🌍 WEBINAR – Democracy at risk: How religious pluralism strengthens its resilience

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Elizabeta Greneron and Sanja Furnadjiska-Adams

Moderation: Dr. Thea Mohr

Committee for interreligious and interconvictional dialogue, Conférence of INGO, Consel of Europe, co-presidents:
Gabriela Frey | European Buddhist Union (EBU) | Tél: 0033 609 77 29 85 | E-Mail: gabriela.frey@free.fr
Lilia Bensedrine | GERFEC | Tél: 0033 629 76 34 95 | E-Mail: lilia.bensedrine@wanadoo.fr
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Committee for interreligious and interconvictional dialogue, Conférence of INGO, Consel of Europe, co-presidents:
Gabriela Frey | European Buddhist Union (EBU) | Tél: 0033 609 77 29 85 | E-Mail: gabriela.frey@free.fr
Lilia Bensedrine | GERFEC | Tél: 0033 629 76 34 95 | E-Mail: lilia.bensedrine@wanadoo.fr
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WEBINAR – Democracy at risk: How religious pluralism strengthens its resilience

DEMOCRACY = TRUST = COMPASSION

Introductory remarks

by Gabriela Frey,
Co-Chair of the committee for interreligious and interconvictional Dialogue

To begin with, I would like to express my sincere thanks to Dr Tilmann Borghardt, who inspired me with the following thoughts for the introduction to this webinar. I would also like to thank the IARF (international association for religious freedom) for providing the Zoom link.

Why is our democracy at risk? Why, in these rapidly changing times, has confidence in democracy been so shaken by the rise of radical forces? It seems that the principle of equality among all human beings is getting out of hand and the idea of equal rights is losing its importance. Without recognising how globally interdependent and interconnected we all are, self-interest and egocentricity are on the rise. As a result, many people see it as their right to exploit the world's resources, discriminate against others and take what other people need to survive, etc.

This tendency to put self-interest before the common good is lessened by religious pluralism. Because it is a central concern of many religions, faiths and beliefs to promote the inner values of each individual and their development. The German atheist and left-wing politician Gregor Gysi stated*: 'Only religions are truly capable of imprinting fundamental moral and ethical values on society in a universally binding manner. Many people in churches live and convey moral and ethical values such as respect for human dignity, solidarity and compassion, which positively counteract all tendencies towards alienation in society."*

People develop when they are given self-determination and space to unfold their inner qualities, whereas in a totalitarian system, the free practice of religion and the desire to shape one's own inner path are increasingly restricted.
Similarly, in a democracy, we abandon narrow perspectives and engage with the viewpoints of others, seeing what they need and developing a sense of care. Taking care means considering everyone, including the vulnerable and minorities, in order to avoid suffering and the potential for conflict that results from it.

Democracy means resonating with one another, i.e., empathising with one another and developing an ever more refined awareness of what is in the best interests of all. That is why democracy and compassion are so closely linked. That is also why religions, beliefs, philosophies and people who live according to their values are so important. With this attitude, we want to be able to rely on decision-making processes and a functioning separation of political powers. In addition to the legislative, executive and judicial branches, independent media and free science are also indispensable.

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There is a general expectation that interest groups (lobbyists) should not interfere unduly in politics. That is why pluralism is so important especially now. We do not need state religions, but people who are truthful and who live accordingly. People who can be trusted. Democracy only works when its citizens are informed, empowered and free in their thinking, and when their elected representatives behave authentically as committed representatives of the common good. The common good is not the sum of all individual interests, but means that everyone shifts away from their self-centredness towards a perspective that includes the family, society, one's own country, Europe and the whole world.

A proper culture of debate belongs to democracy, in which a broad range of views are discussed competently and respectfully. Today, more than ever, it is in our own vital interest to strengthen democracy more effectively. Religion and religious pluralism have the ability to shape the values associated with them in a universally binding way, thereby also strengthening the resilience of democracy. With our webinar, we aspire to contribute to making the qualities of religions and beliefs more visible.

Before I hand over to my colleague Dr Thea Mohr, I would like to draw your attention to our latest initiative: Network for Interreligious & Interconvictional Dialogue. There we collect and network 'best practices of dialogue'. We would be delighted if you would take a look at this website: https://niric-dialogue.eu/

A EUROPEAN MUSLIM PERSPECTIVE

by Carla Amina Baghajati, EULEMA (European Muslim Leaders 'Majlis)

Biography: Carla Amina Baghajati (born 1966 in Mainz and living in Vienna) is board member of EULEMA (*European Muslim Leaders' Majlis*) and engaged in MJLC (*Muslim Jewish Leadership Council*) with activities on European level.
Her professional background is in religious education, working as head of the School Supervisory Authority for Islamic Religious Education in Austria since 2014. She aims to promote interreligious dialogue and social cohesion. There are numerous publications in this field. Her book "Muslimin sein - 25 Fragen, 25 Orientierungen" was published by Tyrolia in 2015. A founding member of the *Platform Christians and Muslims* in Austria and *Initiative of Muslim Austrians* she engages in public discourse to bridge gaps in understanding. She received the Austrian Federal Cross of Merit in 2008.

Thanks for organizing this webinar

EULEMA has only recently joined CINGO – the Conference of International Non-Governmental Organisations of the Council of Europe. Participating in this important webinar organized by the Committee for Interreligious and Interconvictional Dialogue is our first public cooperation.

In these times of growing tendencies of populism and polarisation initiatives like this on European level are ever the more needed.

