IS THERE A CHURCH FOR HUMAN RIGHTS?

SUMMARY

In this article 1453 grade 11 students of private (anglican and catholic) and public schools are investigated with the help of a survey that was conducted in 1995/1996 in the Johannesburg/Pretoria-region in South Africa about the influence of their ecclesial attitudes on their human rights culture. These attitudes appear to positively contribute to their civil and environmental rights culture, negatively to their political rights culture, whereas they appear to have little or no influence on their economic and judicial rights culture. The article concludes with a plea for less decentralisation within the church and for making more space for the youth’s inspiration and creativity.

The question posed in the title of this paper was consciously and carefully chosen. First, it is couched in the form of a question, implying that it is by no means self-evident that churches and human rights are compatible: mostly they are not, as history shows. Second, the question we shall be dealing with is not whether churches are institutions of human rights - again, on the whole they are not, although this statement might be too sweeping to fit each and every case - but whether they are institutions for human rights. This immediately raises a further question: can any institution be said to promote human rights outside of itself, if within its own ranks it does not practise them, or practises them too halfheartedly? This is a thought-provoking question which stops us from being overly arrogant or sanguine about the relationship between churches and human rights.

Let us take the examples of the Catholic Church and the Afrikaans-speaking Reformed churches, to which the authors of this article belong. The Catholic Church is known for its outspoken protests against violations of human rights in any society on any continent. Yet within its own structure, which reminds one of the feudal system of premodern times, human rights like freedom of speech, the press and assembly and the right to privacy – all of them established, classic civil rights – are not structurally implemented. This church sharply criticises discrimination against women in all sectors of society, but within its own ranks it has no inkling of the notion of gender equality. Human rights out there, yes, but within its own power structure? No! This structure – so the interpretation goes – is God-given and immutable in terms of divine law (ex iure divino). This is stipulated in the Catholic codex (eg in Canon 330 – Listl
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1983, 92-94), although it is not postulated in either the Bible or the early church. The notion stems from Greek thought which influenced Western jurisprudence, whence it found its way into Catholic canonical thinking (Corecco 1983, 13). The Council of Trent condemned with an anathema sit anybody who denied that the threefold ministry (bishop, priest, deacon) is ex iure divino. The Second Vatican Council phrased it more abstractly, maintaining that the ministry as such is ex iure divino (Küng 1967, 477). But this does not do away with the fact that the ministry remains ex iure divino. Thus a scrutiny of human rights in the context of the Catholic Church gives us no cause to rejoice.

There is even less cause to rejoice when we contemplate the history of apartheid, which the Afrikaans-speaking Reformed churches in South Africa legitimated with their interpretation of the theme of creation and the God-given separateness of races based on white supremacy. This was not just an evil but an absolute evil, for which these churches through their leadership honestly and sincerely begged forgiveness. Asking forgiveness, giving forgiveness and receiving forgiveness are three different things, which may occur over a long period. Perhaps forgiveness is received only if and when awareness of the need for forgiveness really penetrates the innermost self of the human being and the cry for forgiveness rings from these depths, ever louder and ever more profoundly, both individually and collectively. At all events, the authors do not approach the theme of this paper — the broken relationship between the churches and human rights — with a triumphal attitude.

And yet we feel that this theme should not be neglected, as it raises an issue which is vitally important for a modern democratic society, while the masses of people who are involved with the churches may still hear voices there that plunge them back into pre-Enlightenment darkness. Ignoring such a theme would mean losing an opportunity to dream the dream of human dignity and autonomy which the churches have shattered and then move on from there, clarifying what (small) steps should be and can be taken to achieve a good life for all — something for which human rights are a necessary condition (Ricoeur 1992). We take as our point of departure those churches that are heading in this direction, or at least those aspects of churches which may be considered necessary conditions for creating a human rights culture. The reason for this is that churches can be judged on the basis of their violations of human rights — both past and current — counter to their own scriptural sources and traditions, when they fail to live up to their own ideals and standards. The best possible critique is always that of a “loyal opposition”, that is critique from the inside, that of noblesse oblige.

In this paper, therefore, we look at the relationship between human rights and specific aspects of church identity and church structure found in all kinds of churches at the grassroots in local contexts, aspects which we think may advan-