



Church of Norway's Response to CEC's Open Letter: What future for Europe? Reaffirming the European project as building a community of values

Introduction

With this letter Church of Norway wants to respond to CEC's Open Letter, *What Future for Europe?* The letter was received by the Council on Ecumenical and International Relations, and treated in the Theological Commission and the Committee for International Affairs, before a final response was discussed in the Council.

First of all, we would like to express our sincere thanks for the reflections in the document, and the invitation to take part in dialogue and consultation. The letter has raised interesting discussions in the different church bodies that have treated the letter. Our response is based on these discussions, and will therefore not be organised as a response to each chapter of the letter, but rather be thematically organised.

A community of values

The letter is addressed to churches and partner organisations of CEC. However, as we read the different chapters, it sometimes seems to be addressing the European institutions. In that sense it can be seen as a letter on behalf of European churches inviting the European Institutions to a dialogue on values. As such, it could be an interesting project. On the other hand, as a letter directed to the churches, we would like to point to some matters and challenges that could have been raised, or that could have been treated more in-depth as matters and challenges to the churches themselves.

One such challenge raised in the document is connected to the definition of values, and what creates a community of values. We welcome a continued dialogue among the churches in Europe on this question. What kind of Europe do we wish? We appreciate that the document cites the Charta Oecumenica when lifting up values that can be seen as a European and Christian (or Christian-humanistic) heritage. At the same time, we need a more in-depth analysis of what constitutes a value-based community in the pluralistic society that Europe is today. Although the document raises relevant questions connected to values, we need a discussion among the churches on how common values relate to plurality. When a pluralistic society carries possibilities and is a value in itself, how does that affect the concept of common values? Churches in Europe might not think alike about how an inherited Christian set of values in Europe are to be dealt with in a context of plurality.

The European Union and the European peacebuilding project

We appreciate the historical perspectives given in the letter, lifting up the establishing of the European Union as a community- and peacebuilding project. At the same time, for a church in a country that is a non-EU member state, it is important to see the community- and peacebuilding project not as an EU or non-EU project, but as a project connected to what kind of Europe we want today, beyond EU borders.

“The European Home” was built on Christian values, and in many ways the establishment of CEC was a part of this. Although the Europe we have today is different, the community- and peacebuilding part was an important element in the establishment of “The European Home”.

Therefore, in our discussions, it has been useful to see the letter in connection with the establishment of CEC, and the need for reconciliation and the building of peace among churches in Europe in the aftermath of the World War II. This did not happen independently from the political reconciliation processes in Europe and the building of the European institutions. Also the Coal- and Steel Community was based on a set of values, to a large degree based on a Christian-humanistic heritage. Thereby the very being of CEC is connected to the common European peacebuilding project, which explains some of the focus on the European institutions in *What Future for Europe*.

However, it is interesting to note that although the letter was written before the referendum on EU membership in the UK, the “Brexit” vote has probably had a great impact on the reception process of *What Future for Europe*, influencing an even greater focus on the European institutions. In such a context it could be read as a letter aiming at convincing church members of the importance of EU-membership, since it connects us to the common values of a Christian Europe. In our discussions, a certain concern has been voiced about the EU-centrism of the letter, which creates a double challenge for us. In our Norwegian context it may on one hand create a feeling of being on the outside of Europe. It is clearly a serious matter for CEC that some countries want to leave the EU. But how does that affect a church in a European country that has never been a member of the EU? An example is the refugee situation in Europe, which certainly is a serious matter for our countries and our churches, both within and outside the EU. For us it may be difficult to understand what we as a church are expected to contribute with, if the challenges in Europe are too closely connected to internal EU-matters.

On the other hand, the letter positively challenges us to see ourselves more clearly as part of Europe, regardless of EU membership, and take part in solving common European challenges. Although we may find the letter too focused on the EU institutions, we need to move beyond the discussion of our country’s interests, admitting that the challenges of values in Europe – visible also through the crisis of the EU – are relevant challenges also in our context. Through this we admit that we have a lot to learn about the importance of CEC as a common platform for churches in Europe when discerning the situation in Europe and the role of the churches. We are aware of strong religiously motivated lobby groups, who work strategically against European political decisions to ensure certain human rights. This knowledge makes it even more important that CEC raises questions about values. We therefore appreciate the letter’s focus on values cited in the Charta Oecumenica, such as “respect for human dignity, peace, justice, freedom, tolerance, participations and solidarity”. Seeing these as values that are based on a Christian-humanistic heritage that are important for Europe today, we still need to remind ourselves as churches that these are values also held by people outside Europe.

