

106. “What kind of Christianity in present-day Europe?”

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See http://www.ucsi.org/main.aspx?c=*UCSIA2&n=40046&ct=40722&e=92534

1. There is a question mark in the subtitle of our conference: Christian politics in Europe, an uneasy relationship? From my point of view it should rather be a note of exclamation! For there is indeed a double uneasiness in that relationship. This is especially so if the expression 'Christian politics' is understood in a normative sense, rather than as the label used of one or more Christian political parties, and so is oriented to what Christian faith could mean or imply for economic policy in Europe.

The first form of uneasiness is related to the basic acceptance of current European political structures. They have been shaped in a relatively long history, culminating in the emergence of a European Union in the last half century. That Union is not only rooted in *a variety of political movements and impulses*, but was also in its basic framework *an offspring of the classical neo-liberal perspectives* on human society. Here the names of Wilhelm Röpke, Walter Eucken and Ludwig Erhard should be given special mention because, in Germany, they were the strongest supporters of the idea of the construction of *a free common European Market* with equal conditions of competition for all which, in their view, had to be combined with a type of governance tied to the principle of market-conformity. Of course, there is no reason at all to reject *a priori* this kind of societal structuration. And after all, making compromises is a valid practice in politics and even, in my view, quite in accordance with Christian principles. But a kind of uneasiness arises, if structures like these are expected to function as a given, as the starting point for all forms and types of political input, including the inputs which derive from a Christian vantage point. The well-known request of Jacques Delors to give this Europe “a soul” - how well it was meant! - easily creates in the Christian mind a feeling of alienation, as if to function usefully our faith must simply be a *'superdonum additum'*, as if the structures themselves are already placed *outside* the sphere of Christian critique and appreciation.

The second component of possible uneasiness is related to contemporary European culture, and more specifically to **the current high degree of fragmentation in the Christians presence within European culture.** In speaking about the relevance of Christian policy for Europe we can of course easily pretend that it is "us" as one fragment who have the true insights about Christian values overall. And that, no doubt, is highly contentious and therefore it would also be a problematic starting point. But do we have an alternative? Perhaps, I have to admit, that this fragmentation is more evident to me as an economist than it is for a theologian, and perhaps also it is more of a concern for a protestant than it is for a catholic Christian.

So it is with this double embarrassment that I would propose to you this afternoon that we follow the path of induction rather than deduction, **more the path of realism than**

of idealism. In this case it will not be our ideas about Christian values which function as our starting point, but rather the present social and economic facts and developments in Europe. This means we locate ourselves against the background of our existing European structures and institutions while trying at the same time to analyse some of the most important social and economic developments in contemporary Europe in terms of the current accelerated globalization process. By insisting that in our analysis we face up to where we now are, I am certainly not suggesting that we must remain there. My hope is that in this way we will be able to come to a deeper level of understanding, also as economists, of our own European reality. So I am speaking in the hope that by digging somewhat deeper into the complexities of the present European reality we may be able to uncover one or more spiritual levels, levels which bring something of the significance or relevance of the Christian faith itself to the fore. For we indeed need that source of light in our present highly problematic reality.

A possible method to analyse (the) deeper levels of an existing socio-economic reality has been suggested, now more than two decades ago, by the post-modern philosopher Francois Lyotard. His work demonstrated his intense interest in the presence of paradoxes in theory and reality, and for the purpose of their analysis coined a specific term: *paralogie*. Namely, he suggested - and I think quite correctly - that by looking at the presence of concrete paradoxes we can perhaps move beyond the self-selecting presuppositions of our modern society and of current modern theory (which also includes, of course, our current economic paradigms) in order that deeper dimensions of reality can be spontaneously revealed: *la pensée du dehors*.

Let us now, therefore, identify some concrete paradoxes in the socio-economic reality of present-day Europe; and having done so let us ask the critical question as to what they might possibly have in common. It may be that this is the point where the also the significance of Christian values comes into view.

