

### **IMPRINT**

ComUnitySpirit
The Graz Declaration on Interfaith Dialogue

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# Greetings and salutation, Grüß Gott in Graz!

The prime concern of any city today is the well-being and peaceful coexistence of its inhabitants. We know that the quality of life is maintained and improved, if we appreciate people in their diversity. This plays an important role in many areas such as culture, education and religion.

The city of Graz has a long tradition of endorsing dialogue. Knowledge and understanding of one another enable people to make good decisions as well as socially responsible choices. In this way, a stable society can be further strengthened. This also applies in particular to the topic of religion and this is the reason why the city of Graz, over the past years, has engaged in organizing major events on various religious issues. The Interreligious Conference Graz 2013 "ComUnitySpirit" is a another important milestone on the path to a peaceful and constructive coexistence of people with different religious affiliations. Representatives of different religious communities, experts and academics from a variety of backgrounds focused on many pressing issues of urban community life and looked for constructive answers on how to promote peaceful coexistence between the different religious communities in European cities today.

The document "ComUnitySpirit - The Graz Declaration on Interfaith Dialogue" defines the central questions, addresses the most pressing issues and offers the best ideas for continued efforts for facilitating interfaith dialogue as one of the most important topics of our time.

The fact that the city of Graz has hosted the Interreligious Conference "ComUnitySpirit" is yet another demonstration of our city's openness, while the fact that so many people from different countries and religious communities participated in this event is a clear signal that through ComUnitySpirit, Graz has taken up one of the key topics in Europe. The networking of our city and the personal contacts that have been established during the conference are assets which will serve greater goals such as promoting solidarity, communication and interaction open to constructive criticism and the commitment of municipalities and religious communities alike to mutually work towards achieving these goals.

**Mag. Siegfried Nagl**Mayor of the city of Graz

Siegfrood hard

# Graz engages in interfaith dialogue ....and takes a stand.

In hosting the Interreligious Conference Graz 2013 ComUnitySpirit Graz has once again taken a clear position on religion: Peaceful coexistence of people with different religious affiliations is a major concern in modern and diverse societies that calls for meaningful discussions and constructive proposals. The positive and sustainable culture of dialogue in Graz and the lasting commitment of many had paved the way for ComUnitySpirit: Many committed people from different religious communities in Graz expressed their willingness to support and assist in the planning of the conference and to help identify prospective expert participants to be invited. National and international representatives from religious communities as well as experts from various academic fields participated in the conference and shared their experience, views and different approaches as well as constructive ideas in sometimes controversial but always fair and respectful discussions.

ComUnitySpirit-the Graz Declaration on Interfaith Dialogue as a specific result of the conference has been completed and is now at hand.

As organizers of the conference, we would like to kindly thank:

The city of Graz, for entrusting the task of organizing and carrying out the conference in the hands of the Afro-Asian Institute Graz.

The members of the preparatory working group for voluntarily engaging and committing their time and efforts in supporting the preparations for the conference.

The participants in the conference, who engaged in open and interesting discussions and who contributed valuable recommendations.

The team of editors, that collected and reviewed the results of the conference in a most professional way and edited the present "Graz Declaration on Interfaith Dialogue".

We would also like to thank all those who took an active part in ComUnitySpirit for the wonderful spirit which prevailed in the Interreligious Conference and which helped make the conference an event that will greatly contribute to the peaceful coexistence of religions and cultures in Europe. "ComUnitySpirit: The Graz Declaration on Interfaith Dialogue" is a call to action to the city of Graz, to the faith communities and to each and every individual. It should have an impact as a useful guide for faith communities, institutions and municipalities in Europe. We therefore kindly invite you to associate with it by signing it. Keep talking about it, pass it on and most importantly, keep up the commitment!

Dr.in Claudia Unger

laudie / po

Head of the Afro-Asian Institute Graz

Bakk.a Nicola Baloch
Project manager ComUnitySpirit

Wicke Balon

# WE WOULD LIKE TO EXTEND OUR WARMEST THANKS FOR THE GREAT HELP AND SUPPORT TO

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ComUnitySpirit
The Graz Declaration on Interfaith Dialogue
www.interrelgraz2013.com

# **Com Unity Spirit**

# **GRAZ DECLARATION**

# on Interfaith Dialogue

# Edited by

Bassem Asker, Harald Baloch, Markus Ladstätter, Anna Maria Steiner

### **PREAMBLE**

Graz, the university city and City of Human Rights, regards itself as a place of encounter and dialogue. Our city would like to facilitate a socially just, peaceful and diverse communal life and therefore considers cooperation with and between religious communities to be of primary importance. Today's European cities increasingly reflect the entire world in the diverse range of ethnic, religious and national backgrounds of their residents. In this context, new fundamental questions regarding the perceptions of religions and their roles in public life constantly arise and have to be answered.

