INTERFAITH DIALOGUE AND RECONCILIATION: CREATING AND SUSTAINING SPACES OF ENCOUNTER

**Online panel event
22 February 2023**

**GENEVA CENTRE
FOR HUMAN RIGHTS
ADVANCEMENT AND
GLOBAL DIALOGUE**

INTERFAITH DIALOGUE AND RECONCILIATION: CREATING AND SUSTAINING SPACES OF ENCOUNTER

MODERATION

Dr. Umesh Palwankar
Executive Director, Geneva Centre for Human Rights Advancement and Global Dialogue

PANELLISTS

Ms. Nazila Ghanea
UN Special Rapporteur on freedom of religion or belief

Prof. Fabio Petito
Religion & International Affairs, University of Sussex; Head of Religions & International Relations Programme, ISPI

Dr. Scherto Gill
Director, Global Humanity for Peace Institute; Senior Fellow, Guerrand-Hermès Foundation for Peace

Rev. Sören Lenz
Co-chair, Interreligious & Interconvictional Dialogue Committee, Conference of INGOs, Council of Europe

Dr. Vinu Aram
President, Shanti Ashram, India

Dr. Bakary Sambe
Regional Director, Timbuktu Institute, African Center for Peace Studies

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FOREWORD

The **Geneva Centre for Human Rights Advancement and Global Dialogue** acknowledges the vital need to enhance the promotion of human rights through intercultural, interfaith and inter-religious dialogue. Safeguarding our common humanity and shared values, raising voices in support of multicultural and multi-religious societies, characterized by mutual understanding and respect, must remain a constant driving force. A world society enriched with diversity and empathy needs to be actively promoted.

Towards this end, the Geneva Centre organized, in the framework of its mandate, an international panel on "Interfaith Dialogue and Reconciliation: Creating and Sustaining Spaces of Encounter" on 22 February 2023.

Through this panel event, the Geneva Centre sought to offer a forum for discussion and mobilization around the crucial issue of interfaith dialogue and reconciliation. The objectives of the panel were to Identify international initiatives and best practices of fostering interfaith dialogue, reconciliation and exchange at the international, national and local levels; identify challenges and opportunities that proactively create, promote and support spaces of interfaith dialogue and mutual understanding; raise awareness of interfaith and inter-religious dialogue in response to and in prevention of human rights violations; and, provide an opportunity for dialogue and information sharing between different stakeholders with diverse religious and faith-based backgrounds.

The speakers shared their professional experiences in this domain, and offered innovative ideas and recommendations on how to encourage more concrete initiatives and actions from civil society, including religious leaders, academic experts and the media, as well as national authorities and international organizations, to foster an environment of coexistence, mutual understanding and respect, tolerance and cooperation, leading to just, peaceful and inclusive societies.

Dr Umesh Palwankar
Executive Director
Geneva Centre for Human Rights Advancement and Global Dialogue

PANEL DISCUSSION

Interfaith dialogue creates spaces for promoting human rights, democracy and the rule of law in diverse and multicultural environments. The panel discussion sought to map and discuss some of the most prominent international initiatives and best practices in interfaith and inter-religious dialogue and collaboration, which would enable us to sustain peace and combat intolerance and discrimination, as well as to create and sustain a space of encounter with one another.

The panel discussion reviewed methodologies of successful interfaith dialogue and its limitations. Building also on the outcomes of the Global Forum on Civilizations (2022), the panel further analyzed challenges, needs, and benefits in an effort to provide a channel of communication among faiths and beliefs in the spirit of tolerance, truthfulness, sincerity, love, and goodwill, without forcing our own paradigms or ideas on others.

Event Moderator:

- **Dr. Umesh Palwankar**, Executive Director, Geneva Centre for Human Rights Advancement and Global Dialogue

Panelists:

- **Ms. Nazila Ghanea**, UN Special Rapporteur on freedom of religion or belief

- **Prof. Fabio Petito**, Religion & International Affairs, University of Sussex; Head of "Religions and International Relations" Programme, ISPI

- **Dr Scherto Gill**, Director of Global Humanity for Peace Institute; Senior Fellow and Executive Secretary, Guerrand-Hermès Foundation for Peace (GHFP)

- **Rev Sören Lenz**, Co-chair, Interreligious & Interconvictional Dialogue Committee, Conference of INGOs, Council of Europe

- **Dr Kezevino Aram**, President of Shanti Ashram, India

- **Dr Bakary Sambe**, Regional Director, Timbuktu Institute, African Center for Peace Studies

Opening Remarks by Dr Umesh Palwankar, Executive Director of the Geneva Centre

In his introductory remarks, the Geneva Centre's Executive Director Dr Umesh Palwankar welcomed the esteemed panelists and thanked them for having accepted the invitation to share their analyses and insights flowing from their expertise and extensive experience in the field in regard to the subject of the panel.

Dr Palwankar briefly presented the Geneva Centre, founded in 2013, which is an independent human rights think-tank with Special Consultative status in ECOSOC. The Centre's work rests on four pillars: research and publication on vital human rights issues, training and national capacity building in the field of human rights, international advocacy through reporting on important human rights developments and conferences, in particular the Human Rights Council, and the promotion of a global inter-cultural and inter-faith dialogue through the organization of international conferences and panel debates with follow-up publications for universal distribution.

The existence of a pluralistic society, particularly in terms of religion, faith and culture, requires a platform in the community. In this sense, inter-religious and interfaith dialogue can be seen as an effective platform to build mutual understanding and tolerance in society. All members of society can participate in this process, from ordinary people to religious leaders, academics and politicians, operating at the international, national and local levels. The term *interfaith dialogue* refers to cooperative, constructive and sustained interaction between people of different religious traditions and/or spiritual or humanistic beliefs. It aims to promote mutual understanding and to increase acceptance and tolerance. When employed as a tool or strategic practice, interfaith dialogue can greatly contribute to facilitating discussions and synergies to combat intolerance, hate speech and discrimination and to promote peace building.

The panel discussion will attempt to map and discuss some of the most prominent initiatives and best practices for using interfaith and inter-religious dialogue and collaboration, in regard to efforts to promote tolerance, sincerity and empathy. The panel will also examine the interrelation between diversity of faith and economic, social, historical and political factors of inclusiveness, peace and prosperity.

The esteemed 6 panelists, from international organizations, academia, think-tanks and NGOs working in the field, will offer their insights, analyses and recommendations for ways forward on this issue of vital importance in human rights. A follow-up publication, containing summaries of the oral presentations, the Q&A session, and the written contributions of the panelists, will be issued and distributed widely online, in social media, on the Geneva Centre's website and sent to the Centre's interlocutors which include Permanent Missions in Geneva, international organizations, NGOs, academia, the media. A full video of the event will also be released by the Geneva Centre and shared on our YouTube channel and website.

Ms. Nazila Ghanea, UN Special Rapporteur on freedom of religion or belief

Ms. Nazila Ghanea is Professor of International Human Rights Law and Director of the MSc in International Human Rights Law at the University of Oxford. Her academic work has often connected with multilateral practice in international human rights law. She has contributed actively to networks interested in freedom of religion or belief and its interrelationship with other human rights and has advised states and other stakeholders. She has researched and published widely in international human rights law and served as consultant to numerous agencies.

Ms. Nazila Ghanea, started her statement by providing a **brief overview of the UN position on this topic**. She mentioned the UN "Declaration on the Elimination of All Forms of Intolerance and of Discrimination Based on Religion or Belief", adopted on 25 November 1981, without a vote. She also reported that in 1986 the UN Commission on Human Rights decided to appoint a UN Special Rapporteur to advance this thematic area. Over the last 37 years, there have been 6 rapporteurs. The Human Rights Council's most recent resolution, of March 2022, extended the mandate for a further three years. The resolution expressed deep concern about emerging obstacles to the enjoyment of the right to freedom of religion or belief. It urged States to take appropriate action and to promote mutual understanding through education and stressed the importance of dialogue in all its forms.

She affirmed that **human rights law recognizes States as holding legal obligations for ensuring human rights**, but this doesn't take away from the responsibility of others and of non-State actors. In fact, it is challenging to imagine how States can fully guarantee access to, and enjoyment of, freedom of religion or belief without also giving attention to the responsibilities of other actors, especially religious or belief leaders, communities, and actors. In many States, religion or belief is deeply entangled and overlapped with political actors. There are times when political leaders are also religious leaders. In such contexts, the legal obligations of the State are directly applicable to religious actors.

Moreover, States should outreach and consult religious or belief communities inclusively, recognizing the different structures of leadership and representation that draw from within those communities. This includes their beliefs, practices, convictions and autonomy. Such engagement by States with religious or belief communities should not be exclusively restricted to the largest numerically, the most established, or the most politically or economically expedient. It cannot rest on majoritarianism, conventionality or reciprocity. In this way discrimination would be avoided and the circle of inclusion would expand, breaking down more barriers, misunderstandings and prejudices.

She concluded by stating that with an **ever-widening inclusion by the State on the one hand, and the deepening and spread of the commitment within the communities on the other, the potential of interfaith dialogue and collaboration could be greatly magnified, and trust established**. This would be in sharp contrast with a position that rests on belief in privileged and exclusive access to truth. Such a position risks sustaining divisions that, in turn, may lead to conflict. Perhaps it is such divisions that still dominate the mindset of rank-and-file believers, not allowing obstacles to hatred and violence to break down.

Prof. Fabio Petito, Religion & International Affairs, University of Sussex; Head of "Religions and International Relations" Programme, ISPI

Prof. Fabio Petito teaches, researches and publishes on different theoretical and policy aspects of the role of religion in global politics. His publications include Religion in International Relations (2003), Civilizational Dialogue and World Order (2009) and Towards a Postsecular International Politics (2014). Among his recent publications: Petito, F. (2020), "From Freedom of Religion or Belief (FoRB) Advocacy to Interreligious Engagement in Foreign Policy", Global Affairs, 6:3, 269-286 and Petito, F., Daou, F. and Driessen, M (2021), eds., Human Fraternity and Inclusive Citizenship: Interreligious Engagement in the Mediterranean (Milan, ISPI: Ledizioni, 2021).

Prof. Petito affirmed that religion is often at the centre of a global scenario of conflict and insecurity. Today policy makers around the world increasingly recognize that religion and, inter-religious dialogue and collaboration, can be part of the solution. It can be a strategic resource for peace building, the strengthening of human rights and the advancement of sustainable development. "Religious engagement" is emerging as one of the most promising fields of strategic and creative thinking in which governments and international organizations can work collaboratively (in partnership) with religious organizations to achieve common goals. All the developments in this area highlight the potential positive impact of inter-religious dialogue and collaboration on our growing diverse and plural societies at all stages of the peace-building process to strengthen inclusive and sustainable societies. Despite increasing recognition of the political significance of religion, religious actors and inter-religious actors are still rarely welcome at the leading global policy tables.

