

The Discovery of Europe*

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Europe Rediscovered

The long absence of 'Europe' as a theme in the international debate can be explained by three factors: the predominantly national orientation of Protestant and Orthodox churches, whereas in Roman Catholic thinking 'Europe' seems to have an almost ecclesiological meaning; the fact that for four decades after 1948 the history of the ecumenical movement coincided with the Cold War; and the fact that for long periods 'Europe' has been absent as a theme in the political debate as well.¹

During the Cold War official ecumenical life in Eastern Europe was instrumentalised by the regimes and had no roots in society. Ecumenical life in Europe was basically *Western* European. The Cold War resulted in one of the great failures of the large international ecumenical organisations and their western member churches: for Christian dissidents in Eastern Europe political excommunication also meant ecumenical excommunication. The ecumenical taboo on public debate about the reality of Eastern Europe was broken only in Basel (May 1989), mainly thanks to some Roman Catholic delegates from Poland. A less-known result of the Cold War for ecumenical life was neglect of the (Western) European integration process by the large ecumenical organisations such as the WCC and CEC. This taboo lasted until about 1993. Rather than being the result of developments in the European Community (the Single Market and the Maastricht Treaty, for example), the (slow) lifting of this taboo came about as a result of the '*Wende*' (changes) in Eastern Europe in 1989. An important impulse for the rediscovery of Europe by the churches came also from politics: in November 1990 Jacques Delors issued a challenge to the churches in Europe to participate in the search to give Europe 'a heart and a soul'.²

Which View of Europe?

The three special church meetings in 1991–92 about Europe after the '*Wende*' reflected three different approaches. The Roman Catholic Bishops' Synod (Rome, November–December 1991) represented a rather selfconscious approach, with 'new evangelisation' as the keyword. The Orthodox primates (Istanbul, March 1992) spoke from the experience of suffering in the past and of still feeling threatened today, now by secularisation and proselytism; their approach reflected the Orthodox

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longing for Christian unity in a Christian culture. The Protestant church leaders (Budapest, March 1992) were more open to modern culture but less clear in their own concept; they sought to contribute to the discussion on Europe from the tradition of the Reformation. None of these three meetings, however, produced evidence of much progress on the pleas for the unity of Europe as a whole already produced at Basel in May 1989. Moreover, the great dilemmas on the agenda of the European Community (later the European Union) – deepening or widening? market or political union? intergovernmental or federal? an ‘economic’ Europe or also a ‘social’ Europe? – were still absent from the churches’ agenda (this also applied to the Conference of European Churches (CEC) Assembly in Prague in September 1992). In terms of their view of Europe, none of the three approaches could be seen as a real response to Delors’ challenge. The Roman Catholic approach was too triumphalistic, the Orthodox approach too defensive, the Protestant approach too marginal.

On the surface, there is an ecumenical consensus that the challenge now presented by Europe to the churches is not the restoration of a ‘Christian Europe’. However, elements of restorative thinking are present in all three traditions. According to a recent report produced by the Netherlands Reformed Church, *Heart and Soul for Europe?*, the churches must recognise that old models for connecting ‘faith’ and ‘life’ cannot be restored. New models are not readily available, however. Our task in Europe is to search for such new connections. The report gives a number of examples, most of which are derived from recent theological reflection in Central and Eastern Europe.³

A Positive Approach to European Integration

As far as the process of European integration is concerned, the international ecumenical movement and the Western European member churches have to make up for their long period of neglect. There are now two substantial recent reports by Western European churches that reflect this effort: besides the report of the Netherlands Reformed Church there is the report *Europa fordert die Christen* by the Protestant Church in Germany. Both reports underline and support the original intentions of the integration process: peace (reconciliation) and justice. Both argue (the Dutch report more explicitly than the German report) that these intentions now apply to Europe as a whole. The difference with earlier positions is not that there is now less criticism of negative aspects of European integration, such as the primacy of market forces, social exclusion within the EU, the democratic deficit, the weak Common Foreign and Security Policy (Bosnia!), and inadequate EU policy towards the Third World. The difference is that such criticism is no longer expressed from the sidelines but from a positive assessment of the European integration process as such. This process is now to be welcomed (as the German report says) as the effort to replace in Europe the *law of force* by the *force of law*.

