

The Gospel and the Protestant Churches of Europe: Christian Responsibility for Europe from a Protestant Perspective*

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Protestant Sobriety: Joy without Illusions over the New Europe

A Protestant New Awakening Instead of a Return to the Past

Sobriety, Protestant sobriety, is appropriate when Protestant Christians and churches from our part of the planet assemble to discern their 'Christian responsibility for Europe'.¹ We assemble in the joyful knowledge that, thank God, no political frontier can divide us any longer and that, thank God, no doctrinaire ideology can prevent us any longer from coming together in freedom, speaking together in freedom and acting together in freedom. That joy is certainly great indeed. I hope that our joy will not prove fleeting and immediately subside in impotence, but that it will have a long-term effect both spiritual and secular. Precisely because our joy is great and should be long-lasting, however, that Protestant sobriety is indicated which the New Testament recommends not only to bishops (1 Timothy 3:2, a bishop should be sober. . .) but to all Christians (1 Thessalonians 5:6; 1 Peter 4:7 etc.). What is meant is a sobriety that is indeed very consistent with joy but in no way consistent with illusions. There is one particular illusion into which our new joy at the unity of Europe could easily be transformed and which must be firmly resisted from the outset. When the Protestant churches of Europe assemble, historical traditions which all represent a piece of Europe's past encounter one another. And this holds the great danger of invoking the old times when Europe was still Christian and Christianity still European.

Such invocations of the 'Christian West' have their own tradition. 'Those were fine and glorious times when Europe was a Christian land, when a *single* Christianity dwelt in this civilised part of the world', reads the evocative opening sentence of a famous fragment from the pen of the Romantic writer Novalis, who gave this work the programmatic title *Christianity or Europe*.² Novalis hoped to reconcile Europe once again and for ever with Christianity and thereby also with itself. 'Blood will flow all over Europe',³ he dared to prophesy, until Christianity becomes 'living and effective again' and forms 'a visible church without regard to state frontiers'.⁴ 'Only religion can reawaken Europe, give security to the nations and install Christianity with a new glory visibly on earth in her old peace-making role.'⁵ Such a rebirth of Christian Europe would furthermore radiate out to the whole world, transforming it also: 'the

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other parts of the world are waiting for Europe's reconciliation and resurrection in order to attach themselves and become fellow-citizens of the kingdom of heaven.⁶

If only it were true! But we are far removed from this and will have to recognise Novalis' formulae for what they really are: a romantic invocation — though one can hardly imagine a more impressive one. But even the most impressive invocation is no more than an invocation. The Christian faith has *no* magic power. Rather it admonishes us to that New Testament sobriety which places its hope not in any past to be restored but only in God's prevenient grace. It is in this sense that Peter's first epistle admonishes us to 'be sober, and hope to the end for the grace that is to be brought unto you at the revelation of Jesus Christ' (1 Peter 1:13).

Consequently, a European Protestant assembly has promise only if it leads to a new awakening guided not by some respectable past but only by God's prevenient grace. A new awakening guided by grace will also, of course, always be a *turning round*. But in no way will it prove to be simply a *turning back*, guided by nostalgia for what once was. A new beginning like that would consist essentially in our turning back to ourselves. A Christian, however, in Luther's famous words, never lives 'in himself'.⁷ Indeed, God's grace leads man away from himself. It also leads the church away from itself. We would be ecclesiologicaly regressive if we allowed ourselves to be tempted to a turning back in which we merely ended up at ourselves again. However enticing and promising the models of the past may be, they cannot be the goal for the new beginning which we are promised.

In any case we will honour times gone by if and to the extent that they deserve it. We will not ungratefully despise the legacy of our mothers and fathers, but reflect on it and pass it on with critical respect. Disrespectful criticism of tradition is forbidden for the Protestant Church just as much as uncritical respect. Here and there we may well be allowed a little pride at our ecclesiastical and theological heritage. But a simple return to our denominational and theological roots would be a new beginning without promise. The goal of our turning round lies ahead of us, not behind us. Only if we move forwards together do we also honour the ecclesiastical origins, roots and points of departure from which we come with our respective forms of piety, liturgy, diakonia and theology: whether it is (in our century) dialectical theology with its strict insistence on sticking to the point; or religious socialism which sharpens Christians' social responsibility; or nineteenth-century piety and liberal theology in the spirit of Schleiermacher; or the Baptist teaching of Oncken and his English predecessors obligating every Christian to be a missionary; or the older and more recent revival movements in the Herrnhuter (Moravian), Swabian or Methodist mould; or the Enlightenment, which boldly relativised all denominational conflicts and encouraged independent thought; or the Reformation itself (which at once can neither be acclaimed too highly nor lamented too deeply), together with the Lutheran and Reformed churches which originated from it in Switzerland, the Netherlands, Scotland, Scandinavia, Finland, the Baltic, Poland, France, Germany, Romania and Hungary; or the prereformation movements of the Bohemian Brethren, the Hussites, the Waldensians, the Cathars and others. We know what we have with roots of this kind and what they still have to say to us today. But we remain true to our respective origins only if we do not turn back *to them* but turn round *with them* to the only foundation of all Christians and churches: 'for other foundation can no man lay than that is laid, which is Jesus Christ' (1 Corinthians 3:11).

