

G20 Interfaith Forum - European Regional Online Consultation

Working Group 3, “Frontiers at the Intersection of Governance, Faith, and Technology”

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Introduction

The pandemic caused by COVID-19 has had an impact not only on the way that Europeans live their ordinary lives but also on the way they understand many of the aspects of their social structure. This also affects religion and religious freedom, especially the understanding of certain manifestations of religious freedom; some expressions of religion or belief in the public sphere; the interaction between religion, state and society; as well as the relationships between religion and science, between faith and reason.¹

Social cohesion and harmony; a culture of respect for other people’s religious and moral choices; are permanent positive values. The COVID-19 crisis, however, has helped us to understand how necessary they are in our societies. Emergency situations reveal how much we esteem a society built on the solidarity of human beings who are able to see in each other not an enemy to beat but a fellow human being to help. Without these foundations, it is not possible to advance in sustainable development, which cannot be built exclusively from above and needs the contribution of the entire society.

The COVID-19 crisis has also demonstrated that responses to the pandemic have been more successful where channels of communication and cooperation between state/international organizations and religious/belief communities exist and have been properly relied on, and where governments have acted in consultation with religious as well as with other social and economic actors. And vice versa, where governments have fought the pandemic relying exclusively on their own resources, their reaction has been less effective and agile, to the detriment of their citizens.²

In other words, the COVID-19 pandemic did not strictly raise new themes in governance, faith and technology, but has moved us to rethink old themes in new ways and in a new light.

The recommendations that follow focus on the relationship between religion, state and society in the context of human rights. We consider these recommendations valid not only for times of health emergency or crisis. The significance of the issues that are dealt with in this document may appear with more clarity under the current circumstances, but they are far-reaching and touch the very substance of societies that aspire to be founded on the recognition of and respect for human dignity and to pursue sustainable development in all areas.

¹ See Parliamentary Assembly of the Council of Europe, *Resolution 2076 (2015): Freedom of religion and living together in a democratic society*, adopted on 30 September 2015.

² In the past months, a number of interesting scholarly studies have analysed the consequences of the interaction (or the lack thereof) between governments and religious communities during the pandemic. Among them, see: *Law, Religion and COVID-19 Emergency* (ed. P. Consorti), DiReSoM, available at: <https://diresom.net/2020/05/07/diresom-papers-1-ebook-law-religion-and-covid-19-emergency/>; *La liberté de religion aux temps du coronavirus*, papers presented in a webinar organised by the DRES of the University of Strasbourg, available at: <https://dres.misha.cnrs.fr/spip.php?article670>; and the projects and publications on religion and COVID-19 promoted by the Berkley Center for Religion, Peace and World Affairs at Georgetown University, at: <https://berkeleycenter.georgetown.edu/topics/covid-19>.

Recommendations

1. In order to create a **political and legal framework favourable to the protection of human dignity** and the free, healthy and balanced development of every person’s identity, measures must be taken to **reinforce the protection of human rights, democracy, the separation and reciprocal control of powers, the rule of law and good governance**. The COVID-19 crisis has highlighted the huge social costs of inequality and corruption and exacerbated new vulnerabilities in sectors such as health, big pharma, public procurement or the use of relief funds. Consequently, it is recommended to:
 - 1a. Encourage states to adopt measures for the restructuring of their national legal and political systems that are capable of preventing and combating corruption in the political, administrative and electoral sectors, privileging values such as justice, transparency, responsibility, accountability, impartiality, integrity and independence.
 - 1b. Prevent and combat corruption through education (at all levels—primary, secondary and tertiary), adopting educational policies that, in an integrated manner, promote ethical and integrity values and actively combat the emergence of the so-called “cultures of corruption”, building a solid and genuine culture of legality and respect for human rights and freedoms.
 - 1c. Implement and deepen international policies and programmes of assistance for the integral development of the most disadvantaged countries, with special emphasis on the so-called fragile states (i.e., those which are in a situation of post-conflict or recent democratisation), preventing the surge of phenomena of systemic corruption and state capture.
 - 1d. Deepen global legal cooperation policies and measures essentially aimed at preventing cross-border corruption, the investigation of multi-localised corrupt acts and the appropriate punishment of its agents.
 - 1e. Acknowledge the role that religious communities and religious leaders may have in combatting corruption when they are faithful to the true values of their respective traditions and refuse to cooperate, even indirectly, with corrupt regimes or practices in the public or the private sector.
 - 1f. Promote and support interdisciplinary and interreligious research and dialogue projects that, on an international scale, seek to address and understand the phenomenon of corruption in the public and private sectors and certain recent epiphenomena, such as corruption in the political, religious, justice, financial, health, pharmaceutical, scientific or sports sectors, promoting a culture of legality and integrity.

