



The role and responsibility of the University and the Church in creating a culture of tolerance and citizenship in Europe

Speech by Mr Walter Schwimmer,
Secretary General of the Council of Europe
on the occasion of the symposium
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Ladies and Gentlemen,

When I was invited to address this Conference, I was tempted to ask the organisers two questions:

- Why do you think there is a relation between the Council of Europe, the Church and the University?
- Is this relation significant enough to justify my presence at this important event?

I shall devote the next few minutes to answering both questions.

I consider the European Convention for the Protection of Human Rights and Fundamental Freedoms to be the main achievement of the Council of Europe.

In its very short preamble, there are a few key words which, in my opinion, are and should remain the mission of two of the oldest and most celebrated institutions in Europe: the Church and the University. These key words are:

- Human rights, justice and peace.
- Greater unity and common understanding.
- Collective enforcement.

Let me develop upon why it is that I find that our respective visions are complementary in achieving a shared universal mission.

About human rights, justice and peace

Our three institutions (the Church, the University and the Council of Europe) are committed to universality. First of all, we are convinced that there is something universal in human nature –that certain values are common to all human beings regardless of their cultural, religious, linguistic or other background. The universal recognition of human dignity and human rights is the foundation of freedom, justice and peace. When developing our respective visions, we may put the accent on a different dimension of the issues we want to address. I am convinced that our endeavours are closely linked and complementary, be they focused on the desire to contribute to a divine design, to the spread of knowledge and research or to the promotion of justice and democratic institutions.

I could quote many scholars, politicians, humanists and representatives of the Church who have contributed to spreading this message. I have chosen to quote John XXIII (from *Pacem in Terris*, 1963): *"An orderly and fruitful social life is based on the principle that every human being is a person, that is, a nature endowed with intelligence and free will; and therefore is subject to rights and duties that derive immediately and simultaneously from his very nature: rights and duties which are, therefore, universal, inviolable, inalienable"*.

But universality is something very different of uniformity. Universal rights and fundamental freedoms allow each single person to enjoy being different from the other six billion, to search for truth in his or her own way and to follow his or her own conscience. It is therefore natural that our societies reflect this diversity and perceive it as a richness and not a problem. However, our three institutions know very well that the worst crimes and the worst sins may be committed to eliminate "other" opinions, beliefs or cultures. How do we avoid that happening? I'll try to answer using my second set of key words:

Greater unity and common understanding

I speak to you today as a representative of a secular organisation, the Council of Europe, consisting – in the sphere of educational and cultural cooperation – of 48 countries representing the three major Christian traditions – Catholic, Orthodox and Protestant – as well as the two other religions of the Book – Judaism and Islam –, a wide range of other religions and a substantial number of citizens without any religious affiliation. In some of our members, the Church is still established as a state institution, whereas in others, until less than 15 years ago, the Church as well as individual believers were persecuted by state authorities.

Religious diversity is just one dimension. Continent Europe is a wonderful mosaic made up of many other "diversities": diversity of cultures, traditions, political organisations, social structures, economic development...

If you allow me to use an image, I would compare Europe with a wild meadow. Its beauty is made by the diversity of flowers and colours, by the way it changes with the seasons and the life it makes possible. Beneath all these flowers there is a common and fertile ground. This beautiful meadow can nevertheless suffer from environmental problems (pollution, invasive species, and climatic changes) or may even simply disappear to make place for parking facilities.

It is thanks to this diversity that Europe as a continent has its deep roots planted on a single ground: a ground fertilized by the values shared by more than 800 million citizens, be they believers or not.

These common values constitute an essential part of our heritage. The Church, the University and the Council of Europe share the responsibility of promoting, transmitting and protecting this heritage. I am convinced that becoming aware of the values we share is as important as understanding (and therefore accepting) the "features" that make us different. These "features" may be the result of choices (we choose our opinion or religion) or may appear as a reality that is difficult - if not impossible - to change (race, sex, language, culture...). The complexity of the issue is high so I suggest concentrating on cultural diversity.

Whether at the European or on a global scale, we have witnessed, throughout this past decade, the diversion of culture to justify conflicts between cultural and religious communities. The upheavals suffered by our societies have brought home the fact that *all* of Europe is vulnerable. How can we effectively address this issue?

