

ECRL Annual Declaration, Berlin 11-13 December 2023

Spiritual Responses to Contemporary Challenges: Religious Contributions to Addressing Divisions in European Communities

The European Council of Religious Leaders (ECRL), a co-committee of Religions for Peace Europe,¹ met in the European hub of Berlin, on the 11-13 December 2023.

Appropriately the ECRL annual meeting was held in the Hotel Dietrich Bonhoeffer Haus, named after the distinguished Pastor and Theologian who paid the ultimate price for refusing to compromise on his morals, religious principles, and beliefs. The ECRL offers sincere thanks to our gracious hosts, and to Evangelische Kirche in Deutschland (EKD) for supporting ECRL's annual meeting and making these important deliberations possible.

The main concern of the ECRL annual meeting was the increasing polarisation and divisions in European societies and communities, and to consider what religious and interreligious bodies can do to help bolster stability and social harmony across Europe and beyond.

In the spirit of essential self-reflection, the council began by recognising that ambivalent interpretations of religion can lead to it being implicated in conflict and injustice. As religious leaders it is not enough to dismiss this as a misuse of religion. It is necessary to recognise with humility that religious ideologies and authority can be, and has been, used to perpetuate division and violence. This is the case both within religious traditions, and between different religious communities.

That said, those who instrumentalise religion for terrorism, violence, territorial, and political gains, remain a minority worldwide. The majority of religious leaders and communities advocate for just peace, human security, and social harmony; irrespective of religious, ethnic, or national identity.

The Council acknowledged that many religious communities in Europe today feel under threat from increasingly aggressive secularist movements, as well as from extreme religious apologists. In some contexts there have been attempts to appropriate and misuse universal freedoms of expression and

¹ <https://rfpeurope.org/>

choice to force religion from the public sphere. The Council noted how Freedom of Religion and Belief has been negatively impacted by secularist discourses and extremist ideologies within Europe and throughout the wider World.²

This is a troubling and unconscionable development. The presence of religions in the public realm, and public expressions of religions, are an integral part of the rich tapestry of European cultures and histories. The Council appeals to political institutions and leaders, and to all advocates of human rights, to prevent religious communities and traditions being undermined in this way.

The Council also recognised the proliferation of negative narratives about religion, and the simplistic and divisive ways it is represented in public discourse and the media.

The Council is concerned that the negative narratives around religion are given disproportionate prominence in mainstream and social media, as well as in recent public demonstrations in many European cities. This tendency is not unique to religion and is part of a broader trend in our societies, driven by social media and the increasingly negative ways in which attention is sought.

Countering increasingly polarised narratives is a challenge religious people share with most European citizens who value justice, freedom, and peaceful coexistence. It is the responsibility of all to acknowledge and report the many ways in which religious leaders and communities contribute to just and sustainable peace, humanitarian assistance, and development activities.

The lack of understanding of the multifaceted ways in which religion is used, and misused in societies and international affairs, can play a damaging role in perpetuating division and enmity in European societies and communities. A pertinent example of this is the recent horrific events in Israel/Palestine.

The Council expressed grave concerns about the current increase in antisemitism and Islamophobia in many European societies and recognised that these developments are directly linked to the war in the Holy Land.

ECRL calls upon all people of faith, people of good will, and governments, to do whatever necessary to counter any form of antisemitism, Islamophobia, harassment of Jews and Muslims, burning of the Quran, hate speech, and to ensure the protection all places of worship, including synagogues, mosques, and cemeteries.

The ECRL firmly condemns Hamas and any terrorist act that takes lives of innocent people. We are in deep solidarity with all the innocent victims of the ongoing armed conflict, both Israeli and Palestinian. We call for the immediate release of all hostages, and an immediate cease fire to allow for humanitarian assistance to reach suffering people.

² Link to Dr Werner's presentation <https://rfpeurope.org/wp-content/uploads/2023/12/Conditioning-Factors-and-Threats-to-Fredom-of-Religion-and-Belief-Input-for-ECRL-11-12-Dec-2023.pptx>

Through its deliberations and wisdom, the Council identified several areas within its scope of work where it can make a positive difference. These include:

1. Offering support and education to media outlets to better understand the complex role of religion in conflicts and community cohesion, so that more nuanced, responsible, and positive representations of religions can become customary.
2. Offering support to governments and diplomats, to better understand the role of religion in international relations and help build stronger partnerships with religious communities and actors.³ This is a particularly relevant here in Berlin, where the Government of Germany in recent years has played a leading role in developing expertise in Religion and Diplomacy.⁴
3. Reiterating the Council's support for the Ukrainian people and their resistance to the Russia invasion, whilst continuing to encourage religious actors on all sides to advocate for a complete Russian withdrawal from Ukrainian territories, and a sustainable roadmap for truth, justice, peace, and reconciliation.
4. Working to protect the interreligious friendships and relations built across Europe over many years, and in particular between our Jewish and Muslim leaders and communities at this extremely difficult time. This involves respectful and compassionate dialogue, recognising each other's pain, grief, and difference, whilst also taking every opportunity to model interreligious cooperation and speak out against hate speech and hate crimes wherever they take place.

These initiatives are included in the priorities and actions articulated in ECRL's newly adopted three-year strategic plan 2024-2027.⁵ The ECRL will work tirelessly with like-minded partners from faith-based and non-faith backgrounds to fulfil the Council's responsibilities, and to enhance peaceful coexistence across Europe and beyond.

The Council also takes this opportunity to call on all religious leaders, communities, and policymakers to actively engage in interfaith collaboration, as a cornerstone for building sustainable peace across Europe and beyond. Consequently, we request that:

Religious Leaders take proactive steps to initiate and participate in interfaith dialogues, emphasizing shared values and common goals, and to encourage followers to actively participate in joint initiatives that promote understanding and cooperation.

Communities foster interfaith relationships at the grassroots level. Organising community events, social initiatives, workshops, and cultural exchanges that

³ Link to report from Rev. Dr Martin Affolderbach <https://rfpeurope.org/wp-content/uploads/2023/12/Religion-Diplomacy-ECRL-Berlin-Dec-2023.pdf>

⁴ <https://www.rfp.org/women-faith-diplomacy/>

⁵ Link to new strategy <https://rfpeurope.org/wp-content/uploads/2023/12/ECRL-Strategy-2024-27-Final.pdf>

bring individuals from different religious backgrounds together.

Policymakers recognise the value of interfaith collaboration in promoting social harmony and stability, and integrate interfaith perspectives into policies addressing integration, migration, and social and economic inequities. In addition, support initiatives that involve religious communities in the decision-making process.

Media Outlets commit to responsible reporting on religious matters and avoid sensationalism. Encouraging diverse narratives that highlight positive contributions of religious communities to peace, humanitarian efforts, and development, fostering a more nuanced and positive public understanding of religious roles in society.

Educational Institutions incorporate interfaith education into curricula at all levels. Promoting the study of various religious traditions, emphasising shared values, and the importance of religious diversity in building inclusive societies.

By heeding this call to action, we can collectively contribute to the creation of a more harmonious and cooperative society, where religious diversity is celebrated and leveraged as a strength rather than a source of division.

In an increasingly polarised and volatile European context, the continued existence and work of the European Council of Religious Leaders is a demonstration of the power of respect, friendship, and love, over division, conflict, and hate.

The Council offers continued prayers for the peaceful coexistence of people of all religions and none; for an end to the deadly conflicts in the Holy Land, Ukraine and wherever violent conflict exists; and for just and sustainable peace and harmony wherever people suffer in the world today.