

## **Church of Norway’s Response to CPCE Study text on “Protestant Perspectives on Religious Plurality in Europe”**

### **Introduction**

Church of Norway hereby wishes to express our gratitude to the Community of Protestant Churches in Europe for the study document “Protestant Perspectives on Religious Plurality in Europe”. Following a recommendation from the CPCE General Assembly in 2012, we deeply appreciate that time and effort have been put into a study on the religious situation in Europe, and the document has been read with great interest in our church.

The document has been treated in the Church of Norway Council on Ecumenical and International Relations, its Theological Commission, as well as in the Bishops’ Conference, before its final adoption. In this particular process, we have also been able to seek advice from one of the members of the CPCE drafting group. The process has taken quite some time, and we apologise for the prolonged delay of our response. We are grateful for the understanding CPCE has shown for this delay.

We have organised our response according to the key questions following the document chapters. Kindly find the final response from Church of Norway below.

***1. Do you think that a proper outline of the situation in Europe is given in part 2 of the document?***

***Which aspects would you like to see further elaborated upon and which made more precise?***

Chapter 2 attempts to describe Europe and the religious situation in Europe. In itself it is a demanding task to describe such a complex situation. We appreciate the chapter, as it gives a useful introduction to the document as a whole. Although some things may seem self-explanatory, an introduction needs to give a general overview of the situation. This chapter does provide a good overview, showing that the religious – including the Christian – landscape is very diverse. The relations between minority and majority situation is an important part of explaining this diversity. We also appreciate that the chapter is built on a geographical understanding of Europe, rather than a political, economic or mythical definition. In fact, we would like to point out that the chapter may be useful in an educational context.

In our process, several topics have been brought up that could have been further developed in the introduction. At the same time, we understand that there is a limit to how much can be included. One of the topics that could be considered is to bring in longer historical perspectives on the religious developments in Europe. Also, the context of increased secularisation and changes in church – state relations could have been developed further. At some points in the introduction, it seems that too much is described in a few sentences, e.g.: “The religious change in Europe may be expressing secularisation, or pluralisation, or the return of religion, or the transformation of religion, or even a combination of these ideas”. At

the same time the situation probably is all of this, and we recognise the dilemma of describing a situation that is very complex and sometimes even contradictory.

In the introduction we would have appreciated a clearer definition of the term *religion*. In other contexts, religion is sometimes being defined as *the established religions*, other times it is a more diffuse concept. A chosen and explained definition of religion could be helpful in sorting out the complexity of religious plurality. It may also be helpful with a clearer definition of religion, for the sake of the theological discussion. An element of religion, which we would have liked to see reflected in a document on religious plurality, is also the mystery – the wonder – of religion.

Chapter 2.4. "Dealing with religious diversity" ends with a paragraph summarising challenges that religious plurality presents for the churches. The paragraph seems to say that the situation creates a need for Protestant churches to "give account of their values and convictions" (line 345). This would imply that there already is a certain set of convictions among the Protestant churches, that they will need to defend, even with one voice. However, this assumption does not seem to be the case for the rest of the document, which seems to have a fresh and more open approach to how churches encounter the situation of religious plurality.

***2. Do you deem that documents your church has published are properly described and incorporated in part 3 of the document?***

***Would you please let us know if there are any texts that we appear to have overlooked?***

We are grateful for the presentation of the documents from Church of Norway, which to this end is satisfactory. We find that part 3 of the document provides a very useful overview, as well as material for further studies. We acknowledge the time and energy put into this chapter.

If anything, we would like to comment on the first part of the chapter, 3.1, "Ecumenical guidelines". The study of ecumenical documents gives a useful glimpse into the discussions on inter-religious dialogue among the different actors of the ecumenical movement. It is interesting to note that while WCC has renewed its approach to mission and evangelism, the evangelical movement has opened up to discussions around inter-religious dialogue. It would be useful for this overview to bring in the document "The Cape Town Commitment" from 2010.

***3. Do you think that part 4 provides a helpful orientation aid regarding the basic principles of interreligious encounters and cooperation?***

Part 4 provides rich theological and biblical reflections on inter-religious encounters. We note that the chapter starts with a systematic reflection of *radical grace*, before discussing the concept of truth in Christian faith, before it finally looks into biblical material. We recognise the hermeneutical explanation given for this order, and will offer our comments accordingly.

To use the notion of *radical grace* is an interesting entry point and hermeneutical key to the discussion on Protestant theology in the face of religious plurality. *Radical grace* can be interpreted from several theological viewpoints, depending on the understanding of Christ and God's grace. The text explores the theme at different levels, which invites to broader

discussions. We also find it timely to bring forward *radical grace* in the 500<sup>th</sup> anniversary year of the reformation.

At the same time *radical grace* is an ambitious and demanding entry point. How God's radical grace can be used as a theologically consistent methodology is one of the basic problems of Christian theology. The concept of radical grace will always relate to a certain breach, a broken relationship. Grace cannot be used as a confirmation of grace, without exploring the need for God's grace, from the viewpoint of a broken relationship. We would appreciate further reflections on the Christian confession of the revelation of God, where the broken relationship is restored through the grace of God.

