

## **"Freedom and justice: evangelical responsibilities in politics and the economy"\***

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In the context of the general theme "Christian responsibility for Europe", I speak about freedom and justice in the economic and political realm. That is a subject which is certainly not by accident on our agenda. We are all deeply convinced that the topic of freedom and justice in Europe simply cannot be avoided. We have to deal with it now and here.

We have to do it *now*. For indeed, now is the time of the great transitions in Western and Eastern Europe, which carry with them fear and hope, as well as misery and insecurity. The scene has indeed changed rapidly. Only two years ago, during the fall of the wall in Berlin and the gradual break-down of almost all totalitarian régimes in Eastern Europe, long forgotten hopes came back in the hearts of millions of people: not only in the East but also in the West. A deep and terrifying shadow was passing away, and a new life of peace, freedom and justice seemed to be just around the corner. But now all these new hopes look far more bleak and empty. For what to think, if the new freedom comes to you primarily in the cloak of an overwhelming insecurity about almost everything: about your work, your future, and your daily livelihood? And what to do, if the promise of justice seems to die in the outburst of deep political rivalries, or in the awful contrast between the luxury of the new rich and the blatant poverty of the old and the weak, who wait in vain before empty shops? Then freedom and justice just seem to evaporate.

But, though very differently, in Western Europe too we find now a deep uneasiness of what is growing, in terms of freedom and justice. 'Freedom for whom?' becomes increasingly the question, especially if one looks to the mighty, often multinational

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powers related to the progress of technology and economy, which abuse nature and intervene deeply in private and communal life. That creates insecurity and fear as well. And what is the place of justice, if the extension of the common market implies high trade barriers for others, the dumping of agricultural surplus production, and even closing the borders for economic migrants from outside? Also, in the world of money and capital, injustice seems to grow. The time is coming that South and East together are caught in a deep bondage of enduring debts to the Western centres of money and capital, centres which may compel them to continuous painful economic and financial adjustments. The rich western countries will certainly resist such adjustment for their own economies. It will not take a long time after the breakdown of the wall [ 25 ] that the facades will fall of the presupposed inherent goodness of the rich western world towards the South and the East. Freedom and justice? Indeed, we have to discuss them now more urgently than ever before in Europe.

But this is not only the good time for discussion and exchange, it is also the good *place*. For we are meeting here in the centre of Europe, and we do it as churches of the Reformation. And that may be of great significance for more than one reason. The first is that as churches of the reformation we share in the history of Europe: it is a part of our own history. Therefore if we are speaking here about the problems and miseries, hopes and fears, sins and achievements of Europe, we are not speaking about something alien to us. We can speak and should speak from within. But there is also another point of great significance. As churches of the Reformation, we are also more than a part of Europe. We belong, and want to belong, to a world-wide ecumenical movement. And that means: sharing with all Christians from all races and nations one common faith in a Divine message to this world, which is *also* a message to Europe, and *also* a message of hope about real freedom and real justice. Or, to say it otherwise: when freedom and justice are at stake, we feel at home, and should feel at home. For Protestant churches and movements we know how to stand in a tradition which speaks about the freedom and liberty in Christ of every human being, and of justification by God's grace alone. We want to stick at the heart of that tradition, knowing that it has come to us as a precious heritage from the past.

How can the liberating and justifying power of the Gospel reach the political and economic life of a continent which is involved in so many pains and sinful actions; a continent moreover, in which we have to speak about a solidarity-in-sin of the churches? It is in relation to this painstaking, moving, but central question that I will try to formulate a number of theses. I call them this intentionally, to make clear that I want them all to be fully open to questioning and critique. For there will be no way, if we cannot find it together, and are not able to walk on it together.

