

Community of Protestant Churches in Europe (CPCE)

– Leuenberg Church Fellowship –



The CPCE Executive Committee expresses its views on the issue of freedom of religion and freedom of expression

At its meeting in Budapest 6–8 April, the managing board of the Community of Protestant Churches in Europe adopted unanimously the following statement:

Defending truth, not with force, but with the power of the Word alone

Introduction

The conflicts over the printing of cartoons of the Prophet Mohammed raise basic questions about the handling of basic human rights in our societies. Freedom of expression, along with freedom of the media and the arts, is a key element of a human community of values, as much as freedom of thought, conscience and religion.

The Community of Protestant Churches in Europe – The Leuenberg Church Fellowship (CPCE) stresses that churches have a responsibility to advocate freedom of expression. This calls for a responsible handling of freedom in general. Churches commit themselves to dialogue with believers as well as non-believers. It is the common task of all to contribute to the building of a peaceful and just society by means of dialogue. This is especially important where there is conflict and difference of opinion.

Basic rights

Basic human rights constitute a generally recognised legal framework in secular law. This includes the right to free expression. The same is true of the right to freedom of thought, conscience and religion, and protection from discrimination (cf. The Universal Declaration of Human Rights of 10/12/1948, The European Convention on the Protection of Human Rights and Basic Freedoms of 4/11/1950, and The International Pact on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights of 16/12/1966). The basic rights safeguard pluralism, tolerance, justice, solidarity and non-discrimination in European societies. The CPCE Executive Committee notes with concern tendencies to restrict the exercise of basic rights on religious grounds.

Freedom

Freedom of expression and freedom of religious practice should not be played off against one another. Freedom of belief and conscience, free speech and respect for human dignity are not dependent on any human quality or achievement. They are based on the fact that human beings are created by God, through God's unconditional love and free grace.

Freedom of religion includes the right to freedom of worship and the public exercise of religion as well as the right to criticise religion. Many religions have arisen on the grounds of new theological insights arising from critical debate with existing religions. This applies to Islam as well as Christianity. The churches of the Reformation in particular have emerged from a movement for religious freedom and from a critique of existing Church situations and teachings. It follows that the right to freedom of expression enjoys a particular status in our

churches. The claim of religions to be able to criticise other religions or social conditions must include a readiness to let themselves be called into question by all permissible means of free expression. A religion that keeps itself safely immune from all criticism is totalitarian. It disregards the difference between itself and its transcendental basis, between God and the faith that bears witness to God.

Responsibility

It is a Protestant understanding that freedom is never without commitment; it is associated with responsibility and love. In the words of Martin Luther, a Christian is on the one hand “a free lord over all things and subject to nobody” and on the other “a ministering servant to all things and subject to everyone.” The same relationship between freedom and responsibility is found in the New Testament. The apostle Paul wrote: “all things are lawful but not all things are beneficial.” The criterion for discernment is the question: what serves the best interests of one’s fellow human beings, goodness and peace? (1 Corinthians 10.23f) This question is also raised with regard to media freedom and the exercise of freedom of expression. It follows that there can be good reasons, based on love of one’s neighbour, willingly to abstain from exercising one’s rights to freedom.

Freedom of expression, the freedom of the media and the arts, are limited by their setting within the framework of acts of state, where they may be misused for the purposes of vilifying men and women and discriminating against them. The CPCE rejects all discrimination against men and women on religious, ideological, ethnic, or social grounds on the pretext of freedom of expression or artistic freedom; it also rejects any attempts to erode the freedom of public expression of opinion, including the arts, by an abusive reference to the protection of religious confessions.

Rights of minorities

Many CPCE member churches are in minority situations in their own countries. They know from their own experience how readily they can be exposed to discrimination as religious minorities. They are also familiar with the problem that a limited access to the media can restrict the exercise of their right to free expression of opinion. That being the case, Protestant churches understand how Muslims in a minority situation might feel that their religious sensibilities have been violated by the publication of the Mohammed cartoons.

