

## **"Dialogue of Religions and Cultures – Impulses on the Situation in Europe".**

Lecture 2, Friday, 22.04.2022

**Michael Kuhn**

Ladies and Gentlemen, good morning to you all! To the organisers of this conference, the board of EuFRES: thank you very much for the invitation to participate in this conference and to talk and discuss about culture and dialogue with you. To be honest: after the cancellation of the conference in March 2020 due to the pandemic, I did not expect that this meeting would indeed take place at a later date. So I was all the more surprised when I received the invitation again last autumn to participate in the new edition - with the same topic as two years ago - and to contribute to it again in the form of a keynote speech.

The first question I asked myself after being invited again was: what did I initially intend to tell you? Certainly, something about the various initiatives of the European political institutions, the Council of Europe and the European Union, on intercultural dialogue, and something about the practical possibilities that would result from the political proposals. Probably also about the dialogue between Religions and European politics and the cooperation between Churches and Religions in Europe that is necessary for this.

Immediately after these reflections, however, I asked myself a second question: would those topics I had wanted to talk about in spring 2020 still fit after what we have experienced in the two years since March 2020? Did not important social parameters change as a result of the pandemic and the measures taken to contain it? Have we not become aware of the global connections and interdependencies as well as the resulting limitation of the scope of action for states and individuals? Did we not gain new insights into the (limited) importance of Europe in economic and geopolitical terms? Did we not suddenly realise how much we lack suitable instruments for global cooperation and coordination in crises? Didn't we realise once again how differently we react to common threats - e.g. through the different sanitary-political measures, for example in China or the USA, which are also culturally conditioned, not to mention the divergent approaches in the European Union? The reactions to these measures - protests, demonstrations, emotional arguments in the social media - did they not make cultural and social tensions, shifts, dislocations and ruptures visible that cut across society, friendships and families? Have we not witnessed how quickly deeply rooted cultural forms such as greeting rituals have changed from one day to the next under the

pressure of hygiene measures: no more shaking hands, no more three kisses so characteristic of Latin culture, no confidential putting of the arm around the shoulder and no more "hygge" or "knuffelen". Instead: keep a distance of 2 metres, born of the mistrust that everyone could be a potential carrier of the disease and thus contagious. The crowds at the carnival shortly before the outbreak of the pandemic in Europe had given way to empty public spaces in the cities, instead of the noise of airplanes suddenly a quiet sky, and encounters between neighbours and friends took place on the balcony, each one on his or her side of the street, .

This situation was particularly difficult for the churches and religious communities. Not only was it impossible or even forbidden to practise religion together in public, but pastoral care for the oppressed, the lonely, the sick and the dying was severely restricted, if not impossible. The shift of worship and pastoral care to the internet opened up new virtual spaces and possibilities, but felt unnatural to a great many people. The pandemic strongly challenged and affected the self-understanding of the church and the practice of religion in the form which we were so accustomed to.

So many cultural achievements that we had taken for granted became questionable overnight. What we had partly perceived as homogeneous in society (though that may have been a deception) has turned out to be highly in-homogeneous. In other words, Covid has done something to us, changed us, both individually and as a society. We come out of this crisis different and as others, even when we think we can easily resume pre-pandemic habits and resume our supposedly "normal" lives. Already the pre-Socratic philosopher Heraclitus knew: you cannot step into the same river twice.

I think you understand my doubts and my scruples about presenting you with a treatise here untouched by these experiences. That is why I am so grateful for the word "impulses" in the title: because it gives me the opportunity to tell you four stories of culture and dialogue from Covid Europe, instead of just reading a few theses, and to conclude each of these stories with a question for our further conversation this morning. In the second part of my paper, I would like to reflect on dialogue and encounter in the work of Pope Francis. Connected to this is the only thesis of my talk: a "dialogue of cultures and religions" presupposes a "culture of dialogue", which I believe is currently lacking in Europe and which needs to be practised, not least or above all, in schools.

