



## 41st International Ecumenical Seminar

Institute for Ecumenical Research

Strasbourg, France

July 4 -11, 2007

### ***“Church-State-Relations as an Ecumenical Issue”***

Few issues are as dominant in the public mind today as how Islam relates to the state, politics and violence. Those questions cause Christian churches to reflect on their own relations to state and politics, and to articulate a common agenda. Aside from that, though, there are many other reasons why Christians need to ask such questions at the present time. Europe is on the way toward greater union and a differently defined statehood. That development has provoked heated discussion on whether the new European constitution should contain references to God. In addition, many Christians around the world are asking themselves how the churches should respond to state-sponsored violence, both of the inwardly and outwardly directed kind, as for example in the wars in Iraq, Lebanon or Israel/Palestine. Some Orthodox theologians are controversially raising questions about the churches' stand toward human rights, particularly toward freedom of religion. How can different church traditions coexist peacefully—and fruitfully—in modern, pluralistic and democratic societies if each claims absoluteness?

Behind the churches' different attitudes toward church and state relations lie differing theological commitments, as well as very diverse experiences in centuries-old contextual traditions, all of which inform their ethical judgement. While churches in France live under a principle of *laïcité*—a strict separation of church and state which moves the church outside the public sphere—, German churches enjoy a situation where, on the one hand, church and state cooperate closely, and on the other, the state behaves neutrally toward the different religious communities. In the US, there is also a separation of church and state, though here, unlike in France, the churches exert considerable influence over political life. An entirely different situation, again, exists in Scandinavia. Here Lutheran churches are (with the exception of Sweden) state churches. One could continue this list almost indefinitely.

Both how churches relate to the states in which they live, and how they respond to government and politics, are part of their Christian witness to the world. The fact that Christian churches so frequently diverge and disagree on these issues weakens their witness and renders it unpersuasive. Their differing judgement burdens the churches relations to each other, as well. That makes church-state relations an ecumenical issue. And that is why we are devoting the 2007 Summer Seminar to this topic.

We want to ask how different Christian traditions (especially the Roman Catholic, Lutheran, conservative Evangelical and Orthodox traditions) currently think about these questions and by what principles they are guided. We will also take look at the history of these traditions in order to better understand how the different views on church-state relations

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developed, what lessons churches have learned from history, but also what historical baggage they continue to carry with them. We would like to bring the traditions into conversation with each other, to see where commonalities and differences lie and to assess the importance of those. By our selection of speakers it should become evident how differently the issue plays out in various geographic and cultural contexts (Germany, France, Central and Eastern Europe, Scandinavia, the US). An important emphasis will be on the building of states in Africa. Finally, current events lead us to look beyond our Christian circles and consider how state and religion are regarded within Islam.

Our seminars are not only about formal theology and scholarship. They are also a chance for personal exchange, for participants to get to know each other and each other's different backgrounds. The fact that our participants come from such a variety of countries and churches makes these opportunities that much more fascinating. The seminar affords ample space, both in the plenum and in the workshops, for such exchange. Not planned, but all the more important, are the many spontaneous conversations at exquisite French dinners, in the cafeteria or over wine in one of the many restaurants in medieval Strasbourg.

Languages: English and German are the main languages of the Seminar. Lectures and discussion will be simultaneously translated into and out of these languages. Participants may also express themselves in French in the plenary discussions. A French language discussion group will be set up if there is a sufficient number of French-speaking participants.

Costs: The charge for the seminar, including full pension (i.e., room and meals) in a seminary dormitory (single rooms), is €650. As last year, a smaller part of this amount will be used to assist some participants from Eastern Europe, the South and from Latin America, persons who likely would not be able to participate without our help. In case it is not possible for your church to pay this amount, please do not hesitate to contact us.

Dates: 4 July (arrival and evening reception) to 11 July (departures after breakfast), 2007, in Strasbourg, France.

Information: Inquiries by email should be directed either to

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