2. In order to **foster a culture of social cohesion and harmony based on the notion of human dignity**, it is necessary to promote in contemporary societies an **inclusive approach to the relationship between the exercise of freedom of religion or belief and the exercise of other fundamental freedoms**, especially in cases of the so-called conflicts of rights. This implies, among other things:
 - 2a. Understanding that religion or belief are often essential to the identity of many individuals, groups and institutions. This in turn implies being aware that some of the common contemporary solutions for claims of non-discrimination based on other identity characteristics may de facto result in discrimination on the ground of religious/belief identity.

- 2b. Recognising the specificity of freedom of religion or belief in its individual and collective dimensions, as well as its non-subordinate nature vis-à-vis other fundamental rights; and being aware that the freedom of conscience of individuals and the religious autonomy of institutions entail the right to behave in accordance with one's own religious and moral principles insofar as no superior legal or social interest is endangered.
 - 2c. Trying to avoid an excessive judicialization of conflicts between fundamental rights, facilitating alternative ways of solving such conflicts that are not based on the alleged moral superiority of one view over another.
 - 2d. Encouraging courts to provide balanced judgments that take into account the need to protect the rights of both parties as much as possible, instead of affirming the absolute dominance or superiority of one over the other, in a way that ensures practical concordance and maximum effectiveness of competing rights.
 - 2e. Allowing meaningful hearings on issues involving competing rights, interests and concerns, which can foster understanding and inclusion and help legislators, administrators and judges to devise better workable solutions.
3. **Education**, understood in its **broadest sense**, is key for a culture of social cohesion and harmony.³ Education naturally includes regular academic programmes, in public and private schools, and at all levels (primary, secondary and tertiary). But it comprises also the training of public officials and judges, as well as professionals of communication; the use of the media and social networks; public speeches by members of governments and politicians, etc. A **positive approach** in this area would help prevent misconceptions and misperceptions of freedom of religion or belief as well as of religions or beliefs, their role in society and their essentiality for the identities of individuals and groups. With regard to the academic environment in particular:
- 3a. Academic programmes focused on teaching about religions and beliefs (their history, principles, values and contributions to society) can be a very helpful instrument to foster a culture of encounter, dialogue and mutual respect between citizens and groups with divergent beliefs, if they are designed and implemented in an appropriate manner and developed in accordance with recognised professional standards.⁴
 - 3b. Academic programmes (in private or public schools) focused on specific religions, run by the relevant religious communities, and aimed at transmitting their specific doctrines, can also be a useful instrument as far as they are permeated by an attitude of tolerance and respect for people holding different views and developed in accordance with recognised professional standards.
 - 3c. Integrating theological or divinity studies in universities (private and public), either as stand-alone degrees or within the curricula of other degrees, can be efficient means to promote religious literacy, especially if this is done within an academic atmosphere characterised by intellectual freedom and integrity, as well as by the desire to perform objective and respectful analysis of religions, their doctrines and their history. An intellectual approach to religion, both on the secular and religious sides, without denying

³ See also, in this regard, the recommendations included in section a) of the document prepared by the Europe Ad hoc working Group 1.

