Keynote Presentation: "Religious Freedom: Europe's Story"

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RELIGIOUS FREEDOM, THE BASIS OF ALL FREEDOM

In this lecture, it is not my intention, to sum up what I wrote in my book. You all could or will be able to read that yourself. Rather, against the background of the historical survey, I would like to table some considerations on the idea of religious freedom as such. Almost I had said: the phenomenon of religious freedom. But religious freedom is not a reality, to be demonstrated or seen. It is an idea, an ideal, to be realised, time and again. History shows how much people had to suffer, to struggle, for that realisation, At some moments, by exception, it seemed at hand; not for very long, though. But we cannot abandon the idea. It continues to fascinate us.
My lecture will contain three main parts. First a consideration of what is understood by "religious freedom". We will see that and how western and eastern Europe lay different emphases here..Secondly, we will discuss how religious freedom is under fire today, both in East and in West. Thirdly and finally, we will consider that and why religious freedom is indispensable, the basis of all freedom in society.

1. Religious freedom in West and East

By way of introduction, let me share with you a few stories and cases.
In a consultation on Religious Freedom and Liberty in Eastern and Central Europe, organised by the World Council of Churches and held in Bossey near Geneva in December 2001, Alexander Belopopsky, a WCC staff member on behalf of the Russian Orthodox Church, stated that, in dealing with the issue of religious freedom, one should distinguish between non-discrimination and full equality. In other words: a situation in which there is no full equality of all religious groups, is not necessarily a situation of discrimination. In his opinion, it is a matter of course, that minority groups do not have the same rights, or the same privileges, as the majority has. As he argued, a situation of full equality of minority and majority groups exists nowhere in Europe. It is especially in western Europe, that one pleas in favour of the standard of full equality - but such a plea, according to Belopopsky, is just a matter for export
This statement is a typical illustration of the difference of perspective on religious freedom between East and West. Apparently, the speaker felt urged to defend himself and his own, Russian situation (in which the Russian Orthodox Church is by far the largest religious group) over against western accusations. What he really wanted to say is, I think, that the western world should take a more realistic position. It should not blame non-western societies too easily for their so-called "violation of the right to religious freedom"; the more so as it self obviously does not meet its own criteria of religious freedom.
At the same time, Belopopsky's remark confronts us with the question of the limits of "religious freedom". Where is religious freedom at stake, and where is it not? Is religious freedom already being violated in a situation in which majority groups (as in Russia the Russian Orthodox Church) have more rights than minority groups, -in which it has privileges the other religious groups do not have? Or should one have a more open eye to what is really possible under the concrete circumstances? In the latter case, the "black list" of countries in which

the right of religious freedom is considered not guarenteed could be much shorter.
Are Islamic states to be mentioned on that list? One might say: it depends. In the Islamic world, the situation is not everywhere the same. In history, Christians and Jews had a relative freedom, under Islamic rule; quite different from the situation of Muslims living under Christisan rule but, indeed, only a relative freedom. They were (are) minority groups in Islamic societies. Being a minority group always has a limitation of possibilities as a consequence. One is not in a position to influence politics, as majority groups are. The minority has to adapt. Is that already a violation of the right to religious freedom?
By way of comparison, let us consider for a moment the situation in England. Here, the Church of England still has the position of a State Church, under the king or queen as its supreme governor. May be, this is not so much because it is still the majority Church, as because of tradition: this Church has been part of English national identity ever since the Reformation time. Church (this Church) and nation are simply inseparable, as can be seen at any national celebration, The Church of England has its privileges, its status, that other Churches and religious groups in England, in the United Kingdom, do not have, although these have full right of existence (at the latest since the beginning of the nineteenth century). Is this today a matter of violation of the right of religious freedom? Probably, nobody would think so. But let us be not too fast in our conclusions. Recently, there was an information about an official complaint, made by Danish citizens with the European Court of Human Rights against the State of Denmark, that in their view is too closely linked to one specific Church: the Evangelical Lutheran Church of Denmark. Lutheran pastors are still being paid by the state, and so, indirectly, by the Danish tax-payers, non-Lutheran citizens included. The Lutheran Church is the Danish State Church. Its pastors function as civil servants, at civil solemnization of marriages, at the registration of births etc. It is by far the majority Church: over 80 percent of the Danish population belongs to its constituency. No wonder that non-Lutherans, e.g. Roman Catholics, feel placed at a disadvantage. Probably, the complaint will not be successful. In Denmark, religious freedom is not jeopardised, we say. The complainers should be realistic and accept their minority status. Yet, apparently, they feel affected in their human rights.
We come to a first, preliminary conclusion. Religious freedom has more consequences than one might imagine at first sight. It might be at stake, even where one would think it to be still unthreatened.

