

Key Global Challenges for Churches  
Concerning the Protection of Human Dignity  
and Human Rights in Our Time:

Perspectives from the Thematic Group on Human Rights  
of the Conference of European Churches

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**Global Challenges to Human Rights**

Though most of us had hoped—and believed—otherwise, humanity faces grave challenges today. This is no post-historic age. The geopolitical panorama is shifting rapidly, putting pressure on systems we relied on as stable and which were the basis for the peace that large parts of Europe enjoyed since the end of the Second World War and—to a much fuller extent—since the end of the Cold War. A new, peace-based, just and prosperous world order seemed possible, with democracy and the rule of law as the predominant political system, including an enforceable human rights system for all. In small steps, even the gross injustices of the global trade system, which is still purporting (post)colonial power structures, were being addressed from a human rights perspective.<sup>1</sup> The focus of many observers had already changed from the political and geopolitical to the new and profound—planetary—challenges for humankind, most notably climate change, the loss of biodiversity, and the accumulation of non-degradable waste in the biosphere, especially the oceans.

However, it did not need the Russian war against Ukraine to show that this “post-historical” view was based on vision, not reality yet. On the one hand, it was very much Eurocentric, or rather based on the experiences of the global North in its assessment of the global state of play. On the other hand, it ignored blinking warning signs such as the rise of nationalism, populism,

1. See legislative initiatives to ensure human rights and environmental laws along the supply chain, in particular in EU member states and most recently on the EU level itself: <https://eur-lex.europa.eu/legal-content/EN/TXT/?uri=CELEX%3A52022PC0071>.

and identity politics, aided by new and powerful ways of accessing, sharing, and using information (or misinformation and disinformation), which had already begin to change the scene even in stable democracies for several years now.

In the first part of this chapter, we will endeavour to highlight a few of these challenges in a cursory way.

### *Nationalism, populism, and identity politics*

While, after the end of the Cold War, many states strived to transform into modern democracies, the 21st century saw a return of more authoritarian approaches to national politics. There was no inevitable development toward more democratic, participative, and inclusive societies, but democracy was exposed as a fragile concept with strong competitors on the global scale:

- We have witnessed the influence and success of populist ideology in elections or referenda (Hungary in 2010, India in 2014, UK and US in 2016, and Brazil in 2018, to name but a few). Populism fundamentally questions the concept of pluralistic societies, aiming at imposing an artificial sense of homogeneity by drawing upon a fictional value system claiming to represent the sentiments of “the people,” whose voice has allegedly been suppressed by corrupt elites all along. This divisive narrative seems to have a very strong appeal for the electorate, even though, in practice, populists don’t show any clear compass of values at all but rather perform politics as an opposition to any existing order based on compromise and accelerate tensions within societies as a means of gaining, holding, and abusing power, mostly for the profit of their own leaders and their friends and supporters.
- However, the roots of the problem lie deeper, and election results bringing populist demagogues to power are just showing the tip of the iceberg. For some time now, within Western societies a rift between more traditional and more progressive worldviews has become apparent that seems to widen and strengthen the more extreme positions on the margins. While pluralism is based on the representation and balancing of different interests, identity politics in its different shapes emphasize distinction and resist defining a common ground: in society, centrifugal powers become stronger than centripetal ones. Public discourse is hampered by blame and

confrontation, increasingly putting opinion over fact and conviction over stringent argumentation. The belonging to a particular group gains precedence over the identity of a citizen of an inclusive society and state.

While proponents of populist agendas appeal to a fictional people or majority, proponents of identity politics build their case on a real or perceived marginalization of smaller groups or minorities. However, neither no longer strives to seek the common good or achieve complicated compromise, but rather opts for policies of division, which are increasingly fragmenting societies.

Interestingly, neither of these very diverse movements follows classic party lines but transcends the established political spectre. Populist agitation can be right or left; it represents more of a method, which can be used for nationalism, religious fundamentalism, and many more. Likewise, identity politics isn't the prerogative of certain objectively discriminated groups but can be used by all sections of society that have built a narrative on real or perceived exclusion or disadvantage.

