

## **Conclusions from the CEC-CSC Workshop on "Christian Arguments and their Reception in the Public Debate in Europe: The Case of Bioethics". 6-7 Nov 2014.**

The aim of the workshop was to exchange experiences of churches in different European countries in taking part in public debates on ethical issues, and to exchange insights, convictions, and strategies that will make the contribution of churches more effective, relevant, and convincing.

As a preparation of the workshop, 180 questionnaires were sent out concerning the pressing bioethical issues in the various European countries and how churches engage in these questions. 19 questionnaires (or 10.5%) were returned.

The workshop used these questionnaires as an important background for the discussions. In an introductory lecture Theo Boer reflected on the results of the questionnaires and introduced the workshop from this perspective. The keynote speaker was Nigel Biggar from Oxford University, who introduced the workshop with reflections on "Why Christian faith deserves a place in pluralistic debates about medicine". Biggar argued for the significance of conversation in the public, where the Christian voice maintains an awareness of its roots and origins, and yet in the conversation seeks to make arguments that are convincing for the other. Biggar argued that the Christian voice can enrich the conversation and make significant points that are not necessarily obvious for a more secular approach to ethical issues.

In three smaller groups the experiences with conversation on these matters were discussed among the participants from the different churches. These groups were divided between "end of life" and "beginning of life" issues. These discussions were moderated by members of the WG on bioethics and biotechnology. The discussions were summarized the following morning and the general results were evaluated by the WG Friday afternoon 7 Nov.

The main conclusions from the workshop are:

1. There is a need of Christians from all professions in these debates. Depending on national contexts, contributions of theologians and clergy are met with more or less suspicion; in all cases, there is a need of Christians with other professional backgrounds to engage in the debate.
2. It is important to be very conscious of the language and the words used in these debates. The effective communication requires an awareness of what arguments are selected and used in a given debate.
3. It is highly important to use the informal and personal contexts and networking, if the aim is to be effective in the public debate. It is recommended that the participants in these debates have direct phone numbers to politicians, journalists and others, whom they can contact informally.

4. The most effective way of approaching these issues is often rather through problem-sharing than through official statements.
5. The Christian participation in these debates must be honest and not be afraid to display a certain vulnerability. It may be counterproductive if the debate is approached with too firm positions.
6. Even if the Christian contribution recognizes its provisional status, it should still maintain that there are situations where it should “say something theological”. A Christian contribution has a legitimate role in e.g. raising the “big questions,” such as from what kind of normative anthropology a certain position on euthanasia stems, and to what kind of society such a position may lead.

More generally, it can be concluded that the workshop was very fruitful. The discussions and the final summarizing pointed to significant insights that are important to reflect further on. The workshop would have been even further strengthened, had there been more participants who were more directly involved in participatory processes leading up to public and political decision making. This is worth taking into consideration in a future workshop on Christian ethical contributions in the public.

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December 19, 2014