When people of different cultures and religions live together, prejudices and a lack of information about the "other" will automatically lead to conflicts. For a culture of peaceful community relations, it is therefore important to deepen mutual understanding. Consequently, engaging representatives of the religious communities in a mutually respectful and exemplary public dialogue is one of the decisive factors of peaceful coexistence. Such dialogue and its shared projects are of communal interest, because they enrich and stabilize civil society.

Those were the motivation for the City of Graz to invite representatives of faith communities, academic experts and practitioners in the field of interfaith dialogue to the Interreligious Conference Graz 2013 "ComUnitySpirit". The exchange of ideas and expertise between the participants, the results of the key note addresses, the discussion and the workshops held during the conference are the basis of the present "Graz Declaration on Interfaith Dialogue." The declaration, which includes fundamental considerations of key issues in interfaith dialogue as well as recommendations for further action and measures for municipal governments and religious communities alike, may serve as a useful guidance for cities and faith communities.

### FUNDAMENTAL CONSIDERATIONS

### 1. Every city is global

Nowadays, citizens of all cities come from different nations as well as from different cultural backgrounds and religious traditions. If cities appreciate diversity as an asset and a responsibility, they thereby strengthen relations within the community and at the same time give impetus for peaceful global coexistence. In this way, cities may help prevent the "clash of civilizations". Especially considering the increasingly more complex challenges municipalities are faced with today, such actions are gaining in significance.

### 2. Transcendence is a human trait

Religion is an important dimension of personal and social identity. Religions give answers to basic questions of human existence, pass on wisdom, justify values and inspire people to act in a socially responsible way – beyond what they are required to do by law.

The faith communities often differ substantially as far as their specific profiles and perspectives are concerned. Notwithstanding such differences, they share the conviction that a transcendent dimension is indispensable for leading human life successfully, constructively coexisting in diversity and shaping a future worth living - irrespective of calling it God, Nirvana or any other name.

# 3. Religious traditions have great potential for the personal development of the individual within society.

On many occasions, religious communities have positively and credibly made contributions through their commitment to society with regards to the suffering, the marginalized and the future generations. They recognize such positive potential even beyond the boundaries of their own community.

Even though attitudes and virtues such as humility, love, compassion, trust, fairness, responsibility, respect, civil courage, gratitude, forgiveness, truthfulness and wisdom may not be fully achieved within the ambit of faith communities, they are still cultivated to a significant extent. The religions have also given great impetus to the areas of arts, and here most especially in music and architecture. They help to fill the heart with tranquility and to curtail greed.

Religions promote health and healing - specifically through their motivations towards moderation, fasting and in a larger picture through conveying the meaning of life. The Golden Rule (namely to treat others as one would want to be treated) as well was first explicitly formulated in the various religious tradition and only later was it adopted into the constructions of secular ethics. Religions can support the processes of consolidating the democratization processes (such as in post-communist Poland), they would, however, be overwhelmed with the task of shouldering such processes by themselves.

# 4. Overcoming one's fears

Discovering other religions and exploring humanistic ideas are not a competition but rather a rewarding and exciting enrichment. Investing in mutual understanding and active cooperation is definitely worthwhile. At the same time, the faith communities do not deny the fact that due to different developments and human

inadequacies, religious and humanistic values have at times also been dimmed in their own ranks. The ability to critically self-reflect, recognize one's mistakes and as a consequence make appropriate corrections do not reduce one's credibility but rather are indications of the actual greatness and seriousness of a religious community. In this sense, it is in the interest of the faith communities to prove that they are not concerned with merely instituting privileges for themselves and occupying powerful political positions but that their interest rather lies in serving the individual, humanity and ultimately the entire cosmos.

# 5. Motivating to commitment without appropriation

Religious people are no better than the rest. However, they are able to bring the strong motivational power of their religious beliefs to the creation of a common future – both in the local context and as actors on a global level. Society cannot afford to waste this potential.

An important part of reasonable cooperation between religious communities and social institutions is being wary of any attempt made by representatives of ideological, political, economic, strategic or other interests to dominate the discussion.

