

The European Union

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Churches within European societies have a long history of playing a fundamental role in nation-building and the establishment of modern states, as well as the construction of Europe as a uniting project and the foundation of the European Union. Today, churches find themselves to be part of increasingly secularised and pluralistic societies across the European continent. A 2018 Pew Research Center survey on religion in Western Europe revealed a number of important findings. Secularisation is widespread in the region, but most people still identify as Christian, although the majority is non-practising. Christian majorities in most countries across the region say they would be willing to accept Muslims in their families and neighbourhoods. Their attitude toward Jews is correlated with that toward Muslims. The predominant view is that religion should be kept separate from government policies (see Neha Sahgal, '10 Key Findings About Religion in Western Europe', at <https://www.pewresearch.org/short-reads/2018/05/29/10-key-findings-about-religion-in-western-europe>). Although increased secularisation and plurality allow for diverse voices to be heard in the public debate, they pose consequences for the acknowledgement of Christian positions that can no longer be seen as authoritative. Previously established church authority is challenged, and Christian faith is often perceived as privatised. In some cases, the legitimacy of Christian voices is contested in political discourses and even deliberately marginalised.

Churches and individual Christians engaged in the political debate are frequently confronted with the reality of growing religious illiteracy among political decision-makers. Christianity, and religion in general, are regrettably associated with conflict and their violent past and therefore regarded with suspicion. The role or even the place of religion in European societies is questioned, despite the resurgence of the political role of religion in recent social science literature. The role of religion in international politics remains significantly understudied and the literature is limited in range and quality. Theological concepts and language rooted in pre-modern societies are no longer part of the daily vocabulary of European societies and are definitely incomprehensible for the majority of European policymakers. This poses a challenge to churches and other

faith-based actors. At the same time, churches and Christians engaged in the political debate are faced with the limitations of theological language in relation to other parts of civil society, the global economy, developments in science and technological civilisation, and the domain of politics and international affairs.

Public Theology in Today's Europe

In this contemporary European context, public theology aims to play a part in the public debate about society in areas where churches are able to make a substantive contribution. In relating to European political institutions, the underpinning questions for church institutions are 'what does it mean to be a church with a public voice in Europe today?' and how churches and individual Christians, as part of civil society, engage in public discourse on social and ethical matters in constructive and critical ways. On the European level, this also involves reflecting ecumenically on how churches can jointly translate the Christian message into different secular and political contexts. Further, it includes the ways in which churches, as communities of faith, perceive, engage with and translate for their own constituencies the language and developments of the secular world.

Churches in Europe have a variety of definitions and perceptions of public theology, seen as practical or applied theology or as a critical reflection on the ethical and political implications of faith and witness. Their definitions and concepts are inspired by the vision of God's reign of 'righteousness, peace and joy in the Spirit' (Romans 14: 16–19). Based on Scripture, doctrine, their social concepts and other theological and spiritual resources, churches in Europe advocate for Christian principles toward policy-makers in the frame of post-modern democratic societies. A meeting of representatives of the Conference of European Churches (CEC) and the Communion of Protestant Churches in Europe (CPCE) in February 2023 in Brussels stressed the theological, social and juridical dimensions of the church that simultaneously come to the fore as the church exercises its public role. The meeting underlined that the reflection on the work of churches in society, and its effects on the public sphere, includes both criticism of and constructive participation in all efforts of Christianity to do justice to its own public mission.

Heinrich Bedford-Strohm, Bishop of the Lutheran Church in Bavaria, argues that an essential part of the churches' calling is to offer an account of the ethical implications of Christian faith. This is where the individual and social dimensions come into play. His definition of public theology involves aspects surfacing in a variety of church families in Europe. He discerns six characteristics of public theology: (1) theological profile – it needs a strong theological basis, formulated in language comprehensible

to the public; (2) bilingualism – it should employ both theological language and secular reason; (3) interdisciplinarity – it needs dialogue with other disciplines and sectors of civil society; (4) political counselling – it gives direction to politics despite its limitations in developing relevant concepts and propagating them politically; (5) prophetic criticism – it upholds the critical resistance of the prophetic tradition seeking viable solutions; and (6) intercontextuality – it is ecumenically oriented while rooted in its own context.