Jesus Christ is, however, not only the basis but at the same time the driving force and the goal of Christian existence. After all, he is the one 'which is, and which was, and which is to come' (Revelation 1:4). Whoever turns round to him is inevitably

constantly in movement and new beginning. And so, to the Christianity which is built upon him the sober statement of the letter to the Hebrews applies, that 'here have we no continuing city, but we seek one to come' (Hebrews 13:14). Europe is not the kingdom of God. Europe – like any other part of the world – is the target but not the goal of Christian proclamation. It is for this reason that the Protestant churches of Europe can fulfil their responsibility for Europe only by reminding Europe of its responsibility for the world; and especially for those parts of the world which are at risk of falling under the shadow of a Europe that is getting stronger again. Since ancient times Europe has distinguished itself from the rest of the world as a superior *orbis terrarum*; later, it is true, it exported itself to the whole world, but only in order to bring the rest of the world into line with itself. The Christian churches encouraged this, thereby contradicting their own understanding of themselves. It is all the more important today, in the face of anticipated new migrations of peoples, to oppose the natural temptation for the political European community to develop once more into an *orbis terrarum* separated from the rest of the world.

This situation is new. Less than half a century ago people believed that the signs of the times were 'that Europe has lost its former central position in the world as far as politics, culture and faith are concerned'. In 1946 Karl Barth wrote that

Europe. . . , based on the ancient world and Christianity, was once a great, vital and brilliant unity of politics, culture and faith. Of course, European coherence began to disintegrate early on, but it was in possession of this legacy that Europe went on to gain world significance and European man was able to live for centuries imagining. . . that power and justice, science and education, religion and morals were necessarily what we call those things in Europe. . . . This idea seems today to have lost its force.⁸

Barth then asked anxiously:

Are we inevitably going to have to be renewed from *America*? . . . From now on, are American democracy, American economy, psychology and sociology, American morality and American Christianity going to be decisive for us too? . . . Or are we going to have to be renewed from *Russia*? . . . Europe is today between two millstones. . . That some kind of decline of Europe is for the time being inexorably in progress is something that we will not be able to deny.⁹

This is what Karl Barth thought in 1946. By 1992 the situation has changed fundamentally. Today Europe seems to be in the process of rising anew from its self-induced collapse. And the churches could well be enticed to set up house in the renovated European home and to 'Christianise' it anew. Christianity could well be tempted to offer its services as 'civic religion' to Europe as it unites as a single polity, instead of standing as a reminder of that citizenship which all believers on earth already have in the coming heavenly city, and from the perspective of which they are to approach the European political community both constructively and critically.

Protestant Representation of God Instead of Ecclesiastical Self-representation

Are we theologically equal to the new situation? Are the Protestant churches of Europe capable of being European to the extent that they can regard Europe not as their eternal city, but as something great, which is nevertheless relativised by God's coming kingdom, and for that very reason now also demands to be conceived of as a

useful earthly likeness of that kingdom? Or is Europe's Protestant Christianity assembling here today in order to escape its own insignificance? Or at least to counter the impression and refute the rumour cherished on various sides that Protestant Christianity is a *quantité négligeable*, not to be taken seriously for the future of Europe?

Peter Scholl-Latour, the best-selling author and television journalist influential in France and Germany, who knows how to make comprehensible seemingly surprising historical developments and circumstances, not least from the perspective of the religious convictions that undergird them, has in this respect compared current Christianity with Islam and thereby recognised that at least certain trends within the Roman Catholic Church still have some significance. On the other hand he assesses European Protestantism as having long since become irrelevant as a force having an effect on the real world. His harsh judgment deserves attention because it attributes the insignificance of Protestantism for political Europe to European Protestant Christianity's having waned as a *religious* force, in other words no longer taking its own *faith* seriously: because it has no *spiritual* message it also has nothing to say in *worldly* terms.

We will leave open the question of how far such judgments are justified and how far they accurately render the true state of the Protestant churches of Europe. However, we cannot ignore the fact that at the very least such judgments record a dangerous tendency which seriously threatens European Protestantism. The question of what we have to do or not do in the light of this threat must be faced.