We appreciate the chapter 4.2, "Truth in Christian faith". The two first paragraphs of 4.2.3, "Living in the truth provides space for openness", gives very broad perspectives on truth in a few sentences. Perhaps a part of this could be further un-packed, e.g. by giving a clearer explanation of the sentence: "As embedded normativity it exists in, and with, the persons who live in it and who connect with God in a living relationship" (lines 1010 – 1011).

The last part of chapter 4, dealing with Biblical texts, invites to further study. One could discuss the transition from the systematic theological parts into the biblical theology. One option would be to treat the biblical material alongside the systematic discussions on *radical grace* and *Christian truth*. However, we find that the biblical material presented is very relevant to the theme. The text provides rich examples of the preaching and practices of Jesus. In fact, the chapter concludes by stating that being open towards people of other faiths is to follow Jesus' example (lines 1224 – 1226).

Regarding the biblical material, we would have liked to see further reflections on the relationship between the Father and the Son, as well as reflections on a Trinitarian understanding of God.

We also question the way part 4.3.2. on the New Testament deals with certain other religions. The chapter is rather general, and it could have explored the relationship with the Jews further. We miss a reflection on the relationship between the New Testament and Islamic teaching on the New Testament. Compared to e.g. Asian religions, it is particularly these two religions (Judaism and Islam) who are exposed to the biblical material, and therefore relate in their particular ways to the biblical material. We acknowledge that this may be a very large topic, but perhaps one could consider distinguishing between religions that relate to the biblical material in a different way than Christians, and other religions. Another option would be to initiate a separate study on the relationship between Protestantism and Judaism, and Protestantism and Islam. Another option would be to elaborate further on the paragraph that deals with "misuse of biblical texts" (lines 1057 – 1061).

**4. How do you regard the thoughts and recommendations outlined in part 5?  
Which aspects would you wish to emphasise or expand?**

Again, we appreciate the thoughts and recommendations outlined in part 5 of the document. We find it relevant that the document concludes with a more practical theological part, presenting concrete challenges. However, we recognise the difficulty of naming concrete challenges, since the task of practicing dialogue is perceived in very different ways: "For

some, dialogue is part of their spiritual journey; for others, dialogue is more of an intellectual adventure. For others again it is a socio-political necessity” (lines 1982 – 1983).

In chapter 5, a certain tension between religion in the private sphere and in the public sphere can be read between the lines. This makes the question of what possibilities there are for dialogue rather complex, because it also depends on how much and in which way our societies are affected by modernisation and secularisation. We appreciate that this complexity is present in the document, and the mention of concrete challenges. One such example is the importance of bringing in gender perspectives in the dialogue, while gender issues at the same time may be challenging to the dialogue (chapter 5.2).

Then, there are certain aspects of living together in religiously plural societies that we would have liked to see expanded. One such topic is connected to how we as Christian churches give *witness* to the world. Another aspect, which could have been explored further, is how we relate to *religious spirituality* within interfaith dialogue. What can we say about religious mysteries and wondering? It may be helpful to share some reflections on *what are the limits to what we can say* about religious spirituality. Finally, this leads to what may be the biggest challenge, which is not other religions’ claim to truth, but rather the notion that there is *no truth at all*. A relevant dichotomy today is that between nihilism and trust, the lack of hope versus hope.

While we find chapter 5 important, we would still ask what the connection between the different chapters is, and what the overall purpose of the document is. In the introduction we find mention of the purpose: “...how to constructively shape interreligious relations and how to view such relations theologically” (lines 43 – 44). Particularly chapters 4 and 5 try to respond to this challenge. Perhaps a way of clarifying this would be to look at how the Protestant notion of *radical grace* can be brought into the discussion on how we relate to other religions in practice, and how we live together for the better of society. We strongly recommend that CPCE continues to explore what particular contributions can be made by Protestant churches, for instance in their interpretation of grace.

***5. Should the CPCE continue to examine this topic over the forthcoming years?  
What particular kind of support does your church most need from the CPCE?***

The document contains deep theological reflections and provides interesting perspectives on religious plurality. We are perfectly aware that the document cannot provide a complete guide to the theology of religions, but we appreciate the attempt to raise a number of issues related to religious plurality that are relevant to the churches, and in an accessible way. This way the document serves as a resource to the churches, gives legitimate reasons to open up for inter-religious dialogue, and provides a guide for entering into dialogue.

Since the religious situation in Europe is continuously changing, we believe the topic will continue to be of utmost relevance. We therefore strongly recommend that further studies be undertaken in the coming years, also in areas of disagreements, that reflect the complex situation of Europe.

We have mentioned that the document is useful for study and discussions within the church. In our discussions it has also become clear that the document is relevant for educational purposes, such as theological and religious studies. We would therefore like to challenge the

CPCE to look at ways of developing the material for academic purposes, either as a whole, or in part, as well as for study purposes within the churches.

With this, Church of Norway would like to offer our sincere thanks to the CPCE for providing an in-depth study on one of the most relevant challenges the churches in Europe are facing today. We warmly welcome further studies on the topic of religious plurality, and we will be happy to contribute in any way that CPCE may find useful.

Yours sincerely,

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