So, while they come in different shapes, these political phenomena do have in common that they build on and strive for dissatisfaction, fear, and uncertainty by finding scapegoats in the other, whoever they may be: migrants, refugees, religious minorities, or a majority, or the so-called political class. Their common element is the more or less artificial creation of group identity ("we" as opposed to "they," the latter always posing a threat to the former by being different in general or by competing for scarce resources in particular).

Through suggesting simple solutions to deeply complex problems and by spreading false claims and disinformation, preferably using social media, populist discourse is probably the major threat to democracy and human rights today.<sup>2</sup> Populist agendas negatively affect people's behaviour and values and, in various situations, pose a threat to social peace and the constitutional foundations of the open society based on pluralism, discourse, and compromise. The changes in social climate are tangible even in what are seen as stable democracies, where it is (so far) only an aggressive minority that tries to push political agendas and shift boundaries of the acceptable, such as brutalizing language or twisting facts in public discourse.

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2. See Jordan Kyle and Yasha Mounk, "The Populism Harm to Democracy: An Empirical Assessment," The Tony Blair Institute, 2018, <https://institute.global/policy/populist-harm-democracy-empirical-assessment>.

While the COVID-19 pandemic seemed to have broken the rise of populism at least for a while, it also provided the ground for new movements that spread conspiracy theories and seek to further fracture society. Measures taken by states to mitigate the spread of the disease, in several countries enacted through emergency legislation, aggravated this problem. Limitations to fundamental rights, even when justified, cause fears about government arbitrariness, and in many cases legitimate doubts can and must be raised if the regulatory response—concerning rights such as freedom of assembly, family rights and access to health care facilities, freedom of religion or belief,<sup>3</sup> and others—did always strike the right balance between conflicting aims and fully respected the principles of necessity and proportionality as laid down in national and international law. However, to claim that democratic governments abused the pandemic to systematically erode citizen rights must be rejected, as recent reopenings of societies have clearly shown.

What impact the Russian war against Ukraine will have on a global scale has yet to be seen. On the one hand, the world has shown an unexpected unity in its rejection of this blatant breach of international law, its gross neglect of state sovereignty, and even many crimes against humanity committed in its course. On the other hand, not a few populists all over the world have expressed understanding for the war and used stereotypes from the populist textbook and toolkit to support it. Sadly, this must also be said about the Russian Orthodox Church.<sup>4</sup> While it remains to be hoped that the situation rejuvenates the global appreciation of the foundations of personal and societal freedom, there is a real danger that, if (partly) successful, the “strongman” ideology typical for populist discourse might also get a boost.

Likewise, the economic outfall of the war, including pertinent issues such as food security or inflation, might further tensions within societies worldwide and thus provide new arguments for populists instrumentalizing injustices and inequalities for their political purposes. Therefore, much

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3. In 2020, celebrating Abrahamic feasts like Easter, Hanukkah, and Ramadan was not possible or was possible in a very limited way.

4. The ROC is not an active member of the Conference of European Churches, as it has suspended its membership due to the fact that CEC—in accordance with its statutes—has accepted the membership application of the Estonian Orthodox Church, which the Moscow Patriarchate views as being its canonical territory. However, while it was apparent that this was not the only reason for the suspension (a disagreement about social ethics being a deeper root cause), the CEC has tried over the years to keep in touch in particular on the issue of human rights. However, this has not proven successful in the end. An overview on reactions from the CEC and its member churches can be found at <https://www.ceceurope.org/church-response-to-ukraine>.

depends on how the global community reacts—not only to the war itself but also to its consequences far beyond the region and political scope. It is clear that the victims of this war will be found within already marginalized groups everywhere, and there is real danger that their plight will further empower antagonistic forces.

Therefore, more than ever, the rule of law, democracy, and human rights needs protection. While some of the claims and concepts of populists and other enemies of the “open society” seem almost too ridiculous to be taken seriously, their successes prove them dangerous enough. We can note several cases in Europe, but also in different parts of the globe, where the rule of law and human rights have already been severely jeopardised.<sup>5</sup> The more successful demagogues are instigating fear and uncertainty in people, the less resilient societies prove against an erosion of their legal and moral foundations. Populists, who often style themselves as “men of the deed,” even bank on their contempt and outright rejection of allegedly weak concepts such as dialogue and human rights. By doing so, they even the playing field for worse.