Christians too, time and again, have seen their Christian faith disparaged and their religious sensibilities violated. This is true, not only in secular Europe, but also in those countries of Islamic domination where freedom of religion is respected only to a limited extent. Protestant churches are concerned that in many countries where Islam is the dominant religion, freedom of religion for Christians is guaranteed, if at all, only to a limited degree. An appeal to basic human rights, however, affirms that no differentiation should be made for reasons of the legal or international standing of the country or region to which a person belongs, and that this takes precedence over national provisions (cf. Art.2 of The Universal Declaration of Human Rights).

Peace and reconciliation

Public order is to be valued alongside individual freedom. When one exercises one’s right to free expression of opinion and freedom of the media, one has to take care that public order is not jeopardised.

In conflict situations, the safeguarding of basic human rights is the task of the state. If people feel that their fundamental rights are violated by expressions of public opinion or artistic presentations, they are given the opportunity to claim protection by the responsible public bodies. Furthermore, it is possible to draw public attention to these irregularities and to protest

against them. The CPCE denounces expressly the violent riots and arson attacks on public facilities as well as the death threats against cartoonists and journalists.

The CPCE urges the Protestant churches in Europe to find every possible means to contribute to dialogue and reconciliation; to promote understanding and respect amongst people of different cultures; and to exercise greater sensitivity in dealing with religious feelings. As a Community of Protestant Churches in Europe, we rely on the power of the Word. We must defend truth, not with force, but with the Word alone. It is precisely for this reason that the fundamental rights to freedom of opinion and freedom of religion are to be safeguarded: from a Protestant perspective, they are very precious.

Hanover, 8 April 2006

* * *

At present 105 Protestant churches in Europe (including five South-American churches originating from Europe) belong to the Community of Protestant Churches in Europe (CPCE). Lutheran, Reformed, United and Methodist along with pre-Reformation churches such as Hussites and Czech Brethren grant each other pulpit and table fellowship on the basis of the Leuenberg Agreement of 1973.

A 13-member Executive Committee carries out ongoing business between two general assemblies, headed by a 3-member Presidium: Prof. Elisabeth Parmentier (executive president), professor of practical theology in Strasbourg, Revd Thomas Wipf, president of the Federation of Swiss Protestant Churches in Bern, and Prof. Michael Beintker, director of the Seminary for Reformed Theology at the University in Munster. The other members of the Executive Committee are: Dr Peter Bukowski (Wuppertal), OKR Doris Damke (Bielefeld), Dr Friedrich Hauschildt (Hanover), Bishop Dr Mihály Márkus (Táta/Hungary), OKR Prof. Hon. Dr Michael Bünker (Vienna), Consistory member Revd Piotr Gaš (Szczecin/Poland), Prof. Willy Willems (Brussels), Gen.Sec. Dr Olav Fykse Tveit (As/Norway), Revd Fleur Houston (Oxford) and Revd Canon Harvey Richardson (Croydon/UK).

The deputy members are: Bishop Dr. Martin Hein (Kassel), Prof. Heinrich Holze (Rostock), OKR'in Antje Heider-Rottwilm (Hanover), OKR'in Cordelia Kopsch (Darmstadt), Bishop Dezső Zoltán Adorjáni (Cluj/Romania), Revd Winfrid Pfannkuche (Prati/Italie), Gen.Sec. Dr Bas Plaisier (Utrecht), Revd François Clavairoly (Paris), Prof. John Cecil McCullough (Belfast) and Bishop em. Dr Walter Klaiber (Tübingen).

The Secretariat, which operates under the direction of the Executive Committee, is housed in the Head Office of the Union of Protestant Churches (UEK) in the EKD: Jebensstr. 3, D-10623 Berlin, office@leuenberg.net, tel. +49-30-31001-317, fax - 200. Its director is Dr Wilhelm Hüffmeier, President of the UEK Head Office. The CPCE press officer is OKR Udo Hahn, EKD communication desk, EKD Church Office, tel. +49-511-2796-272, fax -777 or 888, udo.hahn@ekd.de.