CENTRE FOR RELIGION, HUMAN VALUES, AND INTERNATIONAL RELATIONS/IRISH INTER-CHURCH MEETING/DUBLIN CITY INTERFAITH FORUM

CONFERENCE ON TNE FUTURE OF EUROPE: CONSULTATIONS ON 2 DECEMBER 2021

REPORT (AS UPLOADED TO THE WEB PLATFORM OF THE CONFERENCE)

EUROPE, VALUES, THE FUTURE

NATURE OF THE EVENT

On 2 December, the Centre for Religion, Human Values, and International Relations at Dublin City University, supported by the Irish Inter–Church Meeting and the Dublin City Interfaith Forum, hosted an online consultation on the Conference on the Future of Europe

Religious leaders and representatives from across the island of Ireland gathered to discuss key themes around the Conference on the Future of Europe including the regional and global role of the European Union; the EU response to migrants and asylum seekers; the creation of a social and physical environment characterized by equity, sustainability, and shared agency; the impact of algorithmic systems on democratic discourse; the promotion of European values; and to consider the role of religious communities regionally and nationally when it comes to Europe's challenges and priorities.

KEYNOTE SPEAKERS

DCU President Daire Keogh said: "By hosting today's event, the Centre for Religion, Human Values and International Affairs is fulfilling an important element of its mission - to investigate and promote models for achieving peace and global cooperation."

In a welcoming address, Minister of State for European Affairs Thomas Byrne said: "As we look ahead to the fiftieth anniversary of Ireland joining the EU in 2023, it is timely that we reflect on the type of Europe we, as a collective society, want to foster in the next half century and the role Ireland will play in this process. It is important to acknowledge that not all groups in society have

shared equally in this progress and continue to face obstacles in the way of their full participation. Certain communities encounter particular challenges today."

He continued: "You, as leaders and representatives of faith communities and denominations, may encounter them in your pastoral work throughout towns and villages in Ireland. Events like today are very useful to help us consider what role the EU can play in providing better access to opportunities across the likes of education, employment, and health in the years ahead for the most marginalised in our societies."

Other keynote speakers included Noelle O'Connell, CEO of the European Movement and panellists from the religious communities:
- The Most Reverend Noel Treanor, Bishop of Down and Connor
- Gillian Kingston, Vice-President at the World Methodist Council
- Patricia Rainsford, Head of Public Affairs, Office of the Bahá'–ís of Ireland
- Ahmed Hasain, Chief Executive Officer, Islamic Cultural Centre of Ireland

MAJOR THEMES AND CONCLUSIONS

Continuity in the process that has begun

There was a broad welcome for the objectives of the Conference on the Future of Europe. Civic engagement is not a once-off event. Participants are committed to continuing last week's dialogue at an in–person meeting in Dublin City University on 24 – 25 February, circumstances permitting. Within the European Union, consideration should be given to long-term strategies for civic engagement. Article 17, TFEU offers one possible starting point. The Article 17 process could be scaled up to enable a future-oriented participatory dialogue on major questions.

"Hearts are not had as a gift, but hearts are earned …" (W.B. Yeats)

Participants welcomed President von der Leyen's statement in her September address that young people must be able to shape Europe's future and that for this to happen, the European Union "needs a soul and a vision they can connect to." The European Union is "more than the single market." It should be understood as a peace project that gives hope to others. A "soul" of this kind – a unifying factor among all our scattered enterprises - cannot be taken for granted. A shared disposition to act in the common interest, according to common criteria, is a high achievement in any political context. It requires work at several levels, including structured dialogue, communication strategies that reach local communities, and actions on the ground that

demonstrate the active presence of an overall vision. Several participants drew attention to the inner disposition that will accompany a just transition in the public sphere: "change yourself, change the world."