I would like to describe first of all what we must in no circumstances do – what we must in fact definitely refrain from. It would be an intrinsically totally unpromising enterprise for Protestant Christianity to try to secure its threatened religious identity itself and to demonstrate through all kinds of Protestant efforts its contested relevance for a Europe that is, I hope, coming to terms with itself in a new way. That would lead to Protestant self-realisation; but Protestant self-realisation is a fundamental contradiction in terms. A Protestant church that is realising itself would cease to be rooted in the gospel. Just as the church cannot create itself, but is born of the word of God and exists only as a creature of this word, it cannot realise itself without thereby also destroying itself. For Protestant Christianity owes its existence to the gospel, inasmuch as in life and in death it trusts the God who speaks to us in the gospel. If Protestant Christianity has any kind of healthy self-confidence then it is not *alongside* this gospel-based confidence in God, but *strictly identified* with it. It cannot gain anything like Protestant self-confidence *apart* from its confidence in God. Protestant Christianity gains confidence in itself precisely to the extent that it trusts the God who speaks in the New Testament.

For this very reason there can be for European Protestantism no securing of its religious identity: not in relation to secularised society and certainly not in relation to the Orthodox or Roman Catholic churches. The Protestant churches do not want to constitute something special in relation to the other denominations nor are they able to do so. Their claim reaches much higher. The Protestant churches claim to be exactly what all Christian communities are called and intended to be, namely the thoroughly human and therefore earthly representation of Jesus Christ and of the God revealed in him: a representation which succeeds only if it does not turn out to be self-representation. Therefore it is an essential part of Protestant self-understanding to distinguish the two things as strictly as possible: that spiritual distinction which is of the essence of the church and all its members, that they may as men be representations of God; and the worldly tendency to self-representation, which is inherent in all earthly institutions and individuals. In this regard the Protestant

churches are less threatened by the temptation to identify themselves with the victorious Christ as a triumphant church (*ecclesia triumphans*). The specifically Protestant temptation is rather for the persecuted and suffering church (*ecclesia pressa*) to identify itself with the suffering Christ, and instead of proclaiming the passion story of Jesus Christ to recount the story of its own suffering; a far more dangerous form of church self-representation than that of the *ecclesia triumphans* (especially if it is suggested that the suffering of the church has some kind of soteriological quality)!

Only if we do not confuse the task that distinguishes us – that of testifying to Jesus Christ and being a human representation of him in work and deed – with church self-representation, which appears quite of its own accord, only then are we a gospel-based church and gospel-based Christians. Only then do we succeed in offering God revealed in Christ to the world, namely as the gift that benefits the whole world; as the origin, that is, of all that lives, as the food that grants life and happiness – take and eat, take and drink, may you be strengthened and preserved in faith to eternal life.

The best way that we can testify to such a gospel is by making use of it ourselves, that is by accepting and enjoying for ourselves this incomparable gift and sustaining ourselves from it. Wherever the community of believers rejoices in God as the secret of the world granting life and happiness, wherever we ourselves so enjoy God that a hunger for this God arises in the world, wherever we, so to speak, make other people's mouths water, there occurs the representation of God on earth, the climax of which is in offering him: taste and see how kind the Lord is.

If Protestant Christianity exists in this way in Europe, then at the same time it exists as the great ecumenical challenge and invitation to all other denominations to be the True, One, Holy Catholic and Apostolic Church together in the fellowship of being mutually different. In this sense the European Protestant Assembly greets the Roman Catholic Church, the Greek Orthodox Church, the Russian Orthodox Church and all other non-Protestant church bodies of Europe in order to work with them, and not somehow in opposition to them, to make the gospel attractive to Europeans in a new way.

Protestant Affirmation of Secularisation and Pluralism

An essential element in this task will be that European Protestant Christianity must not perceive itself as in opposition to what we call contemporary secularisation, which has pluralism as its consequence. A united Protestant stand against secularisation and pluralism would be a terrible self-misunderstanding. It is true that it is not altogether incomprehensible that people should think that the secularisation of Europe necessarily means its dechristianisation. After all, in the name of 'secularisation' hitherto church-owned goods were transferred to secular ownership, first in the economic and legal sphere, but then also in the cultural sphere. As a rule, the religious communities were financially compensated by the secular power for the secularisation of the church's economic goods. On the other hand, there can be no compensation for the secularisation of the spiritual and intellectual treasures of the church, which began in the late Middle Ages and which has been achieved with full force and on a wide scale since the Enlightenment. On the contrary, the church may be thankful that its spiritual goods now exist in secular form. For example, the secular respect for freedom of conscience (which the philosopher Fichte declared to be 'a holy thing that it would be sacrilege to infringe'), the secular assertion of the inviolability of the dignity of the person, the secular commitment to protect handicapped human life,

universal schooling and many other achievements of the modern constitutional state are secularised church treasures, and not least of the Protestant Church – treasures which were often recognised in their full significance only when they had been secularised. The dechurching that took place in the form of cultural secularisation by no means necessarily implies dechristianisation.¹⁰ ‘On the cultural level, secularisation is not a concept which is in opposition to Christianity’.¹¹

No, European Protestant Christianity also exists in a secular form. And the Protestant churches should rejoice at this their secular child, instead of lamenting it as a lost son or daughter. The church is not the parental home to which this secular child should be returned; the church is at its best if it fulfils its own task, as a pointer, for secular society too, towards the coming city of God, in which church and state will share a common future. The church should not therefore look with suspicion on the (correctly understood) worldliness of the world as a form of secularised Christianity. The Reformation with its doctrine of two realms itself laid the foundation for the existence of a world emancipated from the church and having its own justice and its own value. The Protestant Church should bless this its worldly child and wish it to become truly adult.