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EULEMA looks forward to strong and fruitful cooperation and hopes to develop a strong cooperation

A positive approach to a complex question… And in fact:

Although "religion" is less important for many people in a more and more secular world, it is a decisive factor in shaping identity

- Religious authorities are confronted with scepticism when it comes to their way to adopt democratic values in community life and need to reflect their own standing
- European history teaches a many times gruesome story of power conflicts circulating around the claim for „the one and only truth"- and many lessons have been learned and should be memorized
- Interreligious dialogue and cooperation forms a strong resource for social cohesion in a pluralistic world

A spiritual approach – Unity in Diversity

- Islam teaches that diversity is part of God the Almighty's creation
- Pluralism should be accepted – nobody to be forced in his/her believe
- The absolute truth is with God the Merciful – and He will be the final judge
- Men are meant to strive for the good and compete in good deeds (Quran 5:48)
- Encountering each other to getting to know the other encourages dialogue and peaceful interaction (Quran 49:13)
- Values like uprightness, empathy, helping the needy, patience, solving challenges through debating possible solutions – they all are elements of practicing democracy and are to be found in the teachings of Islam as well as in other religions and convictions

Examples worth to be put in the limelight

- Interreligious and interconvictional cooperations in the field of education, social welfare, anti-racism throughout the EU
- Legal status of religious communities may differ in European member states: The more integrated in the different institutions the easier to rely on „institutionalized dialogue" and enter concrete action
- European cities often engage in creating a „council of religions" and similar initiatives promoting mutual understanding and peace and sending strong signals for personal interaction – the Council of Europe encourages these approaches („Intercultural cities – building the future on diversity")

Best practice: MJLC ambassadors' programme

- Matching young Jewish and Muslim professionals
- Different Cities in different countries involved
- Mentoring by Jewish and Muslim leaders
- Special training programme
- Each team develops a programme/initiative that

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- Positive effects and sustainability: Networking, bridging gaps in society, fostering better understanding, countering tendencies of antisemitism and islamophobia, encouraging exchange between generations

When it comes to Islam - a big „BUT!...“

Even when highlighting the potential of religions in strengthening democratic values we cannot draw a blind eye on growing fears combined with anti Muslim sentiments:

- Islam was used during European history as a way of self-definition through „othering“ (e.g. age of crusaders, Ottoman sieges) while at the same time the rich cultural heritage, scientific exchange got underrated
- Extremism, terrorism and the migration issue feed in narratives of Islam as contradiction to European values
- Lack of knowledge in understanding terms like *„sharia“* or *„djihad“* make it easy for populist movements to stir emotions. They rely on extremist views and need them in creating a concept of the enemy – a dangerous vicious circle of polarisation where the extremes support each other and stimulate tendencies of extremism on both sides.

Muslim declarations:
Various declarations propagate the compatibility of Islam and Europe:

- European Conference of Imams and Muslim scholars, Vienna 2003: *„Islam is in line with the values of democracy, rule of law, pluralism and human rights“*
- Two follow up conferences in 2006 and 2010, each gathering around 130 Muslim leaders went into more practical questions and formed action plans, especially on the role of women and youth: *“Integration by participation”* – a key approach in engaging for the common well being
- “A common Word” – declaration of initially 38 Muslim scholars in response to pope Benedict’s speech in Regensburg 2006: Correcting several misunderstandings on Islam like the approach towards people of other faith.

Clarifications…

- *“Sharia*” literally means „path to water” and captures in this picture the need to constantly seek the essential power of the religious sources each time new questions arise. For it is in the self understanding of Islam to contextualise answers to questions of religious practice according to changing times, places and societies. This guarantees flexibility and pragmatism. Populist demands to forbid *“sharia”* would mean denying Muslims any religious practice and shows complete ignorance about the true meaning of *“sharia”.* In other words – just like for the “*canonic law*” in churches there is room for “*sharia*” in a secular world, as it doesn’t compete with rule of law.

- *„Djihad“* is understood as the struggle to reach God‘s complacency – firstly in fighting one’s own darker desires and secondly in the willingness to support self-defence when needed. Very important that no individual is entitled to decide when such a case occurs, but that this is up to the legal leader.

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Gabriela Frey | European Buddhist Union (EBU) | Tél: 0033 609 77 29 85 | E-Mail: gabriela.frey@free.fr
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- Those asserting that Islam wouldn't know democracy ignore that religion cannot be compared with a political concept. But the essential ingredients in supporting democracy as a method by guaranteeing participation in the decision-making process can very well be found in the scriptures and in the example of prophet Muhammad and his way of leadership (e.g. the principle of "shura" – mutual counsel).

Data on attitudes towards Muslims:

FRA – „Being Muslim in the EU" (2024):
- Racial discrimination against Muslims sharply risen since 2016
- Negative effects in different fields where participation and equal accessibility is essential like in education, working, daily life

Bertelsmann Stiftung – „Religionsmonitor" (2015):
- 90% of Muslims in Germany favour democracy
- 61% of non-Muslims are of the opinion „Islam doesn't fit into the Western world

Universität Wien/ORF – „Was glaubt Österreich" (2025):
- 31% think that practicing their religion should be restricted for Muslims
- 25% claim that Muslims shouldn't have the same rights

Democratic participation without citizenship?
Muslims in EU member states often don't carry the citizenship and are not able to get access to political elections

- Nevertheless, there are various ways to engage in a democratic system! Democracy means engaging for the common good, taking up responsibility in volunteering in public initiatives …
- And it's not the populist and identarian idea of rulership of the majority against minorities … but guaranteeing security and human rights for everybody in a plural society
- Participating in public discourse, knowing about those possibilities where one's voice may be made heard and stepping in
- People of faith and humanitarian convictions can be a model for living democracy in their interaction!

FAITH, DIALOGUE, AND SHARED VALUES: STRENGTHENING DEMOCRACY TOGETHER

***By Lena Zoller**, manging director of the Global Ethic Foundation in Germany*

Biography: Lena Zoller has been the Managing Director of the Global Ethic Foundation since December 2024. As a peace and conflict researcher (M.A.), she is a dedicated thought leader in promoting respectful and peaceful coexistence among all people. With over a decade of professional experience in intercultural and interreligious dialogue, sustainable development, and international cooperation, she has successfully led projects that foster global responsibility and harmonious coexistence in diverse societies.

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Gabriela Frey | European Buddhist Union (EBU) | Tél: 0033 609 77 29 85 | E-Mail: gabriela.frey@free.fr
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Dear colleagues, dear friends,

It is a great pleasure to be here with you today to discuss the role of faith-based actors and the shared ethical values they uphold in strengthening democracy. Our societies face many challenges: increasing polarization, growing distrust in institutions, the rise of populism, and social fragmentation. In times like these, religions and worldviews can play a crucial role – if their potential is recognized and used thoughtfully.