This new policy orientation is emerging in the context of what he called a **new era of inter-religious dialogue and collaboration at the local and global levels: Inter-religious** dialogue and collaboration can include a variety of forms of interactions ranging from theological exchanges to day-to-day socializing and common social action by different religious groups and individuals on specific social,

economic or political issues. Some activities can be formal like high-level meetings between official representatives, often with a view to emphasizing commonalities, whereas others can be informal like grassroots initiatives at the local level, as in neighborhoods and schools. Inter-religious dialogue as a sustained, global practice is a relatively emerging phenomenon and has only significantly deepened over the last two decades. Probably, the most significant trend of this growth has seen inter-religious dialogue moving steadily from theology to practical collaboration with multi-religious collaboration focussing increasingly on pressing social and political issues.

Dr Scherto Gill, Director of Global Humanity for Peace Institute; Senior Fellow and Executive Secretary, Guerrand-Hermès Foundation for Peace (GHFP)
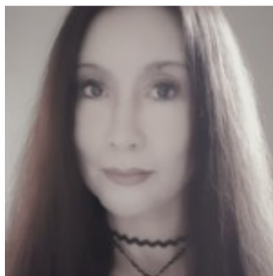
Dr Scherto Gill is on the editorial board of a number of journals, including International Journal for the Study of Spirituality. Scherto is a board member of Spirit of Humanity Forum, and Rising Global Peace Forum, and chairs the G20 Interfaith Forum's Education Working Group. She is a 2022 Laureate of Luxembourg Peace Prize. Her latest publications include Understanding Peace Holistically: From the Spiritual to the Political (Peter Lang); Happiness, Flourishing and the Good Life: A Transformative Vision for Human Well-Being (Routledge), Ethical Education: Towards An Ecology of Human Development (Cambridge University Press), and Lest We Lose Love (Anthem Press).

Dr Scherto Gill started her presentation recalling the idea that **mutual understanding has become one of the major challenges for humanity.** In practice, people and communities tend to partake either the essentialist or the pluralist worldview. When we perceive others and the world from our lenses, we can find others impossible to understand. Ignorance of the values and beliefs that have influenced a particular community or society's ways of being life (religious, cultural and spiritual) can often result in a fear of the Other. When such fear is instrumentalised for political gains, or for guaranteeing the elites' socio-economic advantages, there can be deliberately stirring distrust, rousing discrimination and inciting hatred, leading to not only just antagonism, demonisation of the Other, and but also violence in our discourses, attitudes, and actions. One approach to discriminating against and demonising other people is through narratives.

Individual and collective narratives are important. However, as humans, especially as embodied and emplaced beings, we do not always have the capacity to see things from the perspectives of others (be it underpinned by religion, culture or worldview), nor even to appreciate that others can have values and practices particular to their histories and contexts. Therefore, the claim that all people are equally real and non-derivatively valuable can serve as a corrective to this kind of partiality. It is a

reminder that our experiences and perceptions are always partial and often egoistic in these ways. Humanising narratives about others should start with this equality, and the recognition that we can be ignorant about others, but we should be willing to listen, to dialogue, and to learn from them about what constitutes their humanity.

Listening, dialogue and learning are not mere tools to build new narratives, they are likewise, constituted in our way of being human together. To a certain extent, we may suggest that others and their difference, including religion, faith, cultural practices and spirituality, are, in part, comprised in our well-being.

Rev Sören Lenz, Co-chair, Interreligious & Interconvictional Dialogue Committee, Conference of INGOs, Council of Europe

Rev Sören Lenz has undergone Pastoral Training in the Union of Protestant Churches of Alsace and Lorraine (UEPAL) and served as the Auxiliary minister in the Church of England (Stafford), and Theological director of the Church academy "Liebfrauenberg" in Alsace. Currently, he is the General Secretary of the Conference of Rhine Churches, and Co-chair of the Interreligious & Interconvictional Dialogue Committee of the Conference of INGOs, Council of Europe. Previously Sören has served as the Executive secretary of CEC and official representative at the Council of Europe (2018-2023).

Taking the floor, Rev Sören Lenz informed the participants that in 2021 the European Buddhist Union and the Conference of European Churches (CEC) created the **Committee for Inter-religious and Interconvictional Dialogue (CIRICD).** This Committee strongly supports the recommendation for the creation of a permanent platform for dialogue between representatives of religions and non-confessional organizations in the Council of Europe.

He underlined that in liberal democracies, **the separation of state and religion, freedom of conscience and freedom of belief is fundamental.** Nevertheless, their organizational forms play a crucial role in civil society as they are instrumental in shaping the relationship of individuals with the world, state and society. A credible and constructive dialogue should not be limited to spiritual leaders. It must involve all parts of society and especially the "grassroots" at the local level, as well as be inter-religious, inter-faith and inter-cultural in order to make a genuine difference.

He concluded that the social dynamics of our western modern world are based on optimizing resources, on innovation dynamics and on increasing the scope of its possibilities of action. This is both in terms of individual lifestyles and system structures. Convictions and faith are a matter of conscience, i.e., they are determined individually, yet they are expressed in communities and therefore have a public character. In doing so, they have - consciously or unconsciously - an influence on the shaping of the moral and social behaviour of individuals and thus for society. **Thus religion, faith inspired, or humanist organizations contribute indirectly to the shaping of civil society, as they concern the whole human being as a free, self-determined and acting societal being.**

In dialogue, it is imperative to crystallize those overlaps that form the basis for human rights, tolerance and freedom of conscience in a democratic society. Religious communities therefore have a particularly responsible role to play with regard to their willingness to engage in dialogue. Education in the holistic sense has a supporting role to play here. Education in religions means not only the transmission of knowledge and rites, but also the education of the individual as a self-reliant being.

Dr Kezevino Aram, President of Shanti Ashram, India

Dr Kezevino Aram accompanies communities in their efforts to move out of poverty, address inequalities, build creative leaders and ensure sustained development. Today, Shanti Ashram serves over 250,000 people in urban, semi-urban and rural areas, including 70,000 vulnerable children across 100 villages in Tamil Nadu. A medical doctor and public health practitioner, Dr. Aram is deeply committed to the Gandhian spirit and convenes many initiatives that focus on public health & general healthcare, children's development, community cohesion and active peace building.

Dr Kezevino emphasized that often religion is seen as a part of the problem. However, this premise is being challenged at the local and community levels. During the most recent Covid-19 pandemic, we saw how religious communities were in the forefront serving people, serving one another and serving communities. The desire for religion, religious organizations and people of faith to be in dialogue goes back many years and we can find multiple moments in history where we can trace this aspiration to concrete efforts. The desire to be in dialogue and to find common ground has a very long timeline.

The movement of inter-religious dialogue started with organizations that bring people at multiple levels to be in dialogue. These organizations address contemporary issues in order to explore their

faith in action. Another reason behind the creation of inter-religious dialogue is that dialogue is equally valuable when people meet in safe and respectful spaces. By meeting on concrete issues, it allows for us to move from theological interpretation to finding common ground. This is the *purpose of interfaith dialogue*: to find common ground that allows us to be respectful of distinct differences and diversity, and yet find common ground to see how we can work together. Finally, she mentioned the importance of ethics, moral education and value-based practices within the interfaith dialogue.

The role of the State in the inter-religious dialogue is very significant, it needs to be a respectful partner and to facilitate, enable and co-create these spaces. Finally, her last comment was related to the community and it's vital and positive role in the field of interfaith dialogue in bringing in women and young people. A hierarchy of global to local value also applies in the new landscape of collaboration and cooperation. The global being the most valued and the local being the smallest or least valued.

Dr Bakary Sambe, Regional Director, Timbuktu Institute, African Center for Peace Studies

Dr Bakary Sambe is a teacher–researcher at Gaston Berger University in St Louis (Senegal). Sambe's current work focuses on endogenous strategies, cross-border dynamics and experimenting with agile approaches in crisis zones. An expert working with the United Nations, European Union, African Union, etc., he has notably designed and led advocacy for the establishment of the regional group for the prevention and fight against radicalization of the G5 Sahel (CELLARD), assisted in the process of developing national strategies in Niger, Burkina Faso and the Central African Republic, and produced the first manual of good resilience practices.

Dr Bakari Sambe took the floor discussing radicalization, extremism and interfaith dialogue in Africa. He reported that during the last meeting, he asked what *are the causes of radicalization and what are the solutions*? One answer received was that the most significant part of our conflict and radicalization is the combination of arrogance on the part of the unjust and ignorance on the part of the victim. African countries were marked by French secularism, and our society is purely religious. As a result, how can we disconnect people from their belief systems so that they can express themselves freely? Learning from this failure, we tried to work with religious and traditional legitimates in order to construct peace and dialogue. Indigenous initiatives must be recognized for the dignity of their cultural and religious approaches, Dr Sambe stressed. Secularism does not mean denying the place of the religious in our society. **We risk the clash of ignorance rather than the clash of civilizations.**

He affirmed that Africa is becoming a real international community based on vulnerability. Vulnerability makes us equal: vulnerability towards diseases, like Covid-19, vulnerability towards insecurity and vulnerability to our world.

In addition, he observed that the main topic of the panel event is not just about the dialogue between Muslims and Christians, but also about how to pick tolerance, how to teach dialogue as well as how different religions can discuss and understand each other's beliefs.

QUESTIONS AND ANSWERS SESSION

Question: *Two of the speakers touched upon the role of States, however, Prof. Petito touched upon the system of governance. He mentioned democracy and he related what happens to all the fields that you have mentioned to how democratic a particular state is. So, am I safe to assume then that the more democratic a country is the greater attention and freedom and respect for these rights, or put it conversely, are there any autocratic regimes that allow these types of freedoms?*

Prof. Fabio Petito, Religion & International Affairs, University of Sussex; Head of "Religions and International Relations" Programme, ISPI: In this context clearly, democracy features sides but now I think that actually the issue of inter-religious dialogue and collaboration is something that can have many positive outcomes in many different contexts where the governance does not need necessary to be the liberal democratic one that applies in the Council of Europe context.

Question: *Is there an imperative to include women in the language of interfaith dialogue, this is an evident weakness in the Catholic Muslim bridge building, as both are deeply patriarchal and built on the subordination of women and girls?*

Dr. Kezevino Aram, President of Shanti Ashram, India: It is a challenge for religious communities to change the course of their leadership styles not just in the Catholic and Muslim traditions, every religious tradition had that issue. If you bring traditional leadership, it will be mostly men, older men and men who already have had investment in leadership. This will require for us to work very precisely with women. I am a lay woman; I have a leadership role in my community and I have come up and played leadership roles in inter-religious dialogue as well. It requires an investment in women and their potential in leadership. So, this is going to be a long-time effort, but I think we have to begin with children; children understand the language of equality so much better than others. It cannot be just an aspiration; we will have to bring constructive ways in which we can do that it is by giving slots so positive affirmation and reservation. It is by holding leadership space publicly accountable for its representation; and by preparing leaders, young people, and exposing them to religion. Not only religion, the Governments and the capitalistic world, all of them are equal guilty of this. This is a 21st century challenge that we have to work in.

