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CSC Update on European Affairs

TOPICS COVERED:

Religious leaders meet with the Presidents of the European Institutions; CSC seminar on socially responsible investment; White Paper on Intercultural Dialogue; CSC seminar on Islam, Christianity and Europe; transparency; Treaty reform; migration; upcoming CSC events.

Religious leaders meet the EU leaders

Religious leaders meet with the Presidents of the European Institutions to discuss climate change and reconciliation

The now traditional annual meeting between the Presidents of the European Institutions and the representatives of the three monotheistic religions took place in Brussels on 5 May 2008. The co-chairs of the meeting the President of the European Commission José Manuel Barroso, the current President of the European Council Slovenian Prime Minister Janez Janša and the President of the European Parliament Hans-Gert Pöttering gave the introductory remarks. The following discussion centred around two themes "Climate Change: an ethical challenge for all cultures" and "Reconciliation through intercultural and inter-faith dialogue".

In his speech on climate change, President Barroso said "thanks to their outreach and role in our societies, religions and communities of belief are well placed to make a valuable contribution in mobilising them for a sustainable future". President Janša described environment not only as a natural but also as a sacred place. He went on to state "community and loyalty between man, nature and the Creator is a basic principle of Judaism, Christianity and Islam alike."

In his speech, President Pöttering promised the Parliament to show leadership in climate change, in particular by “greening” its own activities, building and transport. He also stressed that “living in a more environmentally-sound way is related to our personal responsibility to protect the planet’s poorest communities which are often the first to suffer the effects of climate change – including floods, droughts and famine.”

President Pöttering also thanked the religious leaders for accepting the invitation and for giving the European Institutions the possibility to underline, in a very public manner, their commitment to Dialogue with Churches and Faiths.

The Conference of European Churches (CEC) was represented by President Jean-Arnold de Clermont who was accompanied by Reverend Rüdiger Noll, Director of the Church and Society Commission and Associate General Secretary of CEC. Commenting on the second theme of the meeting, the President of CEC welcomed the increased attention to intercultural dialogue by the European Union and the Council of Europe, which proves that these institutions acknowledge that European integration is a cultural process going beyond economic and political dimensions.

President de Clermont further called for a move from multicultural to intercultural societies. “Intercultural” as a notion and as a vision reflects better the dynamism of this exchange, openness towards the other and respect for diversity. In his speech he concluded: “The churches brought together in the Conference of European Churches find themselves fully within these principles. They base their practices on a vision of humanity, as diverse and unique as that which God’s perspective offers them. They, therefore, support all efforts at dialogue, as they attempt to live it among themselves in an inter-religious perspective. But they expect the politicians responsible to contribute to this effort: by educational programmes which put into practice the apprenticeship of dialogue, in particular among the youngest members, so that they learn to listen to and respect others in their differences, as well as expressing their own convictions and opening themselves up in exchange, by attention to inter-religious dialogue as a necessary component of intercultural dialogue, without forgetting atheism or agnosticism, by a particular attention to minorities, in particular those stemming from migration. I would like to signal one point which seems to have a strong symbolical importance: the need to take into account the debate between the unquestionable freedom of expression and the right not to be insulted in one’s own deep convictions. The European Union would gain by taking stock of the rights and practices in force on our continent. This is part of intercultural dialogue”.

Director Rüdiger Noll stressed as an important outcome of the meeting “that the Presidents of the European Institutions as well as religious representatives recognise that the intercultural dialogue is not an end in itself but a means to promote respect, justice and solidarity”. With regard to climate change, the meeting served to underline that climate change does not only have economic and technical, but also spiritual and ethical dimensions. Climate change poses a challenge to our lifestyles.

Besides its President de Clermont and Director Noll, CEC constituency was represented by the following participants: The Bishop of Hulme (Church of England), Bishop Dr.

Wolfgang Huber (EKD), Archbishop Anders Wejryd (Church of Sweden), Metropolitan Emmanuel of France (Ecumenical Patriarchate of Constantinople), Bishop Hilarion of Vienna and Austria (Russian Orthodox Church), Metropolitan Nifon (Romanian Orthodox Church) and Metropolitan Athanasios of Achaia (Church of Greece). The three CEC member churches in Italy are all members of the Federation of the Evangelical Churches in Italy, which was represented by Pastor Dr. Letizia Tomassone.