I would like to start by **introducing the Global Ethic Foundation**, where I work.

1. The Idea of Global Ethic

The idea of a "Global Ethic" began in the 1980s with Hans Küng, a theologian and philosopher from Switzerland. In 1990, his book Project Global Ethic was published. Küng aimed not only to offer philosophical theory but also to provide practical answers to the challenges of his time. One year after the fall of the Berlin Wall, his message was clear:

> "No peace among nations without peace among religions.
> No peace among religions without dialogue among religions.
> No dialogue among religions without shared ethical values and standards."

In 1993, over 200 representatives of the world's religions met in Chicago and agreed on a Declaration of a Global Ethic. Two years later, in 1995, the Global Ethic Foundation was founded, followed by the Global Ethic Institute at the University of Tübingen 17 years later.
The core principles of the Global Ethic are humanity and reciprocity (the Golden Rule), as well as values such as non-violence, justice, and truthfulness. These principles and values are shared across religions and cultures, forming an ethical foundation that allows communities to live together in peace and democracy.

2. Our Work Today

We are a small, operational foundation, with around 12 employees based in Tübingen, Germany. This year, we celebrate our 30th anniversary. Our mission remains the same: to translate fundamental ethical research into concrete projects, making shared values not just a written agreement but a lived reality.

Our work focuses on two main areas:

1. Religions in society
2. Values-based democracy education

Our goal is simple but ambitious:

- Religious and worldview diversity should be recognized as a strength.
- Young people should experience self-efficacy and participate in democracy as a living practice.
- We want to empower them to stand up against inhumanity and actively support a pluralistic democratic society.

We work directly with young people, schools, religious communities, and municipalities. This proximity allows us to translate ethical principles into everyday action, ensuring that values are experienced, not just taught.

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Before I present one concrete project of ours, I would like to explain why we say that faith-based actors are so essential for a resilient democracy.

3. How Faith-Based Actors Strengthen Democracy

Religious actors contribute in multiple ways to the resilience of democratic societies:

1. Values and Ethical Orientation
   - They transmit core principles like human dignity, justice, non-violence, and solidarity, providing ethical guidance that is especially important in times of crisis.
2. Trust-Building and Social Cohesion
   - Democracies depend on trust among citizens and toward institutions. Religious communities can bridge divides between groups that might otherwise remain isolated.
3. Civil Society Engagement
   - Religious actors are often involved in social projects, youth programs, and refugee integration, strengthening social cohesion and the capacity of democratic systems to absorb challenges.
4. Critique and Accountability
   - Faith-based actors can provide a prophetic voice, holding governments and institutions accountable, highlighting ethical issues, and promoting fairness and justice.
5. International Perspective and Solidarity
   - Many faith-based organizations are globally connected, supporting democratic principles across borders and contributing to conflict prevention and international cooperation.

While many faith-based organizations contribute to democratic resilience on a global level, it is equally important to see how these principles are put into practice locally. Let me give you a concrete example from our work here in Germany.

4. Councils of Religions

At the Global Ethic Foundation, we run a project that helps cities in the state of Baden-Württemberg—where our foundation is located – establish their own Councils of Religions. Thanks to the support of the Baden-Württemberg Ministry of Social Affairs, we have been able to expand and realize this idea on a larger scale for more than eight years now.

This project strengthens interreligious dialogue and social cohesion in local communities across Baden-Württemberg. Our work focuses on advising and accompanying municipalities and religious communities in the process of founding and establishing local Councils of Religions, and on connecting these councils at the state level.

Why is this important?

Germany – like many societies today – is becoming more religiously and culturally diverse, while at the same time traditional church affiliation is declining. These changes can lead to uncertainty and tension, but also to new opportunities for cooperation and understanding.

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Our project helps cities to create spaces of encounter, where people of different faiths can meet, build relationships, and work together for the common good.

Since 2017, we have supported around 20 municipalities, organized more than 15 idea workshops, and helped establish 13 local Councils of Religions.
Each council brings together representatives of different faiths — for example, Christian, Muslim, Jewish, Bahá'í, Buddhist, Hindu, and others — as well as members of the local government. They meet regularly to discuss current issues, advise the city administration, and plan joint social initiatives that strengthen community life.

It's important to note that these Councils do not focus on theological dialogue. Instead, they address social, ethical, and civic questions that affect everyone in the city.
Some councils also have separate working groups where religious representatives meet among themselves — without the participation of the local authorities — to exchange perspectives on theological matters.

The Councils of Religions serve as trust-building platforms between religious communities and also improve communication between religious groups and local authorities. They give religious actors a visible and respected role in public life and strengthen the competence of municipalities in dealing constructively with religious and cultural diversity. This has proven to be a valuable preventive structure against polarization and conflict.

Let me share one concrete story.
In the city of Reutlingen, the local Council of Religions was founded with our support in 2019. It includes Christian churches, the Jewish community, several Muslim associations, and the Bahá'í community. The council quickly became a respected partner for the city administration. When the pandemic hit, tensions grew – misinformation and fear were spreading. The council responded by organizing a joint public statement calling for solidarity and care across all faiths.

They also coordinated volunteer support for elderly and isolated citizens during lockdowns, showing that faith communities can be a vital source of social cohesion.
Since then, the Council has organized interfaith peace prayers, youth encounters, and public discussions about discrimination and democracy. These activities have built long-term trust between groups that rarely interacted before.

It's a simple but powerful truth: when people of different faiths act together, dialogue becomes tangible, and democracy becomes stronger. Through this project, religious leaders become visible agents of trust, helping governments navigate diversity and demonstrating that democracy thrives when differences are embraced rather than ignored.

In the coming years, we want to expand this successful model beyond Baden-Württemberg, offering guidance to municipalities across Germany. Our goal is to establish sustainable, nation- wide structures for interreligious dialogue and to make the positive contributions of faith communities visible in society.

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The Councils of Religions show how ethical dialogue can move from abstract principles to everyday practice – how values like respect, justice, and humanity can be lived out locally. They are, in the best sense, democracy in action.

6. Conclusion: Faith, Shared Values, and Democracy

Religious actors contribute significantly to the resilience of democratic societies in several important ways: I have already outlined how faith-based actors strengthen democracy. Let me conclude by summarizing why their contribution is so vital — and what it teaches us about democracy itself.