### *War, violence, and terrorism*

Violent conflict brings out the worst in humanity. That is why Christianity has long struggled with an ethical-theological concept of just war and thereby contributed significantly to civilizing armed conflict through the rule of law even under its terrible circumstances. More recently, the ecumenical movement has come to endorse the concept of just peace as a radical alternative, rejecting violence altogether. At the same time, however, parties to formal war, but even more so to unregulated violent conflict and terrorism, struggle to free themselves entirely of legal bonds and deliberately strike where it hurts the most, regardless of ethical considerations.

Recent and current conflicts show a wide range of examples where human rights, not least freedom of religion or belief, were intentionally violated as an instrument of war. As a consequence, international jurisdiction has also become clearer and more substantial in outlawing and prosecuting such atrocities. The purposeful destruction of holy sites, to give just one example, has been recognized as a crime against humanity.

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5. The following articles provide interesting case studies: Amnesty International, “Defending Rule of Law in Hungary” (n.d.): DW, “EU Starts New Legal Action against Poland over Rule of Law” (22 December 2021), <https://www.amnesty.org/en/latest/campaigns/2020/09/hungary-rule-of-law>; Poland: <https://www.dw.com/en/eu-starts-new-legal-action-against-poland-over-rule-of-law/a-60220102>.

The Conference of European Churches has, over the past years, dealt with a number of such incidents in Europe and its neighbouring regions, from the destruction of Armenian graveyards by Azerbaijan over the purposeful dereliction of Greek Orthodox churches in the Turkish occupation zone of Cyprus to the dispossession of church properties in parts of the Balkans or genocidal attacks on religious minorities (such as the attempted eradication of the Yazidi people by ISIS) in the Middle East.

It is not by chance that we have chosen to highlight religious freedom while recognizing that all human rights come under pressure in violent conflict and that war crimes are committed, violating many of these rights as severely as religious freedom. However, our point here is a very specific one. Because in situations where fissures form in societies and groups start to fight one another, religious groups often come under particular pressure to take sides and become instrumental in accelerating such fights. It is therefore important for religious leaders and communities to become aware of this danger, act responsibly, and build and foster early and sustainable resilience against such instrumentalization. It is also very important for them to become aware of their own vulnerability and develop strategies to defend themselves. For this reason, awareness raising for religious communities on the issue of security has more recently become the focus of the work of secular and religious actors alike. In the second part of this chapter, we will look at some examples from the work of the Conference of European Churches together with religious and secular partners in this field.

### *New dynamics through media and communication developments*

Freedom of information is essential in democracies and for democracy itself. Yet, the way society consumes information has fundamentally changed with the emergence of social media available to (almost) everybody. This development provides both chances and challenges for human rights.

Many fundamental rights, such as freedom of opinion and speech, freedom of the press, and rights of political and cultural participation, depend on access to information. It clearly belongs to the pillars of a thriving democracy. This is why several human rights bodies, such as the European Court of Human Rights, have been considering access to the Internet “one of the principal means by which individuals exercise their right to freedom to receive and impart information and ideas, providing as it does essential tools for participation in activities and discussions concerning political issues

and issues of general interest.”<sup>6</sup> For the Internet has become one of the main means, if not the chief instrument, to access, consume, share, and disseminate information, with its importance rising by the day. It allows people to handle information without consideration for borders—as is explicit in Article 19 of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights; it also gives people a way to exchange and spread opinions as well as organize and mobilize civic movements. It thereby facilitates the democratization of opinions and information, a process considerably aided by the advent of social media. The Internet in general and social media in particular give every person a voice and a means to scrutinize their government, to form their own opinion, and to join the political and social debate on very different issues.

At the same time, these new forms of communication bring a fast track for spreading hate speech and misinformation. They are also in a certain tension with the traditional press: While the Internet can improve news-making by offering journalists a much faster and broader access to global information, more and more people see the Internet and social media as an easy alternative to classic media outlets. As people have all the possibilities literally at their fingertips, they consume information primarily through smartphones. Numbers of this preference go up as age goes down, with an emphasis on social media and easily digestible bits of information, to the detriment of direct news sources or quality journalism with in-depth background and analysis.

