Religion and politics: the dangers of instrumentalization

Monday, April 27th, 2026 - 18.00 – 19.30

(AI based Translation with subtitles in English & French)

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Moderation: Dr. Thea Mohr,
European Buddhist Union, EBU, trainer of intercultural communication

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INTRODUCTION:

Gabriela Frey, *Co-president of the Committee for interreligious and interconvictional Dialogue, Conference of INGOs, Council of Europe*

An eventful couple of weeks lie behind us. First, the spring session of the Conference of INGOs, followed immediately by the session of the Parliamentary Assembly of the Council of Europe. We have drawn up our biennial report, in which we have outlined our committee's work and, in doing so, reviewed the current challenges that we and all other people in our society have had to face. The report is available on our website:
https://www.coe.int/en/web/ingo/committee-for-interreligious-interconvictional-dialogue

During the Parliamentary Assembly's session week, the long-awaited report by Italian MP Francesco VERDUCCI was debated and put to the vote: **Countering discrimination based on religion and protecting freedom of religion or belief in Europe**.
https://pace.coe.int/en/files/35991

In his opening remarks, M. Francesco Verducci very concisely and clearly outlined the topic and the reason for our webinar today, and I quote:
„Nowadays, dangerous forms of nationalism return to instrumentally fan the flames of religious conflicts, of the clash of cultures, poisoning public opinion with obsessive fear of the other, and religious discrimination is the most widespread violation of human rights in the world today. It often overlaps with other forms of discrimination and social inequalities and disparities. And always, in all its forms, it feeds on prejudice, stereotypes and is characterised as a form of racial discrimination. "

During his talk, Mr Verducci touched on another important point:
"There is a special responsibility for everyone who holds public office: to counter discriminatory and manipulative language, to counter the instrumental political use of religion, which is one of these manipulative languages, the misuse of religion to feed stereotypes and prejudices, to stigmatise individuals or social groups, to gain an electoral advantage. This comes at an unsustainable price for our democracies."

We are grateful that Mr Verducci concluded by reiterating one of our committee's key objectives: *"in relaunching the proposal and the objective of establishing a permanent, stable and formally recognised platform for interreligious, interconfessional dialogue within the Council of Europe, to overcome fears that are very often artfully fuelled by malevolent politics or by pundits who use algorithms and new technologies to monetise hatred, but do so to the detriment of our democracies. And this is a big political issue."*

Despite countless difficulties, the **Council of Europe's New Democratic Pact** represents a point of reference and hope for so many people who believe in democracy, the rule of law, equality and emancipation. They all have the fundamental right to self-determination and freedom of religion, which we must all protect and uphold.

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Our guests today bring a depth of experience to this topic, and we are delighted that they have agreed to share their perspectives with us. Before I hand over to my colleague Dr Thea Mohr, I would like to

- warmly thank our partner IARF for providing us the Zoom link and technical support.
- to draw your attention again to our ***Network for Interreligious & Interconvictional Dialogue*****.** There we collect and network 'best practices of dialogue'.
- We would be delighted if you would take a look and contribute to this website: https://niric-dialogue.eu/

Thea Mohr, moderator, presents the topic and the Speakers

Religion and politics: the dangers of instrumentalisation. A very warm welcome to all of you and specially to our speakers. In an increasingly fragmented world, interreligious and interconvictional dialogue can no longer be reduced to mere formal courtesies. Today, this dialogue faces systemic challenges that threaten social cohesion.

We are witnessing a paradoxical dual trend: on the one hand, the **instrumentalization of politics by religion**, where the sacred is invoked to legitimise agendas of power; on the other hand, the **instrumentalization of religion by politics**, where religious identities become tools for electoral polarisation.

Between these two forces, ignorance — often perpetuated or endured — erects walls where we should be building bridges. The aim of this webinar is to analyse these mechanisms:

- How can we distinguish between genuine conviction and a manipulative strategy?
- How can we move from superficial tolerance to a genuine understanding of others?
- How can we resist the ideological pressures and instrumentalization we face today?

In the face of the political appropriation of religion and the rise of ignorance, interreligious and inter-convictional dialogue is more necessary than ever. This webinar examines the mechanisms of mutual exploitation in order to restore genuine dialogue, moving beyond identity-based isolation and strategies of power.

Our esteemed guests this evening are:

Prof. Dr. Elisabeth Naurath, Prof. Francois Mabille, Imam Yahya Pallavicini, and Rabbi Mosché Moise Lewin.