1. **Dialogue and trust-building:**

They create safe spaces where differences are openly acknowledged, and conflicts can be addressed constructively. By bringing together people from diverse faiths and worldviews, they foster mutual understanding and respect. These interactions help communities develop the social trust and cohesion that democracy depends on, turning abstract principles into lived experiences.

2. **Education and awareness:**

Faith-based actors play a key role in educating citizens about values, history, and cultural diversity. Through workshops, mentoring programs, and youth engagement initiatives, they challenge stereotypes, reduce prejudice, and encourage active participation in public life. By equipping individuals—especially young people—with the skills and confidence to engage respectfully across differences, they strengthen the democratic fabric of society.

3. **Ethical guidance:**

Religious communities remind us that democracy is not only about laws, elections, or institutions. It is also rooted in shared values, human dignity, and social cohesion. By emphasizing principles such as justice, non-violence, and reciprocity, religious actors help societies navigate moral dilemmas, make ethical decisions, and uphold the spirit of democracy even in challenging times.

At the Global Ethic Foundation, we see every day how initiatives like the Councils of Religions turn these principles into reality. Religion, far from being a source of division, can be a force for connection, understanding, and democratic engagement.

In times of social polarization and uncertainty, this work is more important than ever. It demonstrates that diversity is a strength, dialogue is a tool, and shared ethical values are the foundation of resilient democracies.

Let us therefore recognize and actively support the role of faith-based actors in building bridges, nurturing democratic culture, and shaping societies where pluralism, respect, and human dignity are not just ideals, but everyday realities.

Thank you very much.

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Gabriela Frey | European Buddhist Union (EBU) | Tél: 0033 609 77 29 85 | E-Mail: gabriela.frey@free.fr
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DEMOCRACY AT RISK? How Religious Pluralism Strengthens Its Resilience

by Tamás Kodácsy (CPCE, ECEN)

Biography of Rev. Dr. Tamás Kodácsy is a Hungarian Reformed theologian-pastor and programmer mathematician, currently serving as Associate Professor of Systematic Theology at the Sárospatak Reformed Theological University and as a pastor in Dunakeszi. He earned his PhD in the dialogue between science and theology, with a particular focus on cosmology. His teaching and research focus on social ethics—especially economic and ecological justice—and the relationship between the Church and democracy in Central Europe.He previously served as Assistant Lecturer at the Debrecen Reformed Theological University (2000–2004) and as university chaplain and lecturer at Károli Gáspár University of the Reformed Church (2004–2014). He was a Visiting Fellow at New College, University of Edinburgh (2018/2019). He was one of the initiators and founding committee members of the Network of Christian Roma Colleges for Advanced Studies in Hungary. Kodácsy is head of the Hungarian Eco-Congregation Movement and serves on the boards of the Council of the Communion of Protestant Churches in Europe (CPCE), the European Christian Environmental Network (ECEN), and the European Christian Ecotheology Research Network (ECErN). He is also a member of the Steering Committee of the global Season of Creation ecumenical initiative.

INTRODUCTION

During communism, singer-songwriter **Tamás Cseh (1943–2009)** and his creative partner **Géza Beremény**i became the subtle voices of a muted generation in Hungary. Performing from a small laundry room (*mosókonyha*), they turned irony and intimacy into quiet resistance.
In 1979, they wrote a prophetic song:[1]

Magamat láttam tíz év múlva itt, hallottam ezt, a mostani dal hangjait, és attól féltem, nehogy ez a dal legyen, hogy tíz év múlva ne ez a dal legyen.	I saw myself here ten years late, I heard the sounds of this present song, And I was afraid: let it not be this one Ten years from now, may it not still be this song!

The "song" symbolized the monotony of socialist life — the endless refrain of slogans and resignation. Their hope was that history would change its rhythm. Ten years later, in 1989, that hope was fulfilled: the Iron Curtain fell, and the whispered obedience became open music of freedom. But in 2016, Beremény**i** revisited the song with darker lines:[2]

Miközben vallás- és kultúrkör szerint Ugranak népek egymásnak megint. Eszem ágában sem volt, hogy a jövőben ez legyen, Föl sem merült, hogy az én embernemem Az ősi fajta ezt veszi majd elő, Ezt a jobb híján kitárult más jövőt!	While, along religious and cultural lines, Nations are leaping at each other once again. It never crossed my mind that the future would be this, It never occurred to me that my human race, The ancient kind, would turn to this again, This other future - chosen for lack of a better one.

1 Cseh Tamás, Beremény**i** Géza: *„Ten Years After",* 1979. https://csehtamasarchivum.hu/dal/classic/ten-years-after

2 Cseh Tamás, Beremény**i** Géza: *„Ten Years After",* 2016. https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=fhETTUuTm7o

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What once expressed hope now laments repetition. Religion and culture, meant to inspire solidarity, have again become lines of conflict.

Cseh and Bereményi's evolving "song" mirrors the paradox of faith: **religious commitment can both sustain and destroy democracy**. When rooted in humility, it strengthens conscience and peace; when fused with pride or ideology, it breeds hostility and war.
The song that began as a protest ends as a plea for maturity. Faith must remain self-critical and compassionate if it is to help humanity change its tune — from fear to reconciliation.

1. Lessons from European History

The history of Europe warns us what happens when religion becomes a weapon instead of a force of reconciliation. The continent endured the French Wars of Religion, the English Civil War, and above all the **Thirty Years' War (1618–1648)**, which decimated Central Europe. From these tragedies came the conviction that the question of God cannot be solved by weapons.
Out of this realization, Europe built the idea of **religious peace and tolerance** — foundations of modern democracy. Conviction must never be coerced; truth must be sought through dialogue and conscience.
Faith strengthens democracy when it remains humble and prophetic.
Resisting the idolatry of nation, ideology, or party, it safeguards human dignity and freedom. When believers see every person as created in God's image, they become builders of a just and compassionate society.