European Commission Press Release:

<http://europa.eu/rapid/pressReleasesAction.do?reference=IP/08/676&format=HTML&aged=0&language=EN&guiLanguage=en>

Speech of the President of the European Council, Janez Jansa:

http://www.eu2008.si/en/News_and_Documents/Speeches_Interviews/May/0505_Janez_Jansa.html

Speech of the President of the European Parliament Pöttering:

<http://www.europarl.europa.eu/president/defaulten.htm?functions>

Photos:

http://www.eu2008.si/en/Media_Service/Photo_Archive/May/0505KPV.html

Corporate Social Responsibility

Socially Responsible Investment: churches bridging the gap between mere market forces and social justice

Over 70 participants from churches and church-related agencies as well as expert organisations from 20 countries gathered on 6-7 May 2008 in Brussels to discuss the topic of “Churches and Socially Responsible Investment”.

The meeting took stock of the recent increase of interest and commitment to socially sustainable investment among the churches. The conference made it evident that churches have a great potential for influencing corporations in order to promote just, sustainable and participatory societies. Tor Gull, Managing Director of Oikocredit, called the churches “to take the leadership in socially responsible investment” and to practice “investment policies that recognise social return of an investment rather than the financial return level”. However, the meeting also observed that socially responsible investment does not necessarily lead to a diminished financial return - indeed the opposite can be true, particularly over the long term.

Many participants felt that the conference had given them lots of new insights and had motivated them to invest more on socially responsible investment. Several participants urged exploring inter-faith co-operation in promoting socially responsible investment. But the conference also identified remaining challenges in involving more of the 125 member churches of the Conference of European Churches in reflection and action on

socially responsible investment, in strengthening the network between churches and church-related agencies in the area and in working together on criteria for socially responsible investment, investment strategies and impact assessment. For that purpose, the conference suggested that the organizers should establish a committee in order to support the ongoing process and to foster the exchange between the churches and the various partners.

The conference was jointly organized by CSC, Oikocredit and the Evangelical Lutheran Church of Finland. A more thorough event report will be produced in the course of this year.

Read also the CEC Press Release of 8 May: <http://www.cec-kek.org/content/pr-cq0827e.shtml>.

Intercultural Dialogue

White Paper on Intercultural dialogue sees the light of day

After months of drafting, negotiation and redrafting, the Council of Europe “White Paper on Intercultural Dialogue” was approved by its 47 Member States, and launched by the meeting of the Committee of Ministers in Strasbourg on 6-7 May 2008. The CSC welcomes the adoption of this important and interesting document, which provides guidance and ideas for the promotion of intercultural dialogue, mutual respect and understanding in the spirit of the core values of the Council of Europe: human rights, democracy and the rule of law. The Ministers applauded the White Paper as a “significant pan-European contribution to an international discussion steadily gaining momentum” as well as to the European Union Year of Intercultural Dialogue.

According to the White Paper, intercultural dialogue plays an essential role in preventing ethnic, religious, linguistic and cultural divides and enabling us, as citizens of Europe, to move forward together. To advance intercultural dialogue the democratic governance of cultural diversity should be adapted. The White Paper suggests the democratic citizenship and participation to be strengthened, intercultural competencies taught and spaces for dialogue created. It also argues in favour of more efforts at the international level.

With regard to the religious dimension of intercultural dialogue, the White Paper stresses the need for dialogue between public authorities and religious communities, between religious communities and philosophical communities as well as between religious communities (interreligious dialogue). The White Paper acknowledges religious practise as a part of contemporary human life, which cannot and should not be outside the sphere of interest of public authorities. However, the state must preserve its role as the neutral and impartial organiser of the exercise of various religions, faiths and beliefs. The White Paper refers to the San Marino Declaration (see Update N° 8), which

invites the Council of Europe to create fora to consider the impact of religious practise in public policies such as health and education.

CSC took active part in the development of the document. Among other ways of involvement, it submitted, together with the Churches' Commission for Migrants in Europe (CCME), a joint response to the Council of Europe consultation based on the results of an internal consultation. The close to 70 responses by the member churches and organisations indicated how seriously intercultural dialogue is taken within the constituencies. The joint response, as well as individual responses by members, was received with great interest at the Council of Europe. The CSC Plenary Meeting held in Armenia in 2007 provided an occasion to discuss churches' statement with Mr Ulrich Bunjes from the Office for Intercultural Dialogue at the Council of Europe (see Update N° 9).

In its meeting the Committee of Ministers emphasised the importance of ensuring appropriate visibility of the White Paper, and called on the Council of Europe and its Member States, as well as other relevant stakeholders, to give suitable follow-up to the White Paper's recommendations. CSC will respond to this call and will continue to promote an in-depth reflection on the implementation of the White Paper guidelines among CEC member churches.

The White paper is available on the Council of Europe webpage http://www.coe.int/t/dg4/intercultural/default_EN.asp? A CSC Briefing on the White Paper is being drafted.

