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Community of Protestant Churches in Europe (CPCE)
Communion d'Eglises Protestantes en Europe (CEPE)

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Contribution of the Community of Protestant Churches in Europe (CPCE) to the Consultation Process on the Preparation of the "White Paper on intercultural dialogue" of the Council of Europe

Introduction

At present 105 Protestant churches in Europe (including five South-American churches originating from Europe) belong to the Community of Protestant Churches in Europe (CPCE). Its basic document is the *Leuenberg Agreement* of 1973 which marks the end of the over 450 years of the church division between the Protestant churches in Europe. On the basis of the common understanding of the Gospel, the signatory churches grant one another a pulpit and table fellowship and commit themselves to common witness and service at local, regional and European levels, and the continuing theological work.

In the *Charta Oecumenica* the Protestant churches have committed themselves to promoting the union of the European continent. The churches can introduce their special proximity to places and peoples here. This includes their special concern for minorities and the socially outcast, since they know the dangers of the pressure towards assimilation and therefore support an integrative society, which accords minorities corresponding rights and opportunities. The Protestant churches can introduce to Europe the model of 'unity in reconciled diversity'. From a history of centuries of repudiation and rejection a community of churches has come into being which has found its way towards reconciliation. The Protestant churches can and want to contribute to the future of Europe with the experiences of this way of reconciliation.

We thank the Council of Europe for the opportunity to share our views on intercultural dialogue and to bear witness to our experience in such a dialogue. Our contribution is linked to the joint contribution of the Church and Society Commission of the Conference of European Churches (CSC of CEC) and of the Churches' Commission for Migrants in Europe (CCME), with whom we work closely together. We will therefore only respond to some of the questions, which are of specific interest for the Protestant churches in Europe.

The need for a differentiated approach to intercultural dialogue

The Protestant Churches in Europe would like to ask the Council of Europe to differentiate between the diverse forms of intercultural dialogue and to distinguish especially between dialogues between political institutions and representatives of social, cultural and religious groups (state-society dialogue), dialogue among different groups in the (civil) society (active citizenship) and the direct dialogue between different cultural or religious groups in society (inter-cultural, inter-religious dialogue).

Some of the political institutions in Europe, such as the institutions of the European Union, have committed themselves to an “open, transparent and regular” dialogue with civil society and religious communities (cf. art. I-47 and art. I-52 of the Constitutional Treaty of the European Union). We believe that such a dialogue should be self-evident in every democratic political system.

With regard to the dialogue between different social, cultural and religious groups, the political institutions have a responsibility to provide a legal and social framework, in which such a dialogue can be realised in an open, transparent and non-discriminating way. We see also a responsibility of the political institutions to foster such a dialogue by providing instruments to make sure that all social, cultural and religious groups in society have the opportunity to participate in the formation of society.

With regard to the dialogue between different cultural or religious groups in society (inter-religious dialogue), we believe the political institutions have to provide a legal and social framework, in which such a dialogue can be realised in an open, transparent and non-discriminating way, but they should not interfere in the dialogue itself, because this dialogue falls under the autonomy of religious groups in the society. From a Christian perspective this is part of freedom of thought, conscience and religion as well as of freedom of expression and freedom of assembly and association (art. 9-11 Convention for the Protection of Human Rights and Fundamental Freedoms).

Consultation question

How urgent are efforts to promote intercultural dialogue today?
Why are they urgent?

Because homogenous societies never existed nor should they be envisaged; intercultural dialogue should be taken for granted in every society. Migration and high mobility have a longstanding tradition in European societies and contribute to the cultural richness of our societies, but at the same time make it necessary to care for integration and dialogue.

The experiences of CPCE Member Churches living in very diverse social and religious contexts show that religious and cultural diversity within one society do not lead automatically to difficulties or conflicts. As many Protestant Churches in Europe are religious minorities within their relevant societies, they have often experienced that diversity of cultures is not a problem, as long as it is not manipulated by political groups. Some of them are therefore very hesitant towards political interventions in the area of intercultural dialogue, as this has the potential to aggravate conflict lines between different cultural or religious groups in society.

The churches are concerned about the development of “parallel societies” in some European countries, with a tendency to isolation and growing boundaries towards others and public institutions. The experiences of some European states show that the development of such “parallel societies” within existing societies make integration more difficult and run the risk of human rights abuse, from outside by discrimination, from inside because of potential isolation from basic values and rights in European societies.