#### **Four short stories on culture and dialogue**

Where I am at home: Religions and cultures on half a square kilometre

I live in Etterbeek, an independent municipality in the Brussels Region. It is located in the inner part of the Region and borders directly on the central municipality of Brussels City. It is 3.1 km<sup>2</sup> in size and has just under 50,000 inhabitants. Of these, 75% are of non-Belgian nationality, over 30% non-European. Altogether they represent more than 150 nationalities. In the neighbourhood where I live, just under half a square kilometre in size, there is a Muslim Orthodox school, a Lubavitcher Jeshiva, an English-language (conservative) Catholic school, other Catholic schools, a Jeshiva, a Bangladeshi mosque, a Greek Melkite church, a Russian Orthodox church, a Roman Catholic sub-parish of a larger parish, and a number of small free churches. All of these live side by side, with each other and without much friction or conflict. The political municipality, committed to the Belgian form of laïcité, maintains contact with all of them and has a councillor responsible for this. The municipality has set up its own advisory body, in which representatives of different

nationalities sit and advise the mayor, the councillors (Schepenen) and the municipal council on interculturality.

So far, one could say, everything is fine and almost exemplary. Only a few hundred metres from the municipal boundary begins Matongé, a neighbourhood in the neighbouring municipality of Elsene, inhabited mainly by Africans, among them the majority coming from Congo and Rwanda, many of them Belgian citizens. There are many cultural institutions, restaurants, shops and also two churches here, all African in character. African culture has become part of Brussels' identity - I'll just mention as an example the singer Paul Van Haver, better known by his stage name Stromae, son of a Belgian mother and a Rwandan father. He was born in Etterbeek, by the way.

In Matongé there are regularly clashes with the police and demonstrations. The reasons for this are on the one hand the socio-economic conditions of the inhabitants and drug trafficking, but on the other hand the open (and more often still hidden) discrimination that many Africans are exposed to, even if they are Belgian citizens and were already born in Belgium. One of the reasons for this is the still missing process of coming to terms with Belgium's colonial past, which is only getting off the ground very slowly and reached a first peak last year with (violent) protests, tainting of monuments and demolitions. The conversation about this charged history between the political authorities and the African community is laborious.

Further west is Kuregem, a sub-municipality of Anderlecht, where a large Moroccan and Turkish community lives. The same applies to Molenbeek, with a large Maghreb population. Here there have been frequent clashes with the police and raids during the lockdowns in the last two years. As in Matongé, there are many reasons for this: poverty, cramped living conditions, unemployment, lack of education and prospects for young people, drug dealing, discrimination. Again, many of the young people involved are Belgian citizens. This became particularly clear during the bombing attacks in Brussels in March 2016. All the attackers had Maghreb roots, but were born, raised and went to school in Belgium.

In many respects, Brussels corresponds to other European metropolises and cities: Paris, London, Berlin, Amsterdam, etc. At the same time, there are certainly "Brussels peculiarities" as I have just presented them, including segregation. However, I wonder whether the problems and challenges that big cities and metropolises like Brussels are facing today can be tackled by an "intercultural dialogue" alone, such as the one proposed in the 2008 Council of Europe document. The causes of the tensions and disputes are complex; the socio-economic and ethnic dimensions play a much more prominent and important role than the cultural or religious ones. In addition, there is the intertwining with colonial history (in Belgium with Central Africa, in France with Algeria, Morocco, West and Central Africa, in the Netherlands with Indonesia). Hence my first question for our conversation:

**Shouldn't the dialogue between different communities needed to deal with the tensions and disputes be much broader and not just limited to the area of differences of culture and religion? Shouldn't it include the whole complex of social inequality and socio-economic conditions, as well as the (poisoned?) past that is laden with colonialism?**

Religious alliances in the face of existential threats. Slaughter or ritual slaughter

Last autumn, "het Grondwettelijk Hof" (as the highest legal body in Belgium comparable to the German Constitutional Court in Karlsruhe) confirmed that the legal prohibition of unanaesthetised slaughter, ritual slaughtering, does not contradict the human right to free exercise of religion. This ruling makes it impossible for Jews and Muslims in Belgium to kill animals according to their ritual rules and to sell their meat. Animals must first be taken abroad for slaughter, for example to Lille in northern France, where ritual slaughter is still permitted, in order to bring their meat back to Belgium after slaughter.