Islam, Christianity and Europe

The second meeting of the series of four seminars devoted to Islam, Christianity and Europe took place in the European Parliament (Brussels) on 29 May 2008. It was, as the other seminars, jointly organised by CSC, COMECE and the Konrad Adenauer Foundation.

The seminar dealt with the issue of the visibility of religion in European public space, and more specifically with questions concerning worship places and religious symbols in clothing. The construction of mosques and the wearing of veils have acted as a catalyst to public debate about freedom of religion, acceptance of change, respect for difference, relations between different religious communities and the relationship between the religious and the secular. The seminar called for the development of a culture of religious pluralism and acceptance of religious symbols in the public space. One of the barriers on the way is the lack of comprehension of religious language and the value and the purpose of religious symbols due to secularisation. The religious communities must be able to convince the secular that religion does not threaten but contributes to the coherence of society. This is particularly challenging with regard to Islam as there are many examples of mosque building being used as a symbolic catalyst to manifest unexpressed fears of the 'Other' related to migration, intolerance and terrorism. To overcome the anxiety related to Muslims and mosques new architectural –

intercultural and participatory - approaches are being developed. The seminar learned about a Belgium model that combines high architectural and environmental standards with architecture that creates spaces, which are open and welcoming for the residents of the entire neighbourhood.

The full event report is attached to this Europe Update. The programmes and reports of the seminars as well as more information on the seminar project is available at: <http://www.cec-kek.org/content/Projectislam.shtml>

Transparency

European Parliament vote on a register for interest representatives

On 8 May 2008, the European Parliament adopted a position on a register for interest representatives. The Parliament voted for a mandatory register, which would allow the Members of the European Parliament to know the identity (including financial sources) of the organisations represented by the lobby groups. The resolution acknowledges the essential role of interest representatives in the open and pluralistic dialogue on which a democratic system rests. It also recognises the value of lobbyists as important sources of information for Members of the Parliament.

The register will cover all actors that carry activities with the objective of influencing the policy formulation and decision-making processes of the European institutions. The resolution lists explicitly professional lobbyists, companies' in-house lobbyists, NGOs, think tanks, trade associations, trade unions, employers' organisations, profit-making and non-profit making organisations and lawyers (with some restrictions). The Parliament rejected a proposal to include churches in the list.

The Parliament resolution relates to a process called European Transparency Initiative (ETI) initiated by the European Commission to create a more structured framework for the activities of the lobbyist and to improve commission's minimum standards for consultation. The overriding idea is to increase transparency of the relations between lobbyist and the European Institutions. The European Commission has already decided to launch its own voluntary register for interest representatives this summer. The Parliament, in its statement, invited the Commission and the Council to set up a common register for the three institutions.

CSC took part in the ETI consultation process last year (see Europe Update N° 8).

European Parliament resolution of 8 May 2008

<http://www.europarl.europa.eu/sides/getDoc.do?type=TA&reference=P6-TA-2008-0197&language=EN&ring=A6-2008-0105>

European Integration

Ratification process of the Lisbon Treaty continues

Since the last Europe Update, Estonia, Finland, Germany, Greece, Latvia, Lithuania and Luxembourg have ratified the Treaty of Lisbon. Earlier, Austria, Bulgaria, Denmark, France, Hungary, Malta, Poland, Portugal, Romania, Slovakia and Slovenia have given their approval for the new legal basis of the European Union.

June should see the parliamentary votes in the United Kingdom. On Thursday 12 June, Ireland will hold a referendum on the issue and will be the only EU Member State to do so. Before the summer break Belgium, Cyprus and Italy are expected to have their say on the Treaty. The Dutch, Spanish and Swedes will reflect on the issue in the autumn.

The consolidated text of the Lisbon Treaty is available at:
http://europa.eu/lisbon_treaty/full_text/index_en.htm.

Migration

Ministers agree on the return directive, Christian organisations continue to raise their concerns over protection of human rights

After three years of negotiations, Justice and Home Affairs Ministers found an agreement over the Directive on common standards and procedures in Member States for returning illegally staying third-country nationals (also called the return directive) on 5 June 2008. The Ministers promise that “the ending of the illegal stay of non-EU nationals will be carried out through a fair and transparent procedure which sets out the rights for illegally staying persons facing return”. They also maintain “detention would only be permitted where other less coercive measures cannot be applied in the case and require a decision in writing with reasons in fact and in law”. The Member States also allow the persons in question the opportunity to leave voluntarily with some exceptions.