There are numerous tools at our disposal. Choosing the right tool for the right purpose is important. Let me just mention how culture and education may be instrumental in this case. You will naturally conclude that our three institutions play complementary roles in this respect too.

Culture and Education play a role in inculcating basic knowledge and promoting empathy about religious and cultural diversity as well as democratic practices. Becoming aware of the existence of other faiths or cultures and of their main features must become an indispensable part of any education in order to limit prejudice and hostility. This is the conviction that guides the Council of Europe's work in the reform of curricula and history teaching and the promotion of intercultural education.

Although cultural policy cannot solve all of society's problems, the Council of Europe is convinced that culture is a factor that must be taken into account both in the prevention of conflict situations and in post-conflict social reconciliation. Through its Intercultural Dialogue and Conflict Prevention Project, the Council of Europe intends not only to analyse the sources of intercultural and inter-religious conflicts. It also intends to define cultural actions to help prevent conflicts, and to consider reconciliation measures to be taken in the post-conflict phase. The objective is to help policy-makers at all levels, civil society and actors in the field to define a policy of dialogue integrating all expressions of cultural diversity.

The university has always been a place of many confessions as well as of a critical conscience. It is also an institution that plays an important role in developing a sense of the sacred, and it is for good reason that so many universities include churches and chapels among their heritage, from Coimbra to Vilnius. Often, the university chapel is the place where the most solemn act in the life of the university takes place. When 29 European Ministers of Education met to launch a process leading to a European Higher Education Area, they did so in the magnificent and inspiring surroundings of the former university church of Bologna. In the same way, ancient and rare copies of sacred texts, in whatever language and of whatever confession, figure prominently among the treasures of university libraries.

I warned you: you now have to conclude that both University and Church have an important and complementary role to play in facilitating inter-cultural and inter-religious dialogue. Both have a privileged position as concerns education (in its broader sense). This also means that you have a great responsibility. You are therefore our natural partners in some of our programmes (concerning the heritage of European universities, religious heritage or intercultural education)

Let's now assume that we also agree on the need of greater unity and common understanding to achieve our goal. The following questions are: how do we ensure the sustainability of our project? How do we pass from wishful thinking to reality? Here I shall use my last key words: collective enforcement.

Collective enforcement

Human rights, the rule of law and democracy are at the very heart of the Council of Europe's mission. I have already talked about human rights. Allow me then finish my intervention referring to what makes their effective protection possible: the rule of law and democracy.

I shall immediately reassure you: I am not going to give a lecture on the meaning of both. I will limit myself to state that there is no viable society or community without democracy and the rule of law. Furthermore, if we wish to give our decisions a chance to be implemented, we need a sincere commitment for collective enforcement. My last comments will aim to prove that our three institutions also play a role - and share a responsibility - in both processes: decision making and implementation.

This is worth emphasizing because today, one often gets the impression of an inherent contradiction between belief and reason or between authoritarian religion and democratic civil society. Leaving aside the question of whether civil society is inherently democratic, it may be worth pausing to consider the reason why religion and its organisational manifestation, the Church, often seems to be thought of as authoritarian and not particularly open to new ideas. Is it simply a case of secular society not comprehending religious belief, or could reasons also be found in the behaviour of the Church? Are members and officials of the Church sufficiently free to ask the challenging questions on which democracy is founded and intellectual progress depends?

The university is founded on the assumption that new ideas and new advances in knowledge must be tested in free debate. Universities are, in a word, places of organized *disputatio*, in the original sense of the word: exchange of views between sincere and open-minded partners rather than invectives exchanged on the way to court. A *disputatio* is impossible, even unthinkable, without the fundamental background of respect and tolerance. Without tolerance and an openness of mind, little or no intellectual development is possible and our understanding of complex phenomena will forever be limited.

You are well aware that higher education in Europe is currently engaged in a process of reform leading to a European Higher Education Area in 2010. In a sense, this Bologna Process, to which the Council of Europe makes an important contribution, is an opening up of new horizons to higher education much as the Second Vatican Council was to the Church. It will make it easier for students and teachers to move across Europe, and it will also make it easier for ideas to do so. It is my hope that the European Higher Education Area, building

on implementation at national level of policies agreed at European level, will encompass all dimensions of higher education:

1. Preparation for the labour market.
2. Preparation for life as active citizens in a democratic society.
3. Personal development.
4. Development and maintenance of an advanced knowledge base.

