Intercultural and inter-religious dialogue in Europe: are the EU and the Council of Europe participants or arbiters of the dialogue?

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Pre-publication version of paper published as:
The various modes of worship, which prevailed in the Roman world, were all considered by the people as equally true; by the philosopher, as equally false; and by the magistrate, as equally useful.

(Edward Gibbon’s *Decline and Fall of the Roman Empire*, Vol. 1, Ch. 2, 1.)

INTRODUCING INTERCULTURAL DIALOGUE

A globalising world necessitates intercultural communication and dialogue. Frequently within Europe, mutual incomprehension seems common in the face of multiple cultural expressions and identities. Consequently, Europe’s governmental institutions have taken a series of appropriate measures to address cultural diversity.¹

The discourse of intercultural dialogue was adopted by both the European Union and the Council of Europe over a similar period with few references prior to the year 2000 in official documents or published texts.² Prior to this point, references to cultural diversity were more frequently couched in terms of cultural co-operation or exchange. The approach of most European governments towards cultural diversity since the 1960s has been to adopt a variant of either multiculturalist or assimilationist policies. The events of 11th September 2001 shook Europe’s political institutions, not the least because Islam had been invoked by western-educated, immigrant terrorists in their deadly protest against the dominant assumptions and values underlying social and cultural policy in the ‘West’.

As European politicians and civil society actors have been tentatively constructing a policy of interculturalism there has been an ebbing away of confidence in multicultural and assimilationist approaches to the management of cultural diversity. The new discourse is being framed with reference to encounter, mutual understanding and awareness, integration, respect, co-existence and exchange.³ It is soon apparent, however, that what constitutes the practice of intercultural dialogue is still far from clear and a consensus of opinion concerning this is yet to emerge within the Europe Union, the Council of Europe, or among the civil society actors active in promoting an intercultural mandate.⁴

In order to provide a clear legal and procedural basis for social policy developments in this area, both the European Union and the Council of Europe have attempted to provide a degree of definitional clarity. The Directorate General of the EU’s Commission for Education and Culture defines intercultural dialogue as

- a process that comprises an open and respectful exchange or interaction between individuals, groups and organisations with different cultural backgrounds or world views. Among its aims are:
  - to develop a deeper understanding of diverse perspectives and practices; to increase participation and the freedom and ability to make choices; to foster equality; and to enhance creative processes.⁵

Although the European Union referenced a number of inter-religious initiatives in its promotion of intercultural dialogue, the Council of Europe was more explicit in locating religion as an aspect of culture and therefore of intercultural dialogue. Its 2007 white paper states that intercultural dialogue occurs where

- an open and respectful exchange of views between individuals, groups with different ethnic, cultural, religious and linguistic backgrounds and heritage on the basis of mutual understanding

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¹ As early as 1954, the Council of Europe adopted a ‘Convention on Cultural Diversity’.
² The European Union is an economic and political union of 27 member States, established in 1957 with the signing of the Treaty of Paris, and commonly associated with Brussels. A sequence of Treaties has followed, the most recent of which is the ‘Lisbon Treaty’ (now consolidated within the Treaty on European Union, 2008). The Council of Europe is responsible for human rights, democracy and the rule of law. It was established in 1949 and currently has 47 European States in membership. It is based in Strasbourg.
³ See for example, the discussion at http://openlines.labforculture.org/about.php. Viewed 9th August 2010.
⁴ A May 2010 report from the EU Culture Programme of the Platform for Intercultural Europe and Culture Action Europe, noted that the concept was weakly defined and delineated and that no guidance was being provided in order to assess and evaluate what constituted the promotion of effective intercultural dialogue. See Platform for Intercultural Europe, *Intercultural Dialogue as an objective in the EU Culture Programme: Summary of Study and Recommendations* (Brussels, 2010) p. 2.
and respect operates at all levels – within societies, between the societies of Europe and between Europe and the wider world.\(^6\)