Human rights

Looking beyond the borders of the EU is important when discerning the European situation and seeking common values. One question is related to the geographical, political and cultural belonging to what is defined as Europe. In this regard, we find it particularly important to address the communication between CEC as European churches and the churches in Russia, particularly the Russian Orthodox Church. This is not merely a question of the Russian Orthodox Church’s suspension of its membership in CEC, as we still see their participation in ecumenical cooperation, also in Europe. It is as much a question of an ecumenical dialogue on values. It is particularly important that European churches uphold human rights as something we believe to be universal values, not only common European values. If human rights are to be seen as universal values, the churches need to discuss how human rights and Christian values relate, and how the churches themselves relate to human rights. This is both a political and a theological matter, which needs to be dealt with in a greater European context, as well as globally.

Education

We appreciate that the letter also mentions achievements of the European project, promoting cooperation and solidarity, such as the Erasmus programme, the Schengen and the European Council. Not least is cooperation on education of great value, and is perhaps an area where there is potential for greater cooperation and twinning also among the churches in Europe. It is, however, important to be aware of existing disagreements. There are discussions e.g. around the Bologna process, which in addition to promoting cooperation, also has contributed to negative attitudes towards certain immigrants and Islam. Some member states collaborate to bring back what they see as a European Christian identity. This is a challenge for the churches, insofar as it may lead to exclusion of certain groups. In such a context it is crucial that the churches uphold diaconal values as true Christian values, in order to defend open and inclusive policies for cooperation in Europe. We hope that CEC can promote a continued dialogue among the churches on the sensitive matter of what Christian values in Europe may mean.

Koinonia and diaconia

Faith in action is an important issue mentioned in the letter. We strongly support upholding diaconia and koinonia as core values for the churches. As a whole, the letter tends to focus so much on internal EU-political challenges that it loses some of the strength in arguing for the potential of the churches in Europe and what they can contribute with. We believe that CEC can be a platform where the churches' potential for being inclusive and integrating communities can be brought out. The self-understanding of the Church of Jesus Christ as one and universal is a deep ecumenical insight that the churches must uphold in a Europe showing tendencies of fragmentation. This is not only a matter for theological discussions; it is also a diaconal challenge, to welcome one another, and to be a home for people who are away from home.

“Have no fear”

We appreciate that the letter brings up migration and the urgency of the present situation for refugees trying to enter into Europe. The main focus is on EU policies and the discussions among EU member states, which of course influence on the situation of the churches, and how the churches can contribute. But, perhaps we need to focus more on the role of the churches in advocating human rights, not only for the sake of influencing policies, but also for the sake of influencing the mind-set of the peoples of Europe. When the letter reads “It does immeasurable harm to the soul of Europe to ward off victims of violence and terror by fire-arms at border fences, or let people drown in the Mediterranean”, it touches the greatest threat Europe is facing, namely to lose the crucial belief that all are created in the image of God, and therefore have the same value.

We see tendencies of nationalism growing in parts of Europe, people feeling threatened by immigration or economic recession. These are reactions driven by fear. Sometimes the rhetoric is frighteningly similar to fear-driven rhetoric in Europe in the 1930ies. Church of Norway therefore welcomed the statement of the Lunteren Ecumenical Conference organised by CCME, CEC and WCC in June 2016, “Have no fear”, as an important contribution to the churches in Europe on how to encounter fear-driven argumentation in the discussions on migration in general, and the current refugee situation in particular. The Church of Norway's Council on Ecumenical and International Relations have initiated further work on this, and we appreciate continued dialogue on the theme of “Have no fear”.

The way forward

“Have no fear” then also becomes a challenge to the discussion on *What future for Europe*. Is the letter itself written out of a fear-driven concern for the situation in Europe, or does it respond to fear? We believe this is an important question the churches need to raise when discussing the values of Europe. When speaking of “reaffirming core values”, we encounter the

danger of being driven by fear for change. We need a discussion on what common values might mean, with an understanding of values as a dynamic concept. Reaffirming values must be open to the idea that values can change because the nature of the situation in which values operate can change. The values listed in the EU's article 2 are values that need to be upheld in a situation of change. What we mean by these values therefore need to be revisited continuously.

The EU may be at a crossroads at this point of history, having to choose political direction for its work. However, this does not mean that Europe as a continent is at the same crossroads. The diversity of the continent rather suggests a number of crossroads. In that situation it may be helpful to use the terminology of signposts, helping us to identify the different directions, offering several options.

We are grateful for the opportunity CEC has given the churches to engage in a discussion around the future of Europe, seeking common values on which we together can build our community. We appreciate the open letter's profound attempt to hold together a number of issues affecting Europe today, thereby giving cause for a longer process of reflection. We strongly support a continued dialogue within CEC on the issues raised, with a particular focus on the role of the churches and their calling to be a prophetic voice in society.

On behalf of the Church of Norway's Council on Ecumenical and International Relations,
Kind regards,
(Sign.)

Berit Hagen Agøy,
General secretary