It is an illusion, however, that the Internet as we know, access, and use it establishes an unprejudiced source of objective information. It is crucial that we understand how the information we are consuming, especially through social media, is compiled. Because the companies responsible for these platforms use algorithms to identify, select, and deliver our *preferred* content, we all have our personal newspaper, daily, filled with such information as has been seen to reflect our personal choices based on previous internet usage. Research has shown that such filter bubbles, created by and within social media, are an obstacle to the construction of critical thinking by citizens and users.<sup>7</sup> “Filter bubble” is a term first introduced in 2011 by Eli Pariser

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6. Cengiz and Others v. Turkey, appl. nos. 48226/10 and 14027/11, judgment of 1 December 2015, §§ 49 and 52.

7. Caseiro, Sofia, “O impacto da inteligência artificial na democracia,” in *Anais de Artigos Completos, IV Congresso Internacional de Direitos Humanos de Coimbra: Uma visão transdisciplinar* (2020), 138, [https://1d377ddc-c8c5-41f0-a5fd-b32d17ff3e72.filesusr.com/ugd/8f3de9\\_a429c79395f342bbade32f7eff2188a.pdf](https://1d377ddc-c8c5-41f0-a5fd-b32d17ff3e72.filesusr.com/ugd/8f3de9_a429c79395f342bbade32f7eff2188a.pdf).

to describe this particular way content is directed to us according to existing preferences so that we are cut off from opinions and information that oppose our views and preferences and thus are intellectually incapacitated.<sup>8</sup>

In 2018, this issue preoccupied David Kaye, then UN Special Rapporteur on the promotion and protection of the Right to Freedom of Opinion and Expression. In his annual report, he alerted people to the dangers of the use of artificial intelligence (AI) in our access to truthful information:

Search engines deliver results for queries (and complete or predict queries) using AI systems that process extensive data about individual and aggregate users. Because poorly ranked content or content entirely excluded from search results is unlikely to be seen, the AI applications for search have enormous influence over the dissemination of knowledge. . . . Consequently, AI plays a large but usually hidden role in shaping what information individuals consume or even know to consume.<sup>9</sup>

Information literacy is essential, not solely for our understanding that there are hidden mechanisms that influence the type of information we receive, but also because such mechanisms—or our failure to understand them—facilitate the spread of misinformation. Misinformation, disinformation, and fake news are problematic in today’s society. Their spread can lead to the exponential growth of hate speech on social media but also on mainstream media. This is something we have been witnessing in different countries and also, more disconcertingly, during the pandemic.

Weighing chances and challenges, it becomes clear that social media in particular are tools—the question is only by whom and for what they are used. To make them our tools and apply them to our purposes, we need to understand how they work and how that can be of use to spread truthful information and to empower communities to claim and exercise their fundamental rights.

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8. Emerging technology from the arXiv, “How to Burst the ‘Filter Bubble’ that Protects Us from Opposing Views,” *MIT Technology Review* (29 November 2013), <https://www.technologyreview.com/2013/11/29/175267/how-to-burst-the-filter-bubble-that-protects-us-from-opposing-views>.

9. David Kaye, “Report of the Special Rapporteur on the Promotion and Protection of the Right to Freedom of Opinion and Expression” (29 August 2018), <https://undocs.org/A/73/348>.



Knowledge alone, however, does not always seem to suffice to counter the threats inherent to social media (ab)-use. Societies also have to consider how to enforce, through legislation and regulation, transparency; how to counter coordinated disinformation campaigns; and how to enforce penal law in the virtual space. This is a particularly delicate matter, not least from a human rights perspective, as it must be noted and considered that all legitimate ways of penetrating virtual spaces to enforce fundamental and other important rights can also be abused to close down safe spaces for human rights activists and other civil society actors by non-democratic governments.

It should therefore, first and foremost, be in the interest and responsibility of societies to claim and defend the virtual public space. This space can, like the public sphere more generally, be used and abused for a wide variety of purposes. More recent public movements such as Fridays for Future or Black Lives Matter show that groups which would most probably not have had an audible voice in the landscape of traditional mainstream media can now easily claim public attention and turn public opinion. But so can less charitable groups, which is the reason why information warfare has long invaded the realm of social media.