In their engagement with the European political institutions, churches in Europe – together with other faith-based actors – strive to represent a credible and legitimate voice amidst the diversity of voices of plural European societies. The churches represented in the CEC membership set out their strategy in 2021 as being ‘to claim and safeguard space for faith as a legitimate element in a European political discourse, and to support churches struggling to find ways in this context. This is done through advocacy and witnessing to churches’ relevance in society.’ This mission calls for ‘a continued and specialised bridge building effort requiring ... concerted determination as European churches. It needs informed, maintained and coordinated action ... from the heart of European decision-making.’

EU Dialogue with European Churches

The EU political institutions engage in official dialogue with churches, religious associations or communities, and philosophical and non-confessional organisations established under Article 17 of the Treaty on the Functioning of the EU (TFEU). Under this Article, the EU commits to the respect, under national law, of the status of churches and religious associations or communities in the EU member states, as well as the status of philosophical and non-confessional organisations. Acknowledging the identity and specific contributions of all these dialogue partners, the EU commits to ‘maintain an open, transparent and regular dialogue with these churches and organisations’ (17.3).

The method of the Article 17 TFEU dialogue includes high-level meetings or working-level discussions with the EU representation offices of religious associations or communities and philosophical and non-confessional organisations. Types of activities at the EU Parliament listed in its implementation of Article 17 include dialogue seminars hosted by the Parliament, other dialogue activities hosted by the Parliament, seminars hosted by other parliamentary actors on issues related to Article 17, activities organised in cooperation with one or more Article 17 dialogue partners, receiving delegations in Parliament partner organisations, representing Parliament at events organised by Article 17 partner

organisations and cooperation with other EU institutions on the implementation of Article 17.

The scholar Lucian Leustean has described high-level meetings between EU political leaders (including the Presidents of the European Parliament and Commission) and religious leaders from EU member states, and also non-EU countries, as 'photo opportunities'. Although these meetings attract the interest of media and are therefore known to a broad audience, they do not result in concrete outcomes. Since they are held only once a year with a large number of participants in attendance, their duration is less than a couple of hours and they take place in a polite and formal atmosphere where controversial themes tend to be avoided, these meetings have very limited opportunity to generate substantial interventions.

The working-level discussions include seminars on specific topics and are organised with the participation of experts from both EU institutions and religious actors. These provide the opportunity for resource persons from the churches with a wide range of expertise and experiences to participate in the dialogue. A set of implementation guidelines published in 2013 by the European Commission regulates the dialogue between the European institutions and their 'interlocutors'. These dialogue partners need to be recognised at the national level and cleave to European values. Although there is no official recognition or registration of dialogue partners at the European level, it is recommended that churches or associations are registered with the European Transparency Register, whose purpose is to ensure public scrutiny and accountability of European institutions. Currently, 44 organisations are included in the Transparency Register.

The background of the establishment of this official dialogue is well documented. Its history goes back to the 1990s and the initiative *Une âme pour l'Europe* (a soul for Europe) of Jacques Delors, President of the European Commission at that time. Churches were actively involved in the process of EU treaties reform, which initially produced a European constitution, which failed, and eventually, in 2007, the Treaty of Lisbon, which is in force today. They found it crucial to argue for the inclusion of references to the Christian heritage of Europe and insisted on provisions for a structured and regular dialogue with European institutions.

