

‘What Unites us as a Community of Faiths is More Important than What Divides Us’

Interfaith Dialogue and Multifaith Action in Times of Division and Conflict

The European Council of Religious Leaders (ECRL) came together in the historic city of Thessaloniki on the 29th and 30th September, to renew and strengthen our sense of unity; to listen and learn with humility from fellow Council members; and to consider the multiplicity of challenges to social and community cohesion evident across Europe today.

Graciously hosted by the Jewish community of Thessaloniki we were provided with the opportunity to learn rich lessons about the history of religious communities in the city. We learned of the long history of Jewish people in Thessaloniki, their inspirational resilience in the face of incomprehensible suffering, and their significant contributions to the development of the social fabric of the city. We offer our deep gratitude for their warm hospitality and unconditional kindness.

The challenges that divide our societies and communities in Europe today are well-known: social and economic inequalities, rising costs of living, negative narratives and policies concerning migration, political polarisation and extremism, and the negative impacts of wars across the world, most pertinently the illegal invasion and occupation of Ukraine by the Russian government.

Given the array of challenges, it is no surprise that the bonds which hold our communities and societies together are under immense strain. As an integral part of our societies, our religious communities also feel the pressures, experiencing a rise in intolerant attitudes towards religions, an unprecedented rise in antisemitism and Islamophobia, challenges to freedom of religious beliefs and practices, a normalisation and acceptance of hate-speech online and on our streets, and violent attacks on our places of worship.

Most significantly for a multi-religious body, the painful tragedy of the conflicts in the Middle East has provided fuel for exclusive, extreme, and even violent religious

narratives and actors, and had a profound impact on interfaith and multifaith relations in Europe; particularly between Jewish, Muslim and Christian communities and leaders.

Due to these problems interfaith dialogue and engagement in Europe today is undoubtedly challenging. Yet as a body of religious leaders committed to respecting difference and pursuing peaceful coexistence, it is our duty to remind ourselves and others that there is more that unites us as people of faith, than divides us.

The European Council of Religious Leaders:

- Stands together unerringly for peace and believes in the absolute and non-negotiable sanctity of human life and human dignity. We pray in solidarity for the safety and freedom of the Jewish hostages in Gaza, for dignity of life for Palestinian civilians, and for sustainable peace and justice across the world.
- We condemn violence in all its forms, and are appalled at the killing of innocent children, women and men in Ukraine, in Israel, in Gaza, and everywhere in the world where war and conflict blight our communities, societies, and nations. The killing of innocent people can never be justified. We urge European governments to do more to prevent it, to speak out more clearly and forcefully against it, and to take decisive action against those responsible.
- Despite the significant pressure on interfaith work in Europe brought about by the wars in the Middle East, we are committed to sitting, listening, and speaking together despite our differences. A commitment to maintaining respectful and open dialogue with members all religious traditions is more important than ever when we disagree.
- We remind our political institutions and leaders that International Humanitarian Law and Human Rights should always be followed by everyone, regardless of circumstances, and that the international institutions which attempt to uphold peace and international law and order should always be respected.
- We unequivocally reject the politicisation and misuse of religion for extremism and exclusive nationalist narratives and movements, and commit to supporting and promoting the European democratic principles which underpin the freedom of religious communities to live and practice their traditions in peace.

The tragic history and resilience of Jewish community in Thessaloniki reminds us of our great responsibility to speak up and act in the face of injustice, oppression, discrimination and violence against innocent people everywhere. The European Council

of Religious Leaders takes this responsibility seriously, and we are privileged to be able to speak up for those who cannot.

As the bonds which hold our communities and societies strain under the seemingly endless onslaught of divisive narratives, the politics of hatred and division, and the horrors of war, in Thessaloniki on the 28th and 29th September 2025, despite our differences and our pain, we as a Council of diverse religious leaders stood together.

A community of faiths, doing our utmost to remember that what unities us as believers, as human beings, and as servants for peace, is so much more powerful than what divides us.

In Love and Prayer.

The European Council of Religious Leaders

01.09.2025

The European Council of Religious Leaders (ECRL) was established in 2002 in Norway as a platform to enhance open and trust-building dialogue between senior religious leaders of different faiths across Europe. The Council draws on the spiritual, ethical and moral wisdom and resources of the world's great religious traditions and leaders to support the building of peace, social harmony and security throughout Europe and the wider world. It is one of the most representative and respected pan-European collaboration of senior religious leaders in Europe.

For further information please contact – mark.owen@winchester.ac.uk
<https://rfpeurope.org/european-council-of-religious-leaders/>