

12/31/11 - "An intra-Christian ethical code for missions:An introduction"

The following article by a Catholic and a Protestant author was published in German as an introduction to the printed German version of the ecumenical code "Christian Witness in a Multi-Religious World ? Recommendations for Conduct" in the journal "Materialdienst" by the Evangelische Zentralstelle für Weltanschauungsfragen (Protestant Central Office for World View Questions) of the Protestant Church in Germany. Translated by Dr. Richard McClary [Materialdienst vol. 74 (2011), issue 8, pp. 293-295 (text of the code pp. 295-299)].

Christian Troll SJ, Thomas Schirmmacher

Since 2006 the Pontifical Council for Interreligious Dialogue and the departments within the World Council of Churches and World Evangelical Alliance responsible for the relationship to other religions have worked on an ethical code for missions. Christian Troll SJ and Thomas Schirmmacher participated in the latest consultations in Bangkok, which have led to the recently published results entitled "Christian Witness in a Multi-Religious World ? Recommendations for Conduct." The ethical code is accessible on the internet on the website of the World Council of Churches (www.oikoumene.org).

The question of ethics in missions has in recent years increasingly been asked in intra-Christian dialogue[1] as well as in relationships between religions.[2] However, a political question has also been asked, and that is the extent to which the human right of religious freedom,[3] including the right to public self-expression on the part of religions and the right to religious conversion, may and must be limited by other human rights.[4]

The first consultation in Lariano, Italy in 2006 was interreligious. There, representatives of Christian denominations listened to adherents of different religions. In the end there was a joint avowal of religious freedom as well as an intra-Christian operational program.

When the second consultation occurred in Toulouse, France in 2007, it involved an intra-Christian assembly. The goal was to find a joint direction as well as to establish a problem catalog and a questionnaire. Questions relating to family, school,

education, social and medical care, the economy, politics, legislation, and violence were discussed. In the end there was a rough outline for the impending document.[5] A list was made of which means were to be qualified as unethical with respect to missions and were thus to be rejected. Included among them were the use of violence, threats, drugs, or brainwashing, but likewise also providing material advantages or the use of police or the army to propagate a religion. From a Christian point of view, such an ethical code for missions should more precisely label forms of abuse of religious freedom and at the same time not least offer assistance to politicians and governments.

A small group of about nine staff members of the Holy See, the World Council of Churches, and the World Evangelical Alliance met regularly in Genf, Bossey, and Rome from 2006 to 2011. As a result, they progressively formulated a recommended text, which in 2010 was sent to various church leaders, member churches, and commissions. Innumerable suggestions were evaluated and incorporated. The entire process was organized by three bodies, first The Pontifical Council for Interreligious Dialogue (PCID), to which delegation archbishops and other church leaders from Asia and Africa belonged, second the Office on Interreligious Relations and Dialogue of the World Council of Churches (IRRD), whose delegation also included representatives of oriental, orthodox, and Pentecostal churches in addition to evangelical church leaders. For the World Evangelical Alliance, the Religious Liberty Commission (RLC) and the Theological Commission were active. Through the inclusion of numerous church leaders from all continents, quick results were not able to be expected.

For the purpose of the third intra-Christian consultation, experts and high ranking church leaders met January 25 ? 28, 2011 in Bangkok for the sole purpose of working intensively on the final text. After the Bangkok meeting only minor details in the text were worked out an amended by the highest committees of the three respective bodies through mutual agreement.

All denominations which unequivocally speak out for and advocate religious liberty are interested that within Christianity there are joint discussions about the limits of religious freedom as well as about unethical methods of missions work. In the meantime everyone is aware of the fact that with respect to the questions named there are problems in all confessions and thus in this respect a self-critical intra-Christian dialogue is called for.

Christian witness essentially includes presenting one's own faith unfeigned to another. However, this is always to be done in a peaceful way and with deep respect for the dignity of other individuals. People who possibly want to become Christians should do this out of conviction and not in a calculating manner. They should have the opportunity to consider their decision and to make it freely and in utter trust in God. All forms of Christian witness and evangelization which do not correspond to these criteria and injure human dignity and human rights in one way or another are to be resolutely rejected as contradicting the good news of Christianity.

The code of conduct at hand does not have a canonical character. Situations in different countries and cultures are in fact so different that short, succinct statements can often not do them justice. For that reason, general guidelines have been formulated for the code.

