II.

HUMAN RIGHTS, CULTURE AND RELIGION: CONVERGENCE OR DIVERGENCE? BELIEFS, VALUES AND EDUCATION*

1. At a time when human rights may seem to be in retreat, the representatives of religious communities reaffirm the urgent need for human rights’ existence, and the role that they should play as a factor in inspiring human action, particularly in the public sphere.

   With this in mind, it seems that, by conferring rights, the European Convention on Human Rights and the Council of Europe’s fundamental texts also constitute an equal number of responsibilities which human beings must assume.

   This being so, religious discourse should, even more than other approaches, point out that rights and duties are the two facets of this responsibility.

2. It was confirmed that human rights should not replace religion. On the contrary, these concepts represent two different expressions, even two different forms, of adhesion to the same fundamental principles, based on the inherent dignity of every human being.

   Equally, the fields of human rights and religion may overlap, without being completely equivalent, since one does not include the other. However, human rights and religious principles can be applicable simultaneously.

   Consequently, the question is one of determining the best form of correlation between them: is there a special or specific relationship between human rights and religion?

   On the one hand, it was pointed out that religion is not limited to a particular culture or a form of morality; it is distinguished by adhesion to a divine principle and appeals to the transcendent. Religious discourse on human rights is thus not required to limit itself to an ethical perspective.

   At the same time, human rights, as the product of reason, are an expression of universal values in human rationality.

3. After considering whether it is possible to accept the universal nature of human rights without diminishing affirmation and recognition of others, and whether it was possible to accept universal human rights while simultaneously expressing a specific form of these rights through one’s religious commitment, the participants concluded together that human rights constitute a universal expression of principles and belong to the sphere of public life, while religion represents a specific formulation of these principles within each community.

   Although it is important that each religious community be able to choose the best method of interpreting human rights, as most appropriate in the light of its texts and tradition, it is also important to preserve the main achievements of human rights which may not be deviated from.

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4. The participants consider that, based on the experience of rights within each religious community, there is a need to restore religious discourse to the centre of public life.

All the participants reaffirmed that tolerance, with the respect and love for one’s neighbour that it may lead to, is enshrined at the heart of the monotheistic religions, thus opening up an important arena for the implementation of human rights.

However, it was strongly emphasised that the founding texts and standard-setting texts were subject to varied readings and interpretations which allowed varying potential for rights to emerge. In specific social or economic contexts, such readings could lead to different applications, and even in some cases to violence, which was to be ruled out. At the same time, the tendency to amalgamate religion and violence was also to be denounced.

Consequently, the texts and their interpretations require in-depth analysis by specialists.

This work must be carried out within each confession and each religion, and should then lead to comparison and a pooling of positive results.

Various fanaticisms are currently practiced in the name of religious texts. Such practices result from erroneous or out-of-date readings and interpretations of the texts, contrary to the fundamental principles which underlie religion and which are the basis of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights. Accordingly, they should be rejected and condemned.

5. Construction of the Europe of tomorrow and, more generally, of the future, requires the development of a political culture that moves beyond hostility.

Consequently, it is more vital than ever to consider the ethical foundations of the principles that govern the life of our European societies. As common cultural matrices of these foundations and principles, religions have an important role to play in this process.

This is particularly relevant in that democracy and religion have in common the concept of recognition of and respect for others.

6. The participants reaffirmed the essential role of education in developing the consciences of future citizens.

Education in human rights should provide an opportunity for a transversal and multi-disciplinary approach. It should be incorporated in every place of education and in private or state schools, whether these are denominational or non-denominational.

Religions, which play an important role in young people’s education, should also transmit human rights values through their teachings, by advocating recognition and respect.

In order to ensure the best possible quality in such a crucial and sensitive subject, the participants consider that the time has come to establish a specific training centre in which a methodology for integrating human rights into religious education, and for integrating the religious dimension into general education, could be developed.

Establishment of an institute of this sort could be entrusted to the Council of Europe and its Commissioner for Human Rights.