Indeed, the regular working-level sessions within the frame of Article 17 dialogue are organised with the participation of church representatives from the Conference of European Churches (CEC), the Commission of Bishop's Conferences of the European Union (COMECE), the European Evangelical Alliance (EEA), the Committee of Representatives of the Orthodox Churches to the European Union, the representation of the Evangelical Church in Germany, the office of the Bishop of the Diocese in Europe of the Church of England, the Quaker Council for European

Affairs, the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints and other church organisations. It is noteworthy that currently churches from Independent and Pentecostal/Charismatic backgrounds do not have official representations in the EU. Other faith-based actors present in Brussels, such as the Conference of European Rabbis and representatives from Muslim, Hindu, Buddhist, Baha'i and other religious communities, participate in the Article 17 dialogue as well.

Although churches succeeded in having the provisions for their dialogue with the EU separated from the general dialogue with civil society in the Treaty of Lisbon, they were nevertheless placed in the same group of dialogue partners as the philosophical and non-confessional organisations. Such participating organisations in the Article 17 TFEU dialogue include humanists and Freemasons as well as free thought and ethical or non-dogmatic organisations. As stated in the April 2022 briefing of the European Parliament on Article 17 of the TFEU, the European Humanist Federation (EHF) and Humanists International advocate the secular neutrality of the EU public sphere. They wish the EU institutions to maintain a neutral stance toward all convictions, whether religious or not. The EHF specifically asserts that an imbalance exists between humanist organisations and churches which relates to their set-up at the EU level, their financial capacity as well as their political impact.

The varying and sometimes diametrically opposed backgrounds of dialogue partners within the framework of the Article 17 process presents a challenge to the legitimacy of faith perspectives, and indeed of Christian voices, as they are repeatedly questioned during dialogue events. An occurrence during an Article 17 dialogue seminar on the humanitarian response to the war in Ukraine held in July 2022 illustrates the predispositions that faith-based actors face. Religious representatives from countries neighbouring Ukraine spoke of the immense effort of faith communities, and especially churches in the region, in assisting the needs of Ukrainian refugees after full-scale war broke out in February 2022. During the discussion, an audience member from a humanist background accused the churches of proselytising attitudes and conversion practices while they provide humanitarian assistance to refugees (who mostly come from an Orthodox background) and suggested that no religion at all would be the best option for European society. All religious representatives on the panel replied by emphasising the positive role of religion and the significant contribution of faith communities in supporting those neighbouring states in their response to the refugee emergency. This incident is but one example of the difficulties that churches in Europe face in their dialogue with the EU institutions. Constant questioning of the credibility of religion, including churches and their institutions, by dialogue partners within the

framework of the Article 17 dialogue weakens the legitimacy of Christian voices in the public debate and even challenges their place at the table.

Part of the multifaceted challenges of Article 17 dialogue was already highlighted in 2010, a year after the Lisbon Treaty had come into force, in a position paper produced by COMECE and CEC on Article 17 of the TFEU. It offered general considerations on the implementation of dialogue foreseen by its paragraph 3. While discussing the modalities of dialogue, the paper reflected on the notion of its openness, discerning three aspects: good governance, topics of dialogue, and frankness. It expressed the willingness of churches, as part of civil society, to be involved in the EU law-making process and governance and all fields within the EU's legislative and governmental competence. In addition, it argued for a candid dialogue that allows the critical engagement of all parties. With regard to the transparency of dialogue and positions of churches toward the wider public, the paper indicates the ways in which churches make their views known through their reports, by receiving visitors, through their participation in public events and as a result of gaining attention in the media.

Concerning the frequency of dialogue meetings, the position paper argues for the enhancement of the framework that is in place, such as working contacts, consultations, dialogue seminars and high-level meetings, as well as new forms of mutual exchange. Improving the quality of meetings involves strengthening exchange between the parties, common content preparation prior to the events (especially the high-level events) and proper follow-up. In relation to the European Commission, in particular, the paper indicates that the frame of a 'regular' dialogue (as described by the EU Commission) should facilitate a strengthening of the frequency of meetings with churches and be organised as part of the Commission's strategic annual planning.

