



FREEDOM OF RELIGION: HEARING ALL THE CRIES

Acknowledging Our Context

The World Communion of Reformed Churches is committed to the flourishing of all of God's creation. Throughout our history we have discerned together the signs of the times and have confessed our rejection of fascism and other forms of tyranny, systematic evils and the denial of the fullness of life for all. Therefore, today as we witness a growing escalation in religiously fuelled hate crimes, and consequently the denial of human dignity, and the freedom of religion, belief and expression, we cannot stay silent, but are instead called to continually reform and be reformed. In line with our 2017 General Council's strong call to hear the cries of suffering people, we call on our churches to take a side, the side of the oppressed. It is for this reason that between the 25th and the 27th of February 2020, a group of 22 church leaders and theologians met in Frankfurt, Germany, to deliberate together and find a faithful paradigm of thinking over the issue of the "Freedom of Religion or Belief."

The choice of venue became particularly significant since a few days before the meeting a person who professed a far-right agenda shot and killed nine persons from "immigrant communities" in the nearby town of Hanau. And neither was the time insignificant since during our meeting New Delhi, India, was wrecked by religiously justified violence that was mainly directed towards its minority Muslim population. We recognized the violence faced by Christian communities in various parts of the world including but not restricted to Indonesia, Cameroon and South Sudan. The group was made acutely aware of the urgency of our task by these incidents, but we were also chronically aware that these were a mere continuation of what seems to be a global trend that is denying the freedom of expression and articulation of religions. The rise of ethno-nationalisms, xenophobia, interreligious intolerance, patriarchal hegemony and racism globally has used various religious traditions to prop up their agenda. This is not only of deep concern but urgently calls on us to confess our faith together, globally and ecumenically. We further recognized that the present global climate necessitates interreligious cooperation and the building of alliances that are committed to a world that is predicated on justice and freedom.

Affirming Our Convictions

We affirm that our Scriptures assert the centrality of justice to our faith (Deuteronomy 16:20) and that God requires justice from humanity (Micah 6:4), and therefore the question of the freedom of religion must be located in the question of justice. We therefore approached this from the perspective of justice.

The group was guided by the conviction that a framework of engagement must be grounded in the experiences of the vulnerable and marginalized, those whose religious rights and identities have been violated and persecuted. Noting that in the context of religious violence, religion often serves as an identity marker that serves as a rallying point for underlying economic and material interests. We were further aware that religion is only one of the many identities because as humans we bear multiple identities which intersect with each other, and as such can make us more vulnerable to systems of oppression—namely ethnicity, gender, caste, class and sexuality. Indeed, it is also often the case that several of us carry even more than a singular religious identity, either by practice or by family relationships. Often what is named as religious violence in actuality involves, though does not invoke, these other identities as well. We therefore recognize that in the context of polarization and religious nationalism, those most vulnerable to violence are those who are "othered" and reduced to singular identities.

Analyzing Our Perspectives

We recognized and valued the importance of the present legal framing of the freedom of religion or belief and the protections it offers to the vulnerable and the responsibilities required from states. We upheld the Universal Declaration Human Rights, article 18, which says: “Everyone has the right to freedom of thought, conscience and religion; this right includes freedom to change his or her religion or belief, and freedom, either alone or in community with others and in public or private, to manifest his or her religion or belief in teaching, practice, worship and observance.”

However, we also understood that in the present discourse the right to freedom of religion or belief as a human right emerges from a particular Eurocentric, geopolitical perspective that attempts to create itself into the only paradigm from which the freedom of religion can and must be seen. We were particularly cognizant that the present legal framework and even laws which protect religious freedom do not emerge in a vacuum but instead from a political economic context that materializes from and is in support of neoliberal imperial capitalism, in other words “empire.” In such a situation, religion and religious practice are relegated to the private sphere and become a commodity to be consumed along with other commodities. As long as any religion or religious tradition plays along with the rules of this game it is tolerated. But we acknowledge that our faith compels us to speak in the public square and have a prophetic voice.

It was highlighted that there are places in which the right to freedom of religion was being upheld as the primary right and was being weaponized against the vulnerable. This is particularly true in places where the freedom of religion or belief has been hijacked by the dominant in order to perpetuate discrimination against minorities and the marginalized. As it was noted that there is an increasing tendency among the majority to project itself as a “victim” and abuse narratives of suffering to legitimize the violence on the “other.”

We debated the role of the state in the protection of the right to the freedom of religion or belief. While states should guarantee the right to the freedom of religion, we recognize that states are not neutral and that even constructs of the secular state are riddled with problems. Existing democratic institutions do not always work to serve those who are oppressed, and the church should challenge these institutions to serve the cause of justice of all the oppressed. Our common human situation is not going to be helped by universalizing one particular understanding of secular democracy.

