
The Russian Orthodox Church and Human Rights: Moscow Meeting, March 2007

Conference of European Churches - Office of Communications
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(Slightly edited for layout but not cut – Philip Walters)

Churches Stay Committed to Human Rights

From 20 to 21 March delegations of experts from the Russian Orthodox Church and from the Church and Society Commission of the Conference of European Churches (CEC) met in Moscow to discuss about human rights. The meeting was organised because the Russian Orthodox Church intends to adopt a basic document on human rights. Preparations for such a document began with the 2006 Declaration of the World Russian People's Council and subsequent statements from members of the Russian Orthodox Church on human rights. These gave rise to the concern as to whether there is still a common basis for human rights related issues among member churches of CEC.

The most important result of the dialogue meeting in Moscow in this regard, is that the very concept of human rights is not under question. The Russian Orthodox Church wants only to raise some questions with regard to the interpretation of certain human rights, as H.E. Metropolitan Kyrill, Chairman of the Department for External Church Relations put it. The Joint Communiqué of the meeting reads:

The two delegations agreed that the result of the present debate on human rights within the Russian Orthodox Church and among European churches will be to strengthen the churches' commitment to human rights as laid down, for instance, in the United Nations Bill of Human Rights, the European Convention on Human Rights and the Council of Europe's Social Charter as well as in documents of the Follow-Up Conferences of the Organisation for Security and Cooperation in Europe.

Rev. Rüdiger Noll, Director of CEC's Church and Society Commission and Associated General Secretary commented:

For us this is a very important result of the meeting with the Russian Orthodox Church. It maintains the common basis of European churches when we address the European institutions on behalf of the European churches and when we address human rights violations.

Under the sub-titles of the meeting on 'Church State Relations', 'The Approach to Human Rights' and 'Implementation of Religious Freedom for Churches and Religious Communities', experts discussed, among other

issues, the relation between human rights and Christian ethics, the relationship between majority and minority communities and the interrelatedness of ethical values such as freedom and solidarity, freedom and responsibility.

The talks were conducted in an open, frank and friendly atmosphere. Fr Vsevolod Chaplin summarised at the end of the meeting:

This concentrated dialogue on one very precise topic proved to be very useful and successful. Very seldom before have we had such condensed discussions in such a friendly atmosphere. Many misunderstandings, which are usually attributed to either a western or an Orthodox perception of human rights, could be clarified. We thank the CEC Church and Society Commission for having brought such a high level group of international experts to Moscow.

Rev. Antje Heider-Rottwilm from the Evangelical Church in Germany, Co-Moderator of the CEC Church and Society Commission added:

There were not just a few concerns in my own church prior to this meeting, whether we could agree on any common basis. The different positions seemed to be too divergent. But the results of this meeting and its positive atmosphere show that there is a common basis and that it is important to engage in such a dialogue in order to inform each other, to learn from each other and to clarify misperceptions.

See the Joint Communiqué of the meeting in English and German.

Members of the delegations headed by H.E. Metr Kyrill of Smolensk and Kaliningrad (Chairman of the Department for External Church Relations of the Russian Orthodox Church) and OKRin Rev Antje Heider-Rottwilm (Head of the Europe Department of EKD and Co-moderator of CEC's Church and Society Commission) were: (for the Russian Orthodox Church:) Fr Vsevolod Chaplin (Deputy Chairman), Fr Igor Vyzhanov, Fr Georges Ryabykh, Priest-Monk Makariy (Markish), Mr. Kirill Frolov, Dr Elene Maler-Matyazova; (for CEC:) Rev Rüdiger Noll (Director and Ass. Gen Secr), Rev Theodor Angelov (Baptist Union of Bulgaria), Rev Prof Alexandru Gherasim (Romanian Orthodox Church), Dr Peter Krömer (Ev. Kirche AB in Austria), Rev John Murray (Anglican Chaplain in Strasbourg, associated staff), Ms Ingvill Plesner (Church of Norway), Can.

Theol. Martin Schuster (intern).

The Conference of European Churches (CEC) is a fellowship of some 125 Orthodox, Protestant, Anglican and Old Catholic Churches from all countries of Europe, plus 40 associated organisations. CEC was founded in 1959. It has offices in Geneva, Brussels and Strasbourg.

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