In this chapter I will examine policies for intercultural dialogue within the EU and the Council of Europe. In particular I am interested in the place assigned in this dialogue to religion and its representatives. As such the discussion will illustrate important themes that run throughout Andrew Kirk’s work, in particular those dealing with gospel and culture; religion and the public domain; religious and secular worldviews; and inter-faith engagement. In particular, this chapter suggests a contemporary application of the intellectual resources of the Christian faith for the renewal of culture and society, articulated most recently by Kirk in *The Future of Reason, Science and Faith.*\(^7\)

**THE COUNCIL OF EUROPE AND INTERCULTURAL DIALOGUE**

The mutual study of European cultures has been important for the Council of Europe since its adoption of the *European Cultural Convention* in Paris on the 19\(^{th}\) December, 1954. Signatories were obliged to promote the study of their own ‘languages, history and civilisation’ among their own citizens as well as those of other signatory countries. In particular it encouraged scholarly exchange and the study of languages, history and civilisation in order to better understand the ‘common cultural heritage of Europe’.\(^8\) The Council’s long-standing attention to cultural diversity has motivated its promotion of cultural co-operation and, more recently, cultural dialogue. The Council currently views intercultural dialogue as an international political priority.

Antecedents to the prioritising of intercultural dialogue include a UNESCO sponsored conference in 1974 which urged UN member states to ‘organize systematic and global comparative research on the different cultures of the world’.\(^9\) In 1994 the Council recognized the *European Cultural Convention’s 40\(^{th}\)* anniversary with a retrospective text *Forty Years of European Cultural Co-operation.*\(^10\) Other significant conventions initiated or adopted by the Council of Europe have included its *Declaration on Cultural Diversity* (2000) and UNESCO’s *Convention on the Protection and Promotion of the Diversity of Cultural Expressions* (2005).

Intercultural dialogue took steps towards becoming a Council policy objective following a research programme in 2002 that helped to determine the parameters across a range of institutional and governmental activities. In 2003 the Council issued the *Opatija Declaration on Intercultural Dialogue and Conflict Prevention* which imparted momentum identifying indicators of intercultural dialogue within existing policies, programmes and good practice.\(^11\)

The Council’s *Declaration on Intercultural Education*\(^12\) (2003) was followed a year later by the *Wroclaw Declaration on fifty years of European Cultural Cooperation*\(^13\) issued in 2004 as a precursor to mark the 50th anniversary of the *European Cultural Convention* in 2005. By mid 2005, the Council had endorsed intercultural, inter-religious and political dialogue as priority policy objectives at the Warsaw meeting of its Heads of State and Governments. Article Six of the *Warsaw Declaration* commits member states to ‘fostering political, inter-cultural and inter-religious dialogue.’\(^14\) The accompanying *Action Plan* commits governments to ‘systematically encourage intercultural and inter-faith dialogue based on universal human rights.’\(^15\) The Council outlined its strategy for

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\(^8\) Council of Europe, *European Cultural Convention*, Article 1 (Strasbourg, 1954)


\(^10\) Etienne Grosjean, *Forty Years of European Cultural Co-operation* (Strasbourg, 1994). *Forty Years* identified five phases of cultural co-operation; reconciliation, mutual knowledge, common philosophy, pooling of solutions, and joint action. Its chief outcomes included: cultural democracy, cultural development, permanent (or lifelong) education and a greater appreciation for Europe’s common heritage.


\(^12\) Council of Europe, *Declaration on Intercultural Education*, Athens, 12 November 2003 (Strasbourg, 2003).


promoting intercultural dialogue on the 28th October 2005 with the Faro Declaration which lent support to the EU’s European Year for Intercultural Dialogue, scheduled for 2008, and to the Council’s commitment to cultural cooperation, European identity and unity, democracy, social cohesion, tolerance and a rejection of the ‘clash of civilisations’ thesis. In 2008 the Council published the White Paper as a contribution to the European Year. The Council of Europe continues to promote intercultural cooperation and intercultural dialogue. At the end of 2008, its Baku Declaration affirmed intercultural dialogue as a means of ‘fostering peace and sustainable development in Europe and its neighbouring regions’ and acknowledged that politically competent management of Europe’s cultural diversity implied the need for intercultural competence.

