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Towards a Christian Europe?

CRISIS OF VALUES

The momentous changes that have taken place in central and eastern Europe in the past six or seven years have led to an intense discussion about the identity and the destiny of Europe, and the role of religion in it. The collapse of the official ideology of central and eastern Europe that had been supposed to give meaning to life in the nations under communist regimes has left a void and a vacuum in the minds of many people. What for many years was supposed to be the truth turned out to be a lie, and people were left without orientation in the world in which they were living.

One thing was clear for many: the new order of things that had come about should move in the direction of the rebirth of Europe. For many years Europe has been divided not only politically but also ideologically by the Iron Curtain, but as soon as this curtain became more transparent the phrase of the "Common House of Europe" was coined by Michael Gorbachov and was taken on many lips. Many began to think about what it was that should hold this house together. In the west of Europe material prosperity and economic expansion had brought about a severe crisis of values, exemplified by the rapid disintegration of family life and a tremendous increase of divorces, by the abuse of drugs, by stark and ugly materialism making the rich countries of the world richer than ever and the poor countries of the world poorer than ever. In the east and center of Europe (insofar as it has been communist) since the introduction of the free market economy a huge gap developed between a small group of rich people, sometimes extremely rich people, who had benefited from the new economic

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order and the great majority of people who had become poorer than they were under communism. A massive disorientation took place leading to all kinds of phenomena that were hidden or were suppressed all those years but now broke into the open, such as racism, xenophobia, and antisemitism.

THE ROLE OF THE CHURCHES

No wonder that in this situation the Churches reflected on their role in Europe of the future. In the formerly communist part of Europe churches had become shelters and hiding places of those who opposed the regimes. When Poland was still communist, the Catholic Church was described to me as the custodian of society in a situation in which society was unable to act independently as it was suppressed by the state. It was only natural that when the communist form of state collapsed the Churches considered themselves as being entrusted with a special responsibility for building up a state that through democratic process was going to reflect more truly the needs, aspirations, and goals of society.

Already before the recent revolutions in Europe took place, church leaders and theologians reflected on their role in Europe. As an example I mention a lecture given by Bishop J. Homeyer of Hildesheim (Germany) in April 1989 entitled "*Die Kirche und Europa aus katholischer Sicht*"² in which he said that only the message of the gospel can be the "igniting idea" to provide the spiritual coherence able to give European nations the foundation, solidity, meaning, goal, and vitality of a new Europe. The gospel is the force which unites nations and builds a bridge between nations of diverse economic and societal systems. He also mentioned Pope John Paul II's call for "re-evangelizing Europe."

This view of the role of the Church in Europe is inspired by the idea of "Europe's Christian legacy or heritage," and of "Europe's Christian soul" and aims at the reconstruction of a "Christian Europe."³ According to Pope John Paul II, the lost European unity breathed through two lungs: the Byzantine lung and the Latin lung. The combination of Greek philosophy, Roman Law, and Jewish-Christian monotheism with their fundamental values had made Europe great and had brought about Christian culture and modern civilization. It is admitted that something in the development of this civilization has gone wrong and that under the modern conditions of democracy there is no way

²J. Homeyer, "Die Kirche und Europa aus katholischer Sicht," *Una Sancta; Zeitschrift für ökumenische Begegnung*, 44/4, 270, 1989.

³See: Reinhard Frieling, "Europa und die Kirchen," *Beiträge aus der evangelischen Militärseelsorge*, 2, 39f., 1991.

back to the medieval *corpus Christianum*. But the liberalization which began with the Reformation and led to the idea of autonomy of reason in the Enlightenment bringing about the extensive secularization of the twentieth century has in this view caused a disastrous decline of moral values in European society, either in the shape of materialistic consumerism in the West, or of atheistic-materialistic communism in the East.

Against this background, Europe is made co-responsible for the global crises of our century such as the world wars, the hunger in the Third World, and the ecological catastrophes. Therefore Europe has a special responsibility for solving the problems of humanity. This makes a reconstruction of its unity and a fundamental renewal of its spiritual, moral, and political resources necessary.

The collapse of communism in central and eastern Europe has made it clear to those who hold these views that a society without God is not viable. Therefore the main task of the Church is to re-evangelize Europe, not only by addressing the individual through religious education and catechesis in secularized society, but especially by taking the lead in shaping the fundamental values of society as a whole. It is basically a matter of overcoming the autonomy of reason which since the Enlightenment has destroyed a humane society by making morality a private matter and by viewing the world in a purely positivistic way in terms of success and failure. Autonomous reason must be exposed as un-reason and it must be shown that true reason is based on the fear of God and on fundamental ethical values which emerge from Christian faith.