In Brussels, ritual slaughter is currently still allowed, in contrast to the other two parts of the country, Flanders and Wallonia. However, it is only a matter of time before the ban is also implemented in Brussels.

Already during the negotiations before the Court, the Brussels Chief Rabbi Albert Guigui and the Muslim lawyer Ibrahim Akrouh stood side by side and argued in the same direction: ritual slaughter, carried out by an appropriately trained "shochet", is less stressful and distressing for animals than slaughter in the large industrial slaughterhouses and meat plants.

The argument against ritual slaughter is that it is intended to prevent animal suffering and the torture of animals during slaughter, something that would be rejected by the majority of society.

In view of the common practice in the meat industry of crushing cattle's skulls with a steel bolt before cutting their necks, or of lowering caged pigs into a CO<sub>2</sub>-filled shaft and suffocating them, the attitude of the majority of society seems hypocritical to say the least. At the latest since the conditions in German (but also other European) slaughterhouses became known, the question arises (which, however, is not to be discussed here) which slaughter method is really more "animal-friendly". In the case of ritual slaughtering (which in Belgium involves 700 animals a year), the prevailing consciousness is that a living being is being deprived of its life for human consumption. There is also a religious-ritual moment in the ritual slaughtering. There is no question of this in industrial slaughter: the animals are seen as raw material for the production of the meat processing industry and treated accordingly: not as living beings, but as material.

Given the disproportion in the number of animals slaughtered or butchered, Akrouh and Guigui see this discussion less as a concern for animal welfare than as a social lack of understanding of religion and ritual. A similar situation could be observed in the German discussion about a possible ban on the circumcision of babies as a rite of admission to Judaism. Akrouh and Guigui criticise a "lack of dialogue" here.

As Ibrahim Akrouh points out, "This ruling shows us how difficult dialogue between civil society and religions has become. There is no longer a common language to talk about such difficult issues. But such dialogue is very important for a society that lives together in peace, a society in which everyone is free to live as he or she wishes. (...) Today, this culture of dialogue, this pluralism, is under pressure."

Albert Guigui puts the judgement in a wider context, and I quote: "It is about unity in diversity. Every identity is respected and that's how we live together. But today Belgium is turning this idea on its head. To us, the Jews, Belgium says: You can no longer live the way you want. You have to

assimilate. You have to become like everyone else. The right to be different is being taken away from us. But that is the very basis of any democracy. This development is very dangerous."

The reactions to the long conversation between the two, which appeared in the Brussels City Newspaper, confirm their suspicions. Religion in general is scorned, called barbaric and reprehensible, ridiculed and insulted. The two representatives of Judaism and Islam are accused of deliberately negating the majority decisions and thus torturing animals.

Apart from the fact that the decision of the Belgian Supreme Court is based on an identical ruling of the European Court of Human Rights in Strasbourg (which apparently did not refer to the Council of Europe's White Paper on Intercultural Dialogue for its decision), the ruling makes it clear that the proposals and demands for dialogue presented in this document come to nothing and remain ineffective if "religious illiteracy" prevails in society (and apparently also in law colleges) and thus the simplest prerequisites for a factual dialogue on religious issues are missing. Hence my following question:

**How can churches and religious communities still find an understanding for religion and for religious practice in an increasingly secularised and religiously unmusical (Jürgen Habermas) or religiously illiterate society? Is there not an increasing need for a "practical dialogue" between religions in order to survive together? Couldn't the understanding grow in such a pragmatic way that what connects religions with each other is ultimately still more than what separates them from each other?**

"You just join the family, that's normal".

As in many other countries in the EU, families in the Netherlands have taken a Ukrainian refugee family into their home in recent weeks. Some have travelled as far as the Polish border to pick up refugees and bring them to the Netherlands. The driving motive is: "I can't stand by, I have to do something". However, some of the difficulties that can arise are underestimated or one's own supposed intercultural competence is overestimated.