INTER-RELIGIOUS DIALOGUE IN THE INTERCULTURAL POLICY INITIATIVES OF THE COUNCIL OF EUROPE

In 2005 the Council reaffirmed its commitment to a democracy of diverse cultures, demonstrating the mutual enrichment to be derived from cultural diversity. In considering its responsibility vis-à-vis inter-religious dialogue as an aspect of intercultural dialogue, the Council has used terms such as ‘encourage’, ‘promote’, ‘foster’ and ‘encourage’. In this context it has linked inter-religious dialogue to discussions of identity, human rights, culture, and conflict.

Earlier Council appreciation of the public value of religion includes its acknowledgement in 1981 that European cultures ‘are strongly rooted in a humanitarian and religious tradition, source of their dedication to freedom and human rights’. Spiritual development was one of the ‘fruits of historical experience and the seeds of the future.’ In 1984 it acknowledged that alongside ‘material assets’, ‘religious and spiritual values, knowledge and beliefs... [were] the basis of progress towards European unity.’ Also in 1984 the Council recognized the importance of European pilgrim routes and, referring to the Pilgrim’s Way to Santiago de Compostela, noted that ‘the religious and cultural contacts resulting from this considerable movement of pilgrims... constituted one of the first approaches to interculturalism and European unity.’

The Council has explicitly encouraged the contribution of 318 local and regional authorities, collectively working as the Congress of the Council, in fostering inter-religious dialogue, which, in November 2006, elucidated ‘Twelve Principles of Intercultural and Interreligious Dialogue for the Local Authorities’.

The Council of Europe has fostered a relatively healthy and principle-directed approach to recognizing religious organizations and communities as appropriate civil society actors and has consistently referenced inter-religious dialogue in its policies of cultural diversity, co-operation, and exchange.

THE EUROPEAN UNION, COUNCIL, COMMISSION, PARLIAMENT AND INTERCULTURAL DIALOGUE

In 2002 the Commissioner for Education and Culture, Viviane Reding, provided what is probably the first published reference to intercultural dialogue within the EU. Reding referred to the attack on New York on September 11th 2001 arguing that education and culture could be ‘cornerstones of tolerance’ whilst intercultural dialogue had the potential to advance policy measures that demonstrated humanity’s ‘shared heritage’, the ‘cross-fertilisation of cultures’, and ‘the contributions of each individual to the shared heritage’.

Two years later, Commissioner Ján Figeľ advanced the idea of a European Year of Intercultural Dialogue at a hearing of the European Parliament on the 27th September 2004. On the 18th December 2006, the European Parliament and Council agreed the necessary legal framework to establish and finance the European Year of Intercultural Dialogue in 2008. Section Six states that;

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18 Council of Europe, Baku Declaration for the promotion of Intercultural Dialogue, p.1.
19 Council of Europe, Faro Declaration, p. 3.
20 For the latter see Council of Europe, Faro Declaration, p. 3., where religion is profiled as one cause of ‘intolerance and discrimination’.
21 Grosjean, Forty Years, p. 40.
22 Council of Europe, European Declaration on Cultural Objectives p.1.
24 Halvdan Skard, Gods in the city: Intercultural and interreligious dialogue at local level (Strasbourg, 2007), pp.221-226.
Intercultural dialogue is an important dimension in many Community policies and instruments ... combating discrimination and social exclusion, combating racism and xenophobia, policy on asylum and the integration of immigrants, human rights and sustainable development, audiovisual policy and research.\textsuperscript{27}

Proposals for intercultural activities were invited during 2007 and civil society actors were invited to profile their intercultural activities through the Year’s website.\textsuperscript{28} The European Commission’s survey of popular views concerning intercultural dialogue was a first step towards its promotion and wider awareness. The results were generally interpreted positively with, for example, over 75 percent of 27,000 EU citizens stating that the presence of ethnic or religious minorities enriched the cultural life of their respective countries.\textsuperscript{29}

Amidst a background of media publicity, the European year of Intercultural Dialogue was formally launched in Ljubljana over the 7\textsuperscript{th}–8\textsuperscript{th} January 2008. The chief objectives included the development of ‘an active European citizenship which is open to the world, respectful of cultural diversity and based on common values in the EU.’\textsuperscript{30}