Now, we get right to the point. Basic for our discussion of religious freedom is article 18 of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, adopted by the United Nations General Assembly on December 10, 1948. This article reads as follows: "Everyone has the right to freedom of thought, conscience and religion; this right includes freedom to change his religion or belief, and freedom, either alone or in community with others and in public or private, to manifest his religion or belief in teaching, practice, worship and observance."
The establishment and official acceptance of this declaration by all UN member states was a milestone on a long way.. Throughout history, specific groups had defended and fought for their specific rights, over against other groups. The idea that human rights, including the right of religious freedom, are not just group privileges but universal rights indeed, is fairly new. In Europe, it was expressed for the first time in the context of the French Revolution, in 1789 (and that revolution was the outcome of the 18th century western European Enlightenment movement). It was then, in 1789, that the ideals of Liberty, Equality and Fraternity were proclaimed. not just on behalf of France, but of all humanity. That, however, did not prevent two world wars. It was only in 1948, after the horror of these world wars, that the basic idea of human rights could be universally proclaimed and could find general acceptance - at least in theory.

UN resolutions are not binding laws; they are only recommendations and cannot be enforced. However, as adopted by the UN General Assembly, they represent world opinion and therefore carry great weight. That certainly goes for the resolution (universal declaration) of human rights. Moreover, later on, its main points have been included in several official covenants. The article on religious freedom is quoted in the European Convention on Human Rights , drawn up within the Council of Europe, ratified by all its member States and in force since 1953. Again, this convention is not binding law. Yet, it has a moral authority. The Council of Europe, in which the member States cooperate, established also a special Commission and Court of Human Rights, for dealing with complaints of abuse of human rights, as defined in the Convention, by any of the member States. All this shows that the issue of human rights, including the right to religious freedom, is taken seriously, on an official level. State authorities are involved and responsible vis-à-vis their citizens for safeguarding these rights.
This gives us a first clue. Religious freedom is indeed a matter of the relationship between Church (or broader: religion) and State. To what extent, in a given context, religious freedom is a reality largely depends on the State policy: whether or not it leaves and defends an open space in which the right to freedom of religion can be fully enjoyed by anyone. History shows, how much State authorities, kings and rulers always were inclined to minimize that open space and to decide on behalf of their subjects on what had to be their religion. Church and State were closely connected over the centuries; in a mono-religious society, especially in western, medieval Europe. In the East the situation was different in so far as under Turkish domination (from the 15th century on) Christians were forced to live side by side with Muslims, as second-class, but well-treated and tolerated, citizens in the Islamic state. State and religion remained closely connected; only, the official religion was now Islam, not Christianity.
The way towards a society in which religious plurality was fully accepted was long and difficult. That way was gone in western Europe, after the 16th century Reformation..After a period of religious wars, in the 16th and 17th century, one first responded by raising the slogan: "cuius regio, eius religio", "whose region, his religion", thus continuing the system in which at least in each territory one specific religion was the official and privileged one. Rulers were convinced, that would promote order and peace among their subjects. That system began to collapse only in the 18th century, under the influence of the Enlightenment. The connection between (a specific) Church and State was loosened. So, religious freedom became a possibility.
In the East, religious freedom was not at stake at all. A Reformation. like in the West, did not take place here. Eastern Christians were not at all confronted with the challenge of religious plurality among themselves. From Christian, Eastern Orthodox point of view, religious freedom remained a matter of selfevidence. Islam had its own policy of toleration.
Of course, with reference to religious freedom, religious people have their own responsibility. If religious people do not tolerate each other, religious freedom will not come about or will get lost, even if the government interferes and keeps the quarrelling parties violently apart. For religious freedom to become or to remain a reality, mutual respect of the respective religious groups for each other is necessary. In the relationship between (Christians as members of) Churches, such mutual respect is usually called: ecumenism. The ecumenical movement, that started in the beginning of the 20th century, aims at overcoming traditional Church divisions and making visible the unity all Christians and Churches (in the whole "ecumene", i.e.: in the entire inhabited world) believe they already essentially have in Christ. Churches that get engaged in that movement (e.g. by their membership of the World Council of Churches, or by their cooperation with that Council) do not necessarily each abandon their claim to be itself the purest, truest, manifestation of the one and catholic (universal) Church of Christ; they recognize, however, that other Churches also represent (at least) elements of this

Church as it was founded and intended by Christ. By that recognition they feel obliged to seek to enter into living contact with these other Churches Where this ecumenical attitude exists, religious freedom is not far away.