We have AI-based translation available in English and French; please select your preferred language. We will also be recording this event and will subsequently make a brochure of the webinar available on our website. If you have any questions for our speakers, please submit them in the chat. We will address them at the end of the presentations.
I will now briefly introduce our guests before each presentation. Prof. Elisabeth Naurath will begin first, as she has to leave at 7:00 p.m. due to other commitments.

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Mrs. Elisabet Naurath – Chair of Religions for Peace Germany and member of RFP-Europe – Protestant theologian, University Augsburg, Research focus areas, Practical theology in the context of social transformation processes; perspectives on public theology. Founder of the Peace Education Canter for Interreligious Education with the study for Certificate of Interfaith Mediation (CIM). Prof. Dr. Elisabeth Naurath is outstandingly active in the field of interreligious dialogue and cooperation on a local, national and international level. Her focus is especially interreligious education, interreligious women's work in research and teaching.
She holds the Chair of Religious Education and Didactics at the Faculty of Philosophy and Social Sciences at the University of Augsburg (Germany). She studied Protestant Theology at the universities of Munich, Göttingen and Heidelberg. She completed her doctorate in Practical Theology with the topic 'Pastoral care as Body Care. Perspectives of a body-oriented hospital pastoral care'. Her habilitation thesis dealt with the topic 'Compassion as a key to ethical education in religious education'. In 2008 she was ordained as a pastor of the Evangelical Lutheran confession. Her chair has the profile of interreligious learning as peace education. This professional focus combines very well with her work for Religions for Peace. She founded a local Religions for Peace group as a women's group in Augsburg-Schwaben in order to strengthen the female voice of religions in interreligious cooperation. Since 2021 she was elected as Chair of Religions for Peace Germany and as a Member on the Board of Religions for Peace Europe. Professor Naurath's current research focuses on the topic of 'Religions and the Climate Crises; Religions as actors for Climate Justice'. She is a Member of the Standing Commission on Nurturing a Sustainable Environment of Religions for peace International'.

INTERVENTION:

In case you are still reading newspapers, these headlines repeatedly catch your eye: religion and violence clearly tend to go hand in hand. It is not hard to see: international conflicts are religiously triggered. Whether it is an American president posing in the idealised image of a healing Jesus Christ, or Iranian mullahs claiming for themselves the realisation of a so-called theocracy. The obvious aim is to imbue one's own supposed strength with religious significance, in order to suggest, in a sublime manner, that one is acting by the grace of God.
History has seen this phenomenon in many forms. The divine right of European monarchs was an early modern variant: this sacralisation of political rule made resistance a sin. In the 20th century, National Socialism used Christian-nationalist symbolism to imbue an ethnically exclusive ideology with religious significance – a prime example of the ideological perversion of religious language.

A matter of the past? Unfortunately not – we are currently witnessing once again how populist forces – mostly in the guise of male leaders – seek to create a binding effect through religious and ethnic nationalism. They are so dangerous because they aim to forge a deep emotional bond. Since our religious convictions are closely linked to our sense of identity, such existential connections achieve a greater emotional intensity than purely rational arguments. At the same time, any rational objection appears to be stripped of its legitimacy, for those who, in their reasoning, decisively claim God's will for themselves, render themselves, in a sense, transcendently unassailable.

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Unless – and here we come to the crucial point: we have clear theological arguments, which at best can be substantiated with scriptural quotations and texts from recognised religious authorities. Unless – we have the courage to contradict those in power on the basis of religious-ethical convictions that emphasise principles such as peace and love for one's neighbour. Unless we possess a strong personality with a clear stance, willing to risk disadvantages – even danger to life – in order to accept the consequences of opposing a religiously charged, misanthropic power structure. All this can succeed on the foundation of sound religious education.

The instrumentalisation of religions affects everyone. No religion is safe from it. For this is a process in which religion is not treated as an autonomous spiritual entity, but as a means to an end in legitimising political rule. Most often, religious convictions are then used – or should I say 'abused' – to exclude, discriminate against, persecute and destroy others. This clear 'othering' implies that there are no shades of grey – only two sides: good or evil. In the stylisation of a supposed 'good versus evil' struggle, religious symbols and narratives are developed to consolidate one's own power interests. Religious affiliation generates strong in-group loyalties that can be politically mobilised in the spirit of community-building. To this end, the infrastructures and networks of religions are utilised.

Religious systems and structures, therefore, due to their transcendent and emotionally charged dimensions, can be seen as a godsend for power-hungry despots. The danger of abuse is inherent in them.