Today, however, this process may be more threatened than is often recognised. Paradoxically one reason is the end of the Cold War and the resulting return of nationalism. Another reason is that the very success of the project ‘Europe’ – from six member states in its beginning to more than twenty in the near future – also contains the seeds of its disintegration. A third reason is the huge agenda before the EU between now and the end of the century. One of the most important items on this agenda is the inclusion of Central and Eastern Europe in the European integration project, which is meant to be a reconciliation project. The Treaty of Rome of 1957 is often called the anti-Versailles treaty. Can it also be turned into an anti-

Trianon treaty? A key moment will be the conclusion of the current Inter-governmental Conference of the EU in Amsterdam in June 1997. This will be held one week before the European Ecumenical Assembly in Graz, where reconciliation is the theme. In preparing for Graz, we as churches must try to ensure that Amsterdam will be about reconciliation as well.

What does 'Europe' Mean for European Ecumenical Life?

'Europe' is potentially of great significance for the renewal of the ecumenical movement. The following points illustrate this.

After the Cold War, the ecumenical movement in Europe finally has to become *European* rather than *Western European*. This implies that the experiences of the churches in the eastern part must be genuinely shared by the ecumenical movement as a whole. These experiences must become part of the collective memory. They must also be digested theologically. Just as after the Second World War there was a need for a 'theology after Auschwitz', after the Cold War there is a need for a 'theology after the Gulag'.

The Cold War division of Europe may have ceased to exist, but many new walls have come up in its place. The integration of Europe presents a new challenge to the churches to overcome national, cultural, religious and confessional boundaries. 'Europe' now forces the ecumenical movement to take the Orthodox world more seriously, and vice versa. The idea of Europe as a 'values community' forces the churches to think about the question 'which values?' – especially since the commitment of the Council of Europe to human rights has been watered down.

In many churches in Western Europe, organisations for solidarity with the Third World have been slow in understanding the significance of the 'Wende' of 1989. As well as having significance in Europe, it also presents a challenge for a new kind of relationship between churches in the 'Second World' and in the 'Third World' (I am aware that this terminology is obsolete).

Some churches are now discovering that the European Union is becoming a new kind of state structure. What kind of ecumenical structures for public witness does this require on the part of the churches? And should there be an explicit recognition of the churches and other religious communities in the Treaty of Maastricht?

How can the European challenge of pluriformity be reconciled with the current ecumenical trend towards confessionalism (solidarity within one's own family)? How can we avoid political and ethnic-national tensions being aggravated by tensions between minority and majority churches?

What Does European Ecumenical Life Mean for 'Europe'?

Just as the ecumenical movement needs Europe to renew itself, Europe needs the ecumenical movement. A renewed ecumenical life in Europe is essential for tasks such as:

- (i) coming to terms with the recent Cold War past;
- (ii) bridging the new (old) cultural gaps between Roman and Byzantine Europe, and between Christianity and Islam (the tragedy of Bosnia being that both have come to the surface again);
- (iii) clarifying the relationship between religion/confession and national identity;

- (iv) monitoring freedom of religion and church–state relations, especially in those countries where new legal systems are being created (at an OSCE seminar in Warsaw in April 1996 the religious issue was called the ‘sleeping giant’ among human rights issues);
- (v) preparing the churches and civil society in the respective countries of Central and Eastern Europe and in Cyprus (and perhaps Malta) for their countries’ EU membership (the negotiations are likely to start by the end of 1997);
- (vi) creating a ‘sense of belonging’ also in those parts of Europe which for the foreseeable future will remain outside the EU.

The key word in all these tasks is reconciliation. Moreover, all these tasks are opportunities to search for new connections between ‘faith’ and ‘life’ – see above. Graz will therefore be an important opportunity for the renewal of the ecumenical movement in Europe.

In many respects, a new kind of ecumenical movement has already developed during the Cold War: the thousands of local church contacts between East and West. These are a form of ‘integration from below’. However, international as well as national ecumenical bodies find it difficult to relate to this very lively new form of ecumenical life.