My first thesis is, *that the present social, economic and political problems of Europe, which cause so much fear, unrest and suffering inside and outside our borders, did not come to us as a kind of fate, but are related to concrete sin and guilt.* This looks like a statement which can be easily accepted by everyone - but it is not. Those of us who have lived for many years in a planned or command economy will remember it clearly, that any reference to sin or guilt in the public realm was just forbidden. In relation to distorted political and economic outcomes the maximum possible confession was that some mistakes had been made. And even those mistakes were not meant to be any accusation of the state as such, to the party as such, or to planning as such - for the prevalent ideology presupposed the goodness of state and party, and the infallibility of the planning mechanism.

People from Western Europe often see this as strange and even stupid. But in doing so they easily forget that this attitude is not so very different from the way in which the market-economy and even the institutions of [ 26 ] political democracy are accepted and appreciated in Western society. They are primarily seen as mechanisms which, if they are treated according to the rules, give you the best chance of a good economic and political outcome. The economic and monetary experts of our time look with a kind of engineering approach to economic life. If they observe growing unemployment, high inflation, and the stagnation of production, then they will certainly not conclude that injustice is done to some extent, but just and only that people and their governments were too slow in their adjustment to the rules under changed circumstances. So mistakes may be made, but sins are not committed. For sin is a strange word coming out of the world of faith and religion, and therefore not suitable for the self-sufficient world of politics and

economics. We now however live in a time in which the limits and dangers of this mechanistic and pragmatic approach to political and economic life become increasingly visible. For the number of problems which cannot be met by the use of this engineering approach is rising, not only in the previous command-economies, but also in the traditional market-economies. The deterioration of the eco-system, the hard kernels of structural unemployment, the shifting of the burdens from the North to the South, they all point in one same direction: that we meet here the consequences of personal or institutionalised injustice, of a lack of care for nature, and even of greed. It is sin and guilt which is clearly present behind the great social and economic problems of our time, and not just the unwillingness of simple people and jibbing governments to obey the rules of democracy or the market-mechanism.

This is also quite evident if we look to what markets, plans and democracies really are. Of course they cannot give all inner guarantee for a good outcome. The mechanisms of market and planning are always functioning in terms of prices and quantities. But that simple fact alone means already that the most important aspects of life and culture, which are qualitative from the beginning, can never be taken care of by just a good and useful social institution. Even John Calvin saw the possibility of markets as an expression of the solidarity between man, and a sign of spiritual community.<sup>1</sup> But it has, as a modern and financial institution, at least three fundamental restrictions or limitations. Firstly, no market can record and fulfil human needs, if they are not expressed as demands; if people have no buying power, then the market does not function. Secondly, no market will offer any *supply* if an adequate financial reward is not given. And thirdly, no market can respect something to be of value if it has not *price*. Those are the natural and inbuilt shortcomings of a mechanism which deals only with the forces of supply, demand, and a resulting equilibrium price. But that is just another way of saying that human responsibility has to come in. If we want to deal with people who have no buying power, or with necessary public provisions which do not bring enough financial rewards, or - even more important - with nature, culture and human health, which do not have a price

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'...expression de la solidarité humaine et signe de la communauté spirituelle.' André Biéler **La Pensée Économique et Sociale de Calviu**, Geneva 1959, ch. 4.

label, then human responsibility itself is at stake, and simply cannot be evaded.

[ 27 ] Nevertheless, it is done. And that brings me naturally to a second thesis. It says that *the deliberate effort to exclude the awareness of sin and injustice from the world of economics and politics is itself one of the root-causes of our present problems and miseries.*

Here really pain comes in, also for ourselves, as churches of the Reformation. You will remember that some minutes ago I referred to that strange situation, that neither in a plan-economy nor in a market-economy are words like sin, guilt or injustice welcome in the discussion. Only mistakes are made, and those mistakes have often the character of a lack of full and prompt obedience to the laws of the plan- or market-mechanism. But what does this really mean in religious terms? Obviously, that societal mechanisms are chosen to play the role of a trustworthy compass for the future of the totality of society. And that they at least partially summon us as guides, orient us on our ways, and even may ask sacrifices. Which however brings us very near to what looks like the service of gods, of other gods. For to set something in creation aside, apart, to elevate it and to expect from it a better future in exchange for your own sacrifices, that is just another formulation of idolatry.