For women to also believe that traditional leadership structures will have to be modified and adapted, that would require again a very important leadership initiative within interfaith dialogue to be able to integrate lay women and their experience and expertise into leadership roles.

Nazila Ghanea, UN Special Rapporteur on freedom of religion or belief: It is crucially important as I mentioned in my forthcoming report. Also, it speaks to the kind of event we are holding. We know that women and children are central to community life in religious belief communities. So, if we are holding actual projects, if we are enabling those voices to come forward, if the topic is not symbolism and only open to leaders then we will also even now hear from them.

Question: *How social media platforms could be doing more harm than good in fostering interfaith and intercultural understanding? Can and should these platforms be made more accountable if their actions lead to polarization, and how can this be achieved?*

Bakary Sambe, Regional Director, Timbuktu Institute, African Center for Peace Studies: In our daily work in Timbuktu as we try to take advantage from the social media, we have signed an agreement with Google and with Meta in order to have a good alliance: they have the technology, and we have the knowledge on how to prevent hate speak online and on how to moderate some platforms. In our Country buying a school is cheaper that a secondhand tank: we must invest in education, even online. We have to invest in education and in human capital. In Timbuktu we have created a YouTube channel to fight terrorism and extremism.

LESSONS LEARNED AND WAYS FORWARD

Lessons learned and ways forward

Introduction

The discussion of the panel event "Interfaith Dialogue: Creating and Sustaining Spaces of Encounter" highlighted an ever-growing recognition on the global stage of the critical relevance of faith in peace building. The term faith in the context of this discussion is understood broadly to include religion and non-confessional belief systems regardless of their status in specific legislatures. This incorporation extends the conversation beyond religious denomination and places a focus on values. Panellist Rev. Sören Lenz, Co-chair of the Interreligious & Interconvictional Dialogue Committee, Council of Europe, emphasized this notion; since values are what we base our deeds and stand up for regardless of the circumstances, they provide a robust starting point to find common ground and build understanding. In that sense, interfaith dialogue holds a far-reaching potential to answer cross-cutting issues beyond the sphere of religious discrimination and conflict. Panellist Prof. Fabio Petito, Head of the "Religions and International Relations" Programme at the Italian Institute for International Political Studies equally highlighted that religion and faith also embody values such as forgiveness and reconciliation, which are not inherent to the state, and therefore offer invaluable resources to advance peace.

The significant disappearance of faith from international relations and formal peace processes appeared as a feature of an essentially secular model dominated by European political culture[1]. But as Fabio Petito explains, the last-standing disregard for religion and interfaith dialogue is now petering out. The expectation that 'modernization' would wither away proved entirely false.

As of 2022, discrimination and repression based on religion or belief has risen in many parts of the world, and religion remains a central element in many conflicts[2]. The COVID-19 pandemic has also had adverse effects on religious freedom globally[3]. Conversely, religiously unaffiliated people face a growing amount of harassment in 27 countries[4]. The call for increased engagement between states, non-state actors, and faith groups has never been so strident.

Religious communities have always taken an active role in promoting dialogue, mutual understanding and human rights within and among communities[5]. Moreover, religious groups have been major actors of social change and civil rights advocacy[6].

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[1] Baderin, M. A. (2010). Religion and international law: Friends or foes? *SSRN Electronic Journal*. https://doi.org/10.2139/ssrn.1621375

[2] 2022 Annual Report on International Religion Freedom (April 2022) U.S. Commission On International Religious Freedom, https://www.uscirf.gov/sites/default/files/2022%20Annual%20Report.pdf

[3] Ibid.

[4] Crawford, S., & Villa, V. (2023, January 27). *Religiously unaffiliated people face harassment in a growing number of countries*. Pew Research Center. https://www.pewresearch.org/fact-tank/2023/01/27/religiously-unaffiliated-people-face-harassment-in-a-growing-number-of-countries/

[5] Coward, H., & Smith, G. S. (Eds.). (2004). *Religion and Peacebuilding*. State University of New York Press.

[6] Hutchison, E. D. (2012). Spirituality, religion, and progressive social movements: Resources and motivation for social change. *Journal of Religion & Spirituality in Social Work*, *31*(1–2), 105–127. https://doi.org/10.1080/15426432.2012.647891

Faith in Societies

Religious and spiritual diversity is without a doubt a source of richness in our societies. Scherto Gill, Director of Global Humanity for Peace Institute explained in her panel statement that "to understand (others) is to comprehend a web of meanings", thus the complexity of our diversity cannot be overstated and merits reflection. Little can actually be assumed about one's beliefs and behaviors based solely on their religious or non-religious denomination. A survey conducted by Prof. Abby Day among a mostly Christian population in the UK showed that people's divergence on specific beliefs about morality, death, and the supernatural did not always coincide with their divergence in religious identity. For Prof. Day, asserting one's religious identity is a means of claiming one's cultural heritage while concurrently excluding members of other social, religious or ethnic groups. Beliefs can be used to exclude vulnerable groups like women and children and to emphasize the significance of various social relationships[7]. At the same time, faith contains and shores ideas of moral and ethical precepts that are regarded as universal truths, majorly influencing perceptions and behaviors[8]. What has been coined *The Golden Rule* : to do good to others and not harm them, is a fundamental universal principle among all major religions[9]. Faith also manifests in a universal way in the face of common struggles of the human experience and has a functional quality. Participation in religious or spiritual practice was shown effective to address, for example, issues of drug and alcohol abuse[10].

As our panellists have indicated, faith exists in public life as well as in the private sphere. In politics, religious and ethnic cleavages factor into voting behavior and party systems, even in liberal democracies that are usually perceived as secular[11]. Across nations, varying degrees of religiosity imbibe political life. The harnessing of internal resources, such as the media, power networks, financial assets, or resource rent, by established religious communities to undertake political action[12] ultimately shapes the daily lives of all citizens. Outside of formal political fora, faith groups and communities garner civic engagement and, in many contexts, play an important role in organizing public life.

Interfaith dialogue and freedom of religion in international relations

At the heart of interfaith dialogue is the freedom of religion and belief (as well as the freedom of conscience and thought); a right enshrined in international law which provides a common set of norms and standards across nations. Article 18 of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights[13] first established *"Everyone has the right to freedom of thought, conscience and religion; this right includes freedom to change his religion or belief, and freedom, either alone or in community with others and in*

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[7] Day, A. (2013). *Believing in belonging: Belief and social identity in the modern world*. Oxford University Press.

[8] Jeffries, V. (1999). The integral paradigm: The truth of faith and the social sciences. *The American Sociologist*, *30*(4), 36–55. https://doi.org/10.1007/s12108-999-1022-6

[9] Deutsch, E., & Hick, J. (1990). An interpretation of religion: Human responses to the transcendent. *Philosophy East & West*, *40*(4), 557. https://doi.org/10.2307/1399358

[10] Grim, B. J., & Grim, M. E. (2019). Belief, behavior, and belonging: How faith is indispensable in preventing and recovering from substance abuse. *Journal of Religion and Health*, *58*(5), 1713–1750. https://doi.org/10.1007/s10943-019-00876-w

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[13] https://www.un.org/en/about-us/universal-declaration-of-human-rights

public or private, to manifest his religion or belief in teaching, practice, worship and observance." In 1960, the Commission on Human Rights and the Economic and Social Council mandated a *Study of Discrimination in the Matter of Religious Rights and Practices[14]*, which alerted the international community on the alarming human rights violations related to religion and belief. Later on, the ICCPR also contained provisions on freedom of religion including limitations and coercion[15]. Finally the landmark Declaration on the Elimination of All Forms of Intolerance and of Discrimination Based on Religion or Belief[16] was adopted in 1981. No process has been engaged to draft a legally binding document following the Declaration. Instead, a Special Rapporteur mandate was created for the purpose of monitoring and promoting the implementation of freedom of religion. The three major regional human rights conventions also secure freedom of religion with a restrictive interpretation of limitations[17]. Most recently, the Muslim world gathered to issue a call for tolerance in the Marrakesh Declaration on the rights of Religious Minorities in Predominantly Muslim Majority Communities.

Any form of dialogue would ideally place each interlocutor on equal footing, on the basis of this fundamental freedom. It is therefore useful to understand the place, history and significance of this principle within the human rights corpus. This ultimately brings the question of how religion and faith is conceptualized in international relations.[18] [19] As mentioned earlier, religion and belief are seen as a matter of individual choice that manifests in public life, thus entailing a collective dimension to freedom of religion or belief. It also acknowledges that individuals may adhere to religious communities or groups with which other religious and secular entities interact. Article 18 of the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights makes this notion explicit: "*This right shall include freedom to have or to adopt a religion or belief of his choice, and freedom, either individually or in community with others and in public or private*". This collective dimension is especially relevant because it distinguishes religious groups and communities as distinct actors and subjects of international law and politics. The ways in which these groups are identified, recognized and categorized subsequently shapes our approach to religious freedom and to the fight against discrimination. While many religions are organized and exert a strong form of identification, non-believers and non-confessional faiths do not enjoy the same representation in multilateral dialogue[20].

In international politics, Elizabeth Sahkman Hurd theorized that religion exists within the narrative of the "two-faces of faith", one that represents harmful manifestations of faith (extremism, sectarianism) which require surveillance, and another that can be leveraged to promote public good. In that sense, religion is transformed into a separate and defining social factor that shapes social order. Subjects of law and political negotiations are identified based on adherence to a recognized faith group and managed as such. Hurd argues that this approach reduces complex and multidimensional

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[14] Arcot Krishnaswami, Special Rapporteur of the Sub-Commission on Prevention of Discrimination and Protection of Minorities. United Nations, New York. (1960). *Study of Discrimination in the Matter of Religious Rights and Practices*. Retrieved from https://www.ohchr.org/sites/default/files/Documents/Issues/Religion/Krishnaswami_1960.pdf

[15] Article 18 https://www.ohchr.org/en/instruments-mechanisms/instruments/international-covenant-civil-and-political-rights

[16]https://www.ohchr.org/en/instruments-mechanisms/instruments/declaration-elimination-all-forms-intolerance-and-discrimination

[17] This includes the African Charter on Human and People's Rights, the American Convention on Human Rights and the European Convention on Human Rights. Also see the Arab Human Rights Charter and the ASEAN Human Rights Declaration.

[18] Scolnicov, A. (2010). *The right to religious freedom in international law: Between group rights and individual rights*. London, England: Routledge.