A Voyage of Discovery

At the end of this ‘lost century’ (two world wars, 40 years of cold war, and now regional wars again) we have yet to discover what ‘Europe’ is about. The old dilemmas of European culture are back on the agenda:

- (i) the relationship between the responsibility of the individual and of the community;
- (ii) the relationship between state and civil society;
- (iii) the question of subsidiarity (the level of authority and power);
- (iv) the relationship between church and state;
- (v) the relationship between religious confession and national or ethnic identity;
- (vi) the question of identity and truth amidst pluriformity;
- (vii) the tension between freedom and peace (including the question of the renewed relevance of the ‘just war’ tradition);
- (viii) the relationship between the three main Christian confessional traditions – Catholic, Orthodox, Protestant – and also the relationship between the different religions.

In the light of its long experience in dealing with these dilemmas, has Europe anything new to offer to the rest of the world? Or is this very question a nostalgic reference to the times when Europe mattered?

Even if Europe does not matter to the rest of the world any more, however, these questions are important for future life in Europe itself. The questions may be old, but their answers are likely to imply new models of society. Finding these answers requires much dialogue between North and South and East and West in Europe.

As already indicated, the agenda which ‘Europe’ presents to us also requires new answers to the more specific theological/ecclesiological challenges.

- (i) Finding new connections between 'faith' and 'life' is the challenge presented by secularisation in Europe. (This is at the core of the 'heart and soul' debate.)
- (ii) Tensions about the 'identity' of nations necessitate a new debate about the 'territorial' versus the 'market' concept of evangelical presence. (This is at the core of the proselytism debate. And western proselytism feeds eastern nationalism.)
- (iii) Konrad Raiser has pointed to the need for finding an adequate response to the use of market mechanisms by new religious movements and sects in Europe. When the churches fail to respond, such movements and sects will impose *their* new models of connecting 'faith' with 'life'.⁴
- (iv) The 'ecumenical meltdown' in Eastern Europe after 1989⁵ is one of the many expressions of the (re)discovery of history in the societies involved. Is the western ecumenical concept adequate for finding answers?
- (v) The newly emerging East–West division in Europe, which to a large extent is a very old culture gap, requires a new and intensive dialogue between Eastern and Western Christianity (Byzantium and Rome).
- (vi) Religion is back on the European agenda, but we will yet have to discover what the implications are for religious institutions, such as churches and ecumenical organisations.

One question is seldom raised in European politics but must be high on the ecumenical agenda. Was the fall of the Berlin Wall the collapse of one particular model of modernisation (communism) and the victory of the western model (capitalism and democracy?) Or was it a sign of the threatening collapse of the European modernisation model as such? If so, how do we find a new model (or new models)?

All of this presents an impressive agenda for debate about the role of the churches in civil society in Europe today.

Notes and References

¹ Two recent studies of the thinking about Europe in the early ecumenical movement are: Martin Greschat and Wilfried Loth (eds), *Die Christen und die Entstehung der Europäischen Gemeinschaft* (Kohlhammer, 1994); see especially Martin Greschat's article, pp. 25–96; and Jurjen Zeilstra, *European Unity in Ecumenical Thinking 1937–1948* (Boekencentrum, The Netherlands, 1995).

² At a meeting with a delegation of church leaders organised by the European Ecumenical Commission for Church and Society (EECCS). This is a small ecumenical body with offices in Brussels and Strasbourg which for many years has been closely following the policies of the EC (now the EU) and the Council of Europe. EECCS is likely to merge with CEC in the near future.

³ *Hart en ziel voor Europa?*, a report by the General Synod of the Netherlands Reformed Church (Boekencentrum, 1996). An English summary is available from the Synod, PO Box 405, 2260 AK Leidschendam, The Netherlands.

⁴ At a seminar on 'Challenges to the Ecumenical Movement in Europe', Bossey, April 1996.

⁵ Paul Mojzes, 'East Europe's changes. After communism. Threats to ecumenism', *One World*, May 1995.