

The Swiss Council of Religions

Its Role in Switzerland – Its interreligious Engagement

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Ladies and gentlemen, honoured guests.

Thank you Mr. XX for your kind introduction.

I am very happy to be here today and would like to thank Professor Krebs for his kind invitation. Especially for rescheduling my presentation. It was initially planned for the late afternoon, which is very close to Sabbath. I consider that a perfect example of inter-faith dialogue put into action.

I was asked to introduce you to the history, the objectives and the current activities of the Swiss Council of Religion. After that I will share with you some thoughts on the place and role of the Council within the broad field of inter-faith dialogue in Switzerland.

If time allows, I shall be happy to answer questions.

History of the Council

The history of the Council dates back to spring 2003. Many people in Switzerland and probably in the whole world were anxious about the imminent second Iraq war, which was considered a late result of 9/11. At that time, many not only propagated a clash of civilisation, but even more a clash of religions. Nobody could really predict what influence the upcoming war would have on the religious peace in Switzerland itself and of course elsewhere.

As a sign, that the religious communities in Switzerland were not willing to participate in this potential ideological clash of religions, Jews, Muslims, Catholics and Protestants gathered for a shared Prayer of Peace at the Cathedral in Bern (Berner Münster). This solemn service with the stated aim to «Strengthen the bonds of peace – in Switzerland

and throughout the world» took place on March the 5th – two weeks before the first strike on Baghdad.

It was Reverend Thomas Wipf, the former president of the Federation of Swiss Protestant Churches, who as a result of this service came up with the idea of a Swiss Council of Religions. The “bonds of peace” should be guarded on long term by a committee of the leaders of the different Christian denominations and other religious communities.

As President of the Federation of Swiss Protestant Churches he was already engaged in bilateral dialogues with leading figures of different churches and religions. But he felt the strong necessity of a standing committee, where all these people would regularly come together.

As a result of the on-going discussions and political events, the decision was made to invite the leaders of the so-called abrahamic communities (Judaism, Christianity and Islam) to participate in such a committee. On Christian side, as well as on Jewish side, the participants were relatively clear, as each of their communities was organised in a national umbrella organisation.

On the Muslim side, a selection process was needed which ended with the election of the two leading people of the two major federal Muslim umbrella organisations.

Finally, 2006 the inaugural meeting of the Swiss Council of Religion took place.

The following people were members of the Council from the outset

- The President of the Federation of Swiss Protestant Churches, who was chosen as first chairman
- The President of the Conference of the Swiss Bishops
- The Bishop of the Old Catholic Church of Switzerland
- The President of the Federation of Islamic Organisations Switzerland
- The President of the Coordination of Islamic Organisations Switzerland
- And the President of the Swiss Federation of Jewish Communities

A reverend, employed by the Federation of Swiss Protestant Churches, acted as Secretary of the Council. Today a researcher in religious studies is the Secretary of the Council.

New Members

This composition did, however, not last long. The Council was already expanded for the first time two years after its institution, since it was soon confronted with the criticism of not having one single woman amongst its members. This was of course only due to the fact, that all leading figures were – and still are – men. This fact could not be changed by the Council, but the criticism was still taken very seriously. This gender issue became one of the first items on the council's agenda.

Different solutions were proposed and discussed. 2007 the churches and religious communities decided to include three female experts in the Council – one of each faith. Since then, these experts are an integral part of the Council.

A year later the orthodox churches became a new member of the Council. Like the Muslim community, the Orthodox Church in Switzerland grew considerably within the last twenty years - both of them mainly due to migration. As there were many different orthodox denominations, which were not yet organised in one national umbrella organisation, it was decided to include a leading person of the orthodox centre of the oecumenical patriarchate in Chambésy. Meanwhile this centre is part of the Swiss assembly of orthodox bishops.

There was also a minor change on the Jewish side. You should know that the Swiss Federation of Jewish Communities consists of 17 member congregations, but does not include the two liberal communities of Zurich and Geneva. They have formed what they call the Swiss Platform of Liberal Jews. In 2008 it was agreed that the president of the Swiss Federation of Jewish Communities also represent the Swiss Platform of Liberal Jews in the Council of Religions.

Let me now turn to the mandate of the Council.

Shortly before the Council was officially founded, the churches and religious communities agreed on a common mandate for the Council, which has not been changed since then.

I would like to take a look at this mandate to give you a clearer idea about the objectives and the work of the Council.