The European Institute for Comparative Cultural Research (ERICarts) was commissioned to prepare an overview of national intercultural initiatives. Its report demonstrated that the key drivers of intercultural dialogue were non-governmental civil society actors\textsuperscript{31} and noted the absence of ‘a clear definition of ICD and of standard indicators for evaluation and monitoring’.\textsuperscript{32} Despite a lack of definitional clarity, the Council of the European Union nevertheless urged, in May 2008, the promotion of intercultural competencies in the areas of culture, education, youth, and audiovisual policy across the EU.\textsuperscript{33} The Commission, equally confident, announced the discovery of ‘new perspectives’ that had highlighted the importance and benefits of intercultural dialogue.\textsuperscript{34} Three days later the Council offered its conclusions on the promotion of cultural diversity and intercultural dialogue.\textsuperscript{35} These included references to intercultural dialogue, its importance, and the ongoing need for its promotion, especially through ‘specific projects, awareness-raising activities and exchanges of good practice’.\textsuperscript{36}

The EU’s cultural mandate has now been enshrined in the Lisbon Treaty. Article 167 outlines a commitment to delineating a common cultural heritage whilst respecting and promoting cultural diversity. Cultural exchange and co-operation are enjoined, in particular with the Council of Europe.\textsuperscript{37}

**INTER-RELIGIOUS DIALOGUE IN THE INTERCULTURAL POLICY INITIATIVES OF THE EUROPEAN UNION**

The 2001 edition of *Le Magazine* linked intolerance, discrimination and violence with periods of religiously inspired persecution in Europe\textsuperscript{38} against the backdrop of perceived and actual Islamic challenges to European political and social stability. The fear of intolerance or violence continues to dominate the way that ‘religion’ and ‘inter-religious dialogue’ is construed within EU policy initiatives. In light of the intended European Year of Intercultural Dialogue, the European Parliament commissioned a briefing paper on Inter-religious Dialogue which it received in early...


\textsuperscript{28} See especially the ‘Partner’ pages at www.dialogue2008.eu. The website was officially launched on 4\textsuperscript{th} December 2007.


\textsuperscript{30} See the ‘Fact Sheet’ at http://www.avrupa.info.tr/Files/File/EYID_FACSHEET_EN.pdf. Viewed 27\textsuperscript{th} June 2010.


\textsuperscript{32} ERICarts, *Sharing Diversity*, p. 11.


\textsuperscript{35} Council of the European Union, *Council Conclusions on the promotion of cultural diversity and intercultural dialogue in the external relations of the Union and its Member States* 2905\textsuperscript{th} Education, Youth and Culture Council meeting, Brussels, 20 November 2008 (Brussels, 2008).

\textsuperscript{36} Council of Europe, *Council Conclusions*, p. 3.


2006. Authored by Jamal Malik, the paper is an extended discussion of engagement with Europe’s Islamic communities, largely conceived of as ‘religious minorities’, in the midst of a Christian majority Europe. The British Council’s *Our Shared Europe* portrays Christian practice as little more than attendance at Sunday and seasonal worship. In contrast, Islamic observance is described as a ‘whole of life’ affair. It is implied that where the Christian majority refers to Europe’s ‘Judeo-Christian past’ there is a concomitant tendency to obscure Islamic contributions to European history and identity.

Commissioner Figeľ made only general references to ‘increasing contact between religions’ at the opening of the European Year, which reiterated the EU’s perception that ‘religious beliefs, philosophies and convictions are an integral part of cultural diversity’ in which ‘the diversity of faiths, beliefs and convictions can lead to misconceptions and fears.’

In contrast to the Council of Europe’s longer engagement with cultural policy and intercultural dialogue, that of the European Union has been a belated attempt to acknowledge and engage religious actors in the social policy arena following 2001. This leaves the EU vulnerable to the suspicion that it has not adequately reflected upon the self-understanding of the various religious groups in Europe, Islamic and Christian alike. In promoting social cohesion policies, the EU tends to obscures differences of self-understanding between the religions. This secular instrumentalisation of religion thus tends to exacerbate the experience in which dialogue between secular and religious institutions remains a mutually incomprehensible dialogue. During 2007 this author was involved in framing a response to the Council of Europe’s White Paper. Frequent mention was made to the perception of European politicians and civil servants that intercultural dialogue was little more than a smokescreen for inter-religious dialogue and that consequently initiatives in this area were both resented and resisted.