The points raised by COMECE and CEC are still of relevance in 2023. Although, as expressed in the COMECE–CEC position paper, European churches are willing to improve and strengthen the dialogue with EU political institutions, the reform of Article 17 dialogue remains an open question and is part of the ongoing exchange of the two organisations, together with other religious actors in Brussels and their political counterparts.

Topics of Article 17 TFEU dialogue

The events organised in the framework of the Article 17 dialogue relate to topics relevant to current EU strategy and agenda. These are identified by either the EU institutions or the dialogue partners and require the agreement of both sides. Depending on EU priorities, the institutions may prioritise certain topics for a period of time involving different dialogue

partners. Nevertheless, partners may address any topic of importance at any given time.

The EU Commission, together with other main EU institutions, develops the overall strategy and political direction of the EU. As seen in the strategy document 'A Union that strives for more, My agenda for Europe, Political Guidelines for the next European Commission', for 2019–24, the six priorities set by the EU Commission include the following: a European Green Deal, a Europe fit for the digital age, economic growth and quality of jobs, promoting multilateralism and a rules-based global order, promoting justice and the core values of the EU, and protecting democracy from external interference and hate speech. These priorities are reflected in the topics discussed in the events and activities organised by the EU Commission and the EU Parliament.

In 2019, Article 17 dialogue seminars explored the role of churches and religions in social issues and the humanist contribution to society. The Parliament and the Commission hosted common high-level Article 17 meetings on 'The future of Europe: a value-based and effective Union', with the participation of non-confessional organisations and religious leaders. In 2020, the EU Parliament dialogue session focused on the implications of the Covid-19 pandemic, as it had been a challenge to all European societies.

In 2021, Article 17 dialogue sessions were dedicated to the Conference on the Future of Europe (CoFE), a series of debates led by citizens in an effort to enable their participation in shaping the future. In April 2021, the Presidents of CEC and COMECE addressed the members of the executive board of the CoFE, when they stressed the need 'to continuously strengthen our common European values in order to reaffirm commitment to the vision of the EU as a true community of values that contribute to a peaceful, prosperous, free, just, inclusive and sustainable Europe for all' (COMECE annual report 2021, 4). In May 2021, CEC and COMECE welcomed the CoFE, stating that 'A broad, open and inclusive discussion about the future of Europe is a much needed first step to renew trust in and reinvigorate commitment to the EU as a true community of values' (COMECE annual report 2021, 4). Among others, a joint event on 'Our hope for Europe' was held in the Chapel for Europe in Brussels in December 2021. Regrettably, this ambitious consultation process was limited due to the pandemic and did not include church or other religious voices. In a meeting of the Inter-Parliamentary Assembly on Orthodoxy (IAO) with COMECE and CEC in October 2022 in Brussels, the leadership of the IAO lamented the complete absence of even the words 'religion' or 'Christian' or any derivatives of these words in the 'Dialogue on the Future of Europe' text which resulted in the final report.

In 2018 and 2023, the European Parliament hosted book presentations on the question of religion and society. The aim of these were to discuss cross-cutting issues related to the European public sphere with authors. The 2018 event discussed Diarmaid MacCulloch's book *A History of Christianity*, published in 2009, whereas the 2023 event discussed the *Oxford Handbook of Religion and Europe*, edited by Grace Davie and Lucian N. Leustean and published in 2022. Other Article 17 dialogue events focused on artificial intelligence and ethical concerns in 2019, the European Green Deal and the preservation of our common home in 2020, and liberal democracy in 2023. Since the full-scale aggression of Russia against Ukraine in February 2022, the Article 17 dialogue seminars, including the high-level meeting of religious leaders at the EU Commission in January 2023, have focused on the war in Ukraine, addressing either the humanitarian crisis or the impact of the war on the continent. A new war on European soil creates grave concerns for the security and stability of the region. The European Parliament Research Service published a study on Russia's war against Ukraine focusing on the religious dimension of the conflict. This is hopefully a sign that EU institutions are willing to engage with such a complex religious issue that is of relevance to the region.

