

Rüdiger Noll<sup>27</sup>

## Dialogue between Religions in Europe<sup>28</sup>

First of all, I want to thank the University of Szeged and the Institute for International and Regional Studies for inviting to this important conference on “Cultural identity: The Role of Religion in Europe”. As a guest, I feel warmly welcome and part of a stimulating debate with people from different contexts and backgrounds. Thank you for bringing us together in this lovely part of Hungary, historically influenced by so many different cultures.

I am working for the Conference of European Churches and its Church and Society Commission, which represents the common voice of its 120 member churches vis-à-vis the European institutions, such as the European Union, the Council of Europe and the Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe (OSCE). It is a merely Christian organization, though often reflecting and acting with partners of other faith and being engaged in mediating in conflict situations, which have a religious component. Though being more of a practitioner, I am very happy to have been invited to contribute in this academic environment. I believe much stronger connections are necessary between academic reflection and research on the one side and the world of inter-religious dialogue and politics on the other. Inter-religious dialogue as well as political action is in need of a sound scientific basis as their background in order to find and keep their direction and in order to develop viable alternatives.

You have given me a huge theme: “Dialogue between Religions in Europe” and several sub-themes: I have been asked to share some good practices of inter-religious dialogue, to address the issue of the role of religion in Europe as well as the role of religion vis-à-vis the European institutions. This is a long agenda for such a short time. On some of these issues I will have to be brief, probably too brief. Let me begin with sharing some good practices.

### Good Practices

In many European countries, there are Inter-Religious Councils next to Christian Councils, where representatives from different faith traditions come together in order to learn from each other, to share their religious traditions and to discuss issues of common concern. Such Inter-Religious Councils exist in countries like Norway, France, Great Britain, Russia, Bosnia-Herzegovina and Albania, just to name a few countries. I understand, that in Hungary such an Inter-Religious Council does not exist as to yet, but there is, at least, an intensive dialogue between the Jewish and the Christian

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27 Rüdiger Noll, Director of Church and Society Commission, Conference of European Churches

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community. Inter-Religious Councils are an important sign in themselves in that they show that religious communities are ready to work together for the common good in their respective societies and that they are willing and able to address common issues and potential conflicts among themselves. It is even more significant when these Inter-Religious Councils and dialogues lead to common actions, to signs of peace and reconciliation.

On 12 September 2001, just the day after the terrorist attacks in New York and Washington on 11 September 2001, religious leaders and representatives from various Inter-Religious Councils in Europe came together in Sarajevo and distanced themselves from these atrocities. They expressed their solidarity with the victims and stated in their final declaration: "Recognizing our own potential as religious communities for violence that resides in all of us, we pray that this senseless deed may not provoke indiscriminate retaliation. We commit ourselves in the spirit of this conference to be instruments of dialogue, to contribute to building justice and peace and to work for reconciliation in our societies."

It is in this spirit that, for instance, Muslim and Christian religious leaders from Armenia and Azerbaijan went together on a pilgrimage together through both war-torn countries. It is these symbolic actions and the means of religions to mediate in conflict situations, which draw on the capacity of religions to foster peace and reconciliation instead of spreading religious mistrust and hatred.

We have seen many Inter-religious Councils in European countries being established and mushrooming after a crisis situation. This was the case after the wars in the Western Balkans, where religion was used to fuel nationalistic hatred. This was, for instance, the case after the atrocities in the U.S. on 11 September 2001. It was in countries where political leaders misused religious connotations to create enemy pictures and to exclude and to marginalize people. As important as these initiatives to establish inter-religious councils in the aftermath of a conflict are in re-establishing relationships, one wonders whether these initiatives sometimes come too late.

### **Inter-Religious Dialogue**

There is no alternative to a committed and ongoing dialogue among religious communities! But the term "dialogue" is used in an inflationary manner and often used just as a metaphor for some activism. What do we mean by "dialogue"? What are conditions for a potentially successful and sustainable dialogue?

It is already quite some time ago that the World Council of Churches engaged in developing curricula for ecumenical learning and ecumenical dialogue. The study guide stemming from this process offers several "definitions" of ecumenical learning and dialogue, out of which I want to

extend and adapt one to the inter-religious dialogue. Inter-religious dialogue and interreligious learning could then be understood as a process, by which

- diverse groups and individuals
- who are well rooted in their own faiths' traditions and cultures
- are enabled to engage in an honest encounter with one another and before their God
- as they struggle together in community
- with personally relevant issues
- in the light of their Scriptures and Traditions of their faiths, worship and global realities
- resulting in communal action and faithfulness to their own calling
- in their strive for justice, peace and the integrity of creation.