Digital literacy is, therefore, a cornerstone of responsible and beneficial Internet use. Seeing the long and strong tradition churches have in education, providing not just knowledge but ethical and moral orientation, this is a matter that certainly deserves their attention. The Conference of European Churches has, over the last years, taken up this issue in different contexts, from theoretical reflections on the fundamental right on freedom of opinion to practical training on how to discern hate speech from the legitimate exchange of conflicting views and becoming alert to consequent dangers evolving for religious groups.<sup>10</sup>

### *Multilateralism or multipolarism? The plausibility gap in the UN system*

Another challenge, which is partly interwoven with those sketched above, is a United Nations that clearly hasn't aged well but to which no better alternative has yet become apparent. In its current form, it was created in the aftermath and as a result of the Second World War, reflecting the power structures of a colonial world, recently reshaped by the emergence of nuclear

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10. For example, an analysis of social media activity concerning specific religious communities or sacred sites should be part of a thorough, preventive risk assessment as it is part of the SASCE programme by CEC and its interreligious partners in the EU.

power. It was (and is) fundamentally based on principles like national sovereignty and equality but with the notable exception that only the Security Council can take legally binding decisions, and to which access is limited

and within which an even more limited and exclusive number of permanent members—the official nuclear powers of that time—have veto rights.

This system—the best we have, but not necessarily a good one—is becoming increasingly criticized for a number of reasons. The Russian war on Ukraine, for example, shows the limits of a system in which an aggressor who is a permanent Security Council member can veto any action by that body, whereas the General Assembly does not have any power to enact legally binding resolutions in cases of crises with global impacts or of global scale. It is fair to say that this two-tier system of permanent Security Council members, as opposed to all other nations in this world, reflects neither the principle of state equality nor the economic power distribution in today's world, nor even anymore the actual distribution of nuclear military power that once gave shape to that order.

While this inequality causes frustration for many, especially emerging powers from the South, it is also an alleged overemphasis on state sovereignty and equality that can cause tensions. This has become apparent when states that are accused of and guilty of the worst human rights violations, even crimes against humanity, are chairing bodies such as the Human Rights Council because of rotation principles or when blatant violations aren't addressed because of political consideration.<sup>11</sup>

What is even more worrying, though, is that even the very principles on which the UN system rests, not least the Universal Declaration on Human Rights, are being questioned. In particular, the allegation that the thus enshrined human rights are not universal at all but reflect “Western” legal traditions, anthropology, and values is being brought forward by interested circles—mostly from states endorsing political Islam—whose protagonists propose to replace them with “culturally more appropriate” alternatives, such as the 2004 Arab Charter on Human Rights. In fact, of course, such documents are about neither decolonizing international law nor enculturating

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11. In fact, especially in the field of human rights, all attempts at reform have so far failed to produce satisfactory results simply because there is no majority of states supporting a neutral and powerful UN body to observe, investigate, report, and condemn human rights violations. The former UN Human Rights Commission has been dissolved for that reason, but the council did not bring about effective improvements.

the human rights agenda into non-Western traditions (which could both be understood as legitimate aims) but about limiting individual human rights. Such attempts, however feeble their arguments, do show the cracks in the very idea of a universal legal and institutional world order. The trend to fragmentation, for which nationalism, populism, or identity politics are a sign on the national level, is also visible on the international scene—and even more so, as the institutions at that level are much weaker.

The world has lost the relative stability of the bipolar order of the Cold War (which also came at a very high price for human rights), but it has not been replaced by a new, multilateral world order. Rather, it is breaking up into a multipolar order with shifting allegiances. Emerging powers like China seek to establish new dependencies, while the powers that still dominate the Security Council seem to be fighting a losing battle for the preservation of their position in the global arena. Sadly, Western or Northern powers have significantly contributed to the loss of plausibility and credibility of this system: not only by trying to preserve it in a state and shape that benefits their national self-interest rather than adapting it to global changes, but also by a considerable level of hypocrisy, in particular in the fields of human rights. If powers that claim to be the guardians of political liberalism, democracy, the rule of law, and human rights criticize only such states as are political rivals or of no economic interest but turn a blind eye to the same or worse violations if committed by their allies or states they have vested interests in, they fail to make a convincing case for a strong global human rights regime in the medium- and long-term perspective. The same holds true if such states frequently demand the persecution of human rights violations but refuse to subject themselves to international human rights jurisdiction.

