

# G3i Groupe International Interculturel et Interconvictionnel

Association Loi de 1901

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## Synopsis of the colloquy held on 24th January 2012

### Becoming citizens of a plural Europe: Interconvictional spaces and Practices

For a number of years the Council of Europe has been interested in religion. It has published Parliamentary Reports on Jewish<sup>1</sup> and Muslim<sup>2</sup> contributions to European history, for example reports on aspects of dialogue among religions, on education for religion, on teaching about the existence of religion or factual information<sup>3</sup>. The Parliamentary Assembly has looked at creationism<sup>4</sup> and more recently it has considered the religious dimension of intercultural dialogue<sup>5</sup> in relation to a chapter in the White Paper on intercultural Dialogue. This work emphasises the universal values of Human Rights, Democracy and the rule of Law while looking at tension and disagreement notable with religion which is an identifiable aspect (of the debate).

A certain amount of religious involvement is already apparent at the European Institutions. As a consequence of European history, the representation of the Holy See is recognised<sup>6</sup>, while several Orthodox traditions are "represented" with offices in Brussels and a "representative" in Strasbourg. The Conference of European Churches and the European Buddhist Union are members of the Conference of INGOs that have participative status at the Council of Europe. The state of Israel is an Observer state at the Council of Europe (as are the United States, Canada, Mexico and Japan). In addition the INGO conference includes INGOs of religious and non religious inspiration among its 400 members. They represent civil society, convictions and human values, of which an example is the European Humanist Federation as well as many humanitarian organisations.

The G3i is an intercultural, international and interconvictional working group. As a consequence the G3i brings together people of different religious convictions, non believers and atheists that include representatives of certain INGOs with participative status at the Council of Europe. The G3i is an "association" (the law of 1901). In cooperation with the Conference of INGOs, the G3i organised the colloquy *Becoming citizens of a plural Europe: Interconvictional spaces and Practices*. It took place in the Council of Europe with the encouragement and material support of Madame Gabriella Battaini Dragoni, Director of programmes at the Council of Europe. In her introductory statement, she drew our attention to intolerance, discrimination and the marginalisation of minorities in Europe, while also mentioning the relevance of the colloquy and of our work.

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<sup>1</sup> <http://assembly.coe.int/Documents/WorkingDocs/Doc87/EDOC5778.pdf>

<sup>2</sup> <http://assembly.coe.int/main.asp?Link=/documents/adoptedtext/ta91/erec1162.htm> Recommendation 1162 on the contribution of Islamic civilisation to European culture (1991). §§ 2-4.

<sup>3</sup> Voir le rapport Schneider «Education et Religion» (2005)

<http://assembly.coe.int/mainf.asp?Link=/documents/workingdocs/doc05/fdoc10673.htm>

<sup>4</sup> Doc. 11375 17 September 2007 The dangers of creationism in education Report Committee on Culture, Science and Education. Rapporteur: Mrs Anne Brasseur, Luxembourg, ALDE.

<http://assembly.coe.int/mainf.asp?Link=/documents/workingdocs/doc07/fdoc11375.htm>

<sup>5</sup> Doc 12553 25 mars 2011 La dimension religieuse du dialogue interculturel Rapport Commission de la culture, de la science et de l'éducation Rapporteur: Mme. Anne Brasseur, Luxembourg, ALDE.

<http://assembly.coe.int/Mainf.asp?link=/Documents/WorkingDocs/Doc11/FDOC12553.htm>

<sup>6</sup> A Conseil de l'Europe le Saint Siège est représenté par un Observateur permanent. La représentation à Bruxelles est assurée par un Nonce.

The colloquy was concerned with the democratic process, the presence of citizens and their contribution to the political debate, as well as with their right to be heard by those who take decisions at governmental and European levels. Bernard Quelquejeu drew the attention of participants who wished to participate in the political debate to the articles of the Treaties of Lisbon, for example Article 17 of the Treaty on the Functioning of the European Union: "Article 17 says that *"The Union respects and does not prejudice the status under national law of **churches and religious associations or communities** in the Member States"* (§1) and *"... equally respects the status under national law of **philosophical and non-confessional organisations** (§2) with which the Union shall maintain an open, transparent and regular dialogue."* He added "Very soon, during our exchanges, we understood that the expression 'interreligious dialogue' did not really appeal to us, because it excluded those among us who did not see themselves as belonging to a formal religion or as looking to religious tradition: we began to speak of our respective **convictions**, or **groups of conviction** and to see ourselves as practising an **'interconvictional dialogue'**".

The word 'interconvictional' is a neologism that we do not find in the dictionaries. Ignace Berten who spoke about the treaties of Lisbon said of article 17 "Its objective is to engage in dialogue with the churches, the religions and with non religious philosophical associations, such as freemasonry, so that they can contribute to the meaning of the European project." Therefore the ideal is the inclusion of every citizen whatever his or her conviction, and always beyond the systems and the organisations, whether they be religious, agnostic or atheist. We make the presumption that all citizens and all convictional groups are equal.

