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A Reappraisal of the Recent Past in the West*

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Introduction to the Question

Two years ago 22 people gathered here. There were almost twice as many participants on our list today, although unfortunately not all have come. Is the time now riper? I do not know. In the churches of Central and Eastern Europe a serious reappraisal of the Cold War past, the division of Europe and the communist period has proved to be very difficult. In the churches of Western Europe such a process never began. On this side we have simply turned the page on 1989.

I recall what Ludwig Mehlhorn and I wrote on our invitation to the first seminar in 1993:

A serious attempt to come to terms with the recent past is necessary on pastoral and political grounds. To discuss this subject in the church is important for the personal reflection of individual church members and for the credibility of the church in the future. Such a discussion will also be a service to society since many view it more as a threat than an opportunity for personal liberation from failure and guilt. Finally, such a discussion will be important for political developments in the countries of Central and Eastern Europe and for Europe as a whole. A past with which people have not come to terms means that frustrations will be shifted onto others (minorities!). It will be a breeding ground for hatred which will end up in fascist and chauvinist developments in Europe.

These words remain relevant. And we have always added that it would be unjust and wrong to burden only the churches in the former communist states with this task. This is a common responsibility of the churches in East *and* West. This was expressed by the synod of the Netherlands Reformed Church back in 1990. It is the latter – the responsibility of the West – that this seminar will be emphasising, although not exclusively, and this is the subject I would like to address in this introductory paper.

The Mechanisms in the West

Two years ago I mentioned several mechanisms which played a role here in the West in church relations between East and West. I am using the same categories here today

*This paper was first presented at the second Seminar on Reappraising the Recent Past in the Churches of Eastern and Western Europe, Berlin, 14–16 May 1995.

– you will find them in my 1993 report as well – and I am going to expand on some of them. I am then going to discuss two examples in more detail: (a) the conflicts within the western peace movement and (b) the Basel Assembly in 1989. I will of course also bring in my own experiences as a member of the board of the Interchurch Peace Council in the Netherlands (IKV) and as secretary for church and society of the Netherlands Reformed Church. First of all a survey of a few mechanisms.

The Influence of the Prevailing Political Paradigms

Church contacts – even on a local level – were subject to the influence of the prevailing East–West political system. For example, ‘No more war in Europe’ required détente. Détente required no conflicts with the authorities in the Eastern Bloc. So ‘peace’ was placed above ‘human rights’. This happened not only in politics, but also in the churches and in parts of the peace movement.

Of course there were variations, particularly in different contexts. In the German Federal Republic before 1990 the division of Germany and of many German families was a painful subject which led to great caution, in the churches as well. This caution gave church officials in the GDR, such as Christa Lewek, a large measure of influence. In addition there was of course Germany’s own past – the War and the Nazi era. I could therefore understand why the group ‘Aktion Sühnezeichen’ did not want to take part in contacts we were developing with dissidents in the East. The work of encounter at Auschwitz was also work for peace. It was not to be jeopardised.

America was another context. There the memory of the anticommunist witch-hunt under Joe McCarthy was very important. In contrast to this anticommunism the churches preached understanding. They organised visits, developed contacts and so on. In other words, talking with the Russians was ‘peace work’. The question of whether the Russians were KGB agents or dissidents was not raised. For that reason there were no contacts with dissidents. I had several very intelligent, critical friends among the churches in America who worked together very uncritically with the Christian Peace Conference.

The Different Spectacles

People view reality through different spectacles. In other words, those of us who visited the East from the West saw what we wanted to see. What kinds of spectacles were there?

Some examples:

- (i) The spectacles of anticapitalism. Those who above all were seeking an alternative to the western economic system saw above all much that was positive.
- (ii) The spectacles of anticommunism. Those who wanted to be confirmed in their anticommunism saw above all much that was evil.
- (iii) The spectacles of anti-anticommunism. Those who did not want to serve anti-communism, the ideology of western self-justification, did see the evil side, but stressed the positive that they also saw.
- (iv) The spectacles of understanding. One got to know people, nice people like us – not the system.
- (v) The spectacles of guilt. I now view this as morally the most ambivalent attitude. It was to be found among those who saw the evil side of the East but did not want to condemn it as they interpreted it as being caused by the West: by

capitalism, by Nazism (as the cause of the division of Europe), by the western role in the arms race, by colonialism and so on. A self-critical awareness of guilt could thus lead to an uncritical way of observing things.

