

**European Council of Religious Leaders ECRL – Religions for Peace RfP  
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**Annual Report 2016  
Moderator Thomas Wipf**

**The role of religion in Europe**

Changes have been affecting Europe's social, cultural and religious spheres for some time. And in recent years they have become more acute as a result of the growing streams of migrants and refugees, who had to leave their homeland because of terrible wars.

But this movement of people has also been driven by the forces of economic globalisation, information technology and greater mobility. The persistent cleft between those regions blighted by poverty and hunger and the wealthier continents exacerbates the trend.

These changes have also introduced new forms of religious practice to many European countries – and for a lot of people this represents a challenge. There is certainly more talk and coverage of religion in the media. However, this heightened interest cuts both ways, as religion is not only perceived as a positive force.

The tragic and violent events of recent times unsettle many people who normally enjoy a positive relationship with their own tradition and the diverse range of belief systems.

The media also tend to view religion these days only as one of the causes of argument and violence. This was already observed and identified as a problem in the “Strategic plan 2014-2018” laid down by Religions for Peace International, which states: “Religion is increasingly being abused in support of violent conflict and terrorism – by extremists using it to incite violence and hatred, by unscrupulous politicians manipulating sectarian differences for their own ends...”.

As members of religious communities, we must be very aware of this danger and talk about it with one another. Representatives of religious communities cannot and must not be expected to assume responsibility for the wrongdoings of followers of their respective tradition. However, it goes without saying that

the disconcerted public would find it helpful and important to hear clear condemnation of such acts.

A good example of this is the joint statement issued by our Muslim ECRL members in spring 2016 in the wake of the terrorist attacks in Paris, in which they distanced themselves clearly and unequivocally from these acts and also sought to reassure Muslims in France.

But religion in Europe means much besides this burdensome and negative aspect.

For many people, it provides a source of strength, orientation, consolation, hope and encouragement. Religion is lived in an extremely wide range of ways. It offers a huge wealth of positive influences and inspiration for the culture of coexistence.

Having said that, in most European traditions – but Christianity in particular – people are increasingly choosing their own ways to practice their faith. Formal institutions no longer play the same pivotal role that they used to.

But passing on a positive faith to the younger generation as a source of support in our lives is a challenge all religious communities face.

### **Religion in the public domain**

Perceptions are divided in Europe. On the one hand, culturally and politically active people increasingly recognise religion's role as a stable guiding force in people's lives. There is increasing reference to the contribution religion makes to peaceful coexistence and the common good.

Set against that is the tendency to criticise religious rituals and ban religious symbols from the public domain. Examples of this include debates about slaughter, circumcision and clothing. But there are also questions as to whether Christian symbols should still be allowed on public display around Christmas.

I believe that we should encourage calm and reasonable public debate in all these cases. Religion – with all its diverse traditions and manifestations – cannot and must not disappear from public view. It is part of human culture and its presence is an expression of religious freedom.

However, it must also be said that in a secular society sober discussion (for example about potentially banning the wearing of veils in public) does not in itself count as discrimination or defamation. Being open to debate is part of our open religious tradition.

## **Human rights and freedom of religion**

Human rights include religious freedom: the right to have a religion, to live according to its principles and to pass this faith on. But this religious freedom is also embedded in a framework of other libertarian principles and basic rights. We can only enjoy freedom of religion as part of this wider context.

It must be set alongside people's rights to freedom of thought, conscience and opinion, and to secure a living, etc.

I believe that standing up for human rights is a core duty that we should also be more acutely aware of in the ECRL RfP.

In many European countries and the wider western world, we long ascribed to the historical philosophical conviction that humans could only live together by developing common values and rights aimed at securing mutual understanding, tolerance and peace.

But nowadays, we are confronted with substantial evidence to the contrary. Neither human rights, nor understanding, nor peace can be taken for granted. And peace is not the natural state of all human relationships.

