

Today we live in a multi-cultural and multi-religious society. This diversity is both enriching and challenging. Religious and cultural traditions nurture a sense of meaning; they can strengthen identity, bring people closer together, motivate them to act for justice, and contribute to the promotion of peace. But they can also be used or be manipulated to justify intolerance, discrimination, violence, and lack of understanding or rejection.

All the religions present today in Switzerland, including Christianity that has marked the history and many traditions of our country, were introduced by migrants. This has sometimes led to strong tensions, but ultimately, the will and the ability to live together with respect have prevailed.

That is why our federal and cantonal constitutions today guarantee freedom of conscience and belief. The *Plateforme interreligieuse de Genève* (Interreligious Platform of Geneva) has been working for twenty-five years to promote recognition and dialogue between members of various religious traditions. Together, we are committed ourselves to ensuring that all people can live and practice their beliefs freely within the framework of the Swiss legal system.

The nine propositions on living together in a multi-religious society set out below aim at contributing to this objective and are intended to encourage reflection and conversation within communities and with the public.

The *Plateforme interreligieuse* offers its collaboration to communities, groups and anyone interested to organize debates, events and projects on this theme.

La Plateforme interreligieuse de Genève
www.interreligieux.ch

We thank the ecumenical working group *Point de rencontre Religion Migration* (Meeting Point Religion Migration) of the Reformed, Roman Catholic and Old Catholic Churches of the Canton of Berne, which drew up this document and has authorized us to rephrase it for dissemination in Geneva.

1. Religions are diverse within themselves

There are various currents within religious or spiritual traditions. The diversity of beliefs can be manifested through different ways of reading and interpreting the founding texts, as well as by adhering to different rules, practices and rituals. This has repeatedly given rise to conflicts, to reform movements, and even to divisions. In view of such diversities, often closely related to the cultural environment, it is important to avoid any generalization vis-à-vis a religion or a denomination, each of which shows a wide variety of sensitivities.

2. Religious communities' contribution to integration

The message conveyed by the various religious traditions gives meaning to existence and recalls the dignity of every human being.

In this spirit, communities encourage mutual respect, invite their members to actions of solidarity and justice. They thus contribute to strengthening relationships and supporting mutual assistance. That is why communities can play an important role in integration processes of their members. Some people are tempted to isolate themselves from society because of their

convictions. Their communities, while offering them a welcome in the traditions that are familiar to them, a sense of belonging, can help them to open themselves with confidence to living together with people of other convictions in a secularized world and in a democratic and secular State.

3. People must not be reduced to their religion or belief

When we encounter someone of another faith or a belief different from ours, we run the risk of focusing on divergences, obstacles or cultural issues instead of considering what can unite us or bring us together in joint reflection or action. Prejudices may then confine our interlocutor within a generalization with a ready-made image of his or her religion. For people adhering to a religious belief, this belonging is only one of many facets of their identity. Elements such as profession, interests, social status, way of life or political beliefs are part of identity. These can be factors of closeness or distance with our interlocutor. A human being cannot be reduced to one element or facet but must be understood in its plurality.

4. Freedom of conscience and belief is a fundamental right

Members of a religious community may individually or collectively suffer attacks on their dignity or unequal treatment. This is the case, for example, where a person is insulted, or systematically excluded from employment or housing because of his or her religious affiliation and practice. But also when people are prohibited in the public space to wearing religious or traditional symbols in the public space. And again when a community is denied permission to construct a building for religious use. This contradicts the prohibition of discrimination and freedom of religion enshrined in our constitutions. The latter state that all individuals can live and practice their religion freely within the framework of the existing legal order.

5. All human rights must be respected

Members of religious communities should not invoke their religious or cultural traditions to justify human rights abuses against members of their communities or any outside person. No one may be discriminated against because of his or her gender or sexual orientation, for example. Human rights apply to all. Not only the State, but also individuals, organizations and religious communities are bound by these rights.

Freedom of conscience and belief, like any rights, has its limits, which may be warranted in relation to public interest or the protection of a fundamental right.

6. Religious communities distance themselves from all forms of violence

The vast majority of the members in religious communities want to live peacefully and promote peace. Unfortunately, as in any human group, there are individuals who not only condemn others but threaten and fight them, if deemed it necessary by justifying this attitude if they deem it necessary by their religious traditions. Religious communities have the responsibility to distance themselves from the fundamentalist drifts within them, to identify their causes in their traditions, and to refuse any form of religious justification for the use of violence. Moreover, society as a whole is called to act against the social, political and economic causes that nurture extremism. Any extremism, whatever its form, is unacceptable. However, members of a religion cannot be held responsible for extremist acts perpetrated by some among them, as a religion cannot be condemned collectively when such acts are performed in its name.

7. Religions call for mutual respect

Other religious traditions and convictions may surprise us, challenge us, or even appear to us as being in contradiction to what we believe in or to our own cultural universe. But it is possible to give witness of one's own faith or conviction, without wishing to distance others from their religion or conviction, or without inciting them to convert or, worse, forcing them to do so. Everyone is free to make his or her own journey as he or she sees fit.

Any encounter with people of other religions or spiritual traditions is a demanding and rewarding experience. Information about other religions and, in particular, personal contacts with people of another denomination fosters mutual understanding and stimulate curiosity and the desire to know one another. This interaction presupposes a spirit of openness, the ability to change perspective, sensitivity and the will to see the other as an equal. It creates a terrain conducive to mutual trust and esteem.

8. Interreligious dialogue is a source of mutual enrichment

By encouraging encounter and exchange, interreligious dialogue can help us realize that we often share the same joys and sorrows, aspirations and hopes. It also enables us to discover that religions open the door to many fundamental questions inherent in existence, such as the search for meaning in one's life or fundamental ethical values. This dialogue makes it possible to recognize that one's own religion does not exhaust all religious forms or spirituality. Interreligious dialogue helps to discover the values of one's own religion and those of others. A better understanding and strengthening of one's own religious identity, as well as a deepening of one's own faith, often results. Interreligious dialogue is a source of enrichment in life and promotes social cohesion while contributing to peaceful coexistence among all.

9. Interreligious dialogue allows for spiritual openness

Anyone engaged constructively in interreligious dialogue also perceives the importance of inner transformation. Interreligious encounter can become a space in which one seeks to discover the efforts undertaken by each one, within the various religious traditions and cultures, in order to realize in oneself a spiritual transformation.

This discovery opens up a welcome change in our usual ways of analyzing, identifying, interpreting and understanding other cultures, allowing us to refocus on the fundamental values of our respective beliefs.

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This first edition is intended to stimulate discussion.
It is thus destined to evolve.

What do you say and what do you think of interreligious dialogue ?

You can send feedback or comments to:
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Avec le soutien de :



9 PROPOSITIONS

for
Living
Together
and
Respecting
One
Another
in a
Multi-
Religious
Society

