
February 2009

CoGREE contribution to the follow up of the “White Paper on Intercultural Dialogue”

1. We welcome the Council of Europe White Paper on Intercultural Dialogue. The White Paper looks at cultural diversity, national minorities and Intercultural dialogue the white paper should also raise the awareness of policy makers, administrators, educators, the media and civil society to the necessity for intercultural dialogue and to its important role in the context of the fundamental standards of the Council of Europe. We welcome the openness of the document that seeks to define intercultural dialogue, while looking to Council of Europe Principles with their moral compass and general understanding. In applying to activity at all levels in the European as well as national and local domains they are related to the claim that they are universal values that transcend cultural difference.
2. We also welcome the emphasis on education for citizenship and the teaching of history. For us this is not purely a focus on knowledge because it includes aspects of learning that facilitate the acquisition of skills and the development of attitudes. By enabling young people to understand the influence of history, the origins of their society, and the expressed and unexpressed influences to which they are subject, historical insight supports a personal commitment to ideals and the values that they underpin. It may also foster a lifelong awareness of their role in society, political life and the locality to which they belong, as they meet people from different cultural traditions or with different outlooks and pre-suppositions. We also welcome the connected emphasis on democratic values, the recognition of the dignity of every human being and the concomitant equality of all while noting the reference to the darker aspects of twentieth century history.
3. We are pleased that the white paper considers the work of ECRI (European Commission against Racism and Intolerance), the Anna Lindh foundation and the North South Centre. We note the work of the European Commission for Democracy through Law (the Venice Commission) and the co-operation of the Council of Europe with relevant bodies in Africa, Asia, Americas and Arab countries)., There is a need to avoid stereotypes and also the affirmation that intercultural dialogue requires the freedom and ability to express oneself, together with the preparedness to listen. This work follows on from the Kazan Declaration and that of the Volga Forum (2006) which called for an “open, transparent and regular dialogue” together with the meeting in San Marino (2007) that affirmed that religions could raise the level of dialogue and contribute to its enhancement. It also follows on from the more recent dialogue meeting with representatives of the religious communities, INGOs and others in the Council of Europe on 8 April 2008 on “teaching religious and convictional facts”.

4. In the chapter on the religious dimension of intercultural dialogue, we are pleased to note that religion is regarded as a significant factor, although religion is more than a dimension of intercultural dialogue. The white paper upholds the principle of freedom of Conscience and Religion to which we are committed, together with such limits as may be necessary in a democracy, with the associated implication that democracy enables people to live together in mutual respect, understanding, and active tolerance. We are similarly impressed by the affirmation of the need for democratic governance that upholds a political culture that values cultural diversity in the context of fundamental freedoms guaranteed by human rights. Inter-religious dialogue, although outside the immediate competencies of the Council of Europe, is a connected issue. It enables the religious organisations to fulfil their role. It includes the intercultural dimension of religious dialogue. Though not a competency of the Council of Europe, it is integral to the far reaching aspirations of the white paper.
5. For similar reasons we regret the omission of any reference to the experience of faith or to the possibility of its concrete existence. Men and women may be motivated by faith. It need not be religious though it often is. It is an element in acts of bravery and self-sacrifice. Misunderstood it has led to excesses in history and in our own generation. Religious believers of different traditions join the political organisations in condemning those excesses. They would be helped in this and other respects by acknowledgement of the insight of “the other” and of their capacity to contribute from experience at the grassroots like INGOs with their engagement in civil society.
6. There is another dimension to the intercultural aspect of faith, religion and interreligious dialogue. Religious organisations claim an existence in their own right. Because not a few of them operate on a world scale they incorporate cultural diversity within a framework of shared belief and values. They also make an unconditional contribution with their social engagement, together with their literature their culture, artistic and musical inheritance.
7. We looked for further examples of the engagement of the religious organisations’ in intercultural awareness. Humanitarian activity is often conducted by so-called “missionary” organisations. Their expertise is often unrelated to proselytism and adds much to the life and well-being of the countries and communities in which they work. Mutual knowledge goes beyond dialogue when people who have the opportunity to live in another culture take that experience back to their home countries or further afield. Religious organisations make a practical contribution through dialogue at the grassroots and the knowledge gained from that involvement.
8. We are therefore interested in the white paper’s emphasis on an impartial and objective education about religion for all children in Europe. Nevertheless the meaning of the expression “religious and convictional facts” is not entirely clear. Although young people must know about what surrounds them, such as other days of festivity or other views on morals, this is also an area in which teachers of religious education can contribute to interreligious as well as intercultural understanding and to the instigation of the thinking behind the white paper. Religious facts that are easily taught in the school curriculum are necessarily defined by their reception in the religious tradition. Though they are related to culture they are also frequently but not exclusively related to experience within the tradition

to which they apply. The special nature of the spiritual experience claimed by religious believers is difficult to define within the competencies of a political organisation, although appropriate education can contribute to more open awareness. It may also contribute openness, as well as to personal development and insight about the awareness of individuals and the groups to which they belong.

9. Religious educators in Europe have considerable experience of exploring knowledge and of encouraging young people to understand a range of beliefs in a manner that is free from sectarian indoctrination. Just as young people need to become literate and numerate, they also need to gain the skills and attitudes to enable them to become “religiante”, in order to engage in intercultural dialogue.
10. We also believe that education *about, from and through* religion is necessary to enable young people to make informed conceptual and spiritual judgements. It is important to understand how, in European history, common elements of the history, practice and thought of the great religions can sustain different views. Good education also aims at helping students to take account of how religious extremism may relate to unjustifiable assumptions.
11. We believe that by resonating with democratic governance, citizenship and participation, these developments facilitate the learning and teaching of intercultural competencies. In providing a space for dialogue at all levels, from the local one to international relations, they exemplify the “joined up approach” that is so obviously necessary, while transcending what may be imposed by the procedures of dialogue. In committing ourselves to cooperation with the initiatives of the Council of Europe, we would like to see more work in this area. We therefore look forward to the continuing development of the Wergeland Centre and urge it to engage with religious education seriously and without reticence.

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