Perhaps this is the reason for the widespread view of a world without religion being a better alternative. The 'Weltanschauungen' research group confirmed this in 2017, finding that around 40 per cent of Germans believe the world would be a more peaceful place without religion.[1] The trend is rising. However, empirical global studies show that around 80% of the world's population feel they belong to a religious community[2] . In that case, this wish would be impossible, or it would be obvious to say: even a world without people would be better. This does not get us anywhere and cannot be seen as universal remedy, even in processes of secularisation. Especially as the question of the values inherent in religions and the formation of values would thus also be disregarded.
In the following, I would therefore like to offer some brief ideas on possible strategies:

Differentiation as a task and a democratic necessity
The danger of the instrumentalisation of religions can only be averted if religious convictions, in their manifold manifestations, are viewed both with nuance and a critical eye. For it is evident that, historically, religious traditions have both legitimised oppression and inspired resistance against it. The crucial analytical and political task lies in precise differentiation: between religious conviction and its political instrumentalisation, between legitimate value

1 See Forschungsgruppe Weltanschauungen in Deutschland, Religion and Peace in the World, 2017, https://fowid.de/meldung/religion-und-frieden-2017.
2 See Pew Research Center (2012): *The Global Religious Landscape. A Report on the Size and Distribution of the World's Major Religious Groups as of 2010.* Washington, DC.

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orientation and manipulative mobilisation, between believers as political citizens and religion as an instrument of domination. It is therefore important to recognise that religions are not monolithic blocs (there is no such thing as 'Christianity' or 'Islam'). Rather, religions themselves reflect a diverse range of currents and beliefs, which are often shaped very differently depending on context and thus also culturally. Differentiation protects against instrumentalisation!

The guarantee of religious freedom as a legal framework

Democratic constitutional states have developed institutional safeguards: the principle of the separation of church and state, the guarantee of positive and negative freedom of religion, and the principle of neutrality. These are necessary prerequisites against strategies of political instrumentalisation. Resilient democracies therefore also require cultural counterweights, such as religious actors who assert their (prophetic) independence from political power. It is also important to foster a critical public sphere that identifies and calls out strategies of instrumentalisation. This should be seen as a task of religious education: to promote a political culture that understands religious plurality not as a threat, but as a constitutive feature of a free society.

Promoting the capacity for plurality as a central task of religious education: The significance of interreligious education and interreligious dialogue

The affirmation of every person (which is grounded, for example, in both creation theology and justification theology within Christian theology) implies the ethical principle of human dignity. The 'affirmation' of human dignity and the 'affirmation' of plurality are thus like two sides of the same coin: they are inextricably linked. This implies that the capacity for interreligious dialogue and pluralism are fundamental concerns of religious education. From nursery school through to school education, from adult education to work with the elderly, learning to know and understand other religions is an educational task that should also be seen as a means of preventing prejudice and the creation of enemy stereotypes. The ideal approach is the encounter between people of different faith traditions, constructive dialogue, and cooperation to promote common goals such as peace, nature conservation and climate justice. To this end, we need forms of religious education that contribute to interfaith professionalisation – such as the Certificate of Interreligious Mediation – CIM at the University of Augsburg
(ZIM:https://www.uni-augsburg.de/de/fakultaet/philsoz/fakultat/religionspadagogik/ZIM/)

Strengthening the peace-building potential of religions

The shared ethical potential of religions to promote peace must be emphasised more clearly than before. There are numerous positive examples of conflict mitigation and de-escalation by religious actors and institutions.[3] The interfaith peace organisation Religions for Peace (https://www.rfp.org), which has been active for more than 50 years, exemplifies the shared commitment to peace-promoting cooperation between religions at local, regional, national and international levels. A focus on the global context of these tasks offers definitive

[3] See Markus Weingardt, Religion Makes Peace. The Peace Potential of Religions in Political Violent Conflicts, Bonn (Federal Agency for Civic Education) 2010; Markus Weingardt: The Peace Potential of Religions. In: Altmeyer/ Grümme/ Naurath/ Schröder/Suhner/Tacke: Peace. JRP 42 (2026).

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protection against the instrumentalisation of religion. In view of the immense challenges posed by global crises, the emphasis must be on fundamental values such as human dignity, respect for religious and ideological plurality, the conservation of natural resources and the promotion of a just peace.