We recognize that the right to the freedom of religion or belief is indivisible from all other human rights. For example, the right to the freedom of religion cannot be used to discriminate against sexual minorities as being practiced in certain countries. However, we also recognize that the present discourse on human rights is particularly anthropocentric, ignoring the rights of the earth. We seek to learn from Indigenous traditions that see the earth itself as having rights and that our rights as human rights is intrinsically connected to the rights of the earth.

Admitting the Complexity of Our Scripture and Tradition

Given this situation it is necessary that we imagine a framework for religious freedom that is located in and emerges from the cries of the most vulnerable in our communities and societies. It should offer a space for their cries to not only be heard but their perspectives to lead the thinking on the freedom of religion. Such attentiveness to the divine self-disclosure in the struggles of those beyond the bounded and bordered imaginations of the powerful should be the axis around which responses to this issue should be framed. This should be a deep listening to the stories of those who have been abused by religion that should disturb us and bend us out of shape, so that we as a church

would be healed by those very people, we set out to heal. We recognize that in many contexts it is Christian communities that are themselves vulnerable and are subject to violence. We recognize further that even within one particular religious tradition there are minorities who are oppressed and are oppressed precisely because of their theological traditions and embodied vulnerabilities. We further recognize that women across all religious traditions suffer the consequences of these toxic theologies and scriptural interpretations that consign women to subservience and silence. Yet we also heard and acknowledged testimonies of resistance and communities that offered hope.

We discerned the problems and promises of our Scriptures on the subject of the freedom of religion or belief. While we were, on the one hand, enabled to see the impulse towards religious freedom in Scripture, on the other hand, we could also equally recognize that the Bible has texts that call for the annihilation of the other (Ezekiel 23) and towards genocide (Joshua 6)—calls that are problematically and violently appropriated even today. We recognize that the Bible is a site of contention and is often used against the religious “other.” Yet we also note that in Christ we are called to freedom (Galatians 5:1) and that includes the freedom of religion.

It is through the lens of the “othered” as we live out Jesus’ command to love your neighbour that we witness the moments of liberation in our Scriptures, where the bodies of the vulnerable find hope in the vulnerable and silenced bodies of Scripture. So we look to the persecuted woman who walks into the houses of the religious elites to sit at the feet of Jesus (Luke 7: 36-50); her presence and the affirmation of Jesus shamed systems of prejudice that marginalized her and regain her religious freedoms at the side of Christ. We look to the many stories of Jesus touching those who were considered impure, transgressing boundaries of purity and pollution and bringing healing (Mark 1:40-45; 10:46-52, John 9), displaying to us what true freedom of religious expression looks like. We therefore recognize the vulnerable bodies of the faithful who resist societal and political dogmas of oppression, whose lives we must bear witness to as we discern our purpose and confess our sins.

Similarly, we recognize the complexity of our own Reformed heritage on the question of freedom of religion. During the Reformation communities of refugees sought to discern what it meant to have religious freedom. However, this was often an exclusive understanding of religious freedom which meant religious freedom for the self and not for others. Yet we seek to draw inspiration from this same Reformed heritage. We looked to John Calvin who professed that all humans have inherent God-given dignity, meaning our rights are rooted in God. In the language of Calvin, God has rights and these rights also offer human rights, including the right to freedom and the right to justice. This is the God of the Cross, through whom we also derive our hope; therefore, denial of such rights is denial of God in whose image we are made. We reaffirm the cross as the symbol of resistance against religion and state where characterized by hegemony and violence of dominant and dominating power. We therefore cannot speak about the freedom of religion without speaking of justice and dignity of all humans.

We recognize both the complexities of our own faith, Scripture and traditions and yet we also recognize our own failing to live up to our best ideals. We recognize that the church has failed in its duty towards others. We have been inward-looking and serving our own interests. We call for a self-critical assessment of our history and change in our practice.

Articulating Our Vision

We recognize the suffering that communities within our own communion face, we similarly recognize our own complicity. As ambassadors of Christ, called to work for justice and to be peacemakers, we strongly condemn all forms of religious discrimination, oppression and persecution.

In this context, we privilege the perspectives of the marginalized, the communities of imagination, those whose stories are shared through acts and arts of resistance. We heard such stories and upheld such exemplary examples of cooperation and solidarity in interreligious communities for the sake of justice and freedom of all. These communities display a resistance to the dogmas of the empire, despite and precisely through vulnerability. We heard the stories of communities broken by religious violence but who worked towards restoration and reconciliation. In these stories we found hope!

We are called to assume a theology of courageous risk and a radical and mutual hospitality. For this we can look to examples of religious cooperation and support even in the midst of religious violence. We recognize that only an interreligious community of imagination can challenge nationalist notions of intolerant religiosity that deny the dignity and religious freedoms of the vulnerable. We call for a lived theology of resistance, restoration and reconciliation.