

Service and Advocacy: Matters of Faith?

Rev. Dr Olav Fykse Tveit

General Secretary, World Council of Churches

1. Hope as inspiration and criterion for advocacy

The ecumenical work on advocacy – raising a voice together with those needing accompaniment for justice and peace – is a genuine task for a fellowship of churches who together express faith in the triune God of life.

This faith dimension of advocacy for justice and peace should convey hope. In my view, a commitment to convey hope should also be considered as a criterion for the critique of religion.

This reference to “faith” is not only a platform on which churches consider different perspectives, but much more; it is an approach and attitude, nurtured by fellowship across confessional and contextual borders. It is work accompanied by a daily prayer: “Thy kingdom come, thy will be done on earth as it is heaven.” It is service offered by those thirsty for righteousness and willing to be peacemakers. Faith is expressed and brought to action in many ways: in confidence and trust in God, in the content of doctrine, in the teaching of the church, in a commitment to serve and share, in embodying a community of faith and sacraments, and in common witness in words and deeds.

Advocacy work must be a substantively critical contribution, identifying hindrances toward a more just and peaceful world. However, it should also contribute to finding ways forward and solutions to the problems addressed. The characteristic of the message of the church is and must be hope. The advocacy of the church can only be based on a Christian faith that has a prophetic, critical approach that is aiming at transformation and hope; not marked by fatalism, by indifference or cynical words of devaluation of others, but by love.

Issues of immorality, injustice and conflict, understood internally and externally, are woven into Paul’s first letter to the Corinthians. One of the most significant and well

known biblical expressions of these three attitudes of faith, hope, and love is given in the context of his discussing unity, ecclesiology and Christian witness, also from the perspective of justice and peace (chapter 11). Chapter 13 defines faith as intrinsically linked to and only properly understood under the criterion of love. Hope grows out of the core of Christian faith, the apostolic tradition of the cross and the resurrection, as it is elaborated upon in chapter 15.

True hope is never only for me and my group and our interests; it is anchored in an event that is widely known and that has universal implications, Paul argues.

From these texts I conclude that if it is not a hope for all, it is not a real hope, and it is not a Christian hope.

Hope is a quality of faith. And a necessary condition for hope is that it expresses itself in love for others, whoever and wherever they are.

2. The context of the theme – and of my contribution

My theme belongs to at least three ongoing discourses. First, it relates to the interpretation and the elaboration of the present theme for the work of the World Council of Churches: *Together on a Pilgrimage of Justice and Peace*. The pilgrimage we can undertake together as churches and as Christians must be a journey in a shared Christian faith, whether the pilgrimage is symbolic or concrete. Justice and peace are in this sense not primarily political categories, but objectives and criteria for discernment of God's purpose and will for the world and for human life. (These terms represent theological concepts that are related to God and the relationship between God and human beings. At the same time, they cannot be understood in isolation from the realities of the world in which we live day to day.)

The ecumenical movement has been a space of learning for many. It is through participating in the daily reality and struggle for life that we have the possibility of understanding better what the Christian faith is. The divine message of the incarnation "Peace on earth!" can have many dimensions, but it is meaningless without a dimension of a just peace between human beings.

One of the ongoing tensions in the ecumenical movement has been between those who emphasize the work of Faith and Order and those who are committed to the work for justice and peace through different agendas and instruments. We see now that this theme of pilgrimage for the period after the 10th Assembly (Busan, Korea, 2013) is bringing the different foci of the ecumenical movement together, both in practical cooperation and in conceptual, theological reflection. The Faith and Order

(F&O) Commission is committed to study the theological implications of this pilgrimage of justice and peace; the Churches' Commission on International Affairs (CCIA) is asked to give more clear references and arguments from explicit faith perspectives in their work on advocacy.

Second, there is to some extent a parallel to these two "schools" of ecumenism in the differentiation between the disciplines of dogmatics and ethics within the Protestant category of "systematic theology." (This audience is well qualified to discuss the definitions and distinctions between the two disciplines.) I realize that in our daily work in the WCC the distinction is not very operational. This is partly due to the mixture of confessional and cultural traditions in the ecumenical discourse, and partly due to a focus on the issues and tasks of the churches.