So far, I spoke of "religious freedom". The title of my book speaks, more fully, of "freedom of religion and belief". These two concepts, "religion" and "belief", are both also used in the above article 18 of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights..It is said there, i.a., that everyone is free "to change his religion or belief" as well as "to manifest his religion or belief". In a way, these two terms are interchangeable. Yet, there is a difference. "Religion" usually is a matter of community and organisation, of common and organised conviction.."Belief" does not necessarily have that connotation: it may just be a matter of personal, private conviction.
This difference does not seem to play any role in article 18 of the Universal Declaration, though. Here the "freedom of religion (or belief)" is mentioned together with the "freedom of thought" and of "conscience". Apparently, these three freedoms are supposed to be variations of the same kind. Religion (or belief), one could say, is a certain type of "thought"; it includes a specific view of life, a specific world view, as well as a specific moral conviction, a voice of the "conscience", based on that religious view. What characterises religion is its orientation towards a higher, transcendent, decisive reality. Many call this transcendent reality "divine", or, understood as a supranatural personal Being, "God".
Now, freedom of religion, understood as a special case of freedom of thought or of conscience, is appartently seen as primarily a personal matter. It is above all the individual person who is in the picture here, who is the point of departure - as is the case in all the articles of the Declaration. The right to freedom of religion (or belief) is, like all other rights, mentioned in the Declaration, a right "everyone" has. According to this right, every person may choose or change his religion as he or she likes it. Religious communities as such are within sight only as a secondary, derivative possibility and only in connection with the "manifestation" of religion: everyone may "manifest" his religion (or belief) "either alone or in community with others". That again is supposed to be a matter of everyone's personal choice or preference.
In the context of the Declaration, another approach probably would not have been possible. But in fact, with reference to the phenomenon of religion, it leaves out an important element. As I said, religion usually is a matter of community. The religious community is first; the individual owes his personal belief to his belonging to that community. Therefore, freedom of religion should include freedom to religious groups, to Church communities etc., to exist and develop, to manifest and practise their religion. to express it in worship and teaching. To take up my own distinction between "religion" and "belief": religious freedom should be freedom both of (personal) belief and of (collective) religion.
The latter aspect the more touchy one. Communities, groups, may have an impact on society as individuals do not have it. Freedom of (collective) religion would open the possibility for such a religion to influence society. State authorities are not always very happy with such a possibility. Religious individuals are, one may say, harmless to the existing social order in a way religious groups are not always.

Here again, we have to speak of the difference between East and West. The collective aspect of religious freedom is closer to the eastern than to the western European mind. In the West, the 15th and 16th century Renaissance and the 18th century Enlightenment have emphasized the individual's rights over against an oppressive social and religious order. Personal independence of thinking was highly appreciated, both in philosophy and science. Scientific progress and modernisation of life became possible thanks to this individualist mentality of

