

## HUMAN RIGHTS – WHY DO THEY MATTER FOR CHURCHES?

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### Summary

*Human beings were created in the image and likeness of God. Human Rights reflect the Covenant of God's faithfulness to His people. On the basis of this Covenant the Churches (should) commit themselves to intervene whenever human dignity is being trampled on and fundamental rights are disregarded.*

It is a fundamental Christian belief that men and women were created in God's image (Gen 1, 27). This basic belief indicates that human existence is of divine origin and a gift of God the "Maker of heaven and earth and all things visible and invisible" (Nicean-Constantinopolitan Creed), and that humankind was in the will and mind of the Creator before time began. This belief implies that our existence on earth lies not only in the relationship between God and man (in the sense of "anthropos", namely "human being" and not "anēr", namely "male"!), but also in the relationship between the children of God, a relationship marked by harmony and righteousness.

Human rights reflect the Covenant of God's faithfulness to his people, as well as of His love for the world. It is precisely in the light of this Covenant, fulfilled in the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ and in the power of the Holy Spirit, that the Churches commit themselves and take position when human dignity is trampled on, when fundamental rights are disregarded and whenever freedom is taken away. In acting so, the Churches are motivated by the firm conviction that the entire "Oikoumene", the whole inhabited earth that is destined to live in the peace of the Lord according to God's plan of Salvation, can become a safe haven for all His children only when the root causes that generate millions of victims of human rights violations - poverty, economic inequality, refugees, migrants and asylum seekers, racism and xenophobia - are eradicated.

It goes without saying that Europe is not exempt from such worldwide phenomena. It is a fact that most of them affect the daily life of our societies. Hence the eagerness of European Churches to seek solutions to many of these acute problems, in concert and in co-operation with their national governments and/or with European institutions.

In the course of the last two decades, the Churches of Europe have insistently stressed the need to formulate a new vision for Europe. They have repeatedly affirmed their belief that the European Union should not only be about economics and politics, but that it should also take into serious consideration the spiritual needs of its citizens.

Indeed, all rights projected and promoted by the United Nations, by the European Union, by other International Bodies or by Human Rights activists, such as the right to work, the right to enjoy and maintain a distinct cultural identity, the right to dissent, the right to personal dignity, or the right to manifest freely his/her religion or belief in practice, worship and observance, are meaningless in the eyes of the Church without taking into account the spiritual side of man's existence on this earth - simply because "*the divine gift of freedom is the fulfillment of the human person, and it is so, to the extent that every individual carries within himself or herself the image of the personal God*". (Third Panorthodox Preconciliar Conference, Chambesy, 1986)<sup>1</sup>. Therefore, to deny a person's freedom, is to deny him/her an essential part of the *humanity* with which God has endowed him/her.

Individual rights however are closely linked with collective rights. It is a fact that the post World War II human rights system was developed mainly to protect individuals. Yet, from the Christian perspective the right to freedom of religion is one of the principal rights that has a strong collective, communal element, simply because the Church by its very nature, is above all a "community of believers". This implies that a religious community has the right to establish and maintain communal institutions, to build places of worship, to set up schools and to train clergy and community leaders.

On this particular issue the *International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights (ICCPR)* adopted by the UN in 1966, unequivocally affirms in its Article 18 that, although it is the individuals who possess the human rights, there are situations where these rights can only be exercised in community with others. This Article reads as follows: "*Everyone shall have the right to freedom of thought, conscience and religion. This right shall include freedom, either individually or in community with others, to manifest his religion or belief in Worship, observance, practice and teaching*". The question we face is whether in the ongoing discussion about Human Rights, there is a willingness to tackle the issue of *collective rights* of a variety of ethnic and religious groups living in minority situations, with the same ardour as when we attempt to promote and defend fundamental *rights of individuals*.

Churches and Christian organizations have a collective responsibility to make sure that both individual and communal rights, particularly of those in a minority situation, are fully respected by all those in power. And they also have the duty to express their belief that human rights cannot be dealt with in isolation from the larger issues of peace, justice and development - because the rights that every person enjoys in a given society, contribute effectually to the peace, stability and prosperity of that society. Experience shows that injustices in society may generate social, economic and political disorders.

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<sup>1</sup>The Panorthodox Preconciliar Conference, is the inter-orthodox body in charge of the preparation of the Great and Holy Council of the worldwide Orthodox Church.