A third ongoing discourse, also in many heated public debates in many European countries these days, is how much, if at all, the church should be involved in what are defined by some as political issues. The common factor of those who question this involvement is most often that the church or the ecumenical organizations are critical of actors in the political establishment who have another agenda.

Some critique, though, is also coming from within. Some have found the emphasis on advocacy too strong, accusing the World Council of Churches of being merely a church parallel to the United Nations. Conversely, some have found the focus on the classical issues of doctrine and ecclesiology too strong, too narrow and too much of a discourse for insiders in some circles.

This picture is changing in a remarkable way. We have today an ecumenical situation with great potential for stronger expressions of unity through common advocacy and service in the world. There is a remarkably wide and high level of consensus about several significant and longstanding involvements in advocacy from the agenda of the WCC. Together with our member churches and other ecumenical partners, such as the Roman Catholic Church and the World Evangelical Alliance, we are involved in advocacy for human rights, freedom of religion, initiatives for peace and reconciliation, care for creation and addressing climate change, strategies for overcoming poverty, care for refugees and migrants, involvement in inter-faith dialogue and cooperation for peace, and more. We often hear that ethics are dividing the churches; this might be true for some issues, but definitely not for many of them. We also experience a growing commitment to address issues like these together in cooperation with other faith communities.

3. Two cases of advocacy that raise the question of the “faith” contribution

Let me share two cases from last year’s work on advocacy for justice and peace that can illustrate the present relevance of the question of what faith as hope could mean in the work of advocacy.

Care for creation is a matter of accountability to God the creator and a matter of love for other human beings, including our children and grandchildren. Thus it has become increasingly clear how the environmental crisis is a moral crisis and a spiritual crisis. This is said not only from voices speaking on behalf of religion, but also from international political leaders like the Secretary General of the United Nations and among the voices of civil society in large. Scientists and politicians have on many occasions acknowledged that their comfort zones of reasoning and argument were surpassed when they got into dialogue with religious leaders about these issues. Nevertheless, they have found it absolutely necessary.

In March 2015 the Human Rights Council of the United Nations in Geneva organized an extended session on climate change and human rights. Insight and input were sought from representatives of civil society and countries that are experiencing the negative effects of climate changes in a dramatic way, such as from the Prime Minister of Tuvalu. The session showed clearly that the basic human rights of access to food and water, health services, education, and others are threatened by the dramatic changes many experience already.

I was asked to give a contribution from what is very interestingly called “faith-based organizations” represented in the international context of Geneva. Affirming the analysis of many others on how climate change challenges the basic rights of many, I spoke about the specific faith-based contribution to this discourse. I reflected on the perspective of “faith” from three dimensions: as content, as commitment, and as community. The three dimensions are interrelated. We – and here I spoke on behalf of most of the faith communities I am aware of – do believe that this world is created by God and that we are as human beings created in the image of God, responsible and accountable to the creator for how we steward it. We are part of nature and totally dependent upon nature; it is inhuman and against our deepest religious convictions to do harm to others in the way we see it happen through climate change. This is evidenced through joint confessions and statements of faith, but it is even clearer in many of the actions taken by communities of faith to call for climate justice.

However, there is another dimension of faith to be articulated in this context. In the discourse of the Human Rights Council I formulated this as “a right to hope.” The

world needs desperately the hope that something can change for the better. The negative effects of human activities can be reversed, and fairer common agreements can be established. Financial investments can shift to renewable energy. Our human, financial and material resources can be used in a totally different way for future life together.

This dimension of hope, that transformation is possible, is a significant dimension of faith in God and faith in the inspiration and strength given by God. There is a shared confidence in the potential of human beings to understand and pursue the will of God, not only short-sighted and narrow-minded self-interests and perspectives. It is expressed in prayers that are the catalyst for change, a spirituality that has a formative purpose and effect.