thinkers and researchers. The French Revolution was an explosion that devastated the Ancien Régime of the two allied powers: the abolutist State and the dominant (Roman Catholic) Church. By way of contrast, the slogan "Liberty, Equality, Fraternity!", with its main emphasis on 'Liberty", had from the beginning a strongly individualist meaning.
In the struggle for freedom, that achieved its break-through in the French Revolution and continued throughout the 19th century, the fight for the individual's rights was the first priority. It included the fight for democracy, the system in which the rulers exercise their authority "by the grace of the people", and not by the grace of a God (as represented by a Church) that keeps the people under tutelage. The people themselves demanded their right to vote. The consequence was not only the end of the close connection between State and (a specific) Church so that religious plurality became acceptable, but even the separation of State and (any) Church. Only then, the ideal of Liberty would become a reality. In the future, State authorities would do their own job of governing without accepting any guidance (or hindrance) from any Church.at all, and keeping away from dealing explicitly with matters of Church and religion - and this: for the benefit of all people..As it is said in the American Bill of Rights, in the text, ratified December 15, 1791: "Congress shall make no law respecting an establishment of religion". Throughout the 19th century, this principle of separation of Church and State would be introduced and practised in western European societies. Henceforth, religious matters would be considered just private matters.
In eastern Europe, religious freedom is much more considered a collective issue. Both Renaissance and Enlightenment, with their individualist focus, were typically western movements, that hardly had any impact in the East. Over the centuries, Eastern Orthodox had lived in a situation of "cesaropapism", of selfevident "symphonia" of State and Church, of Byzantiane emperor and ecumenical patriarch. Changes in that situation had come only from outside: from the Turks who in the 15th century started establishing their Muslim Ottoman Empire in Asia Minor and South-East Europe. Christian rule was replaced by Muslim domination. Later, in about the same time in which the Ottoman Empire collapsed, in the beginning of the 20th century, in another part of eastern orthodox Europe, Russia, another power spiritually coming from outside took over: communism. To Christians and Churches, the communist era in Russia and later also in neighbouring countries, in a large part of eastern Europe, was a time of unprecedented oppression.
It was over against this oppressive communist power, that religious freedom became an ideal, a dream. Only after the end of the communist era, that dream could again come true. And, as a result of the course of events, religious freedom unavoidably got the meaning of national revival. Here, in post-communist eastern Europe, it was not so much a matter of freedom to be religious in a way that is different from the dominant religious (Christian) tradition; rather, it a matter of freedom to be religious at all (over against an atheist State). It was (and is) not so much the freedom of the individual, but of the collectivity, of the people as such, that matters. Freedom itself was experienced as the people's new possibility to regain and redevelop its own national character. And of old, since the times of the Byzantine Empire, nation and (orthodox) religion have been an inseparable unity. In each of the traditionally Orthodox countries, the Orthodox Church feels to be the selfevident guarantee of the Christian nation's unique character. Thus, national freedom and religious freedom are considered more or less identical.
Both Turkish/Muslim and communist domination, each in its own territory, brought the old "symphonia" between State and Christian Church to an end. That is why nowhere in eastern Europe any official State Church situation exists any more. As Alexander Belopopsky, the Russian Orthodox World Council of Churches staff member, pointed out at the WCC consultation I mentioned earlier, that is remarkably different from western Europe, where in several countries (England,

the Scandinavian countries) such official State Church situations still do exist. This remark implies the question: why then would western Europeans blame eastern Europe for not taking the issue of religious freedom seriously enough? Such a blame would be mistaken indeed. But the difference between East and West, hinted at by Belopopsky, has its roots in history. Western Europe never came under control of a (non-Christian) power from outside (apart from Spain and Portugal, who were under Arab/Muslim rule for several centuries; but that situation was terminated and Christian rule was re-established by the end of the 15th century). Later, under the inspiration of the 18th century Enlightenment, separation of Church and State was introduced from within, but certain remainders of the former State Church situation could nevertheless survive up to today. In the East, what happened was just the reverse: State Church situations have radically been brought to an end, and exactly because of that a western-style "separation of Church and State" is not at all a hot issue here.

Are Church and State in eastern orthodox Europe separated? Yes - and no. Yes, because the State authorities do not claim to be Christian authorities any more. No, because the close relationship between Orthodox Church and nation still exists. Church and State remain partners in their mutual concern for the people. They cannot escape from this mutual partnership. They cannot avoid meeting each other time and again, and cooperating. In that sense, the ancient cesaropapism left its traces.

To eastern Europeans, this is not at all in contrast to the principle of religious freedom. That, as we heard, is interpreted here above all not as a matter of the individual, but of the collectivity: as the freedom of the people, to live and manifest its own, Orthodox-Christian, religion. It is clear that this position creates problems to groups, minorities, who represent alternative religious ideas and beliefs. In eastern European countries in which the Orthodox-Christian tradition has been the dominant religion of old, there is little openness to accepting such alternative groups as fellow inhabitants. Soon, the feeling comes up that such groups "do not belong here"; that they anyway should be satisfied with their minority position.

Let us take one example: the position of Roman Catholics in Russia. Recently, the pope established four new Roman Catholic dioceses in Russia. The Russian Orthodox patriarch is fervently opposed and accuses the Roman Catholic Church (as he did so often) of "proselytism", illegal propaganda among Orthodox believers, trying to convert them to Roman Catholicism. Russian politics are involved as well: in the Russian parliament discussions were held about a bill to outlaw these new Roman Catholic dioceses. Rather often we hear about measures by Russian authorities against Roman Catholic bishops or priests in Russia. E.g. against a bishop, whose diocese is in East Siberia but whose visa was withdrawn when he wanted to return from a visit abroad. The Vatican asked for a clarification, which however the Russian minister for foreign affairs refused to give. The pope sent a letter to president Putin, asking him to mediate in the conflict; that letter, so far, remained unanswered. Russian State and Russian Orthodox Church are separated, and yet, apparently, there is a close connection between the two. Westerners, understanding religious freedom above all as each one's personal right, would find it difficult to speak of a situation of religious freedom here. In the East, where religious freedom is understood primarily as a collective right, as the nation's right, that could be done without any hesitation. Remember Belopopsky's above statement that lack of equality does not necessarily mean discrimination; that it is a matter of course that minority groups do not have the same rights or privileges as the majority has and that that does not at all infringe upon the right to religious freedom. It is not surprising, to hear such a statement from an eastern European Orthodox.