I would not dare to say this if there were not indications in this direction. One indication is the repeated assurance in our modern society that only a continued and rapid economic growth will save us from the present miseries. This may be true to some extent for impoverished nations, but sounds very strange for nations which are already very rich. Why such a limitless, infinite run for always more, while others lack minimal provisions? Obviously, then a new law and new morality have been introduced to society - a morality and a law, which indeed exclude the awareness of sin and injustice but only to pave the way for legitimated greed. For greed and selfishness and hard competition may be objectionable from an 'antique' religious point of view, but they are highly functional to uphold a rapid growth of the economy, and to reach a rising standard of living.

But there is also another indication. It is remarkable that even in the present

situation of growing poverty in the world, deep instability in the previous command economies and an alarming environmental crisis, the majority of the political and economic actors go on as usual. Governments, banks, international agencies, but also employers, employees and common citizens do not really give any indication that they wish to correct their attitudes; they seem to think and to act as if the problems will mainly look after themselves. If we look for an explanation, then we can look in the direction of the existence of a kind of common obedience to anonymous forces; or to a deep trust in the existing political and economic mechanisms; or to a combination of them. But in both cases we have to deal with a kind of abdication of at least a crucial part of human responsibility. I mean that part which, so to say, has been delegated to the blind powers of economic and technological progress as they reveal themselves in the working of a world-wide market-economy. But will those blind powers help us, save us? Will they act as real saviours or betray us at the moment that we need them most? And now the plan-economy has failed as mechanism, why would it be [ 28 ] impossible that the market-economy, as mechanism, fails as well in due time?

But these alarming questions should not lead us astray. For - and that will be my third thesis - *as soon as social, economical and political life are seen as open to sinfulness and even kinds of idolatry* - in which we, ourselves, are at least partially included - *then also the power of God's Redemption and Forgiveness can come in its liberating, healing and disclosing presence.*

You could ask me where do I possibly find the ground for such a statement. It may be true - so you could say - that the present environmental deterioration in East and West is due to a too great trust in the automatism of plan and market. And even that the growth of poverty inside - but even more outside - Europe has been caused by the unquestioned and self-legitimizing greed of an acquisitive Western Society. But is that sufficient for the conclusion that, firstly, our repentance may lead to God's redemption and that, secondly, His redemption will offer us new ways in social and economic life? Is that not a risky effort, to spiritualise the hardness of present social economic life? And moreover, does such a statement not presuppose that Europe is still willing and prepared to react as a kind of Christian civilization?

I see and acknowledge the validity of these remarks, but nevertheless I defend my thesis. I'll try in two ways: first, by explaining what freedom and justice could mean for economic and political life in the light of the Gospel, and secondly by referring to the Goodness of the Lord in upholding his Creation.

Freedom and justice are, in the words of Jacques Ellul (in his book on Subversive Christianity<sup>2</sup>), fruits of the Cross-Tree of Jesus Christ. These fruits are of such a value that every ideology has tried to steal them and to use them for its own purposes. In Ellul's view we therefore see in modern history repeated efforts to re-define freedom and justice, and to make them serviceable for what peoples and governments want in terms of their own power, their own welfare, their own designs. But, as Ellul also points out, Christians seem to have forgotten how powerful and valuable freedom and justice were and are in their original setting, and for the renewal of society; so extremely valuable, that the ideologies did their utmost to catch those fruits. Which means that there is a far deeper meaning and power in 'freedom' than just 'the freedom of the market', and in 'justice' than the 'social justice' which the plan pretended to bring. For those interpretations are instrumentalized interpretations, to serve the dominant ideology.