## **Why Churches Must Become Human Rights Actors and How They Can Do This**

At the moment, sadly, it is becoming ever more obvious that the world has not yet found the strength and resolution to amend and improve its formal systems of organizing and limiting power in any of the above areas. In particular, the UN increasingly struggles to keep up some kind of order in the face of multiple and multi-layered challenges. For the context of this assessment, it is most important to note that not only is a weak and contradictory international human rights system problematic, but also the failure to address any of the other global challenges has a direct (and negative) impact on the protection of human rights. In particular, the ecological

planetary crises lead to a worsening of human security for many people.

Because not only do human rights need democracy and the rule of law to flourish, but they also need a material base. The destruction of our climate and environment deprives first and foremost the already underprivileged and marginalized of basic needs—and therefore rights. It is crucial, especially from a Christian perspective, to focus not only on the classic human rights—the political rights of freedom and equality—but also on second- and third-generation human rights. We need to advocate for an understanding of human life and relationships that is consequently rights-based. States do not only have to abstain from abusing power to limit political and civic rights, they also have to take responsibility for ensuring access to basic conditions for human development and security. Human rights must more generally come to be seen as an obligation not only to abstain from doing evil but also to do good.

For this to materialize, states—both on the national and the international level—need to recognize the contribution of civil society and of religious actors. The observation that space for civil societies is shrinking on a global scale is therefore extremely worrying. It would be a serious misunderstanding of human rights in general—and of second- (and third-) generation human rights in particular—that a state, even if benevolent, could take sole responsibility for their flourishing. In many cases, the state can and must provide a frame, but the frame needs to be filled by actors from within society. Therefore, the principle of subsidiarity must be taken more seriously, enabling non-state actors to make their contribution.

In the second part of this chapter, we will, therefore, explore why and how churches should become even more active as human rights advocates and actors.

### *The need for theological reflection and dialogue*

Churches are natural advocates of human rights, even though they have taken a long time to realize it and some still struggle with this insight. However, theological reflection and dialogue can deliver the necessary translation between, on the one side, the biblical understanding of men and women in their relation with God and one another and, on the other side, the secular concept of human rights. For the two share the same core: human dignity. By human dignity we understand the indestructible and indivisible property of all human existence, which Christians believe to be rooted in the act and fact of creation by God. It begins with conception and does not even

end with death, as even mortal remains are entitled to post-mortual respect because they are part of what was once a living, individual being, endowed with spirit and soul and the capacity to love and be loved. Simply by virtue of being created by God and in God's image, known or unbeknownst to themselves, every person must be perceived of as being wanted by God and treated accordingly! No one has the right to deny a person this respectful, even reverential treatment, and likewise no person can act in such a way that he or she could ever be regarded as having waived this right.

Of course, as evident as this testimony is to the believer, its practical application to the merits of individual cases must be subject to intensive reflection and exchange. Accepting God's choice to give humanity the freedom of choice between good and evil, for example, does not imply for us that we have to respect a person's choice of evil. We must love the sinner, but not the sin. Now, what follows from such distinction? Of course, penal law must seek to both punish and prevent repetition. But it must also seek to improve and rehabilitate, even in seemingly hopeless cases.

There are many other examples of how human dignity needs to be asserted in everyday life. The more vulnerable a person is to humiliation and maltreatment by others, or the more plausible possible justifications for such acts are, the more need there is to uphold the inalienable principle of human dignity.

All secular human rights—rights of freedom and equality and participation—derive from this same notion, albeit stripped of such transcendent origin they must be to be acceptable to all. For churches, though, it is important to remind the world of this origin, as “God,” even for a secular person, can be understood as a *chiffre* for something beyond human power. We can and must define what consequences to draw from the idea of human dignity in the very human social, political, and legal orders, but we must not deny their existence as beyond our human remit.