2. Religious freedom under fire, in both East and West

In this dilemma between eastern collectivism and western individualism, which side do we choose? That question is unanswerable. Freedom has both its individualist and its collectivist aspects. East and West would do wise to listen to each other. A collectivism that forgets about the rights of the individual will inevitably end in totalitarianism and repression. An individualism that forgets about the collectivity will discover in the long run that the individual cannot live without the community that surrounds and supports him.

With reference to religious freedom, both East and West have their weak points. First, let us once more look at the situation in eastern Europe, e.g. in Russia. One may rightly say that the position of Roman Catholics in Russia is not fully a position of freedom, that they, unlike the Russian Orthodox, are subject to restrictive measures. Such restrictive measures cannot be justified by referring to the fact that Roman Catholics in Russia are a minority and therefore should understand and accept their position of disadvantage.And the Roman Catholics are not the only religious group in Russia living in a position of.disadvantage. Protestant groups are easily qualified as "sects" and thus as foreign elements, dangerous to (Orthodox) Russian culture. Their activity is soon blamed as "proselytism", illegal, not to be tolerated within Russian society. But can a religious, believing community be expected to refrain from its activity? even from its outward activity?

This matter does not just regard the Russian Orthodox Church, it regards also the State. The Russian Constitution officially proclaims the equality of all religions, but rather often the practice is different. To be able to function within Russian society, a religious group has to register officially and so to obtain a juridical status. In practice, for many groups it is difficult to register. Examples of this are the Salvation Army and the Jehovah's Witnesses. Such a situation raises serious questions about the extent of religious freedom existing in Russia.

Now, by way of comparison, let us look at the situation in western Europe; e.g. in France. Here, like in Russia, the Constitution provides for freedom of religion. After many changes - since 1789 France passed through several phases of revolution as well as of restoration - a law on the separation of Church and State was passed in 1905. This law still stands and is the basis of the current legislation on religious freedom. However, recently, some restrictions on religious freedom have been introduced. In 1996, the National Assembly adopted a commission report in which no less than 173 minority religious groups were identified as dangerous "cults" or "sects" (to be distinguished from the - acceptable - 'religions"); among them a Pentecostal Church, the Mormons, the Jehovah's Witnesses.and an evangelical Baptist Church. One is afraid of their growing influence. Continuing study of the "sect" phenomenon led to the adoption, in 2001, of a bill that opens the possibility to tighten restrictions on suspect religious organisations.

No exact definition has been given in the bill of what is a "cult" or "sect", and of what makes such religious groups especially suspect. Is their activity of a criminal character? The commission whose report was adopted in 1996 mentions as reasons for blacklisting religious groups: that they "place inordinate importance on finances, cause a rupture between adherents and their families, are responsible for physical as well as psychological attacks on members, recruit children, profess 'anti-social' ideas, disturb public order, have 'judiciary problems' or attempt to infiltrate organs of the State". This list of possible criminal or dangerous activities is rather vague on what it has mind..

When does "placing importance on finances" become "inordinate", and why? Can any outsider take a decision on that, with reference to a specific religious group? What exactly is meant by "anti-social ideas"? Who will determine where an approach of members crossed the borderline to become a "physical" or 'psychological attack"? It is feasible that membership of a religious group causes a rupture between the group member and his family; where and when does this indicate the "criminal" character of (the leadership of) that group? If there are

reasons to put a religious group under suspicion, that group or its leaders should be prosecuted under criminal law. It is then up to the court to take a decision and to pass judgment. With reference to the blacklisted groups in France, however, that did not happen so far. There are just suspicions and charges based on hearsay. Who will protect such groups from government arbitrariness? Remarkably enough, only minority groups were blacklisted (without explaining the specific reasons for each of them to be blacklisted.). The Roman Catholic Church (by far and of old the majority Church in France) and the larger Protestant Churches (Reformed, Lutheran) were not, of course not; they have their accepted place in French society. Recently, Roman Catholic and Protestant leaders in France raised concerns about the current legislation. Apparently, they feel that freedom of religion, although guaranteed in the French Constitution, is under threat.