We in the West should ask ourselves this question: what were we looking for in the East? An alternative to our own society? Confirmation of our own point of view? An alternative to the official East–West policy because this brought too little result? A strengthening of our own position on the question of the moral authority of the Eastern European dissidents? Simply Christian solidarity with brothers and sisters in an oppressive system? Solidarity with young people in the GDR who – even inspired a little by our demonstrations – took courage and protested against the militarisation of their society? And so on.

Solidarity is Difficult

It is difficult to show solidarity with people in a totalitarian society. When am I helping by speaking, when by remaining silent? Even trusted contacts often gave differing responses. I remember a conversation in the GDR with the Protestant Bishop Hempel. He criticised the contacts the IKV maintained with peace groups in the GDR. ‘There is no danger for you,’ he said, ‘you are from the West. Nor for me, I am a bishop. Nor for the youth pastors, I can protect them. The danger is for the young people. They don’t realise it themselves but they cannot be protected either by you or by me.’

The young people themselves naturally spoke differently. Whose advice should we follow, then? This problem was constantly coming up in the context of the hundreds of parish and congregational contacts which developed above all in the 1980s. The question was already being posed at the preparatory stage of visits: ‘How far can we go in asking uncomfortable questions? If we do that are we not making our partners’ already difficult situation even harder?’ To be on the safe side people chose the path of caution. This also became a mechanism.

Official Ecumenism Takes Place between the Leaderships of the Churches

The World Council of Churches, the Conference of European Churches and other similar organisations are associations of churches. The fact that they are therefore orientated around the church leaderships is not in itself a problem. This is the case both in the Third World and in the West. However, critical voices from these areas are often heard speaking at major ecumenical meetings. The fact that we hear such voices is for me the great value of ecumenism. The great failure of ecumenism, though, was that critical voices were not heard from the communist countries. These people were often not even known.

The great failure of the ecumenical movement as regards the communist countries was in my view, then, not that there hardly were any official critical statements (because of the threat of withdrawal on the part of the East European churches). Nor was its great failure the taboo on certain subjects such as human rights in Eastern Europe or Western European integration. Nor was it the unsuccessful quiet diplomacy, because at certain periods this was not at all so unsuccessful. The great failure was that for critical Christians in Eastern Europe political excommunication also meant ecumenical excommunication.

At this point I would just like to ask a question. Why did the western member

churches not take on this role, or take it on to such a limited extent? Why did we not hear these voices even at the West German Protestant Kirchentage? In other words, we should not ascribe all the guilt solely to the large ecumenical organisations in Geneva. The former director of the Swiss institute Glaube in der Zweiten Welt, Eugen Voss, has sent the organisers of this conference a description of his experiences with the church leaderships in the West and in Geneva. He writes that the litmus test of the ideological or political orientation of the leading figures in the churches was how they reacted to the work of Glaube in der Zweiten Welt. I think it would be good if here in the West we would just check back on how our churches reacted to the information and appeals for support from Glaube in der Zweiten Welt and Keston College.

Example: the Western Peace Movement and the Conflicts over a New Strategy

In the first decades of the Cold War it was easy: 'Peace' was left-wing while 'Human Rights in Eastern Europe' was right-wing; 'Disarmament' was left-wing while 'Parity' was right-wing; 'Détente' was left-wing while 'Containment' was right-wing. And so on. Only at the end of the 1970s did things change somewhat, mainly under the influence of movements that arose in the East after the 1975 Helsinki Agreement, such as Charter 77.

In the Netherlands the two church peace organisations, Pax Christi and the IKV, developed an active policy that peace would no longer be set against democracy and human rights. Two ideas lay behind this:

- (i) We were pleading for unilateral steps towards disarmament in the West. At the same time we regarded a growing democratisation in the East as a parallel development which could contribute there to a loosening of the East–West system. In this way a 'weakening' would also become possible in the West. Democratisation in the East was thus also in our interest.
- (ii) Pax Christi and the IKV had for a long time been committed to contributing to overcoming the division of Europe. The price for peace in the West should no longer be paid by the peoples in the East. Détente from above should be supported by détente from below. In the long run a peaceful and undivided Europe could only be a democratic Europe. For that reason we needed initiatives that crossed the divide between the blocs.

In the peace movement in the Netherlands Mient Jan Faber of the IKV was the leading advocate for a linking of peace and freedom (human rights). In England the leading advocates were Edward Thompson and Mary Kaldor. At the 400,000-strong demonstration in November 1981 in Amsterdam, Faber read out a message from Charter 77 to the western peace movements. Looking back now I see this as a historic moment. I must add, however, that it was our greatest mistake that at that time we had not yet developed similar contacts with the Solidarity movement in Poland.