In a series of reports, the Dutch daily newspaper "NRC" follows a family in the province of South Holland who picked up an elderly man, his daughter and his 12-year-old grandson from the eastern Ukrainian city of Kramatorsk at the border and took them in. The man was an English and history lecturer at the university, his daughter rented flats, and the grandson went to school. The daughter and grandson were accommodated directly with the family, the older man with another family nearby. After the first week, when everything seemed to go well at first, the first disagreements arose and strict house rules were established: Night rest, meal times, participation in common meals. In addition, the hosts interfered in the child's upbringing: what he was allowed to eat, when and in what quantity, or how often he had to change his clothes (at least daily) or take a shower. The irritations increased until the Ukrainian woman finally forbade interfering in her child's upbringing. She was a grown woman and could decide for herself what she did and how she lived. That was the last drop that broke the bucket. The next day she was told that they had found a place for her and her son in the neighbouring city of Leiden and that she would have to move that very day. Her reaction: she was relieved.

In a conversation between the newspaper and the host family, the exaggerated expectations quickly became clear: "Whoever stays with us becomes part of the family and fits in." Despite the initial selflessness of taking someone in, after a few days life was supposed to go back to normal and the "guests" would not attract any further attention. Many of the well-intentioned hosts do not realise, or far too little, the impact of the fact that these guests, refugees, are traumatised by the very fact that their previous independent life and their life plan have been destroyed and that they have lost everything except for the things they were able to take with them.

What many well-meaning and do-gooders in Western Europe overlook are the language barrier (despite English being the "lingua franca", how many Western Europeans speak one of the Slavic languages?) and the still huge cultural differences. Many people in Western Europe usually have very little idea about the history and culture of Central and Eastern Europe and at the same time think in prejudices about Central and Eastern Europeans: backward, believing in authority, uncouth and uneducated, but at the same time materialistic and consumerist. They see the stereotypes and forget the real people in front of them.

Probably more fundamental, however, is the "rift in the common but not shared history" of Europe since World War II. In Central and Eastern Europe, many people feel that they themselves have been underprivileged and shortchanged compared to the states of Western Europe. The primary goal of EU membership for these countries was and is to achieve the same high standard of living and prosperity as the rest of Europe after years of deprivation. The (self-) understanding of being "losers of history" is still in the minds and dominates the way thinking.

This rift is not only the fault of the Central and Eastern Europeans. The interest of the "old EU" in the new members was often exclusively economic and was not directed at the people, but at possible new sales markets. The freedom of movement of people was experienced as problematic. Mostly, people were welcome as (underpaid) labour in professions where no suitable skilled workers could be found: Harvest workers, care workers, cleaners. At the same time, however, resentment arose against the 'Polish plumber' and all those who often worked faster and cheaper than corresponding craftsmen from their own country.

It is these prejudices and more than thirty years of neglected/missed dialogue that makes it so difficult to meet each other at eye level and accept each other as equals, despite helpfulness and goodwill.

I am telling this story because I think it is typical of the relationship that still exists between Western, Central and Eastern Europe and because two things are exemplary about it: on the one hand, a lack of interest in the other and its history, its culture, its uniqueness, while at the same time overestimating one's own cultural achievements and the conviction that "everything is better here". My question here is:

**Can something like a dialogue between cultures succeed at all under these conditions (or rather: the lack of conditions)? Doesn't it first require a great willingness to self-reflect and, furthermore, a great deal of self-relativisation? Shouldn't there be a greater curiosity to know more about the cultural and historical background of the other?**

Conspiracy theorists, "fake news" propagators and anti-vaxxers - the new social divide and its consequences for democracy

This brings me to my fourth and final impulse for our conversation. I assume that most of us are familiar with the phenomena I describe here. At the same time, I can also imagine that some of you are asking yourselves whether it has anything to do with the topic that concerns us today, namely the dialogue of cultures.