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M. François Mabille - Professor of political science, secretary general of the International Federation of Catholic Universities, and researcher at the CNRS (GSRL-EPHE) *(CNRS: Centre national de la recherche scientifique, GSRL: Groupe de sociologie des religions et de la laïcité, EPHE: École pratique des hautes études).*

François Mabille is an Associate Research Fellow at IRIS (French Institute for International and Strategic Affairs), where he leads the Geopolitical Observatory of Religion. He is a professor of political science (international relations), a specialist in religious actors in international relations and in particular in pontifical diplomacy. He is an associate researcher at IRIS, where he directs the Geopolitical Observatory of Religion.

His research also incorporates a strong prospective dimension since his collaboration with the Peace and Conflict Department of Uppsala University and with the Copenhagen Institute of Future Studies. Since 2013, François Mabille has been a statutory researcher at the Religions, Societies, Secularism Group (EPHE – CNRS), researcher at LIPHA (Paris Est University) and associate researcher at UQAM (Raoul-Dandurand Chair) in Montreal (Canada). From 2015 to 2017, he was also director of the International Network for Studies on Radicalization and Religious Risk.

INTERVENTION:

I would like to begin with a simple idea, which I believe is essential for understanding current transformations: we have entered a phase of generalized interpretive pluralism, affecting both religious traditions, systems of belief, and more broadly the symbolic frameworks of politics.

Contrary to a widely held assumption, religious traditions have never been univocal. They have always been shaped by debates, tensions, and competing schools of thought. What is new today, however, is the nature of this pluralism. It has become more visible, more conflictual, and above all much more difficult to regulate. Traditional religious authorities—whether institutional or doctrinal—are increasingly challenged in their capacity to structure and arbitrate interpretations. At the same time, globalization, the accelerated circulation of ideas, and the rise of digital spaces tend to place very different—and sometimes incompatible—interpretations on an equal footing.

We are therefore not simply dealing with pluralism, but with unregulated pluralism. This point is crucial. When pluralism is no longer structured, it opens a space in which religious interpretations can be selected, recomposed, and even instrumentalized according to political objectives.

This brings us to the relationship between religion and politics.

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In this context, religion tends to function less as a stable normative framework than as a repository of available meanings. It can be mobilized as belief, of course, but also as identity, culture, memory, or symbolic boundary. In other words, religion becomes a political resource—not external to politics, but increasingly embedded within it.

This is precisely what I have sought to analyze in my work on religious populism. Religious populism does not simply correspond to a "return of religion" into the public sphere. Rather, it represents a specific articulation between political crisis, crisis of representation, and the mobilization of religious references.

Since the end of the Cold War, we have witnessed a recomposition of political ideologies. The major structuring narratives—liberal, socialist, or communist—have lost part of their capacity to frame political life. In this context, political actors are seeking new resources to produce meaning, cohesion, and legitimacy. Religion appears as a particularly effective resource, because it mobilizes powerful imaginaries, draws symbolic boundaries, and reactivates forms of belonging.

However, it is essential to clarify that, in many cases, the religion mobilized politically is not primarily doctrinal or spiritual. It is often a culturalized religion, simplified and selectively appropriated. Christianity, for example, may be mobilized not as faith, but as a civilizational heritage, as an identity marker opposed to Islam or immigration. Similar dynamics can be observed in other religious contexts.

Religious populism thus functions as a political grammar. It constructs an opposition between a supposedly homogeneous people, rooted in a religious tradition, and elites accused of betraying that tradition, as well as figures of alterity perceived as threatening. In this framework, religion plays a role not only of legitimation but also of simplification. It moralizes political conflict by transforming disagreements into oppositions between good and evil, authenticity and corruption, "the people" and their enemies.

At this point, an important distinction must be made. This political mobilization of religion should not be conflated with radical or violent forms. It can be carried by institutional actors, political parties, and even democratically elected governments.

This leads us to what I refer to as an integral logic of religion. This logic consists in viewing religion not as confined to the private sphere, but as having the capacity—or even the vocation—to structure the whole of social and political life. It is not new, but it takes on a particular significance today in a context marked by pluralism and competition among interpretations.

Within this framework, it is useful to introduce a related but distinct concept: integralism. Integralism should not be confused with religious fundamentalism. Fundamentalism generally refers to rigid, often exclusionary—and sometimes violent—forms of doctrinal radicalism that claim a return to an original purity. Integralism, by contrast, refers to a broader and often

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more diffuse conception: the idea that religion should inspire, guide, or structure all dimensions of collective life, including political, legal, and social orders.

Integralism can therefore exist without overt radicalism. It may be upheld by moderate, institutional actors, including those engaged in interreligious dialogue. Yet it has significant political implications, as it tends to blur the boundaries between religion and politics and to legitimize an expanded role for religion in the public sphere. In a context of unregulated pluralism, this integralist logic may become a point of leverage for political uses of religion, precisely because it offers a flexible and encompassing normative framework.