The situation in France is not an exception, in the West. There is reason to speak of a growing religious intolerance, not just in France, but in the whole of western Europe. In Belgium, similar developments like in France took place. Here, in 1997, the parliament issued a report in which 189 groups were blacklisted. The report included various allegations against Protestant and Catholic groups, Quakers, Hasidic Jews and Buddhists. Again, all this is based on hearsay, without any verification. Alarming are also the developments in Austria, where the government in 1998 set up a special "Sect Office" to collect and disseminate information on various religious groups that do not belong to the twelve "recognized" religions in the country. The investigations of this "Sect Office" could easily have a stigmatizing effect on the investigated groups. One wants to alert the public for what is considered dangerous, claiming that it is the task and competency of government officials to decide on what is acceptable religious faith and what is not. - Can all this really go together with the official maintenance of religious freedom?

A matter for special concern is the position of Muslims in western Europe. Partly, that is caused by the attacks on New York and Washington, on September 11, 2001, by Al Qaida terrorists who justified their actions by appealing to Islam. More and more now, western Europeans feel uneasy about the presence, among them, of so many asylumseekers and strangers from Third World countries. One is becoming aware of the difference between Islamic culture and the western standards and values.of emancipation and democracy. There are concerns about Muslim activities, that might become a threat to western lifestyle. In the Netherlands, very recently, there was much commotion because of press informations on extremist statements by some imams (i.e. Muslim religious leaders) in their regular sermons, held in their mosques in some Dutch cities. Statements in which God was prayed to "destroy" all "enemies of Islam", in which Muslim suicide terrorists were openly praised as "holy martyrs" and violent,discriminative behaviour against women was promoted. Dutch inhabitants living in the same street or quarter felt threatened and appealed to the municipal authorities, asking for a close down of these mosques. That did not (yet) happen, but in several places special measures of control were taken. Sermons, held by these imams (usually in Turkish or Moroccan/Arab language), will in future have to be submitted to the authorities, in Dutch translation, so that can be seen whether these sermons are acceptable within Dutch society and culture or not. The new Dutch government plans to find out what are the legal possibilities to take action agaianst extremist religious statements. - All this may be understandable. Yet, one wonders how this relates to the constitutional principles of separation of Church (religion) and State.and of religious freedom.

The terrorist attacks of September 11, 2001, undoubtely play a role, But they are only an additional factor in a tendency that existed anyway. Karen S. Lord, Counsel for Freedom of Religion with the Commission on Security and Cooperation in Europe, sees reasons for her conclusion that "personal faith and

principles of religious liberty are under fire in Western Europe today". I may underline: in western Europe no less than in eastern Europe. As I said: with reference to religious freedom both East and West have their weak points.
Let me say a few more things about these weak points. In the East, the collectivity feels threatened by the presence of new religious movements that may attract people who in their longing for meaning and purpose in life are no longer satisfied by the traditional, Orthodox Church. It is particularly the traditional Church itself that apparently fears the attractivity and dynamism of newcomers and expects from the State certain legal measures to restrict their activities. Strong feelings of nationalism, all the stronger as a reaction to the decades of communist dictatorship that had denied and suppressed such nationalist feelings, are promoting a policy of keeping foreigners "other" religious groups included, outdoors or under control as much as possible. Government action to prevent or limit the growth of new, "not-native" religious movements is politically popular.
Nationalist feelings are also coming up in the West, partly due to the increasing influx of people (refugees, asylumseekers and others) from Third World countries, partly in reaction to the ongoing process of European unification. As the European Union is getting more and more influential, national borders tend to decrease in importance. by contrast counter-movements now emphasize the value of national identity. On the whole in western European politics (like in Austria, Belgium, France, the Netherlands), one sees a "shift to the right".
In the West, another factor is also influential, though. Here, the trend of individualism, that has increased over several centuries (as a result of the Renaissance and Enlightenment movements), has resulted in a secularism that tends more and more to marginalize the influence of religion on society. To a large extent, religion has been driven away from the public scene and is widely considered just a matter of private life. That is why religious groups and institutions (like Churches) are watched with some suspicion. Remembering the dominant position of Christianity in former times, one is always on the alert because of the danger of new religious totalitarianism. Traditional Churches may have undergone a process of modernisation, of adaptation to modern culture, that is not necessarily so with religions, religious groups, coming from outside. Religious extremism and fundamentalism could be dangerous to attainments of western culture like one-man-one-vote democracy and emancipation.
In short: while religious freedom is under fire in the East because of the desire to preserve (national, collectivist) unity, it is under fire in the West out of concern for true (individual) freedom. The East is inclined to preserve unity at the expense of personal freedom, religious freedom included; the West is inclined to defend personal freedom at the expense of unity, of community sense, religion as a binding force included.