*Freedom* in the Gospel is not primarily an indication of the possibility to do whatever you like to do. Freedom is a way-to-go, a calling: Stand in the freedom to which God has called you! And the opposite of biblical freedom is not primarily a limitation of your choices, but slavery. It is living under the domination of sin, caught in the prison of the powers of the flesh, like selfishness and a lack of care. Similarly, *justice* is a way-to-walk-on; and its destination is to fill the earth. Its root word in the Old testament is 'sedaqah', which stands for the restoration of the poor and the weak, the [ 29 ] widows and the orphans, in the midst of the human community. It is the state (the king), who is directly addressed to take care of them, and to resist openly the mighty and the wicked who think that they are allowed to rule the earth. With his own mighty arm the king has to set free the weak and the oppressed by confronting the doers of injustice.

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Editor's 2008 footnote: This is a reference to the book by Jacques Ellul **The Subversion of Christianity** (Translated from the French by G W Bromiley) Eerdmans, Grand Rapids 1986

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Now if we look at Europe, East and West, in its present predicament, that is exactly where the suffering people and where the overused and exploited parts of nature are waiting. They wait, so to say, on the Return of the King. The deepest desire of the people of the West is not to have an always rising standard of living, and a continuous outburst of the volcano of industrial goods. Nor is it the deepest desire of the people of the East to have all the possible freedoms to possess, to acquire, to become rich. They long for another freedom, which starts from deep respect for the dignity of every human being; and for a justice which stops the cruel games of exploiters in all deferent forms. And most of them do know, even if they seem to be pagan, intuitively, that it is not to serve other gods that Jesus bought us freedom; regardless if those gods appear to be the compelling mechanisms of market or plan, or the enforcing powers of progress and technology. And they are aware deeply and inwardly that the earth is a created earth - which means that in its whole structure and functioning it still holds the promise of food for all and of a blessing for all living creatures. In this way it is the Goodness of the Lord which receives a *Status Confessionis*. In this way we begin to confess that it is not because He is not good that we are in trouble now; it is because of our own lack of willingness to follow His paths as a way of freedom and justice.

But saying this means that in principle another way becomes visible. That leads me to my fourth and final thesis. It says that *the social, economic and political renewal of Europe stands or falls with our willingness to re-orient our social and economic life to other principles than a maximum rise in our standard of living, and to re-structure social-economic life to become a platform for the fulfilment of still vacant responsibilities.*

This last thesis can be explained at best by the use of two metaphors: the metaphors of a tunnel, and that of a tree. Our present society looks very much like a tunnel. In a busy tunnel all vehicles have to move at the highest possible speed to obtain the best continuous flow of traffic. Not every care is welcome; there is an exclusion of slow traffic at the entrance to the tunnel. The resulting noise and risk of collisions are seen as unavoidable. Similarly in our society - and in this respect the market-economy and plan-economy are not so very different - the basic orientation is a flow orientation. Not the

preservation of stocks, but the maximum flows of production and consumption comprise the concrete goal. Therefore the highest possible productivity has to be reached even if that implies the exclusion of many, like the unemployed. Side-effects are passed to others - like environmental harm, and the burdens which are shifted to the poorer countries of the world. But a society does not function necessarily like a tunnel. It can also function like a tree., A living tree is not oriented to infinite growth in trying to reach the sky. It grows to maturity when it has reached enough [ 30 ] height. Its purpose is not growth-as-such, but to bear fruit. Therefore too, a tree will not over-use the soil on which it stands, and it can include all cells in a living participation. Similarly it can be said that a society can choose to give priority to the needs of the poor, to the preservation of nature and to the meaningful employment of all, if and only if it is willing to abstain from the *maximum* rise of its standard of living. That desire to reach the utmost level of production and consumption has to go, to make room for these other purposes. For only then will there be enough for all. It is as Ghandi once said: on this earth there is enough for everyone's need, but not everyone's greed.