This is a key point. It helps explain why the instrumentalization of religion cannot be understood solely as an external manipulation by political actors. It also relies on internal dynamics within religious traditions themselves. When interpretations multiply and authorities struggle to regulate them, religion becomes more easily appropriable by political actors. We are thus confronted with a double dynamic: the internal fragmentation of religion and its renewed political activation.

This dynamic can be observed globally. Comparative studies show that the relationship between populism and religion takes very different forms depending on context, but shares several common features: the use of religion as an identity marker, the production of narratives of decline or threat, and the construction of a homogeneous “we” opposed to a perceived “other.”

In this framework, religion is often used less for what it says than for what it enables politically. This raises, of course, the question of the dangers of instrumentalization.

- The first danger lies in the simplification of religion itself. When mobilized politically, religion tends to be reduced to a few symbolic elements, at the expense of its complexity, diversity, and critical dimension.

- The second danger lies in the polarization of politics. When religion is used to draw identity boundaries, it hardens divisions, makes compromise more difficult, and transforms political disagreements into existential conflicts.

- The third danger concerns the weakening of pluralism. By constructing a homogeneous “people,” religious populism tends to delegitimize internal diversity within societies, whether religious or non-religious.

Faced with these dynamics, interreligious and interbelief dialogue is often presented as a solution. It is indeed an important space for encounter and cooperation. However, it is necessary to question its limits. In many cases, such dialogue operates within relatively institutionalized frameworks, involving actors who are already convinced of its necessity. It may therefore appear disconnected from more conflictual social dynamics. Moreover, it often emphasizes consensus, sometimes at the expense of confronting deeper divergences.

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The question then becomes more demanding: is dialogue capable of engaging with real alterity, including when it is conflictual, irreducible, or even incompatible?
This question is all the more important as we are confronted with a growing fragmentation of beliefs, which makes the construction of shared frameworks more difficult.
Ultimately, the dangers of the instrumentalization of religion cannot be understood without taking into account this broader configuration. It is not simply a matter of political manipulation, but of a structural transformation.

This implies shifting our perspective. Rather than asking only how to prevent instrumentalization, we must ask why religion has become so easily instrumentalizable today. This requires rethinking the role of religious authorities, the regulation of pluralism, the responsibility of political actors, and the very forms of interreligious dialogue.
In conclusion, the challenge is not to reduce pluralism, but to reflect on the conditions under which it can be regulated, so that it does not become a factor of division. The task is less to eliminate tensions than to make them politically and socially manageable in a world marked by fragmentation and uncertainty. Thank you.

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Imam Yahya Sergio Yahe Pallavicini is an Italian Muslim leader and scholar who plays an active role in fostering interreligious dialogue and cooperation across Europe. He serves as chairman of EULEMA (European Muslim Leaders Council) and is a board member of the Muslim-Jewish Leaders Council (MJLC), contributing to initiatives that strengthen collaboration and mutual understanding between religious communities. He is vice president of COREIS (Italian Islamic Religious Community) and imam of the al-Wahid Central Mosque in Milan. As a founding member of EMUNA Italy, he is committed to promoting ethical values, dialogue, and peaceful coexistence. Through his work, he supports efforts toward social cohesion, religious literacy, and constructive engagement between Muslim communities and wider European society. "

INTERVENTION:

Nearly a thousand years of history — from the coronation of Emperor Charlemagne (800 AD) to the fall of the Ottoman Caliphate (1922) — connect the relationship between religion and politics in both East and West. Indeed, certain affinities can be drawn between the Islamic Caliphate and the Holy Roman Empire in their respective approaches to the relationship between the political system and religious authority. The most radical divergences of interpretation emerge fundamentally with the progressive development of modernity in Europe and with the independence of nation-states.

The Prophet Muhammad was both a messenger of God and a faithful transmitter of Divine Revelation, as well as, for a defined period, the governor of the city of Medina. According to Christian theology, Jesus is simultaneously king, prophet, and high priest. From this synthesis, we may observe that — albeit with differing nuances — both Muhammad and Jesus embody a distinct exercise of royal or political power alongside prophetic service and spiritual authority. The difference lies in doctrinal and symbolic form, yet both share a substantial unity

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and distinction between temporal and religious power, both to be interpreted following a sacred perspective albeit in relation to different domains.