Thus, in the discourse of human rights I find it relevant from a faith perspective to speak of "a right to hope." This is primarily because respect for and protection of human rights addresses the most common basic hopes we have as human beings for justice and peace and the sustainable future of life. The conventions of human rights are in their deepest sense established to give hope in times of crisis. The experiences of being without rights, particularly in vulnerable situations, should not be repeated. Furthermore, I called for a right to hope because the hope must be nurtured by reliable reasons and signs that give hope, actions that respond to the need for hope. These reasons must come from actions of love, care for the other and a commitment to justice and peace.

As I also was asked to address the High Level Dialogue in COP21 in Paris in December last year, representing the many faith-based communities represented in that meeting, I found it most relevant and most urgent to use my allocated time to emphasize the dimension of hope. We indeed have a lot of reasons to critique the narrow-minded interests evident in the unwillingness to address properly the present situation of human-made climate change. Nevertheless, as people and communities of faith, we also have the privilege and the task to express hope that change toward the better is possible. I had the feeling from the response of the audience that they were somewhat surprised by the tone in my message.

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Another context in which the ecumenical movement has been particularly active in the last years, and where our advocacy for justice and peace in many ways challenges our faith, is the crisis of the war in Syria and the subsequent refugee situation in Europe. I shall not give a full resumé of what we are involved in, and how the churches and other faith communities try to address the terrible situations

for millions, but I will point to some dimensions of advocacy work that have a significant impact on what we mean by religious faith.

First of all, advocacy to end the violence, the military conflict, particularly the attacks that directly and indirectly target civilians and their livelihoods, is a high priority for the WCC. There is no way effectively to address the many other tragic dimensions of this situation if there is no serious attempt to start and support a political, non-violent peace process. It is a matter of faith to claim that non-violent methods are the preferential and indeed the most relevant approach to solve conflicts. The respect for human lives and the human right to not be victims of violence is founded in our faith in God.

Furthermore, the very complicated mixture of religious identities with the different pretexts for being involved in the war in Syria makes it quite demanding to address the situation from a perspective of faith. Religion is brought into deep disrespect and dishonour in this situation. This makes it even more critical that there is a discourse, a critical and self-critical discourse, about the connection between violence and religion in the context of the war in Syria. The issue of faith cannot be ignored, and particularly not by those who represent faith communities locally, nationally and internationally (and ecumenically).

The dramatic situation of the extreme numbers of displaced persons, some seeking asylum in other countries, not only the neighbouring countries but also farther away in Europe, North America, and some also in Asia and Africa. Faith communities have been particularly vocal in addressing the situation from the perspectives of human dignity, human rights and human solidarity. In many cases church representatives find themselves also in a critical discourse with governments and in conflict with nationalistic protectionism, even in need of condemning movements that have fascistic features.

For most of the churches in Europe, calls for advocacy for the rights of refugees have been combined with strong commitments and new initiatives of *diakonia*. It has been for many a new challenge to express what Christian faith is, particularly in a situation in which some of the arguments against receiving refugees from Syria have been twinned with calls for protecting Christian, European culture and values.¹

¹ Two relevant texts from WCC involvement in the mobilization of a faith-based approach to these questions are "Welcoming the Stranger," published by UNHCR, web address: <http://www.unhcr.org/51b6de419.html>, and the communiqué from an international church leader consultation in Munich, October, 2015: <https://www.oikoumene.org/en/resources/documents/other-meetings/communique-munich>.

Another critical aspect from the perspective of the WCC in this situation is the dramatic decline in numbers of Christians remaining in Syria (and Iraq). The presence and the role of the church in this area goes back to the first centuries of Christianity. The civil war in Syria, with all its negative aspects and consequences, has made many so uncertain about their future living in this region that they have left for other countries. Terrorists have attacked communities of faith, most of them Muslim. Christians have also been persecuted and killed, or driven from old Christian villages and cities. This is a situation that also calls for a response of faith. For Christians, what does the call to unity and mutual love mean in a situation like this? For Muslims, what is their faith-based approach to the Christians as neighbours, even brothers and sisters they should respect and care for?