A church or a religious community crosses borders

A creative conversation about interpreting and applying the values embedded in the Treaties should acknowledge the risk that some member States in Central and Eastern Europe may appropriate European values in such a way that the prevailing understanding of the rule of law is not accepted. A religious confession or community crosses borders, within and beyond the EU. Religious actors can contribute to the dialogue that is needed. For this to happen, we need "mutual literacy" and mutual respect between public authorities and religious actors. Believers, including young people, should not be deterred from talking about their personal beliefs. The Churches and faith communities must acknowledge that political decisions are ultimately for political authorities and must call on appropriate expertise from their members in order to contribute cogently to discussion on complex policy issues.

Identifying the consequential issues

Several participants praised the European Union for its leadership on climate change. A number of other consequential issues were mentioned as requiring institutions or political processes with the scale, expertise, and authority to effect solutions. For example, engagement at the European level is called for in relation to pandemics, cybersecurity, and the "digital transition."

The hope was expressed that religions can collectively promote a European "constituency" sensitive to the needs of vulnerable and marginalised communities. This can help the political leadership in national politics and within the European institutions to develop a more effective and ambitious strategy on migration, including more effective protection of the rights of asylum-seekers.

More generally, it was argued that some issues need to be addressed on a time-scale longer than the electoral cycle and on the basis of a consensus that crosses party lines. The Covid–19 pandemic has demonstrated once again the depth of societal inequalities. The lived experiences of the participants and those they work closely with in communities and parishes suggests that 'inequality of condition' remains a strong feature of Irish and wider European society. Churches and religious communities would be glad to be part of a longer-term conversation on the impact on lived experience of unguided market forces.

It was common ground among the participants that we inhabit one world (Wesley: "the world is my parish"), and the same questions and the same values are at stake everywhere. Therefore, we should be cautious about the ways in which we deploy the term "European values."

We need to keep in mind that current and future technology is in our hands, and we can direct it in the right direction. AI is very powerful, but it is not intelligent. Do we need to challenge the big businesses that are running the digital media platforms to start designing these systems in a way that promotes human dignity and human development?

BREAKOUT SESSIONS

The breakout sessions addressed five questions.

1. *The UN Secretary–General's recent report, "Our Common Agenda" (September 2021), states: "the world is experiencing its biggest shared test since the Second World War … Humanity faces a stark and urgent choice: breakdown or breakthrough." To what extent will the future of the European Union depend on our becoming "part of the solution" at the regional and global levels?*

It was noted that the UN was born out of mid-20th century conditions. Its peacemaking mandate has not delivered the results hoped for. However, we should acknowledge the broad scope of the UN and its agencies and the achievements of WHO, ILO, UNESCO, UNICEF, UNHCR, the Office for the High Commissioner for Human Rights (OHCHR) and other bodies. We should be open to a re-imagining of the UN under the conditions of the 21st century.

An overall sense of direction, at least on some basic issues, should cross party lines. We need to develop the spaces – including the physical spaces – where the right conversations can happen. Diversity – including religious and cultural diversity – should be seen as a resource. During Covid, religious communities have helped ensure that local people know the regulations and restrictions in place. Similarly, an awareness of international agreements and commitments can be communicated in part through faith communities.

A number of contributors suggested that the European Union has to be more than an economic project and that it should demonstrate its values in the international sphere, particularly in the way it treats vulnerable communities. Trust - and the soul of Europe – are to be discovered in action. Consensus is needed (John Hume – "the difference between policing and martial law is

consensus"). Participants are open to new ways of measuring wealth and well-being (as in the projects underway in both jurisdictions on the island).   There is concern that the traditional role of the media in support of open, informed, respectful debate is threatened under current conditions.

There was general support for greater interaction between faith communities and the European institutions. We should highlight the many success stories where faith communities have helped to promote reconciliation and tolerance.

The question was opened – but not resolved – as to how the European Union – should use its economic weight and its aid programmes in support of political objectives and human rights.

