Europe at the Crossroads—a New Challenge for Christian Higher Education

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The face of the European continent has drastically changed in the last ten years. The main impetus has been the dramatic breakdown of the mighty empire of the Communist parties and the socialist states of Middle and Eastern Europe. It seems as if, in its train, the whole stream of social, economic and cultural life on this continent has entered into a kind of rapids, with consequences which can only be partially surveyed or calculated.

One reason for the rapidly changing scenery is that the break down of communism entails for Europe as a whole far more than liberation from an evil political regime; more even than the liberation from a culture of fear and oppression, or the end of a central command economy. Mainly in the East, but partially also in the West, this breakdown did not only bring liberation but also carried the seeds of spiritual disorientation.

That is not difficult to understand. If in any society one of the direct goals for life and action (in this case the struggle for or against communism) falls away and leaves a vacuum, that in itself creates a problem. But if such a goal has been ideologically absolutized, and has been attributed with ultimate meaning and is seen as the horizon for society—as happened on both sides during the Cold War—then the collapse of such a goal means nothing less than the emergence of a spiritual vacuum. But vacuums cannot and will not last. And, as we can observe now in the rapid changes, the vacuum is being filled again. In the line of the Gospel one could say that now the partially-swept clean house of Europe is invaded

by a diversity of spirits, all of which try to conquer it: the spirit of a hard nationalism, even ethnic cleansing, the spirit of a hard collective materialism, and the accompanying xenophobia. There is also the revived spirit of an extreme and cynical individualism, which so easily bears the fruit of the disintegration of many social bonds within society.

Quo Vadis, Europe? That is the burning question for this conference. Because it is in this turbulent Europe that Christian higher education has to find its place.

Before we look at education, it may be good to clarify the present situation. It is full of ambiguities, insecurities and contradictions, and all are accentuated by the spiritual disorientation which I just mentioned.

Take the economic scene. It is almost schizophrenic. On the one hand we see Central and Eastern Europe involved in the deep and largely unexpected problems which accompany the transfer from a planned economy to a market economy. These societies now have to cope with inflation, with shameless forms of exploitation of the poor by the new rich, and with a sharp decline of the general standard of living. At the same time Western Europe is setting its course to a future of an even larger material abundance and a higher standard of living. The one part of Europe is decentralizing and trying to open its economies, the other part is integrating its markets and trying to keep them closed.

These contradictions can also be found in the social and cultural realms. The one part of Europe deplores the departure of its best people to the West, the other part tries by all means to prevent more people from coming in. Western Europe thinks and acts out of a renewed confidence in the superiority of its own neo-capitalist system; Central and Eastern Europe try to forget their mistrust against that system and to overcome their present feelings of inferiority.

The differences are so deep and the directions taken are so full of contrasts, that the question arises whether one can still speak of Europe as one continent. Sometimes it seems as if now, after the fall of the Wall, Europe is more divided than before it fell. An iron curtain came down, but new curtains are erected. And they are not only of silver, but also of glass. For you can look through, but what is behind the glass will never be yours.

The Nature of Our Unity

Let me rephrase the question: Here in Debrecen what really unites us as people of Europe? I hope sincerely that we will not try to avoid that crucial question. For it sometimes seems as if the only matter which Europeans of both sides can still discuss together is the topic of the working of their respective economies, or a selective list of common problems,

like the internal problem of ecology and the external problem of world poverty. And even if on those topics a discussion takes place, the agenda is often more often suggested by the West than by the East. These questions are not the primary issues in Central and Eastern Europe. Even here in this conference on Christian higher education, we run the risk that the only proposals for cooperation will lie in the field of a restricted set of problems, because outside these problems we miss too much common ground to be of real help to each other.

The question about the future way of Europe is therefore more than a question directed to our respective societies. It is also a question to ourselves, to our own history and destiny, in the midst of our own institutions of higher education. There is no guarantee of a good outcome.

At this point some feelings of protest may arise. Do we not share as Christians a common heritage on which we can build together, the tradition of the Reformation which had European roots? Is it really necessary to stress so strongly the present diversity in Europe and the existence of spiritual powers which could divide us?