This affinity shifts, however, when the organisation of Christian jurisdiction seeks to interpret the clear separation between Caesar's imperial power and the spiritual authority of Jesus. As a consequence, throughout the history of the Western world, Christian structures endeavoured to manage a complex — at times conflictual — balance between religious and political power.

During the Holy Roman Empire (800–1806) and the associated Papal States, the various Catholic emperors received their political investiture through papal imprimatur, until a ferocious Thirty Years' War brought about a radical confrontation between political and religious authorities in conflict between Protestants and Catholics. A century later, the French Revolution would further overturn this relationship, giving rise to a process of autonomy and independence of European states from the central influence of the Pope.

In less than three centuries of European modern history — from Luther's Reformation (1517) to the Thirty Years' War (1618–1648) to the French Revolution (1789–1799) — the development of the relationship between politics and religion in Europe was fundamentally and irrevocably transformed.

What, then, of the relationship between religion and politics in Islam? The Charter of Medina represents perhaps a first constitutional model, and the Umayyad Caliphate — and above all the Abbasid Caliphate, through to the end of the Ottoman Caliphate — represents the organised development of a political jurisdiction bearing a Muslim confessional identity, while upholding the right to religious freedom and the dignity of religious practice for citizens of Jewish, Christian, Hindu, and Buddhist communities.

In other words, one of the first fundamental differences to be noted between the Holy Roman Empire and the Islamic Caliphate is the absence in the West of any reference to or legal framework for religious pluralism. Indeed, far from it: the Western experience was rather one of division, power struggles, or territorial conflicts between different Christian Churches vying for the exclusive primacy of Christendom as imperial blessing.

In the doctrine of the Islamic Caliphate, the authority of the Caliph — following the first four noble Companions of the Prophet Muhammad — was that of an administrator of peoples of diverse cultures and believers of different religions, whose security, health, education, and development were to be ensured through an interpretation of the sciences useful to the dynamics of a society extending geographically from Central Asia to the Maghreb.

The recognition accorded by the citizens of the Islamic world was understood as respect for a system ordered from a theocentric perspective and inspired by a political, juridical, ethical, intellectual, and spiritual organisation for the distribution, circulation, and service of goods for the progress and dignity of every sacred aspect of the life of each person, family, community, and sphere of study and labour.

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The precepts of the Caliphate were: the promotion of good and the prohibition of evil; social justice in the equal dignity of citizens; freedom of religious and cultural pluralism (including in matters of matrimonial and inheritance law) with the active participation of men and women of every religion among the members of the Council of concertation and provincial administration; and, finally, respect for local culture within the mosaic of the Caliphate. No formal homogenisation, no moral exclusivism, and no confessional coercion.

If these are some of the fundamental characteristics of political doctrine in traditional Islam — at least until the decadence, corruption, and end of seven centuries of the Hanafi Ottoman Caliphate — one may readily observe the enormous differences and grave incoherencies with respect to the criminal parody perpetrated by ISIS or the Taliban government. These are but some of the movements that instrumentalise the name of Islam to justify their struggles for power and violence, committing abuses, attacks, invasions, destruction, and murder against Muslim believers and believers of every other religion, both in the East and in the West.

It is noteworthy that the origins of this political degeneration arose only in the nineteenth century with the Wahhabist nationalist movement, followed by certain ideologues of Salafist puritanism in Egypt and Syria, followed in turn by the radical fundamentalism of the Muslim Brotherhood, which would go on to found the armed wing of Hamas and inspire the jihadist terrorism of al-Qaeda. The entire heritage of millennial and multicultural Muslim civilisation — its juridical, sapiential, scientific, theological, and spiritual teachings — appears to have been forgotten through the arrogance of a few individuals and certain movements of puritan, punitive, rationalist, and pan-Islamist revolution, who instrumentalise politics, religion, the identity of a people, and national culture for an integralist propaganda and to legitimise a subversive project of domination, barbarism, and violence.

In Europe, the declining knowledge of religion in general and the ignorance of Islam in particular creates fertile ground for a minority of extremists in Western politics, who employ political propaganda to deny freedom and equal religious dignity to all believers and citizens through a vulgar campaign of discrediting Islam and Muslims — deliberately and in a generalised manner associating them with irregularity or incompatibility, foreignness, or a threat to security.

In this climate, the function of representation, witness, and mediation by European Muslim religious leaders becomes of great importance in clarifying and proposing counsel that pacifies minds, avoids discriminations and polarisations, and prevents rivalries, resentments, and alienations. European Muslim religious leaders can foster the construction and development of bridges of respect, dialogue, understanding, and collaboration between individuals, citizens, believers, and politicians.