As I mentioned at the beginning, the pandemic and the subsequent measures imposed by governments to contain and combat it made the tensions, fault lines and fractures in our European society visible and evident. The most visible sign of this are the manifestations and demonstrations of those people who oppose the measures taken by governments. They cite different reasons for their resistance: either because they play down the covid disease or doubt the existence of the virus at all; because they question the effectiveness of the measures taken and see in them only a means of restricting freedom and oppressing citizens. Others see in the virus an international conspiracy, be it by big companies like Microsoft, be it by the pharmaceutical industry, be it by investors and financiers like George Soros, be it by other dark forces in the background planning the "Great Reset" with the intention of making humanity compliant for their sinister plans. You all know enough examples of these conspiracy theories. "Fake news", "alternative truth", "anti-vaxxers" etc. - a colourful mixture of people of different origins, gender, age, cultural and professional backgrounds who have one thing in common: The virus and the measures taken to tackle it limit their individual freedom in an impermissible and intolerable way. This applies to the obligation to wear a mouth-nose protection, to the call to keep distance, to the restrictions in retail, gastronomy, tourism and culture. It is true: the measures taken by the governments were often not coherent and were sometimes taken hastily (though some came too late). All this was probably due to the exceptional situation and the fact that even experts did not always know exactly how the virus would behave and develop.

For the Dutch writer, essayist and columnist Bas Heijne, who in 2017 won the prestigious P.C. Hooft Prize for Literature in 2017, however, this shows another culmination of an already longer-term development: the effects of a hyper-individualism in which everything serves only the (self-)presentation and staging of the "hypersensitive" (or better, narcissistic) "I", which sees every questioning or restriction as an insult to itself and which slowly but irrevocably occupies the public space and displaces the common good in favour of the self-interest. This attitude, in which only "I and my selfie-interest" count, is reinforced by two other factors: by a competitive thinking and behaviour fuelled by our neoliberal economic system, and by the social media, which reinforce this competitive behaviour and enclose the individual in an "echo chamber", as it were, in which, controlled by algorithms, he is only confronted with what confirms him in his attitude. As a result, an "us versus them" thinking slowly grows, whoever the "them" may be - the elites, politics, or all the dark powers already mentioned above. The anonymity of social media allows pent-up frustration, anger, and aggression to run free. You all know examples of verbal aggression, which unfortunately is increasingly followed by physical aggression.

Even if it may seem exaggerated to you - this way of thinking and acting has already found its way into politics in Europe (we were already "used to" it from Donald Trump). Words like "we'll remember names and faces for the tribunals of the people they will have to answer to" are being uttered.

In my opinion, this is slowly but steadily eroding our political system, parliamentary democracy, and thus undermining the foundation for any dialogue. How can a dialogue be conducted with someone who only lives in his bubble and is inaccessible to anything that comes from outside and contradicts his opinion and view. However, democracy can no longer function without debate, without the endurance of opposites and without attempts to live together prosperously despite these opposites and to find pragmatic solutions for coexistence. Hence my last question - and this brings me back to the beginning of my talk:

**Before we can even think of a dialogue of cultures (and religions), is there not first a need for a "culture of dialogue" in our pluriform, partially divided and fragmented society? If this is the case, then the question remains: what qualities are needed to become capable of dialogue, and where or how do we acquire and practise these qualities?**

### **How to go on? Some hints on dialogue from Pope Francis**

Without being able to answer the question just posed in detail and without wanting to anticipate my colleague and his lecture tomorrow, I would like to give some hints on the "how to go on" and a culture of dialogue. In doing so, I draw on Pope Francis' reflections on dialogue.

In the Apostolic Exhortation "Evangelii Gaudium" and the two encyclicals "Laudato Si'" and "Fratelli tutti", Pope Francis repeatedly addresses the various aspects of dialogue, which is one of the key words in his theological thinking. In doing so, he holds the following principles for a successful dialogue:

- At the beginning of every dialogue is the encounter. What Francis means exactly by encounter is, in my opinion, best expressed by the Dutch word for encounter, namely "ont-moeting". Literally translated into German, it means "ent-müssen". Genuine encounter, free from any compulsion to produce a result, i.e. un-forced, open encounter, which only comes about for its own sake, is the first and most important prerequisite for a fruitful dialogue.
- At the centre of this kind of encounter and dialogue is not a "something", a thing to be discussed or a problem to be solved, but a "someone", a person to be encountered and with whom one enters into dialogue.
- A basic attitude in the encounter is the appreciation of the other. I must leave the other in his or her inherent value despite all the differences between us. Encounter and dialogue do not exclude conflict, but it is a question of how we behave in it and how we respect the right to be different in each case.
- Dialogue requires as its most important virtues humility and meekness (two virtues that are not very popular today) as well as the ability to really listen (that is, to be able to "be fully with the

other") and the curiosity that helps us to ask intelligent questions (instead of giving premature answers). This attitude is supported by the insight that things can look different from the centre than from the periphery.