There can be no doubt that many of the armed conflicts in this world (such as those in Northern Ireland, Israel and Palestine, Kashmir or Nigeria) may well have religious components. To sweepingly portray them as religious conflicts would mean to disregard and conceal the various extra-religious constituents and interests involved (regarding nationalistic, economic, geopolitical, military and cultural issues).

Leaders from the faith communities are therefore called upon to resolutely and publicly confront and denounce such appropriations, even from within their own camp and to use their authorities to de-escalate conflicts and to promote peace.

# 6. Religion is public

The 20<sup>th</sup> century showed us, as no other era has done before, that ideological and totalitarian attempts to create a new image of the human and a new society that left out the transcendent dimension not only failed but have brought a hitherto unprecedented extent of bestiality.

Considered against the backdrop of the terrible experiences during the times of National Socialism and of totalitarian comunism, it becomes evident that the religions, as witnesses of transcendence, should be given appropriate scope and proper weight in private and public spheres. Genuine recognition also implies providing public space. The sensible and necessary separation of church and state does not mean that public space has to be designed in a sterile way without any symbols and does in no way exclude the recognition of the public dimensions of religion.

# 7. Resisting indifference and fundamentalism

Members of the faith communities through bonds of solidarity feel connected to all those who are driven by humanist motivations are committed to creating a livable future.

They stand together against a spiritual slackening of the human existence caused by religious indifference. At the same time, they are acutely aware of the dangers fundamentalist currents represent which aim at asserting the respective faith in an arbitrary and totalitarian interpretation.

The faith communities are firmly set in their commitment to combat such tendencies in their own ranks and to distance themselves clearly, especially in cases in which violations of human rights are veiled in pseudo-religious justifications (such as with practices of female genital mutilation, forced marriage or creating psychological dependency).

# 8. Cooperating with people of other faiths and ideologies on a global scale

Questions that have occupied people globally such as issues of human rights, peace and justice, environmental and economic challenges as well as educational opportunities can only be dealt with sensibly and efficiently through dialogue and with the cooperation of all religious and non-religious forces alike.

Through their international networks, faith communities can contribute greatly to the success of the most central global future tasks.

# 9. Guaranteeing the right to freedom of religion as a fundamental human right

The right to freedom of religion has to be guaranteed in its fullest sense by society, countries and religious communities themselves. The benchmark among nations should be the positive implementation of said right. Successful role models for the implementation of the right to freedom of religion are much more rewarding and constructive than trading accusations of deficits. Only with this can one legitimately demand others to take individual measures. The right to freedom of religion manifests itself in the free choice of religion and the right to practice it freely in public. This includes the fundamental right of constructing and maintaining buildings which are vital for community life and the practice of one's faith.

Religious communities are invited to discover and unfold within their own respective traditions those insights and arguments which adequately substantiate human freedom and dignity. This freedom should also include the right to criticize religion in a civilized manner, to change one's religious denomination or to freely choose not to join any religion at all.

# 10. Religious education and education about the religions are necessary

The responsibility for the future of all social institutions is borne by the area of education. It is of utmost importance that religious communities should shape the religious education of their members in a suitable way, without stripping the sense of belonging it offers or of the rational level. In order to achieve this, adequate frameworks need to be in put in place.

Of particular importance in this context is language. There are areas and situations in which the use of appropriate religious diction is important and indispensable.

However, particular attention should be paid to determining the appropriate level of language that allows every individual to gain an understanding of the spiritual and religious interpretation of one's own life.

Furthermore, it is of vital importance that one implements education about the ethical and cultural relevance of religions (in the plural and not limited to the narrower area of ethics) in the public sphere to a sufficient extent.

Only those educational concepts that can take these requirements into account are suitable to contribute to social peace in the long term. In both contexts obtaining related theoretical knowledge about the "foreign" has to be

seen as a first step which then has to be complemented through face-to-face encounters and finally reflecting and securing the experiences gained.

### 11. Regarding diversity as a source of enrichment

Differences in key concepts should not lead automatically to conflict or even violence, but represent legitimate attempts to verbalize and provide answers to that which appeals to all people in its absoluteness. Different approaches are inspired by different identities, which invite and at times urge a mutual broadening of the horizon. The differences between the religions have been misused time and again in order to justify discrimination, persecution and violence. Without ignoring the reality that a potential conflict is a possibility, interfaith dialogue sees these differences as opportunities to encounter one another respectfully and to learn from each other.