This raises the question of the structural preconditions for intercultural dialogue. Which structures are needed and who has the right to establish such structures? A number of religious or cultural groups do not have representatives with a mandate to speak on their behalf, especially if they are not organised on a national or European level. Intercultural dialogue should therefore be rooted on the local level. The churches with their widespread network of local parishes are ready to participate in this dialogue and thus to contribute to the common good of living together in a peaceful society.

Consultation question

What can be done to give cultural diversity a more positive connotation than it has today? What should the response be to intolerant, racist and xenophobic tendencies in the public debate?

We see an important role for intercultural education in this context, which allows for learning to know other cultures and religions. According to our experience, a precondition for intercultural learning is having knowledge about one's own religious and cultural identity. People will only be able to enter into a dialogue with other people about their cultural identity, if they have some idea about their own roots and cultural specificities. We, therefore, believe that education in everyone's own religion is a precondition for dialogue with others. Comparative religious studies do not provide a sufficient background for dialogue, because they do not provide a basis for a dialogue based on personal convictions.

We encourage the Member States of the CoE to facilitate the encounter of people of different origins and cultures, also crossing borders. Exchange programmes for citizens of CoE Member States, partnerships between local communities, youth groups, cultural or sports groups help to come to a better understanding of each other. We strongly recommend the easing of visa restrictions between CoE countries, starting with facilitating of travel for exchange programs and partnerships.

In some CoE countries civil society started to build networks against racism and xenophobia, based on non-governmental organisations, churches, trade unions or local authorities. CoE Member States should foster such initiatives of civil society by supporting the networking of these initiatives on national and European level.

The legal framework of CoE Member States should not allow racist positions to be taken in public debate (cf. EU regulation on the persecution of racist positions and denying of the holocaust.)

Consultation question

Which is the most promising overall "vision" for living together in multicultural societies, what is the most suitable model for managing its diversity in a democratic way?

The New Testament provides a number of good examples for the relationship between identity and differences, the dialogue between diverse groups and special respect for

minorities and the marginalised. Cf. 1Corinthians 12,4 “there are varieties of gifts, but the same Spirit; and there are varieties of services, but the same Lord”. It sees the “love for God” and the “love for neighbour” as key elements in the living together of all people. “Love, which is not self-seeking” (1Corinthians 13,5) is the Christian understanding of dialogue crossing all borders. The concept of special respect for the “weak”, the marginalised (cf. Romans 14-15) is an expression of this love. We believe that intercultural dialogue should be measured by its impact on the weakest and most marginalised members in a society.

Based on this biblical understanding, the Protestant Churches in Europe are promoting the model of “unity in reconciled diversity” for intercultural and inter-religious dialogue. “Unity in reconciled diversity” means community building based on common values and a continuing discourse on the differences between the different stakeholders in the society. It is thus much more based on the concept of a common understanding of fundamental elements in a society than concepts of “unity in diversity”, which do not necessarily provide a common ground for the different groups. The concept of “freedom through community” (“Freiheit durch Gemeinsamkeit”), that the CoE postulated in the late 1980s, was very much going in the same direction. The churches regret that the CoE did not follow this guideline anymore in recent years. We would very much welcome it if the CoE followed this concept more strongly again, which contributed successfully to the fall of the Iron Curtain.

Consultation question

How do cultural diversity and human rights relate to one another?

Basic human rights constitute a generally recognised legal framework in secular law. This includes the right to free expression. The same is true of the right to freedom of thought, conscience and religion, and protection from discrimination (cf. the Universal Declaration of Human Rights of 10/12/1948, the European Convention on the Protection of Human Rights and Basic Freedoms of 4/11/1950, and the International Pact on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights of 16/12/1966). The basic rights safeguard pluralism, tolerance, justice, solidarity and non-discrimination in European societies. The CPCE Executive Committee notes with concern tendencies to restrict the exercise of basic rights on religious grounds.

Human rights, freedom of expression and freedom of religious practice should not be played off against one another. Freedom of belief and conscience, free speech and respect for human dignity are not dependent on any human quality or achievement. They are based on the fact that human beings are created by God, through God’s unconditional love and free grace.

The churches of the Reformation in particular have emerged from a movement for religious freedom and from a critique of existing church situations and teachings. It follows that the right to freedom of expression enjoys a particular status in our churches. The claim of religions to be able to criticise other religions or social conditions must include a readiness to allow themselves to be called into question by all permissible means of free expression. A religion that keeps itself safely immune from all criticism is totalitarian. It disregards the difference between itself and its transcendental basis, between God and the faith that bears witness to God.

Consultation question

What is the “added value” of Council of Europe action on intercultural dialogue, which distinguishes it from that of other international organisations?

The CoE includes almost all European countries and provides thus the appropriate framework for intercultural dialogue in Europe. As it is based on the European Convention on human rights, it provides a very good legal framework for this discussion. It has proved to be an efficient platform in bringing together European countries for dialogue and common action. We would encourage the CoE Member States to come to a more reliable cooperation within the framework of the CoE. In principle the CoE disposes of all the tools necessary for the promotion of intercultural dialogue all over Europe; it has just to put it into practice.

Consultation question

How can we best define “intercultural dialogue”?

We would suggest revising the formulation as follows:

“Intercultural dialogue is an open, transparent, regular and respectful exchange of views between individuals and groups belonging to different cultures that leads to a deeper understanding of the other’s world perception.”

We miss in the definition the practical impact of such a dialogue. Dialogue does not automatically have a sense in itself, but should lead to an outcome: the living together of people in society.

Consultation question

In which political, social and cultural contexts can “intercultural dialogue” play a relevant role?

Consultation question

Which measures are necessary to enable cultural minorities, such as migrants and national minorities, to express their cultural identity and to contribute to the cultural richness of the whole society?

They should have access to public institutions, to the media and to public life. They should have the opportunity to participate in public opinion making like other stakeholders.

We would expect the majority groups in the society to have a positive attitude towards the participation of minority groups and should promote the participation of minorities in

consultation processes. If we want to take minorities seriously, we have to integrate them into the institutional processes.

Consultation question

Which role does the principle of gender equality play in intercultural dialogue?

Equal participation of women and men in society is an expression of the Christian understanding of the human being and should not be put into question.

CPCE rejects all discrimination against men and women on religious, ideological, ethnic, or social grounds; it rejects any attempts to erode freedom and gender equality by an abusive reference to the protection of religious confessions.

Consultation question

Are there minimum conditions that must be fulfilled in order to make intercultural dialogue at all possible?

- Sufficient knowledge of a common language;
- Clarification of representation: It should be clear who is mandated to speak on behalf of specific groups;
- Respect;
- A legal and social framework for an open, transparent, regular dialogue, free of domination;
- Common interests or projects;
- Non-violence;
- Mediation could be helpful;

Openness to critique and readiness for self-critique: “The claim of religions to be able to criticise other religions or social conditions must include a readiness to let themselves be called into question by all permissible means of free expression. A religion that keeps itself safely immune from all criticism is totalitarian. It disregards the difference between itself and its transcendental basis, between God and the faith that bears witness to God.” (CPCE Declaration: Defending truth, not with force, but with the power of the Word alone).

Consultation question

What is the place of religious communities in a policy promoting intercultural dialogue? Which significance has the dialogue among religious communities?

Freedom of religion is a human right, which is mainly practised in community with other people. It is a fundamental dimension of the human being. Binding together people from all cultural and regional backgrounds without being exclusive with regard to nation, culture, sex, age or other factors, Christian communities contribute to the common good of all.

We would like to encourage the CoE to take notice of the daily positive contribution of religious communities to the common good in European societies, e.g. in their diaconal or educational work. Religion should not be reduced to a conflict factor in intercultural dialogue.

Religious communities may provide a framework for intercultural dialogue, because they have been pioneers in this area and have a far-reaching experience in facilitating such dialogue processes.

We would like to point out again that the state should not interfere in the dialogue among religions, which falls under the autonomy of religious groups in the society and is part of freedom of thought, conscience and religion, as well as of freedom of expression and freedom of assembly and association.

Consultation question

Should the Council of Europe engage in dialogue with religious communities? If yes: how?

For nearly five decades, the Protestant churches in Europe have been in a permanent dialogue with the CoE, working together with other churches in the Church and Society Commission of the Conference of European Churches (CEC) and its predecessor ECCCS, which are representing the common voice of the churches towards the political institutions in Europe. We believe this to be an element of active citizenship and participatory democracy in Europe. We would encourage the CoE to recognise and to intensify this dialogue and to provide a legal framework for an “open, regular and transparent dialogue” with religious communities, following the example of art. 1-52 of the Constitutional Treaty of the European Union.

Consultation question

How can the capacity of individuals, groups and institutions for intercultural dialogue be enhanced?

See answer to Consultation question No. 2.

Consultation question

How can the equal participation of men and women in intercultural dialogue be ensured?

Christian ecumenical organisations work with quotas in order to ensure an equal participation of women and young people in their work.

Consultation question

Which dialogue methods are specifically suited for promoting intercultural understanding?

The Protestant churches in Europe have a long-reaching tradition of study groups working on doctrinal questions. The principle of the CPCE study group is to prepare a document with a group of experts, which has then to be ratified by all Member Churches to become an official church document.

Since 2003, CPCE and CEC are running a joint project on “Healing of Memories” in Romania (see *annex*).

Consultation question

What is necessary for going from intercultural dialogue to joint action?

No answer provided.

Consultation question

What are the expected political and individual “results” of intercultural dialogue? How can they be “measured”?

Intercultural dialogue should lead to better mutual understanding, a better social cohesion in European societies, the decrease of prejudices and discrimination and contribute to the inner and outer peace of European societies. One indicator would be the number of violent crimes in European societies with a racist or xenophobic background.

Consultation question

Which underlying values are important for the promotion of intercultural dialogue? Are “new” values needed?

“Basic human rights constitute a generally recognised legal framework in secular law. This includes the right to free expression. The same is true of the right to freedom of thought, conscience and religion, and protection from discrimination (cf. The Universal Declaration of Human Rights of 10/12/1948, The European Convention on the Protection of Human Rights and Basic Freedoms of 4/11/1950, and The International Pact on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights of 16/12/1966). The basic rights safeguard pluralism, tolerance, justice, solidarity and non-discrimination in European societies. The CPCE Executive Committee notes with concern tendencies to restrict the exercise of basic rights on religious grounds.” (CPCE: Defending truth, not with force, but with the power of the Word alone)

CPCE shares the values and principles formulated in the preparatory document:

- “Recognition of the equality of the dialogue partners as bearers of human rights;

- Recognition of the primacy of human rights and fundamental freedoms;
- Recognition (tolerance) of, and respect for, each other's culture;
- Recognition of cultural diversity as a fundamental characteristic of contemporary societies;
- Acceptance of the fact that cultures – for all their diversity – are not opposed to each other but overlap and influence each other constantly, and that cultural “purity” is neither a justifiable nor a realistic aim;
- Recognition of the principle of non-violent conflict resolution and of the need to keep or achieve peace.”

Consultation question

Are there “natural” limitations to what intercultural dialogue can achieve? What are the possibilities of dialogue with those who do not share our world view, have a different interpretation of shared values or refuse to dialogue?

It is a Protestant understanding that freedom is never without commitment; it is associated with responsibility and love. In the words of Martin Luther, a Christian is on the one hand “a free lord over all things and subject to nobody” and on the other “a ministering servant to all things and subject to everyone.” The same relationship between freedom and responsibility is found in the New Testament. The apostle Paul wrote: “Everything is permissible – but not everything is beneficial.” (1Corinthians 10,23) The criterion for discernment is the question: what serves the best interests of one's fellow human beings, goodness and peace?

“Public order is to be valued alongside individual freedom. When one exercises one's right to free expression of opinion and freedom of the media, one has to take care that public order is not jeopardised. In conflict situations, the safeguarding of basic human rights is the task of the state. If people feel that their fundamental rights are violated by expressions of public opinion or artistic presentations, they are given the opportunity to claim protection by the responsible public bodies. Furthermore, it is possible to draw public attention to these irregularities and to protest against them. The CPCE denounces expressly the violent riots and arson attacks on public facilities, as well as the death threats against cartoonists and journalists.

The CPCE urges the Protestant Churches in Europe to find every possible means to contribute to dialogue and reconciliation; to promote understanding and respect amongst people of different cultures; and to exercise greater sensitivity in dealing with religious feelings. As a Community of Protestant Churches in Europe, we rely on the power of the Word. We must defend truth, not with force, but with the Word alone. It is precisely for this reason that the fundamental rights to freedom of opinion and freedom of religion are to be safeguarded: from a Protestant perspective, they are very precious.” (CPCE: Defending truth, not with force, but with the power of the Word alone)

Consultation question

How can formal, informal and non-formal education promote intercultural dialogue and prepare individuals for living in a multicultural society?

