

Report of the 20th Academic Consultation of the *Societas Oecumenica*

‘On Nations and the Churches: Ecumenical Responses to Nationalism and Migration’

Ludwigshafen 2018

Churches in Europe have a specific history of experiences with regard to relationships to their respective nations. While churches agree that the Christian faith has a transnational character, the question to what extent this character should also be realized in a collective and national sense of interpreting and shaping community life is always present. In 20th century Europe, related theological debates took place against the backdrop of political realities such as colonialism, the world wars, fascist regimes, and Communism. After World War II, the establishment of the WCC demonstrated a growing critical attitude, particularly in Western European churches, towards various forms of nationalism. The transformation movements in Europe after 1989 and the renewed convergence of East and West, however, revived theological discussions on the legitimacy of a strong link between Church and nation. These questions also came to relate directly to experiences of mass migration, the suffering of violence in war, and state oppression, as well as with current uncertainties due to felt threats of the dissolution of supposed cultural homogeneity. Can “nation” be understood, on the background of these different experiences, as part of the theology of creation – as a space of life given and to be shaped in a Christian manner? Is there a way for nationalism and current migration experiences to converge? Do churches have something specific to say on this situation in an ecumenical perspective? These questions, which were at the heart of our consultation, were introduced to us in the opening paper from the President, Prof. Dr. **Ulrike Link-Wieczorek** (University of Oldenburg).

The consultation purposefully sought interaction with a variety of disciplines to ascertain a rich variety of voices and perspectives. In the first plenary paper, New Testament scholar Dr. **Niko Huttunen** (University of Helsinki) put nationalism and a high esteem of state authority in perspective by positioning the apostle Paul as an anarchist. His vision of the future held the destruction of the present world, Huttunen claimed, but in a particular way: the world is not changed through a revolution but slowly, quietist and, in a sense, politically realistic. This paper was responded to from a systematic theological perspective by Prof. Dr. Ivana Noble (Charles University Prague).

The third plenary session took place in the beautiful main hall of the University of Heidelberg, where Prof. Dr. **Peter Phan** (University of Georgetown) afforded us with an analysis of the interrelations of migration, nationalism and ecumenical unity, well-seasoned with personal stories and reflections on larger narratives. After

providing the basic facts of contemporary global migration as the context for understanding its impact on nationalism and ecumenical unity, Peter Phan explored the ways in which migration has undermined the formation of nationalism in recent history. Finally, he investigated how ecumenical unity can be fostered by the concerted efforts of the Christian Churches to meet the challenges of contemporary migration and how the current patterns of the relations between migration and nationalism can serve as a model for ecumenical unity. This main paper was offered a dual response through warm interventions by Prof. Dr. Friederike Nüssel (University of Heidelberg) and Dr. Kaholi Zhimomi (United Theological College, Bangalore).

The third day of our consultation was opened by Dr. **Vladimir Shmalyi** (Faith and Order), who read his paper from a distance via videoconferencing. From the perspective of a Russian Orthodox theologian and believer, Vladimir Shmalyi reflected anew on the relations between church, nation and nationalism. He highlighted the potential of a close relationship between church and nation and offered the listener a strong plea for a church that is well aware of and imbedded in its cultural and national context. His paper received a critical response by Prof. Dr. Elzbieta Adamiak (University of Koblenz-Landau), who pointed to the dangers of such an alliance, not only potential but also in real politics – thus returning to the perspective set forth by Niko Huttunen. On this day, we had hoped to have a paper read by Dr. Fulata Moyo (WCC) on foreignness, hospitality and exploration, but regrettably, she had to cancel her participation at last notice. As an alternative, Prof. Dr. Andrew Pierce (Trinity College Dublin), who was asked to provide a response to her paper, graciously accepted the request to take over this slot and he provided us with his reflections on these themes.

In the sixth plenary session, the main paper of Prof. Dr. **Andrea Strübind** (University of Oldenburg) analyzed for us the ambivalent ecumenical experience of Church and Nation from the perspective of Free Churches. She stressed the ambiguous relation between nationalism and ecumenism and based on ecclesial history, she argued for the church not to be directly related to the state in a political way, but to speak as church one's voice within the context of a secular nation. She received a response by Dr. Petre Maican (University of Aberdeen), who argued from the case of the Romanian Orthodox church that nationalism needs not be at odds with ecumenism. In the afternoon of this fourth day, we consciously sought interaction with other ecumenical initiatives which were dealing with the same themes simultaneously. A dialogue was opened with Simone Sinn, co-organizer of a recent conference on churches as agents for justice and against populism in Berlin, and with Kataline Tahaafe-Williams, co-organizer of the upcoming WCC-Vatican international conference on xenophobia, racism and populist nationalism in the context of migration.

In the closing session of this consultation, Prof. Dr. **Hector Scerri** (University of Malta) proposed, consciously building on shared biblical paradigms, some attitudes in response to the very complicated situation on which the consultation focused, aiming to provide a proper Christian vision which could be shared by all those who call themselves disciples of Jesus Christ. Starting from Abraham's hospitality and ending

with the opening verses of Hebrews 13, Scerri proposed a fourfold attitude involving (1) Commitment, (2) Discernment, (3) Welcoming wayfarers, wanderers, waifs and strays as we would welcome Christ, and (4) *Philoxenia*. His paper received a closing response from Prof. Dr. Peter-Ben Smit (VU University Amsterdam/Utrecht University).

Dozens of questions related to the conference theme were discussed in smaller groups in four sessions for smaller papers, totaling over 30 papers from junior and senior researchers. Their topics ranged from historical considerations of nationalism intersecting with religion around the globe to theological and philosophical reflections on hospitality and migration. Presenters spoke from a wide variety of traditions and cultures, consciously seeking to cross boundaries to learn from one another. For the first time in the history of *Societas Oecumenica*, research posters were also invited and the main hall featured a photo exhibition on the conference theme by Christian Henkel. This allowed us to not only think theoretically about the questions at hand, but to be confronted in these pictures with the realities of suffering and stress caused by the migratory experience.

Jelle Creemers

Former Secretary of the *Societas Oecumenica*