The objective will be to enhance the similarities, know the differences without creating stereotypes, critically review and expand mutual images, open up new perspectives, develop interfaith tact as well as respect one another despite all the differences.

Experience has shown that a substantial part of a thus conceived interreligious dialogue will have to be employed within one's own ranks.

## 12. Interfaith dialogue deepens identity and strengthens the global community

Interreligious dialogue is a first step towards cooperation of faith communities globally. It starts with the mutual interest to share the respective spiritual wealth, comprises the willingness to engage in rational discourses and assumes an appreciative recognition of the legitimacy of the other partners in dialogue. Furthermore, it requires an understanding of the difference in the self-perception and the perception by others as well as mentalities of tolerance and acceptance, justice, friendship and willingness for reconciliation. The art of dialogue combines respect with the tackling of mutual challenges. Only those partners who have precise positions may establish an enriching dialogue. Genuine tolerance in dialogue starts where conflicting convictions diverge.

Of particular importance in this context is once again the sensitive use of language.

The following levels of dialogue have to be differentiated: Dialogue comprises everyday encounters, joint projects, exchange between the academic and theological spheres and discussion of spiritual experiences. All interested parties should be included in a participatory process of communication at the appropriate levels.

Opponents of interfaith dialogue sometimes fear syncretistic mingling of religions and the subsequent loss of identity. In contrast, experience shows that genuine interfaith dialogue not only contributes to a better mutual understanding and leads to a deepened understanding of one's own identity but in addition opens up opportunities for common action and activities.

Responsible dialogue works best without a cheap and condescending sense of always being right nor missionary work in the sense of "converting" others to one's own denomination or faith. The aims of interfaith dialogue really are to listen to each other, and to bear credible witness of one's own religious and spiritual experience. The interreligious dialogue that every society needs and that gives every individual more joie de vivre exists in the framework of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, in respecting that men and women should have equal dignity and in acknowledging the values of democracy – especially freedom of religion.

# RECOMMENDATIONS FOR ACTION TO BE TAKEN BY MUNICIPAL GOVERNMENTS AND RELIGIOUS COMMUNITIES

The following recommendations have been made by the members of the 17 working groups of the Interreligious Conference Graz 2013 "ComUnitySpirit". With regards to the different political and sociological realities, the recommendations are general in nature; no claim is made with regard to their completeness.

### 1. Sustainability of the dialogue

- 1.1 Engaging in dialogue means engaging in a relationship. This relationship requires stability and continuity. In order to make interfaith dialogue public and fruitful, cities provide a permanent structure to interfaith information and encounter. This structure may take the form of an interreligious council of the municipal government, a coordinating office or Round Tables hosted on a regular basis.
- 1.2 The faith communities engage in continuous dialogue on their own initiative and shape their mutual relations through regular encounters even in times when no specific problems have to be discussed.
- 1.3 Via the interreligious councils, the coordinating offices and the Round Tables, the public receives a clear and transparent picture of the situation and concerns of the religious communities as well as information on good practices of interfaith dialogue.

### 2. Quality of information and communicating information

- 2.1 The cities ensure that their responsible political and administrative representatives are sufficiently informed and have realistic understanding of the cultural and religious situation of the respective city's population.
- 2.2 The cities ensure that qualified information on religions and religious communities present in the city is made available on their media and support corresponding publications of the faith communities.
- 2.3 Homepages of cities portray the religious diversity within the city and offer links to the web portals of the respective local faith communities.
- 2.4 The religious communities jointly and in cooperation with the municipal administrations publish a brochure accessible to all which informs the readers of their ideology, their different holidays and festivities, rites and forms of important events such as birth, marriage and death. The brochure also provides information on their respective religious places of worship in the city.
- 2.5 The religious communities ensure that those religious texts which emphasize gender equality and equal treatment of both sexes become more widely known and recognized within the various faith communities but also to a broad public audience. The religious communities consider gender equality in their publications and in their vacancy notices.

#### 3. The search for and the art of encounter

3.1 The individual faith communities offer reliable information on other religions to their members and encourage possibilities of encounter with other faith communities.

- 3.2 The faith communities organize open house days at least once a year and in this context invite visitors as well as members of other faith communities to an exchange and dialogue on religious, cultural and social issues. Furthermore, the faith communities invite one another to their religious festivities.
- 3.3 The cities and the faith communities organize multi-religious events such as exchange meetings that span different generations and neighborhood parties to facilitate encounter and exchange. Participation in community life encourages social integration.
- 3.4 At all public functions and joint celebrations the cities and the faith communities respect and consider holidays, prayer times, dietary preferences and manners of the invited or participating faith communities.
- 3.5 The cities treat all faith communities irrespective of their legal status- with openness and appreciation and protect them from defamation and discrimination.