2. Political Idolatry — Faith Misplaced

As a Reformed theologian from Hungary, where faith and politics often intertwine too closely, I have studied **political idolatry** — how politics and religion both express the human longing for meaning, yet both can become substitutes for God.
When we build our lives around political idols, we become dependent on them. When those idols are threatened, we panic — not merely disappointed, but apocalyptic. The fall of our party, leader, or ideology feels like the end of the world.

As **Timothy Keller** observes in *Counterfeit Gods* (2009):

> "One of the signs that an object is functioning as an idol is that fear becomes one of the chief characteristics of life. When we center our lives on the idol, we become dependent on it. If our counterfeit god is threatened in any way, our response is complete panic. We do not say, "What a shame, how difficult," but rather "This is the end! There's no hope!" This may be a reason why so many people now respond to U.S. [and EU] political trends in such an extreme way. When either party wins an election, a certain percentage of the losing side talks openly about leaving the country. They become agitated and fearful for the future. They have put the kind of hope in their political leaders and policies that once was reserved for God and the work of the gospel. When their political leaders are out of power, they experience a death. [...] The points of contention overshadow everything else, and a poisonous environment is created.

Another sign of idolatry in our politics is that opponents are not considered to be simply mistaken, but to be evil. [...] The increasing political polarization and bitterness we see in

Committee for interreligious and interconvictional dialogue, Conférence of INGO, Consel of Europe, co-presidents:
Gabriela Frey | European Buddhist Union (EBU) | Tél: 0033 609 77 29 85 | E-Mail: gabriela.frey@free.fr
Lilia Bensedrine | GERFEC | Tél: 0033 629 76 34 95 | E-Mail: lilia.bensedrine@wanadoo.fr
www.coe.int/fr/web/ingo/interreligious-and-interconvictional-dialogue

U.S. politics today is a sign that we have made political activism into a form of religion. How does idolatry produce fear and demonization?"[3]

This fear explains why political transitions can provoke such extreme reactions — even in democracies. When a party loses, its followers feel not just defeat but despair. Opponents are no longer wrong but *evil*.
This polarization turns **political activism into a form of religion**. Campaigns acquire rituals, slogans, and moral absolutes. Each side proclaims its own righteousness and demonizes the other. Such dynamics are visible globally — not only in the United States, but across Europe and beyond.

3. Homo politicus — The Human as Political Being

Aristotle called the human being *zoon politikon*, the creature who lives in community. Modern ethology, as **Vilmos Csányi** noted,[4] reminds us that political instincts are biologically rooted: all politics concerns the question of how resources are distributed. We seek security and belonging, often driven by fear and desire.
From this perspective, political behaviour can be understood but not excused. Corruption, manipulation, and false promises appeal to ancient survival mechanisms. Awareness of these instincts can make our civic life more realistic — and perhaps more merciful.
The opposite of this is **political idiocy**. In Greek, the *idiotēs* was not stupid, but private — one who refused to participate in public life. Today, many retreat from politics in the name of neutrality or purity. But withdrawal is not the answer.
To abstain is to surrender our prophetic responsibility toward society and future generations. There is no apolitical existence. Even silence has consequences.

4. The Exodus Model — When Politics Becomes Religion

The Bible's most dramatic warning against idolatry is the story of the **golden calf (Exodus 32)**. While waiting for Moses, the people grew impatient. They melted their own gold to make a visible god — the very one who had freed them. It was not foreign worship, but the **objectification of freedom itself**.

Each contributed personal wealth, turning the idol into a kind of spiritual *shareholding company*. In modern terms, political idols are similar: emotionally and materially crowd-funded products of collective anxiety.

When freedom is turned into a product, it is lost. "This is your god, Israel, who brought you up out of Egypt" — they said, forgetting that liberation cannot be manufactured. Only a God who is independent of us can truly liberate.
Likewise today, our democracies risk worshipping self-made idols: national myths, charismatic leaders, or ideologies promising redemption. The idolatry of politics always begins in impatience — the refusal to wait for what transcends human control.

5. Political Examples of Idolatry

3 Keller, Timothy, Counterfeit Gods: The Empty Promises of Money, Sex, and Power, and the Only Hope that Matters, Penguin Books, New York, 2009, 104.
4 Csányi Vilmos, Íme, az ember, Libri, Budapest 2015, 282–283.

Committee for interreligious and interconvictional dialogue, Conférence of INGO, Consel of Europe, co-presidents:
Gabriela Frey | European Buddhist Union (EBU) | Tél: 0033 609 77 29 85 | E-Mail: gabriela.frey@free.fr
Lilia Bensedrine | GERFEC | Tél: 0033 629 76 34 95 | E-Mail: lilia.bensedrine@wanadoo.fr
www.coe.int/fr/web/ingo/interreligious-and-interconvictional-dialogue

We can recognize political idolatry in several recurring forms:[5]

1. **The sacralization of power** — when leaders claim a divine or historic mandate. Totalitarian systems of the 20th century, both fascist and communist, replaced faith with ideology and demanded ultimate loyalty.
2. **Religious nationalism** — when faith becomes a political identity rather than a prophetic conscience. The language of salvation is used to defend the nation, and dissent becomes blasphemy.
3. **Civil religion** — when national symbols and ceremonies acquire sacred status. Constitutions, flags, or revolutions are revered as if they were divine revelations.
4. **Apocalyptic fear** — when political opponents are seen not as mistaken but as evil. This moral absolutism destroys dialogue and makes reconciliation impossible.

All these forms reveal the same structure: the **absolutisation of the finite** — the transformation of human power into a false transcendence.

6. From Political Creatures to Community Beings

Jesus Christ took on the full nature of the *homo politicus* — engaged, yet free. He faced political questions about law, taxes, and empire, but refused both withdrawal (*idiotism*) and fanaticism (*idolism*).

He neither fled the world nor surrendered to its powers. His *polis* was the *kosmos*; his community, all humanity.
To follow him is to become not merely political, but truly communal — engaged in justice without idolatry, loyal without blindness.

In this transformation, **religious pluralism becomes an ally**, not a threat. Encountering other faiths teaches self-critique and humility. It prevents us from confusing our convictions with ultimate truth.

Pluralism thus strengthens resilience by exposing hidden idols and sustaining moral vigilance.