3. Religious freedom: the basis of all freedom

How can the dream of religious freedom become true? What kind of State and State policy would be needed for that? By way of conclusion, let me offer a few considerations on that issue.
Religious freedom cannot survive or exist in a society where one religion is oppressingly dominant. Religious freedom for all means that religious dissidents, religious minorities have the same rights as the majority religion. It is the duty of the State authorities to take care that these rights for all, for minorities no less than for the majority, are safeguarded.
In that sense, western Europe could learn something from its own history. The French Revolution was a major break-through in the struggle for freedom against an oppressive, Christian Ancien Régime. Its triumphant proclamation of freedom included the proclamation of religious freedom. As it was stated in the Declaration of Human Rights, issued in August 1789 by the new National Assembly, "No

person should be troubled for his opinions, even religious ones". This break-through was necessary, for the sake of human dignity. And the East could learn here from the West, to see aspects of this human dignity it never has discovered. However, history shows also how easily the ideal of personal freedom can be absolutized and then results in its contrast: new terror, new oppression. That happened in France, soon after the revolution of 1789. The revolutionaries mistrusted each other and fell victim to each other's violence, until the "strong leader" (Napoleon) seized power and the young French republic changed into a dictatorship, an "empire". Some fifteen years later, the emperor was defeated and the ancient order (in France and everywhere) was restored. In and after 1848, another revolution broke out in Paris, another manifestation of liberalism. Again, after a few republican years (the second French republic), France became an empire (this time under emperor Napoleon III, a nephew of the first Napoleon).
We remember, the 1789 French Revolution had raised the slogan "Liberty, Equality, Fraternity". It had emphasized itself "Liberty" most of all. Later, socialism and communism came up, aiming, like liberalism, at real freedom, but understanding that individual liberty is not enough to guarantee real freedom, freedom for all. Like liberals, socialists and communists were heirs of the French Revolution, however emphasising "Equality". As soon as communism was put into practice, in Soviet Russia in the beginning of the 20th century, later also elsewhere in eastern Europe (a western system imposed in the East!), it too developed into a situation of terror and dictatorship: the "dictatorship of the proletariat".
Equally in the first half of the 20th century, two more, inter-related emancipation movements came up: fascism in Italy and national-socialism in Germany, the first more an extreme nationalism, the second more an extreme racism. Fascists and national socialists too were heirs of the French Revolution, stressing however the ideal of (national or racial) "Fraternity". Again we see: their projects of freedom and emancipation ended in their contrast: another system of terror, with millions of victims, another dictatorship: this time executed not in the name of "Equality" but in the name of "Inequality".
Is it of significance that these respective "freedom systems" had developed in an ideological spirit? Anyway, true freedom had to be gained in a struggle against these "freedom systems". Apparently, what proclaims "Liberty" (or "Equality", or "Fraternity") is not as such a guarantee for real freedom. And remarkably enough, Churches sometimes were allies in that struggle, against both atheist communism and pseudo-religious national socialism. Remember: Churches, representing religious, Christian values, such as had been more and more abolished, at least marginalised, in western Europe since the French Revolution! Could religious values be important in the struggle for true freedom? Is then religious freedom, instead of being dangerous or suspicious (as it is seen in a secularised society), rather of elementary interest to understanding what freedom as such is about? Yes, I think so.

Let me elaborate a little on that. In the West, separation of Church and State is considered one of the basic principles of modern democracy. In that context, one also speaks of the "neutrality" of the State: the State itself refrains from taking sides in any ideological or religious debate, leaving that debate to the citizens themselves. The only thing the State can and should do, it is felt, is: keeping things administratively in order and providing for space so that everyone can live according to his or her own private views on matters of faith and ethics. Such private views may be brought into discussion, but these discussions should not and will not affect in any way.public life.
As the English Protestant theologian Lesslie Newbigin (who died in 1998) has pointed out, western post-Enlightenment culture is characterised by a fundamental dichotomy between the private and the public worlds: the public

