

Human Rights under Pressure – Promoting Human Rights through Cultural Traditions?

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Summary

Bishop Stephan Ackermann in his opening put the conference in the context of the Justice and Peace Working Group on “Human Rights and Cultural Traditions”. Experiences and workshops of the Justice and Peace Working Group so far have shown that there is no abstract dichotomy between human rights and traditional culture, although there always will be tensions in concrete situation. But the terminology of human rights is able to help and empower people on the margins of society to speak out for a better life. Usually the argument of tradition is invoked by those who live well with the imbalances of power. Human rights obligations are recalled by those who are deprived of basic entitlements.

The first panel in the conference focused on new challenges in Europe by the influx of migrants. The exchange of the panellists from three different countries in Europe made clear that there is a strong necessity to intensify dialogue on the perception of migration. Perception differs by country, also due to the different historical narratives and the imprint of national identity. But above it was obvious that between European states there is a wide range of possibilities to put human rights entitlements into day to day practice. While a one-size-fits-all approach shall fail, the human rights agenda gives space for a cultural sensitive implementation that is not necessarily arbitrary. At the same time we have to define in dialogue the limits and to point to those political developments that cannot be accepted from the perspective of human dignity.

Moving from Europe to the Middle East Father Jacques Mourad from the Association Mar Musa Syria shared impressive insights in his work. Father Jacques is a Syrian-Catholic priest of the Association Mar Musa in Syria, who is involved in intensive Christian-Islamic dialogues. He stands up for Christian-Islamic reconciliation in the Middle East. Because of this Father Jacques was abducted in Syria in May 2015 by the IS, he was able to free himself in October 2015. But since then his work on reconciliation has even intensified. He is convinced that the way to peace must lead through non-violent interaction and dialogue between members and representatives of the different religions in the region. Archbishop Sebastian Shaw from Lahore in Pakistan called upon the authorities in his country to reconsider the blasphemy paragraphs of criminal law. He spoke about the devastating consequences for society that follows from the misuse of this law provision.

The next panels deeper analysed the right to health as a test case for the relation between human rights and traditional or religious convictions. The introduction by Prof Stephan Rixen not only explained what the right to health means and identified some misunderstandings. Above he gave some examples of religious sensitive implementation of the right to health. He stated that this perspective might also contribute to health programs of the United Nations, because such an approach could help to overcome some of the tensions between UN and religious institutions.

Workshop A explored some of the statements of Prof Rixen in detail. The special focus was on the opportunities of engagement of religious actors in the health sector and how to broaden their impact – worldwide religious institutions are of a great importance. Workshop B focused on measures necessary to stop the care and brain drain in the health sector from Africa to countries abroad. It was said, that e.g. more Tanzanian doctors work outside than inside the country. To change this both northern countries and Tanzania would have to adjust their policies. Northern countries should open opportunities for circular migration, to encourage medical staff to migrate for a certain times without cutting all options of going back. On the other side, in both parts state have the obligation to install a health system that works in itself – not relying on cheap or charity work and workers from outside. Thirdly, the southern states should allocate enough financial resources to the health sector so that all adequately educated health workers could find jobs and prospects of a career within their countries. Workshop C concluded with the notion, that many traits in traditional medicine unfold potentials when they are recognized as specialised in addressing life style questions, as Prof Grover mentioned. Bruchhausen identified the role of many traditional healers in Africa as care takers for spiritual health. Seen in this perspective they could have a certain role to play also in international health debates.

Two panels in the end took up some of the question touched during the days. The conference was seen as a good example of how religions could establish platforms of dialogue. The conference brought experts from different countries, institutions and religions together. Their exchange from very different backgrounds and experiences is helpful not only in the perspective of a better understanding of the human right to health. Moreover it could be understood as a contribution to the debate on the implementation of human rights: Human rights will have a greater impact if cultural and religious convictions of all the involved persons are invited to contribute to the implementation of human rights.

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