Churches and church-related organisations have throughout the process voiced their concern over several aspects related to the return directive. They have criticised the possibility to keep irregular (notions preferred by churches) migrants detained for up to 18 months on the basis of an administrative decision. The Council agreement foresees this option. Christian organisations have called the decision-makers to restrict the mandatory EU-wide entry ban to exceptional circumstances and provide for procedures to mount legal challenges to such administrative actions. The Council decision includes entry bans as accompanying measure to a return decision without these restrictions. Thirdly, Christian organisations have called to improve access to voluntary return by granting for this purpose a minimum of 30 days, if not the equivalent of time given to the authorities to enforce removal after an expulsion order has been issued.

Following the Council decision, the European Parliament is expected to vote on the text on 18 June. CCME, CEC, COMECE and Caritas Europe addressed the Members of the European Parliament in a joint letter on 30 May 2008 raising once again their concerns over the proposed directive.

Council conclusions of 5-6 May 2008

http://www.eu2008.si/en/News_and_Documents/Council_Conclusions/June/0506_JHA-pr.pdf

CCME urges Italy to uphold European fundamental rights and take action against the violence against Roma people

The Churches' Commission for Migrants in Europe (CCME) expressed its concerns about the recent riots against Roma people in Italy and the increased level of intolerance and discrimination towards this specific ethnic group in a letter sent 19 May 2008 to Mr Roberto Maroni, Italian Minister of the Interior. CCME observes an unfortunate mixture of negative migration and ethnic minority discourse around these incidents in the Italian media. Doris Peschke, General Secretary of CCME affirmed that "while we would not dispute the problems around integration of migrants and ethnic minorities, we maintain that every person deserves dignity and equality before the law". She insisted on the right for fair trial. Whether a person is a criminal has to be determined by a competent court. "It cannot be tolerated", she stated, "that a group of people takes the law into their hands and raids a whole settlement and destroys their homes."

Read the full press release at:

http://www.ccme.be/secretary/NEWS/CCME_PressRelease_Rroma_Italy.pdf

Forthcoming events

7th Assembly of the European Christian Environmental Network

From 24 to 28 September 2008, the European Christian Environmental Network (ECEN) will hold its 7th Assembly under the title "The true challenge of climate change." At the invitation of the Federation of Protestant Churches in Italy, the Assembly will take place in the "Sacro Cuore" conference centre, near Milan.

In its scope and content, the 7th ECEN Assembly will follow up the outcomes of the previous Assembly "Living in the new energy era" organised in Sweden in September 2006. The Assembly will also take stock of the Third European Ecumenical Assembly, held in Sibiu in September 2007, in which environmental topics played a significant role.

The aims of the Assembly are:

- to identify the link between the theme of the Assembly and the life of the churches;

- to offer guidance to the churches in Europe for dealing with the challenge of climate change;
- to create space for sharing of practical examples of the churches' work on climate change;
- to deepen thematic activities in the network.

Along with reflections on developments within church and ecumenical life, the Assembly will pay attention to the developments on the international political scene, where the challenge of climate change is presented with increasing urgency. Outcomes of the recent UN meeting in Bali, as well as the latest EU initiatives, will provide the Assembly with its socio-political context.

More information about the Assembly is available at www.ecen.org

Other future CSC consultations

In addition to the above-mentioned events, CSC will, in the course of 2008, organise several other consultations on themes linked to its work programme. The meeting with churches from countries holding the upcoming EU Presidencies took place in Sweden on 26-27 May. More information on that event will follow in the next Europe Update. A consultation focusing on religion in the public sphere has been scheduled for November 2008. A brainstorming meeting on Ethics, Science and Technology is also planned for the year 2008.

Furthermore, CSC, in cooperation with COMECE and the Konrad Adenauer Foundation, will contribute to the European Year of Intercultural Dialogue 2008 by organising four seminars on Islam, Christianity and Europe, which will be targeted for the members of the European Parliament and EU civil servants. The report of the second seminar is attached to this Europe Update. The next seminars will take place in Brussels on 3 July and 11 September. For further information, please contact Ms Elina Eloranta, elo@cec-kek.be.



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The Church and Society Commission (CSC) is one of the commissions of the Conference of European Churches (CEC). The CSC links CEC's 125 member churches from all over Europe and its associated organisations with the European Union's institutions, the Council of Europe, the OSCE, NATO and the UN (on European matters). It engages its member churches and associated organisations in studies and projects relevant to church and society and thus supports and strengthens the common witness of European churches vis-à-vis the European Institutions and in the respective European societies.

This publication informs CEC members on European developments and related CSC activities. Members are welcome to use this publication as a channel to inform on their respective work. For comments or further information on the issues as well as to subscribe or unsubscribe, please contact csc@cec-kek.be. CSC Updates on European Affairs are also available on the CEC website at: <http://www.cec-kek.org/content/EuropeUpdates.shtml>