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CSC Update on European Affairs

TOPICS COVERED:

CSC plenary meeting, CoE exchange on teaching of religious and convictional facts, CSC seminar on Islam, Christianity and Europe, Treaty Reform, migration, upcoming CSC events.

CSC Plenary Meeting

The Church and Society Commission (CSC) met in Prague on 10-13 April 2008 for its annual plenary meeting. The Commission meeting was hosted by the European Baptist Federation, the Ecumenical Council of Churches and the CEC member churches in the Czech Republic.

During the plenary, Anthea Cox (Methodist Church of Great Britain) was elected as the Commission's new Co-Moderator in succession to the Rev. Antje Heider-Rottwilm (Protestant Church in Germany (EKD) who will take up a new position developing a new ecumenical centre in the HafenCity Hamburg. Rev. Heider-Rottwilm was warmly thanked for her work and dedication over the eleven years she worked with CSC.

During the plenary meeting, the Annual Review of the Commission's work was adopted as well as the work plan for 2008-2009. The foreseen projects include conferences on the Legal Aspects of the Role of Religion in the Public Sphere, Family Policies, Climate Change, a Human Rights Training Manual, seminars on Intercultural Dialogue and a conference on Churches and Socially Responsible Investment (6-7 May 2008).

The Church and Society Commission of CEC noted that 2008 marks the European Union's Year of Intercultural Dialogue and sees this as a major issue for the Commission. Discussion on this theme focused on the role of religion as an important part of the identity and culture in today's Europe. The new CSC Briefing on Intercultural

Dialogue within the EU, which provides a detailed review of the developments, is attached to this Update.

The plenary issued a public statement concerning the recent launch of the EU's Peace-building Partnership (see Europe Update N° 12). The Commission welcomed the creation of the Peace-building Partnership, but expressed concerns at its understaffing and lack of resources. It called on the EU and its Member States to give non-violent forms of conflict resolution and crisis management a far higher priority – both financially and in terms of political commitment. At the moment, the contrast with the amount of resources devoted to the European Defence Agency and the other military dimensions of the EU's Common Foreign and Security Policy (CFSP) is staggering.

A meeting was held with representatives of the Czech churches. The main speaker was Dr. Pavel Cerny, President of the Ecumenical Council of Churches in the Czech Republic. Other churches of the Council were represented by Josef Cervenak, Superintendent of the United Methodist Church, Joel Ruml, Moderator of the Evangelical Church of Czech Brethren, Dr. Tomas Butta, Patriarch of the Czechoslovak Hussite Church, Dr. David Tonzar, Bishop of Prague of the Czechoslovak Hussite Church and Mahulena Cejkova, Synod Curator of Evangelical Church of Czech Brethren.

Intercultural Dialogue

CoE exchange on teaching of religious and convictional facts

On 8 April 2008, the Committee of Ministers of the Council of Europe held a meeting on "Teaching religious and convictional facts – A tool for acquiring knowledge about religions and beliefs in education; a contribution to education for democratic citizenship, human rights and intercultural dialogue." The around 60 participants included ten people (churches, experts and CSC staff) either belong to or related to the CEC constituency.

Even if the meeting did not reach concrete results such as an agreement on common commitments, it was a success. According to the CSC staff, the dialogue was open and sincere. Two main fears about hidden or unconscious agendas were expressed. On the religious side, it was the fear that religion could merely be taught "from outside", in a total abstract, rational and sociological way, excluding the crucial dimension of religion as a deep personal experience in the life of believers. On the humanist and atheistic side, it was the fear that the teaching of religious and convictional facts in schools could lead to proselytism and the teaching of one specific catechism. In terms of expectations, all participants seemed to agree that, irrespective of the school system, the teaching of religions and convictions for all European students would be a contribution to democratic citizenship and that there is a need for education to pluralism as part of the school teaching.

Orthodox and Apostolic Armenian religious representatives underlined the need - as a common exercise - to revise the presentation of other convictional groups in our textbooks. They called for the teaching of religion to be presented as part of history and sociology but stressed that this education should not replace the voluntary learning of one's own religion. In addition, they said that there should be no state-supported monopoly of positivism or atheism but that plurality should govern as the principle.

Protestant religious representatives or experts in religious teaching insisted on the need to help people become religiously literate, capable to understand and critically reflect on religion, including on their own. They also raised questions such as what is the educational quality of religious teaching and how to support religion teachers in order to enable them to deal with diversity in the school system. The protestant participants also stressed the importance of learning to reflect on one's own faith, beliefs and convictions. This should be accompanied by learning one's own and the others' feelings and attitudes regarding faith, beliefs and convictions.

