



Conference of European Churches  
Conférence des Églises Européennes  
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## **CSC Briefing on the Council of Europe “White Paper on Intercultural Dialogue”**

### **INTRODUCTION**

In May 2008 the Committee of Ministers of the Council of Europe adopted the White Paper on Intercultural Dialogue. Even if the Council of Europe has viewed itself as a platform for intercultural dialogue since its beginning in 1949, intercultural dialogue gained new weight on Council of Europe’s agenda in 2005. That year the third summit of the Heads of State and Government identified intercultural dialogue (including its religious dimension) as a means of ensuring European integration, cohesion of society and reconciliation. The subsequent Faro Conference made a Declaration on the Council of Europe’s Strategy for Developing Intercultural Dialogue and suggested the preparation of a White Paper on Intercultural Dialogue.

The Council of Europe is not the same organisation as the European Union. The Council, founded in 1949, today counts 47 member states also including all the member states of the European Union. It seeks to develop throughout Europe common and democratic principles based on the European Convention on Human Rights. The basic values of the Council of Europe are Human Rights, Democracy and the Rule of Law.

Recognising intercultural dialogue as a concern for the whole of society, a wide-ranging consultation on intercultural dialogue ensued between January and June 2007. Questionnaires were sent to all member states, members of the Parliamentary Assembly and the Congress of Local and Regional Authorities, to representatives of religious communities, migrant communities, journalists and cultural and other non-governmental organisations. The member churches of the Conference of European Churches and members of the Churches’ Commission for Migrants in Europe<sup>1</sup> (CCME) contributed to this consultation in a remarkable way. The some 30 individual responses by the member churches and organisations were submitted to the Council of Europe, together with a joint response prepared by a CSC<sup>2</sup>-CCME expert group.

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<sup>1</sup> CCME is foreseen to become a commission of the Conference of European Churches in the near future.

<sup>2</sup> The Church and Society Commission (CSC) is a commission of the Conference of European Churches.

## **WHAT IS THE WHITE PAPER ON INTERCULTURAL DIALOGUE?**

“White Papers” are policy documents containing background information and proposals for action in a specific policy area. The name and concept of White Papers originates in parliamentary practice, particularly in England in the first half of the 20th century, where this type of document was bound in white instead of the customary blue paper cover. The Council of Europe has published very few White Papers in the past. In 2000, the Organisation published the “White Paper on the protection of the human rights and dignity of people suffering from mental disorder, especially those placed as involuntary patients in a psychiatric establishment”; and in 2003, a “White Paper on the principles concerning the legal consequences of parentage”.

## **WHAT DOES INTERCULTURAL DIALOGUE MEAN?**

In the White Paper, the definition of intercultural dialogue is as follows:

“Intercultural dialogue is understood as an open and respectful exchange of views between individuals, groups with different ethnic, cultural, religious and linguistic backgrounds and heritage on the basis of mutual understanding and respect. It operates at all levels – within societies, between the societies of Europe and between Europe and the wider world.” (Chapter 1.4 “Key terms”)

The concept of interculturalism is understood as a response to old approaches (multiculturalism; assimilation) that are no longer seen as adequate to manage cultural diversity. Intercultural dialogue should lead to the management of Europe’s increasing cultural diversity in a new way. Multiculturalism underpins a scheme of segregation in society between immigrant minorities and the “host” majorities. Assimilation has its focus on the individual, merging into a new environment. Interculturalism is seen as a mixture concept of both. It takes from multiculturalism the recognition of cultural diversity; it takes from assimilation the focus on the individual. Interculturalism adds the new element of dialogue on the basis of shared values and equal dignity.

There are several conditions for intercultural dialogue. The common values, seen as a basis for a successful dialogue, are the values of the Council of Europe: Human rights, democracy and the rule of law. In addition, intercultural dialogue requires the adoption of the additional “new values” of equal dignity and mutual respect. Another condition is gender equality, which is seen as a key element for sharing experiences from different points of view. The religious dimension – as common European heritage but also as source of conflicts – plays an important role in the concept of intercultural dialogue.

The Council of Europe considers the White Paper on Intercultural Dialogue as a new “moral compass” to foster a culture of tolerance which includes “majority” and “minority” traditions. Critical reflections on the approach of a new “moral compass” are certainly necessary and could be an important task especially for religious communities.

## **WHAT IS CULTURE?**

The White Paper does not clearly define the meaning of culture. But looking across the text there are some indications: Culture is not a static concept (like multiculturalism may suggest) but a dynamic one. The chapter on education shows that the understanding of cultural

diversity and also reflection on one's own cultural background can be learned by official and unofficial learning. Limits are not as clear as they seem at first sight. The most important aspects of culture in the White Paper are migration, globalisation, religion, gender and common values.