Only when we are able to see secular society positively in this light can we also respond appropriately to the dark shadow of what Martin Buber called darkness without God, which in the form of secularism was certainly a disastrous accompaniment to secularisation. For the European churches to lament this secularism must, however, imply, first of all, self-criticism. For it was the denominational division of Europe, with the wars that were its appalling consequences, and the inability of all churches under the sign of the Reformation to bring about religious peace, which made it necessary to place all significant areas of public life on a basis independent of denominational conflicts. On this secular basis, independent of all church claims to truth, it was quite possible (although not strictly necessary) to invoke that godlessness which was first of all adopted privately by bourgeois Europe – though in a private way that had a public effect – and which communist Europe subsequently put through in the form of programmatic politico-ideological pressure that moulded the whole of society.

The collapse of this politico-ideological system now means that there is a tremendous opportunity, but by no means a guarantee, for a new religious awakening or even a church revival movement. This certainly does not mean that the church is to lay down rules for secular society on how it is to behave. As Melancthon unambiguously declared, ‘the gospel does not bring with it any new rules for bourgeois (secular) existence’.¹² The gospel does indeed indicate what is expected of secular legislators, but it is certainly not itself a political legislator – just as Christ is not a ‘second Moses’. The Protestant churches can and should articulate such ‘gospel expectations’ of political authority. But to do more than that would in fact be to achieve less. The Protestant church would betray the gospel if it wished to identify itself with political authority or recommended itself to it as *societas perfecta*.

What ‘Protestant sobriety’ will do will be to affirm in principle the pluralist society which exists in the West and which is now also emerging in the East of Europe. It will therefore indeed present the gospel’s claim to truth, which it represents, as a universal claim to truth – ‘for all people’ – but affirm it within society as *one* claim to truth *among many*, a claim which has no other authority than that of the apostolic prayer: ‘we pray you in Christ’s stead, be ye reconciled to God’ (2 Corinthians 5:20).

The basic Protestant conviction that the truth of the faith can be asserted *sine vi humana, sed verbo*¹³ – that is, without secular force but only through the work of

proclamation – has prepared the ground for the pluralism of modern society, which is a good guarantee that secularisation will not be abused in a totalitarian way. If only for that reason the Christian Church must wish to affirm the pluralism which relativises the church's own existence. In this way it takes seriously the proposition that the gospel of the justification of the godless will be effective only as a liberating word which consequently can only be heard by a freely consenting liberated conscience.

It follows from this premise that the Protestant Church will also have to strive for an understanding with the non-Christian religious communities – an understanding which does not see peace among the religions and the Christian missionary commission as simple alternatives. The Protestant religion of freedom, as Hegel called it, will also have to stand up for the freedom of the other person with regard to other religions, in order to testify in this way too that the truth of the gospel is a liberating truth. The extent to which it is will now be discussed in greater detail in the second part of this paper.

Protestant Passion: Enlightenment in the Light of the Gospel

Passion, Protestant passion, denotes that Christian self-understanding which recognises the gospel of the justification of the godless to be the central truth of the Christian faith, without which not only the individual person but the whole world is hopelessly at the mercy of its own inconsistency and so destroys itself. Without the good news of justification, says Luther, 'the whole world is nothing but death and darkness'.¹⁴ For the Protestant Church, the kernel of the Christian message, against which everything else that can be said about God and the world demands to be measured, is as follows. Man lives in a state of contradiction with his God, with his world and with himself for which he is himself to blame. In leading such a contradictory life he is ultimately destroying himself both in time and in eternity. He is restored, put right and justified for time and eternity by a gracious God and thereby liberated and raised up to be a free master over all things without having to do anything – without indeed being able to do anything – to achieve this through his faith alone, but only through his trust in the grace of God revealed in the person of Jesus Christ and in the work which speaks effectively to us of this grace. This kernel, which I have formulated in a way that is recognisably close to the language of the Apostle Paul, can also be defined in Johannine terms: that Jesus Christ is the *truth* which decides over life and death and of which it is said, 'And ye shall know the truth, and the truth shall make you free (John 8:32)'.