It is further argued that even the neutral state and pluralistic democratic society are only viable if they rest on values not depending on democratic consensus, but derived from the gospel. Therefore the Church must assume spiritual leadership over society. This is in fact the Church's most precious service to society. It is not enough that the Church should make one among other contributions to the discussion on fundamental values which should guide society. That would go against the grain of the Church's claim of having been entrusted with the truth. The Church must demand from the state that it enforces Christian values in society. The ultimate aim is the Christianization of society, in which human responsibility before God is recognized, a Christian Europe in which the nations respect the Christian fundamental values as interpreted by the magisterium, the teaching of the Church.

Many Catholics see in Pope John Paul II the real spiritual leader of the 1989 revolutions in central and eastern Europe and demand that the Church be given the task of turning these societies which are now

living in an ideological vacuum, into Christian, or more specifically, Catholic societies. This demand can be made in more or less drastic terms and supported by more or less aggressive arguments. Similar claims are made by members of other churches, whether Protestant or Orthodox, particularly the Russian Orthodox Church.

THE CREDIBILITY OF THE CHURCHES

This is only one among other trends in the Catholic and other Churches. There are also strong voices within the churches that contradict these claims and advocate different attitudes for Christians to be guided by in the present situation of fundamental change in Europe. They have a far more realistic opinion about the position of the Church in the former communist countries. They know that the process of forced secularization under communism has had a devastating impact on religious life in those countries. Nearly two generations grew up with no or very little contact with religious traditions. This is true for Judaism and Christianity. During communist dictatorship Churches may have been shelters for those who opposed the regime, and therefore it seemed that the Churches had still quite a lot of influence, but what religious life really meant for most of those who had contact with the Churches in those times became clear when the communist regimes collapsed. In East Germany, for example, the churches then turned out to be as empty as in West Germany, where the process of secularization had drastically undermined religious life under very different circumstances, in a situation of freedom and affluence, and caused the religious communities to lose their influence in public life. There is a sharp decline of religious practice in the whole of Europe whether people had lived under communist or under democratic governments. Secularization has become part and parcel of modern European culture as such. One should have no illusions about this in spite of all kinds of temporary revival movements.

I should like to deal with this situation from my angle as a person involved for the last thirty years in a process of Christian rethinking of the Church's relationship to the Jewish people, first as theological adviser in Jerusalem to the Netherlands Reformed Church and then as general secretary of the International Council of Christians and Jews. I am looking at this issue as a *Christian* involved in this process of rethinking.

The process of rethinking started in a number of Church circles in the wake of what had happened to the Jews in Europe during the Second World War, that is to say, in the wake of the collapse of fundamental human values during the Nazi regime which led to the Shoah, the destruction of European Jewry. Those involved in this rethinking

realized that the Shoah was not just an accident of history, but was part and parcel of European history and culture and part and parcel of the contribution of the Churches to this history and this culture. They saw the Shoah as the most conspicuous expression of the bankruptcy and moral collapse of European culture. They realized that the Churches to a very great extent were responsible for creating a climate of opinion in which the Shoah could take place and was met with relatively little resistance among the overall population of Europe, including the membership of the Churches. Neither Hitler nor those who executed his orders were excommunicated from the Churches. After the war many were even helped by Church leaders to escape justice. It was the Church's teaching of contempt of the Jews—an expression coined by the French historian, Jules Isaac—which prepared the ground for anti-semitism as a deeply ingrained disease of European history and culture. Ever since the Church had come to political, social, and cultural influence in Europe, anti-Judaism and antisemitism accompanied its actions, its teaching and preaching, in some centuries to a lesser degree, in other centuries to a very large extent.

Those who are concerned about the ideological vacuum in Europe correctly maintain that there is a profound crisis of values, and that Europe can only survive if it overcomes this crisis in a positive and creative way. We have seen that there are influential voices in the Churches, whether in Catholic, Orthodox, or Protestant Churches, which claim for the Church more or less exclusive moral leadership in Europe of the future. But those involved in rethinking the Christian-Jewish relationship ask themselves: Is such leadership role at all possible if the Churches have not yet come to terms with their co-responsibility for the collapse of fundamental values that occurred in the Shoah? Confessions of sin and guilt have come very slowly and hesitantly, if at all, over the lips of Church leaders. A process of rethinking has indeed started in the Catholic Church, but what of this rethinking has reached people at a grassroots level in the Catholic Church? The same question applies to Protestant Churches, let alone the Orthodox Churches where this process of rethinking is at its very beginning.

