



Conference of European Churches  
Conférence des Églises européennes  
Konferenz Europäischer Kirchen  
Конференция Европейских Церквей

## **Have hope not fear!**

### **Responses to populism from a religious and human rights perspective**

For what does the Lord require of you  
but to do justice, love mercy and walk humbly with your God.

Micah 6:8

*The Members of the Conference of European Churches (CEC) are called to confess the Gospel of Christ publicly in this world, both in word and in deed. The essence of this Gospel is to love God with all our heart and our neighbour – near or far, kin or stranger, friend or foe – as ourselves (Luke 10,27). This commandment commits Christians to respect other people, whatever their faith or belief, their ethnicity or nationality, their class, gender and sexuality. It therefore commits them to the respect of fundamental human rights, to compassion and dialogue.*

*In this spirit, the participants of the conference ‘Alternative to Populism from a Human Rights Perspective’, organised by CEC, in cooperation with its Spanish members as hosts of the Conference, and with the participation of European Jewish and Muslim organisations, agreed on the following STATEMENT ON POPULISM as a challenge for Churches and religious communities all over and beyond Europe:*

#### **1.) Analysis and definitions**

We observe with great concern how populist discourse is on the rise in many European societies. While populism is not a clearly defined phenomenon, and can be found at both the extreme right and left ends of the political spectrum, we condemn those forms and varieties that pose a danger to democracy and the rule of law, on which social justice and peaceful coexistence in our societies depend.

Religions proclaim messages of hope, based on faith, convictions and positive ethical standards. Populist discourse, on the contrary sends out predominantly negative messages: ‘Being against’, for example by using anti-establishment rhetoric, rejecting the institutions of sharing and balancing power, discrediting pluralistic media, questioning minority rights, as well as more generally propagating anti-liberal attitudes, features prominently in their propaganda. This approach feeds on the fears of a broad section of society: people who feel left behind by globalisation and its expressions like migration and pluralisation. It is not necessarily marginalised groups only that fall prey to the populist temptation, but also those who are made uncomfortable by changes and uncertain how these will affect their social status and whether they will render them vulnerable to economic stagnation, unemployment, rising social inequality and a loss of traditional certainties and cultural identity.

Populist discourse draws upon such fears, enhances them by casting doubt on reason and science, twisting facts, spreading conspiracy theories and, more generally, describing the world in a black and white pattern, dividing society into 'us' and 'them'. Populist politicians then claim to represent the 'us', defined as a numeric electoral majority that imposes its way of life on the others, marginalising, suppressing, excluding and in the long run expelling minorities and adherents of other convictions. In Populism, there is a tendency to depict democracy as the rule of such a majority, rejecting that it needs to be balanced by the rule of law, including human rights for everyone, especially the dissenter, the critic and minorities in general.

While the above negative dissociation from key features of modern societies, and embracing of nationalism and even tribalism are also common to most populist movements, they can otherwise be very flexible in their political content, adapting it easily to the expectations of their target groups. This makes them all the more dangerous and difficult to refute.

Many people feel attracted to populism, because they perceive democratic systems as weak and public discourse as restricted by political correctness. The populist notion of strong leaders and clear words offers easy solutions. We believe, however, that managing life in a complex reality is not possible by looking for simplistic answers. It requires informed deliberations and sometimes painful compromises. Representative democracy and a public administration of experts are the best ways to legislate for all people, not just powerful interest groups.

Religion is often used as a tool in populism, aimed at creating a sense of identity and unity among the group, stirring conflict with the adherents of other faiths. Antisemitism has been a powerful tool for creating such divisions for centuries, and is, regrettably, still prevalent and actually on the rise again. Islamophobia, Christianophobia and prejudices and incitement to hate against other religions are also well known phenomena, depending on the context, as populist groups emerge in every society and adapt their doctrine accordingly.

## **2.) Responses and alternatives**

When discussing possible responses to populism from a religious and a human rights perspective, and searching for alternatives, our deliberations started from the self-critical insight that tensions between denominational and religious groups, historic and present, contribute to a climate in which religion can be more easily abused by populist rhetoric. We emphasised that, while it can contribute to prejudice, alienation and othering if religious groups primarily point to the deficiencies of the others, it is important for rapprochement and conciliation to clearly stand up against fundamentalist and exclusivist tendencies within our own faith communities. In order to arrive at common standpoints and actions, standing up for one another, opportunities for encounter must be sought and created by all religious actors. Discrimination of and hate crimes against one religion call for open support and acts of solidarity by the others.

Our discussions focused in particular on the following issues:

### *(a) Identity and Diversity*

It is important for people to have an identity and a sense of belonging. Globalisation, with phenomena like migration, pluralisation, and modernisation – at an ever faster speed –, gives many people the impression that their identity is becoming increasingly questioned. Therefore, they view identity and diversity as competing concepts. In fact, however, every person holds multiple identities and people are very different in many ways. We all rely on a tolerant and pluralist society, in which we can develop with all the differences we bring with us. It is, therefore, important to strengthen identity as a

means of cohesion, while at the same time rejecting it as a means of division. We must learn to embrace diversity and complex situations, in which people have and are allowed to have multiple identities and loyalties, which are not exclusive, but enriching. Strengthening positive identities empowers people, and empowered people are less likely to fall for the simplistic and divisive worldview of populism, and more likely to strive in diverse settings.

*(b) Group related discrimination and incitement to hatred*

Judaism is the oldest of the Abrahamic religions and has often been subject to discrimination by both Christians and Muslims. From this, a destructive antisemitic narrative could develop that functions even in societies with hardly any religious fibre or social contact with Judaism itself. The specific historic experience of the Shoah calls for a resolute response to antisemitism in all its forms.

The current perception of Islam is not so much shaped by the complex and often fruitful historic relations between Christian and Muslim culture and religion. Many people in majority societies in the West put an emphasis on differences experienced in the context of migration. Integration is often perceived as a one way road, ignoring the responsibilities of the majority society.

Christians are not free from experiences of discrimination and oppression, either from radical secularists or from other religious groups. Advocacy work for Christians is, therefore, legitimate and necessary. However, Christians must also be aware of how the situation of persecuted Christians in other parts of the world, Christian narratives and symbols can be instrumentalised by populist agitators to stir up prejudices against other religions.

### **3.) Conclusions and recommendations**

We need to differentiate between populist politicians, who aim at undermining or eroding liberal democracies, the rule of law and peaceful coexistence, and those people who vote for populist parties, driven by fears and devoid of trust and hope. While we need to stand up against the former, we also need to address the legitimate concerns and worries of the latter. We believe that, in raising an awareness of their identity, building a sense of belonging and strengthening social justice and participation, religion can make a valuable contribution to healing rifts within and between our nations.

Churches have a responsibility to counter populist discourse which uses religion to create hostility between people and which forges false senses of identity and belonging. Churches can act through:

- ◆ their educational work, including biblical and theological teaching,
- ◆ their diaconical work,
- ◆ their political and diplomatic activities, but also through
- ◆ creating spaces for ecumenical, interreligious and cross-cultural encounters,

In many European countries churches have a unique position and unique opportunities to counter populist thought and action. They can contribute to awareness raising to the dangers of populism by engaging a silent and possibly disinterested majority of people in the fight for democracy and human rights, and by helping to prevent the fearful and disoriented from falling

into the traps of authoritarian, illiberal ideologies. 'Have hope, not fear' is a genuinely religious message – and one so urgently needed in our unsettled world.