world is the world of "objective facts", scientifically tested and established, whereas the private world is the world of "subjective values", based on private views or beliefs. It is this widely accepted idea of dichotomy between the two worlds, that is the basis of the principles of separation between Church and State and of the "neutrality of the State", so characteristic of western culture.
As we heard, unlike one might expect, in a "neutral" State religious freedom is not safe. It is strictly kept within its limits. In the European Convention on Human Rights, it is stated that "everyone has the right to freedom of religion", which right includes, it is added, everyone's right "to manifest his religion or belief". An additional part of the article, however, deals with "limitations" of this right, that "are prescribed by law and are necessary in a democratic society in the interests of public safety, for the protection of public order, health or morals, or for the protection of the rights and freedoms of others". This definition may seem to be a matter of selfevidence, at the same time it opens the door to lots of discussions on what are and what are not legitimate limitations. We have heard that nowadays in western Europe the tendency exists to restrict the right to religious freedom more severely than possibly is justifiable. Where exactly does what is called a "restriction" of that right in fact begin to be a violation of it? It is difficult to answer this question in practice. That, in turn, gives the authorities the opportunity of interfering into religious matters whenever they think that is needed.
So, a "neutral" State appears to be not so "neutral" as it pretends to be. As a matter of fact, such neutrality is impossible. Here, the West can learn from the East. The State has to do with legislation; already that implies a moral responsibility. The State just cannot be indifferent vis-à-vis moral and ideological discussions, at least if it does not want society to degenerate into a loose collection of fragments. For its survival,.any society requires a certain extent of community in standards and values, derived from its history and tradition. The State has to be more than just the guardian of free space for the expression of every private opinion. Guarding that free space is already in itself a matter of leaving indifference and taking sides. A State that would like to stick to an absolute "neutrality" will soon be taken over by ideological forces that jump into the vacuum and bend things to their own will. That was what happened in Italy and Germany, in the first half of the 20th century.
To avoid such a scenario, State authorities should be so wise as to listen to what Churches and other religious groups have to say on public issues. That was what the French politician Jacques Delors, the then president of the European Commission of the European Union, understood, when he called on the Churches in Europe to contribute to the discussion on what is Europe's "Heart and Soul". He issued that call in the beginning of the 1990's, and repeated it at the end of his term as president of the Commission, in 1994. If the European Union is to be more than just a matter of economic cooperation, if it is to be a real community, then the Churches cannot be missed in the discussion about Europe's future. Once politicians are understanding such things, the matter of religious freedom appears in another light.

I am not pleading in favour of a return to a closed, Christian monoculture like in western Europe in the Middle Ages. I am pleading in favour of a State community in which the power centre will be kept ideologically empty, i.e. kept free from any tendency of totalitarianism. Politicians, political leaders, are often inclined to overestimate the importance of politics. Here, one should remember that "politics is not everything" , that there is more to life than politics, that politics does not decide on the ultimate meaning of life. It is not up to the State to authoritatively determine what is to be considered (ideologically) true or morally good, either in a Christian sense or in any other religious or non-religious sense. Rather, the State has the modest task:"to provide for justice and peace" so that human life can be lived in an imperfect world. As such, however, it has to be aware of the

other, essential dimensions in life, to be taken seriously and to be discussed openly and freely. That such discussions really take place is in the interest of the State itself, of society at large. The State should encourage these discussions and facilitate them. That is why also religious freedom is so important, really indispensable, the basis of all freedom. It has to be defended and guaranteed, not out of indifference but out of an understanding of what really matters in society.

There are many religions and beliefs represented in society today. Via their representatives, all are possible partners in the social discussion. Churches and other religious groups themselves have every reason to participate, as well as to promote that it takes place indeed, instead of being blocked by economic or bureaucratic forces (as it is so easily the case). Nothing less than the quality of democracy is at stake here. That should be a matter of major concern, also for those who represent religious views.

Yes, it should be. But what if it is not? What if a certain religious group would try to impose its views upon society in a totalitarian way, thus aiming at occupying the power centre for itself? We cannot close our eyes for that dark possibility (a possibility that so often was a reality in a "theocratic" past). I think, in such a situation a firm conclusion would be necessary. The State would have the right and the vocation to intervene in favour of democracy, in order to keep the power centre ideologically empty. Such a State intervention, that would block specific antidemocratic actions of a specific religious group, would then not be a restriction of the right to religious freedom; it would rather be a step in defense of real religious freedom.

Of course, this is tricky. A State action against a specific religious group can easily be out of place, based upon a misjudgment. or a prejudice. The State authorities should be aware of the danger and act very carefully. Churches and other religious groups could and should be helpful in giving their advice., using their right to religious freedom and speaking out in public.

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