## **Security and religion**

Politicians face major challenges in their efforts to ensure public safety and uphold the rule of law. This is no easy task in a society rocked by barbarian acts of violence and terror. These threats call for measures to protect public order and security, but which have to respect our society's framework of laws and not restrict people's freedom.

As a result of this, the politicians and security agencies in many European countries are clearly becoming more willing to engage with religious communities and their representatives.

I can illustrate this with an example from Switzerland. As part of Swiss security policy, a paper on “Preventive measures against radicalisation” includes the first formal recommendations for talking to religious communities.

I believe we should seek talks with the political authorities wherever we can. And I mean *together*; not from the angle of our *individual* traditions and interests.

The ECRL/Religions for Peace would make an excellent mouthpiece for this task.

Above all, we need to show in this way that, in reality, religion does not lie at the root of this problem. Instead, it forms part of the creative and positive solutions that we can adopt to underpin peace and safety.

I call for the ECRL to make much greater use of the resources that make up our innermost substance and conviction: understanding, reconciliation and resistance to violence and abuse of our religions.

One practical example of the ECRL’s work is the “Interfaith, Cities and Government” project that we launched last year after talks in London and Berlin.

Representatives of the two cities’ multi-religious organisations, local authorities (and in London, also the police) have now convened twice.

They have been addressing their social, societal and multi-religious circumstances and discussing existing collaborative projects – both fruitful and less successful examples.

These talks, which are hosted and chaired by the ECRL, are set to continue, and we plan to also invite representatives from Paris next time around.

## **Our guiding values**

The Guiding Principles of Religions for Peace International state that our religious communities should “act on deeply held and widely shared values”.

All over Europe, intensive debate has sprung up about the common values and standards that are necessary for living together as a society.

This discussion is to be welcomed, even if it stirs up major controversy in parts.

What are these values? What values do we have in common? Are these secular values? Or secularised religious values?

I believe that the ECRL also needs to reaffirm soon what these “deeply held and widely shared values” are.

### **Political situation in Europe**

The question of guiding values also raises itself under current conditions in Europe.

Although the ECRL is not a political organisation, we are nonetheless the “European” Council of Religious Leaders, and this continent is our primary geographical focus.

At the same time, we are conscious of also being members of the greater world family and the global network of Religions for Peace on all five continents.

To mark the 60th anniversary of the European Union, in March of this year the European Commission published a “White Paper on the Future of Europe”.

It analyses developments over the past 60 years and outlines five potential scenarios for the future course of the European Union.

From the start, the EU-project meant much more than a convenient economic community. It arose in the wake of devastating wars throughout Europe with the imperative aim of founding a peaceful community based on shared values.

The White Paper therefore reiterates these common values that characterise Europe.

I believe it would be sensible for the ECRL to address this vision for the future of the continent in which we live.

If the ECRL were to contribute to the pan-European discussion proposed by the European Commission, this would surely be the only multi-religious declaration and would carry our organisation’s considerable weight.

I propose this in my capacity of moderator and as a citizen of a country that has its reasons for not joining the European Union, but works with it in close collaboration.

The Conference of European Churches – CEC, for example (which incorporates all Europe’s Christian Churches apart from the Catholic Church), recently published its own detailed contribution to the debate entitled “What future for Europe? Reaffirming the European project as building a community of values.”

### **Religions for Peace International**

I would like to take this opportunity to remind us all that, under the leadership of our Secretary General, Dr William Vendley, Religions for Peace International has intensively scrutinised the key topics raised by the United Nations (UN).

RfP International drafted its own proposals and suggestions before the sustainable development goals (SDGs) were formally passed by the UN General Assembly in September 2015. We presented the body with an opinion paper by the international Executive Committee entitled “Shared Well-Being: Multi-Religious Values for Sustainable Development.”

One year prior to that, the Executive Committee had passed its “Multi-Religious Call for Action on Climate Change”, thus Religions for Peace also supported the UN’s efforts on this urgent issue.

