

Istanbul Declaration on Tolerance

Our commitment to Justice, Equality and Sharing

Preface

Strategically located as a meeting place between east and west Istanbul has been one of Europe's major cities for two millennia. In 2010 Istanbul is a European capital of culture. The bridge across the Bosphorus is a powerful symbol of the meeting of cultures and religions; those with a long presence on the European continent and those that have arrived more recently. It reminds us that a genuine meeting between cultures and religions is a precondition for building a culture of peace in Europe.

Today Europe stands at a crossroads. Traditional European cultures are faced with new challenges. Migration challenges the indigenous population to show compassion and act with justice, which are important values in European history. The environmental crisis is a challenge to a continent whose wealth rests on the industrialisation which is one of the causes of climate change. New technologies offer possibilities to do good or to do evil.

In the first decade of the 21st century religion came to be recognised as an important force in European societies. There are tragic examples of strained relationships between people of different faiths, but more often religious people live peacefully together, and initiatives for interreligious dialogue and cooperation are multiplying. Secular ideologies are influential and share many characteristics with religions. This provides religious leaders with an opportunity to engage in dialogue also with those who deny the place and role of religion in society, in order to enhance understanding and seek, as far as possible, common ground.

Meeting in Istanbul from 26 to 28 April 2010 and inspired by our experience of interreligious dialogue the European Council of Religious Leaders – Religions for Peace offers this Istanbul Declaration on Tolerance:

Religious roots and importance of tolerance:

- Historically the idea of tolerance developed in Europe, through struggle and violent conflict, as a way of living with religious plurality. Today tolerance must be nourished as a universal value. In its comprehensive sense tolerance means respect, acceptance and appreciation of the rich diversity of cultures, forms of expression and ways of being human in the world today.
- Exploring our own religious traditions and convictions we each find that tolerance is a spiritual responsibility rooted in the divine origin of all life, the dignity of every human person, love for the neighbour and the commandment to do unto others as we would like them to do unto us. The principle “there is no compulsion in religion” guides all our religions. The Turkish word for tolerance is *hosgörü* which literally means “seeing the other in a good way”. This sums up our understanding of the concept.
- We acknowledge that religious people and institutions have not always honoured this important principle and at times have fostered intolerance. In order to contribute to building a cohesive and peaceful Europe, religious people and institutions must also engage in self critical scrutiny.
- Religions are sources of ethical thinking and conduct and have broad and deep social networks in our societies which contribute to promote justice, equality, sharing and a culture of peace that should influence secular laws and regulations.

Tolerance requires mutuality and is a precondition for a culture of peace:

- Tolerance is an active recognition of diversity and means respecting the otherness of the other with whom we differ religiously, culturally, or otherwise, with compassion and benevolence.
- Tolerance does not mean unconditional approval of the ideas of others nor of the way they live their lives. Tolerance means respecting the other’s human rights, but not necessarily sharing his or her viewpoints.
- Tolerance implies mutuality and not compromising one’s beliefs. Many religions make truth claims that can be mutually exclusive, as do other convictions and ideologies. This is no threat to tolerance as long as others are allowed to give voice to their own convictions.
- Tolerance implies that all may speak openly and freely, also when their views are controversial. Tolerance does not prevent us from speaking clearly against injustice, oppression, violence and everything which threatens life.
- Tolerance meets its most difficult challenge when faced with the intolerant. A cohesive and peaceful society must protect itself and its institutions against intolerance.

Commitments to tolerance in Europe:

Based on this understanding of tolerance we as religious leaders commit ourselves to work individually and together to translate the attitude of tolerance into transformative acts of toleration:

- 1) In our teaching, preaching and in exercising our leadership roles we will emphasise that which in our respective religions inspires mutual respect and acceptance.
- 2) We will speak clearly and publicly against, and when required confront, that which fosters intolerance and discrimination. We will do all we can to counter any form of hate speech or other hate crimes, whether it is in the form of anti-semitism, islamophobia, attacks on Christians or any other religion. We acknowledge our responsibility to take action especially when such acts are presented as religiously motivated.
- 3) We will work for the rights of all religions to be visible in the public square. In a tolerant society people have the right to promote their faith and to manifest it in public. This includes displaying religious symbols, wearing religious dress, symbols or articles of faith, establishing schools for the education of new generations, and building places of worship which conform to each religious tradition. We believe that such manifestations contribute to the richness of a society, and also acknowledge that such presence in public space implies a responsibility to respect the rights and sensitivities of those who do not share our religions.
- 4) We will support further efforts to establish a Universal Code on Holy Sites which should protect inter alia places of worship, shrines and cemeteries.
- 5) Recognising that promoting tolerance and a culture of peace is a long term task involving the formation of new generations, we will encourage and support teaching for tolerance in educational institutions. We recognise a specific responsibility to promote such teaching in schools which are run by religious institutions and organisations. In these endeavours it is important to promote the role of women and youth.
- 6) We will continue to explore our faiths and traditions to celebrate what we have in common and establish understanding when we disagree. We will act together when possible, and also develop ethics of disagreement.
- 7) Convinced that interreligious dialogue is a powerful way of promoting tolerance, we will actively share with others, including policy makers, the deep insights and inspiration which we achieve through working together as an interreligious council with mutual respect and recognition.
- 8) We will continue our work to promote a culture of peace in Europe and beyond as set out in our Lille Declaration on a Culture of Peace (2009) and based on our Berlin Declaration on Interreligious Dialogue (2008).