[19] Bielefeldt, H. (2012). Freedom of religion or belief--A human right under pressure. *Oxford Journal of Law and Religion*, *1*(1), 15–35. doi:10.1093/ojlr/rwr018

[20] Hurd, E. S. (2015). Beyond religious freedom. In *Beyond Religious Freedom*. Princeton University Press.

socio-economic, ethnic and historical issues of human rights violation to a too unstable and vague category of "religion". Nonetheless, the international community has found it increasingly pressing to address discrimination based specifically on religion or belief.

Ms. Nazila Ghanea, Special Rapporteur on freedom of religion or belief, pointed out that the international community first struggled to come to agreement on this principle and concentrated it's efforts on discrimination based on race first. Ghanea and other experts posit that this reluctance came from the contentious right to *change* religion. It could also endanger power structures since many regimes draw their legitimacy from their position in the religious order. Some nations were wary it would disrupt social cohesion and invite proselytism, which is protected in its basic form by freedom of information, freedom of expression and freedom of speech[21].

Religion and interfaith dialogue plays a more important role than ever in diplomacy. Huntington's 'clash of civilization' theory[22] states that cultural and religious differences between the West and the Muslim world will be the primary cause of conflict in the 21st century. Largely criticized and dispelled by scholars, this rhetoric pervaded in world politics post-9/11 and still informs the discourse of populist parties in all corners of the world[23]. Out of this theoretical assumption, many states position themselves as champions of civilizational dialogue in order to cultivate positive relations and, in that process, place themselves as guardians of religious institutions and faith. They gain a role of intermediary between other powers and their kin and subsequently fortify their sacred cultural capital on the global and regional stage.[24]

Faith orients international development and humanitarian aid as well. For international development, faith-based organizations possess a remarkable capacity to (1) develop networks and perform outreach sometimes more efficiently than governments attract funding, likely because they inspire a sense of trust and solidarity across borders and cultural or ethnic divisions.

A study found that out of all US-based development organizations, 59% of them were faith-based. For humanitarian aid, faith-based organizations.

The State : between neutrality and faith engagement

In secular regimes, the relationship of the state to faith is delicate. The view that religion can undermine a regime, whether that be a democratic one or not, may bleed into state policies, leading to discrimination and erasure. The democratic transition in Indonesia provides an edifying counter example[25] : the secular and religious political actors were initially in disagreement on the role of Islam in the new government. Both eventually accepted that Pancasila, the core philosophy of the state, would represent the core values of Islam while guaranteeing freedom to choose one's religion and not forcing citizens to abide by one single form of Islamic practice. Regarding ideological divergences

[21] Bielefeldt, H., Ghanea, N., & Wiener, M. (2017). *Freedom of religion or belief: An international law commentary*. Oxford University Press.
[22] Huntington, S. P. (2002). *The clash of civilizations: And the remaking of world order*. Simon & Schuster.
[23] Haynes, J. (2019). Introduction: The "clash of civilizations" and relations between the west and the Muslim world. *The Review of Faith & International Affairs*, *17*(1), 1–10. https://doi.org/10.1080/15570274.2019.1570756
[24] Bettiza,G.(2020). States, Religions, And Power: Highlighting The Role Of Sacred Capital In World Politics. Berkley Center For Religion, Peace & World Affairs Georgetown University.
[25] Barton, G., Yilmaz, I., & Morieson, N. (2021). Authoritarianism, democracy, Islamic movements and contestations of Islamic religious ideas in Indonesia. *Religions*, *12*(8), 641. https://doi.org/10.3390/rel12080641

between religion and national law, the topics of women's and LGBTQ+ right quickly come to mind. Bridging these perceived incompatibilities requires engaging the multitude of identities within faith-groups. Dana L.Eck reported the experience of a civil society initiative in anticipation for the 20004 US presidential election[26]:

> On September 2004 the Pluralism Project gathered at the National Press Club representatives of national women's organizations, both religious and secular, that were actively involved in electoral education. They included representatives of Protestant, Catholic, and Jewish organizations, as well as the Muslim Women's League and the Sikh Coalition. At the end of the day, Sammie Moshenberg summed up some of the concerns of the membership of the National Council of Jewish Women and saw them present in the agendas of other women's groups as well: ''Childcare, work-family issues, domestic violence, school prayer and vouchers, abortion rights, gun control, peace in the Middle East, international family planning, judicial nominations, among others: these are the issues that Jewish women care about. And it's striking that theseare these issues that Sikh women care about that Muslim women care about, Christian women care about, Buddhist women care about.''

Recalling Hurd's theory of "harmful religion", states' attitude towards faith is too often to impose limitations on the grounds of security and defense, or social cohesion. Ms. Ghanea reminds us that these are not valid grounds. In spite of article 18(3) of the ICCPR, which states : Art. 18(3): "*Freedom to manifest one's religion or beliefs may be subject only to such limitations as are prescribed by law and are necessary to protect public safety, order, health, or morals, or the fundamental rights and freedoms of others*", the Human Rights Committee General comment 22 details that : "paragraph 3 of article 18 is to be strictly interpreted: restrictions are not allowed on grounds not specified there, even if they would be allowed as restrictions to other rights protected in the Covenant, such as national security"[27].

Many of the panellists asserted that, while the state should have a role in interfaith dialogue, it should be that of a facilitator rather than a manager. Interviews with religious leaders and interfaith activists echo the same view: "It [government's involvement] becomes too formal, too political, too much red tape"[28]. according to one religious leader in Canada. The involvement of government agencies in meetings, for example, can reduce trust and prevent individuals from speaking freely if their beliefs do not align with those prescribed by the state[29].

States also play a big role in funding interfaith encounter. While interfaith dialogue is widely accepted as one of the most effective counter-terrorism measures, states spend far more on restrictive,intrusive

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[26] Eck, D. L. (2007). American Religious Pluralism : In T. Banchoff (Ed.), *Democracy and the New Religious Pluralism* (p. 243). Oxford University Press.

[27] a digest on freedom of religion and belief : https://www.ohchr.org/en/special-procedures/sr-religion-or-belief/international-standards#18

[28] Agrawal, S., & Barratt, C. (2014). Does proximity matter in promoting interfaith dialogue? Journal of International Migration and Integration, 15(3), 567–587. https://doi.org/10.1007/s12134-013-0295-3

[29] Abu-Nimer, M. (2021). Challenges in Peacebuilding Evaluation, Voices from the Field. In P. Brodeur & M. Abu-Nimer (Eds.), *Evaluating Interreligious Peacebuilding and Dialogue* (p. 25). Walter de Gruyter.

or punitive strategies[30]. Faith groups and religious minority groups in particular, just like the rest of civil society, are among the first and most severely hit sectors during recession. The COVID-19 pandemic resulted in very limited resources for civil society groups. Ms. Kezevino Aram, President of Shanti Ashram, reminded us in the panel discussion that interfaith dialogue must be viewed as a continuum rather than a temporary band-aid solution to a crisis. In this sense, funding should be appropriately stable. Highly dependent on short term funding[31], faith-based organizations grapple to expand their activities to fit a long-term approach. To strike a balance in state engagement with faith, one might think in terms of top-down versus hands-off approach. On the one hand, a top-down model in which the state oversees dialogue can be a guarantee of neutrality. On the other, a hands-off approach implicitly encourages the majority faith to initiate dialogue with minorities, "de facto entrusting interfaith initiatives to other stakeholders than the state, and thereby establishing a pluricentric governance network"[32].

Faith in action at all levels

Dialogue should be fostered at all levels, in varying degrees of formality. At the community level, dialogue has been kept vibrant by a variety of traditions and innovative initiatives. Our guest Ms. Aram saluted the work of organizations like Religion for Peace, for their work in bridging communities with decision-makers on the global stage. Still, community practices are not valued enough and their transmission to national or international platforms remains challenging. Speaking of the Sahel region, Mr. Bakary Sambe, Regional Director the Timbuktu Institute and African Center for Peace Studies, explained that " there is a gap between the international approach and the local perception, which has sometimes seriously undermined the very spirit of cooperation in a region undergoing rapid change." A Western institutional model for dialogue has a number of serious limitations[33]. First, a lack of literacy and knowledge about traditional and indigenous forms of religiosity. Second, over representation of religious elites and, in contrast, under representation of religious communities that do not project an image of influence. Third, taking for granted certain systemic inequalities and socioeconomic factors that undermine dialogue. For example, many African Independent Churches are excluded from national and regional ecumenical bodies in Africa because they have not been recognized by Western-established churches.

A multi-level approach to interfaith dialogue would include a broader set of actors, including local governments and traditional leaders. Mar Griera of the University of Barcelona gives an account of the case of Llieda in Spain,which shows an interesting attempt at locally hosted dialogue among religions, good practices and detrimental attitudes[34]:

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[30] Everett, S. S. (2018). Interfaith dialogue and faith-based social activism in a state of emergency: Laïcité and the crisis of religion in France. *International Journal of Politics Culture and Society*, *31*(4), 437–454. https://doi.org/10.1007/s10767-018-9291-0

[31] See n(30)

[32] Paulsen Galal, L., Lund Liebmann, L., & Nordin, M. (2018). Routes and relations in Scandinavian interfaith forums: Governance of religious diversity by states and majority churches. Social Compass, 65(3), 329–345. https://doi.org/10.1177/0037768618787239

[33] Building bridges and trust through interfaith relations in Africa: The role of African indigenous religious and cultural values. (2020). *International Journal of African and Asian Studies*. https://doi.org/10.7176/jaas/66-06

[34] Griera, M. (2020). Governing Religious Diversity Through Interreligious Initiatives: Afinities, Ambiguities and Tensions. In A. Körs, W. Weisse, & J.-P. Willaime (Eds.), *Religious Diversity and Interreligious Dialogue*. Springer International Publishing.

With the support and advice of 'interreligious experts' from the local UNESCO Association, [Xavier Saez– a local councilor] decided to establish a municipal assembly of religions. The initial idea was to create a forum where all the city's religious groups would be represented, and which would provide a space for religious leaders to talk and get to know and trust one other. The Assembly was also intended to be a 'consultative committee' for the city's religious affairs. Several religious representatives were appointed and an 'interfaith professional' was invited to help in the chairing and organization of the meetings. [...] On the one hand, the Municipal Religious Assembly is used as an instrument to make the 'good contribution' of religions to public life more visible and to foster 'dialogue' between religious communities. To some extent, it resonates with the ideal of religions contributing to a liberal democratic public sphere. On the other hand, the City Council has sought to regulate religion by removing important decisions from the jurisdiction of the Assembly. Moreover, most religion-related policy decisions have been made without clear justification or without a formal and explicit program of consultation–as was the case with the full-face veil ban.

