

San Marino Conference 23-24 April 2007
The religious Dimension of intercultural Dialogue

Contribution by François Becker

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It is as joint secretary of the European network Churches and Liberty that I am making a contribution to this rich debate. The network Churches and Liberty is a convictional INGO established at a European level as an association of men and women with Christian convictions, for the most part Catholic.

First of all I should like to thank the government of San Marino for inviting me to this conference, for its welcome and for allowing INGOs to take part and to contribute.

My contribution is about work carried out a European "think tank" made up of associations with Christian, Muslim, Jewish, Humanist, Atheist and Agnostic conviction and culture. The group is engaged in preparing a colloquy which will take place in the Council of Europe on 4 October 2007 in the context of INGO activities concerned with:

"Social Cohesion in a multicultural Europe, the role and impact of traditions of thought and of religions."

I should like to touch briefly on four points:

1) The Council of Europe must go beyond interreligious dialogue and the religious dimension of intercultural dialogue to take account of the contribution of non religious traditions of thought. I propose, therefore, to replace interreligious dialogue with inter convictional dialogue and to take account of the convictional dimension of intercultural dialogue and not only of its religious dimension.

Indeed, if religions contribute to the search for meaning, to the development of values and spiritual life, they are not the only ones to do so. Organisations of atheist, humanist or agnostic conviction also contribute to the presentation of values, to the search for meaning and to spiritual life. Moreover, it is an exigency of the development of social cohesion in Europe that one approach should not be favoured over another. It is therefore

necessary to take account of the contribution of humanist, atheist or agnostic traditions of thought and not just religious ones, hence the use of the term interconvictional.

2) We speak about religious communities. How do we define them? How do we choose them?

Religions are not monolithic and are not confined to monotheist religion. It is therefore essential to engage with traditions of thought found in a number of religions (together with humanist, atheist and agnostic groups). "Intra-religious" or "intra-convictional" dialogue is, therefore as important as "interreligious" or "interconvictional" dialogue. If there were enough time, I could cite concrete examples, but I will confine myself to important conceptual differences arising from the thought of a given religion on attitudes towards women. So as to take account of these differences, INGOs of conviction that share the objectives of the Council of Europe, as members of religious communities, should engage with the whole process and not just with their hierarchies. INGOs of conviction are, in fact, made up of men and women that are both players in civil society and who bring mature convictions that are well thought out in the framework of their organisations.

Therefore they are a particularly important point of contact between civil society and those who come with their religious or other convictions; in particular with the grass roots and the hierarchies of the Churches.

3) How do we engage in dialogue?

We are citizens, men and women with different convictions. To enable the process of "living together" we need:

- to discover in religions and traditions of thought things that are a universal calling and those that are tied to culture, or to the sociological and historical context in which they have been expressed;
- to accept criticism and debate, for it is only in dialogue that each of us constructs himself or herself and that expressions of religious and philosophical conviction develop and become finely honed;
- to embed and to continue dialogue in concrete activities, to establish inter convictional "diapraxis";
- no religion or convictional organization should claim for itself values that are recognised as universal, even if it is the instigator.

- no religion or association of conviction should impose values of which it is the only advocate.

This entails a process of openness without thought of monopoly

4) We must not cut off women from the whole of humanity as we engage in intercultural dialogue and in analysis of its religious and convictional dimension.

All too often women are not regarded as equal with men, especially in the field of religion, and this is a violation of human rights, which are recognised as essential values. We must pay particular attention to that aspect.

To conclude,

In the Committee of Ministers proposal that there should be "Annual Council of Europe encounters on the religious dimension of intercultural dialogue," I propose:

1) to replace "religious dimension" by "interconvictional dimension" in the title,

2) in respect of religious communities to include among them INGOs of religious conviction as we have seen in respect of civil society.

3) to let it be known that INGOS may also submit their chosen topics to be selected by the Committee of Ministers.

Thank you very much.