I am not going through it in detail, but I just want to point out some of the main items and shortly comment on these.

Let me first shortly focus on the Council's mode of operation – how it is suggested in the mandate and the way it effectively operates.

After that I am going to pick out some of the key objectives and will illustrate them with a few examples.

Finally, I will make some comments on public relations issues.

Mode of Operation

While it is suggested in the mandate that the council meets at least twice a year, it was agreed from the beginning to meet four times a year.

The sessions are guided by the Chairman chosen by the members. After Reverent Wipf stepped down 2 years ago, I took over. The members of the Council jointly agree on the items to be put on the agenda for discussion. Normally the items are suggested by the Chairman in cooperation with the Secretary and complemented by the other members.

Objectives

„The objectives of the churches and religious communities that created the Swiss Council of Religions are to contribute to and promote the preservation of religious peace in Switzerland;“

I have to admit, the mandate starts with a very ambitious objective. You will realise it is closely related to the solemn service I mentioned in the beginning, with the title

“Strengthen the bonds of peace”. But the Council has in no way the illusion it could do that all by itself. Still, I consider the Council as one of many necessary instruments of trying to strengthen this bond.

The first secretary of the Council, Reverend Sahli, used to say, the mere existence of this Council was already a sign of successful interreligious peace. This might sound a very small contribution, but looking at the world today, it seems to me as a comforting sign that we can look back on 6 years of mutual trust and friendship among the members of the Council.

With that goes the third objective in the mandate :

“to build confidence amongst the religious communities “

The objective, to strengthen peace amongst the religious communities, was particularly important in the year 2009. Back then right wing parties of Switzerland launched the national initiative against the construction of minarets. As most religious communities and interreligious platforms the Council was opposed to this proposed prohibition. The Council was not only against this particular prohibition, but mainly against the discrimination of one particular faith and the growing isolation of that community on false pretence. Therefore, the Council made a clear public statement against this initiative. Unfortunately, as you probably all know, all the efforts were in vain.

As my next focus, I would like to point out two other objectives mentioned in the mandate:

“to reach agreement amongst the members on matters of common interest”

and

“to conduct a discussion on current religious and/or political issues;”

These are actually the main points of our work - especially the discussions on current religion related political issues. I would even say therein lies the main difference to most other interreligious platforms in Switzerland.

Let me now give you some examples of our recent debates:

We had long discussions about religious symbols in the public sphere. Starting from minarets to church bells, to crucifixes in Schools, or the wearing of headscarves or other religious symbols in public, in particular by people in public office. Can a religiously neutral state prohibit it?

We discussed the relationship of religion and public schools. Do schools have to be absolutely free of any trace of religion? How much does a school have to take into consideration religious freedom of the students? Should children get a dispensation from the compulsory joint swimming lessons for boys and girls, if their parents ask for it for religious reasons?

Most recently we talked about the male circumcision, which in public was most controversially discussed over the last few months after the famous Cologne judgment. We all agreed, male circumcision should stay legal, but we asked ourselves, how far secularisation will go, and what place religious worldviews will have in a society more and more sceptical of religions.

As you see, we don't focus on theological discussions or on matters of faith, but we concentrate on current issues of political or social relevance. That is also due to the different backgrounds of the members of the Council. On Christian side, the leading figures are clergymen, whereas on Jewish and Muslim side we have leaders of a mainly secular background. Still, in a few instances we exchanged views on more theological matters. One example was how our view on other Religions is expressed in our prayers. This discussion was based on the controversy around the catholic custom to pray on Good Friday for the salvation of Jews. As interesting these discussions are - they are seldom the focal point.

Together we strive to understand and respect each other's positions on religion related political matters, even if we disagree. Still, in these discussions we attempt to find a common position, which is sometimes not an easy task.

Of course, the focus I just described on specific contents doesn't fully explain the special role of this Council. The fact that the members are, apart from the female experts, leading figures of the different religious communities coming themselves with a mandate from their constituencies, is undoubtedly a main difference to other inter-faith platforms.

This becomes clear in the next objective I would like to focus on:

“to provide a consultative framework for the Swiss Government in such matters.”

The different religious communities had always been engaged in dialogue with politics and the Swiss Government and they still are. The Council doesn't want to be a replacement for other existing dialogues. But it has the necessary representative basis to speak in matters that concern all of the represented religions on a national level.