⁴ Helpful documents of reference in this area are, inter alia: OSCE/ODIHR *Toledo Guiding Principles on Teaching about Religions and Beliefs in Public Schools*, Warsaw, 2007; ECRI *General Policy Recommendation No. 10: Combating Racism and Racial Discrimination in and Through School Education*, adopted on 15 December 2006; Parliamentary Assembly of the Council of Europe, *Recommendation 1720 (2005): Education and Religion*, adopted on 4 October 2005.

or undermining the faith element of religious beliefs, could facilitate a better mutual understanding between science and religion as much as an open-minded approach to science.

- 3d.** Religious literacy comprises also an adequate education about freedom of religion or belief as a fundamental right, its significance and implications, within a conceptual framework of human rights as manifestations of respect for human dignity. Although such education is helpful in the entire academic setting, it is especially important in certain degrees such as law, political science, administration, governance, journalism and management.
- 4.** The main **protagonists of social life have an enhanced responsibility in positively influencing or educating society** on the importance of respect for freedom of religion or belief in a broad sense, using means outside classic academic channels and institutions. In particular:
- 4a.** Full compliance with the legal implications of the right to freedom of expression is compatible with finding ways, in contemporary societies, to stimulate a culture of respect among people’s different choices in matters of religion or belief. Politicians, public officials, journalists, educators, and public figures and influencers in general, are especially responsible for the promotion and preservation of such culture, and they should shape their speech and messages accordingly.
 - 4b.** Religious leaders and representatives (of majority and minority religions) also have a very important role and responsibility when it comes to fostering a culture of respect through their teaching on the basis of their own doctrines, in a way that makes clear that their commitment to freedom of religion or belief is aimed at the protection of the freedom of all and is not used simply as a cover for self-interest or for privileging one’s own beliefs.
 - 4c.** Religious communities can make a significant contribution to educate the youth in ethical values shared in contemporary societies, many of which concern their responsibility in building a fairer and sustainable world. For instance: the equal dignity of all human beings; solidarity with particularly vulnerable persons; seeking that all people have the minimum material conditions necessary to live a truly human life; recognising that we are part of a complex natural system and committing to its protection; responsible use of new technologies; the positive and constructive use of social media, etc.
- 5. Cooperation and dialogue between religions/beliefs, state, international organizations and society**, as well as **between religious/belief communities**, is of the utmost importance to making real progress in sustainable development, economic as well as social. Consequently, recommendations include:
- 5a.** The establishment, design and proper functioning of institutional channels and platforms for mutual cooperation and dialogue between state/international organizations and religious/belief communities as part of ordinary dynamics of communication between public authorities and civil society.⁵ As the COVID-19 emergency has demonstrated, this aspect of the interaction between state and society is beneficial for all citizens.
 - 5b.** Ensuring that smaller religious groups are not left out of that process of dialogue and cooperation even if their size may not justify their inclusion in institutional channels. Other

⁵ See Parliamentary Assembly of the Council of Europe, *Recommendation 2080 (2015): Freedom of religion and living together in a democratic society*, adopted on 30 September 2015.

instruments, such as public hearings or informal consultations, could be used to that purpose.

