will pick up stories of human endeavour, and of empowerment of the weak if they are truly worthy – but to demand that they do so would of course be anti-democratic. The Council of Europe – and those working to bring about its aims - must take its chances along with all others seeking to promote and publicise their efforts. The Council of Europe could however use the internet to reach young people and those who are otherwise voiceless more effectively.

Co-operation with other international organisations

31. *What is the “added value” of Council of Europe action on intercultural dialogue, which distinguishes it from that of other international organisations?*

The Council's admirable record on Human Rights and the fact that it does not have religious representation. If the Council also chooses the dangerous route of religious representation it will destroy one of the most valuable and positive distinctions it has.

32. *How should the Council of Europe co-operate with other international institutions, in order to achieve a maximum impact of activities promoting cultural diversity and intercultural dialogue?*

A danger that needs to be guarded against when cooperating with religiously-dominated organisations is that the Council's pre-eminence in the promotion of Human Rights could be compromised.

33. *How can the Council of Europe contribute to the “Alliance of Civilizations” initiative of the United Nations?*

By encouraging it to turn away from religion and the protection of beliefs and group rights, and emphasise instead the protection of the universal rights of individuals.

STATISTICAL APPENDIX

Given the repeated assertions that “religion is back”, we commend the following to illustrate the low and declining level of religious belief and observance in Europe. (More information is available on request):

The decline in Christian adherence

It is ironic, but perhaps not surprising, that increased input from religion is being proposed at a time when adherence to Christianity in Europe is at its lowest ebb and in continuous decline, and that even those who continue to be counted as adherents are less likely than ever before to abide by the strict doctrines of their churches.

Independent statistics show a substantial sustained reduction in Christian belief, adherence and practice. We believe these destroy the case for any one religion to be able to claim it speaks on behalf of the people in member states. The following incontrovertible evidence runs completely in the face of the much hyped phrase “religion is back”^{ix}. Only a third of Western Europeans believe in a personal God. More than 80% of Europeans do not regularly attend a religious service. Religiosity has been in decline for nearly a century^x. In Britain, normal Sunday church attendance dropped from 11% of the population in 1980 to less than 7% in 2005 and is forecast by Christian Research to drop to 2% in 2040^{xi}. Religion ranked just ninth in a list of characteristics regarded as important to their identity^{xii}. When Europeans were asked what values they “cherish above all”, religion came bottom of list of 11 - with a meagre 7%^{xiii}. Eurobarometer 66 conducted in 2006 showed “Public opinion is divided about the place of religion in society”. On average, a significant 46% of respondents agree with the proposal that it is “too important”.

The 2004 draft report “Religion in Europe”^{xiv} grouped member states into the “Franco-German core” (France, Germany, Austria, Switzerland, Belgium, the Netherlands, Luxembourg), the “Catholic fringe” (Spain, Portugal, Italy, Poland, Ireland, Slovenia, Greece [which though Orthodox is similar]) and the “Northern/Eastern fringe” (Norway, Sweden, Finland, Denmark, the United Kingdom, Hungary, the Czech Republic). The report found that religion has been and continues to be in long term decline, where “attendance dropped substantially in every European country during the last three decades of the 20th century”. The report concluded that “each birth cohort is somewhat less religious than the one before.”

A December 2006 Financial Times/Harris Poll^{xv} (comparing the US with Great Britain, France, Italy, Spain and Germany) found a high European preference for the separation of church and state with Great Britain at 70%, France at 86%, Italy at 71%, Spain at 84% and Germany at 77%.

We also recommend the analysis contained in *Why The Gods Are Not Winning*^{xvi} by Gregory Paul & Phil Zuckerman (despite it apparently not having been peer-reviewed)

ⁱ <http://www.policyexchange.org.uk/images/libimages/246.pdf> 2007

ⁱⁱ Section II paragraph 3. This document was published by the Offices of the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith over the signature of the (then) Cardinal Ratzinger and Archbishop Bertone on November 24, 2002

http://www.vatican.va/roman_curia/congregations/cfaith/documents/rc_con_cfaith_doc_20021124_politica_en.html

ⁱⁱⁱ See full article on http://www.kenanmalik.com/essays/islamophobia_prospect.html

^{iv} See <http://www.muslimnews.co.uk/paper/index.php?article=2890>

^v <http://hpd-online.de/node/2029> dated 31 May 2007

^{vi} <http://news.bbc.co.uk/1/hi/uk/4694896.stm>

^{vii} https://www.iheu.org/v4e/html/vision_for_europe.html

^{viii} <http://www.lsbu.ac.uk/families/publications/SCDiversityEdu28.8.06.pdf>

^{ix} Coined by Mr de Puig during the Intercultural dialogue Colloquy on Questions related to State and Religion in Strasbourg on 27 February 2007

^x <http://www.gallup-international.com/ContentFiles/millennium15.asp>

^{xi} UK Christian Handbook Christian Trends No. 5, 2005/2006 Publ Christian Research Ed Peter Brierley ISBN1-85321-160-5, Table 12.13

^{xii} (Home Office Research Study 274 Religion in England and Wales: findings from the 2001 Home Office Citizenship Survey) publ 2004

^{xiii} http://ec.europa.eu/public_opinion/archives/eb/eb66/eb66_highlights_en.pdf

^{xiv} by David Voas at the Cathie Marsh Centre for Census and Survey Research University of Manchester England

^{xv} <http://www.harrisinteractive.com/news/printerfriend/index.asp?NewsID=1131>

^{xvi} http://www.edge.org/3rd_culture/paul07/paul07_index.html