

Religion and Society in Europe Partners or Competitors?

Theology conference - 3-9 October 2006
Haslev, Copenhagen, Denmark



Conference Report



Introduction

From the 3rd to the 10th of October over 40 students from all across Europe and from different Denominations gathered together at Haslev Folk High School near Copenhagen in Denmark to discuss the question of how religion and state co-operate in Europe. The conference began with an



Ecumenical act of worship. This was repeated each evening throughout the conference. The worships reflected what had happened during each day, the lectures, the workshops and the informal conversations shared between participants.

This was followed by introductions and ice breakers. The highlight of these icebreakers focused on the question 'how do the intricate parts of the human body interact together?

Participants acted out the interweaving relationships of the members of the body, personifying organs, veins, and blood. The body must work together, in partnership, to survive. The exercise set the tone for the week, in which all participants would work together to explore the question of how religion interlaces into society



Wednesday



The first full day of the conference began with a joint Anglican and Roman Catholic morning worship. The first lecture of the conference was given by Peter Lodberg, Associate Professor at the University of Aarhus, entitled "Church Involvement in 'Civitas

Terrena.’ What are the Limits of Church Contribution to Politics?’ The lecture began with a historical overview of Church-State relations and then focused primarily on the situation in Denmark finishing with discussion on the role that the Ecumenical movement in Church/State relations. It was therefore great introduction to the conference and was followed by a lively discussion.

After lunch, participants took a historical tour of the town of Haslev, led by Per Vibskov, the director of the folk school where our conference was held. The town houses many traditional folk schools, which have strong Christian roots, fuelling historical discussions on the relationships of Church and educational systems.



After the tour a panel discussion on globalisation that covered many differing areas of the topic was presented by three of the participants, Thorsten Nilges from Germany, Lilit Varzhapetyan from Armenia and Eva Bernhagen from Denmark. These differed from efforts to protect producers through free trade goods to the damaging effects of globalisation on individual cultures. The discussion provided background for future lectures and discussions on the AGAPE process and on empire.

The session before dinner comprised of three workshops led by the participants. Angharad Jones, a member of the ERC from SCM UK, facilitated a workshop on gender roles in the Church and State. Andrew Scott, also from SCM UK, introduced a Bible reading technique developed in South Africa by those who were marginalised. A third workshop continued the discussion of globalisation and interfaith questions that arose during the panel discussion moderated by Lukas Trebula from Slovakia.

The highlight of Wednesday evening was the Movement Market and Intercultural evening. Participants shared dances, foods, stories, quizzes, and songs from their own cultures. From learning line dances, singing the Dutch national anthem in Dutch, physically forming Mt. Ararat, and spinning across the room in a Russian dance, the intercultural evening was a night of variety and laughs.



Thursday

On Thursday, after Orthodox morning worship, Dr. Lars Reuter, from Aarhus University, gave a lecture entitled “Ethics in Genetics—Possibilities and Pitfalls”. The lecture began with background in ethics, distinguishing between ethics as an ‘individual enterprise’ and as a ‘professional discipline’, going on to ask the question ‘are ethics genetically determined?’ He then went on to the emotive topic of the ethics of genetic research, which fuelled a time of discussion that spilled over into lunchtime.



After lunch, participants from around Europe took part in a discussion panel on the “Different Patterns of Church and State Relationships in Europe.” Amanda Hill from the U.K., Bogdan Popescu from Romania, Natallia Vasilevich from Belarus, and Andreas Carlmark from Norway each revealed differing histories and differing perspectives on the need for and strength of the relationship between church and state, leading to a lively interactive dialogue.

Later in the afternoon, Nikolaos Dimitriadou, from the Youth Organisation of Saint Athanasios in Greece, led a workshop entitled ‘dialogue with Osama’ on interfaith dialogue, a hot topic of conversation throughout the week. The workshop challenged to participants to think about the question ‘who is my neighbour?’ and led to a discussion of the role of the media in the interfaith debate. Christian Hoff, from Denmark, led an interactive workshop entitled “Sugar or Salt,” focusing on the parables of Jesus in the Bible to address the question of how the Gospel is presented.



In the evening, participants watched “Adams Æbler” (Adam’s Apples), a Danish film, giving a view into Danish humour, sparking laughs, and leading to discussions on the nature of evil and religious symbolism.

Friday

Friday was excursion day, and we went by train into Copenhagen. We began the morning in the Danish parliament, and heard a lecture from Caroline Lucas, a member of the Danish Parliament, on her view of the relationship between the Danish government and the state Lutheran Church. Her lecture led to a discussion, as many different governmental traditions and views were represented by many different cultures.