[Deleted for reasons of space: The code of conduct at hand is in any event an unambiguous indication of the fact that the vast majority of the global Christian community clearly distances itself from every form of missions work that seeks to coerce or manipulate with psychological, financial, or physical might and power. Missions work is only justifiable within the framework of correctly understood religious freedom. It is based on the conviction that it is part of the basic dignity of an individual to be able to decide freely and concretely after careful consideration for a faith or world view one holds to be true and views to be compulsory for oneself. Daily we see people on television who use force or unfair means to spread their religion or at least attempt to do so.]

In its history, Christianity has in multiple cases employed dishonest means and has to be on guard against any relapse into former and abnormal attitudes and behavioral patterns. We thus view it as an extremely welcomed and long overdue sign that Christians now jointly and officially declare, as in the code at hand, that such methods are immoral and unchristian and thus contradict and distort the true sense of mission. Furthermore, they publicly obligate themselves to follow the principles named in the code as well as to allow their actions to be measured by them.

Paul calls upon believers in 1 Peter 3:15-17 to answer everyone's questions and to clearly defend one's own "hope," also towards those who wish us evil. However, they should do this with "gentleness and respect." People who do not hold to their

convictions are not partners for dialog to be taken seriously, but there is a world of difference between peaceful and respectful propagation and a forcible spreading of one's own conviction which does not respect the dignity of others. Christian witness is not an ethics-free space; it requires an ethical foundation which is biblically based, so that we truly do what Christ has assigned us to do.

Umbrella organizations have been founded by the Catholic Church, the National Council of Churches, and the National Evangelical Alliance in India and Malaysia. These organizations face the state with a single voice, especially when it comes to questions relating to missions work and laws against conversion formulated to oppose them. Ostracized and discriminated against via unjust laws, Christian confessions do not work against each other but rather with and for each other.

In recent decades there have been developments in all denominations which have made this affiliation possible in the first place. On the Catholic side this began with the Declaration on Religious Freedom at the Second Vatican Council. It awards state power sole concern for the secular public welfare and once and for all rejects the idea of a 'Catholic state' as being contradictory to religious freedom. This also includes the dismantling of prior enemy stereotypes and controversial topics between the World Council of Churches and Evangelicals ? thanks to an evangelical missiology which has become self-critical and an enhanced status awarded thought relating to missions over against political topics found in ecumenism. In the process, Churches in the south have been leading the way in building a bridge between the camps.

Let us hope that this code of conduct on missions is accompanied by regularly occurring consultations based on the model of the intra-Christian consultation in Bangkok which took place from January 25-28, 2011. In such consultations, Christian denominations should jointly scrutinize their particular conduct in missions work in a self-critical manner. On all sides, what is called for is self-critical, honest, interreligious dialog on questions of current, concrete behavior exhibited by religious groups towards each other.

[2] All codes on mission existing worldwide, secular, religious or Christian, are discussed and compared in Matthew K. Richards / Are L. Svendsen / Rainer Bless, Codes of Conduct for Religious Persuasion. The Legal Practice and Best Practices, in: International Journal for Religious Freedom (Cape Town) 3 (2010) 2, 65-104.

[3] Cf. die international academic consultation at the State University of Bamberg: Marianne Heimbach-Steins / Heiner Bielefeldt (Hg.), Religionen und Religionsfreiheit. Menschenrechtliche Perspektiven im Spannungsfeld von Mission und Konversion, Würzburg 2010.

[4] See the Oslo Declaration signed by all religions in Norway plus experts from the academic field: Oslo Declaration, Missionary Activities and Human Rights: Recommended Ground Rules for Missionary Activities, www.oslocoalition.org/mhr.php (5.7.2011).

[5] The programme is spelled out in the opening plenary in Toulouse: Thomas Schirmmacher, "But with gentleness and respect". Why missions should be ruled by ethics, short version: in: Current Dialogue (World Council of Churches) 50 (Februar 2008), 55-66, long version under www.worldevangelicals.org/news/article.htm?id=1372 (5.7.2011), German version: "Mit Sanftmut und Ehrerbietung". Warum die Mission von der Ethik bestimmt sein muss, in: Klaus W. Müller (Hg.), Menschenrechte ? Freiheit ? Mission, edition afem ? missions reports 18, Nürnberg 2010, 97-119.

Download "An intra-Christian ethical code for missions: An introduction" as PDF