Over the past six years, there have been frequent meetings with members of the Swiss Government, the Federal Council. In our Constitution, only religious freedom and religious neutrality of the state are issues of concern to the Federation, all other religion related matters are assigned to the cantons. Therefore, the Swiss government doesn't have a department for religious affairs. Most meetings therefore, are held with the head of the Federal Department of Home Affairs or the Federal Department of Justice and Police - in a few cases even with the Federal Department of Foreign Affairs. Each member of the Swiss Federal Council differs in his or her interest in religious matters. Pascal Couchepin, the former federal councillor, for example, was an important supporter of the Council and was always highly interested in the dialogue with the Council. Others, however, seem to consider it less important, to say the least! From the point of view of a secular state, that's more than understandable, but for us it sometimes is a difficult task to build a continuing trustful relationship with the government, especially if there are changes within the Federal Council. By the way, this is also a certain problem within the Council, since its members change from time to time, depending on when they are being discharged from their duties in their churches or religious communities.

I would like to end our quick look into the mandate with a focus on public relations aspect.

To fully understand the Council's mode of operation and how the Council is perceived in public, I find it crucial to take its way of communication into account. Generally the discussions within the Council are confidential. This allows us to express our views freely and openly.

This is primarily due to the fact that one of the main goals of the Council is to build mutual trust and friendship among the leading figures. Why is this so important? All in all the religious peace in Switzerland is in quite good shape, if I may use these words. Certainly compared to other countries it would be wrong to say we had major interreligious conflicts. But still, we are very well aware, that this cannot be taken for granted.

In case this peace should be severely disturbed, we want to be sure to have a well-functioning relationship at the top level between the leaders of the different churches and religious communities. The building and maintaining of mutual confidence and friendship amongst the members of the Council is, therefore, an important and on-going part of our work.

If you read further on in the mandate's last section, you realise, that the Council can decide to issue public statements, but this is rather an exception. It is obviously not the Council's goal to publicly participate in each and every on-going discussion.

Furthermore, the decision to make a public statement must be taken unanimously by all the members of the Council. This is another reasons why you find very little public statements by the Council.

Now, this is on the one hand an advantage for our mode of working, on the other hand, we have to face the criticism, that no one really knows what the Council is doing, and that it has little impact on society.

Also we find it hard to maintain the confidentiality, and at the same time reach the basis, i.e. the members of our churches and religious communities.

Finally, let me now turn to the last point, the position of the Council within the wide range of interreligious dialogue in Switzerland

In Switzerland you find many different forums, places, and levels of interreligious dialogue. Starting with Abraham's round table on a municipal level, other interreligious forums - like the Zurich forum of religions -, up to inter-cantonal and national organisations like the House of Religions in Bern or the IRAS (Interreligious Association of Switzerland).

Many of these are much older than the Council and they all make important contributions in the field of interreligious dialogue.

Now, where is the Council to be situated?

I consider three things to be crucial:

First, the Council works exclusively on a national level. This relates to its composition, as well as to the topics discussed. As already pointed out, the members are the leading figures of the different religious communities, and the matters chosen for discussion should be relevant on a national scale. It is of course possible that we discuss cases of a municipal level or even foreign affairs, but always with the focus on its domestic relevance.

Second, the Council essentially concentrates on matters with religion related political or social content. We do not focus on theological questions, as much other platforms do.

Third – and that seems to me the most obvious, but also most important point is that the members of the Council are, unlike in other inter-faith dialogue setups, the leaders of churches and religious communities represented in the Council, carrying also a political role and responsibility.

Incidentally, in the early days of the Council, some people feared, the Council might try to compete with other forums of interreligious dialogue and could try to take over the lead in these matters.

But the Council is neither willing nor capable in any way to replace any of the many existing organisations of interreligious dialogue.

The Council is rather the assurance and the promise that the leading figures of the abrahamitic religious traditions are committed to a regular dialogue - that they are trying to reach a mutual understanding of each other's points of view in matters concerning our society and that we continuously work on our mutual friendship and our confidence in each other.

On a national level, such a council is still unique in Europe. Other countries, which only know regional councils so far, have shown their interest in our work and our approach.

All in all the Council should not be seen either as taking the lead in interreligious dialogue or as a competing force, but it should be considered the natural and necessary complement in the wide range of interreligious dialogue.

Thank you for your attention, I will gladly answer your questions now.