In our daily life, culture diversity is manifested in various areas such as food, sports, arts, fashion, architecture, language... According to the Encyclopedia „kann man Kultur umschreiben als die Gesamtheit der materiellen, sozialen und ideellen Schöpfungen vom Menschen im Gegensatz zur Natur.“ In other words, culture can be paraphrased as the whole of material, social and ideal creation made by mankind instead of natural creation. Culture – and that is an important fact – creates identity. It fulfils and creates needs and communicates human experiences such as hope, fear and pleasure in a symbolic way.

Culture as a main element of identity building also creates distinctions. Generalisation and abstraction is a social fact and helps in understanding the world. Intercultural dialogue is an active and constructive way to face the risk of discrimination and prejudices growing from established distinctions.<sup>3</sup>

## HOW IS THE WHITE PAPER STRUCTURED?

The White Paper has 5 pillars which are basic to the implementation and success of intercultural dialogue:

1. *Democratic governance of cultural diversity (Chapter 4.1 and 5.1)*

European states and civil society organisations need a neutral institutional and legal framework, based on the Council of Europe's basic values, for intercultural dialogue. Policies against discrimination ensure that everyone has equal rights and responsibilities regardless of his or her thought, conscience or religion.

2. *Democratic citizenship and participation (Chapter 4.2 and 5.2)*

Public authorities support active participation in public life at local level by all who are legally resident. The White Paper suggests that a framework can be developed by "Local integration committees", "Foreigners councils", by the establishment of educational programmes or by creating "intercultural cities".

3. *Learning and teaching intercultural competences (Chapter 4.3 and 5.3)*

Education on all levels – formal and informal – is the main pillar to ensure intercultural competences in society. Intercultural competences' content: Experience of other cultures, plurilingual competences, Human Rights education (Council of Europe schoolbooks "Compass" and "Compasito"), history (multiperspectives view), knowledge about religious and non-religious convictions, creativity and arts, access to cultural heritage. The White Paper names the Oslo European Resource Centre on Education, recently named as the "Wergeland Centre", as a good example. The centre trains teachers in intercultural competencies. One of the recommendations of the White Paper in the field of learning is the

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<sup>3</sup> Laundry / Wood, The Intercultural City. Planning for diversity advantage, London 2008, p. 15ff.

establishment of a “Day of Remembrance of the Holocaust and for the Prevention of Crimes against Humanity”.

#### 4. *Spaces for intercultural dialogue (Chapter 4.4 and 5.4)*

It is vital to create space for intercultural encounter (“open towns” and public spaces). Civil-society organisations, including religious communities, are invited to provide the organisational framework for intercultural and inter-religious encounters. Spaces for artistic expression are also part of it. The Council of Europe has established a Media award.

#### 5. *Intercultural dialogue in international relations (Chapter 4.5 and 5.5)*

The White Paper suggests local and regional authorities organise regular and institutionalised consultations with the territorial communities of neighbourhood states, transfrontier and interterritorial co-operation. The “Congress of Local and Regional Authorities” plays an important role in transfrontier relations. The White Paper foresees the establishment of the “Faro Open Platform”, a joint platform of UNESCO and the Council of Europe to strengthen the cooperation in the field of intercultural dialogue, exchange of experiences and dialogue with civil society. Other activities mentioned in the White Paper are: the European Year of Intercultural Dialogue 2008, “North-South Centre”, “Artists for dialogue” (to be launched in 2008), Venice Commission (co-operation of the Council of Europe with relevant bodies in Africa, Asia, Americas and Arab countries).

### **WHY IS INTERCULTURAL DIALOGUE IMPORTANT FOR CHURCHES?**

CSC/CEC and CCME warmly welcome the White Paper on Intercultural Dialogue as a crucial step to set new frameworks for a tolerant and peaceful society. CSC and CCME underline that dialogue starts first on an individual level and should not only be through representatives. Churches provide spaces for personal encounters. The European churches are committed to strengthening their work to raise awareness on religious and ethnic diversity in Europe – and the value of this diversity. They also strongly support the basic ideas in the White Paper, especially educational training programmes on Human Rights and intercultural learning. The churches share the basic values of the Council of Europe, also the “new” ones mentioned in the White Paper. CSC/CEC and CCME joint response additionally highlights the values of community and reconciliation. Churches also seek to overcome divisions by celebrating ceremonies together. This is a form of symbolic dialogue. Celebrating together has the advantage that it often surpasses language barriers and allows more people to participate in dialogue. While CSC/CEC and CCME recognise the basic conditions for dialogue set by the Council of Europe, they want to stress that ways should be found to dialogue also with groups or persons who are not sharing the Council of Europe’s values or who understand them differently.