Ms. Aram illustrated in her statement how the concept of faith in action allows us to step away from theoretical considerations about the substance of faith and base dialogue on concrete social issues that demand to be addressed. These include issues of universal relevance such as climate change, disarmament, agriculture, as well as locally specific problems. In fact, in many countries, faith-based organizations are the most widespread and efficient institutional aid for the poor[35]. In this way, faith groups take on an active role and reflect the interests and values of their communities. Specifically, women and young persons are particularly active in spaces of faith. Although studies find no clear difference in religiosity between men and women[36] [37], it appears that minority groups that are historically pushed away (because of their gender, age, ethnicity…) from participating in dialogue wish to claim their place in discussions and demand social justice through faith.

Indeed, faith-based organizations of all beliefs unite and are one of the driving forces behind impactful social movements. Capable of eliciting powerful emotions and speaking to a community in an authentic and deeply effective way[38], faith often motivates people to rise up for social change. Religious institutions are also experienced in leadership and know how to manage a network of people[39].

In order to further promote interfaith dialogue, our speakers specified that it must not be restricted to high-profile meetings between world leaders but can take place within communities, and in daily life.

The link between health and faith, for example, is as strong as it is old. Faith has always been concerned with the health of individuals and communities, as the relationship to the body and its

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[35] Heist, D., & Cnaan, R. (2016). Faith-based international development work: A review. *Religions*, *7*(3), 19. https://doi.org/10.3390/rel7030019

[36] Hadi Kusuma, J., & Susilo, S. (2020). Intercultural and religious sensitivity among young Indonesian interfaith groups. Religions, 11(1), 26. https://doi.org/10.3390/rel11010026

[37] Merdjanova, I. (2016). Overhauling Interreligious Dialogue for Peacebuilding. *Occasional Papers on Religion in Eastern Europe*, *36*(1).

[38] see n(6)

[39] Ibid

sanctity is a concept almost all faiths possess. Faith groups have played a role in health care advocacy, community outreach and information[40].

Another important aspect of the conversation is 'interfaith' dialogue, or harnessing faith to create peace within a religious community; an essential part of engaging in dialogue with others. A case in study [41] looks at interfaith mediation between farmers and herdsmen in Bauchi State, Nigeria, where Islam is the majority religion. Three aspects of the mediation were identified as determinant to its success: (1) religious groups engaged with non-religious groups in the mediation process, (2) concrete solutions, such as the construction of a dam, eased the dispute, (3) training was provided to both parties on how to peacefully negotiate with the other side.

Indeed, all of our distinguished speakers in these discussions placed a special emphasis on education as a highly promising tool to facilitate interfaith dialogue and foster peace. While the notion of learning may seem straightforward, it can be a transformative experience[42] that tackles interpersonal communication, a sense of self, on top of learning about others. It is worth remembering that education takes place not only in school, but also in the media, in companies, and within the public sector. Every area in which education is accessible is a safe area for dialogue, and a haven for building peace.

Recommendations and ways forward

1. Abandon the narrative of "harmful religion" or "harmful atheism" which suggests that certain religious identities are, in essence, a threat to democracy, security, or development, especially in the political sphere.
2. Depoliticize interfaith dialogue. In order for states to provide sustainable spaces for encounter, facilitation should be considered as public service provision.
3. Acknowledge pluralism within confessional groups and promote authentic representation in dialogue processes by inviting women, young people, or non-orthodox branches of faith to the discussion table.
4. Address historical, socioeconomic and cultural factors of divide in interfaith dialogue and acknowledge the intersection of religious identity with other forms of identity. While centering faith can be a unifying factor, other factors of conflict should be addressed simultaneously.
5. Promote engagement with a broader set of actors in the fields of education, healthcare, economy and sustainable development in particular.
6. Integrate principles of dialogue and mutual understanding into education and educate on the diversity and plurality of faith and beliefs.

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[40] Levin, J. (2016). Partnerships between the faith-based and medical sectors: Implications for preventive medicine and public health. *Preventive Medicine Reports*, *4*, 344–350. https://doi.org/10.1016/j.pmedr.2016.07.009

[41] Saleh, M. (2022). Role of interfaith mediation centre in managing conflict between farmers and herdsmen in Bauchi State, Nigeria. *Journal of African History, Culture and Arts*, *2*(2), 110–123. https://doi.org/10.57040/jahca.v2i2.203

[42] Pope, E.M. *This Is A Head, Hearts, And Hands Enterprise'" Interfaith Dialogue And Perspective Transformation*

WRITTEN CONTRIBUTIONS SUBMITTED BY THE PANELISTS

Ms. Nazila Ghanea, UN Special Rapporteur on freedom of religion or belief

What are the challenges and opportunities to support platforms and policies that foster interfaith dialogue and reconciliation and address issues of distrust, xenophobia and discrimination among people of different beliefs and backgrounds? What is the role of governments in creating and sustaining those spaces and what type of support countries and civil society need in this regard?

In 1962, the UN General Assembly, "deeply disturbed by the manifestations of discrimination based on differences of race, colour and religion still in evidence throughout the world", requested the drafting of two declarations and two conventions on the elimination of racial discrimination and religious intolerance.

This eventually led to the adoption of the UN "Declaration on the Elimination of All Forms of Intolerance and of Discrimination Based on Religion or Belief" on 25 November 1981, without a vote.

Concern that a mechanism was required to ensure and follow-up on advancing the objectives of the 1981 Declaration, led the UN Commission on Human Rights to decide in resolution 1986/20 to appoint a UN Special Rapporteur to advance this thematic area on 10 March 1986. We have had 6 rapporteurs since, over the last 37 years.

The most recent resolution 49/5 of March 2022, the Human Rights Council extended the mandate for a further three-year period. The resolution also expressed deep concern at emerging obstacles to the enjoyment of the right to freedom of religion or belief, urged States to take appropriate action and to promote mutual understanding, through education, and stressed the importance of dialogue in all its forms. It expressed concern at acts of violence, the rise of religious extremism, incidents of religious hatred, discrimination, intolerance and violence, manifested through derogatory stereotyping, negative profiling and the stigmatization of individuals on the basis of their religion or belief, and attacks on religious places and sites and the vandalism of cemeteries.

Mutual understanding and the promotion of dialogue is critical, if we are going to reduce the violations, the grave incidents, the attacks, the prejudices that are engulfing us all. These target people for their religion or belief, discriminate against them and their co-believers, violate their rights and their freedom to believe, and those attacks are sometimes even perpetuated in the name of religion.

Human rights law recognises States as holding legal obligations for ensuring human rights, but this doesn't take away from the responsibility of others and of non-State actors. In fact, it is hard to imagine how States can *fully* guarantee access to, and enjoyment of, freedom of religion or belief without also giving attention to the responsibilities of other actors, especially of religious or belief leaders, communities, and actors.

In many States, religion or belief is deeply entangled and overlapping with political actors. The political leaders are sometimes also the religious leaders, or the religious leaders and religious functionaries are state officials, or they are state employees, or their work is highly directed by the State. In such contexts, the legal obligations of the State are directly applicable to the religious actors.

Regardless of whether there is such close proximity between political and religious leaders and actors, or there is a greater distance between the political and religious or belief sphere, the challenge of advancing reconciliation, dialogue and understanding remains and the role of the State and of religious or belief leaders, communities and actors needs to be explored.

One arena in which both States and non-State actors have exerted effort to promote mutual understanding has been through interfaith dialogue and joint collaborations. We have engaged in

interfaith dialogue and exchanges for at least 130 years. How effective have we been and how can we improve on that track record?

On the part of the State, outreach to, and consultation with, religious or belief communities must be inclusive and recognize the different structures of leadership and representation that draws from within those communities and their beliefs, practices, convictions and autonomy.

Such engagement by States with religious or belief communities should not be exclusively restricted to the largest numerically, the most established, or the most politically or economically expedient. It cannot rest on majoritarianism, conventionality or reciprocity. In this way discrimination would be avoided and the circle of inclusion would continually be expanding and growing, breaking down more barriers, misunderstandings and prejudices.

On the part of religious and belief communities, we should examine the question of whether there is coherence between their formal engagement in occasional interfaith dialogues or projects and their internal messaging within the community. Do the statements of commitment and solidarity carry over into the education, teaching and practices called upon within the community? The real currency of religions and beliefs is text, interpretation and practice. These illustrate whether the spiritual and belief commitment to interfaith dialogue and collaboration is deep and congruent, or not. These illustrate if the formal positioning is underscored by a commitment to the equal validity of different religious and belief ways of life.

This congruence would make possible a genuinely shared commitment to upholding the sphere of conscience, a free environment for the journey of the exploration of meaning. If we are committed – not only legally and politically but also spiritually and religiously – to the responsibility of each to investigate truth and meaning for themselves, then we would respect this freedom and seek to make it truly accessible to all.

This is not a position of indifference towards matters of religion or belief, but it is framed by recognition that the task of each is to investigate reality and seek to live in accordance with what they are persuaded by, and to accord the same respect to the journey of others to do the same. This would allow a deep commitment and full recognition of the humanity of the other and respect for the path they have freely chosen to commit to in the realm of thought, conscience, religion and belief. This liberating framework would allow all followers to genuinely commit to this, not only for a few actors to formally voice such a message detached from their wider community.

With an ever-widening inclusion by the State on the one hand, and the deepening and spread of the commitment within the communities on the other, the potential of interfaith dialogue and collaboration could be greatly magnified and trust established. This would be in sharp contrast with a position that rests on belief in a privileged and exclusive access to truths. Such a position risks sustaining divisions that, in turn, may lead to conflict. Perhaps it is such divisions that still dominate in the mindset of rank-and-file believers, not allowing obstacles to hatred and violence to break down.

Prof. Fabio Petito, Religion & International Affairs, University of Sussex; Head of "Religions and International Relations" Programme, ISPI

What are some successful **programs and policies** that support interfaith and interreligious engagement on the international level (e.g., in global politics and foreign policy)?

What are the **key challenges** in introducing and implementing policies to promote positive relations between people of different religious and cultural backgrounds?

What **aspects of policies and programs** need to be strengthened to ensure interfaith dialogue is successfully incorporated as a strategic practice that facilitates combatting intolerance and promoting peaceful societies?

Too often religion seem to be on the side of extremism and nationalism and at the centre of a global scenario of conflict and insecurity. **Today policy makers around the world increasingly recognise that religion and, in particular inter-religious dialogue and collaboration, can be part of the solution and a strategic resource for peace building, the strengthening of human rights and the advancement of sustainable development**. "Religious engagement" is emerging as one of the most promising fields of strategic and creative thinking in which governments and international organizations can work collaboratively (in partnership) with religious organizations to achieve common goals. Despite greater recognition of its political impact, however, religious and inter-religious actors are still rarely welcome at the leading global policy tables and therefore today's initiative by the GCHRAGD is to be welcomed and praised.