It is commonly held that this latter approach is characteristic of the laicist manner with which the EU addresses religion as an aspect of social policy. Muslim participants in the debates of the European Year resisted being cast as a ‘problem’ within civil society and there remains a feeling that the EU is religiously illiterate. This is a mistake that the Council of Europe has worked hard to overcome. It appears to recognise that cultural literacy requires religious literacy, even in the absence of religious establishment or commitment.

**EUROPE’S CHURCHES IN DIALOGUE WITH THE TWO POWERS**

Both the EU and the Council of Europe assume the universality and thus incontestability of certain values: individual human rights and freedoms, democracy, free markets, and the rule of law. This becomes problematic where dialogue with partners as yet unconvinced by these values is a pre-requisite to conflict resolution. This is a widely understood principle of inter-religious dialogue where common values may be relatively few, or indeed where one partner might, under normal circumstances, seek to censure or restrict the activities of the other dialogue partner. The Conference of European Churches (CEC) insists that ‘it is important to engage in dialogue even with those who do not share the same values, for example, to achieve conflict resolution.’ A similar point was conceded at the Council’s San Marino Conference in 2007 by Jean-Paul Willaime,

‘The religious dimension of intercultural dialogue can only be approached from the standpoint of the shared values of democratic humanism, and without denying that there may be tensions and divergences between these shared values and certain other religious and non-religious conceptions...’

An understandable unwillingness to acknowledge that the foundational values of the EU and the Council might be culturally and ideologically bounded does not prepare them well for their own dialogue with the religious

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39 See, for example, Jamal Malik, *Inter-Religious Dialogue: Briefing Paper* (Brussels, 2006) p. iii, where it is claimed (correctly) that Islam ‘does not provide for an over-arching body and central authority, which can speak on its behalf’, unlike Christianity (incorrectly). Malik also glosses over the fact that Christian communities exist as minorities in some European countries with an Islamic majority and frequently feel themselves to be religious minorities in those European nations that are highly secular.

40 Ehsan Masood, *Our Shared Europe*, 2008, pp. 33-34, 35 Though one must note the cautions expressed about over-emphasising the Islamic contribution to Europe, see especially p. 47.


communities. Both the EU and the Council of Europe have been reluctant to engage in the definitional debates concerning ‘culture’. Equally, each of them struggles to define adequately the relationship of culture to religion, a point made repeatedly in the submission of CEC to the Council’s Draft White Paper. Their respective statements repeat the view that religion is an aspect of culture, a point that is not lost on CEC and others who insist that there are difficulties in conceiving of religion as an aspect of culture, not the least of which is that there are times when a religious worldview remains highly critical of widely shared cultural values and practices.

The Christian communities tend to see culture and religion relating much more dynamically than does either the EU or the Council of Europe. Minority religious traditions, for example, frequently display trans-cultural characteristics in the face of majority religious traditions that wholly reflect dominant cultural or nationalistic contexts. In this sense, religions can be said to exist as a counter-culture; as a cultural protest. CEC’s submission took the view that the categories of religion can also be shown to extend beyond the conceptual terrain of cultural discourse, in particular through its references to ‘the divine’, ‘the sacred’, or ‘spirituality’ for example. Architects of intercultural dialogue must acknowledge the reality that the religious communities themselves do not believe they can be reduced to mere expressions of culture, even where they might concede that their religious practices are culturally embedded. CEC’s submission draws upon the resources of contextual theology as a pre-requisite to intercultural dialogue. In doing so it strives to express both cultural specificity and Christian universality, or catholicity.

CEC’s submission is critical of the fact that the Council adopts the posture of a neutral broker when encouraging dialogue between Europe’s religious communities. CEC argued that the Council’s avowedly secular identity is an ideological position that cannot be ignored or obscured. The EU and the Council state unambiguously that dialogue enriches dialogue participants through the encounter with diversity and ‘otherness’. That being so, it is incumbent upon them to take seriously this challenge from CEC and respond to religious dialogue partners in the same spirit of openness to institutional change and development that it urges upon participants in intercultural and inter-religious dialogue. Secular ideologues are encouraged to seek a dialogue with the various religious traditions through which might emerge new and valuable post-Christendom resources for the vitality of civil society.