These four dimensions are intimately linked, but I would in particular like to underline the social dimension of higher education. I call on you to contribute to this goal.

The Council of Europe is now embarked in the promotion of active citizenship (including of young people). Citizenship implies commitment to common, societal goals as well as the willingness to work towards those goals. Citizenship is indeed a *sine qua non* for democratic institutions and democratic laws to work, as we have seen on several occasions in Europe in our most recent history. Citizenship in a modern, complex society can only be built on tolerance and acceptance of others, and that includes their beliefs and convictions, their culture and expression, their language and their looks. Citizenship means commitment to one's own beliefs, convictions and ideals but also respect for those of others and a willingness to listen and to learn.

Citizenship as well as scholarship implies courage and integrity – the will and moral power to fight for one's convictions even when these go against the grain of society. Of course, our thoughts go immediately to those who displayed spectacular acts of courage, whether academics like Andrei Sakharov and Miguel de Unamuno or church leaders like Bishop Clemens Graf von Galen and Archbishop Oscar Romero. However important these acts of courage may be, citizenship, as well as scholarship, are built mainly through the painstaking and conscientious labour of committed individuals in their daily lives, most of it far away from the headlines.

Citizenship also implies community. We cannot be citizens each in our own little corner, even if we can and should be citizens also in our own individual acts. Also, learning and scholarship, while often developed by individuals or – increasingly – by teams of individuals, must be communicated to greater society to have an impact. Not least, religion is a balance of individual and community acts. A believer will and should pray alone, but he/she should also be a part of a larger community. An Order like the Carthusians, who have an intense life of personal prayer, also leaves an important space for community celebrations. We recall the injunction to go forth and make all peoples disciples. We should also make people citizens.

The Council of Europe is now launching a new project on higher education governance addressing, on the one hand, the relationship between traditional academic self-government and the claims on influence from external stakeholder and society at large, and on the other hand the role of student participation. This is not "just" about how students can influence higher education - as members of the academic community and not as "clients" or "customers" - but also about how universities can foster active citizenship through academic practice as well as academic teaching and research. To paraphrase the title of a Council of Europe project, universities as well as churches should be sites of citizenship.

The public space, in which citizenship is played out and our common destiny reflected upon and decided, seems to be shrinking while the private space of immediate personal satisfaction seems to be growing larger. Both the University and the Church share a

responsibility for reminding us our basic responsibility to the preservation of Human Dignity (with capitals) in the societies we design, to the collective enforcement of our plans.

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Before concluding, I would like to ask you for your support for a political issue that is now high on the agenda of the Council of Europe and that logically follows on from I have just said.

It concerns the future of Europe and of cultural co-operation. As you know, the European Union is now enlarging to 10 additional countries and there is a risk of new dividing lines emerging. The Council of Europe is closely following the developments in the convention on the future of the Union and the possible constitutional treaty. We have insisted on the need for the Union to accede to the European Convention on Human Rights and this seems to be on the right track. We are also considering further ways to improve the synergy of our efforts.

As you know, the European Cultural Convention has provided, since its adoption in 1954, the framework for all the Council of Europe's work in the fields of culture, education and youth. It has also provided the whole of Europe with a forum where all European States (be they members of the Council of Europe or not) could make the first steps in intergovernmental co-operation thereby laying the foundations for their future role in the construction of Europe. It is a Convention to which the Holy See is also a party, and under which the Holy See already contributes to the Council of Europe's work.

My next ambition is therefore that the European Union accedes to our Cultural Convention. I hope that the arguments I have developed here today will make you endorse this project and that the Council of Europe can count on the support of the representatives here of both the Church and the University.

I started by asking two questions: the first was what is the relation between the Council of Europe, the Church and the University? I hope to have answered this question. The second question was whether my presence at this important event was justified: I leave this to your (hopefully kind) judgement.

Now, I would like to conclude with a last question: what's the next thing we can do together?