2. *Commission President Ursula Von Der Leyen's "State of the Union" address on 15 September was entitled "Strengthening the Soul of our Union." Do we agree with the formula that "the democratic state relies on conditions that it cannot itself guarantee" and do the churches and religious communities have a role in discerning and promoting European values?*

The role and place of churches and religious communities as agents for social cohesion is vital today as political discourse becomes more fractured globally. Many people feel alienated from political structures. Churches and religious communities can help build interconnectedness and solidarity and hold economic forces to account.

The contribution of young people across Europe to this conversation must be central. As President Van Der Leyen says in her address: "…if we are to shape our Union in their mould, young people must be able to shape Europe's future. Our Union needs a soul and a vision they can connect to." Dialogue is essential. Churches and religious communities do not have a monopoly on this. An important consideration is that because of their universal character they can help transcend nationalities and cultures.

President von der Leyen (referencing Havel) describes our values as having "come from the cultural, religious and humanist heritage of Europe." It seems that a clearer articulation of these values is required. Is there a potential clash over what European values are? Is there a risk of promoting just "Western" values and not something deeper? How do our values, as we now understand them, square with the origins of the European Union? Are faith-inspired values, espoused by people of faith, a threat to what some view as political cohesion? Have the EU Institutions adequately forged a language that is accessible to people across Europe? Does European public opinion have an engagement with the values enshrined in the Treaties?

Churches and religious communities can have an important role in promoting literacy in terms of values while, at the same time, maintaining a critical distance. Flowing from this, (i) churches and faith communities should call on appropriate expertise from their members in order to contribute cogently to discussion on policy issues; and (ii) the European institutions should foster openness to faith-inspired discourse on key issues facing society.

3. *An important theme at the recent EU Fundamental Rights Forum (11 –12 October) was that protecting human rights includes the creation of a social and physical environment characterized by equity, sustainability, and shared agency. Should the European Union promote greater "equality of condition" as part of our just transition in the face of climate change?*

The group focused on the wide issue of equality of condition rather than just transition and climate action.

First, the lived experiences of the participants and those they work closely with in communities and parishes suggests that 'inequality of condition' remains a strong feature of Irish and wider European society. A number of diverse and different examples were used to illustrate this, including:

- Housing and the precarious circumstances in which significant numbers of families and children are living
- Experience of aspects of health and residential care which fails to acknowledge ethnic differences, for example the failure to provide ethnic food in nursing homes
- Sense of phobia about faith and how it is perceived in the public sphere and in public discourse
- Lack of sensitivities around key aspects of ethnic difference, such as the attitude of airport staff to ethnic clothing and religious symbols
- Real fear of the far-right across Europe; it is anathema to 'equality of condition'

Second, there is a hunger for spirituality/meaning and a deep sense that it makes an enormous difference to people's lives – though the scale of this 'demand' is not always recognized by policy makers. Examples noted include:

- the desire for spiritual help and guidance among elderly people, particularly evident during Covid
- spiritual support and concern with mental health has formed a key part of the relationship between many lecturers and their students over the last two years
- there is simply lack of manpower to meet the demand in this area

Third, education is absolutely critical in moving us towards the day where everyone will feel safe in the public sphere. We need to equip young people to connect the language of their faith with the language(s) of public discourse – a form of "bilinguality" or "mutual literacy" between the churches and religions and social values

Fourth, the gap between rhetoric and ambition on 'equality of condition' and the lived experience can be narrowed by demonstrating the value of multi-culturalism in practice.   The key point made here is that climate and biodiversity loss are not (or are less) contentious and therefore provide an opportunity for diverse groups to really work together.

4. *In relation to migrants, asylum–seekers, and the likelihood of continuing, strong migratory trends in the decades ahead, does the European Union have the decision-making capacity to ensure forward–looking responses in a spirit of burden–sharing?*

The will to act can sometimes be engendered through the voice of citizens and civic society. It's important that churches and faith communities play their part in collectively promoting a European "constituency" sensitive to the needs of vulnerable and marginalised communities, in particular people fleeing their country. Some issues need to be addressed on a time-scale longer than the electoral cycle and on the basis of a social consensus. We should help political leaders in national politics and the European institutions to develop a more effective and ambitious strategy on migration as a global issue, including more effective protection of the rights of asylum-seekers.