Thus, as churches discover the impact that the powerful message scripture has on living human life and relations, they can develop a strong theological case for human rights. The great variety of theology found in different traditions and denominations can enrich the pursuant discourse and help contextualize such understanding.

*The importance of education and training*

To understand is one thing; to act accordingly is quite another. In general, humanity does not suffer so much from a lack of insight but from a lack of application. So, having established the theological importance of human dignity, churches, religious communities and their leaders, and faith-based organizations must enable their followers to act upon this knowledge. Like with other aspects of Christian practice, this needs education and training.

Despite widespread secularization, especially in the global North, churches still benefit from a great trust many people place in them in the field of moral orientation and education. Unlike single-issue organizations like NGOs, churches have access to people at all stages and walks of life. They are represented at local and provincial levels, on the national and international stage, and—not least through the WCC itself—on a global scale. And they are well organized, from the parish or congregational level upward. They have the means to reach out to many people, which in turn have influence on others, such as teachers or political leaders. They can spread the word and create a strong net of multipliers for the cause of human rights.

However, it would underestimate the role of religion if churches were to be seen only as an organization among others, if with a unique structure. They are more: the appeal of their message is holistic. It has the potential not only to reach out to a great variety of people, but also to strike chords other actors in the human rights field cannot so easily play. They appeal not only to the mind, but also to the heart and soul. As they address and influence people's emotions, they can more easily bridge the gulf between understanding and consequent action. Religion is, above all, about healing relationships and spreading love, so the kind of empowerment it can provide is deeply rooted in the person.

Churches also have a long and strong tradition of teaching and can integrate human rights education in formats they already offer. While it may justly be seen as beneficial for churches to offer explicit fora for human rights, it is far more important that the message of human dignity finds its way into preaching and teaching in everyday religious life. It should also be well reflected in the way churches act in their communities and within society, as to act consistently is also very important for the churches' standing and reception by others. Likewise, their failure to live by their own standards can considerably weaken their capacity to reach out to and convince others.

*The role of advocacy and networking*

The church's mission in this world is to spread the gospel. There are basically two ways to do so. While pure theology (theological reflection in preaching and teaching) clearly has a missionary intention, applied theology (living the faith in Christian practice) also needs its content communicated. As these two forms must be seen as distinct but inseparable, Christian social ethics must have a missionary impulse too. Human rights advocacy is part of this wider endeavour.

To be successful communicators of their message, churches do not need only to have a clear message and powerful language, but also partners in those areas of life where the church is less well represented. The first step in building a strong and reliable network is, of course, ecumenicity. No church or denomination is represented everywhere, and the tendency toward a pluralization of societies makes the need for better inter-church cooperation even more apparent and pertinent. The second step is to seek alliances with all people of goodwill, regardless of their personal faith. Especially in the field of politics—and a lot of advocacy work is directed at the political sphere—religion does not play a role as such. International organizations such as the United Nations, the World Bank, and their associated bodies, or regional organizations such as the Organization for Security and Co-operation in Europe (OSCE), the Council of Europe, or the European Union are secular by nature. But they can be valuable partners in applying ethics that churches derive from their faith and mission.

In all this, churches will know that their work does not always have an immediate impact. While there are, thankfully, many cases in which the intervention of churches does improve the human rights situation of minorities or individual persons, a lot of work simply consists in monitoring situations, contributing to legislative processes, raising issues with authorities, and explaining all over again why churches become involved in this type of work at all. Especially education that aims at changing attitudes and behavioural patterns can take generations to have a visible effect.

*Practical examples from the work of the Conference of European Churches*

The Conference of European Churches has been dedicated for many years to engaging in such advocacy and training work. The annual Summer School on Human Rights<sup>12</sup> in particular provides a good and concrete example for how religious actors can go about this. Travelling through the different regions of Europe, the Summer School has taken up many issues relevant to both the host country and its pan-European constituency. It combines the following:

- exposure (such as visiting a refugee camp in Greece)
- spirituality (such as daily common worship reflecting on the respective theme from different theological traditions)
- academic work (such as case studies delivered by human rights experts from universities, legal practice, or international organizations)
- practical training (such as creating educational materials for congregations)
- networking (such as cooperating with international organisations, such as the OSCE or non-Christian interfaith dialogue partners such as the European Jewish Congress or Muslim organizations)