It might also learn from the experience of CEC which, in common with that of other pan-European Christian entities (including the European Evangelical Alliance and the Conference of Catholic Bishops in Europe), draws on nearly five decades’ of inter-religious and intra-Christian dialogue. Integral to this has been a dialogue of cultures. CEC has established procedures and protocols for engaging in inter-religious and intercultural dialogue. In its response to the Draft White Paper, CEC’s expertise and experience of dialogue is illustrated through a description of four levels of dialogue: symbolic dialogue, academic dialogue, spiritual dialogue, and a dialogue of life. It also enumerates several indicators of successful dialogue.

CEC’s submission highlights intercultural competence within Europe’s Christian traditions and strengthens the case for them to be recognised by the EU and the Council of Europe as competent intercultural actors. Understood thus, it seems somewhat churlish, even patronising, for either the EU or the Council to be urging or encouraging a dialogue that has been underway for over five decades within the Christian communities of Europe.

This fact is frequently overlooked; whether wittingly or unwittingly is difficult to say. In response to the European Year for Intercultural Dialogue a Platform for Intercultural Europe was created which brought together a wide range of civil society actors, including art foundations and NGOs. In gathering definitions of intercultural dialogue, five responses referred to religion, each of them portraying religious division and conflict as a justification for intercultural dialogue. Attempts to engage with religious projects and NGOs have met with resistance. One position paper referred directly to the danger that doing so would only result in ongoing tension and conflict within the intercultural platform; therefore it was best to avoid its discussion. It seems ironic that a Platform emerging out of a year committed to dialogue should choose to ignore a potential dialogue partner on the grounds

45 See also Willaime, Religious Dimension, p. 2.
46 The Russian Orthodox Church, for example, maintains that all cultures have religious roots, pointing to the origin of the term ‘culture’ origin in the Latin term ‘cultus’ with its obvious religious referent. See Bases of the Social Concept of the Russian Orthodox Church (Moscow: Moscow Patriarchate, 2000), XIV, 2, para. 1. Available at http://www.mospat.ru/en/documents/social-concepts/ (Viewed 29th October 2010).
47 The most important fruit of which has been CEC’s Charta Oecumenica (Geneva, 2001). See also ‘On the way to a common theology of religions in Europe’ Statement adopted by the CEC Churches in Dialogue Commission at its fifth meeting in Pullach, Germany (25-27 June 2008) (Geneva, 2008).
that it would cause tension. All the more tragic given that the same Platform laments a lack of criteria for establishing effective dialogue and for assessing success in dialogue. If the religious communities were encouraged to share their learning of five decades with the Platform, there is the strong possibility that much could be learnt.

If competence in a globalizing world implies intercultural competence, then this necessarily entails the existence of an effective intra-Christian dialogue out of which lessons in competency can be drawn. Whereas Europe's Christendom past tended to project a universalist worldview at the expense of the particular, the current postmodern tendency elevates the particular over universalist claims and aspirations. A contemporary Christian witness, emerging out of the experience of the ecumenical catholicity of the Christian church points to a universalism which is highly sensitive to the particular.50

**Kirk's proposals for a more fruitful engagement**

Our discussion of intercultural dialogue approaches the heart of Andrew Kirk's missiological mandate for 'the West'. In sketching the unfinished task of the "Toward a missiology of Western Culture Project" Kirk, on behalf of members of the project, highlights 'intercultural communication' as one of four areas requiring further attention by missiologists wrestling with epistemological questions. He poses the collective question, 'What is the relation in communication between proclamation, dialogue, and testimony?' A sharper critique of intercultural dialogue is implied by the group's reference to the fact that culture has become 'an ideological weapon in a pluralist world', a world that relativises all cultural forms and norms.53

The discussion also illustrates other important themes that Kirk has constantly addressed in his writing and academic career. Of immediate relevance are his reflections on inter-religious dialogue and its relationship to secularism, culture, truth, relativism and pluralism, and social policy.54 Much of Kirk's writing has furthered what Lesslie Newbigin described as 'level three' mission, addressing the typically 'unquestioned assumptions', or 'root paradigms', which operate in both personal and public behaviour.55 The utility of Kirk's work in the concrete social and political policy debates informing intercultural dialogue within the European institutions lies precisely in the higher level of his missiological discourse.