This recognition has led to the creation of new roles and offices in ministries of foreign affairs of countries such as France, the US, the United Kingdom, Canada, Germany, Switzerland, the Netherlands, Norway, Italy and Hungary as well as new international initiatives such as the UN-led "Fez Process", which has produced a *plan of action* for *religious leaders* to prevent incitement to violence (UN, 2017) and a global platform like *The International Partnership on Religion and Sustainable Development* (PaRD), which is bringing together governments, international organizations and religious actors to harness the positive impact of religion in sustainable development and to promote, for example, peaceful and inclusive societies. In general, a more focused consideration of the role of religion in development has started to trickle down throughout the UN system[43] in the acknowledgment that engaging religious leaders and communities can promote sustainable development and more effective humanitarian assistance, as also the EU has recognized in some recent policy documents and the Council of Europe last year by approving the Strasbourg Principle for inter-religious dialogue to foster peace and human rights through the prism of inter-religious collaboration.[44]

All these developments highlight the potential positive impact of inter-religious dialogue and collaboration for our growing diverse and plural societies in all the stages of the peace-building process to strengthen inclusive and sustainable societies in the spirit of SGD16. It also appears to recognize the post-secular insight that religions actually possess resources – such as forgiveness and

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[43] See the UN Interagency Task Force on Engaging Faith-Based Actors for Sustainable Development Annual Report of 2016 & 2017.
[44] See the European Parliamentary Research Service (2017) '*Religion and the EU's external policies*: Increasing engagement'.

reconciliation – that states do not and, that therefore, in situation of tension and conflict collaboration between different religious communities involved is vital.

This new policy orientation is emerging in a context of what I would call a new era of inter-religious dialogue and collaboration at the local and global level: Inter-religious dialogue and collaboration can include a variety of forms of interactions ranging from theological exchanges to day-to-day socializing and common social action by different religious groups and individuals on specific social, economic or political issues (it can be a dialogue of life, dialogue of action, dialogue religious experience and dialogue of theological exchange[45]). Some activities can be formal like high-level meetings between official representatives, often with a view to emphasizing commonalities, whereas others can be informal like grassroots initiatives at the local level, as in neighborhoods and schools. Inter-religious dialogue as a sustained, global practice is a relatively new phenomenon and has only significantly deepened over the last two decades. Probably, the most significant trend of this growth has seen inter-religious dialogue moving steadily from theology to practical collaboration with multi-religious collaboration focusing increasingly on pressing social and political issues.

A milestone of this new era of inter-religious dialogue is the 2019 historical *Document on Human Fraternity*, co-signed by Pope Francis and the Grand Imam of Al-Azhar, Sheikh Ahmed Al-Tayeb, with which the two religious leaders sent a powerful message in favor of political inclusion and against the discrimination of minorities, especially in countries where Islam or Christianity represent the majority religion: if we are all brothers, then we all need recognition and respect, including the right to participate in public life as citizens with full rights, freedoms and responsibilities. This unprecedented inter-religious initiative has scattered seeds of hope for unity in the Euro-Mediterranean world and opened a new era of interreligious dynamics that policymakers need to take seriously and engage with.

This is why in a recent report on [Human Fraternity and Inclusive Citizenship: Interreligious Engagement in the Mediterranean](#) we have put forward the idea of inter-religious engagement as a new policy framework that recognizes and amplifies these novel inter-religious dynamics. By "inter-religious engagement", I refer to the inter-religious, policy-oriented interactions between states and international organizations on the one hand, and religious and inter-religious actors, groups, coalitions, platforms and activities on the other. Inter-religious engagement is a new policy approach that amplifies these novel inter-religious dynamics through innovative government-religious partnerships aimed at achieving more inclusive and peaceful societies.

Among the forms of inter-religious dialogue and collaboration which carry the most potential in terms building peaceful and inclusive societies are those that recognize and respect the differences of the participants – way beyond the platitude of a vague, minimal, common denominator – and strive to involve "difficult" religious actors beyond the "**usual suspects**"(for example religious actors that have been involved in the inter-religious dialogue movements for decades). It is also interesting to note that inter-religious dialogue and collaboration represent arguably one of the most dynamic and promising areas of **active citizen participation and new socio-political leadership – especially among**

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[45] See The Pontifical Council for Interreligious Dialogue and Congregation for the Evangelization of Peoples, (1991) 'Dialogue and Proclamation: Reflections and Orientations on Interreligious Dialogue and the Proclamation of the Gospel of Jesus Christ', Vatican City.

young people and women – against the background of a contemporary scenario of democratic crisis marked by disengagement, disenchantment and a rejection of public responsibility and the search for the common good.

Of particular importance in this respect is the challenge for states to strike the appropriate balance between facilitating inter-religious dialogue and collaboration and, reaffirming the state's commitment to the principle of neutrality in matter of religion while recognizing the need to take into consideration the local cultural and historical backgrounds in a democratic society (as also the ECHR has recognised by developing the doctrine of margin of appreciation). Rather than seeking to lead or influence inter-religious engagement, **the primary role for states is to facilitate and provide an infrastructure or environment which would enable inter-religious engagement to take place**. The state can further provide financial or political support for inter-religious engagement activities; places within the state's purview, including schools, universities or museums, can provide ideal fora for inter-religious engagement activities. By facilitating inter-religious engagement in this way, states fulfil their obligations to secure the right to FoRB for all. If states, however, seek to operationalize inter-religious engagement in order to further a political agenda or legitimize differential treatment between religious communities, inter-religious engagement is unlikely to achieve its aims. Furthermore, inter-religious dialogue should not be high-jacked by governments and/or majority religions as an official public relations exercise to respond to criticisms of state and societal violations of FoRB in specific states.

Here it is worth noting that there is a certain scepticism in some policy and expert circles about the very usefulness of interreligious dialogue when dealing with violations of FoRB. This position, however, while pointing to some of the limitations of more-traditional forms of inter-religious dialogue, not only reproduces some of the well-rehearsed stereotypes and secular blind spots on religion (being elitist, exclusionary, uncritical, unaccountable) but also, more importantly, overlooks the remarkable and well-evidenced social and political effect in the last few decades of inter-religious dialogue and collaboration at all stages of peace-building. Furthermore, it does not take into account the most promising new trends and shifts in inter-religious actions, from theological exchanges to common social action, from global high levels to local grassroots, all very often driven by young people and women rather than the "usual" religious suspects. This can be seen in the impressive innovative inter-religious work – done, for example, on peace, by a Christian community such as the Community of Sant'Egidio, on active coexistence by a non-confessional/secular organization like *Coexister*, on Holy Sites by an NGO like Search for Common Ground.

There is an enormous, unexplored, repository of cultural and religious resources and arguments with which to advance HR and combat discrimination from *within and across* religious traditions. On the other, the idea rests on the appropriate form of engagement and partnership that states and international organizations can develop with inter-religious actors, groups, coalitions, platforms and activities in order to advance HR and foster the development of peaceful and inclusive societies. This complex process requires an improved level of **religious literacy** within government. Policy-makers should be able to understand the religious perspectives and constraints of religious actors in specific national–cultural contexts if inter-religious engagement strategies are to be successful. While this does require a degree of understanding of religious/theological doctrines, what is more important to this enterprise is an understanding of the sociocultural dimension of religion and its complex

embeddedness in the social fabric of societies, as well as the historical development of their specific forms of state–religious arrangements. In particular, a good mapping of the diversity and varieties of religious actors and practices in a specific national context is a necessary starting point for an improved religious literacy among policy-makers and for effective HR-promoting strategies.

The transition from an understanding of the political role of religion in global affairs as primarily that of a security problem, to an understanding of a more comprehensive engagement with religious communities on broader human development goals, is not easy, but it carries the promise of a new realistic politics of hope for peace and unity.

Let me conclude by quoting, to some extent in a surprising way, the French President Emmanuel Macron in his recent speech at International Meeting of Prayer for Peace meeting organized by the community of Sant'Egidio in Rome has said that against today's multiple socio-political crises all religions have an even stronger role to play in what he called the "must of resistance" (le devoir de la resistance) against any form of politics which doesn't respect the dignity of every human being as well as in fostering a message of universalism, which is not hegemonic and so much needed in our increasingly fragmented world. A striking but courageous and visionary call from the institutional representative of *laicitè* for new forms of innovative religious-secular partnerships for the common good in Europe and globally.

Dr Scherto Gill, Director of Global Humanity for Peace Institute; Senior Fellow and Executive Secretary, Guerrand-Hermès Foundation for Peace (GHFP)

Every heart sings a song, incomplete, until another heart whispers back. Those who wish to sing always find a song. At the touch of love everyone becomes a poet.

—Plato, *Symposium*

Introduction

Mutual understanding has become one of the major challenges for humanity.

On the one hand is the essentialist worldview which defines what there is, who we are, and what our purpose is in the world. These are found in religious scriptures, traditional beliefs and indigenous practices;

On the other hand, is the recognition of multiple perspectives and pluralistic ideas, including a total rejection of any foundational views that determine what there is and who we are (Rorty and other post-modernist thinkers).

In practice, people and communities tend to partake either the essentialist and the pluralist worldview. When we perceive others and the world from our particular lenses, we can find others impossible to understand.

In particular, ignorance of the values and beliefs that have influenced a particular community or society's ways of being life (religious, cultural and spiritual) can often result in a fear of the Other. Where the interests of our community are threatened by those who are different from us, e.g. immigrants, refugees and asylum seekers who escape from violence in pursuit of well-being in societies where locals are already struggling, people can engage in active Othering as a way of self-defence and self-protection. When such fear is instrumentalised for political gains, or for guaranteeing the elites' socio-economic advantages, there can be deliberately stirring distrust, rousing discrimination and inciting hatred, leading to not only just antagonism, demonisation of the Other, and but also violence in our discourses, attitudes, and actions.

One approach to discriminating against and demonising other people is through narratives. For instance, some politicians employ discriminating narratives, using incendiary language to describe people from these other groups; some select questionable facts and generate stories to hound, scapegoat and dehumanise entire groups of people. Equally, negative events tend to dominate media reporting. Even human rights-based narratives, intended to offer legal mechanism to safeguard passages for people in distress to enter a better space for life, can counterintuitively fuel negative attitudes towards the other (Drywood & Gray, 2019).

Individual and collective narratives are important. To comprehend is to understand a web of meanings, the contexts within which these meanings are constructed, and the interaction through

which understanding occurs. No doubt, narratives that we use to tell stories about different groups of people can have a huge impact on how we might regard them, relate to them and receive them into our communities. Demonising narratives are designed to portray some people as less human than others.

The question is therefore: "What might humanising narratives consist in?"
The answer to this question requires an underlying assumption that all persons are equally and non-derivatively valuable! This is the foundation of minimum equality amongst all people, regardless of who they are, where they are, what they believe in, or how they live our their values in the day-to-day.