Have the very roots of the Churches' failure to counteract the collapse of moral values which led to the destruction of Jewry in Europe been really discovered? Has a real diagnosis of the disease of anti-semitism and anti-Judaism taken place? As long as such diagnosis has not been made, and no real therapy has started, can the Churches be entrusted with spiritual hegemony of Europe? And perhaps here lie also the deepest reasons of the decline and loss of credibility of religion in Europe whether in the East or in the West. And let us take the word

“credibility” in its literal sense: the ability to arouse faith. Can one still have faith in the message of religion? Can it really inspire belief, if it apparently has been unable to prevent this greatest crime in recent history? Do people unconsciously feel this and therefore react in this way on established religion and vote on religion with the feet leaving religion by the side in their daily lives?

Nevertheless there are Church circles that continue to speak about a “reconstruction of Christian Europe.” I see my Jewish friends shrink in fear or anger, because they know that when Europe *was* Christian there was no place for them, nor for other dissidents and for those whom the Churches considered to be heretics. As a Christian, I must ask myself: Why was it that the principle of the recognition of universal human rights emerged in Europe in circles that were considered heretical by the Churches. I refer to the Enlightenment which was welcomed by the Jews as a liberation, although religiously they could not accept its basic assumptions of human autonomy any more than the Christians. It contained also other elements that were unacceptable to Jews.

THE HATRED OF JEWS: A POISON IN THE BODY OF EUROPE

We must ask further: Why were the Churches so disturbed by the presence of Jews as their neighbors in society? Why could they not tolerate that Jews developed freely in the countries where Churches had influence and power? Take the example of Spain. In the year 1492 Europeans embarked from this country to “discover” America and to massacre the indigenous people living there. It is also the year of the expulsion of the Jews from Spain and the year of the fall of Granada, when the last remnant of Muslim presence in Spain was removed, and Spain became an exclusively Christian country. The attitude towards Jews is often the measuring rod of the moral quality of a society. If Jews are not safe in a society, that society cannot be safe for others either.

Why then have the Churches throughout history been so hostile towards Jews? Why is anti-Judaism so deeply ingrained in its theology, its liturgy, its teaching, and its policies, so that it could inject a whole culture with anti-Jewish poison even where the memory of the Christian origin of that culture has become very faint? But the poison is still in its body.

One of the deepest causes of this hostility seems to be that the Jews through their very presence among Christians challenged the Church’s claim that the decisive turning point in the history of salvation had already occurred, namely, in the coming of Christ on earth, in the incarnation of the Son of God. This challenge was all the more severe as it came from the people, with whom this history of salvation had started,

from the people elected by God to be God's witness in the world. If of all people they refused the claim of the Church that the new age had been ushered in, could Christians then be sure that the new age had really come? The Jews caused Christians to have nagging doubts about their most central faith claims. Could they tolerate this? And when Christians saw that Jews kept faithful to the Torah which the Church had appropriated in its Holy Scriptures as the Old Testament, and that Jews were able to maintain throughout the centuries a religious and social life according to their own interpretation of the Torah, many of them understood this as an affront, a challenge to the claim of the Church of being entrusted with the true interpretation of scripture, and saw this therefore as an undermining of church authority.

The Church with its triumphalism and its claim of realized eschatology, i.e., the claim that the last decisive stage of history had been ushered in with the coming of Christ, could not bear nor tolerate the Jewish denial of this claim. At the famous disputation of Barcelona of 1263, to which the Jewish rabbi and mystic Moses Nachmanides was summoned by the king of Aragon, James I, and where all power was on the side of the Christians who had brought their best theologians into the field, the words of Nachmanides caused embarrassment and anger among the Christians: You, Christians, claim that the Messiah has come, but where is the messianic age? You claim that the Redeemer has come, but where is the redemption? "From the time of Jesus to the present," he said, "the world has been filled with violence and injustice, and the Christians have shed more blood than all other peoples together." The disputation was quickly interrupted and Nachmanides had to flee from Spain and went to Jerusalem.