After the imposition of martial law in Poland on 13 December 1981 we increasingly developed a twin-track policy, or double strategy, in the IKV. The official Eastern European peace councils continued for a long time to regard us as a natural partner because we were campaigning against NATO missiles. They accepted that we were also against the Soviet SS-20s. We were constantly being invited to meetings, conferences and demonstrations, but our twin-track policy meant that we would go only if it meant there was something for our second track, that is for the

independent groups in the East.

Each time there was endless discussion within our organisations – IKV and Pax Christi – about how a particular visit should or could proceed. At one end of the spectrum was the minimum result: we will go because we will get a visa and will therefore be able to develop our contacts with, for example, Charter 77. At the other end was the maximum result: we will go only if our friends, for example from the Dialogue group in Hungary, are also officially invited. Each time we asked ourselves the question how much room for manoeuvre there was and how we could expand it.

Naturally this led to conflicts with the peace councils of Eastern Europe. When in 1982 Mient Jan Faber visited not just Bishop Krusche, the CDU and the state secretary for church affairs but also Rainer Eppelmann he was barred from future entry to the GDR. Not until 1990, when Eppelmann was a minister in the new government, could Faber return. Together with Jan ter Laak and others he was also expelled from Czechoslovakia. Thus there were many conflicts. The history of these conflicts with the authorities of Eastern Europe has unfortunately not yet been written and I do not propose to discuss them here. What I want to discuss are the conflicts which arose amongst *us*, in the West.

Conflicts within the Peace Movement

First of all there were the conflicts within the peace movement. When I speak here of the ‘peace movement’ I mean the broad coalition that then existed. The conflict with the communist groupings within this broad coalition was not of significance in the Netherlands. (This conflict was of greater importance in the FRG.) Even on an international level these communist groupings in the West were not a problem. Back in 1981 we had set up an international coordinating body of independent peace groups. By ‘independent’ were meant the non-communist movements. Thus the communist groups were not present at important discussions on strategy.

More difficult to cope with was the fact that within this international coordinating body there were groups which wanted to limit themselves specifically to questions of disarmament, such as certain pacifist groups or coalition groups like ‘Women for Peace’. These were coalitions in connection with the theme ‘nuclear weapons’. Had the question of ‘détente from below’ been added these coalitions would have fallen apart. Groups of this type were Women for Peace in the Netherlands, CND in Britain and ‘Nei til Atomvaben’ (No to Nuclear Weapons) in Norway. There were conferences in the East and also in the West in which the IKV and Pax Christi would not take part, although many other movements within our international coordinating body felt happy to do so.

Even within the IKV there was a conflict in the middle of the 1980s. We had always worked on the principle that *we* would decide the membership of our delegations and not the authorities in the East. If any *one person* failed to get a visa, *no one* went. At that time we had a chairperson who did not want all our contacts with the GDR to be blocked because Mient Jan Faber could not travel there. When we stuck to our procedure that he was not to travel as chairperson because our general secretary had been forbidden to do so, he went anyway, but in his professional capacity. In the GDR he was of course presented as the IKV chairperson.

Political Conflicts

Secondly there were the political conflicts. We were attacked from the right by those

who believed that our contacts with dissidents served only to mask the fact that we were paid by Moscow. We were criticised from the radical left as lackeys of President Reagan. All this was of no interest. What was of interest was the debate with the SPD in Germany. They said: ‘Your “détente from below” is not supporting détente from above, but jeopardising it.’ We organised three seminars with the SPD in Bonn to which we invited our contacts in the independent movements in Eastern Europe and the SPD invited their official contacts. I believe that this was a real contribution, that the SPD could develop official contacts with dissidents via a peace movement in the Netherlands and that a dialogue of this kind between ‘official figures’ and ‘independents’ could take place in Bonn.

Conflicts with the Churches

Thirdly, the churches. Our problem was the GDR. Since as early as 1978 we had developed good relations with the Theological Study Department of the Federation of Protestant Churches. In 1982 or thereabouts these contacts were ‘frozen’ because the church leadership rejected any identification with Solidarity or Charter 77 and the IKV – apparently too rashly – had suggested a kind of European platform of independent peace groups.

Of course, contacts with the Federation continued via the Netherlands Council of Churches. But this body did not dare to include Mient Jan Faber in any delegation. I could be included because, in addition to the IKV, I also represented the Reformed Church. Once an IKV employee went with a delegation; the whole delegation was allowed into the GDR with the exception of this person, and although it had been agreed jointly in advance that the delegation would stick together, they nevertheless accepted the situation.