### 4. Responsibility for society

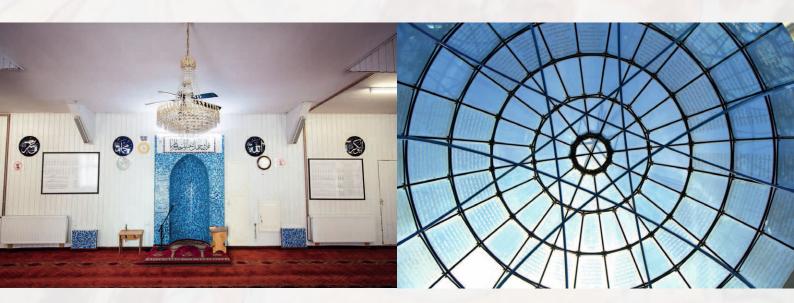
- 4.1 The cities and the faith communities, aware of their public responsibility, apply the Universal Human Rights and position themselves clearly if these rights are violated in any way such as through discrimination and work together with human rights organizations.
- 4.2 The cities and the faith communities adopt a formal position- if possible together- publicly and clearly oppose any form of political or religious extremism.
- 4.3 The cities provide information to newly arrived residents on the local possibilities of exercising one's religion. This responsibility applies especially to asylum seekers and refugees.
- 4.4 The cities and the faith communities promote educational programs which are dedicated to encouraging a constructive coexistence of the religions.
- 4.5 The cities ensure that professional mediators, who can provide expert mediation services in the case of religious or cultural conflicts, are available on demand to their municipal administrations and public service institutions
- 4.6 The cities ensure through further education and training programs for their staff members that municipal authorities and public service institutions employ the needed sensitivity when dealing with members of different religious communities.
- 4.7 Individual cities, which are already aware of the importance of interfaith communication for constructive community relations engage in networking activities and can by way of mutual exchange, realize this aim more effectively.
- 4.8 Faith communities, within their own various communities, allow and encourage open discussions on self-perception and perception by others of one's own and other religions.

# 5. Children and young people - the future of dialogue

5.1 The cities promote further training of educational staff in child care facilities so that the staff can explain the reasons for the different life styles of different religions (concerning their respective festivities, dietary habits, nutritional requirements and others).

- 5.2 The cities and the faith communities organize events for children and young people of different religions (such as game days or joint festivities) so that together they may learn from and about each other concerning their cultural and religious backgrounds.
- 5.3 The faith communities support children and young people in their development in such a way that they encounter people of different cultural and religious backgrounds with openness and curiosity and treat them with respect and acceptance.
- 5.4 The cities support intercultural and interreligious projects proposed by young people in and outside the school environment.
- 5.5 The faith communities offer expert counseling and support to young people, addressing their concerns as well as fundamental questions of life without exerting any kind of religious pressure.

Further concrete recommendations for action can be found in a collection of good practice examples of interfaith dialogue which are already being implemented in various countries and settings and which have been named by the participants of the "Interreligious Conference Graz 2013 ComUnitySpirit". This collection of good practice examples in interfaith dialogue can be found at: www.interrelgraz2013.com



### **CLOSING WORDS**

Global responsibility starts from one's own doorstep. In order to communicate good sustainable practices of interfaith dialogue accessible to a broader public, cities should aim at structurally embedding the dialogue with the faith communities. Particularly in times when reports of conflicts dominate the media, in addition to exchange on a personal level, quality media reporting and fast transfer of positive examples of cooperation are called for. Even though conflicts may not always be avoided, we can learn to find a constructive way of dealing with them. Graz continues to promote the "ComUnitySpirit" of the Interreligious Conference 2013 and would hereby like to initiate and facilitate an intensive exchange with other cities.

The Graz Declaration is the result of the Interreligious Conference Graz 2013 "ComUnitySpirit". The city of Graz, as the conference's host, would like to invite all participants of the conference as well as all other interested individuals, who identify with the contents worked out in the conference, to endorse "ComUnitySpirit- the Graz Declaration on Interfaith Dialogue" by signing it. The electronic version as well as a link to sign of the "Graz Declaration" online can be found at:







