

**Interreligious Cooperation at local level and internationally – the potentials of  
interreligious dialogue “of life”**

Bishop Dr Stephan Ackermann  
Side Event at the 70th United Nations General Assembly  
New York, October 22 2015

Distinguished guests,

Dear Ladies and Gentlemen,

Freedom of Religions and Belief is one of the great issues of our time. This human right is at the core of the human rights agenda, since it deals with inner convictions of utmost importance for many people. The Second Vatican Council Declaration entitled “Dignitatis humanae” from the year 1965 marks up to the day of today the Church’s position on freedom of religion. The declaration is the result of a highly conflict-ridden learning process taking place within the Church. It culminates in the conviction that the truth can only be recognised in freedom. As the Council phrased it: “(...) The truth cannot impose itself except by virtue of its own truth, as it makes its entrance into the mind at once quietly and with power.” (DH 1) This insight is by no means new to the Church’s teaching, but it entails new political and legal consequences.

Religious hatred and misunderstandings are part of the daily experiences of many people. Of course, religious violence and hatred is most serious elsewhere, not in Europe. We all know. But the worldwide tensions have repercussions in all our societies. In Germany for instance we now deal with a growing Anti-Islamic Movement, intensified through growing numbers of asylum seekers from Syria. Above in Western European states one frequently encounters for instance the misunderstanding that religious faith has become a “private matter” in a modern free society, and that freedom of religion hence primarily seeks to protect a “private” domain of freedom. This serves to confuse secularism based on the rule of law with a laicistic programme purging the public domain of religious symbols.

As a reaction to more recent developments the Muslim world brought the phenomenon of religious hatred to the UN Human Rights council. Their resolution on “Defamation of Religions” caused many debates. But the resolution 16/18 now is a cornerstone in this debate, since it turned the perspective on the needs of protection of the human being. It contains an 8-point-action plan on measures to strengthen the support for freedom of religion and belief within societies. We welcome this development and understand it as our

common responsibility to strengthen the follow up line with suggestions of resolution 16/18. Next to this text the "Rabat Plan of Action" should also be mentioned. This paper can be understood as a call for more recognition in society for those, who work for a culture of mutual recognition and cooperation "at eye level" between different religions and religious denominations. Above it seems to strengthen those who work for calming down world-wide (religious) tensions at local level.

As the President of the German Commission of Justice and Peace I will focus on the situation in Germany – but allow me to mention also some developments in international scene, at the ILO, where our Commission is part of.

In some cities in Germany, especially in Berlin, there is a promising movement of 'broad based community organizations' that brings together different groups of a neighbourhood of the city to take action for the development of the particular area. This is a movement rather new to Germany, where we tend to let community development to the administration, also at local level. An important side effect of the cooperation is that faith based organizations, Islamic groups or church groups, active in the neighbourhood, and also non-religious or even anti-religious groups, start to listen and to get to know each other. In these local networks, together they identify the most urgent needs and look for ways of change at very local level. In most of the organizations local parishes and mosque based associations are part of it.

In the community organizations the value of direct face-to-face communication of all actors is highly esteemed. It is necessary to build mutual trust and sensitize for each other's challenges in daily life. Let me highlight a concrete problem in the one of the community-organizations in Berlin: In that city there are very few cemeteries where Islamic funerals are possible. A young father told his story who – after his wife delivered a dead-born baby – it took him two months to find a burial place. Now he and his wife have to travel more than two hours a day to mourn at the grave far away from their home in the city. After having heard the story, community organizations now are campaigning for an Islamic grave yard in close surroundings. This is very remarkable since in our society usually there is little reward for religious obligations – and even less for what people call privileges for Islamic people. But through the story of their neighbour people are touched and learned to understand the needs. Together they looked for a site, with the help of local parishes they found one and now are in touch with officials to realize a new cemetery.

Moreover we learn from Muslims, who are engaged in the community organizations, that they feel accepted as part of civil society simply because of being a fellow citizen. They experience themselves on equal footing with all others groups in the neighbourhood. The commitment for solutions of problems in the community brings them together. Not the adherence to this or that faith. Their specific competence lies in being part of the area they live in. Through action solidarity becomes a reality, even for topics that were not at all in focus in the beginning – like the mentioned Islamic grave yard. A precondition is listening and storytelling. Doing so, people really experience their relatedness with each other.

The potentials of a solidarity that is grounded in religious convictions became visible. This will strengthen not only mutual respect. Above it shows clearly, how the resources to work for a just and inclusive society could be freed by a true implementation of freedom of religion.

The potentials of interreligious action are not restricted to local level. In 2011 Justice and Peace participated in an interreligious dialogue on the importance of social justice and decent work at the ILO. The dialogue was jointly initiated by the ILO, the World Council of Churches and the Islamic Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization – ISESCO. About 20 representatives of Buddhism, Islam, Jewish Organizations and Churches came together in Geneva. One of the outcomes of this dialogue is a practical manual, a guideline for ILO-workers in the field to facilitate interreligious dialogue and to understand the perspectives of different religious actors on decent work. A series of such dialogues took place, in September this year in Ivory Coast with Catholic Workers' and Youth movements, Caritas, Justice and Peace, Catholic entrepreneurs, the WCC and Muslim representatives. It is planned to be continued by regional meetings in Latin America and Asia.

In the light of the new SDG Agenda interreligious dialogue now takes up momentum in order to raise awareness among religious groups and NGOs on labour related issues. The conditions for decent work are addressed now in Goal 8 of the SDG's and still remain the core concept for the ILO.

The two examples at local level and in international scene are encouraging. They make visible to politicians and to the broader society: religions matters as a motivational source to come up for a just society. Often our understanding of interreligious dialogue does not encompass this "dialogue of life". The interreligious dialogue „of life“, as a practical sign for our shared concern for the common good, is of great importance. It will gain even more value in our time of globalization and rising migration – also within our church. Recent crisis and long term developments demand more intense cooperation than ever before. More than knowledge about mutual dependence of the human society, interreligious cooperation is one of the ways to participate in a common vision of the future of our planet and of the human family.

Far from being a call to churches and religious communities only, states have their role to play. "Dignitatis humanae", the already mentioned declaration of the Second Vatican Council, underlines to the public significance of religion and its contribution to society's culture. For this reason, it requires that the State is "also to help create conditions favourable to the fostering of religious life, in order that the people may be truly enabled to exercise their religious rights and to fulfil their religious duties, and also in order that society itself may profit by the moral qualities of justice and peace which have their origin in men's faithfulness to God and to His holy will." (DH 6). Governments at all levels have to take up their part to facilitate and encourage those who are engaged in action and interreligious dialogues for our global social and just society.

Bonn, October 2015