2. The first paradox, which I would like to discuss, is **the paradox of increasing poverty**. That relative increase is to some extent a global phenomenon; I would remind you of the well-known statistic from the UN Development Programme. When we analyze the real income per head we can compare the top 20% income-layer throughout the world with the poorest 20% what we do we find: in 1969 the ratio was 30 to 1, in 1990 it was 60 to 1, and now it amounts to 74 to 1. But even stranger than this deepening inequality is that also *within* rich countries and regions - like the US and Western Europe - the number of poor people is now increasing. One of nine families in the US is reported to have a direct experience of hunger, and in the 1990's the life expectancy of a child born in Harlem, New York, was even lower than that of a child born in Bangladesh. *Time Magazine* recently reported that in Western Europe the number of homeless people now nears to 3 million people, and adds: "the highest level in 50 years".

Why does poverty increase in the context of growing wealth? Is it, perhaps, related to another paradox. Consider **the care paradox**, which rests on the absurdity that the level of personal, social and medical care for elderly and handicapped people has in many places in Europe diminished compared over the last ten to fifteen years, when the average income level was, of course, much lower. Economists know all that the rise in discretionary buying power usually leads to a higher level of demand for social services; are these services an exception to the rule, and why?

Or is there perhaps also a relationship with **the budget paradox**; the remarkable phenomenon that especially in the richest countries and regions in the world there is

not only an incidental, but even a structural, need for an ongoing process of cutting public expenditure? Is that also not highly paradoxical when a higher level of income and property also suggests a rising tax base?

Two other paradoxes conclude my overview. The first is what we could name **the environmental paradox**. Technically and scientifically we have reached a higher potential to deal with environmental threats than ever before. Why, then, is it so awfully difficult to agree - even at the European level - to an effective reduction of for greenhouse gasses, as was formally agreed in Kyoto? That should be easier now than in the past with all our technological and scientific advances. Or is it purely and simply a matter of a political will?

The last paradox which I would mention here relates to the current wave of **mergers and take-overs in the European Union**, which has reached enormous proportions. This is not only in the sector of banks and industries, but also in the field of public or semi-public services like energy, insurance, airports, railways, post and telephone. Last year the American databank Mergerstat reported that in Europe no less than 12,000 mergers and take-overs had taken place, and that was 700 more than in 2004. This leads to a **paradox of an institutional nature**. For the European Union was created to become a well-preserved common market accompanied by good environmental regulations and social safety nets; a living example of the so-called Rhineland-model. But this present Casino-like type development does not bring about any critical European political reaction. The commission and the national governments adhere to the so-called Lisbon-agreement, which says that the European Union has to be turned into the most competitive economic region of the world. That is paradoxical, for is there not something to defend, to protect, to preserve from Europe's rich structural and institutional heritage? The investors are eager, but the politicians are afraid. That was the recent verdict of the Dutch newspaper the *NRC Handelsblad* (see edition of March 25, 2006).

3. Several paradoxes show up today, and some of them are really alarming. But do they have also similar features, or perhaps even **common roots**? Yes, they do, in at least two aspects.

First all these paradoxes are to some extent connected with the deep tension which exists between the power of Europe's current economic-technological dynamic on the one hand and its complex natural, social, cultural and even institutional reality, on the other. This last reality cannot easily, deal with this dynamic pattern and so tends to stay behind. Let us test this reality: According to recent US and European research, the so-called "new poverty" in rich countries is as much rooted in several forms of deliberate social and economic exclusion - for instance in the labour market - as it is in a growing lack of physical, psychic or educational capacities to cope with this dynamic and very demanding reality. New poverty seems to be correlated therefore not with a lack of economic expansion, but to just the opposite, namely to the speed and pattern of economic expansion itself.

But something like that is also true for the care-paradox. For it is well known that the sectors of health, social care and education tend to lag behind in terms of rising industrial productivity. One cannot expect a nurse to care each year for 4% more patients, or a schoolmaster to deal each year with 3% more pupils. But their yearly income usually follows, and correctly so, the trend of rising wages in the more dynamic economic sectors. Which implies, of course, a disproportional increase in the total costs of care, health and education. Which implies that in a dynamic society these sectors are either forced to acquire higher levels of productivity or are just

gradually crowded out, because they have become too costly to entertain. Here we meet the root of the care-paradox but also partially of the budget-paradox. For the bulk of government expenditure is tied to these less-dynamic economic sectors, so that continuous tax rises are necessary to maintain the same level of those public provisions. And so the European Union itself has to cope in this time of accelerated globalization with mounting costs to maintain and protect its public provisions and its social safety nets.