- 5c. Positive dialogue and cooperation between religious communities themselves as a way to enhance social cohesion and harmony. With full respect to religious autonomy, state and international institutions could intervene as facilitators of such interreligious dialogue and cooperation.
6. The development of **plural societies** based on the mutual respect of different religions or worldviews requires an **adequate and coordinated protection of freedom of expression and freedom of religion or belief** that takes into account the various competing interests. To that end, it is recommended that states:
 - 6a. Carefully define hate speech, as a matter of media and social media regulation, in a way that prevents humiliation, dehumanisation, discrimination, persecution and aggression against individuals and groups. At the same time, this should never call into question the possibility of respectfully, seriously and critically assessing and discussing political and religious ideologies and doctrines in the public sphere.
 - 6b. Recognise the decisive role that the cooperation of religious communities may play in the active fight against hate speech, using new technologies as well as more traditional means such as sermons, teaching, public statements, etc. For instance: in disseminating adequate information about other religions; in conveying messages of respect for the beliefs and morals of others; in making joint public statements unambiguously condemning episodes of religious hatred or violence; in transmitting the proper doctrine of their own religion with regard to the need to avoid violence and to search for ways of peaceful and harmonic living together; in discrediting explicitly the position and messages of hate speakers; and/or in obtaining information about hate speakers.
 - 6c. Distinguish hate speech (e.g. homophobic or xenophobic speech) from the explanation or teaching of religious moral doctrines regarding sexual relationships and practices, or especially binding moral obligations with regard to members of one's own religious community, as well as the teaching of religious dogmas concerning what are considered essential and ultimate truths in a particular religious tradition. It is equally important to differentiate between firmness in one's own beliefs and intolerance of the beliefs or practices of others.
 7. In order to ensure that **the benefits of technological innovation can be shared in a post-COVID-19 world**, it is recommended that states:
 - 7a. Create transnational institutional and digital platforms for public discussion on ethical, legal and social challenges arising from rapid innovation in areas such as artificial intelligence, genetics and nanotechnology; favouring a multi and interdisciplinary, transparent and participatory approach, with the strong involvement of civil society, including different religious communities.
 - 7b. Make efforts to create and implement an internationally accepted and global legal regime on artificial intelligence, genetics and nanotechnology that protects the human person, stimulates scientific progress and meets the needs of the most vulnerable social groups.
 - 7c. Promote international dialogue and cooperation in the development of effective, safe and sustainable technical and technological solutions, which can be realistically accessed and implemented by countries with lower levels of economic and scientific development.

- 8. Specific attention must be paid to sacred sites and places of worship and meeting**, as they are one of the essential manifestations of freedom of religion or belief in its collective dimension. In addition to the relevant religious communities, governments also have the responsibility to ensure that these sites contribute to the smooth functioning of society instead of becoming a problem for society. To that purpose it is recommended:
- 8a.** To reflect carefully on which legitimate limitations can be imposed by governments on the use of places of worship and meeting in situations of health emergency. State action aimed at protecting public health needs to be reconciled, as much as possible, with the importance that worship, and collective prayer or meetings have for different religious communities. Governments should follow an adequate process of consultation with religious representatives before enacting rules imposing hygienic and safety conditions that restrict the use of the relevant religious places. In turn, religious communities must cooperate with governments and be flexible when it comes to adapting their rules and liturgy in the interests of public health.
 - 8b.** To consider that sacred sites are often part of the heritage of a country and hence an integral element of its history, culture and tradition; the same applies to religious symbols, ceremonies and other intangible heritage. The preservation of religious heritage constitutes a paramount interest not only of religious communities but also of the entire society, and it is therefore compatible with the state's religious neutrality. It entails economic investment and cooperation with the relevant religious communities. The conservation of religious heritage also has a significant educational function and requires recognising and respecting the religious origin, purpose and meaning of sacred sites, even in the cases where those sites have lost their original religious use. The state's action must be aimed not only at preserving the religious heritage that reflects the beliefs and tradition of the majority but also that of minority religions, to facilitate that they are properly integrated into and not excluded from social life.
 - 8c.** To remember that places of worship and meeting without particular value as historic heritage are also an important part of the culture in a different sense: they are manifestations of the spirituality of a society and expressions of the exercise of the fundamental right to freedom of religion or belief.
 - 8d.** To keep in mind that states have the obligation to protect sacred sites (with or without value as historic heritage) against violence, vandalism and terrorist attacks. Firmness in such protection and, when appropriate, prosecution of those acts are an effective way to combat hate crimes and to create a culture of respect.
 - 8e.** To deal carefully with traditional sacred sites whose history reflects the layers of various religious sensibilities. Universal homogeneous solutions are often inadequate in such situations, which require a case-by-case analysis that pays attention to the particular history and characteristics of each site. This is especially important in those cases where inappropriate treatment may lead to social tension, or even geopolitical or armed conflicts.

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