There were also conflicts over local church contacts. The IKV laid great emphasis on publicity, but the local church contacts preferred to operate without it. A GDR bishop said once: ‘You hit the news, we just get hit.’ The effects of these conflicts have lasted until today. They have never been talked through.

So much for the conflicts over this twin-track policy. But I would like to make one more observation. What I have said so far about our attempt to link ‘peace’ with ‘human rights’ perhaps sounds too much of a ‘success story’. Of course we were fairly well satisfied with ourselves after the changes in Central and Eastern Europe in 1989 when our friends suddenly became government ministers and so on. Of course, we had been strongly stimulated to follow our twin-track policy by our Eastern European contacts. Witness for example what Václav Havel wrote in 1985 when he was not allowed to come to our congress in Amsterdam (*The Anatomy of a Reticence. Eastern European Dissidents and the Peace Movement in the West*, 1985).

But ‘success’? What does ‘successful’ mean? I would go so far as to say that it was luck more than judgment. We had not expected that Germany would be united in our century and that communism would be destroyed so quickly and with so little violence. It was even not our goal, not because we did not want it to happen but rather because we considered it to be out of reach. So, more luck than judgment! For me that indicates that I should be slow to criticise others who supported other strategies.

An Autobiographical Interlude

I already had some experience of Eastern Europe before becoming active in church

peace work. I visited Prague in 1966 as a guide for American tourists and found it very depressing. As a theology student I visited East Berlin a couple of times and I was impressed by the dialogue with Marxism of which I knew little. But when I saw marching soldiers I thought: 'These aren't communists – they're Prussians'. I visited Leningrad and Poland as a tourist and what I remember most is all the drunkards. On the way to Turkey I saw the poverty in Bulgaria and Romania. Because of these experiences I never believed that more meetings would lead to more understanding. This was the first practical experience I came away with.

I gained my second practical experience when I went to Moscow and Zagorsk in 1975 for a WCC meeting. Albert van den Heuvel was then general secretary of the Netherlands Reformed Church and he gave me very thorough instruction. 'Don't drink too much vodka and Georgian wine, because you must be ready to take a taxi at midnight.' He gave me several addresses, including that of Andrei Sakharov, and he told me: 'There will be a lot of pressure. People will say you are making the difficult situation of the church even more difficult, and so on, but that is all part of the game.' He instructed me not only about what I should do, but about how I should prepare myself against the criticism. I have always been grateful to him for these detailed instructions; but for this very reason I have always been aware how difficult the trip would have been for me without these instructions. I can therefore also understand why so many western scientists, doctors, journalists and others were not able to withstand the 'caviar treatment' during all their various congresses in the East; but I also have to ask why no one here in the West gave *them* similar instructions.

Finally my role within the IKV. I travelled less than others to Eastern Europe; I concentrated more on the Federal Republic of Germany (before 1990) and the USA. But I chaired our commission for international work and so I participated in all the discussions. In my role as chairman I had two aims in addition to the business on the agenda: to keep my commission together and to cultivate our contacts with the member churches. I was thus cautious and sought compromises. In retrospect I think I used the brake more than the accelerator – but that was probably not always a bad thing. In any case, I learnt from these experiences how hard it often is to decide on the spot where the boundary between cowardice and wisdom lies. At the two great international conferences on theology and peace in Budapest in 1984 and 1987 – on both occasions I was in the preparatory commission – I learnt that it is only in argument and conflict that these boundaries can be discovered. Not everyone in the West was prepared for this. Readiness for conflict was also something I had to learn.

Example: the Basel Assembly in May 1989

In May 1989 it was just a few weeks before the first free elections in Poland. It was also just a few days before the NATO summit in Brussels at which not only NATO's 40th anniversary was to be celebrated but decisions were to be taken on new missiles which would also be targeted at Poland.

The European Ecumenical Assembly 'Peace with Justice', which took place from 15 to 21 May 1989 in Basel, was organised by the Conference of European Churches (CEC) and the (Catholic) Council of European Bishops' Conferences (CCEE). I was part of the CEC group in the preparatory commission. We had shared out the work on the final document. As I had wanted, I was responsible, together with a Polish professor from the CCEE group, for the review of the chapter on Europe. I believed the first version was influenced too much by the ideas of Gorbachev's 'Common

European Home' – too much harmony and hope, too little conflict and concern. I definitely wanted an ecumenical document at last to contain a clear positive response to the emergence of 'civil society' in Eastern Europe, as a contribution to détente and as a challenge to the churches. Both the result and the process of achieving it still give me satisfaction today. Lukas Vischer, who is present here today, was also involved in the drafting.

