

## I God and Transcendence

### 1.1 The significance of the conception of God for humans:

#### Why God, why Transcendence?

The religions have an understanding of someone or something, that encompasses and transcends our world and attribute different names to distinguish "it". And this is exactly what agnostics and atheists question, by denying its sense and sometimes combating its relevance.

What is the significance of God, of Transcendence for the individual and for society at large? Have systems that exclude the conception of God, proved their worth in the sense of humanity? What do the conception of God and perceptions of Transcendence look like in the various religions? Which potential for violence or peace do these conceptions bear?

### 1.2 Religions and Spirituality:

#### What distinguishes a religious person?

Religionen haben unterschiedliche bis gegensätzliche Vorstellungen von Gott und Transzendenz. Allen gemeinsam ist die Bedeutung, die der religiösen Erfahrung zukommt. In diesem Sinne ist Spiritualität zu einem viel verwendeten Begriff geworden.

Was aber ist Spiritualität, was macht einen religiösen Menschen aus? Trägt Spiritualität zur Selbstentfaltung bei? Können Menschen aus verschiedenen Religionen spirituell voneinander lernen und gemeinsame Formen der Spiritualität (Gebete, Meditationen u.a.) praktizieren? The religions have different and even contrary conceptions of God and Transcendence. However, all of them have one thing in common: the importance that is attached to the religious experience. In this sense spirituality has become a frequently used term. What is spirituality and what distinguishes a religious person? Does spirituality contribute to self-development? Can individuals with different religious beliefs learn from each other and practice common forms of spirituality (prayer, meditation, etc.)?

### 1.3 Self image of religions and perception of others:

#### What is the meaning of terms like "Nirvana", "Trinity" or "Devotion"...?

The understanding of the respective other religions is often weak; important contents of other religions are often widely misunderstood or tainted by prejudices.

In this workshop religious terms and concepts will be viewed from an internal and external perspective.

And how can ways be found to successfully bridge the gap between self perception of the respective religion and the perception by others?

### 1.4 Identity – Rites – Symbols:

#### Religious identity is privately and publicly expressed through symbols, holidays, religious festive culture and the compliance with dress regulations: The cross, head scarf and Sunday rest are current strikingly prominent examples.

Symbols offer orientation but at the same time hold great potential of conflict. Which forms of religious expression have been integrated in social coexistence? What is their contribution in this context? What potential for conflict do they hold in public sphere? And: What are the possibilities of promoting constructive and peaceful coexistence of all citizens on this level?

### 1.5 Mature and communicative religious belief:

#### How do religious people position themselves between the polar opposites of fundamentalism and indifference?

In our current life religious belief finds itself in a field of tension between religious pluralism and the claim to absolute truth: religious fundamentalism seems to be the counterpart to indifference towards all religions.

How can interreligious dialogue counter the uncertainty, religious indifference and fundamentalist currents of religions? What is fundamentalism and how is it positioned in the context of religion? And how "flexible" should belief be?

### 1.6 Freedom of religion, criticism of religion, converting to another religion:

#### How is the human right to freedom of religion implemented on a political, state level and within the respective faith communities themselves?

Pursuant to the Universal Declaration of Human Rights and the constitutions of many countries, freedom of religion and freedom of expression are guaranteed.

What do these freedoms and rights look like in reality? Does freedom of religion conflict with any other values? How do religious communities promote and support the implementation of free expression and practice of religion and belief? Do they recognize and allow the freedom of expressing one's criticism of religion or the right to change or renounce one's faith and to convert to another religion? And: what role do freedom of religion, freedom of conscience and freedom of expression play in the relationship with God?

## II The Individual and Society

## **2.1 The responsibility of religions in the public sphere:**

### **To what extent should and would faith communities participate in political life?**

Civil society may reasonably expect of religious people and the institutionally shaped faith communities a contribution towards social cohesion as well as fair and peaceful coexistence.

How do faith communities respond to these expectations and how do they perform these tasks?

How can public administrative services and institutions contribute to increase cooperation with the respective faith communities and in this way strengthen their sense of responsibility? And: In what way can religious majority communities contribute to the protection of religious minorities?

## **2.2 Coexistence in religious diversity:**

### **What are the challenges and are there any inspiring initiatives?**

Religious diversity is enriching, but at the same time holds great potential of conflict.

What can we do in order to prevent discrimination for instance on the job market?

How can we best overcome difficulties and resolve conflicts which arise in the private spheres- for instance in interreligious marriages or in parenting?

How do the respective faith communities react to these challenges of diversity? How can we prevent the social phenomenon of "ghettoisation" and members of minority faith communities withdrawing into so called "parallel societies"?

## **2.3 Religions and gender:**

### **What are the paths to greater equality between the genders in the faith communities and in society at large?**

Concerning questions such as dignity and equality for women and men, religious teachings and traditions are still relevant. However, the ideas and views regarding the understanding of "gender equality" often are widely divergent.

In what way do faith communities promote gender equality? How is non-discrimination and equality reflected in religious institutions and lived in every day religious life? And: Which significance do traditional stereotyped role models have in the respective faith communities today?

## **2.4 Partnership, family and sexuality:**

### **In which way do religions contribute to building interpersonal relationships embodied with human values and dignity?**

Traditional moral concepts and lifestyles are sometimes contrasted by more open understandings of partnership, family and sexuality in societies.