A Shared European Heritage

As for our common background, I would undoubtedly say, yes, of course we share that extremely important European heritage. But in the current great diversity it might be reckless to presuppose that at this conference on Christian higher education our common spiritual heritage is strong enough to cope with all possible powers of division. So let us be careful. For not only are the present powers of division in Europe strong and deep, Christian higher education is in no way and in no place isolated from its own society. We do not stand outside the spiritual crisis but in the midst of it.

To make my point clear let me mention three names: the French philosopher Francois Lyotard, the American economist John Galbraith, and the American social scientist Robert Bellah.

Francois Lyotard, a post-modern philosopher, sees the end of modernity lying in the fact that all "grand recits," all great stories of Western culture, such as socialism, communism, liberalism, capitalism and fascism, have in one way or another betrayed their adherents in their results. These results are to a large extent terror or oppression or deprivation; the era is ending in the unmasking of all its ruling ideologies.

But if we incline to agree with Lyotard on this point, it is good to know that Christendom is seen by him as one of those grand recits, because Christianity as well as the others has not been able to fulfill its promises. So how could we say that our Christian institutions are fully exempt from

this dismantling process? Christianity appears rather to be a part of the same great crisis.

John Galbraith describes in *The New Industrial State* (1967) the rise of a technological society in which old divisions such as that between plan and market, and between state and society are fading away. For markets themselves are now more and more planned by mighty multinational corporations. And within capitalism the old sharp distinction between government and industrial enterprise can no longer be maintained. Both are parts of one new complex, the industrial state.

Again we are inclined to agree. But we should be aware that Galbraith sees modern education as increasingly a fully dependent part of the same industrial society, living by the grace of government rules and industrial subsidies. His prediction is that in the Western world all types of schools, including Christian schools and universities, will become a functional part of a single professional world, one which they are supposed to serve and not criticize.

Robert Bellah recently made a very interesting analysis of the changes in attitude in the United States of America. In his *Habits of the Heart* (1986) he makes clear that America is becoming increasingly individualistic and separatistic. He observes the rise of an "ontological individualism" in which even the deepest ethical virtues are justified as matters of personal preference (p 6), and in which all normative commitments are treated as so many alternative strategies of self-fulfillment (p 48).

Again, we tend to agree but would observe that this development has devastating consequences, especially for higher education: "Here, in higher education, students were traditionally supposed to acquire some general sense of the world and their place in it. But in the contemporary multiversity, it is easier to think of education as a cafeteria, in which one acquires discrete bodies of information or useful skills. [And] feeble efforts to reverse these trends, like the effort to establish a 'core curriculum,' often turn into a battle between the disciplines in which the idea of a substantive core is lost" (p 279).

In summary, Europe is not only a continent in dissarray, but also deeply divided. Different spirits seek to conquer Europe and win its soul, but until now the only consequence has been a deeper alianation of the different parts and regions of Europe from each other. In earlier times of crisis Christianity was sometimes a unifying factor, but now it seems to fall under the same judgment as all grand recits and failing ideologies. Christian higher education seems, moreover, to be too handicapped by its adaptation to society and to the trend towards individual achievement to deliver a worthwhile contribution to the healing of Europe.

It is all true. But is that all that we can say? I think not. But to recapture hope we may have to dig deeper than we have done so far. Moreover, we shall have to begin from the other side. That is, not the side of a denial of the past in the name of a better self-choosen separate Western and Eastern future, but of a deep respect for our common European history, even if that history reveals to us the roots of our sins. It is the side, not of the primacy of the selective list of our own Eastern and Western problems, but of the primacy of our common Christian mandate, including education, in relation to a continent which is deeply wounded and desparately needs healing.

So let us consider our common European history, and the significance of our common European task. Only on that base will we be able to define the challenge to Christian higher education on this continent in this epoch.

Our European Heritage

To study the history of Europe is for most Europeans a waste of time. For them only the present and the future matter. But behind that neglect of the past there is a fear of the present. It is the fear of being reminded too often of a past which was full of failures and mistakes, because that could hamper the fight for a better future. As the Dutch sociologist Fred Polak once wrote, "Western man has changed from a God-fearing into a time-fearing being."