An important role for European Muslim religious leaders is above all an educational one: the formation of young people to prevent radicalisation — as well as assimilation — and to transmit not only the value of a universal and sacred perspective on religious life, but also a

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narrative that dismantles the brainwashing perpetrated by extremists and speculators of religion and politics in Europe.

Interreligious collaboration becomes essential in meeting the challenges of contemporary society, accompanying minds and sensibilities towards the recognition of what is authentic in both religion and politics, and avoiding superficial approaches or false solutions of tolerance or intolerance that seem merely to serve as alibis for refusing to acknowledge the richness, complexity, and depth of human nature.
A responsibility of citizens, believers, and wise religious figures of Europe is to inspire a fraternal collaboration capable of 'competing in good works' so as to develop harmony among peoples and in the sound governance of political administrators. To this responsibility is added the further value of a spiritual sensibility in the quality of life — expressed by religious figures through the opening of the heart to faith and the grace of God. This has nothing whatsoever to do with the domination of the world or tyranny of governance.

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Chief Rabbi Moché Moïse Lewin:
Chief Rabbi Moshe Lewin is a prominent Jewish leader and representative engaged in fostering interreligious dialogue and cooperation across Europe. He serves as a key figure within the Conference of European Rabbis, where he acts as Executive Vice President, contributing to initiatives that strengthen Jewish life and representation at the European level. He is also a Board Member of the Muslim-Jewish Leaders Council (MJLC), promoting collaboration and mutual understanding between Jewish and Muslim communities. In addition, he serves as Special Advisor to the Chief Rabbi of France. Through his work with European institutions and religious organizations, he advocates for religious freedom, social cohesion, and the protection of minority rights. His efforts focus on building bridges between communities and encouraging constructive engagement in an increasingly diverse European society.

INTERVENTION:

Today, as religious leaders, we must strive to rebuild social bonds in a fragmented world. Paradoxically, we live in an era where religions have never been more present in public discourse, and yet they have never been so misunderstood. There has never been so much talk of dialogue, and yet mistrust has never been so intense. For what we lack today may not be dialogue; what we lack are encounters. We have learned to coexist—to tolerate—but to tolerate often implies: "I accept you, but without truly encountering you." Meanwhile, the very capacity to remain united as a society is beginning to fracture.

I would like to recall the first time—together with Pinchas Goldschmidt, President of the Conference of European Rabbis—that I met Pope Francis. It was in April 2015, on the occasion of the 50th anniversary of *Nostra Aetate* (the Vatican II Declaration on the relationship of the Catholic Church with non-Christian religions)—the 60th anniversary of which we are celebrating this year. I had expected a formal, institutional occasion; yet what left a profound impression on me was not his office, but his gaze—a gaze that sought not to convince the

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other, but to understand him. In that moment, I realized that dialogue begins precisely where the need to be right ends.

Today, this quality of presence is becoming rare, for we are living in a state of profound confusion. On the one hand, religion is instrumentalized by politics to legitimize human ambitions. On the other, politics instrumentalizes religion as a tool to divide society. When God becomes a political argument, it is no longer God whom we serve, but power. The Prophet Isaiah had already warned us: "This people honors me with their lips, but their hearts are far from me" (Isaiah 29:13). This is precisely what we are experiencing: a religiosity of mere appearances.

In December 2015, the King of Bahrain invited me to an interreligious gathering. We were diverse in every respect—culture, religion, and customs. And yet, each person spoke from the standpoint of their own identity, without seeking to dominate the other. It was there that I realized that dialogue does not erase differences; it simply prevents them from becoming threats. The true adversary is not the other person; it is ignorance. Maimonides, in his dialogue with Averroes, tells us in *The Guide for the Perplexed* that most human errors stem from ignorance. Today, this ignorance has morphed into a rejection of complexity—for to truly know the other is to forfeit the comfort of caricature.

The Jewish tradition offers us a decisive criterion through the spirited debates between Hillel and Shammai, two sages of the Mishnah. The text teaches us that a dispute undertaken for the sake of Heaven endures, whereas a dispute between men—waged solely for the sake of personal victory—fades away; for these masters sought the truth, not victory. Hillel used to say:"Love peace, pursue peace, and love all creatures." He did not suggest that we should love only those who resemble us—something that is never difficult. To love the one who unsettles us requires an inner transformation. True courage lies in listening without becoming defensive. The EMOUNA program was born of these convictions. Following the terrible attacks of 2015 (Paris, Copenhagen, Tunis), a priest, an imam (Hassen Chalghoumi), a pastor, a member of the Council of State, Marek Halter, and I all agreed that we could not remain mere spectators of a world in collapse. We realized that religious leaders did not actually know one another. We therefore set ourselves a challenge: to bring together priests, rabbis, pastors, imams, and Buddhists for 18 days spread out over the course of a year. We named this initiative EMOUNA (equivalent to *Amen* for Catholics and *Amanah* for Muslims)—a word whose root evokes the concept of trust.