The WCC called for a church leaders' consultation in Munich last October to discuss the churches' responses and contributions to the situation of significantly increased numbers of refugees coming into Europe. It was organized together with the Evangelical Lutheran Church of Bavaria, under the leadership of the Landesbischof and chair of the EKD council, Heinrich Bedford-Strohm. He has in many contexts, and in this discourse about the refugee crisis, applied his approach of "public theology" in the conceptual discussion about the advocacy of the church and in the actual involvement in the above-mentioned areas of advocacy. We will have a follow up of this consultation in Geneva next week, discussing with politicians and representatives of UN organizations how the churches can contribute to a realistic hope in this situation.

In the dramatic situation of refugees who are forced to leave their homes and lands, the advocacy required must be multifaceted. In a consultation in 2012 organized by the then-High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR), there was an argument for the need for cooperation with faith-based communities and organizations along several lines. The presence of these communities in almost any context of the world is an enormous resource, often not acknowledged. The possibility of finding a centre of belonging based on the most fundamental values of a person is of great importance. Another potential is the commitment of these faith-based communities to be in solidarity with and offer tangible support to and be willing to meet the needs of refugees, practically and politically (the latter often through international organizations and networks). Through communication, representatives of these faith communities can focus on the perspective of the refugees, even if there are many challenges to handle them practically and politically. For displaced people, the faith a person has or potentially can have is one of the few resources a person seeking asylum somewhere else might carry with her/him. This faith can offer the hope that can make them more able to handle the situation in which they find themselves.

In the responses to the present refugee situation, e.g., in Europe today, the need for involvement from civil society is, for the most part, well acknowledged, also by the politicians who are dealing with these issues. In several cases there is well-organized cooperation, in some cases the only real contribution. I have myself seen how refugees are dependent on actions by the churches or church-related organizations (in Italy and Greece, for example). The churches are active in advocacy on many levels, including security and a response to the basic needs of refugees, but they also maintain involvement in political discourses about how realistically to handle all the dimensions of such a crisis, from addressing the root cause of their leaving to the work of proper integration in their new context.

Speaking in more general terms, the involvement of the churches and their leaders in the difficult moral or political issues in, for example, South Sudan or Pakistan, in Syria or Tuvalu, are not so much defined by systematic theological concepts or confessional traditions as by the urgency of the challenges and need for contributions to justice and peace that can really make a difference and give hope. Simply put, we are often in a situation where the practice of the church gets much more attention than the public discourse about the content of Christian faith per se.

4. Faith can be an obstacle to a real hope

Still, or maybe for that reason, I find the question about “faith” even more compelling and interesting. In my view, discussion of faith as content and as a phenomenon in relation to advocacy for justice and peace must be carried forward by scrutinizing exactly the interconnectedness of faith, hope and love.

The cases mentioned above show that the relevance and implications of religious faith trigger more than a discussion of the concepts and principles of faith.² The

² I deliberately leave the definition of faith also open to include more than just Christian faith. It is not possible or relevant to isolate the Christian faith from the general and inter-faith discussion concerning the role of religion in the public sphere and in addressing specific challenges for our societies today, locally or globally. Historically it would not make sense either, as we have a lot to learn from church history when assessing the role of religion related to political powers and political practice. Nevertheless, my reflection is based on a reflection of Christian faith, primarily from a Lutheran perspective, but with some other perspectives from an ecumenical point of view.

relevance of a discussion about religion as a problem is not only a matter of how to define and condemn *abuse* of religion, or a discussion of the role of religion in relation to politics in general terms. It is also related to the content, practice and communication of faith in forms that are by some constituencies accepted as genuine and authentic. A narrowing of the concept of faith to the content of faith too often leads to a premature conclusion of defining religion, religious texts, and faith as something pure and immune to the critique based on the practice of faith.