I find this definition helpful as a heuristic principle to review and initiate dialogues. Just to highlight a few features: Dialogue is not starting with the intention to make the dialogue partner to change or to give up his or her convictions and beliefs – as Bishop Kiss-Rigó has already mentioned in his presentation. Dialogue is a process of mutual learning. Dialogue is not just a discussion among like-minded people. It is not about avoiding conflict, it is about addressing conflict. Dialogues do not take place in a vacuum; they are only gaining importance, if and when they address real concerns, issues which are relevant to the involved people. And finally, dialogue has a purpose. It leads to common action. It is especially with regard to the latter that the Christian Academies have established a programme called “Dialogue for a Peaceful Change”, which established some basic rules for a successful dialogue to take place and which tries to train people all over the world in dialogue methodologies and non-violent conflict management.

It is in this context, I also see the “Charta Oecumenica”, which the Conference of European Churches and the Council of European Bishops' Conferences signed in 2001 after a long process of consultation with European churches of all major confessions. The Charta Oecumenica contains “Guidelines for the Growing Cooperation of Churches in Europe”. The underlying assumption is that churches are and remain to be different from each other, but they regard their diversity as a richness and as a calling for assuming common responsibility. With regard to the common calling of churches for the European continent, the Charta Oecumenica points to the positive role churches can play and have to play: “We are convinced that the spiritual heritage of Christianity constitutes an empowering source of inspiration and enrichment for Europe. On the basis of our Christian faith we work towards a humane, socially conscious Europe, in which human rights and basic values of peace, justice, freedom, tolerance, participation and solidarity prevail.” Again, this is formulated from a Christian perspective, but it could well serve as a point of entry for an inter-religious dialogue on the role of religion in Europe. All the more as the Charta Oecumenica continues to say: We commit ourselves ... “to oppose all forms of anti-Semitism and anti-Judaism in church and society, to seek an intensified dialogue with our

Jewish brothers and sisters ... and to conduct ourselves towards Muslims with respect and to work together with Muslims on matters of common concern”.

### **Lessons Learnt**

Drawing on these good practices and experiences of inter-religious dialogues, I want to highlight a few lessons, which have been learnt over the years. In this context, I would want to mention only four particular aspects:

Wesley Ariarajah, one of the early and prominent promoters of inter-religious dialogue, spoke about the inter-religious dialogue as not being the “ambulance”, but a “public health care education and immunization”: “We were doing ambulance service where public health education and immunization were called for long before the outbreak of the disease! ... Dialogue is not so much about attempting to resolve immediate conflicts, but about building a “community of conversation”, a “community of heart and mind” across radical ethnic and religious barriers where people learn to see differences among them not as threatening but as “natural” and “normal”. ”That is to say, inter-religious dialogue is to be seen primarily as a preventive measure, while it often fails as a crisis intervention mechanism. But as a preventive measure it pays back in bringing people together, who do know each other and who have gained trust in each other, not allowing religion being misused for fueling conflicts. On the contrary, on the basis of a committed inter-religious dialogue and practice, religion could fulfill its role as an agent of peace and reconciliation. I am emphasizing this aspect so much, because it is still difficult to find appropriate resources for preventive measures. Governments often only discover religion as an important dimension of conflict resolution, when it is too late. Inter-religious dialogue as a preventive measure needs all the support it can get from people of good will, politics and governments.

Interreligious dialogue should not only remain on the level of religious leaders. It needs to be undergirded by the involvement of the people and of local communities. This is why the Conference of European Churches already during the wars in the Western Balkans involved religious journalists, academics and local community workers in round tables and peace building efforts. In the aftermath of the war, it engaged local communities in trainings in non-violent conflict resolution, in theological reflections on the role of the other in different faith traditions and life situations. There are many good examples of local inter-faith communities in Europe making a difference in working together in projects addressing growing poverty, the marginalization of certain groups in society, in working together for the integration of refugees and the poor. If inter-religious dialogue is supposed to take place on all levels, it goes without saying that inter-religious dialogue needs to be accompanied by an intra-religious dialogue.

I first and foremost regard it as a genuine task of the religious communities themselves to engage in inter-religious dialogue. It is them, who have to find the right structures (on a local as well as on a global level), the right pace and the right contents for their dialogue in the sense described above. I remain skeptical vis-à-vis attempts of politics and governments to initiate and structure inter-religious dialogues. If inter-religious dialogues get politicized and/or their agenda is determined by outside forces, they tend not to be sustainable and to make a difference, especially not when conflict situations occur. However, governments do have a role to play in supporting inter-religious dialogues, where they have been initiated by the religious communities themselves and in fostering tolerance, pluralism and reconciliation in their respective societies.