Roman-Catholic representatives stressed that one should not confuse religion, race and faith. It was also mentioned that in the UK, there is a statutory obligation for religious education and teaching to promote social cohesion. Finally they emphasised the need for religious people to be associated to the elaboration of school programmes on religion.

The Jewish representatives underlined the need for a teaching nurtured by meaning and wisdom. They also highlighted that such teaching cannot consist of common values only.

The Muslim representatives reminded the conference that all religions had a peace message to convey but that all of them had failed to live it. In the same vein, they stressed the need to avoid that hatred by the weak replace contempt by the strong. The Muslims were also concerned by the identification of the "medium" Islam with its radical political option and the need to distinguish "family Islam" and "political Islam".

The other participants, which included **experts and representatives of the CoE, INGOs and other International Organisations** raised the following issues: the need to relate teaching of religion and teaching of human rights, the need to combat violence in the name of religion, the need to reflect on how to tackle the tension between teaching facts and religious doctrines, and the central role of women in education. It was also highlighted that - according to the jurisprudence of the European Court of Human Rights in the field of teaching of religion in public schools - the state is expected to ensure the respect for the parents' convictions and that the states must either provide objective, critical and pluralistic teaching or, if this is not granted, the right for students not to attend the classes. Mr Jean-Paul Willaime, rapporteur of the meeting, welcomed the CoE's practice of "laïcité of intelligence and dialogue" as "a common good of all".

The meeting was a follow-up to the San Marino conference on inter-religious dialogue held in April 2007 (see Europe Update N° 8). It was also the first of the "Council of Europe annual exchanges on the religious dimension of intercultural dialogue". After the evaluation of this first event, the CoE will, in July, decide whether this kind of

exchange should become an annual event. Towards the end of May, CSC will hold an evaluation meeting with the San Marino Permanent Representative, who coordinated the preparations for the event.

According to CSC, the meeting clearly showed the importance for CEC to have an in-depth reflection on the theme of education. This assessment was also approved by the CSC Plenary in Prague.

Islam, Christianity and Europe

On 17 April, CSC together with COMECE and the Konrad Adenauer Foundation organised a seminar entitled "Intercultural Dialogue: response to which problems? Christian and Muslim perspectives." The seminar hosted by the European Parliament was the first of a series of four that the partners will organise under the overall theme of "Islam, Christianity and Europe" in the framework of the European Year of Intercultural Dialogue 2008.

The seminar stressed the importance of intercultural dialogue as a way to foster social cohesion in Europe and peace and solidarity in EU foreign relations. Intercultural dialogue as well as inter-religious dialogue were seen as ways to improve knowledge and understanding and thereby help overcome the fear and hostility on which discrimination feeds. Beyond its value as a means to tackle problems, intercultural dialogue should be seen as an element of civilized culture. In addition to intercultural and inter-religious dialogue, the seminar underlined the importance of intra-cultural and intra-religious dialogue. The main challenge for all those dialogues is to involve those who in the first place object to dialogue.

The full event report is attached to this Europe Update.

European Integration

Ratification process of the Lisbon Treaty continues

Even if the ratification process of the Treaty of Lisbon is well on its way, it is still far from being completed. Up to now the following eleven countries ratified the Treaty: Austria, Bulgaria, Denmark, France, Hungary, Malta, Poland, Portugal, Romania, Slovakia and Slovenia.

According to the rough schedule of the final ratification in other countries, if decided, the next country to vote on the issue will be Lithuania. May should see the voting in Germany, Spain, Greece, Italy and the UK, and June in Luxembourg. In June, Ireland will hold a referendum on the issue and will be the only EU Member State to do so. The last country to vote on the matter before the Summer break will be Belgium. The

Northern countries Finland, Sweden and the Netherlands will reflect on the issue in the Autumn.

EU citizens finally have the opportunity to study the entire document in a readable version. The consolidated text of the Lisbon Treaty is now available at: http://europa.eu/lisbon_treaty/full_text/index_en.htm.

The final publication has resulted in some renumbering of sections. What was until recently known as Article 16c (on relations between Europe's churches and the EU) has now been renumbered Article 17.

The CSC briefing on the issue, not yet renumbered (!), is available at: <http://www.cec-kek.org/pdf/CSCReportTreatyofLisbonMarch2008.pdf>

Migration

Europe Study “Mapping Migration in Europe - Mapping Churches’ Responses”

The Europe Study “Mapping Migration in Europe, Mapping Churches’ Responses” was presented in the annual meeting of the General Secretaries of the National Council of Churches in Europe in Palermo in April 2008. The Study, undertaken by CCME and the Nova Research Centre in Gloucester, provides information on actual immigration and emigration figures as well as analytical chapters and migration profiles for 47 European countries. Furthermore, it presents experiences and examples of relationship between migrant and indigenous churches and congregations across Europe.