The speakers were concerned with the practicality of dialogue with the religions as well as with philosophical and convictional traditions at the European level. Religious leaders take part in "annual summits"<sup>7</sup> with the Commission. Generally there is a meeting with the ministers of a member state when it takes over the Presidency,<sup>8</sup> while communities of non religious convictional inspiration say that they do not have the same opportunities to be heard, despite the way in which the documents and the treaties are drafted. David Pollock wonders about the opportunities for dialogue that may be available to organisations of non religious conviction. In addition we asked about the democratic nature of the representation carried out by religious leaders in view of the method of appointing Bishops (who are not elected) or even about non hierarchical traditions when it is difficult to identify the leaders.

In general, the speakers at the colloquy spoke about conceptual aspects, about the two treaties, about interconvictional practice in education, about problems encountered by humanists, about the INGO code of good practice and about the interaction of the European organisations with associations of convictional and interconvictional inspiration.

It is to be noted that the word "conviction" does not appear in the treaties. We need to compare the treaty of Amsterdam (1992) with its declaration n° 11 which specifies that the Union respects the status enjoyed by the Churches, religions and non confessional philosophical organisations together with the unification of the treaties following the European Council at Laeken (2001). The aim was a new convention to unify the treaties and the democratic development of the European Union. For organisations of convictional inspiration, article 17 stipulates "The institutions maintain an open, transparent and regular dialogue with representative associations and with civil society" while also modifying article 52 of the treaty of Amsterdam, "recognising their identity and their specific contribution, the Union maintains an open, transparent and regular dialogue with these churches and organisations".

We need to take up the debate again by proposing an interconvictional process which involved all European citizens in the debate, whatever their personal convictions, while also presup-

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<sup>7</sup> Des informations sur les « Sommets annuels » sont disponibles sur le site web de la COMECE (la Commission des évêques de la Communauté européenne) qui représente les Catholiques voir <http://www.comece.eu/site/fr/dialogueueeglises/sommetsannuels> . La COMECE et la CEC travaillent ensemble et des représentants des églises membres de la CEC participent aux sommets annuels.

<sup>8</sup> Voir par exemple <http://www.comece.eu/site/fr/presse/communiquésdepresse/newsletter.content/1371.html> ou même [http://www.nouvelles-oecumeniques.be/site/news.php?extend\\_138](http://www.nouvelles-oecumeniques.be/site/news.php?extend_138)

posing convictions that are open to development, and linking convictions and beliefs to democratic, spiritual, philosophical or religious traditions. The new Europe should be able to facilitate the process, but the institutions already present still have a role. There is no one who is not influenced by the context in society or that of history. Convictions are more open to development and evolution than certainties and the interconvictional is more inclusive than the interreligious.<sup>9</sup>

As for education, it should be liberating, because no one is an island entire and absolute (to paraphrase the English poet John Donne). We must always ask ourselves about the presuppositions of childhood. The role of the school, which is a place of meeting, is fundamental. It promotes no faith or religion. It offers an education to the ideas and perceptions of the other. It encourages dialogue and questions that help the acquisition of knowledge. At the same time conviction is not put aside, because, well presented, it is a resource on condition that we enable people to learn about plurality.

The day, like all G3i activities gives tacit support to European values, in particular those of the Council of Europe, while going beyond the simple declaration of the three pillars and supporting mutual knowledge, the development by each individual of his or her ideas and of ideas adopted in debate, the basis of which is personal integrity. The interconvictional, with its connection to dialogue, values and the convictions of the other, exists in a context of which the principles are dependant on a *laïcité* that guarantees a neutral space for personal conviction and the practice that follows. It also takes full account of the "disinstitutionalised" religious context.

We rely on the Brasseur report, which is about the religious dimension, an expression borrowed from the Council of Europe's White Paper on intercultural dialogue. In addition the reach of the dimension is important, because religion is not just beliefs. We belong to a religious group, we take part in (religious) services and offices, but conviction is not the monopoly of religions and people with solidarity and conviction represent different levels of European International Society.

To sum up, in his contribution, Philip Lazar says :

The speakers who have mentioned the way the European Union deals with these questions attest its formal openness on the need to deal with them but also its extreme cautiousness, that is the least that one can say about the way things are happening. Perhaps the Union is afraid of opening a Pandora's box by going too far, aware that the most informed players are aware of the risks that traditional religious institutions will go too far because they are anxious about the diminution of their effective "representativeness", and that they might be tempted to act as pressure groups without really respecting diversity of conviction in our continent? There have lately been some striking examples in the attempt to adopt a European Constitution in 2005. But we can also perceive a distinctly more critical attitude in respect of the Union; David Pollock has set that out for us in a very convincing manner!

The proceedings will be published at the end of 2013.

James Barnett, Vice-Président of the G3i

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<sup>9</sup> Ce dernier exclut les convictions dont l'inspiration n'est pas religieuse, donc il n'incorpore pas à ses activités tous les citoyens de l'Europe.