Furthermore, there are many reasons to welcome a critical approach to religion, even in the concept of faith, as we know that faith as deep conviction can be based on texts, practices and institutions that have the potential and a record of binding the faithful to a status of control, to attitudes and actions of intolerance, even suppression and discrimination based on race, social status, gender, sexual orientation, and other criteria.

There is indeed a need for an ongoing internally critical approach to the abuse and use of religion and faith to pursue certain politics or interests. The need for discourses and structures offering a practice of mutual accountability among groups of faith and leaders of faith is quite obvious. Ecumenical dialogues have promoted this attitude and culture. Inter-faith dialogues have relevance only if they include these dimensions. The need for a strong contribution and involvement of an academic culture of critical research and discussion is quite obvious, as well.

Among the most significant criteria for assessment of authenticity and relevance of faith are how faith expressions and practices are truly indicative of hope for the future expressed in actions of love for your neighbour. Thus, the practice of a mutually accountable dialogue must include a discussion of what brings hope, exercised in love, in a search for justice and peace.

Within the scope of this scrutiny, we need to see also the potential for faith to be an obstacle to liberating and transforming hope. One perspective, which, while extreme, is definitely voiced in numerous contexts (even in public statements quite recently from a leader of the Inner Mission movement in Norway), is a form of apocalyptic fatalism: there is no reason to call for faith-based action on issues of climate change since this world will perish anyway and the faithful will be released from the tribulations of this world.

That this can be seen as an attitude of faith, based on texts of authority and shared convictions, is one important reason why faith must be tested as authentic against a measure of how much it is an expression of hope, transforming hope. This hope must be an expression of love, caring for the wellbeing of others, actually of all life, including one's own life. An apocalyptic hope limited to some groups, or even ignoring the brutal effects of climate change, ignoring the lives of other human

beings in their suffering of injustice, conflict and environmental degradation, can hardly be an expression of Christian faith, realized in love.

However, an ignorance or disinterest in the perspectives of eschatology could also lead to the same result of underestimating the significance of hope for a living faith.

5. The role of hope in Christian advocacy today

What is the narrative of our time? What are the overall perspectives driving the actions of leaders of the world? Is it a narrative of crisis, of decline, of a world getting into a constantly more risky and complicated situation? If so, what is the narrative that can contribute to change for the better?

The Millennium Development Goals were succeeded by the new Sustainable Development Goals in 2015. Many analysts agree that the Millennium goals inspired and led to significant improvements. In their evaluation of the status of the MDG, many well-informed analysts point to global statistical figures showing less poverty, more education, more democratization, fewer wars.

There are now new technical possibilities for development without dangerous emissions and other damaging pollution to nature. We are facing the so called 4th industrial revolution. There are reductions in total global carbon emissions from one year to the other for the first year in 2015.

What is the approach from leaders of faith-based organizations in this respect?

The prophetic voice of the church has been defined in the discourse of ecumenical advocacy mostly as the critical voice, to “speak truth to power.” Often it is combined with an analysis of the present status of the poor and oppressed in the world as being under the dominance of the power of “empire,” pointing to the significant signs of injustice, domination and lack of freedom the dominating structures represent, even for the privileged.

There is no reason to diminish the significance of the critical approach in Christian, international and ecumenical advocacy for justice and peace. It is exactly because of the brutal realities we are witnessing that the church worldwide addresses not only the effects of poverty and violence through charitable work, but also the root causes in structures of injustice and bad governance. This is based on a faith perspective of God as the God of justice and of peace, expressed in the calls to justice, evident in the moral tradition of the church, as well as in the critical teaching of the prophets of the Old Testament and of Jesus (and the apostles) in the New Testament.

Nevertheless, the question remains: is proclaiming and contributing to hope a profound part of the church's call to advocacy for justice and peace? There are particular reasons why Christian faith is and should be expressed as hope. There is a possibility for change that goes beyond the present status of the situation.

