

The Future of Europe

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During the last two years tremendous changes have taken place on the European scene. In the autumn of 1989 the walls 'came tumbling down' in Eastern Europe. At times we could hardly believe our eyes, when we looked at the news. On the one hand, there were feelings of surprise, joy and gratitude; on the other, there were also feelings of deep concern and compassion. All of a sudden Eastern Europe, that for a long time seemed to be so far away, appeared to be very near indeed. All of a sudden the basic unity of Europe became visible again, be it only in part yet.

But what does it all mean for the future? I believe that we need much reflection on this score, both from the side of the churches and from the theologians. Early in July 1990 the European Committee of the World Alliance of Reformed Churches (WARC) met in Yugoslavia and naturally the question of what a new unity of Europe may mean for the churches of a Reformed confession was discussed. Equally naturally, no definite answers were given. One of the questions raised was whether it would not be good to have something like a European Reformed Church with one synod. For the Roman Catholic Church a united Europe does not pose much of a problem, but for the Protestants with their national churches the matter is quite different. Must we, now that the national borders are increasingly becoming blurred, also give up the idea of strictly national churches? But if we do this, should we aim at a kind of EEC-Church (that is a united church for Western Europe only) or should the ideal be a Reformed Church for all of Europe? Of course, at the moment these are only theoretical questions which seem to be far removed from the present reality. But the very fact that they are being asked does show that we may be moving in the direction of new developments.

On one point most people, at least in the Netherlands, agree, namely, that there is a great need for close contact between the churches. During the period that the Iron Curtain was still in existence many congregations in the Netherlands had a kind of partner-relationship with congregations in the German Democratic Republic. On both sides of the Iron Curtain these contacts were greatly appreciated. Once or twice a year Dutch church members travelled to the GDR and visited the partner-congregation. For the East Germans it was usually more difficult to reciprocate, but even so the contacts were felt to be very important for both congregations. Perhaps this kind of contact should be extended, especially also to the Protestant congregations in Southern Europe, which are often small in number and feel themselves rather isolated. Personally I believe that such contacts on a small scale are of far greater importance than the establishing of one large Reformed European Church.

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organizational know-how? The situation of the church in Western Europe is rather worrisome, not to say alarming. In the Netherlands the larger churches are continually decreasing in numbers. The former established church, the Nederlandse Hervormde Kerk (Netherlands Reformed Church) loses about 40,000 members every year and although officially it is still a large church (about two and a half million members), in reality it is much smaller, because the number of nominal members is much larger than that of the active members. The Roman Catholic Church officially has about five million members, but in actual fact no more than a million of them go regularly to church. My own church, the Gereformeerde Kerken in Nederland (Reformed Churches – in the plural, due to the emphasis on the autonomy of the local church) has about 800,000 members but loses about 10,000 a year. The smaller churches do much better, but they too begin increasingly to feel the impact of secularization.

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In many ways the religious and ecclesiastical situation in the Netherlands is a mirror of what is going on in all of Western Europe, including Great Britain. A few years ago a R.C. Study Centre in Brussels made a study of 'God in Europe'. The results clearly indicated that the belief in a personal God is diminishing. Only one third of all Western Europeans still believes in a personal God. Even among active church members this belief is decreasing. Admittedly, Christianity is still a strong force in Western European culture, but this is a matter of history rather than of present reality.

In the present situation it is becoming high time that the churches in Western Europe begin to realize that their own countries have become mission fields and that they need a fresh outpouring of the Holy Spirit. Perhaps they should do well to listen to their brothers and sisters in Eastern Europe, in order to learn from them how the Lord kept them going in those dark years of communist repression. Personally I believe that we should not be pessimistic, in spite of all the negative figures I have mentioned in this short report. The church does not primarily belong to us but to the Lord. And we have his promise that he will be with us 'to the close of the age' (Matt.28:20). The period 'between the times' is the era of the Spirit! But we should realize, of course, that the Spirit does his work, not without us but with us and through us. In other words, a great task lies ahead of us!