Kirk writes from a thoroughgoing commitment to rational argument, rooted in a conviction that the advent of secularism represents a moment of intellectual and cultural liberation from the medieval Aristotelianism that held sway in Church and University for the better part of 400 years (c.1250-1650).56 Though he welcomes the move towards a more secular account of science and philosophy, he argues that the Reformation and Enlightenment led inexorably towards a form of individualised and atheistic secularism (characterised by Descartes) that has been corrosive of religious conviction, takes the shape of an ideology and perhaps that of a religion, yet has been unable to free itself from being ultimately parasitic on the religious worldview that it ousted. Kirk's work has become an attempt to invite this secular worldview to a dialogue with its religious counterpart. This rests on the conviction that without a re-engagement, the secular worldview, particularly in its 'postmodern' expressions, may still be 'moving' but that these are the convulsions of imminent death rather than vital signs of life.57

What follows below is, then, an attempt to understand the implications of his work for just three of the more significant themes that he writes about with regard to aspects of intercultural and inter-religious dialogue.

**A dialogue with secularism**

52 J. Andrew Kirk, *To Stake a Claim*, p. 239.
54 Other important and enduring themes that are also relevant, though not dealt with directly here, include: ecclesial establishment and political power, epistemology, Europe, and the missionary nature of theology.
56 Kirk has developed this theme since 1980 when he argued for an acceptance of the 'reality of secularisation'. See J. Andrew Kirk, *Theology encounters revolution* (Leicester: Inter-Varsity Press, 1980), p. 70.
Kirk argues that Christians are correct to understand the secular outlook as a potential partner in dialogue about ‘fundamental issues in life’. In 1980 he outlined the pragmatic atheism that he felt characterised Western Europe of that period. From Metz he drew the observation that theology is a ‘dialogue between the church’s traditions and the modern world, whose purpose is mutual criticism and correction.’ Metz argued that the task of theology is ‘to engage in the debate about the society of the future’. Later, Kirk would summarise one of his volumes in the following way,

‘One of the most basic concerns motivating this study has been the desire to allow the message of Christian faith to engage sympathetically and dialogically, but also critically, with the prevailing assumptions of modern, secularised societies. Whereas inter-religious dialogue is considered to be essential at different levels among the followers of the major religious traditions of the world, one cannot say as much of the upholders and purveyors of secular convictions.’

Kirk criticises contemporary inter-faith dialogue because it too frequently ‘seems to ignore the social and political context’. He insists that inter-religious dialogue should happen in light of the fact that ‘societies are gradually losing any sense of common vision and becoming little more than an aggregate of isolated people’. This finds immediate application, for example, in contemporary debates concerning the universality of human rights. Kirk has consistently pointed out that without a universally acknowledged theoretical value base for human rights, the whole enterprise is highly vulnerable. A dialogue in this respect is overdue. This is a difficult point for committed secularists to concede. Having abandoned the Christian heritage that nurtured the soil of secularisation, most seem willing to seek ‘solutions to the present crisis ... everywhere but in the Christian world-view.’

CEC’s submission to the Council of Europe’s White Paper on intercultural dialogue, described above, overlaps substantially with Kirk’s own thinking, especially in identifying the need for secular institutes to understand themselves as dialogue partners and not merely as self-appointed arbiters of intercultural and inter-religious dialogue.