We then visited Copenhagen Cathedral, and heard another lecture from Anders Borre Gadegaard - Rural Dean of Copenhagen Cathedral. He continued to talk on our theme and proved an interesting follow on from Caroline Lucas.



We were able to explore Copenhagen, finding small cafes for coffee breaks, before going on a boat tour of the city. On the tour, we learned about the history of Copenhagen, its royal family, its new buildings, the independent youth island, and



its unusually clean water. We were able to see the famous statue of the Little Mermaid, from one of Hans Christian Anderson's fairy tales, whose head is often stolen and has to be remade. We then had the opportunity to explore the city more, and some participants ran into the actor who played the



character of Gunnar in the movie we watched the night before. The Danish participants graciously hosted us for a delicious dinner at a church in Copenhagen which holds unique youth ministries.



Saturday



The Reformed participants began the fullest day of the conference with the morning worship. Rev. Rudiger Noll, Director of the "Church and Society Commission" of the Conference of the European Churches, gave a lecture entitled, "The Future EU Constitution. Space for God or Not?" This began with an introduction to the EU constitution and a fascinating insight into how the Churches and Society Commission, part of CEC-KEK, has influenced the writing of the constitution. There followed an energetic interactive discussions which continued into lunch.

Rev. Darrel Jackson, a Researcher in European Mission and Evangelism for the Conference of European Churches, gave a lecture entitled "The Future of the Institutional Church in Europe." Discussion groups focused on the definition of, the need for, and the strength of the Institutional church. We also participated in brainstorming sessions on innovative church ideas to impact society.

In the session before dinner, Dr. Rogate Mshana, Program Executive for Economic Justice JPC - WCC, gave a lecture entitled, "The AGAPE Document - An Effective Answer to Globalisation?" He gave an overview of progress of the AGAPE document, from the WCC general assembly in Harare in 1997 to the general assembly in Porto Alegre in 2006. This was followed by discussion groups which looked at the document called the 'AGAPE call' and we brainstormed ways in which globalization is manifested in our churches, communities, and nations, and on methods to combat globalization.



After dinner Maria Gogonea, from Romania, led a workshop entitled 'Empire', based on her experience at a WSCF interregional event in Nairobi, Kenya on the topic. She focused on methods to combat Empire, and this topic proved of great interest to a number of the participants and Maria encouraged and inspired those participants to want to know more about the topic.

Sunday

On Sunday, after a Lutheran Worship, we listened to and participated in interfaith dialogue of the topic of human rights with Olga Israel, the chair of the European Union of Jewish Studies (EUJS), and Henna Szovati, a representative from the Forum of European Muslim Youth and Student Organisations (FEMYSO). Both speakers emphasized that the similarities in human values between Islam, Judaism, and Christianity, and called for increased interfaith dialogue, while explaining differing aspects of their individual faiths. Their presentations sparked many questions and interactive discussions. This was a highlight of the conference and all the participants were drawn into thinking about a multi-faith Europe.

After lunch, Beate Fagerli, EEA3 Assembly Secretary for the Conference of European Churches gave the final lecture of the conference, entitled “The Importance of the Ecumenical Movement in Contemporary Society,” and provided a forum for brainstorming about the chosen topics for the upcoming EEA3 assembly to be held in 2007 in Romania.

The final formal inputs of the conference were workshops. Aura Nortomaa from Finland led a workshop on ‘Human rights, Religious rights and the rights of sexual minorities’. Andrew Scott from the UK, inspired by UK SCM’s tradition of always having an action to leave a conference with, led a workshop on what practical actions participants could do following the conference. It was decided to continue the conversation over email after the conference.

The final day of the conference concluded with a farewell party, including late night dancing, discussions, snacks, and picture slideshows from the week.



Conclusion

The conference provided an ideal forum for the discussion of the relationship of church and society, fuelled by contributions from participants with diverse backgrounds and opinions. Throughout the week interactive discussions on the role of society and the church broadened to include current discussions of interfaith dialogue and gender issues, as well as the governments’ involvement in both. We were truly able to explore the complex issue of church and state relations, as well as the impact and influence of the Church on society and in our everyday lives.



Those responsible for the conference were Bogdan Popescu, Romania; Angharad Parry Jones, UK; Csaba Orova, Hungary; Christian Hoff, Sweden; Thorsten Roehrbaek and Morten Skrubbeltrang, Denmark.