



“The heart of the matter is at stake”

The Russian Orthodox Church’s understanding of human rights raises problems. But there are also other voices within Orthodoxy. By Stefan Tobler.

The conviction that the defence of human rights is the core task of the church is deeply rooted in Protestantism. It is good that this should be taken for granted. At the same time we should make no mistake that it is the result of a process of learning which is still young.

Behind human rights stands the idea that all human beings have a dignity that they cannot lose. That is a great historical achievement. In the Roman cultural sphere human dignity was a concept which was connected with social status and corresponding social behaviour. One had dignity in so far as one belonged to a particular group, since the exalted dignity of the ruler radiated on all his subjects. The biblical message and with it the church as it came into being had a different perspective. Every human being is created in the image of God, and every human being is equally addressed by the message of salvation in Christ; in him there is “neither Jew nor Greek” (Gal.3.28). The idea of the universality of human dignity is closely bound up with the Jewish faith – but it often had to establish itself in the face of the churches. If Protestant churches today stand up for human rights, they do so in this twofold attitude: resolute in the cause and modest with respect to their own history.

The social pluralization which shaped European countries to a growing degree from the 16th century on was decisive for the development. It compelled a new orientation in the relationship between church and state which is also to be assessed positively in a theological respect: it gave the churches new freedom to serve the gospel and not human lords. A distinction is bound up with this pluralization which is fundamental to the assessment of human rights from a Christian perspective, namely that between morality and legality.

The law does not have the task of training people for the good; but it should create spaces so that a life according to the will of God is possible. The law cannot and may not make conditions as to how men and women have to live, but it must protect against the misuse of freedom at the expense of the weaker ones. It is at this point that the questions to the 2008 document of the Russian Orthodox Church, which posits “a direct connection between human dignity and morality” (I.5), begin, as human beings preserve their God-given dignity only the observance of moral norms.

The observance of these norms is said to be “indispensable to eternal salvation”, as the 2000 social teaching of this church puts it (ibid. III, 3), and therefore it is necessary for the state to collaborate with the church in this. Often fields of problems overlap and confirm one another here, and need to be discussed: the relationship between church and state, the understanding of freedom and the doctrine of justification. What is at risk is the heart of the matter: the universality and inalienable nature of human dignity and the validity of human rights for every individual, regardless of their membership of a particular community.

In this conversation it is also important to be ready to learn oneself and to take up the positive concerns of the partner. In this case that is a concern for domestic mission and the sanctification of life. Moreover it would be a mistake to regard this position – important though it is – as generally valid. There are also different voices in Orthodox and so one must distinguish between the cultural, national forms and the Orthodox tradition, which are often closely connected, but are not identical.