

THEOLOGICAL CONSULTATION ON “MISSION AND RESPECT”

The meaning of baptism and conversion as goals of mission, eschatological implications and the meaning of salvation, the understanding of justice, mission as an invitation to adoration, and missionary strategies were the topics of a consultation of around 40 invited theologians and pastors in Berlin (Germany) in June 2016, to advance the understanding of the programme “MissionRespect.”

An Ecumenical Declaration

In 2011, the World Council of Churches, the Pontifical Council for Inter-religious Dialogue and the World Evangelical Alliance issued a declaration on “Christian Witness in a Multi-Religious World—Recommendations for Conduct.”¹ In the awareness of the tensions between people and communities of different religious convictions and varied interpretations of Christian witness, the document wants to address practical issues associated with mission in a multi-religious world, as the Preamble states: “The purpose of this document is to encourage churches, church councils and mission agencies to reflect on their current practices and to use the recommendations in this document to prepare, where appropriate, their own guidelines for their witness and mission among those of different religions and among those who do not profess any particular religion. It is hoped that Christians across the world will study this document in the light of their own practices in witnessing to their faith in Christ, both by word and deed.”

The document then lists *seven basic perspectives* for Christian witness, each with a short explanation:²

- For Christians it is a privilege and joy to give an accounting for the hope that is within them and to do so with gentleness and respect (cf. 1 Peter 3:15).³

¹ The document is easily retrievable in different languages from websites (like the World Council of Churches: www.oikoumene.org), under its title “Christian Witness in a Multi-Religious World.”

² I present only the main line and idea. I proceed in the same way for the Principles below.

³ The reference to 1 Peter 3:15 offered the key word for the entire document: *Mission and respect*. The words “gentleness and respect” (*metà prautetos kai phobou*), however, are rendered differently in various translations: “gentleness and reverence” (New Revised Standard; New American Standard Bible; New Revised Standard), “with meekness and fear” (American Standard; King James Bible), “with gentleness and respect” (New International Version) or “with respectful humility” (Common English). They are given as “douceur et respect” (TOB), “sen-

- Jesus Christ is the supreme witness (cf. John 18:37). Christian witness is always a sharing in his witness and oriented towards the kingdom.
- The example and teaching of Jesus Christ and of the early church must guide Christian mission.
- Christian witness in a pluralistic world includes engaging in dialogue with people of different religions and cultures (cf. Acts 17:22-28).
- In some contexts, living and proclaiming the gospel is difficult, hindered or even prohibited, yet Christians are commissioned by Christ to continue faithfully in solidarity.
- If Christians engage in inappropriate methods of exercising mission by resorting to deception and coercive means, they betray the gospel and may cause suffering to others.
- Christians affirm that while it is their responsibility to witness to Christ, conversion is ultimately the work of the Holy Spirit.

These perspectives open to 12 *principles*:

1. Acting in God's love, God is the source of all love.
2. Imitating Jesus Christ in all aspects of life.
3. Christian virtues: integrity, charity, compassion and humility.
4. Acts of service and justice to recognize Christ in the least of the sisters and brothers. Acts of service, such as providing education, health care, relief services and acts of justice and advocacy are an integral part of witnessing to the gospel. The exploitation of situations of poverty and need has no place in Christian outreach.
5. Discernment in ministries of healing. As an integral part of their witness to the gospel, Christians exercise ministries of healing.
6. Rejection of violence. Christians are called to reject all forms of violence, including the abuse of power in their witness.
7. Freedom of religion and belief.
8. Mutual respect and solidarity. Christians are called to commit themselves to work with all people in mutual respect, promoting together justice, peace and the common good.

cillez y deferencia" (Biblia Latinoamericana), "sencillez y respeto" (Biblia de América), "con buenos modos y respeto" (Nueva Biblia Española), "con delicadeza y respeto" (Levoratti), "Sanftmut und Ehrerbietung" (Elberfelder; Zürcher), "mit Sanftmut und Furcht" (Münchener Neues Testament; Fridolin Stier), "Sanftmütigkeit und Furcht" (Luther 1912), "bescheiden und ehrfürchtig" (Einheitsübersetzung). Some versions present the words in verse 16.

9. Respect for all people. Christians recognize that the gospel both challenges and enriches cultures.
10. Renouncing false witness. Christians are to speak sincerely and respectfully; they are to listen in order to learn about and understand others' beliefs and practices.
11. Ensuring personal discernment. Christians are to acknowledge that changing one's religion is a decisive step that must be accompanied by sufficient time for adequate reflection and preparation.
12. Building interreligious relationships. Christians should continue to build relationships of respect and trust with people of different religions.