A dialogue of diversities

Kirk has argued that cultural dialogue tends to emphasise cultural diversity and discontinuity whilst obscuring continuities such as ‘common humanity’. At the same time, in terms of hoped-for outcomes to inter-religious dialogue, Kirk ‘wonders why diffuse generalizations are considered a more appropriate way to approach inter-religious dialogue than a recognition from the outset that incompatible and mutually exclusive beliefs have to be acknowledged and discussed.’ Emphasising cultural discontinuities whilst simultaneously struggling to harmonise religious claims would seem to be somewhat illogical, unless one assumes the ideologically driven nature of the promotion of intercultural and inter-religious dialogue by Europe’s political institutions. In reality, European institutions are engaged in pragmatic efforts to construct an emerging sense of shared European identities and cultures. The drive to achieve a greater unity within diversity extends to cultural and religious identities. Yet these still rest on under-examined assumptions concerning the relationship of culture and religion. The failure of the EU and the Council of Europe to adequately address this relationship is reflected in their apparent refusal to listen to the claims of religious believers about how they themselves view the distinctions.

Kirk outlines a view that ‘Christian missiology begins with propositions that are, in principle, distinguishable from contingent cultural formulations of them,...’ He adds that to dispute this contention secularists must advance

60 Kirk, Theology encounters revolution, p. 68.
62 Kirk, Loosing the Chains, p.12.
64 Kirk, Mission Under Scrutiny, pp. 42-43.
65 Kirk, Theology encounters revolution, p. 72.
66 Kirk, To Stake a Claim, p.238.
67 Kirk, Loosing the Chains, pp.182-183.
counter-arguments that are themselves culturally contingent (such as relativism or the view that objective reality is beyond our comprehension and is constructed through the sign value of language). ‘Beliefs, particularly those associated with religion, are not merely the products of culture. There is the matter of whether they could be true, irrespective of particular cultural embodiments or whether they may produce peace or conflict.’

For the theologically conservative member churches of CEC, claims to truth are not to be readily relinquished whilst for others, particularly some of the protestant member churches, the notion of universal or absolute ‘truth’ is viewed with suspicion. These reflect an intra-Christian diversity reflecting diverse theological and cultural assumptions about Christian faith. The limits to acceptable intra-Christian within this context are under constant review and strain. It is this aspect of intra-Christian dialogue that has equipped its interlocutors with significant competencies in sustaining communities of co-existing and competing Christian traditions without obscuring confessional and ecclesial diversities. This experience suggests vital cues for secular interculturalists tempted to force unwanted cultural and religious harmony upon dialogue partners.

**Dialogue and its alternatives**

Kirk also argues that the early Christian communities engaged in mission in religiously and culturally plural societies without reducing *everything* to categories of dialogue although he insists that ‘authentic evangelism has to be conducted in a dialogical manner’; what he describes as a ‘coming to terms with pluralism.’ With the reception by Jewish believers of Gentiles into the early church, cultural pluralism relieved the early church of the burden of its being tied to an ethnic or nationalist programme of expansion and power. With an awareness of its own socially marginalised and politically vulnerable position, the early church committed to a bold programme of persuading others that Jesus Christ alone was ‘the one authenticated by God to save people from wrong beliefs and destructive practices’ irrespective of their cultural or ethnic identity and background.

Articulating Christian witness in this manner has proven challenging for Christian communities that wish to argue their right to engage in social policy debates. This is particularly true where the dialogue gatekeepers maintain exclusively secular assumptions iminical to the exclusivism of Christian truth claims. Such claims will only make sense to secular counterparts when witnessed to with a chastened sense of humility accompanied by a self-critical distancing from the oppressions and abuses of Christendom. Equally it is imperative that Christian dialogue participants hold confidently to the conviction that God, in Christ, speaks words of truth that are of value in the public domain of social policy debates, including those of European intercultural dialogue.

If, in articulating a witness in this fashion, the Christian community in Europe, or some constituent part of it, finds itself culturally and socially marginalised by its secular counterparts, it behoves the Churches to recognise that authentic Christian witness may also be offered from the social and cultural margins. However, it must also be a part of the churches’ witness that if inter-religious and intercultural dialogues are allowed to become dialogues between only the powerful majorities, whether religious or secular, something vital is lost in the attempt to construct a more comprehensive European identity. If this happens, genuine intercultural dialogue in Europe will be fatally impoverished, will wither, and eventually die.

[6,435 words, including footnotes]

29th October 2010

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70 Kirk, *Loosing the Chains*, p.65.
72 Which Kirk uses for the title of chapter eight of *Loosing the Chains*.
74 Kirk, *Loosing the Chains*, p. 156.