It was the great Western philosopher Walter Benjamin who made the sharpest analysis of the fear of time in the heart of European man. Walter Benjamin was a Jew, and he ended his life just before the Second World War in France, when entry into Spain was denied to him as a Jew. Perhaps the most impressive part in his "theses about history" are his comments on a drawing, made by the German artist Paul Klee, with the name "Die Engel der Geschichte," the angel of history.

At first sight, Paul Klee's drawing reveals only a small and slightly sad personal phantasy. We see an angel hanging in the sky with its face turned to the earth below. The angel tries to spread its wings, but both wings are blown away by a strong wind which comes from the earth and goes upward in the sky. The comment of Walter Benjamin has made this drawing unforgettable. For he sees the Angel as not just looking to the earth, but looking to earth's history, as it unrolled until the present day. Because the Angel flies with its face turned towards the past and the present, she is not able to see the future behind her back. This means that she does not know what we have in mind when we influence the present in the hope for a better future. Paul Klee draws the Angel of History with an expression of deep pain in her face. Walter Benjamin explains: In all our ideologies,

we thought that we had to sacrifice in order to realise a better future. But the Angel sees only an endless process of human suffering, of men, women and children as victims of that futile quest. The good angel tries to spread its wings to bless and to heal the pain below, but the strong wind from the earth blows her away. Walter Benjamin makes the sober comment: The wind which is blowing from below is the wind of progress, "ist das was wir Fortschritt nennen." In the name of progress ever more sacrifices are necessary.

Better than a long epistle, this comment on the drawing of the Angel of History reveals what we have to learn from the history of the continent where we live together. Europe first received the gospel as an unique heritage. But it is also where all the great ideologies have been born, where the bloodiest revolutions took place, where both world wars started, and from where all the other parts of the world were brutally colonized. What an endless number of sacrifices that has meant to the world: millions of victims of all ages, all continents, all races—and all that in the name of one or another kind of progress: the progress of civilization, the progress of Christendom, the progress of capitalism, the progress of communism.

And now new plans are made for a better and stronger European market, for a strengthening of European political power, and for a new European renaissance. And the message is that at all costs a newer and better Europe has to be constructed. But where and when did we hear that before? And is it a wonder that many young people are now becoming very sceptical, questioning the price of all Western progress in the East and the South, and doubting if more nationalistic striving will really bring us freedom instead of sacrifice?

Walter Benjamin, the suffering Jew, reminds us that the past should never be forgotten. Every today is always more than just a moment of transition to tomorrow. For, as he once wrote, it will be through the gateway of a present day that the Messiah will enter world history.

The most important lesson may be that only if we will look together to our common past as in a mirror, then and then only will the common European civilization have a common future.

Europe the Prodigal Son

Dr. Willem Visser't Hoofd, the first Secretary General of the World Council of Churches, once summarized this insight with a reference to the parable of the Prodigal Son. For, in the same way as the oldest son in the parable reminds us of the people of Israel, the youngest son looks so strikingly like Europe. He claims his whole heritage and wants to use it in his own autonomous way; he strikes out to find his own happiness in an

unknown land. But once there, he can find no other meaning in life than to squander his possessions, and to go to the extreme of using everyone and everything for his purposes. He continues until he is confronted with the limits of himself and his heritage, and finds no other companions than the unclean pigs. Europe has to refind itself in the image of the prodigal son, of whom the Gospel says that the first thing which he needed was to come to his senses. For without that, he could not move in the right direction, back to his Father's house.

I like this interpretation of Visser t'Hooft because it has an implicit hope and perspective. If Europe goes on with its fixation on one or other old or new ideology, then it will have learnt nothing from its own history, and will re-enter the process of ruining its own future as well as that of others. That holds also for the ideology of the so called free market society. If there is one thing which we should learn from the breakdown of the centrally-guided economies it is that no economic system has eternal life. Already now the unlimited material growth of Western capitalism is absorbing many possibilities of life in both Eastern Europe and in the South, both of today and of the world's future generations.