Specifically, we should not close off the possibility of safe routes for people fleeing their country - causing deaths at the borders. What would it mean to have a relocation scheme allowing member States to apportion asylum-seekers and/or to share financial costs? What would it mean to have a more level-headed debate about integration? Having accepted free movement within the European Union, why are we often reluctant and fearful about accepting newcomers? Does the language of burden-sharing, written into the European Union's guidelines ("pact"), indicate a value judgement that refugees are a burden rather than a gift – or a potential solution to

demographic imbalances? Are there aspects of our common foreign policy that work against a genuine dialogue between EU states at the border, transit countries, and countries of origin?

In the context of migration, what is a "forward looking" policy? That depends on the values at play which (implicitly) will give us an understanding of the direction that is "forward". Faith communities could explicitly examine this question. We might try to encourage local conversations about values around race, inclusion, the environment, and interactions with neighbours. This might lead, for example, to acknowledging fears and concerns around migration at the local level but also to bringing forward case studies and empirical social and economic data to show that immigrants have in many instances revived local communities. This could enable a meaningful and authoritative engagement at state level on the part of the churches and religious communities, capitalising on their unique grassroots (pastoral) knowledge.

Climate change means a much more ambitious migration strategy will be necessary in future.

> 5.   *Algorithmic systems that exploit personal data, deliberate disinformation (trolls), on–line hate speech, the collapse of the traditional business model of the "fourth estate," and dangers to the independence of the media have serious implications for democratic discourse. Do we need a European digital public sphere and what would this entail?*

We need to keep in mind that throughout history, technological development has always been carried out in one of two forms (the history of technology teaches us this). There are various sets of terms for these two forms, e.g.:

> Lewis Mumford (anthropologist, writing in the 1930s): biotechnics/monotechnics

> Howard Rosenbrock (engineer, writing in the 1980s): human-centred / technocentric

> *Laborem Exercens* (Pope John Paul II): technology as an ally / technology as "almost an enemy"

We need to keep in mind that current and future technology is in our hands, and we can direct it in one or other of these directions.

A second premise is that AI is very powerful, but it is not intelligent. Luciano Floridi, the philosopher, recently gave a lecture in which he said AI really stands for *Agere sine Intelligere* –

"action without understanding." Digital technologies can do a great number of things, but with zero intelligence. The real problem with these technologies is that they can do a lot of things, but there is no intelligence behind what they do, and that is dangerous.

Among the particular issues noted within the group are the following:

- The power of amplification: the spread of news and opinions can be engineered and paid for (the Cambridge Analytica story; the use of bots by state and non-State actors)
- How we address one another/hate speech
- 'Nothing can be unsaid:' the positive vetting of civil servants, employees, and citizens can lead to new forms of social control
- The emergence of simplified markers of identity in democratic societies ("echo-chambers"; polarization)
- Non-transparent means of influencing consumers and citizens through data-harvesting
- The abdication of editorial responsibility on media platforms
- Conflicts of interest where public authorities depend on profit-making networks for the conduct of public business (cf. research in Africa by Nanjana Nyabola)

Clearly, education is part of the solution. People need education to know how to deal with digital systems to promote the kind of discourse we need. Do we also need to challenge the big businesses that are running the platforms to start designing these systems in a way that promotes human dignity and human development, rather than damaging both as is increasingly clear from much that is being written about the systems they are producing?

The European Union can show leadership in shaping the global regulatory environment for digital as well as for other fast-moving, investment-driven technologies.

NEXT STEPS

The present report is intended to serve as a basis for discussion as we prepare for a longer and more detailed in-person meeting among the same stakeholders on 24 and 25 February 2022. At the February meeting we hope to be in a position to agree on a number of specific recommendations.