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Freedom and Faith: Religious Notions of Individual Freedom in Comparison – A Christian View.

Relations between diverse understandings of individual freedom in given societies and states, and the perceptions and realisations of freedom in different faith expressions, faith doctrines and faith communities are full of tensions and contradictions, particularly in the modern, and, in different ways, also in our post modern world of today. Faith communities, in particular also Christian faith communities, may consider themselves 'free' in their inner practice, and committed to freedom in what they communicate to the outside, but by at least parts of society they may be looked at as unfree. On the other hand, and not only as a consequence, but also quite genuinely, a faith community may look at the state and the society surrounding it, and of which it should be part, as oppressive. - Principles of individual freedom, as enshrined in state constitutions, universal declarations of human rights and in received opinions of a society, or parts of society, may be in tension with what a faith community sees and declares as their inner and outer freedom. And, the other way round, a faith community and its individual members may feel very much limited in action and expression by the governing principles and doctrines and practice of a state and a society, or parts of it, and forced to appeal to principles on a higher level and of a general nature, - also and in particular secular principles -, for help. - For all of this we have striking examples in real life.

So it may be, that there is a legitimate case for state and society as a whole to criticize a faith community for lack of respect for individual freedom, and even to intervene in the inner proceedings of a faith community, in order to secure basic freedoms for people, who are not only the faithful of a faith group, but also the citizens of that given state and members of the respective society. And a faith community, on the other hand, may come into a position to rightfully criticize state actions and movements in society for violating the rights of the faith community, but also the individual freedoms of its members, out of convictions of faith, but also in defense of generally accepted

universal principles. - Thus the ideas of faith communities, and of state and society may be overlapping in contradiction as well as in consent. Not only are there overlaps with respect to the people and fields of action both sides are addressing, but also with regard to rights, principles and ideologies they are living of. This last overlap may also be called mutual responsibility, a responsibility which amounts to mutually guaranteeing each other.

Since I find myself on this podium, and may be also in this conference, as the sole explicit representative of the Christian religion, I feel called upon to say a few words about a Christian understanding of individual freedom. What I have said before, were general remarks, which I see as applying to the relations between faith communities, state and society, and the individual in a general way, and of course also with respect to Christian faith communities. When I then noticed a possible tension between the understanding of freedom, also individual freedom, as practiced and professed in faith communities, and principles and practice of freedom in given states and societies, it can by no means be assumed, that principles and practice of freedom on the side of state and society are themselves free from faith influences. The individual actor in state and in society may act upon his or her faith convictions, and the doctrines and opinions governing state and society, may, and most often, are imbued with teachings of faith, - not only in some Muslim countries, but also in the so called Western states and societies, - and Christianity has its large part in it. Not only, but also therefore knowledge of the teachings of religions is important.

In Christianity, like in other religions, there are different faith communities, or denominations, called churches. Although it might not always look like it, the different Christian faith communities have a common ground for their teaching and practice, which is the Gospel of Jesus Christ, which fundamentally is a message of individual freedom based on faith. The core of the matter, without going into further theological explanations, is the justification of the individual believer before God, the forgiveness of sins, and thus the recovery of the freedom of the individual to act in this world as people redeemed and commissioned by God. If through the history of Christianity and of the Christian churches the message often got lost or falsified, this

should not be taken as the fault of the message. - Since I am a Lutheran bishop, I should also mention, that it was Martin Luther, the German church reformer of the 16th century, who so to say rediscovered and again stressed the core importance for Christianity and the world of this message of freedom.

The Christian message of freedom in first instance addresses the conscience of the individual faithful, whose burden of guilt and remorse, which every human being carries with him or her, is no longer a hindrance to act freely, responsible only before God. Indirectly this idea gained importance also outside explicitly Christian contexts, strengthening the perception of the unalienable dignity of every human being, of human rights, starting with the freedom of conscience, and of democracy as the organization of the common will of the people arising out of the expressions of individual will. Since long these principles of governance of many nowadays states and societies and guiding ideas of international conventions and commitments are no longer under the ownership of Christian churches, or of Christianity as a whole, - if indeed they have ever been. But Christian faith communities must, or at least should, feel committed to them out of their own faith conviction and out of their responsibility for the world, states and societies, surrounding them.

The impulse to act, based on the Christian belief, that the individual faithful is freed by God himself to turn to the world, ideally for its betterment, was strengthened by the Reformation of the 16th century in Europe, and has influenced world history, for the good, and also sometimes for the bad. It has indeed to be acknowledged, that the Christian belief in "justification by faith alone" develops in two directions: The individual believer recovers inner freedom. He or she experiences God as guarantor of freedom. And by this token he or she feels compelled to act and 'meet the world'. In this process the ideas of Christianity must be 'for free', secularization included, since God's grace also is 'for free'. Ideally there should be no contradiction in principle between a free society, and a state guaranteeing it, and Christian faith communities.

But, at least from a Christian standpoint, which I would defend, there also should and cannot be unity between a Christian faith community, a church, and the state, even less a society. The transcendent aims and foundations of faith, which might and should enable a believer to act in society and state, are different from the aims of the state and the motions of societies limited to this world. A state and a society should not be built on religious faith, even less on a particular faith community. But the impulse received through faith, in this case the Christian faith, which becomes active through the individual, may be helpful running a just state and a free society. In the Bible, the Gospel, it is said, that God's Spirit blows "where it pleases" (John 3, 8). How can one build a state on such ground?