I would like to take up the significance of this sentence from John's Gospel for the self-understanding of Protestant Christianity in Europe today. To be *Protestant* means, very simply, to be committed to the liberating truth which Jesus Christ personifies. The existence of the Protestant Christian depends on this truth. He insists on this truth. He relies on it. It sustains him. He is able to obey it and therefore also wants to obey it – and does so, moreover, 'willingly and joyfully'.¹⁵ The truth that liberates is, to use Zinzendorf's word, the great *passion* of the Protestant Christian. It adds to Protestant sobriety the character of Protestant passion.

Moreover, truth is here more than merely the correctness of a discovery or a consensus on which there is agreement. If Jesus Christ is truth personified, and this truth makes the person who believes in him a Christian, then it has a power that transforms human life; it is, as Immanuel Kant once said, a revolution in attitudes, indeed a revolution in human existence. But note that here man does not perform a

revolutionary act – he is himself revolutionised. When this truth confronts him and reaches his heart he experiences a transition from the compulsion to lie, which dominates the whole of life and throws it into darkness, to the light of truth which illuminates him from within. That is the miracle of the Holy Spirit. The truth of the gospel is therefore a liberating force, because in the power of the Holy Spirit it exposes and destroys the living lies (*'Lebenslügen'*) with which we deceive ourselves and only too willingly allow ourselves to be deceived and cheated. Two such living lies should now be mentioned particularly.

Liberation from the Living Lie that One Has to Make Oneself

The most penetrating of all these lies is, in the Reformed understanding, the great self-deception that man can find himself through his own actions, can himself produce the meaning of his existence through his own moral efforts and his own achievements through which he controls his life. However, if the meaning of life is misunderstood as a human product, I place myself under enormous pressure not only constantly to produce something but at the same time constantly to create myself in all of it. Western philosophy for its part has vigorously promoted this illusion and put forward 'man's self-creation' as a humanistic ideal.¹⁶ In this way man is cheated of the insight that his existence is thanks to his creator, who, as his redeemer, knows what to do with his failed life. And so a whole society falls victim to the illusion that man is nothing other than the sum of his actions. If his actions turn out well man has succeeded. If his actions turn out badly man has failed. Indeed, through his deeds man makes himself human, and if he behaves inhumanly he is responsible for turning himself into a brute. 'I am what I do' is the essence of this illusion; and European society especially, which perceives itself, not by chance, as an achievement-orientated society, lives under its spell.

The gospel destroys this lie – but not by discrediting human labour or its success. Certainly not! According to the Bible every labourer is worth his pay. Achievement should be worthwhile. But it cannot become the purpose of life without resulting in the exact opposite. Where achievement threatens to become the purpose of life, life loses its meaning. Whoever desires to realise the meaning of life forfeits that meaning. Whoever makes himself loses himself (Mark 8:35). The truth of the gospel resolves this dilemma by liberating man from the manic compulsion to make himself and to make himself human. For this truth treats every human being as a human person by ascribing him the dignity of a person definitely recognised by God. And this is dignity which cannot be surpassed by any human deed or destroyed by any human misdeed, for it is based not only on human rights but on *God's right vis-à-vis* mankind which he established irrevocably in the cross of Jesus Christ.¹⁷

The Protestant churches' responsibility for Europe is first and foremost to shed enlightenment on this issue, thus once again to pursue enlightenment, but this time enlightenment in the light of the gospel. This includes very specifically the reminder, with its socio-ethical consequences, that the criminal is also a person who has inviolable dignity. Even inhuman deeds do not make a person cease to be a human being. The denial of humanity is rather in itself an inhuman act. To such enlightenment in the light of the gospel also belongs very specifically the reminder, with its socio-ethical consequences, that children and old people, who are not yet or no longer able to do anything for their own existence, paradigmatically represent the absolute priority of the person over his achievements and have the right to living conditions corresponding to the dignity of their young and growing or old and declining persons.

These are but a few examples showing that the liberating truth of the gospel is a truth that also stands secular society in good stead. Every day provides the opportunity to apply the same truth to other issues and to rely on its beneficial effect.

Liberation from the Illusion that One Can Renew Oneself

Enlightenment in the light of the gospel certainly also involves the exposure of another illusion: the illusion which asserts that we can make new men of ourselves, if only we believe in ourselves. Friedrich Nietzsche on the one hand and Karl Marx on the other enormously strengthened this illusion. To believe in oneself, then, either means 'God is dead: now what we want is that superman should live'¹⁸ or it means creating, via the dictatorship of the proletariat, the new classless society in which man understood as the totality of social relations likewise becomes a new man. The fascist dictatorships made their own use of the one theory and the socialist dictatorships of the other, thereby placing law in the service of either race or class and making the state a quasi-religious legislator. Whoever wishes to create the new man must, after all, create new sets of commandments, which make total demands on man and totally direct him. The totalitarian claims of this legislator automatically usurp quasi-religious qualities, which differ from true fear of God in that they implement their totalitarianism by means of the terror of the lie. For, since in truth no earthly power can make a new man of the old Adam, totalitarian claims can be maintained only by means of lying and lying only by means of terror. Thereby the totalitarian state, which in this way perceives itself as being quasi-religious, deceives not only its citizens but above all itself. Enlightenment in the light of the gospel also acts in this respect as the liberating truth that God alone can create a new man out of that old Adam which we all are and are destined to remain until our death – a new man who battles with the old Adam in us. Whoever is liberated by this truth believes in God and now no longer in himself or in any promises which require man's faith in himself.