What understanding do the respective faith communities have with respect to family, partnership and sexuality? How can religious principles be applied in questions of divorce or homosexual marriage? Which limits should the society lay down (for instance in cases of continuous problems in one of these areas)? And: What are the possibilities for religious people to hold on to their respective values and at the same time contribute towards a tolerant society?

## **2.5 Salvation and healing:**

### **How are the various notions of religious salvation linked to our health?**

If we consider a human being as a unity of body, mind and spirit, the role of religions in the context of healing is not limited to the consolation of hope of eternal salvation, but also includes healing in a worldly understanding. Religions transmit meaning, mobilize psychosomatic powers and encourage helpfulness.

What effects can religious belief and spirituality have on health and healing in general? Can religious principles also impede healing processes? What is the constructive and critical potential of religions in regard to modern and tightly scheduled medical treatment processes? And: What role can and should religions generally play in the public health care system?

## **2.6 "Teaching Religion":**

### **To what extent is religious education a public responsibility and service?**

Religious education is an internal matter of religious communities while at the same time a concern of society. Religious education can address strong motivational forces and plays an important role in promoting peaceful coexistence and mutual understanding. The concepts, systems approaches, however, vary significantly and range from "teaching about religion" to "teaching in religion". Education is an important element of the success of peaceful coexistence in cultural and religious diversity.

Are there general recipes for success, or is the path to success based on the respective historically developed social reality? How much knowledge of religion is necessary for a successful social coexistence anyway? Which concepts of religious education exist already and how many new approaches need yet to be developed? And: What responsibility does an ideologically neutral state have in this context and what is the scope of a city in all this?

# **III World and Global Responsibility**

## **Interfaith dialogue:**

### **Who communicates with whom about what? Why? To what purpose and under what conditions?**

Global responsibility is beginning right at our front door. It is based on the presence of individuals with a cultural and religious background that varies from one's own in a city. Interreligious dialogue is a crucial global issue that serves the purpose of preventing the imminent danger of a clash of civilizations.

At which levels does interreligious dialogue take place- in everyday life, among experts, in common activities and events, among persons in leading positions? What understanding do the respective faith communities have of each other? Which successful dialogue initiatives are there on a local level? And: How can experiences and results of international dialogue be communicated sustainably on a local level? In what way can cities and local faith communities take part in global dialogue processes?

### **3.2 Responsibility for the world:**

#### **What potential do the religions offer for a global future worth living in?**

Over the past years interreligious dialogue has led to the question of whether there is a Global Ethic of all the world religions as a vision of a global transformation of ethical awareness for a peaceful and sustainable future.

What responsibilities do the religious communities assume in the areas of sustainability, ecology, social and economic fairness, peaceful conflict resolution and combating poverty?

In what ways can local religious communities on the basis of the principle of Global Ethic cooperate with one another and with other committed people in questions of development policies, ecology, fair trade, etc. And: Will the religions establish themselves as "global players" and what will be their impact in future?

### **3.3 Religions and politics:**

#### **Is religion a private matter?**

**Democratic societies are distinguished by a legal separation of Church and State. The state and religions cannot interfere in each other's spheres, but at the same time rely on close cooperation.**

To what extent do religions have a role to play in public sphere? In what areas is their presence welcome and contribute to a better interreligious understanding? How can the faith communities address community concerns and how should the state or a city promote the presence of religions in the public sphere? And: How are the religions at risk of being used for certain political interests?

### **3.4 Religions and Human Rights:**

#### **Can faith communities convincingly commit to advocating for Human Rights?**

Graz holds the title of City of Human Rights and in this way already takes on responsibility for advocating Human Rights. As they are universal, all religious communities are obligated to respect and abide by them.

What contribution should religions make in this area, in their fundamental principles, their political commitment and their charitable works? How convincingly do they implement and protect human rights in their own midst? How do they uphold and promote human rights and how can they cooperate with administrative services and NGOs in their engagement with human rights?

### **3.5 Religions and young people:**

#### **How can we succeed in offering constructive guidance?**

The most precious potential of every society is their youths. This is why optimum development opportunities represent a primary public concern. Religions may offer constructive and genuine guidance and action motivation for young people.

How religious are young people? Which shape does religion have for young people of the cyber- era? What do the faith communities have to offer to young people? What importance does religion have for young people who grow up in the present youth cultures? Which approaches and best practice examples are there for the faith communities' and youth organizations' outreach activities in youth work? How can young people be interested in interreligious dialogue and in this way learn to overcome cultural and religious barriers? What possibilities and for joint activities and synergies are there in the public sphere?

### **3.6 Religions and the media:**

#### **How can the scope and enormous power of the media be utilized best?**

The freedom of the media is an indispensable element of democracy. At the same time the media have a great responsibility: Not only do they portray events, they also weigh and even construct reality. By providing information, they widen the view but at the same time narrow horizons by restricting the view of the overall picture to its negative aspects (also on and between the religions).

Which role do religious communities play in this field- as mere objects of media portrayal, as active players shaping the media as stakeholders and as media owners? How can this cooperation be constructively and responsibly designed and implemented in a plural society? How do religious minorities present themselves in the media of their country and how are they portrayed by the media? What possibilities does a city have to position and present itself in this question, possibly off the trodden paths of common media representation? And: How can more media publicity be created for interreligious dialogue?