

## Council of Europe encounter Erevan 2-3 September 2013

### Liberties of Religion, Conscience and Thought

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I do not think that there is anyone among us who does not agree with the fact that Liberties of religion, of conscience and of thought are fundamental and essential liberties which characterise humanity. In addition, for us the challenge is to be aware of the essential difficulties and the conflicts that can arise in giving effect to and in exercising those liberties as well as in understanding the reasons for these difficulties so as to provide a remedy.

Because civil society is particularly concerned by these difficulties and conflicts, the INGO Conference of the Council of Europe has asked me to preside over a working group on Human Rights and Religions in order to contribute to these analyses and make proposals to provide solutions to difficulties that we identify. This working group has written a report, that is still provisional, on "Human Rights and religions" of which chapter III quite properly considers the conflicts that exist between rights and freedoms: liberties of religion, of expression and of conscientious objection. This provisional report is available on the website of the INGO Conference of the Council of Europe:

[http://www.coe.int/t/ngo/Source/Conf\\_HR\\_GT\\_DH\\_religions\\_fr.pdf](http://www.coe.int/t/ngo/Source/Conf_HR_GT_DH_religions_fr.pdf)

The Conference of INGOs also adopted a series of recommendations to the member states that deals with some of the challenges discussed here:

[http://www.coe.int/t/ngo/Articles/CONF\\_PLE\\_2013\\_REC4\\_HR\\_religions\\_fr.asp](http://www.coe.int/t/ngo/Articles/CONF_PLE_2013_REC4_HR_religions_fr.asp)

[http://www.coe.int/t/ngo/Articles/CONF\\_PLE\\_2013\\_REC4\\_HR\\_religions\\_en.asp](http://www.coe.int/t/ngo/Articles/CONF_PLE_2013_REC4_HR_religions_en.asp)

The Conference of INGOs is in the process of finalising propositions for reflection and action for the attention of religious leaders and members of religious organisations, as well as an appeal to citizens and to INGOs about several questions discussed during this encounter.

That is why I could like to raise a question of vocabulary and two difficulties among others that concern more particularly persons and organisations (INGOs, churches, trade unions etc.), because political aspects have already been mentioned a number of times.

#### **First a question of vocabulary:**

In several contributions the words "Islamophobia", "Christianophobia", have been used. These words seem to me to be dangerous and can lead to conflicts, particularly when they are used in association with antisemitism. They are dangerous for at least two reasons:

These words identify a person and his or her religion, dramatically reducing his or her identity to his or her religion. In addition, when these words are associated with anti-Semitism, it produces a mixture of religion and ethnic grouping.

When a person is situated in his or her religion, these words hinder normal criticism of a religion or a philosophy. That is because criticism of religion is connected with the criticism of the person who practises a religion. This is evident when these terms are applied to anti-Semitism. In fact, anti-Semitism is a violence perpetrated on a person for what (s)he is in his or her being, while the other words should signify criticism of a religion and not of the person who practises it.

It seems to me that it is essential to suggest other terms to name the violence perpetrated against people who practice a religion, because of their religion, which is contrary to rights, by opposing criticisms of religions which are included in freedom of thought and freedom of expression.

**The first difficulty for the exercise of liberties of religion, conscience and thought that I should like to raise concerns each person because it is connected to convictions about THE "truth" et personal attitudes towards others.**

In a pluriconvictional society each person discovers that what (s)he thought was the truth is not actually true for others, that his or her convictions, or concept of humanity, of life, his or her practice and customs based on this truth, are not shared by others. So, liberty of religion, liberty of thought by those who do not think like us who do not have the same religions, or who, within our own religion, have other views of truth and other ways of being, compel us to question our convictions and our perceptions of truth. This reexamination of our convictions, of what we think we are, of the way in which we interpret the founding texts of our religion and what they mean in our daily life, is sometimes difficult to live and may lead us to violent action, to rejection, to misunderstanding that is contrary to human rights.

**Some proposals to correct these difficulties:**

- to ensure that everyone realises that (s)he does not "possess" the truth but that (s)he only perceives an aspect of it, and therefore that other people may perceive other interesting aspects that are to be discovered so as to extend their own perception of truth in a respectful dialogue among one another (*the experiment of the cylinder in the meeting: a limited view in two dimensions, (with one eye) makes the cylinder look like a circle when we look at it along its axis or like a rectangle when we look at it at right angles to its axis. Those who hold either point of view have their reasons to do so and it avails for nothing to fight to ensure that one's point of view prevails. On the contrary in changing his or her point of view, every one discovers that the other is also right and becomes aware that (s)he perceived only a part of the truth about that object. In being open to the point of view of the other in dialogue, each person discovers that what one took for a circle or for a rectangle was only his or her perception of a new object that must be represented in three dimensions, the cylinder that contains the two aspect to one of which their perception was limited*).
- Education about the knowledge of the other, the acquisition of an open spirit, listening to others with regard to their value and in mutual respect.

Draw the distinction in a text between what is derived from the socio-cultural, political, historical context of the writing of the document and the message that the text seeks to convey today and how it will be formulated. Seek, in this way, to distinguish within each religion and each religious practice what is the fruit of culture and social or political context at the moment when it comes into being or when it is explained, or what corresponds to an expression of faith that makes sense in our days. This research must be conducted in an open manner that includes a range of competence and schools of thought as much within as outside each religion.

Practice an open and frank dialogue, that is a dialogue that respects the person, but not necessarily his or her convictions. That is a multimodal dialogue, as Michael Aguilar says, in other words that we must organise interreligious and interconvictional dialogue (which means that it should include agnostics and atheists as well), but also intra-religious and inter-convictional dialogues. In fact, controversial questions mean that there are more differences between those who hold different positions within a religion, than between those who hold a given position in different religions.

Undertake common activities (social, charitable, sporting, cultural activities, exchange visits, travel etc...) between the followers of different religions and currents of thought in such a way as better to know one another and to remove the fear of the other which can be a significant source of violence and non comprehension. A good example is given by the association COEXISTER (<http://coexister.fr/>)

**A second difficulty in exercising liberties of religion, thought and conscience arises when society allows certain ways of being, certain acts, certain customs contrary to our own view of things.**

That is the case for example in the wearing of certain religious clothing or, in another field, in allowing abortion in certain conditions, or in our attitude about people who are homosexual, or marriage of people of the same sex etc. If liberty of thought and liberty of expression give us the right to express our opposition to these practices in legally acceptable terms, it is important to note that **right does not mean that one is obliged to do a thing**. It is not because abortion is allowed in certain instances that abortion is obligatory! Liberties accorded to others are not necessarily contrary to my right and freedom! Not to impose on others that they should live as we think that one should live requires thought, attention and respect of others.

Meanwhile it is essential that liberties, like any right, should be exercised in a responsible manner that allows others the right to exercise their freedom...

We should also note that the way in which we resolve these difficulties depends on the space in which these liberties are exercised: within us, in the private space, in the public space, in the public sphere, in businesses, in spaces of public service and so on.