Tensions between an extremely dynamic and demanding reality on the one side and the cultural, natural, social givens on the other, also form the background of the other paradoxes, which I mentioned. Nature and time imply the unpleasant characteristic - for economists and politicians in particular - that they cannot be dynamically produced, or technologically increased. So however much they are used or burdened, the more scarce they become. Paradoxes like greater environmental pressures and a faster and faster way of life are then an inevitable consequence.

4. But, as I indicated, there is something which these paradoxes have in common. And in searching for this common element we also reach a level where something can be said from the viewpoint of Christian policy. It is the element of normality, of what is seen and valued as just, as normal in our current modern society. The paradoxes are all rooted in a common perception that reality is intrinsically dynamic. If things or people stay where they are, or are just staying behind, we are inclined to see them in this way and to judge them as lagging behind, and so we usually view them as belonging to an inferior class or position. As well, we will also tend to speak of *nature* as something which limits our own growth: of elderly people as human beings who are non-productive; of social provisions as a costly burden which hinders our progress; and of poor nations as primarily underdeveloped economies. But these characteristics tell almost nothing about what is being judged. They tell far more about who is doing the judging - it is the modern dynamic men and women. It is their modern outlook which reduces reality in a dynamistic way. But does this not imply that there is a real gap between the modern the *omni-versum* type of perception that arises from the heart of our modern economy and society and the perception of a real universe as it was created by God? Our dynamistic self-made universe asks everyone and everything to adapt to its so-called realistic rules, but continually falls as a consequence of that demand into the trap of deepening and increasingly more perplexing paradoxes. If Christian values have something to say here and now, then it is that God's reality consists of more than what is just strong and dynamic. His Kingdom honours what is weak and needs protection. It is not the kingdom of the survival of the fittest but the survival of the needy and the weak, as it was told to us in the parable of the Good Shepherd.

5. From this point of view, the European Union somehow looks like an institution which is imprisoned by its own, all too limited set of dynamic economic targets. Especially the Lisbon-agreements remind me of the metaphor, once used by Lord Keynes, in his comparison of our society with a tunnel. He used this metaphor in his article of 1930 "The Economic Possibilities for our Grandchildren" <http://www.econ.yale.edu/smith/econ116a/keynes1.pdf>, where we find the following words: "Avarice and usury and precaution must be our gods for a little longer still. For only they can lead us out of the tunnel of economic necessity into daylight". A tunnel is indeed expected to lead to the daylight. But its daily discipline is that priority has always to be given to dynamic impulses, which then gradually begin to rule as our gods. Keynes uses here in fact religious language. But that language has then to be

compared with what we know and learnt from our own Christian sources. Seen from these sources the present main European route looks like an escape route forward in a tunnel, where the walls are increasingly nearing each other and could finally close us in.

Let me conclude. The present worldview of Europe needs to be broadened and enlarged beyond its present dynamistic features. For no economy can stand on its own feet, it always needs to be embedded in what people can endure, what nature can endure. That is also the kernel of the Biblical concept of *oikonomia*, the mandate to take care of all of what is entrusted to us. This includes the need to preserve the human, social, and natural capital of our society, which could and should even lead us to reflect upon the necessity of a general acceptance of **levels of enough** throughout Europe, of restraint in the rise of our own income and consumption levels. "Sufficiency", the element of positive saturation in material human needs, is almost fully eliminated from economic thinking, especially from mainstream neo-classical economic thought. But we need it badly in present and future European economic policy, so that a trade-off *ex ante* or *ex post* becomes possible between a further enlargement of material consumption on the one side and the preservation and even extension of human, social and natural capital on the other side. In the first joint Christian democratic program in the Netherlands of 1977, entitled ***Not by bread alone!***, this was in fact already suggested as a core of Christian policy in the future. And I think correctly so, for does not Biblical doctrine strongly endorse human happiness with moderation, instead of the endless quest for always more?

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