Human rights, and especially freedom of religion or belief, hold a special place on the EU agenda. The European Parliament, through its Intergroup on Freedom of Religion or Belief and Religious Tolerance, re-established for the 2019–24 period, ensures that the EU promotes and defends these freedoms in its external relations. The annual reports on freedom of religion or belief around the world focus on discrimination against religious minorities, Christians, Jews and atheists, as well as the promotion of religious pluralism in the world (www.religiousfreedom.eu). In December 2022, the European Commission appointed the Belgian diplomat Frans van Daele as the new special envoy for the promotion of freedom of religion or belief outside the EU, after the position had remained unfilled for a period of three years. Since 2013, guidelines have been in force on the promotion and protection of freedom of religion or belief in EU external relations that were adopted by the Foreign Affairs Council.

Based on the interests of the organisations in Brussels and their staff capacity, faith-based actors participate in the events and processes organised under the Article 17 dialogue. For instance, CEC contributed a 'Response document to the Draft Ethics Guidelines for Trustworthy AI' for the High-Level Expert Group on Artificial Intelligence in 2019. A year later, it offered a response to the EU Commission's 'White paper on Artificial Intelligence – A European approach to excellence and trust' and addressed the question in the events organised for its constituency. Similarly, CEC

has been working on economic and ecological justice, monitoring relevant EU policies, including the Sustainable Development Goals, fostering expertise from churches in Europe and strengthening advocacy work with the EU. Its recent publication 'Every part of creation matters' summarises the work of theologians, experts in ecological and political science, as well as activists from churches across Europe. It features key aspects of theological traditions on the matter and offers insights into the European Green Deal, which it supports, with the aim of achieving no net greenhouse gas emissions by 2050.

A significant contribution of churches in Europe belonging both to CEC and to COMECE concerns the EU Presidency meetings. The Council of the EU holds Article 17 dialogue meetings twice a year in the framework of the rotating Presidency to discuss its six-month programme. Representatives from the EU Presidency discuss the priorities of each Presidency with CEC and COMECE representatives. This is a unique opportunity to put forward the concerns of churches in Europe and to have an impact on the agenda of the EU Presidencies. During the meetings of the Presidency of the Council of the EU in the country that holds the Presidency, CEC and COMECE coordinate the meaningful engagement of churches on the national level.

Migration and asylum policies in the EU constitute an important area of work for churches in Europe. Religion plays a role in migration processes, as well as constituting a factor for the integration of migrants in European societies. Several organisations, including COMECE, EEA and the Churches' Commission for Migrants in Europe (CCME), work for the rights of migrants, refugees and their families and advocate for the integration of migrants and asylum seekers in hosting societies. CCME in particular is an expert organisation monitoring EU policy developments in the areas mentioned, coordinating relevant initiatives of churches and other partners in the field, and putting forward relevant advocacy positions.

Building on cooperation with a broad spectrum of partners and expert organisations in Brussels and beyond (such as the International Catholic Migration Commission), CCME works closely with the European Union Agency for Asylum, whose aim is to support EU member states in applying the Common European Asylum System, a package of EU laws that regulates asylum, international protection and reception conditions. It also works with FRONTEX, the EU Border and Coast Guard Agency, providing concrete recommendations for action.

CCME has a special focus on the integration of ethnic minorities and promotion of policies against discrimination on grounds of racial or ethnic origin and religion. Its advocacy work is closely related and supported by its ecclesiological reflection on migration as an opportunity and challenge

for the unity of the church. In this frame, CCME engages experiences and theologies of international (so-called ‘migrant’, ‘inter-cultural’, ‘minority ethnic’) churches in Europe in a joint ecumenical reflection on being church together in Europe.

