

The EU institutions and inter-religious dialogue

Dialogue between the EU institutions and European churches and religious organisations has evolved from earlier informal contacts to a more structured system of regular meetings, underpinned by a solid legal basis.

The starting point – 'A Soul for Europe'

Relations between church and state fall within the domestic competence of EU Member States. However, they are obliged to respect the fundamental rights guaranteed in the [European Convention on Human Rights](#), such as the freedom of thought, conscience and religion (Article 9). In 1994, European Commission President, Jacques Delors established the first formal links of the European institutions with religious communities within the initiative '[A Soul for Europe](#)'. He identified a need for European integration to go beyond a purely economic and legal dimension. A structured dialogue with representatives of religions and humanist organisations was begun, with the aim of contributing to the spiritual and ethical perspectives of the EU, and promoting civil society participation in the integration process.

The Treaty of Lisbon – strengthened legal framework for inter-religious dialogue

A [Reflection Group](#) on the Spiritual and Cultural Dimension of Europe was established in 2003 on the initiative of Commission President, Romano Prodi to reflect upon issues relating to values that are relevant for European unification. It fed into the work of the Convention which drafted the EU Constitutional Treaty, which in turn set the ground for the eventual adoption and entry into force (in 2009) of the Treaty of Lisbon. With Lisbon, [Article 17](#) of the Treaty on the Functioning of the EU introduced, for the first time, a legal basis for regular, open and transparent dialogue between the EU institutions and churches, religious associations, and philosophical and non-confessional organisations. It also states that the EU shall respect the status under national law of churches and religious organisations in the Member States.

Ten years of high-level meetings with religious communities

The Reflection Group's work was taken on by the Commission's Group of Policy Advisors (GOPA, later [BEPA](#), which has been replaced in the Juncker Commission by the [EPSC](#) – European Political Strategy Centre). Among other tasks it oversaw contacts with churches, and religious and philosophical associations. From 2005, it contributed to the organisation of annual high-level meetings between the EU institutions and representatives of religious organisations, notably [COMECE](#) (the EU Catholic bishops' conference), the Council of European Churches ([CEC](#) – including Protestant, Anglican, Orthodox and Old catholic churches), Muslim communities, the [European Jewish Congress](#) and Hindu, Sikh and Mormon associations.

The Commission adopted [guidelines](#) in 2013 for the implementation of dialogue under Article 17, which stated that it should contribute to policy-making and be held regularly in various configurations or levels, aiming to cover topics, agreed upon by all parties, which were related to the EU agenda and EU integration.

The first [high-level meeting](#), which took place just five days after the July 2005 attacks in London, highlighted the need for Europe to [combat terrorism and eliminate its causes](#). Other subjects debated in these meetings have included the [fight against poverty and social exclusion](#), [democratic rights and liberties](#), and [solidarity between generations and demographic challenges](#). Since 2007, the high-level meetings have been hosted by the European Commission and co-chaired by the President or responsible Vice-President of the European Parliament and the European Council President.

In its April 2014 [resolution](#) on EU foreign policy in a world of cultural and religious differences, the EP recognised the role of parliamentary assemblies of international organisations for the promotion of inter-religious dialogue and called upon the European External Action Service and EU Delegations to contribute to its promotion.