7. Conclusion — The Courage to Break Idols

Our time faces new idols: national myths, digital populism, and the illusion that technology or markets can save us. Even faith communities are tempted to sanctify their ideologies.
But democracy's survival depends on **spiritual humility** — the courage to break idols, including our own. Pluralism, when grounded in respect and repentance, becomes a discipline of freedom. It reminds us that truth transcends every system and belongs to no single tradition.
As **Martin Luther** began his *Ninety-Five Theses*:

5 KODÁCSY, Tamás: *A bálványimádás és politikai idiotizmus jelei a választási időszakban,* 2018. https://kotoszo.blog.hu/2018/03/20/a_balvanyimadas_es_politikai_idiotizmus_jelei_a_valasztasi_idoszakban

Committee for interreligious and interconvictional dialogue, Conférence of INGO, Consel of Europe, co-presidents:
Gabriela Frey | European Buddhist Union (EBU) | Tél: 0033 609 77 29 85 | E-Mail: gabriela.frey@free.fr
Lilia Bensedrine | GERFEC | Tél: 0033 629 76 34 95 | E-Mail: lilia.bensedrine@wanadoo.fr
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> "When our Lord and Master Jesus Christ said, „Repent" he willed the entire life of believers to be one of repentance."[6]

As Paul Tillich wrote, the Protestant principle is "the prophetic protest against the claim of any human reality to absolute truth and unconditional validity." It is the Spirit's *No* to every attempt to make the finite infinite, the relative absolute, the human divine.

This principle does not belong only to Protestantism; it is a continual act of judgment within all religions and cultures. It demands that we resist every form of profanization and demonization, even within our own communities. The Protestant principle reminds us that faith must always remain self-critical, always open to reformation, always aware that God transcends our systems, our institutions, and our politics.
Repentance here means constant reformation — a turning away from idols toward truth. If we practise this together — Buddhists, Christians, Muslims and all people of conscience — then religious pluralism will not weaken democracy but renew its moral heart.

DEMOCRACY

by Roland Minnerath, Archbishop emeritus of Dijon

Biography: Roland Minnerath studied history at the Sorbonne in Paris, administrative sciences at the University of Paris IX-Dauphine, and Catholic theology and canon law at the Catholic Faculty of Theology of the University of Strasbourg and at the Pontifical Gregorian University in Rome. He attended the Almo Collegio Capranica and was ordained a priest on 25 June 1978. After two further years of study at the Pontifical Academy in Rome, he entered the diplomatic service of the Holy See. He holds doctorates in theology, canon law and administrative sciences and a master's degree in history. From 1980 to 1985, he was secretary and then auditor at the Nunciature in Brasília, later in Bonn. On 10 April 1981, Pope John Paul II conferred on him the honorary title of Chaplain of His Holiness (Monsignor). From 1985 to 1988, he worked in the Secretariat of State of the Holy See.
From 1989 to 2004, he was professor of church history and legal relations between church and state and took over the chair of church history at the Catholic Faculty of the University of Strasbourg. Since 1992, he has been a member of the Pontifical Academy of Social Sciences and, since 1997, a member of the International Theological Commission. He is also a member of the Joint Committee for Theological Dialogue between Catholics and Orthodox Christians.
He has published numerous books and articles on the history of the Church, particularly on the beginnings of Christianity and on the relationship between state and Church, especially social doctrine and social ethics.

1. Democracy, as a system of government by the people for the people, has everything to gain by opening up to the specific contribution of religious traditions, which are often ignored or methodically dismissed, as if they were not part of the living heritage of civil society. Given

6 LUTHER, Martin: *The 95 Theses*, https://www.luther.de/en/95thesen.html

Committee for interreligious and interconvictional dialogue, Conférence of INGO, Consel of Europe, co-presidents:
Gabriela Frey | European Buddhist Union (EBU) | Tél: 0033 609 77 29 85 | E-Mail: gabriela.frey@free.fr
Lilia Bensedrine | GERFEC | Tél: 0033 629 76 34 95 | E-Mail: lilia.bensedrine@wanadoo.fr
www.coe.int/fr/web/ingo/interreligious-and-interconvictional-dialogue

that religions contribute to shaping mentalities, ethical systems and social values, it is right to give them a voice, especially if they choose democracy from the outset.

The Council of Europe is the leading institution which, since the last war, has been committed to promoting human rights and fundamental freedoms, democracy and the rule of law among its member states. These three areas are closely connected. For democracy to exist, there must be civil equality among the citizens who make up the people in whom sovereignty resides, separation of powers and political pluralism. For democracy to be strengthened, it needs fertile ground in which to flourish: a culture of discussion and compromise, a foundation of shared values, goals to be achieved in terms of economic development and social justice, and relations between states based on international law. In a democratic system, it is the rule of law that must prevail, not the rule of the strongest.

Democracy is now in danger because these principles and values have been eroded and we are seeing the emergence of the disturbing phenomenon of extremist ideologies and populism.
Today, the Catholic Church defends the democratic system. But we must ask ourselves what it means by this. It should be remembered that this has not always been the case.

2. In the 19th century, the democratic movement appeared suspect to the Church for two reasons. In line with the social contract of Hobbes and Rousseau, the sovereign people, deciding by majority vote, are the source of the law. They decide what is right and what is wrong. By becoming secularised, the state cut itself off from any reference to transcendence, for a field of action without limits.

In Catholic doctrine, public authorities are constituted to work for the common good of society. The method of appointing those who govern is left to the free choice of the people. The common good is understood as the set of conditions that enable the realisation of the rights and duties of each person. The common good is the primary value that public authorities must clearly identify and implement. This process is not self-evident. It requires appropriate institutions and rigorous ethics on the part of leaders.

Since Leo XIII, the social doctrine of the Church has been based on the dignity of the human person and the common good. Democracy is not the supreme good, but it is the system best suited to pursuing these two objectives: promoting the dignity of the person and ensuring the common good of society.

Through papal encyclicals, the Church has developed a body of thought on society based on the dual principle of the inherent dignity of every human person and the duty of all organised power to serve the common good. The common good presupposes the pursuit of freedom, truth, solidarity and justice. Natural law, inscribed in human nature, guides positive laws. The goods of the earth have a universal destination. From the family unit to international relations, every community must govern itself according to the principle of subsidiarity. Democracy respects the rule of law.

Committee for interreligious and interconvictional dialogue, Conférence of INGO, Consel of Europe, co-presidents:
Gabriela Frey | European Buddhist Union (EBU) | Tél: 0033 609 77 29 85 | E-Mail: gabriela.frey@free.fr
Lilia Bensedrine | GERFEC | Tél: 0033 629 76 34 95 | E-Mail: lilia.bensedrine@wanadoo.fr
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In a world of post-truth and post-reality, democracy cannot survive, because then living together is no longer based on a common order and values, but on arbitrariness and the unlimited power of the most powerful.

The transition from pre-modernity to modernity was characterised by the abandonment of an objective worldview based on God in favour of a subjective view of truth centred on the individual. From then on, it was no longer objective truth, inscribed in the created order, but the consensus of citizens that prevailed. What struck Catholic thought was the 'unlimited' and subjective nature of the exercise of freedom, without reference to a universal order of ethical values. When the Church speaks of universal ethics, it means the natural order that human intelligence discerns, the 'law of nature' that pre-exists positive human laws. This thinking is not confessional; it stems from a philosophy present in Aristotle and the Stoics of Antiquity. For believers, this natural order is that of creation. The language of political philosophy joins the language of faith.

The Catholic Magisterium has approached the question of democratic government with caution, always in relation to current developments. First, there was an awareness in the nascent industrial society of an awakening to social democracy, beginning with the right of workers to organise. Then, at Christmas 1944, Pius XII acknowledged that democracy is the only system „consistent with the dignity and freedom of citizens", a natural postulate demanded by reason itself."

Finally, John Paul II, in his encyclical Centesimus annus 46 (1991), removed any doubt about the Church's preference for a democratic regime understood as the realisation of the human rights programme. „The Church appreciates the democratic system as a system that ensures the participation of citizens in political choices and guarantees the governed the possibility of choosing and controlling their rulers, or replacing them peacefully when appropriate."

3. The question is raised by the relationship that has now been established between democracy and ethical relativism. Systems of thought that proclaim the existence of objective truth, particularly in the fields of anthropology and natural law, are branded as enemies of democracy. The idea of a horizon of truth is seen as a threat to the pluralism of ideas and value systems, and therefore a threat to democracy. Democracy would thus be the result and guarantor of pluralism. But pluralism without reference to a set of common values is pure relativism. Pure relativism is, however, socially untenable. While citizens have the freedom to adhere to and express all possible opinions, they need a civil order that guarantees them this freedom.

What characterises Western democratic societies is the loss of ethical benchmarks, the end of a foundation of shared values, the weakening of social ties, the inability of education to produce free and responsible citizens, rampant individualism and the growing isolation of people from one another.

Furthermore, pressure groups and the media influence democratic debate. Democratic societies have little control over the economic constraints of globalisation. Large sectors of

Committee for interreligious and interconvictional dialogue, Conférence of INGO, Consel of Europe, co-presidents:
Gabriela Frey | European Buddhist Union (EBU) | Tél: 0033 609 77 29 85 | E-Mail: gabriela.frey@free.fr
Lilia Bensedrine | GERFEC | Tél: 0033 629 76 34 95 | E-Mail: lilia.bensedrine@wanadoo.fr
www.coe.int/fr/web/ingo/interreligious-and-interconvictional-dialogue

financial market activity are beyond democratic control. Major international financial institutions have no democratic legitimacy.

Decisions are taken far from citizens, outside the channels of democratic consultation. The rapid spread of artificial intelligence threatens to further deprive citizens of their right to control economic choices. The power of social networks and their ability to create fake news is discouraging. The future seems to be shaped in Silicon Valley rather than in democratic debates.

The balance sheet of the relationship between democracy and ethics therefore appears mixed. At the beginning of the industrial era, liberal democracy promoted inequality and showed little interest in the fate of the proletariat. It has been pointed out that democracies have not prevented wars. Today, market values are invading the entire social sphere. The values of solidarity – especially intergenerational solidarity – are fading. The sense of responsibility and the notion of the common good are no longer mobilising forces.

4. Democracy as a system of government requires specific conditions: a democratic culture of mutual respect, a set of shared values, and an anthropology that sees individuals as free subjects capable of participating in decisions that affect everyone. It also requires a social system that promotes responsibility, an economic system that allows free enterprise, and a vision of society where social power is built from the bottom up and where citizens are not infantilised by an all-powerful state. Moreover, in order to be operational, democracy must respect the rules on which it is based. It cannot call into question the very principle of equality of citizens, alternation of power, etc. Democracy therefore needs these values to be lived and accepted in society. Is democracy possible if it is not supported by responsible citizens?

Democracy can only develop in conjunction with the idea of the individual, responsibility and solidarity. The values that underpin democracy are deeply rooted in consciousness, informed by experience, reflection and religion. They draw their strength from a vision of the human person and their inherent social dimension. The values that condition democracy predate the practice of parliamentary democracy. The transcendence that underpins and reinforces democratic practice is that of the natural moral law inscribed in every human person.
Among the values that lead to democracy, it is worth asking which ones seem more indispensable than others.

The first is respect for others, in other words, the recognition that all members of a society have the same dignity and the same rights. Power cannot be monopolised by a few, whether they claim it by birth, science, expertise or membership of an ideological movement. It belongs to everyone. All citizens have the right to take part in decisions that affect them.

A test of democracy is the integration of ethnic minorities. National democracies must protect the family, the cultural groups that live in natural solidarity within it. These groups must not claim privileges that are incompatible with the common good of the community to which they belong.

Committee for interreligious and interconvictional dialogue, Conférence of INGO, Consel of Europe, co-presidents:
Gabriela Frey | European Buddhist Union (EBU) | Tél: 0033 609 77 29 85 | E-Mail: gabriela.frey@free.fr
Lilia Bensedrine | GERFEC | Tél: 0033 629 76 34 95 | E-Mail: lilia.bensedrine@wanadoo.fr
www.coe.int/fr/web/ingo/interreligious-and-interconvictional-dialogue

It has been emphasised that what Max Weber called the ethics of responsibility must prevail in a democracy. The ethics of conviction are appropriate for a homogeneous society that shares the same values. The ethics of responsibility are suited to pluralistic societies in which alliances change according to objectives, where it is a question of making balanced decisions for which one can be held accountable for the consequences.

Democracy begins in the minds where deep convictions are forged. The principles of social ethics do not derive their validity from the democratic process. They predate it. They are rooted in human nature. Democratic practices stem from concepts that predate democracy itself.

Hegel called 'civil society' the associations of citizens who take charge of their interests without resorting to the state. The state must exercise a subsidiary or supplementary function and not encroach on areas where citizens are capable of self-management. Until then, no distinction was made between the state and civil society.

The values that underpin democracy are transmitted through education. The Greek city-state owed its civic culture to paideia. People are not born democrats; they become democrats through education.

It has been noted that the values on which a democratic system is built are taught by institutions that are not democratic: the family, school and churches.

It is legitimate to ask whether there are still common values recognised by society. Individualism has become the filter for understanding and extending human rights, as evidenced by the case law of the European Court of Human Rights with its systematic recourse to Article 8 of the European Convention on the Right to Privacy. Education that promotes the satisfaction of children's desires, regardless of any objectivity, and instils the idea that even our biological determinations are social constructs, does not prepare them for democratic debate. Without a shared understanding of reality and truth, there can be no democratic debate.

5. Democracy must remain vigilant in the face of developments that threaten to undermine it. Today, we are seeing the threats that may arise from the ongoing process of globalisation. Democracies that operated on a national basis with a history and values are now confronted with a global economy. A supranational order with democratic control is desirable. The concept of democracy – decision-making by majority vote – cannot be extended without caution beyond the sphere of political decision-making procedures. There is no automatic harmony between the market economy and democracy.

The Catholic Church relies on citizen engagement to ensure that the founding values of democracy prevail in the laws and democratic culture of countries. The reality is that it has never succeeded in influencing the legislation and attitudes of secular societies in this way. As a result, radical Catholic movements dream of a return to an authoritarian state that would impose standards in line with the natural order.

Committee for interreligious and interconvictional dialogue, Conférence of INGO, Consel of Europe, co-presidents:
Gabriela Frey | European Buddhist Union (EBU) | Tél: 0033 609 77 29 85 | E-Mail: gabriela.frey@free.fr
Lilia Bensedrine | GERFEC | Tél: 0033 629 76 34 95 | E-Mail: lilia.bensedrine@wanadoo.fr
www.coe.int/fr/web/ingo/interreligious-and-interconvictional-dialogue

It is clear that the main condition for democracy is its ability to define and guarantee the realm of non-negotiable values. The role of the constitution of states is to proclaim the principles and values in light of which laws will be drafted. The legislator cannot make and unmake the laws that implement these principles according to the changing needs of society. But he cannot change the principles and values that underpin social harmony itself. Among these principles are the right to life, freedom of conscience, thought and religion, and the protection of the family.

These principles and rights must be enshrined in the constitution. They are inalienable, as they are rooted in human nature. In short, society protects itself democratically against abuses of democracy.

In the ideal synthesis between values and democracy, religion provides archetypes and values based on human beings and their destiny. Democracy is a value that is produced upstream of democratic practice and democratic regimes. This upstream lies in civil society and in the institutions that teach human dignity and worldviews that provide values. Political institutions merely implement the values lived by society.

There is a wide gap between democracy in crisis and the democratic ideal advocated by the Church. The Church must remain within its own sphere of competence: tirelessly transmitting the values that are at the source of democratic regimes, which are a matter of citizens' convictions and commitment.

CONCLUDING WORDS

by Lilia Bensedrine-Thabet

Co-President of the Committee of Interreligious and Interconvictional Dialogue, CoE

Dear speakers, dear participants,

Throughout this webinar, a common thread has clearly emerged: democracy and religious pluralism share the same requirements – trust, mutual respect and dialogue. In a world marked by polarisation, identity-based withdrawal and the loss of common reference points, religious pluralism is proving to be not a threat, but an essential resource for democratic resilience.

We have heard that religions and beliefs, when rooted in the awareness of the common good, can offer a universal ethical framework: respect for human dignity, justice, solidarity and non-violence. These values are found in all religions. They constitute the golden rule: 'Do unto others as you would have them do unto you. Do not do unto others what you would not have them do unto you." These values are not abstract; they become real when they are lived out on a daily basis, for example in local initiatives such as religious councils, which are true laboratories of democracy in action.

Interfaith and inter-belief dialogue, far from erasing differences, brings them together. It is a learning process and an education in listening, debating with respect and seeking solutions

Committee for interreligious and interconvictional dialogue, Conférence of INGO, Consel of Europe, co-presidents:
Gabriela Frey | European Buddhist Union (EBU) | Tél: 0033 609 77 29 85 | E-Mail: gabriela.frey@free.fr
Lilia Bensedrine | GERFEC | Tél: 0033 629 76 34 95 | E-Mail: lilia.bensedrine@wanadoo.fr
www.coe.int/fr/web/ingo/interreligious-and-interconvictional-dialogue

together. This is how democracy regains its momentum: through encounter, responsibility and mutual recognition.

We have also seen that religion can become dangerous when it is exploited as an ideology or an instrument of power. On the contrary, it can help society remain vigilant against all forms of political or economic idolatry. Pluralism then becomes a discipline of freedom, a bulwark against the temptation of dogmatism and fear.

Democracy can only be sustained if it is supported by responsible citizens who are educated in values, open to dialogue, capable of listening and compassionate.
Recognised and practised religious pluralism is one of the ways to cultivate this shared humanity.

Dialogue helps to make diversity not a source of division, but a force for resilience and lasting peace.

Thank you all for your presence, your attention and your commitment.

Committee for interreligious and interconvictional dialogue, Conférence of INGO, Consel of Europe, co-presidents:
Gabriela Frey | European Buddhist Union (EBU) | Tél: 0033 609 77 29 85 | E-Mail: gabriela.frey@free.fr
Lilia Bensedrine | GERFEC | Tél: 0033 629 76 34 95 | E-Mail: lilia.bensedrine@wanadoo.fr
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