In the midst of the celebrations of the birth of Jesus Christ according to the different calendars of our churches, I see more clearly how the various dimensions of the Christmas gospel are relevant for the life of individuals, the churches, and the world. We definitely live in a world and in a time when there is just as much need as ever to be saved from sin and the destructive consequences of sin. This emphasis on the birth of a saviour has given shape to the Christmas traditions in the Western church, maybe particularly so in the churches of the Reformation. The saviour gives light in the darkness to see the reality of sin and evil but also finds a way out of the darkness, into all significant dimensions of peace on earth. The role of the church as the body of Christ is also to be critical and prophetic toward the "world" and all its suppressing powers of injustice and violence, calling for repentance and change.

In the Orthodox church tradition there is a stronger emphasis on seeing Christmas in the perspective of incarnation and transfiguration together. Hence, the task of the church is to share the news given (through the birth of Jesus Christ) about the potential for transformation, or deification, of human life. In that perspective, the task of the church and the meaning of the celebration of the incarnation is not only to remind human beings and humanity of what is wrong and sinful, but even more so to describe the new possibilities to do what is right and pleasing to God.

Should not one dimension of the prophetic calling of the church be to bring new perspectives on what transformation is possible in light of the gospel? The church daily offers the chance to see signs of hope and to be part of processes of transformation. Why should that not also be the case in a wider perspective, encouraging human beings to act collectively according to what creates and nurtures the hope for justice and peace on a national and global scale?

The theology of hope as developed by Jürgen Moltmann 50 years ago contributes a great deal to proper reflection on why Christian hope is and must be focused on transformation of this world. Yet this hope-filled theology can only provide something more than another perspective on change and transformation if it convincingly conveys a perspective of transcendence. The present situation of faith-based advocacy needs a renewal of the discussions related to the theology of hope.

The launch of an English version of Moltmann's book *Der lebendige Gott/ The Living God* next week in Geneva is one contribution to this reflection.³

Let me quote: "Without hope for the ultimate, hope for the penultimate soon loses its force, or it becomes violent in order to extort the ultimate from what is penultimate" (180) And, "Dominating knowledge establishes facts. Participatory knowledge leads to community with what already exists. The knowledge of possible change perceives the future of things and communities, and evaluates their potentialities" (186).

Faith-based advocacy should not be identified by an eschatology that divides the realities of this world into a polarized black and white picture, where, for example, only one interpretive key is used to assess the present challenges of the world (e.g., the use of the metaphor of empire). It is also necessary to avoid bringing a secular, fatalistic approach into the faith and work of the church by keeping an emphasis on the future's belonging to God. Any form of eschatology that brings judgment of others and of their status and rights in a way totally incompatible with the basic dimensions of Christian faith and ethics must be eschewed.

We can see such examples in Christian Zionism (a belief that God has an eschatological plan in which the occupation of the Palestinian territories by Israel is justified) or in interpretation of biblical eschatology in terms of fundamentalist millenarianism (the conviction that what happens, happens anyway, and we can have no influence on God's plan).

We indeed need a theology of hope that points to the potential for change. There is a need for theological perspectives on why faith in the living God has an impact on our daily ability to address the challenges we are facing individually or collectively, nurturing the courage to believe in something better.

There is a need also for articulating the signs of realism in faith-based advocacy, challenging those who want to ignore these contributions as unrealistic.

Hope is more than general optimism. Real hope is shown in action according to what we hope for, what vision and values we hope will be realized. In any form of advocacy, the priority of care for others and particularly those in urgent need must dominate. The advocacy work of the church and the ecumenical organizations is an authentic part of the diaconal ministry of the church. One of the great challenges for the communication of Christian faith today is that it is not really seen as bringing hope for a better future in justice and peace.

³ Jürgen Moltmann, *The Living God and the Fullness of Life*, tr. Margaret Kohl (Geneva: WCC Publications, 2016).

I believe that systematic theology can offer more to the churches and the ecumenical movement in this respect, addressing how the expressions of faith can be and must be authentic expressions of hope. I do so as I keep in mind the words of the Apostle Paul:

“And hope does not disappoint us, because God’s love has been poured into our hearts through the Holy Spirit that has been give to us” (Romans 5:5)