A print version can be requested at the CCME secretariat. Download the Study at: <http://www.ccme.be/secretary/NEWS/CCME%20Europe%20Study%20on%20Migration.pdf>

Romanian Orthodox Patriarch calls for integrated approach to combating all forms of modern slavery

Some 80 representatives of churches, governments, trade unions, police and NGOs from 15 European countries met for an international conference and workshop on trafficking in human beings in Bucharest on 27-30 March 2008. The workshop “Christian action against trafficking - going beyond”, co-organised by CCME, aimed at mapping and sharing best practices against trafficking forced labour.

During the official opening conference on March 28, the host His Beatitude Daniel, Patriarch of the Romanian Orthodox Church, underlined the importance of continued cooperation between governmental and non-governmental actors. According to His

Beatitude, trafficking in persons is a major concern to churches as “no one has the right to turn humans into the objects of profit”. Representatives of the Romanian Government responded to this call by welcoming the continued collaboration between the churches in Romania and the state institutions.

Forthcoming events

Conference on Churches and Corporate Social Responsibility: the use of churches' own financial resources

Corporate Social Responsibility has become a major concern in recent years. The issue of how churches best use their own financial resources will be investigated in a conference in Brussels on 6-7 May. The event will be jointly organised by the Church and Society Commission of CEC, Oikocredit and the Evangelical-Lutheran Church of Finland.

A report on the seminar will follow in the next Europe Update.

7th Assembly of the European Christian Environmental Network

From 24 to 28 September 2008, the European Christian Environmental Network (ECEN) will hold its 7th Assembly under the title “The true challenge of climate change.” Following the invitation of the Federation of Protestant Churches in Italy, the Assembly will take place in the "Sacro Cuore" conference centre, near Milan.

In its scope and content, the 7th ECEN Assembly will follow-up the outcomes of the previous Assembly “Living in the new energy era” organised in Sweden in September 2006. The Assembly will also take stock of the Third European Ecumenical Assembly, held in Sibiu in September 2007, in which environmental topics played a significant role.

The aims of the Assembly are:

- to identify the link between the theme of the Assembly and the life of the churches;
- to offer guidance to the churches in Europe for dealing with the challenge of climate change;
- to create space for sharing of practical examples of the churches' work on climate change;
- to deepen thematic activities in the network.

Along with reflections on developments within church and ecumenical life, the Assembly will pay attention to the developments on the international political scene, where the challenge of climate change is presented with increasing urgency. Outcomes of the recent UN meeting in Bali, as well as the latest EU initiatives, will provide the Assembly with its socio-political context.

More information about the Assembly will soon be available at www.ecen.org

Other future CSC consultations

In addition to the above-mentioned events, CSC will, in the course of 2008, organise several other consultations on themes linked to its work programme. The meeting with churches from countries holding the upcoming EU Presidencies will take place in Sweden on 26-27 May. A consultation focusing on religion in the public sphere has been scheduled for November 2008. A brainstorming meeting on Ethics, Science and Technology is also planned for the year 2008.

Furthermore, CSC, in cooperation with COMECE and the Konrad Adenauer Stiftung, will contribute to the European Year of Intercultural Dialogue 2008 by organising four seminars on Islam, Christianity and Europe, which will be targeted for the members of the European Parliament and EU civil servants. The report of the first seminar is attached to this Europe Update. The next seminars will take place in Brussels on 29 May, 3 July and 11 September. For further information, please contact Ms Elina Eloranta, elo@cec-kek.be.



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The Church and Society Commission (CSC) is one of the commissions of the Conference of European Churches (CEC). The CSC links CEC's 125 member churches from all over Europe and its associated organisations with the European Union's institutions, the Council of Europe, the OSCE, NATO and the UN (on European matters). It engages its member churches and associated organisations in studies and projects relevant to church and society and thus supports and strengthens the common witness of European churches vis-à-vis the European Institutions and in the respective European societies.

This publication informs CEC members on European developments and related CSC activities. Members are welcome to use this publication as a channel to inform on their respective work. For comments or further information on the issues as well as to subscribe or unsubscribe, please contact csc@cec-kek.be. CSC Updates on European Affairs are also available on the CEC website at: <http://www.cec-kek.org/content/EuropeUpdates.shtml>