What faith means – in the strictly religious sense of the word – is to trust another so much that I make myself absolutely dependent on him. If that other person, in whom I have faith, is God himself, that is to say the liberating truth in person, then absolute dependence on him means that I, like God himself, become a free master of all things. So dependence on God and human liberty grow at the same rate.

Because he makes us free, God alone is to be worshipped. If on the other hand I make myself dependent on *myself* because I have faith in myself, then I am beginning to worship myself too. And that is exactly what the totalitarian state claiming quasi-religious authority has practised in multifarious ways: instead of honour due to the king (1 Peter 2:17), it has demanded fear and worship by trying to make the citizen, whom it promised to make a new man, totally dependent on itself. But what it practised was dependence on the lie. So it was courage to speak the truth – Gorbachev called it *glasnost*' – which brought about the collapse of the whole mighty pack of lies. After so much lying Europe is in need of truth as seldom before. And seldom in world history has the truth on its own had such a radically transforming effect as in the past few years.

Protestant Love for Truth and the Political Consequences

The Protestant churches contributed to at least some extent to this transformation of the political landscape by not giving any credence to the lie about the new man that socialism wanted to create and by instead honouring the truth that God alone is to be

worshipped while in the state nothing and nobody is to be worshipped. The Protestant churches' responsibility for Europe from now on also consists in combatting with the fifth Barmen thesis the false teaching that the state, beyond its own particular task, can and should become the sole and total regulator of human life¹⁹ and ascribe to itself religious nature and honour. Only when church and state – in peace, however, not in enmity – are unambiguously separated from one another will the churches, as Jakob Burckhardt has put it, 'once again be elements and examples of liberty'.²⁰ And the state will be too.

Precisely because the Protestant Church did not bend to the quasi-religious totalitarian claims of dictatorship, but tried to hold them in check, it will have to ask itself self-critical questions and establish where it forsook its passionate love for the truth in favour of a survival strategy or even for the sake of lesser advantages and, instead of entrusting itself to God's liberating truth, put its trust in the political semi-darkness. It is again the truth alone which is liberating as far as involvement of church workers in the power structure of totalitarian dictatorship is concerned. Attention should be paid to truth not just in church offices in the East but also in the ecumenical headquarters in Geneva. The church must not in any circumstances shrink from directing enlightenment in the light of the gospel inwards as well. Then its strengths will come to light as well as its weaknesses and it will be able to respond more credibly to the wholesale suspicions that are rampant at present.

The possibility of the church 'itself becoming an organ of the state', earlier rejected by the Barmen Synod in the face of National Socialism, virtually nowhere at all, thank God, became a reality in the Protestant churches of socialist Europe, at least if one does not confuse individual church officials with the congregations.²¹ Perhaps even more effectively than bishops and prelates it was courageous pastors, their congregations and other church groups who prevented this happening; and not least a scholarly theology that did not have its eye on political effect but undeviatingly sought for truth! Such theology can, of course, be most uncomfortable for the church leadership, which is necessarily always open to compromises. But the church needs this thorn in the flesh. Without proper theology – unfortunately there is also improper theology! – the Protestant churches in Europe will become more or less conformist and relatively uninteresting institutions. It deserves to be placed on record that in the decades now behind us Protestant theology was practised not only west of the 'iron curtain' but also in an impressive way under the extremely difficult conditions east of the wall and the barbed wire. Within the bounds of the possible, communication between East and West was even maintained in this area of scholarship, probably as in no other scholarly discipline.

I would therefore like to testify here to my deep respect for the work done by the higher theological schools in the former socialist states. Where they did their work well – I know that here too there were depressing examples of the opposite – they were the conscience of the churches. If the Protestant churches take this theological conscience of theirs seriously in the future as well, then for their part they can make a significant contribution to forming the conscience of Europe.

Protestant Forming of Conscience Instead of Determination of Moral Guilt

The newly emerging Europe needs to have a conscience formed if only so that the future Europe will not merely be administered but will see real responsibility taking the place of mere administration. It seems to me that one of the greatest threats to the new Europe is that political and social structures will continue to be formed that no

longer permit or tolerate any personal responsibility. This threat can be countered only by a culture of conscience for which the *conditio sine qua non* is that such a conscience is indeed formed. The Protestant churches have perhaps more to contribute than any other European institution. Indeed, they perhaps have even more to contribute than they realise.