But the parable suggests the possibility of another future, which is not built on sacrifice-demanding ideologies. It is a future for Europe as a whole, which comes in sight only if Europe is willing to link its own life with the life in the *oikos* of the Father. For in that house where we all were born our destiny lies. But Europe can reach that destiny of a fully accepted son only if it begins to act in this world as a servant for all humankind.

Failings of Christian Higher Education in Western Europe

My second main thought relates to Europe's future as a challenge for Christian higher education. Here we have to begin by asking a critical question: Why has it often distorted the course of events?

One important reason is the still dominant Western concept of science as an activity which should take place only in the realm of what can be measured or understood in mathemathical or mechanical terms. Outside that realm we can only speak of metaphysics, which is out of bounds to scientific truth and concerns only personal subjective valuations.

Especially the social sciences such as economics are structured according to this concept, with almost devastating consequences. For if the norms and values which have to guide a civilization on its future course are seen solely as subjective opinions, then the economy, the political game and the development of science and technology can only be seen, commented upon, and measured from the viewpoint of their own internal system-derived yardsticks. For the economy the yardstick is the growth of

the gross national product; for politics, the degree of democracy; and for technology, the rapidity of innovation and implementation of new inventions. Thus, by definition science is opting for a culture which is oriented to progress only. For all guiding external rules and anchorages for human society are seen only as infringements on the autonomy of science. This is why the service of modern science to modern society has usually been so slavish and servile, silent about the course of society, but in the meantime providing all the instruments which society needs for its self-determined purposes.

But is this common European attitude equally present among the scientists from the East and from the West? I think not, because the scientific tradition of Eastern Europe has clearly been different, at least in some respects.

An Eastern Perspective

I would like to mention the name of the great Russian Christian philosopher and social scientist Nicolai Berdiajew. When vital norms in society were at stake he never hesitated to take a strong stand, not only as a private person but also as an academician and scientist. Living and lecturing in Moscow in 1920, he was banned by Lenin to France because of his resistance against the atheistic character of the new communism. Living in Paris he continued his sharp analysis of both capitalism and communism. He spoke about capitalism as an economic system which could arise only in a society which had lost almost any idea of the value of the Christian ethic, but instead wished to serve human desires as the last and decisive criterion of life. "It is impossible," he wrote in 1950, in his book *Das Neue Mittelalter*, "to imagine Capitalism as an economic system with any relation to holiness" (als ein sakrales Wirtschaftsystem); "for it is a full consequence of the secularisation of economic life into an economism.... Mammonism has become the ruling spirit of our time, a time which adores nothing so much as the golden calf" (p 37). These remarks seem to be written directly for our time. Here we find a scientist working and thinking in a tradition, which still has a knowledge of vital norms which are needed to guide a civilization and to contextualise our scientific judgments. He was seeking for that very special relationship between holiness and science, between the economy and the integrity of man and creation, for which our sick European culture longs so deeply.

Conclusions

1. Let me now conclude. We have learned from Walter Benjamin that a faith which respects time, man, and God's creation, is pathway-oriented.

It is therefore totally different from sacrifice-demanding, goal-oriented ideologies. Therefore the Christian faith still has an important message for a wounded and disoriented Europe.

2. We also saw that scientists, especially those working in the Western European tradition, are not very well equipped for these healing tasks, not even in institutions for Christian higher education. For far too long they have been trained to evade all value judgments, seeing these as belonging solely to another domain, namely that of metaphysics.

3. We should see our common task and mutual cooperation primarily in this deep concern: How can we prevent that our students receive only pieces of fragmentized knowledge, but miss the wisdom to implement it in a truly healing and responsible way? How can we motivate them to look together to those forms of common research, which in their purpose are not oriented to the selfish wishes of a closed and self-centered society, but to the needs of a society of service which wants to listen to eternal ways and commandments? That our Europe may finally come to its senses!

For science is discipline; it learns to follow a way. So why not learn as well the way back to our deepest origin and to our ultimate destination: to the Alpha and the Omega of Europe's alphabet?