The International Congress in Berlin (2014)

Three years after the publication of the document, there was a major international congress in Berlin (Germany) with around 250 invited representatives of different churches (many from, or based in, Germany). They deepened their understanding of mission and church and tried to spell out several aspects of missionary practice. They also shared the first reception process of the document.⁴

There, the more practical aspects of mission in a multi-religious context took central stage, starting with some case studies and testimonies from Brazil, India, and the Netherlands. The different workshops at the congress dealt with questions like: Germany as a country for mission; where it is forbidden to preach; development aid and mission; evangelisation and dialogue in Africa; mission under different value systems; mission and proselytisation; India and the legislation against religious conversion; aggressive evangelisation; baptism and church asylum; religious instruction and Christian witness; interreligious social welfare.

⁴ For a report on the congress see: Klaus Vellguth, *MissionRespekt. Der ökumenische Verhaltenskodex zum christlichen Zeugnis in einer multireligiösen Welt und seine Rezeption in Deutschland: Verbum SVD 56 (2015) 160-179*. The proceedings of the congress were published in: Evangelisches Missionswerk in Deutschland e.V./Internationales Katholisches Missionswerk missio Aachen, *MissionRespekt. Christliches Zeugnis in einer multireligiösen Welt. Dokumentation. Internationaler ökumenischer Kongress 27./28. August 2014, Berlin, Hamburg: EMW, 2015*; they are available also online (in German): <http://www.missionrespekt.de/derkongress/dokumentation/index.html> (June 27, 2016).

Sharing Theological Perspectives

In June 2016, at the invitation of missio Aachen and the EMW (Evangelisches Missionswerk in Deutschland, Hamburg) around 40 theologians, pastors and directors of churches or church mission agencies convened in Berlin to discuss for two days the theological backgrounds and implications of the programme “Mission and respect.”

In the time since the big congress in Berlin, the public image and discussion on religion in Germany have developed quite unexpectedly with the massive arrival of refugees and the social action—partly motivated by religion—in welcoming them and offering a society of religious freedom on the one hand, and manifestations of rejection of Islam and the influence of religions in the public order, with feelings of anxiety and fear and even some racist attacks on asylum hostels, on the other hand. This partly new context and the perceived disparities in theological underpinnings of the document warrant a reflection on the missionary nature and its practical realisation.

In the first step at the consultation, Klaus Vellguth (of missio Aachen) compared recent missionary declarations by different churches: *The Cape Town Commitment* (2011),⁵ *Together Towards Life* (2013 at Busan)⁶ and Pope Francis’ encyclical *Evangelii Gaudium* (2013). The analysis of central perspectives in the three documents from the different church traditions shows a lot of coincidences: There are many common perspectives and motivations in the discourse and practice of mission. As the three selected documents show, the centre of gravity has shifted from Europe to other continents (Cape Town: South Africa, Busan: Korea, and Buenos Aires: Latin America, if the Pope’s background is to be taken into account), corresponding to a stronger self-awareness of the churches there.

On the level of *orthodoxy* and faith expression, the perspective of *missio Dei* has been taken on by many churches and mission perspectives. The actor in mission is the entire people of God. However, “people of God” may be more a metaphor than a univocal theological term.

Referring to *orthopraxis*, Vellguth underlined the strong emphasis on economical criticism of the state of the world in the documents. Other keywords are the option for the poor, the poor as *locus* for the encounter with God, hospitality in times of migration and human trafficking, inculturation,

⁵ See <https://www.lausanne.org/content/ctc/ctcommitment> (June 28, 2016).

⁶ See <https://www.oikoumene.org/en/resources/documents/commissions/mission-and-evangelism/together-towards-life-mission-and-evangelism-in-changing-landscapes> (June 28, 2016). See also Stephen Bevans SVD, “Together Towards Life”: Reflections on the WCC Mission Statement: *Verbum SVD* 56 (2015) 146-159 and further references there.

the overcoming of anthropocentrism through a stronger relation to creation, and the connection between word and deed in evangelisation.

Finally, Vellguth presented the criteria of *orthopathos*, a concept introduced by liberation theology: A first moment of “pathos” is expressed in the joy of sharing the Gospel. There is also a common vision about victims due to misunderstandings in mission. In viewing the world, there are different accents: While the *Cape Town Commitment* stresses the broken relationships due to sin, *Evangelii Gaudium* is more optimistic because of the new creation being brought about by God’s Spirit. There is a shared emphasis on the Spirit’s action.