However, as humans, especially as embodied and emplaced beings, we do not always have the capacity to see things from the perspectives of others (be it underpinned by religion, culture or worldview), nor even to appreciate that others can have values and practices particular to their histories and contexts. Therefore the claim that all people are equally real and non-derivatively valuable can serve as a corrective to this kind of partiality. It is a reminder that our experiences and perceptions are always partial and often egoistic in these ways.

In affirming this equality, we are not suggesting that one shouldn't care more about our local lives and livelihood. Rather we are asserting that, impersonally, people close to us are equally valuable as those who are distant from us, e.g. strangers. Therefore humanising narratives about others should start with this equality, and the recognition that we can be ignorant about others, but we should be willing to listen, to dialogue, and to learn from them about what constitutes their humanity.

Secondly, given that all persons are equally human, how should we perceive and receive our difference? Indeed, philosophers, theologians, thinkers, researchers and practitioners have long been advancing the idea that human difference or diversity is an important source of our enrichment.
From the ancient time, through commerce, migration, education, arts and culture, and other forms of encounter, communities and societies have experienced profound fusions of horizons, and mutual nourishing. Hence the conclusion in Hans-Georg Gadamer's phrase: *Dialogue that we are*. Being, living and becoming is always already an encounter, dialogue, and mutual enrichment. Any society that was closed to the outside world, that rejects differences, will find its people treating others as intruders, and invaders, and are vulnerable in front of difference.

Hence, listening, dialogue and learning are not mere tools to build new narratives, they are likewise, constituted in our way of being human together. To a certain extent, we may suggest that others and their difference, including religion, faith, cultural practices and spirituality, are, in part, comprised in our well-being.

How can we transform our narrative and see others and differences through religion, culture, spirituality and other worldviews as enrichment rather than as threat?

A lot of great ideas have already been offered by previous speakers. Therefore, I will only highlight a few additional ones based on the idea that transformative narratives must be humanising stories – they ought to provide opportunities for listening, dialogue and learning about what constitutes other

people's humanity; and they should have the potential of transcending differences, and alleviating our relationships with the other towards generative relations and towards caring.

Here are five key ideas. The first two ideas are aimed at creating spaces in formal education.

Education:

a. **Interreligious learning**:

In a book entitled "*Re-Defining Religious Education*", I have argued that the spiritual life/religious life partly constitutes human flourishing and that interreligious education can have an important role to play in enriching our values and practices, and in cultivating a spiritual way of being. We acknowledge the potential contribution that different religions and faith traditions can make toward a young person's spiritual growth, without asserting that spirituality is impossible independent of a religion.

Narratives, as part of the pedagogy, can encourage active and reflexive listening, in which the goal is not to criticize or defend but rather simply to see what the interpretation of the story has to say to us. Stories can bring out the Otherness and the religious, cultural and historical roots of such Otherness. Attending to narratives means that we can truly bring ourselves to a state of comprehension and openness. However, more important still is the idea that understanding through narrative requires application. As we engage in a conversation with an interpretive stance, we not only listen to what the narrative says but also apply it to our own context. In short, we speak back to it.

In interreligious education, different kinds of narratives can be helpful for young people to explore the transcendent reality. The narrative can be broadened to include stories, myths, personal accounts, (life) histories, ways of life, forms of art, symbolism, and more. There is a vast treasure of such narratives.

1) To begin, there are the sacred stories (from scriptures), which are often the life histories of those who received divine wisdom that then led to the founding of particular religions, such as the stories of Jesus, Guru Nanak, Confucius, and many more. All religions and faith traditions have inspiring sacred narratives, and they provide a wealth of meaning and can provide answers to questions such as "What is sacred?" "What are the meanings of the sacred stories?" and "How are these stories relevant to us today?" By engaging in sacred narratives, young people learn to understand that religious stories are multifaceted and subject to the interpretation of different communities, individuals, and historical periods. Sacred stories can often provoke rich debate and discussion within the classroom about the spiritual.

2) Then there are myths and other mystical narratives. These are symbolic tales of the distant past (often primordial times) that concern cosmology, belief systems, or rituals and can serve to guide our social actions and values. Often of a sacred nature, they are foundational or key narratives of some religions and are believed to be true from within the associated faith systems. Reading and understanding mystical narratives can evoke in the young person a recognition of the presence of the transcendent, the mystical, and the sacred. It can be spirit forming and world forming.

3) Furthermore, there is rich heritage of world literature that is concerned with personal transformation, often spiritual in a broad sense of the term. From Tagore to the *Bhagavad Gita*, from Milton to Dante, and from *The Little Prince* to the His Dark Materials trilogy, literature can offer young people an in-depth understanding of the spiritual and reveal that the self, others, and

the divine are the key elements within a definition of spirituality. Together with other emerging themes—for example, meaning, hope, connectedness, and beliefs and expressions of spirituality—literature can help young people understand that the nature of *God* or transcendent reality may take many forms. By being exposed to beautiful and artistic articulations of the transcendent in literature, young people can begin to consolidate their own experiences of the greater reality, as well as be empowered to launch their own explorations of the spiritual.

Thus interreligious education can be a container for many different individual stories to be shared with students. Where appropriate, teachers should have the courage to share their stories, including the possible struggles, doubts, questions, and profundity of their experiences. Equally, students should be given a space to tell their own stories.

b. **Ethical education as dialogue**: instead of teaching the foundational values of democracy to prepare students to assume responsibility for our political future, I have proposed to include ethical education as a feature of school's life, including

1) **Develop dedicated spaces in the curriculum for Ethical Education**, with a focus on nurturing listening, dialogue, collaborative learning and supporting young people's social, emotional, ethical and spiritual development.

2) **Actively seek ways to integrate the values and practices of Ethical Education** into the wider curriculum and culture of the school, including prioritising co-creation within the curriculum and empowering learners to take responsibility over their own learning, development and flourishing.

3) **Empower learners to act towards positively transforming narratives** by offering constructive opportunities for sharing with students who are different, visiting their communities and engaging and strengthening collaborative relationships through dialogue with key stakeholders (e.g., parents/families, faith actors and local community groups). Here intergenerational dialogue can be a great experience for students to learn to adopt humanising narratives when talking about and understanding others.

Community:
In Relational being: in Ken Gergen's book Relational Being, he proposes that the best way to understand each other is not through talking about the difference, but through co-action and community engagement. In the doing with and doing for each other, we learn about our difference and we integrate the different ways of being and doing as a form of enrichment.

Media:
There are many ways that media can be encouraged to provide inspirational narratives. Moving beyond shocking effects and sensation seeking, public and social media must reflect upon their responsibilities in shifting narratives towards humanising stories.

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How do we contribute to fostering positive relationships and collaboration between communities? And building more inclusive and peaceful societies?

1. Creating common spaces for encounter
2. Relational pedagogy in schools to embody and to cultivate the arts of positive relationships, including: the arts of valuing/appreciating diversity, the arts of dialogue, (listening, questioning, inquiring, agreeing and disagreeing); the arts of caring.
3. Community engagement as trust-building: collaborating on planting trees, communal gardens, festivals, cultural
4. Radical hospitality/radical love: love our neighbour, where everyone is a neighbour, mutual visit in religious sites, offering, making and sharing meals, inviting a stranger to into our practices of hospitality, and so forth
5. Cultivating openness and curiosity in organisations and in the community: fear is often acting upon our vulnerability and ignorance. Therefore recognising and accepting our vulnerability and ignorance is a starting point for becoming open to and curious about the strengths and weaknesses of our own traditions and practices, from which we can become open to and curious about other worldviews and practices
6. Critical capacities: be media savvy – recognising the kinds of discourse aimed at demonising the other; calling it out where
7. Resilience: Intergenerational dialogue offers an opportunity for communities to identify wisdom, practices and resources of resilience.

Rev Sören Lenz, Co-chair, Interreligious & Interconvictional Dialogue Committee, Conference of INGOS, Council of Europe

I.   Introduction

In April 2021, on the initiative of the European Buddhist Union (EBU) and the Conference of European Churches (CEC) - both with participatory status with the Council of Europe - the creation of the Committee for Inter-religious and Interconvictional Dialogue (CIRICD) was proposed together with seven other faith-based NGOs to the Conference of INGOs, and was adopted by a large majority.

II.   The Council of Europe (CoE)

The Council of Europe, with its 46 member States is the most important intergovernmental Human Rights organisation in Europe, with the European Court of Human Rights (ECHR) as legal instrument. It has standard setting function in ethical, democratic and rule of law issues. The three pillars of the Council of Europe are human rights, democracy and the rule of law. The Council of Europe has had working relations with international non-governmental organizations since 1952. This status was changed from consultative to participatory in 2003, and since 2016, the status is regulated by [Resolution (2016)3](#) of the Committee of Ministers. This Resolution sets out the rules for the granting of participatory status to INGOs, gives more information on the background of the status, what it represents, the conditions to be met by INGOs and the possibilities it gives to INGOs to co-operate with the Council of Europe.

III.   The IRICD Committee in the framework of the CoE

The IRICD Committee refers to the Parliamentary Assembly Recommendation 2080(2015) entitled "Freedom of Religion and living together in a democratic society". It strongly supports the recommendation for creation of a permanent platform for dialogue between representatives of religions and non-confessional organisations in the Council of Europe.

In the Lisbon treaty, the European Union has established a dialogue with Churches, religious associations or communities, philosophical and non-confessional organizations. More than half of the members of the Council of Europe are part of the EU and are therefore affected by this regulation.

It is therefore crucial that - in our view - the Committee of Ministers of the Council of Europe follows up the Parliamentary Assembly's Recommendation by creating a platform for dialogue. In today's world, genuine, inclusive and interfaith dialogue is under threat, with serious consequences (fears reinforced by conspiracy theories, anti-democratic propaganda, as well as by an amalgam of political and religious power-ambitions). Our aim is therefore to put into practice and live this urgent dialogue with our committee, as well as to compile, study and communicate to other actors the most successful practices.

However, a credible and constructive dialogue should not be limited to spiritual leaders. It must involve all parts of society and especially the "grassroots" at local level, be concretely inter-religious, inter-faith and inter-cultural in order to make a genuine difference.

IV.   Interconvictional – an inclusive neologism

The terms "inter-religious" and "interconvictional" have been deliberately chosen: "interconvictional" implies in this context the inclusion of ideological and humanistic organisations. Individuals follow they follow traditional or individually accepted values, a religion or a worldview that guide their orientations in all areas of life and at different levels of society. Our daily lives, including our relationships with others, are shaped by strong values that for our lives.

Strong values, in contrast to weak values, are values that one stands up for regardless of the circumstances. The daily actions of individuals are consciously or unconsciously based on these strong values and are influenced by them. Therefore, an open exchange and readiness to question them is indispensable for a peaceful society. These values are the motivation for people to get involved in society - positively or destructively.

