

Recommendation 1396 (1999)¹¹

Religion and democracy

(Extract from the Official Gazette of the Council of Europe – January 1999)

1. The Council of Europe, by its statute, is an Organisation which is essentially humanistic. At the same time, as a guardian of human rights, it must ensure freedom of thought, conscience and religion as affirmed in Article 9 of the [European Convention on Human Rights](#). It must also ensure that manifestations of religion comply with the limitations set out in the same article.
2. The Assembly has already taken an interest in the diversity of the cultures and religions in Europe. Their co-existence and interaction have considerably enriched the European heritage. In particular, the Assembly refers to [Resolution 885](#) (1987) on the Jewish contribution to European culture, [Resolution 916](#) (1989) on redundant religious buildings, [Recommendation 1162](#) (1991) and [Order No. 465](#) on the contribution of the Islamic civilisation to European culture and [Recommendation 1291](#) (1996) on Yiddish culture.
3. The Assembly is also aware that, even in a democracy, there are still certain tensions between religious expression and political power. There is a religious aspect to many of the problems that contemporary society faces, such as intolerant fundamentalist movements and terrorist acts, racism and xenophobia, and ethnic conflicts; consideration should also be given to inequality between sexes in religion. The Assembly has already addressed some of these issues in [Recommendation 1202](#) (1993) on religious tolerance in democratic society and [Recommendation 1222](#) (1993) on the fight against racism, xenophobia and intolerance. Extremism is not religion itself, but a distortion or perversion of it. None of the great age-old religions preaches violence. Extremism is a human invention that diverts religion from its humanist path to make it an instrument of power.
4. It is not up to politicians to decide on religious matters. As for religions, they must not try to take the place of democracy or grasp political power; they must respect the definition of human rights, contained in the European Convention on Human Rights, and the rule of law.
5. Democracy and religion need not be incompatible; quite the opposite. Democracy has proved to be the best framework for freedom of conscience, the exercise of faith and religious pluralism. For its part, religion, through its moral and ethical commitment, the values it upholds, its critical approach and its cultural expression, can be a valid partner of democratic society.
6. Democratic states, whether secular or linked to a religion, must allow all religions that abide by the conditions set out in the European Convention on Human Rights to develop under the same conditions, and enable them to find an appropriate place in society.
7. Problems arise when the authorities try to use religion for their own ends, or when religions try to abuse the state for the purpose of achieving their objectives.
8. Many conflicts also arise from mutual ignorance, the resulting stereotypes and, ultimately, rejection. In a democratic system, politicians have a duty to prevent

an entire religion from being associated with actions carried out, for instance by fanatical religious minorities.

9. Religious extremism that encourages intolerance, prejudice and/or violence is also the symptom of a sick society and poses a threat to a democratic society. As it compromises public order, it must be fought with those means in conformity with the rule of law, and as it is an expression of a social malaise, it can only be combated if the authorities tackle society's real problems.
10. Education is the key way to combat ignorance and stereotypes. School and university curricula should be revised, as a matter of urgency, so as to promote better understanding of the various religions; religious instruction should not be given at the expense of lessons about religions as an essential part of the history, culture and philosophy of humankind.
11. Religious leaders could make a considerable contribution to efforts to combat prejudice, through their public discourse and their influence on believers.
12. The combating of prejudice also necessitates the development of ecumenism and dialogue between religions.
13. The Assembly consequently recommends that the Committee of Ministers invite the governments of the member states:
 - i. to guarantee freedom of conscience and religious expression within the conditions set out in the European Convention on Human Rights for all citizens and, in particular, to:
 - a. safeguard religious pluralism by allowing all religions to develop in identical conditions;
 - b. facilitate, within the limits set out in Article 9 of the European Convention on Human Rights, the observation of religious rites and customs, for example with regard to marriage, dress, holy days (with scope for adjusting leave) and military service;
 - c. denounce any attempt to foment conflict within and between religions for partisan ends;
 - d. ensure freedom and equal rights of education to all citizens regardless of their religious belief, customs and rites;
 - e. ensure fair and equal access to the public media for all religions;
 - i. to promote education about religions and, in particular, to:
 - a. step up the teaching about religions as sets of values towards which young people must develop a discerning approach, within the framework of education on ethics and democratic citizenship;
 - b. promote the teaching in schools of the comparative history of different religions, stressing their origins, the similarities in some of their values and the diversity of their customs, traditions, festivals, and so on;
 - c. encourage the study of the history and philosophy of religions and research into those subjects at university, in parallel with theological studies;
 - d. co-operate with religious educational institutions in order to introduce or reinforce, in their curricula, aspects relating to human rights, history, philosophy and science;

- e. avoid – in the case of children – any conflict between the state-promoted education about religion and the religious faith of the families, in order to respect the free decision of the families in this very sensitive matter.
- iii. to promote better relations with and between religions, and in particular:
 - a. engage in more regular dialogue with religious and humanist leaders about the major problems facing society, which would make it possible to take account of the population's cultural and religious views before political decisions are taken and to involve religious communities and organisations in the task of upholding democratic values and promoting innovative ideas;
 - b. encourage dialogue between religions by providing opportunities for expression, discussion and meetings between representatives of different religions;
 - c. promote regular dialogue between theologians, philosophers and historians, as well as with representatives of other branches of knowledge;
 - d. widen and strengthen partnership with religious communities and organisations, and especially with those which have deep cultural and ethical traditions among local populations in social, charitable, missionary, cultural and educational activities.
 - iv. to promote the cultural and social expression of religions and, in particular, to:
 - a. ensure equal conditions for the maintenance and conservation of religious buildings and of the assets of all religions, as an integral part of the national and European heritage;
 - b. ensure that redundant religious buildings are reused in conditions which are, as far as possible, compatible with the original intention of their construction;
 - c. safeguard cultural traditions and different religious festivals;
 - d. encourage the social and charitable work undertaken by religious communities and organisations;
14. The Assembly also recommends that the Committee of Ministers:
- i. lay down, as part of its projects on education for democratic citizenship and history teaching, guidelines for the introduction of educational syllabuses relevant to points 13.ii.a, b and c of this recommendation;
 - ii. continue to provide a framework for pan-European meetings between representatives of different religions.

[1] Assembly debate on 27 January 1999 (5th Sitting) (see [Doc. 8270](#), report of the Committee on Culture and Education, rapporteur: Mr de Puig).
Text adopted by the Assembly on 27 January 1999 (5th Sitting).

<http://www.assembly.coe.int/Mainf.asp?link=/Documents/AdoptedText/ta99/EREC1396.htm>