See answer to Consultation question 2 (role of religious education, necessity to know about your own religion to have the capacity to enter into a dialogue with others.)

Consultation question

How can the awareness be strengthened that intercultural dialogue is not “just” a cultural issue, but needs systematic supportive action in other policy areas?

No answer provided.

Consultation question

Which institutional arrangements must be put in place to ensure a better coordination of the different policy areas concerned – at international, national and local level?

No answer provided.

Consultation question

Where should the policy of “mainstreaming” intercultural dialogue begin, which policy areas should have priority over others?

No answer provided.

Consultation question

How can intercultural dialogue be promoted in the local community?

No answer provided.

Consultation question

How can intercultural dialogue be promoted through measures at national level?

Some CoE Member States have installed national fora for intercultural or inter-religious dialogue. The question has to be raised whether it is the task of the state to initiate such fora. It is an interference with the autonomy of religious community, if public authorities take decisions concerning who should represent religious communities in such meetings or establish codes of conduct for religious communities. Any activity of the CoE and its Member States in this area should carefully respect freedom of assembly and association (art. 9-11 Convention for the Protection of Human Rights and Fundamental Freedoms).

Consultation question

How can international organisations, such as the Council of Europe, support local and national initiatives for the promotion of intercultural dialogue?

No answer provided.

Consultation question

How can civil society organisations be encouraged to strengthen their commitment to intercultural dialogue at international, national and local level?

No answer provided.

Consultation question

What is the responsibility of political parties in promoting intercultural dialogue? Which specific role can they play?

No answer provided.

Consultation question

How can the cultural industries, including journalists and media organisations be encouraged to develop approaches that more effectively promote intercultural dialogue?

No answer provided.

Consultation question

What makes a practical example of intercultural dialogue an “example of good practice”?

No answer provided.

Consultation question

How can examples of good practice (in the area of intercultural dialogue) be publicised in the best way?

No answer provided.

Consultation question

How should the Council of Europe co-operate with other international institutions, in order to achieve a maximum impact of activities promoting cultural diversity and intercultural dialogue?

CPCE Member Churches coordinate their activities in relation to the political institutions in Europe with the office of the Church and Society Commission of the Conference of European Churches in Brussels. CSC of CEC is thus the relevant instrument for the co-operation of political institutions with the churches on the European level.

Consultation question

How can the Council of Europe contribute to the “Alliance of Civilizations” initiative of the United Nations?

No answer provided.

Vienna, 30 May 2007

CPCE Presidium

Council President Revd Thomas Wipf, Bern

Prof. Dr. Michael Beintker, Munster

Senior Advisor Revd Dr. Stephanie Dietrich, Oslo

Appendixes

- Project description of the joint CPCE/CEC project “Healing of memories” in Romania.
- Consultation on the Challenges of Migration and Asylum. Declaration of the Conference of Rhine Churches and the Community of Protestant Churches in Europe - Leuenberg Church Fellowship -. Liebfrauenberg 10-12 May 2004.
- Defending truth, not with force, but with the power of the Word alone. The CPCE Executive Committee expresses its views on the issue of freedom of religion and freedom of expression. Budapest, April 2006.

At present 105 Protestant churches in Europe (including five South-American churches originating from Europe) belong to the Community of Protestant Churches in Europe (CPCE). Lutheran, Reformed, United and Methodist along with pre-Reformation churches such as Hussites and Czech Brethren grant each other pulpit and table fellowship on the basis of the Leuenberg Agreement of 1973. A 13-member Council carries out ongoing business between two general assemblies, headed by a 3-member Presidium: Revd Thomas Wipf (President), Council President of the Federation of Swiss Protestant Churches in Bern , Prof. Michael Beintker (Co-President), Director of the Seminary for Reformed Theology at the University in Munster , and Revd Dr. Stephanie Dietrich (Co-President), Church of Norway . The Secretariat, which operates under the direction of the Council, is housed in the Severin-Schreiber-Gasse 3, A-1180 Vienna, office@leuenberg.eu, tel. +43.1.4791523.900, fax .580. Its director is OKR Prof. Dr. Michael Bünker. The CPCE press officer is Dipl.theol. Thomas Flügge (Bern), tel. +41.31.3702502, t.fluegge@leuenberg.eu.