

## FINAL STATEMENT

Theological School of Halki, Hebeyliada Island, Turkey

9 September 2015

The Conference of European Churches has not just a peripheral interest in Human Rights and the advance of freedom of religion and belief for everyone. For CEC a concern for human rights and freedom of religion or belief is part of our DNA. Freedom of religion and belief is at the centre of CEC's work. CEC stands for the promotion and protection of all human rights and freedom of religion and belief – for every human being, nation and people.

With the end of the old divisions in Europe it was supposed that there would be less need for vigilance with regard to Human Rights and freedom of religion. Tragically this has not been the case, whether in Europe or in the wider world.

Deep within the central doctrines of the Christian faith, and even more widely in the monotheistic faiths of the Abrahamic tradition, Judaism, Christianity and Islam, are to be found the origins of what we now call Human Rights. Abraham recognized in the face of the three strangers the very face of God.

St Athanasius the Great taught that God became human so that humans might become gods. All human rights – and duties – stem *theologically* from this. As Christians, we understand that the way of forgiveness and peace is the only response that will ultimately change the conditions in the face of persecution and deprivation of the most basic human rights. Therefore CEC does not advocate only for Christians! It advocates equally for all, knowing that God loves each and every human being. If we forget that every human being is created in His own image and likeness to the fullness of His infinite mercy, then we have failed in our Christian vocation.

Here in Turkey we need to record the generous hospitality for two million refugees from neighbouring Middle-East. In paying proper tribute to this generosity we bear in mind that Turkey itself is in a period of change. This is not always easy. So we applaud the progress – sometimes against opposition – the Turkish Government is making. Our gathering here – symbolically on Halki – is one step in that direction. We express our support as this continues.

Our conference is mindful of the fact that Turkey is rightly seeking membership of the European Union. We are supportive of this. In being genuinely supportive of such EU membership we recognise that there are still obstacles. Turkey – like any other state on accession – would still need to implement some fundamental standards of the European Union. In 1971 the Theological School of Halki was closed by the authorities, but things are changing and we support further moves to

widen religious freedom in Turkey. The issue of minorities, especially the Kurdish issue, will also need a good resolution. The question of Armenia is particularly sensitive but cannot be ignored if progress is to be made. But there are real signs that the two communities, Turkish and Greek, in Cyprus are close to a real reconciliation.

CEC also addressed the issues of the on-going crisis in the Middle - East and especially in Syria and Iraq where the armed group ISIS continues to commit ethnic and religious cleansings, abductions and murders of innocent people no matter their religion or belief. The European churches call for the immediate release of all abducted people and cessation of the killings of civilians. The churches condemn the torture, mass murders and rapes, crimes which occur in many areas of conflict. As churches we are committed to Christian values and therefore we act in the spirit of mutual love and trust. We pray for all people and for the protection of their human dignity as people who are created in the image of God and His likeness.

The Conference of European Churches supports cultural and religious diversity even though such diversity can prove to be a challenge to both: churches and society. Pluralism and religious diversity are essential parts for the functioning of democratic societies. Religious freedom or belief is a matter of individual thought and conscience. The manifestation of religious beliefs may take the form of *worship, teaching, practice and observance*. As freedom of religion or belief is a fundamental human right, the treatment of religious minorities, their politicisation and instrumentalisation need to be condemned by the European Institutions, whenever and wherever they occur.

We also want the EU itself to pay fuller attention to the internal and external coherence of the application of its human rights policies. The EU has adopted the Guidelines on freedom of religion and belief. European institutions can do great service to the cause of Human Rights, including the fundamental human right to belief and the practice of religion, by such unbiased reporting such as the one we request.

Therefore we suggest that European Institutions should:

- Report on the state of fundamental religious freedoms of beliefs within the countries of the EU relating to the discrimination based on religion or belief, hate speech, discriminatory legislation, Islamophobia, anti-Semitism ect.
- Publish separate report on the situation on religious freedom or belief outside the EU.
- Encourage high standards and implementation of human rights in respect of the treatment of migrants and asylum seekers

But also European Churches are asked to speak out against human rights violations and should offer a helping hand to migrants and refugees arriving at their shores, a task in which Youth should be involved. In this moment in history European

churches need to publicly condemn human rights violations faced by refugees and asylum seekers and should seek a dialogue with their respective governments in order to change the situation for good.

As Churches we work with political and civil society for the flourishing of this diversity supported by law and the propagation of all human rights, including those to belief and the practice of faith. Churches should approach their respective Governments on the issue related to the implementation of the EU Guidelines on Promotion and Protection of Religious Freedom. Let us face the task together. Let us hold our hands, not only in prayer but also in solidarity with one another. We owe it to our God, to each other and to the world.