In this program, participants learn to listen and to express themselves without animosity, regardless of the subject matter. We do not shy away from any topic—not even the interpretation of the most complex passages, such as the sacrifice of Isaac or Ishmael, or the contentious issue of religious caricatures (a subject often addressed at the Louvre). We even discuss the Israeli-Palestinian conflict with diplomats from the French Ministry of Foreign Affairs, as well as with Israeli and Palestinian speakers. By confronting complexity head-on, participants emerge transformed—and become friends. Experience has shown that, after ten years, we have trained more than 350 religious leaders who are now working together on the

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ground. The initiative has even expanded, with the launch of EMOUNA Belgium and EMOUNA Italy—thanks in particular to the efforts of my friend Yahya Pallavicini.

For the objective is not to be content with high-level meetings—which are often confined to state institutions. That is why, a few years ago, we also established the CRCF (Conference of Religious Leaders of France), enabling national religious leaders to meet informally among themselves every three months within their respective places of worship. The ambition is to replicate this at the local level, for when people know one another, peacebuilding initiatives emerge naturally.

In conclusion, the Talmud (Tractate Sanhedrin 37a) asserts that human beings were created as a single individual so that no one could ever say: "My father is superior to yours." The unity of humanity must take precedence over all our differences. The Prophet Zechariah exhorts us: "Love truth and peace." Truth without peace becomes violence; peace without truth is merely an illusion. The danger never lies in difference itself, but in our inability to live with it. In a world that pits people against one another, engaging in dialogue has become a form of resistance; our courage must no longer consist of defending our identity *against* the other, but rather of building it *in the presence* of the other.

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CONCLUDING REMARKS by Lilia Bensedrine-Thabet
Co-president of the Committee for interreligious and interconvictional Dialogue, Conference of INGOs, Council of Europe

We extend our deepest and warmest thanks to all four of you for the richness and depth of your presentations, which open the door to a host of further questions. You have shed light on a complex—and often misunderstood—reality: the relationship between the religious and the political is not, in itself, problematic. It is the mutual instrumentalization of these spheres that constitutes the true danger.

Through your contributions—rich in both lucidity and commitment—we have seen just how plural, profound, and nuanced religious traditions truly are, standing in stark contrast to the caricatures that all too often reduce them to monolithic blocs and instruments of division.
Such instrumentalization feeds on ignorance, oversimplification, and a binary worldview that artificially pits an "us" against a "them." In the face of this, our collective responsibility is to promote knowledge, education, and an understanding of complexity.

You have just demonstrated the significant role that religion plays in the construction of identity for individuals, peoples, and communities. You reminded us that:
The major religious traditions predominantly convey teachings asserting the incompatibility between faith and violence.

They strictly regulate the use of force. They share a common foundation of moral values, at the heart of which lies that universal Golden Rule: "Do unto others as you would have them do unto you."

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In this context, the role of religious authorities is fundamental: they bear the responsibility of safeguarding their traditions against any attempt to co-opt them for ideological or political ends. Regarding the diversity of understandings of religious traditions—and their influence on conflicts—the same religion can give rise to violence through a reading of texts that prioritizes and justifies armed struggle; conversely, that very same religion, through a different interpretation, can lead to the prohibition of violence in a given situation. There are countless ways to approach religious texts—countless ways to understand and interpret them.
Yet, beyond institutions, it is also incumbent upon each of us to remain vigilant in the face of rhetoric that manipulates religion to justify power dynamics.

Finally, the fundamental relationship between peace, justice, and dialogue has been underscored. To engage in dialogue, we must meet one another. When we are in conflict, meeting becomes more difficult—a situation that can only exacerbate and prolong the conflict. Interreligious dialogue is not a panacea; it is a form of prophylaxis. If, after years of interreligious dialogue, we have succeeded in establishing a certain level of trust, there is a strong likelihood that this will prove invaluable during times of conflict.

Interreligious and inter-convictional dialogue is, therefore, a necessity. It is closely and strongly linked to peace and justice. There can be no dialogue without justice, and there can be no lasting peace without dialogue and without justice.

Once again, thank you all for your presence.

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