In addition, governments have an important role to play in fully implementing the right to freedom of religion, conscience or belief as a prerequisite for an inter-religious dialogue to take place. In order for the dialogue to be successful it is indispensable that religious communities, may they be majorities or minorities, may they be new religious movements or “traditional” religions, have an appropriate space to exercise their religion in public and are legally provided with equal opportunities.

### **Religion in the Public Sphere**

I was asked to also look upon the role of religion in the public sphere, which I will be able to only do in a very abbreviated manner. Research on the ever changing image and role of religion in societies fills libraries by now and several other speakers at this conference will address the issue. And while I have spoken thus far on the relations in-between religions, about an inner perspective, looking on the role of religion in the public sphere, the perspective is changing. It turns to an outside perspective: How is religion viewed in society and how do religions (religious structures) react to the ever changing environment. This has, of course, also repercussions on the inter-religious dialogue.

I am sure, if historians will look back in 10 or 20 years to the time in which we meet today, they will come to the conclusion that the early decades of the 21<sup>st</sup> century were marked by a considerable change in terms of the role of religion in the public sphere. There are many symptoms for this development in many European countries. There are strong tendencies to restrict the role of religion in the public sphere and to contest the “self-determination” of religious communities.

The reasons for this development are manifold and they seem to be reinforcing each other. Certainly, atrocities such as the attacks on 11 September 2001 and religious fundamentalism contribute to it, but also the presence of new religious movements (regarded as something strange and sometimes dangerous) in former seemingly homogeneous contexts. The more militant approach of anti-clerical and humanist organisations also played

a significant role. The more “traditional” communities react in a defensive manner wanting to protect their sphere of influence over and against others, the more the process of secularization seems to gain speed. It is a special challenge for “traditional” religious communities to reflect theologically on their role in ever more pluralist societies. It is a challenge for societies to keep the space open for religions to exercise their religion and to contribute to the common good, privately or in public, alone or in community with others. Any attempt trying to relegate religion to the private sphere is deemed to fail and to result in even more fundamentalist responses.

When the Conference of European Churches and its Church and Society Commission reflected over the last years on the role of religion in the public sphere, the discussion had the notion of the German philosopher Jürgen Habermas as a point of entry, who spoke about religion in a “post-secular society”. Habermas sees a role for religion in today’s societies, which have passed through a process of secularization, in offering meaning in complex and seemingly ratio-driven societies. However, for religion to assume this role, it needs to fulfill three criteria. Religion has to follow the rules of a modern constitutional state, it has to reckon with the prerogative of ratio and science and it has to solve conflicts among religions by way of dialogue and not by force. It seems to me that Habermas’ approach, further developed since 2001, takes up many of the dimensions referred to above, bringing them into a fruitful relationship.

### **Dialogue between religious communities and the EU Institutions**

It would now, indeed, be interesting to take up the short reflections and the experiences for successful dialogues on the role of religion in modern (post-secular?) societies and to use them as heuristic principles to review the dialogue with the Institutions of the European Union. As the Secretary of State Hólvényi will address this issue, I will limit myself to just offering my preliminary observations in a nutshell.

The European Union in its present form is based on the Treaty of Lisbon, which entered into force on 1 December 2009. For the first time, the Treaties recognize the role of communities of faith and conviction. In Article 17 of the Treaty on the Functioning of the European Union, it reads: “Recognising their (i.e. churches, religious associations and communities, philosophical and non-confessional organizations) identity and their specific contribution, the Union shall maintain an open, transparent and regular dialogue with these churches and organizations.” Almost against the trend, it is evident that the institutions of the European Union do not intend to relegate religion to the private sphere. To the contrary, the European Union recognizes the identity and the special contribution of communities of faith and conviction have made in public and in promoting the European integration process as a peace and reconciliation project after World War II.

Several mechanisms are in place (some of them since a long time) in order to implement the “open, transparent and regular dialogue” between the European Union and religious communities, such as high-level meetings of religious leaders with the Presidents of the European Institutions, dialogue seminars on common issues and regular meetings on the working level between religious representatives and civil servants and members of the European Parliament.

However, the European Union remains a secular project in its approach and has, at times, difficulties in dealing with religion. The dialogue between religious communities and the European Institutions is, therefore, still in an experimental phase. Rather than establishing substantially new structures for the “open, transparent and regular dialogue”, it is necessary to take a closer look on the “culture” of this dialogue applying criteria for a potentially successful dialogue. When doing so, it seems to me that the present dialogue is too much guided by the institutions wanting to “handle” religion, instead of two partners meeting on an equal footing. “Handling religion” also leads to an approach which tries to avoid conflict, rather than to address it. It is also very evident, that in this dialogue religious communities and the European institutions use a very different language and very different time perspective, which makes it not always easy to communicate with each other. As far as the culture of this dialogue is concerned, there is space for improvement. But this is also true for many other dialogues.