Is not this gap between claim and reality one of the weakest points in the Christian worldview? In order to satisfy the claim, reality is violated; in order to defend the truth as the Church sees it, other insights, other experiences of truth are excluded and people who hold them dear are persecuted. At the Second Vatican Council a beginning was made to overcome this attitude of the Church to others, and a new openness to other confessions, other religions, and other world views was displayed. But are not many of those who claim for the Church the exclusive or main moral leadership in the Europe of the future, also those who show little appreciation for the achievements of the Second Vatican Council and try to turn the clock back?

A SUPPRESSED HERITAGE

It is said that Europe is the grandiose synthesis of Greek philosophy, Latin Law, and Jewish-Christian monotheism, and that this synthesis has brought forth the Christian soul of Europe. It seems to me that

such view is a distortion of history. The coalition of state and church in the Middle Ages and early modern history has often suppressed the heritages (or major elements of them) that were not to the liking of this coalition. It was these suppressed heritages, or elements of them, that brought about the revolutions of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries including the whole movement that advocated universal human rights. Only when it turned out that the course of history could not be reversed, the majority of Churches joined in this movement and found justification for it in Christian doctrine. In the same sense, democracy is not an essentially Christian achievement. It had many different fathers and mothers standing at its cradle.

One of the suppressed heritages of Europe was the Jewish heritage. When it is claimed that Jewish-Christian monotheism is one of the main elements of the "Christian soul of Europe," the hyphen between the words "Jewish" and "Christian" is telling. It means that the Jewish element is only acknowledged as a legitimate element insofar as it is filtered through Christianity. Christians may speak about the Jewish roots of their religion, but often they mean thereby that anything worthwhile that has grown out of these roots is Christian, but they do not realize that out of the same roots an entire separate tree has grown: Judaism and the Jewish people, and that after Judaism and Christianity had parted ways, Judaism has been a very important and creative factor in the building of Europe, often in the form of dissenting voices that called for openness when everywhere there were only closed systems. It was the Jews who kept the connections going between the various parts of Europe as a people distributed over the whole of Europe and beyond. They also kept the connections open with the past. An outstanding example is the translation schools of Toledo in medieval Spain, where it was predominantly Jews who translated classical Greek and Latin works that had been lost in the original languages from Arabic into Latin and made them accessible to the European nations. And well known to all are the rich contributions of Jews to European culture after the Jewish emancipation, after Jews were openly allowed to make their contributions to science, medicine, literature, music, arts, etc. Then a true explosion of suppressed energy occurred.

Europe does not have only a "Christian soul," but its soul is composed of many elements. Each of them has a great deal to contribute to the Europe of the future.

A serious problem is indeed that there exists currently a vacuum with regard to fundamental values able to guide Europe—whether formerly Communist or not—into the future. It is indeed a problem for most parts of the world, America included. The danger is that this vacuum will be filled by ideologies (such as fascism and communist

materialism did in the period that lies behind us), which will prevent genuinely humane values from prevailing in Europe of the future. Or that this vacuum will be filled by the sheer greed of unlimited egoism in capitalism and consumerism. But the solution cannot be that only one element of the European soul should claim exclusive leadership.

The problems of our time are so overwhelming that we need the wisdom of all traditions of humanity. An open and intensive dialogue between the adepts of all traditions is necessary. Christians and Jews who draw their life sap to a large extent from the same roots should get together and explore what common basis they have and what they together have to contribute to the articulation of the fundamental values to guide modern society. And they should not do this in isolation from other traditions, religions, and cultural heritages. As Jews and Christians we have to be open to what Islam has to offer, what the Hindu and Buddhist traditions have to offer, what the religions of indigenous people of Australia and America have to offer.

The tremendous challenges posed to us to shape the future character not only of Europe—which must not become a fortress—but also of our whole world in accordance with truly humane fundamental values, can only be met through an intensive dialogue among all who have to offer wisdom and insights of truth. We are one world. Jews, Christians, and Muslims believe in One God. Because there is One God we may believe that he has not left himself without witness among all people of the world who in different ways express what insight of truth they have received from the One who holds the one world in his hand. Being open to what others have to offer us, is being open to the One God, who has created also the others and imparted also to them gifts of his grace and truth. Therefore—contrary to what is often maintained—monotheists cannot be exclusivists but must be inclusivists, since all are under the grace and judgment of the One God.

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