V.   Education at the heart of dialogue

In liberal democracies, the separation of state and religion, freedom of conscience and freedom of belief is fundamental. Nevertheless, their organizational forms (churches, congregations, humanist associations etc.) play an important role in a civil society as they are instrumental in shaping the relationship of individuals to the world, state and society.

So states the German legal scholar Ernst-Wolfgang Böckenförde regarding the concept of freedom in a democratic state:

The liberal (German "freiheitlich"),[1] *secularized state lives by prerequisites which it cannot guarantee itself. This is the great adventure it has undertaken for freedom's sake. As a liberal state it can endure only if the freedom it bestows on its citizens takes some regulation from the interior, both from a moral substance of the individuals and a certain homogeneity of society at large. On the other hand, it cannot by itself procure these interior forces of regulation, that is not with its own means such as legal compulsion and authoritative decree…"* (translation S.L. after E-W Böckenförde, *Recht, Staat, Freiheit*, Suhrkamp, Frankfurt 2016 6. Auflage, p. 112).

Regulations from the interior are convictions, beliefs knitted to strong values. That's the core of democratic citizenship, that individuals are free to adopt them or not. Religions and worldviews are based on attitudes and convictions that directly concern the individual at an existential level. Action patterns and fundamental attitudes are based on values that are recognized as being of paramount importance. As a result, the transmission of knowledge cannot be purely factual, but also includes aspects such as the ability to abstract, to relate or to verbalize and relativisze one's own beliefs.

Expressiveness, self-reflection and self-relativization paired with self-awareness are the basic conditions for a fruitful dialogue that strives for tolerance and mutual recognition. To contribute to better understanding and tolerant coexistence, dialogue is fundamentally based on the education and training of those involved. Education therefore plays a key role in a much broader sense. Currently the aim of the Committee is to research and collect non-formal education and training programmes for dialogue formats. Exchange and sharing of inspiring dialogue practices is fostering mutual understanding and anti-discrimination for a more peaceful society and within religious and inter-faith organizations. The ability to dialogue and the freedom to dialogue are essential for a peaceful and

democratic society. They are protected by Article 9 of the European Convention on Human Rights (*which obliges states party to the Convention to respect and protect these freedoms, which also encompass the full range of people's beliefs*).Our Comity itself aims to be a living example of inter-religious and Interconvictional cooperation within the Council of Europe and beyond.

V. Conclusion

The social dynamics of our western modern world are based on optimizing resources, on innovation dynamics and on increasing the scope of its possibilities for action, both in terms of individual lifestyles and system structures. Convictions and faith are a matter of conscience, i.e. they are determined individually, yet they are expressed in communities and therefore have a public character. In doing so, they have - consciously or unconsciously - an influence on the shaping of moral and social behaviour of individuals and thus for society Thus religion, faith inspired organizations or humanist organizations contribute indirectly to the shaping of civil society, as they concern the whole human being as a free, self-determined and acting social being..

In dialogue, it is important to crystallize those overlaps that form the basis for human rights, tolerance and freedom of conscience in a democratic society. The religious communities therefore have a particularly responsible role to play with regard to their willingness to engage in dialogue. Education in the holistic sense has a supporting role to play here. Education in religions means not only the transmission of knowledge and rites, but also the education of the individual as a self-reliant being.

Dr Kezevino Aram, President of Shanti Ashram, India

Often religion is seen as a part of the problem. However, this premise is being challenged at the local and community levels. During the most recent Covid-19 pandemic, we saw how religious communities were in the forefront serving people, serving one another and serving communities.

I want to go back to this space of inter-religious dialogue from the global to the community, and from the community to the pan continental approach that we have today. This desire for religion, religious organizations and people of faith to be in dialogue goes back many years and we can find multiple moments in history where we can trace this aspiration to concrete efforts. In India, it was very a definitive and distinctive part of the freedom struggle, acknowledging that the country is home to many religious traditions and has welcomed many religious traditions from around the world. One of Mahatma Gandhi's deep commitments was to see the coming together of religious and faith communities in public space. We can go back to the encounter of Saint Francis and his journey to the Middle East.

This desire to be in dialogue and to find common ground has a very long timeline. In the last 20 to 30 years, we find that this space of interreligious dialogue is being acknowledged by the government, one societal pillar in a clearer way and slightly more respectful way.

With this background in mind, we can draw on three examples of how this movement for interreligious dialogue came to be:

1. In the 1940s the work of the one of the world's largest inter-religious organizations, **Religions for Peace**, was around the issue of nuclear disarmament. Religious communities came together and saw the work for disarmament both in their own nations and at the UN as a commitment to peace building. Religions for Peace has celebrated 50 years of its work and you see them continuing to bring people at multiple levels to be in dialogue and to find contemporary issues that allow them to explore faith in action.

2. Another model is looking at the area of **education**. Education does not fully nurture the holistic development of a child. It has been found to be deficient and therefore the dialogue that has extended both between governmental institutions which are looked upon as primary responders to the need for children's education, and societal institutions including religion where we desire that ethics, moral education and value-based practices are integrated in it. The work of **Arigatou International** is to find common ground and to allow children to see how their own innate resilience gives them internal strength that connects with the needs of society.

3. Dialogue is particularly valuable when people meet in safe and respectful spaces. When people meet with concrete issues it allows for us to move from theological interpretation alone or in isolation to finding what is common, which is the very purpose of interfaith dialogue: to find that **common ground** which allows us to be respectful of differences and diversity and see how we can work together.

Today interfaith dialogue is equated to a colorful picture of leaders coming together and making statements. In fact, we simultaneously bring them together and then criticize them for making these statements., The coming together of religious leaders should not be in isolation from what happens at the community level but seen as a continuum of what can also be done in the community.

The role of the State in inter-religious dialogue can be very important as a respectful partner, not always facilitating or enabling the dialogue but co-creating these spaces. In India, during the COVID-19 pandemic there was an ongoing misinformation campaign which meant that everyone needed to work together to reinforce the message of science, and the religious community had an important part to play in this.

Regarding community, while we always speak about the value of community, sometimes we do not value it enough. In the new landscape of collaboration and cooperation, the hierarchy of global to local also presents value in this same descending order, the global being the most valued and the local being the smallest or the least valued. The Pandemic has shown us that this hierarchy has to be positively disrupted. While communities could be isolated in times of the pandemic, they can also provide valuable lessons. The question is how can these lessons be created and sustained. We have to hear one and other in the pursuit of knowledge. Dialogue can be facilitated through actions and in the space to discover one and another. There is space for leadership in every sector, the government, private sector and civil society included. We are all witnesses to a leadership style that doesn't include the voices of women and young people equally. Religion is no different from this as it mirrors other societal institutions.

In this aspect, we have a very vital role to play. There are positive news from the field of interfaith dialogue and a genuine effort to bring in women and young people in equally. In this regards, Arigatou International does important work in building young citizens with greater understanding of values and leadership styles, which contributes to populating these spaces at the community level.

Finally, it is very important to look at the new institutions that bring governments together as the different dimensions of inter-religious dialogue are supported by institutional frameworks. We need conversations that value the spaces for dialogue from the local to the global level. The outcome of this dialogue is societal benefits stemming from the richness of religions and experiences.

"What we do today will determine our tomorrow" - Mahatma Gandhi

Dr Bakary Sambe, Regional Director, Timbuktu Institute, African Center for Peace Studies

In 2021 the United Nations Office for West Africa and the Sahel (UNOWAS) organized a regional seminar on the "Contribution of religious and traditional leaders to peace building, conflict prevention and resolution in West Africa and the Sahel". When I asked one of the most important scholar in West Africa what are the causes of radicalization and the solutions, he said that the most important part of our conflicts and radicalization is the combination of arrogance and ignorance. Thanks to all the research we have done in the region we can classify the so-called radicalized people in two categories: those seeking meaning and seeking means.

In the past, when people were talking about the international community, they thought of powerful countries who could vote against everything for everyone in the world. Now, we are increasingly becoming an international community of the vulnerable. It is vulnerability which makes us equal. Vulnerability towards diseases like COVID-19 and towards insecurity. When people were talking about disease, wars and hunger they were thinking about Africa. The example of Ukraine shows that we are more and more becoming an equal international community towards vulnerability.

We already know a lot about the possibility of dialogue between Christians and Muslims. We know that different religions can discuss and understand each other. The issue is not to how to organize interface dialogue, the issue is how to teach dialogue and choose tolerance.

In Africa, we are witnessing a raising extremism in all forms of religiosity. The attack in Mali in 2012, which destroyed several monuments of Timbuktu, the city of knowledge and tolerance, was really shocking. From the African perspective it was an attempt to deny the African contribution to the Islamic civilization. Radicalized groups, more often than not, abuse and control the interpretation of religion and make an ideological takeover. In this region the problem is not a clash of religion, the problem is the clash of the extremes.

Extremes are clashing in the region. In other words, the arrogance of those who still erect worlds of misunderstanding between people must not weaken the will of those who are ready to build the bridge to promote living together, counter violence and extremism, and enter into dialogue with one another. Without falling into an excess of hope, we can nevertheless believe in the future.

In the Sahel and when many of Timbuktu's cultural heritage sites were destroyed, it was to deny the contribution of Africa and the Islamic civilization, imposing doctrines of Salafism and Wahhabism.

In Africa, we have to recognize the value of indigenous initiatives and communality. The issue with Africa and its international partners is how to promote this mechanism of community regulation based on ancestral alliances between people and between populations. Similar initiatives are being implemented by communities in Burkina Faso and in Mali. In the context of the Sahel, there is a gap between the international approach and the local perception, which has sometimes seriously undermined the very spirit of cooperation in a region undergoing rapid change.

In the last years, Timbuktu has been in collaboration with the United Nations Office for West Africa and the Sahel in organizing meetings to try to map actors integrated in the group of traditional religious legitimacy. In the French speaking countries secularism was imposed on the people, although these societies are purely religious. Trying to disconnect people from their religion or belief in exchange for their right to express themselves in the public sphere was a failure. Today, work in the region is based on involving religions and traditions to foster peace and dialogue. This includes

involving religious leaders and authorities, traditional authorities, customary authorities and civil society.

It is important that the international partners recognize the solution coming from the indigenous initiative, which is based on culture and religions. Secularism does not mean that the place of religion in our societies is denied. The risk we face is a clash of ignorance rather than a clash of civilizations.

With the current global developments, including the rise of populism and extremism on all sides, we need courage to meet one another as humans, based on our common conscience. The determination of those who seek to erect worlds of conflict should not deprive us of our common determination to build bridges of dialogue.

GENEVA CENTRE
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ADVANCEMENT AND
GLOBAL DIALOGUE