This is because, unlike all secular institutions, they have the advantage – which cannot be overestimated – that not only can they say what should and should not be but that they may also, in the name of God, *forgive* guilt and sin when what should not be nevertheless occurs. And the experience of forgiveness sharpens the conscience and makes people much more aware of responsibility than any moral imperative is able to do. Our transgressions can be understood in their full magnitude, and small and large illusions with their devastating effect given their proper names, only when they come out into the light of forgiveness. One can then deal with them in such a way that one grows in responsibility. The church is different from all moralists, who only ever accuse and draw the attention of the accused to his guilt, in that it proclaims a liberating truth which exposes illusions by making the man who is a liar (Romans 3:4) *true and truthful*. Therefore the church which is passionately devoted to this truth can really give guilt its proper name without falling into the trap of the moralist, who as a rule tends to hinder rather than help.

In doing this, the church is certainly not claiming that it is ‘faultless’, as Pope Pius XII dared to assert, offering daily prayers as an unblemished ‘mother church’ not in its own name, but only ‘in the name of its sick and suffering members: forgive us our trespasses’.²² In the Protestant understanding the church cannot so easily distinguish itself from its members. Luther’s interpretation of the holiness of the church was exactly the opposite: that the church is able to take its sin seriously and for that very reason recognise itself as the greatest sinner. ‘There is no greater sinner than the Christian Church. How [is it possible that] it is holy and [yet] a sinner? It believes in the forgiveness of sins and says: “Forgive the debt”. Nobody says that who is not holy.’²³ The church would betray its holiness if it refused to acknowledge its own guilt. It is a necessary consequence of the priesthood of all believers that the sins of the believers are also the sins of the church. And what dreadful sins the European churches in particular have seduced people into: the crusades, the inquisition, mission as a form of colonialism, ethnic conflicts with the blessing of the church and so on. The history of Europe is also the history of a church that has fallen into a state of guilt. Only by praying for forgiveness of guilt in its own name can the church discharge its priestly duties and proclaim the justification of the sinner.

This is, however, its real task. This is what the church is there for. If the church remains passionately true to this its task then it remains true not only to the coming heavenly kingdom but also to Europe, which is so thoroughly of this earth. If in its liturgical services Protestant Christianity gratefully celebrates the gospel as God’s liberating truth and continues this worship celebration as ‘reasonable service’ in the everyday life of the world, then secularised Europe will have a place ‘not conformed to this world’ (Romans 12:1–2) in which the European can heave a sigh of relief because he is saved from the burden of himself without having to do anything to bring this about. And when this happens he gains what he can himself work for only to a limited extent: an unexpended future. The future which we make ourselves emerges already half expended, because it must of necessity be only a product of the past. The future that comes out of reconciliation with God on the other hand is *every morning fresh and new*, for it originates in the creative grace of God. ‘Every morning is fresh and new, the Lord is gracious and always true.’ If the European Protestant churches

testify to this in both spiritual and secular terms then they are doing the best thing that they can do for Europe.

Notes and References

¹ A European Protestant assembly does well to give some thought to what it claims to be when it describes itself in one and the same breath as both *European* and *Protestant*. Geographically, Europe is the smaller part of Asia, i.e. the part of the Asian continent which stretches westwards from the Urals. Culturally, however, Europeans – the name Europe was not generally used either in ancient times or in the Middle Ages – perceived themselves first and foremost as inhabitants of the Graeco-Roman *orbis terrarum*, which took the form of a closed circle separated from the surrounding barbaric tribes. Then for a long time Europeans defined themselves by means of Christianity, in other words in religious terms, so that substantial parts of what geographically formed part of Europe were regarded politically and culturally as non-European. Furthermore, Europe could even be limited to the Occident, that is to Latin Christianity, and distinguished from the Graeco-Byzantine Eastern cultural environment: Charlemagne was acclaimed as *pater Europae*. However, the Renaissance brought together again what had been divided. And in deliberate contrast to the denominational division of Europe brought about by the Reformation a new Europe emerged, now emphatically adopting that name, as the result of a process of secularisation, ‘as a “modern”, rational and rationalistic structure out of and alongside Western Christianity which was now split along denominational lines’. Around 1800 this European consciousness already appears to have adopted ‘the character of an emancipation from Christianity’ (Heinz Gollwitzer, ‘Zur Wortgeschichte und Sinndeutung von “Europa”’, *Saeculum* 2, 1951, p. 169). This Europe, in the form of its specific rationality with its associated science, technology and economy, but also ideology, was in turn exported worldwide and since then has been in a certain sense omnipresent. The opposition movement encountered everywhere to ‘European thinking’ and its implications (including lifestyle) is but one indication of the extent to which Europe has overrun the whole world, determined the surface structure of all parts of the world and thereby set both good and bad standards. One may deplore this global European omnipresence on account of the problematic consequences which are today everywhere obvious; but one cannot deny it.