But a *re-orientation* of the economy in those terms has to be complemented by a corresponding *re-structuring* of society. Otherwise the way of justice - which means: the offering of a shield for the weak and the poor - and the way of freedom - which means: set free from the tyranny of a continuous adaptation to blind forces and mechanisms - will too soon be blocked again. That re-structuring does not mean that markets are no longer welcome, or that they have to function quite differently. But it does mean that they lose their significance as a final yardstick or an ultimate criterion. That can only be arranged and maintained if a number of concrete responsibilities, which until now have just been forgotten or delegated to the market as a kind of super-mechanism for the solution of all our problems, are brought back to human agents. They should be attached to concrete institutions and authorities in society, which should be held accountable for what they do. For it is too cheap to speak about the protection of the interests of the poor, if it is no one's responsibility to fight for them or to be accountable for them; or to refer to justice for the unemployed if neither employers, firms nor the state have any public duty to restore them in meaningful work.

Let me try to give two short examples as an illustration of what I mean. At Maastricht the nations of Western Europe agreed upon the formation of a political and monetary union. That union has still as its main goal, according to article 2 of the Treaty of Rome, to contribute to the peace and well-being of its member states by the creation of a common market which has to lead to a sustainable growth and a rising standard of living. At the same time during that meeting no agreement was reached about a common social charter, or about a sharp common policy to protect the environment. Neither was any priority given to the struggle against poverty in the world as a whole. In such a situation we have to conclude, as churches, that clear responsibilities were left vacant which should have been taken up. Here we find a clear failure to structure the paths of freedom and justice in the midst of a modern, rich and self-centred society.

A second example: In the present world order one of the deepest forms of injustice is related to the privilege of the rich countries to create their own international liquidities like dollars, francs, marks, pounds and guilders. These currencies are accepted everywhere in the world in exchange for goods. But if you are less rich, or even poor, you have to borrow the money of the rich countries and their banks as soon as you run [31 ] into problems. Therefore there is a direct link between the origin of the debts' crisis in the world and this inequality and injustice in the world's monetary system. The poor have to borrow the money, which the rich can make for themselves and lend to others. Here justice means that the lesser rich and poor countries should also have the right of direct access to the sources of money-creation in the world. But that means a restructuring of the world's monetary system in which the key-currencies of the rich countries are at least partially replaced by other kinds of money (e.g. the so-called special drawing rights which can be issued by the International Monetary Fund and distributed in equal or proportional shares over all its member-countries). But why are proposals like this constantly rejected by the rich nations? Because they know that that will diminish their mighty privileges and, in consequences, their increase in production and consumption flows.

These two illustrations make also very clear, that important barriers have to be knocked down on the way to justice, freedom and good stewardship. A lot of resistance

may be expected. But the way is there. And in the coming years it may prove itself as the only *real* way for Europe; when the tunnel society will find out that the walls of the tunnel are approaching each other, and begin to block the traffic.

I remind you of the two great institutions of the economic system which we find in the books of Moses, namely the Sabbatical year and the year of Jubilee. The Sabbatical year regulates the freedom of slaves and liberation from enduring debts. The year of Jubilee restores justice in society to its roots. For all families are restored in their rights of access to their original lands, and they receive from their previous creditors the equipment needed to cultivate it. All that starts on the day of Atonement, the day of the great Reconciliation between God and his people. For it is just an expression of what Reconciliation and Redemption may mean for social and economic life.

It is therefore not be accident, that the churches of the *ecumene* in the South, in Latin America and Africa, have chosen the theme of the Year of Jubilee to make clear how badly they need more than just a cancellation of their debts - that is Sabbath year - but as also longing for a fundamental reconstruction of the world economy as a whole. And it may be our task here and now, to join them in that battle from the bottom of our heart, including the consequences which they may have for our own economies in the North. For only in their peace can we find our own peace, in the unity of God's one good creation.