- The aim of dialogue is not to give up one's own identity in favour of a solution, to be absorbed in a "general non-commitment" (that would be relativisation) but to ask how my identity could be a contribution to the greater whole (and to the solution). Behind this is one of the four main principles that shape Francis' thinking: "The whole is superior to the parts and more than the sum of the parts" (Evangeliu Gaudium 234, Laudato si 141).

For Pope Francis, the goal of the dialogue is his frequently used image of the polyhedron, the multiform body with its different surfaces and partial bodies, which presents itself differently depending on the perspective from which one looks at it - and which nevertheless represents a unity. In its multiformity - which resists unambiguity - it is for Pope Francis the image of our pluriform society (and, but this is only aside, also for our Catholic Church).

For Francis, encounter and dialogue are not completed individual events but processes whose aim is not to adopt one point of view or the other, but to reconcile differences, again with a view to the greater whole. Ultimately, it is a matter of remaining open in dialogue for a possible third, for a solution that could not even be envisaged as a possibility at the beginning of the dialogue, but which is, as it were, given as the "fruit of dialogue". In this context, Francis speaks of "overflowing": through the informality and freedom, the creativity of the dialogue partners is given so much space that it finally bursts forth like a spring and overflows.

For this to happen, however, sufficient time is needed. This corresponds to another principle in Francis' thinking: that time is more important than space, that it is not important to occupy spaces of power, but to set processes in motion (Evangeliu Gaudium 222, 223, Laudato si 178).

As you can already see, these are not ready-made recipes that can simply be applied, but attitudes and virtues that need to be acquired and developed before a fruitful dialogue can emerge. In view of the circumstances described above, this does not seem to me to be an easy task, but it appears to me to be indispensable for a culture of dialogue to be developed and promoted - without which, again, I repeat, there can be no dialogue of cultures.

Allow me to conclude with a story that shows what I mean by the practical application of these virtues:

About 15 years ago, at the European Forum in Alpbach, there was a panel discussion on our topic "Dialogue of Cultures". A young woman wearing a Turkish headscarf, a *Türban*, took part. She was a medical doctor and was completing part of her training in Vienna at the Medical University. When the conversation turned to the wearing of head coverings and the prejudices or discrimination associated with it, she told the following little story:

A few months ago she had participated in a teaching event at the university with a patient. Everyone was wearing their doctor's clothes, but she, as the only one, was also wearing her *doorban*. She was already thinking about it when she noticed that one of the female doctors who was busy with the

patient kept looking at her. She immediately related these glances to her headscarf. She imagined what this doctor would say to her after the end of the lecture, accusing her that it was inappropriate to wear a Türban as a doctor and asking her to take off her headscarf. And how she would defend her headscarf as an expression of her identity and accuse the doctor of discriminating against her and disrespecting her religion and identity. She got further and further into this inner dialogue - until suddenly the doctor actually addressed her. She felt the pent-up inner dialogue wanting to burst out of her - and stopped with her mouth open. The doctor asked her, looking at her headscarf: "You are Turkish, aren't you? Could you please help us with this patient. She only speaks Turkish and we can't communicate with her."

In one fell swoop, it had become clear to her: it was not the others with their glances at her headscarf who were prejudiced against her, but she herself who was prejudiced against the others, thinking that a glance at her headscarf must automatically mean discrimination or a disparaging judgement. This event triggered her self-reflection. She was able to step back from her prejudices and enter into conversation with others about her identity much more freely and openly. A small example of successful learning for (intercultural) dialogue?

Thank you for your attention.

*Michael Kuhn, Brussels, April 2022*

***The spoken word prevails***