Protestant is a denominational label for all the churches and Christians close to the Reformation, who perceive themselves as different from the Roman Catholic and also from the Greek and Russian Orthodox Churches. In the strictly theological sense, however, to be *Protestant* definitely includes the claim to be genuinely *catholic*, that is to say not to be limited to particular historical and geographical contexts, but to be present in a universality that relativises all frontiers, and to teach and to live rightly in a manner corresponding to the gospel; in other words to be committed to *orthodoxy* (and equally *orthopraxis*). To be Protestant does not exclude Catholicity and Orthodoxy/orthopraxis, but includes them. But what then is the characteristic of Protestant Christianity? It is this question that I propose to answer in the course of this paper.

² Novalis, ‘Die Christenheit oder Europa’, *id.*, *Das philosophische Werk II*, edited by R. Samuel in collaboration with H.-J. Muhl and G. Schulz (2nd edition, 1986), p. 507, lines 4–6.

³ *ibid.*, p. 523, line 6.

⁴ *ibid.*, p. 524, lines 16ff.

⁵ *ibid.*, p. 523, lines 11–14.

⁶ *ibid.*, p. 524, lines 9–11.

⁷ M. Luther, ‘Von der Freiheit eines Christenmenschen’ (1520), in *id.*, *Werke. Kritische Ausgabe* (Weimarer Ausgabe (WA)), vol. 7, p. 38, line 7.

⁸ K. Barth, *Die Christliche Verkündigung im Heutigen Europa* (Munich, 1946), p. 5.

⁹ *ibid.*, pp. 9ff.

¹⁰ In the nineteenth century this was pointed out by the philosopher Hegel and the theologian

- Richard Rothe, and in the twentieth century above all by Ernst Troeltsch, Friedrich Gogarten and today Trutz Rendtorff.
- ¹¹ T. Rendtorff, 'Wie christlich wird Europa sein? Zwischen Säkularisation und Re-evangelisierung', *Evangelische Kommentare*, no. 2 (1992), p. 99. However, Rendtorff's thesis that secularisation occurs 'as an un-Christian or anti-Christian process . . . only under conditions of deliberate political repression' seems to me to be questionable. Only? Secularisation *can* definitely take the direction of an anti-Christian process under conditions of a European bourgeoisie swearing by Voltaire or Nietzsche or Freud, or of a proletariat following in the footsteps of Ludwig Feuerbach.
- ¹² Ph. Melancthon, 'Apologia Confessionis Augustanae', in *Die Bekenntnisschriften der Evangelisch-Lutherischen Kirche* (6th edition, Göttingen, 1967), p. 308, line 8.
- ¹³ *ibid.*, p. 124, line 9.
- ¹⁴ M. Luther, 'Die Promotionsdisputation von Palladius und Tilemann' (1538), WA, Vol. 39/1, p. 205, line 5.
- ¹⁵ M. Luther, 'Von der Freiheit eines Christenmenschen' (1520), WA, vol. 7, p. 34, lines 32ff.
- ¹⁶ Cf. K. Marx, 'Zur Kritik der Nationalökonomie. Ökonomisch-philosophische Manuskripte' (1844), in H.-J. Lieber and P. Furth (eds), *Karl Marx: Werke-Schriften-Briefe*, Vol. 1 (Stuttgart, 1962), p. 645. Marx commends Hegel for having taught 'man's self-creation' and for having grasped it 'as a process'.
- ¹⁷ In distinction to Islam, and also, however, to the relevant pronouncements of recent popes, God's right in relation to man is understood here in deliberately Protestant manner as the right of God justifying mankind, a right that has prescriptive character only because it graciously puts man in the right.
- ¹⁸ F. Nietzsche, *Also sprach Zarathustra. Ein Buch für Alle und Keinen*, in *id.*, *Werke. Kritische Gesamtausgabe*, edited by G. Colli and M. Montinari, vol. 6/1 (Berlin, 1968), p. 353.
- ¹⁹ A. Burgsmüller and R. Weth (eds) *Die Barmer Theologische Erklärung. Einführung und Dokumentation* (Neukirchen, Vluyn, 1983), p. 38.
- ²⁰ J. Burckhardt, *Weltgeschichtliche Betrachtungen* (Stuttgart, 1978), p. 120.
- ²¹ The danger was perhaps greatest when people thought that they could share power secretly via the State Security Service, even if they thought they could improve things by so doing.
- ²² Pius XII, Encyclical *Mystici corporis*, In *Acta Apostolicae Sedis*, vol. 35 (1943), p. 225. Vatican II cautiously corrected the Pope: cf. *Constitutio dogmatica de ecclesia 'Lumen gentium'*, c. 1, a. 8; c. 5, a. 40.
- ²³ M. Luther, 'Predigt vom 9 April 1531', WA, Vol. 34/1, p. 276, lines 6–8.

(Translated from the German by Michael Rowe.)