Conclusions

In addition to working with the EU institutions in the framework of the Article 17 dialogue, church organisations employ the tools necessary for advocacy. They provide newsletters and other online or printed materials to inform their member churches about political developments in the European institutions. They draft background papers and organise *ad hoc* meetings, workshops and conferences, with participation from church representatives and experts, and they contribute to the public consultations organised by EU institutions. They monitor EU policy and legislation developments and manage networks and relations with relevant partners. They organise campaigns in Brussels and Strasbourg. In this way, they reflect on social and ethical questions and offer their unique contribution to the public debate on the present and future of Europe.

However, the actual impact of the churches’ engagement with EU institutions is limited. Apart from the practical reasons that affect this engagement, hindering factors also relate to the dynamic relationship between church and state, or – more accurately – religion and state. On the one hand, the lack of investment in church representation to the EU reduces the churches’ capacity to proactively set the agenda on topics where they can meaningfully contribute. At the moment, they provide their policy contributions primarily through the Article 17 dialogues, which are heavily shaped by Commission priorities and focused on meetings that tend to be one-off, as opposed to constituting the foundation for longer processes with specific outcomes. Lack of capacity not only hampers the churches’ ability to monitor and address a wider range of thematic priorities but also limits the impact of their advocacy efforts. Many church organisations tend to be output-focused (organising meetings and drafting papers) rather than outcome-focused. They respond to the desires of their members, who want to see many outputs, in this way ensuring visibility within their constituencies. But on the whole, they lack a theory of change and step-by-step strategies that will lead to concrete outcomes.

On the other hand, the expansion of modern states and governmental restrictions in Europe also present a challenge for churches and religion in general. A 2019 Pew Research survey spanning 2007 to 2017 demonstrates restrictions on religion imposed by both governments and private individuals or social groups. From national laws regulating religious dress code, to local laws banning public worship by Muslims,

to government harassment of religious groups and social hostilities related to religious norms as well as religious hostilities by organised groups, the report depicts the shrinking space for religion in Europe (Jeff Diamant, 'Europe Experienced a Surge in Government Restrictions on Religious Activity Over the Last Decade', at <https://www.pewresearch.org/short-reads/2019/07/29/europe-experienced-a-surge-in-government-restrictions-on-religious-activity-over-the-last-decade>).

A recent example of the possible threats to religious freedom from the European context, and the positive role churches can play in situations when the rights of specific communities are under threat, has been the proposed legislation for all non-Danish congregations in Denmark to translate their sermons into the Danish language. The intent behind the 2021 proposal was to prevent hate speech of extremist Muslim preachers. Had the legislation passed, all religious communities, including German, Romanian and English congregations in Denmark, would have had to translate their texts into Danish. In a letter, CEC addressed Danish Prime Minister Mette Frederiksen and Minister for Church Affairs Joy Mogensen expressing deep concern regarding the suggested legislation on the compulsory translation of sermons. The proposal was perceived as an unreasonably negative signal in relation to religion and the role of religious communities in the country, as well as an indicator to non-Danish European nations and Christian communities that their religious practises and presence in Denmark were questioned and deemed unequivocally problematic. Coordinated efforts among the National Council of Churches in Denmark, which led the dialogue between churches in the country and the government, CEC, which pointed to the larger European legislative framework, and the Evangelical Church in Germany, which is represented with several German-speaking congregations in Denmark, resulted in the repeal of the legislation in April 2023. The successful intervention of churches and cooperation on both the national and the European levels protected the right of religious communities to express their faith and preach in their mother tongue.

The proposed legislation and its cross-cutting impact on church, state and society demonstrates the need for increased dialogue and cooperation of churches with the political institutions on the national and European levels. As the states' presence in the different sectors of life is expanding, the space for religion is diminishing. Restrictions concerning worship imposed by states across Europe during the Covid-19 pandemic also attested to the challenges to religious freedom posed by the modern state. This reality – combined with the declining membership of churches in Western and Northern Europe, the challenges to church authority and the competition of diverse ideas in the public space, as mentioned

in the introduction to this essay – presents increasing difficulties for the churches' engagement and fruitful dialogue with EU institutions.

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