The churches’ interest in dialogue derives from Christian anthropology which postulates openness and care for the other. Intercultural dialogue can be an instrument to find solutions to the challenges associated with international migration. But one thing has to be underlined: Intercultural Dialogue should never be seen only as an instrument to implement values. Dialogue is an aim in itself to connect individuals with others and with society, which has a positive psychological and emotional impact. Barriers to entering into dialogue – socio-economic barriers, no access to information, ghettoisation, racism, language – have to be

overcome. Dialogue partners should have the readiness to exchange points of view and have a “curiosity” for the other.

CSC/CEC and CCME also welcome the attention which the Council of Europe pays to the religious dimension of intercultural dialogue. The White Paper on Intercultural Dialogue dedicates a whole chapter to this issue. It underlines the important role that Christianity, Judaism and Islam have played in Europe’s history and still do today. As part of the White Paper follow-up strategy, the Council of Europe invites representatives of religious communities once a year to discuss religion-related issues. The CSC was included in the preparation of the first meeting on 8<sup>th</sup> April 2008. In addition, the CSC prepared its own participants for the meeting. The theme of the first meeting was “Teaching of religious and convictional facts”. It is likely that this theme will also be included in the 2009 meeting.

Another follow-up action on the part of the Council of Europe related to the religious dimension is a publication on the Strasbourg Human Rights Court jurisprudence concerning Article 9 of the European Convention on Human Rights. Article 9 ensures the freedom of thought, conscience and religion.

## **THE FOLLOW-UP BY THE CHURCH AND SOCIETY COMMISSION**

CSC will do next steps in the following fields:

- The CSC will continue the co-operation with the Council of Europe for the annual meeting between representatives of religious communities and the Council of Europe.
- Together with CEC associated educational organisations (ICCS, IVEE...) and CEC member churches, CSC will develop a concept on education and the role of religious education in Europe.
- The CSC will become a platform for reflection and networking for the churches of the European Capital of Culture, a programme facilitated by the European Union.
- The CSC will develop a concept on what role churches could play as partners in “Intercultural Cities” programmes in cooperation with the Council of Europe and the European Commission.
- The CSC will continue the fruitful co-operation with CCME and Churches in Dialogue Commission<sup>4</sup> (CiD) for questions on migration and interfaith dialogue

## **HOW CAN CHURCHES CONTRIBUTE TO THE FOLLOW-UP?**

Churches have a long experience in dialoguing and dealing with differences. On all levels – representative and grassroots – dialogue between cultures, religions and denominations brings people together. Often the projects are not running under the policy concept of “intercultural dialogue” which is understood as an instrument to implement certain policy aims. Churches also live from an informal dialogue which has its aim in itself. Churches can contribute to the overall concept of intercultural dialogue if they reflect on their own concept of dialogue. CSC very much welcomes these reflections. But how to do that?

Therefore it could be helpful to use the 4 journalistic “Ws”:

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<sup>4</sup> Churches in Dialogue Commission is a commission of the Conference of European Churches.

1. **Who?** With whom is our church in dialogue? Who are the groups or the individuals? And with whom are we not in dialogue? Do we have a balance between men/women, young/old, nationalities, different occupational areas...?
2. **Where?** Where are we having dialogue? Are we inviting people to our church places for conferences and meetings? Are we going to the place of the dialogue partner or are we meeting at a neutral place? Are we meeting the dialogue partners on the football field, in a common service or at school?
3. **When?** Are we meeting to prevent conflicts or to solve conflicts? Or are we meeting during peaceful times? During which periods of church life do we meet (holidays, school events, synods, public events...)?
4. **What?** What are the objectives of our dialogues? What are our issues and how do we talk about them? How do we find out about these issues? What do we want to achieve by dialoguing? Is the dialogue an instrument to achieve something concrete or do we dialogue more for informal exchange of experience?

These questions may help to develop the already existing awareness for dialogue in a church and to give a structure to intercultural and interreligious activities. It may also help to define issues and lack of dialogue. The questions should also be reflected in relation to the five pillars of the White Paper.

CSC encourages all churches and communities to reflect on the aim and the structures of their dialogues and to share these reflections with CSC so that the Commission can bring the churches' work, needs and opinions into European public discussion.

#### FURTHER INFORMATION

- White Paper on Intercultural Dialogue  
[http://www.coe.int/t/dg4/intercultural/Source/White%20Paper\\_final\\_revised\\_EN.pdf](http://www.coe.int/t/dg4/intercultural/Source/White%20Paper_final_revised_EN.pdf)
- CoE website on Intercultural dialogue  
<http://www.coe.int/t/dg4/intercultural/>
- CEC's website on intercultural dialogue. It includes the joint CSC-CCME response to the White Paper as well as the members' individual responses.  
<http://www.cec-kek.org/content/intercultural.shtml>

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