In general, the CEC executive secretary for human rights and the Thematic Group on Human Rights have always emphasized that human rights advocacy needs to be done through alliances with secular actors, in particular international organisations. The CEC's Church and Society Commission has been a strong advocate in the process leading to the proclamation of the EU's Charter of Fundamental Rights before 2000, and its human rights secretary has been active on the EU's Fundamental Rights Agency's civil society platform. At its human rights events, it has always sought to include representatives from the EU, the Council of Europe, the OSCE, and even the United Nations. Historically, the human rights work within CEC was—in the aftermath of the Helsinki Declaration—the only political issue that the Geneva-based pan-European ecumenical body could address during the Cold War. This experience helped a lot when, after 1990, closer cooperation with the Brussels-based Church and Society Commission was embarked on that finally led to the merger of the two organizations. It shows that human rights are at the core of ecumenical work in Europe.

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12. See <https://www.ceceurope.org/summer-school>.



The Human Rights Manual,<sup>13</sup> also produced by the Conference of European Churches, follows the same approach as the Summer School, as do a variety of shorter seminars and conferences, often held at the express invitation by a church or a number of churches which face similar challenges in their home setting. In the case of its Spanish member church, the CEC has explicitly supported the Protestant minority in a case (relating to a discriminatory national pension scheme for clergy) that even went up to (and was won at) the European Court of Human Rights.<sup>14</sup>

The CEC was also the only ecumenical organization in Europe that came up with an early statement<sup>15</sup> on how to evaluate the impact of restrictive COVID-19 containment measures on the fundamental right to freedom of religion or belief. In this statement, it said:

Because there has not been any comparable restriction of religious freedom or many other fundamental rights in modern times, and because these rights are usually seen as the legal backbone of our democracy and the rule of law in Europe the Thematic Group on Human Rights of the Conference of European Churches has closely considered the issues at stake. It came to the following reflections:

6. The current restrictions to fundamental rights, including FORB (Freedom of Religion or Belief), are therefore generally legal and acceptable from the perspective of human rights. The protection of the weak and vulnerable is also a very high value from a religious perspective and needs to be balanced against the need for community and gathering.

7. Whilst in times of persecutions, massacres and genocides, and even previous pandemics, churches have been places of refuge and consolation for many believers, it is important to acknowledge that the prohibition of assemblies, including services, are not meant as religious discrimination and persecution. At present this measure is intended to safeguard human lives, both of the believers and of other members of society.

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13. See <https://www.ceceurope.org/human-rights/education>.

14. *Manzanas Martín v. Spain*, Appl. No. 17966/10.

15. CEC Thematic Group on Human Rights, "Reflections on Freedom of Religion or Belief during the Fight against the COVID-19 Pandemic" (n.d.), <https://www.ceceurope.org/wp-content/uploads/2020/04/CEC-document-on-COVID-19-English-1.pdf>.

8. However, all restrictions of fundamental rights must have a legal base, be necessary, suitable, reasonable and generally proportionate in relation to the aim they serve and the right they limit. The principle of equal treatment, including the consistency of measures, must also be considered. In legal practice, these requirements give cause to complex assessments and complicated balancing, leading to decisions on a case by case basis.

In publishing such a statement, the CEC contributed to steering a debate from the emotional to the rational. In its assessment of the situation, it based its conclusions on the text of and judicature relating to international human rights law. It conceded that containment measures, in the midst of a hitherto unknown pandemic, do constitute a justification for restrictions even of centuries-old religious traditions, such as receiving Holy Communion with one spoon, as is done in the Orthodox traditions. However, it also highlighted the legal limitations to such restrictions, advocating for believers to respect the purpose while advocating for governments and courts to uphold the fundamental right itself and limit restrictions to the necessary and proportional in view of the purpose.

These examples may show the potential of churches to become human rights actors in their own right, not dependent on but in discourse and interaction with secular human rights institutions. In the light of shrinking spaces for such actors, due to the challenges described above, this seems to be a promising way forward for the global church. As the protection of human dignity needs to be translated into secular safeguards, this also seems the only way forward for churches, if they truly want to proclaim the gospel in both word and deed.