It was completely different with another contribution which I tried to make. Basel was intended to be something for the whole of Christianity in Europe. What we had so long tried to do on a small scale with the IKV and Pax Christi – to recognise the dissidents as official partners in dialogue – was to happen now on a large scale. Political excommunication in the East was no longer to mean ecumenical excommunication. In other words, it was now to be clear that when certain people had not been able to come to Basel it was because the *state* had not given a visa, and not because the *church* had not wanted to invite them. But in this my attempts were completely unsuccessful. So even retrospectively I cannot share the euphoria over Basel.

As the preparatory commission, we were naturally not in a position to influence the official church delegations. Basel presented the old Eastern Europe, not the new, with the exception of the GDR and the Catholic delegation from Poland. This is what we had expected, and there were four ways in which we could put this right:

(i) The official speakers. Most speakers were to be famous figures, but we had the possibility of inviting two younger people as speakers. At my suggestion a young man was invited from the Polish 'Freedom and Peace' group, which was connected with Solidarity; but he was rejected by the Polish Bishops' Conference.

(ii) The 'advisors'. I had drawn up a long list of people from Charter 77, Solidarity and so on, but it turned out that an invitation was possible only with the agreement of the churches in the relevant countries. For the Protestants and Orthodox in CEC this was impossible, so it could be done only with the Catholics. Finally only one person from my long list received an invitation – Václav Malý from Prague. The CCEE was prepared to agree to the choice of this advisor only with the approval of Cardinal František Tomášek, but the general secretary Ivo Fűrér was not able to arrange this over the telephone. Jan ter Laak had done some preparation and Mient Jan Faber had visited Tomášek and asked him to write a letter confirming his trust in Malý. I faxed this letter to Fűrér and that is how it was possible to invite Malý. So, only *one* advisor from my list. Looking back on this today I still consider it scandalous.

(iii) The 'Workshop for the Future of Europe'. This was a form of market of possibilities for about 100 groups. Only those from the GDR were truly representative; those from the other countries of Eastern Europe were not. I had drawn up a list of peace, ecology and other groups but it became clear that this was not a priority. Only a few attended. The Christian Peace Conference, naturally, was prominently represented. This was all the more piquant as the Berlin Conference of Catholic Bishops had decided not to participate.

(iv) The hearings. Responsibility for these lay not with the CEC and the CCEE but with several international ecumenical organisations. Here there was space. As I recall, however, it was only at the three hearings which had been organised from the Netherlands that independent groups from Eastern Europe were in fact present. The West Germans did not dare, while most of the others were not interested.

And finally the gathering in Basel itself. The irony of Basel is that the Polish bishops had initially been against it and that the Polish Catholic delegation saved Basel. Halina Bortnowska told the plenary session: 'Eastern Europe is being forgotten even here. We are now seeking more freedom, but the debt crisis is weighing us down because the West has given credits to irresponsible regimes which do not represent the people.' And she added: 'We are like the wife of an alcoholic who has to pay the debts of her husband but cannot do so.' No one from the East had ever spoken out like this at a major ecumenical gathering. Many people were grateful to her for this. However, the fact that so many Polish delegates voted against the final document was never discussed. It is for this reason that I still do not know whether I was right to take some pride in my contribution to this document.

Conclusion

Why is this debate on the evaluation of the past relevant? First of all because it would be wrong and unjust to leave our friends in Central and Eastern Europe to face this task alone. We in the West were part of the problem.

Secondly, because there were arguments and differences of opinion which could be repeated. For instance, there was the ecumenical human rights programme of the churches of the CSCE states. It met early in 1989 in Prague, but a suggestion to visit the trial then taking place of Václav Havel was rejected. Such shameful incidents must not be forgotten.

Thirdly, because the Stasi and the KGB had a much higher assessment of the potential of the churches than we did. In 1992 the last five-year plan of the Stasi and the KGB – for the period 1986–1990! – was published by a German newspaper and of course we in the IKV were pleased to see that we were named in first place among the organisations to be combatted. But what was really interesting was that more than half the organisations mentioned in which the secret services had an interest were church or Christian organisations.

And fourthly, if – as Heino Falcke taught us 2 years ago – the right relationship between sin and reconciliation, between confession and forgiveness, and between grace and the law is essential for the people of the former GDR to be able to live together in the future, then of course the same goes for all of us. The question of the complicity of the church in the structures of society also affects us all. It plays a very clear role in extreme situations such as recently in Eastern Europe, South Africa or Argentina – but thanks to this visibility in extreme situations we ought to be able to see more clearly that it always remains a lively issue for us too.

(Translated from the German by Felix Corley)