

Christian churches in building the European societies

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According to the latest research, the European churches have been active in seeking for political and social balance within the continent after the Second World War. During the tense years of the Cold War, many of them showed great willingness to promote endeavours which on both national and international level have aimed to lessen prejudices, tension, and hatred between nations, political systems, and religious denominations.

An important role in these bridge building activities was played not only by the international ecumenical organisations but also individual churches, e.g. the German Evangelical Churches, the Finnish Evangelical-Lutheran Church, and the Russian or the Romanian Orthodox Church, participating in bilateral theological dialogues which touched upon also social themes such as peace or social responsibility. Many of these dialogues still continue to play an important role in interpreting the different denominational or national traditions within European societies.

Since the end of the Cold War, many of the East European churches have faced a new era of religious freedom, but also a number of challenges rising from the new socio-political situation. In some case this has meant a drawback in their stance towards ecumenism or tolerance towards “the others” of their respective societies. In general, however, the churches continue to stress the importance of the human rights and mental unity of European people.

There is however differences between the different church traditions on understandings of the church’s role in the civil debate: e.g. while the Roman-Catholic church understands the ministry of the church as the teacher of a political community, the protestant churches consider themselves equal participants of the debate. Furthermore, while the Orthodox churches have traditionally bid themselves to harmony with the respective local governments, the western churches do not have this kind of theological binding. Thus, the theological elements have their affect on the different ways the European churches see and have seen their role in the building of the society.

Among the North-European churches, the discussion and activities concerning the European unity have been dominated by questions of peace, human rights, religious freedom and general social responsibility of Christians. However, the politically motivated discussion about the process towards European integration has appeared on churches’ agenda only recently, and they have shown a growing willingness to actively promote such politics that would help Europe to become more aware of the rights and needs of different minorities and the world beyond Europe.

Since the late 1990s the churches have increasingly interacted in a global, interdependent environment where many issues seem to be out of their hands, or even out of the hands of the national governments. In the future it will be a challenge for the them to seek a ”policy coherence” in their theology and social teaching when it comes to integrating the national concerns in the global responsibility.

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