



Human dignity and Christian morality: a response from the CPCE to the Russian Orthodox Church

Since the Movement for Practical Christianity (Life and Work), “Doctrine divides – but service unites” has been a thesis often expressed in the ecumene. What is correct in it is that the churches have a common responsibility in the face of the questions and demands of the world. But it is also evident that differences in doctrine lead to divergent ethical and political positions.

One example of this is the treatment of human rights. A year ago the Russian Orthodox Church published “The Principles of the Russian Orthodox Church on Dignity, Freedom, Rights”. In this foundation statement the Russian Orthodox Church distinguishes between an “ultimate value” and a “dignity” of the human being which has still to be struggled for, and which depends on moral behaviour. In transferring this anthropological conception to human rights the Russian Orthodox Church arrives at a subordination of human rights to Christian moral teaching. The Russian Orthodox Church requires that human rights do not stand in the way of patriotism and the “values of the spiritual world”.

The CPCE has now responded to this position of the Russian Orthodox Church in a lengthy statement which was worked out by the Specialist Group on Ethics and approved by the Presidium after discussions in the CPCE Council. The basis of the CPCE statement is the making of human beings in the likeness of God and the doctrine of justification. “In principle, therefore, human dignity grounded in God’s righteousness cannot be put in question by the sinfulness of human beings.” The CPCE criticizes the Russian Orthodox Church for misunderstanding human rights. “Human rights are rights of protection and participation which put human actions and sphere of living under the law and guarantee a framework for the co-existence of human beings together. Human rights are rights of protection and participation which put human actions and their sphere of living under the law and guarantee a framework for the co-existence of human beings together.” The Protestant churches therefore see human rights not as a threat to Christian morality but as foundations for peaceful and respectful coexistence in a pluralist society.

Already in the past in respect of Islam - the Protestant churches in Europe have spoken out against a limitation of human rights for religious reasons. In the CPCE doctrinal conversation on “Law and Gospel” the churches stated together: “human rights are rights which exist before the state, which are not at the disposition of the

lawgiver. Nor can their recognition be made dependent on any actions in return” (Law and Gospel). That is one reason why the CPCE has now spoken out quite clearly against a limitation of human rights within the Christian churches for religious reasons. The other is that it is part of the Protestant ecumenical understanding that doctrinal differences which exist in and between the churches must be worked on further. The CPCE has therefore coupled its statement with an invitation to continue the dialogue on human rights.

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You will find the CPCE statement at

<http://www.leuenberg.eu/daten/File/Upload/doc-9805-2.pdf>