In the discussion it was noted that there are different notions of “conversion” in play. The different churches use different approaches to tradition. There is also a different way of dealing with declarations like *Together Towards Life* (how far do such perspectives influence church life and doctrine?). Altogether, declarations seem to be most interesting for a small circle of their authors, theology teachers and faculties, but have limited importance for believers in the field. However, as “mission” as such is questioned in today’s discourse, such declarations do have their importance. There is also a common opposition to proselytism and a shared commitment to mission with respect.

Baptism and Conversion

The consultation addressed one of the fields requiring deeper understanding and sharing which has to do with the importance of baptism and conversion. Different aspects come into play: baptism as a (conscious) entry into the fellowship of Jesus, and its relation to the kingdom of God. Therefore, conversion and baptism should be understood not as the goal of mission, rather they are oriented towards the kingdom of God.

There seems to be a problem today (in Europe) with the idea of conversion. On the other hand, there are people who want to be baptised in order to show their interest in the local culture (e.g. be accepted in German society). How does it show that someone has experienced God’s grace, what does it mean to be converted? What changes can be observed when someone has been converted? What does it mean to lead a life in fellowship (beyond the cultural style of living)?

Salvation and Eschatological Perspectives

What do missionaries and Christians think about eschatology? There is the option to see the necessity for conversion and baptism to recognise that there is salvation only in the name of Jesus. God’s mission is oriented to-

wards this point and this final convergence in history gives mission its definitive urgency.

An alternative perspective was laid out by (Catholic) theologian Ottmar Fuchs: All humanity is God's people, his grace attains every person. God's love reaches every person without conditions, not even the condition of an answer of faith, conversion or acceptance. Mission tries to convey this message of God's unconditional and unlimited love for every creature.

The discussion showed that there remains the tension between these two options in the different church traditions.

Justice as Goal for Mission

Justice has a social dimension. In biblical terms, however, justice is first of all God's characteristic and is expressed in terms of the covenant. Therefore, returning to this divine perspective is most important when justice is to be established.

The consequence of such an approach to justice is a strong call for conversion and reconciliation with God, maybe limiting justice to the realm of faith and conscience. Other perspectives would use the concept of justice for the building up and the articulation of society and social transformation—maybe a worldly perspective. In many charismatic churches, such social engagement in the name of justice seems to be heavily debated and questioned.

The discussion called attention to the fact that many aid organisations were initiated with the perspective of social change and development aid as an expression of faith. On the other hand, today public funding of such activities for social development demands that any reference to faith be excluded. Churches find it difficult to find support for their developmental work, but also would not want to keep quiet about the motivations for their social engagement.

For Further Discussion

The meeting in Berlin should be seen as yet another step towards better mutual understanding of Christian churches from Catholics through Protestants to charismatic and pentecostal churches. There were no big new visions and unexpected agreements, nor were there fierce discussions. Rather it was a time for attentive listening and getting a feeling for the other positions. A formal "listeners' group" emphasised the perceived intention to build on common opinions and theological perspectives.

The following are a somewhat personal list of topics for further work:

- How to understand God’s action in our world? How does it relate to human action, within and outside of a church community?
- The concept of *missio Dei* is generally accepted by now, but maybe is not understood in the same manner: What is done there by God in what manner and where is human action required? Is human action to be expected only by believers and what roles would “non-believers” have in God’s salvation? In this context, what is supposed to be the *missio ecclesiae*?
- The question of inculturation and the relation to local cultures are fields requiring further discussion. For some churches the question of the validity of cultures and religions seems to be getting interesting. There is, of course, the question of religion producing culture or religion being a subsystem of culture, and the implications of such a perspective for mission, respect, and conversion.
- How to understand the human person in today’s world? This is related to the field of anthropology, with the need to uphold the necessity of redemption while believing also in the human capacity to act according to God’s spirit in the world.
- Questions of power. They become quite important particularly with reference to the role and position of women in mission (a rather thorny question for Catholics).

The consultation in Berlin in June showed interesting coincidences in theological thinking and faith motivation for mission in the perspective of respect and witness, while there are still many widely different accents and difficulties as well. The meeting took place within an atmosphere of respect and listening. Jokingly, some participants noticed the unaccustomed companionship—Catholics and Pentecostals in the same room, even praying together, reading the same Scripture....

However, the programme of “MissionRespect” with its underlying faith convictions and perspectives still needs a lot of reflection and diffusion in all churches and certainly also merits theological discussion and ecumenical encounters and mutual motivation for Christian witness in a multi-religious context.

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