I sincerely thank Dr Vendley, his team and all those involved for the hard work they invested on our behalf.

I would like the ECRL to adopt the concerns and recommendations regarding both issues and to consider how we can actively help drive them forward.

### **The ECRL’s activities during 2016**

The ECRL, the General Secretariat led by Jehangir Sarosh – and for part of the year by Mark Owen, the Executive Committee and the moderator have tried their best to perform the day-to-day work and instigate new projects with the very limited resources at their disposal. You will hear more about this in the General Secretary’s report.

We are very grateful to have been able to embark upon intensive strategic and operative collaboration with the Winchester Centre of Religion, Reconciliation and Peace.

The Council gave the go-ahead for this at the 2016 Annual Assembly in Brixen, South Tyrol, and the Executive Committee passed an agreement of collaboration to this effect.

Since then, General Secretary Jehangir Sarosh and I as the moderator have been able to rely on the competent and dedicated work of the Director of the Centre, Dr Mark Owen, as Vice General Secretary. We have been aided and supported by Rebecca Bellamy, their highly skilled officer manager, and Professor Simon Keyes, an experienced member of staff.

I wish to thank the outgoing General Secretary, Jehangir Sarosh, for his many years of service and great achievements for Religions for Peace and the ECRL. And I also thank Mark Owen for his willingness to assume the role of General Secretary with effect from this assembly.

As the moderator, I have been constantly involved in these processes. Last year, I had the opportunity to make various contacts in different European countries. This often occurred in the guise of my various concurrent roles.

I won't name every such case, but will limit myself to just a couple of good examples:

The University of Münster in Westphalia organised a prestigious event on "Messages of peace from religions". Alongside Grand Imam Shayh Ahmad al-Tayyeb, the Rector of the al-Azhar University in Cairo, and representatives of other religious communities, I spoke about "Religions' responsibility for peace".

In Frankfurt, I took part in a conference entitled "Justice and Faith against Nuclear Risks" and referenced the RfP's handbook on "Inter-religious commitment to abolishing nuclear weapons."

In December, the ECRL co-organised a symposium in Brussels on "Religion and Migration" hand-in-hand with the German federal state of Hesse.

Expert contributors from the European Union, its member countries and the ECRL took part in this prestigious event.

The final example I am going to cite stemmed from last year's Annual Assembly in Brixen with its headline of the "Refugee and migration situation in Europe – addressing potential for disharmony."

I believe that the closing statement of the Assembly, entitled "Mass Migration: A European Challenge", is the only multi-religious declaration on this urgent subject in Europe to date.

### **The future of the ECRL**

The ECRL is currently at a critical juncture regarding its continuing existence and further development.

The situation is somewhat paradoxical. On the one hand, the ECRL's vital work is gathering increasing esteem and recognition, not least by the European Union and the OSCE/ODHIR.

Our efforts, as the only multi-religious forum on this continent, to promote understanding and collaboration amongst the religious communities are considered extremely important.

We are also reaping success in forging new contacts with the political sphere and civil society.

On the other hand, we are very weak in terms of our organisational structure and resources.

Looking forward, we can only fulfil expectations if more members of the Council actively support our work and we can raise the minimum requirement of financial resources.

For this reason, last year the Council and Executive Committee commissioned an examination of the ECRL's current status, its mission and its potential for fulfilling this brief.

This also addresses the extremely urgent need to clarify the structure of the four virtually autonomous sections of Religions for Peace in Europe, as the current set-up continues to cause confusion.

We are grateful that this process has now already commenced with the assistance of Dr Vendley.

Professor Simon Keyes' report entitled "The European Council of Religious Leaders – An Agenda for Chance" is extremely important for the decisions

regarding the future of the ECRL, which need to be made at this 2017 Annual Assembly. It reflects many discussions with our members combined with careful research and will be distributed to the Council today by the Executive Committee along with concrete recommendations.

Turku, Finland, May 2017

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