

96. The Churches' Witness in Today's World

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What is our international task today? How is the ecumenical community to witness in today's world? We live in a world facing various simultaneous global threats: ongoing economic injustice, continuous ecological destruction and the increase of violence. These threats are related to one another, and reinforce and aggravate one another in many ways. We all know, for instance, how both poverty and material enrichment entail environmental destruction. They often lead to outbreaks of violence; and violence can in turn lead to the destruction of nature and easily cause flows of migrants and thus hunger and poverty. These three major global threats seem to place humanity on an avenue from which there is no escape; they lead to the risk of a downward spiral which could justly be called *the dynamics of death*. For death is the inevitable outcome of violence as well as of misery and ongoing environmental destruction.

The interrelationship of these three global problems in fact poses a challenge also to all churches. For churches are expected to stand for the preservation of life. How are Christian churches to respond to the triple threat? As we celebrate today the 50th anniversary of a Reformed centre, let us turn our attention to the so-called "call of Debrecen" as a point of departure for our reflection. In 1997 the General Council of the World Alliance of Reformed Churches called upon its member-churches to engage in *a committed process of progressive recognition, education and confession regarding both economic injustice and ecological destruction*. Two of the world-wide threats which we have mentioned were thus combined in one invitation to confess God as the God of life versus all powers of death.

There are two questions arising from this call which I should like to pursue in my short address. First, does Christian faith respond to threats about the future in particular ways? Is there a specifically Christian discourse in viewing today's world-wide problems and their inter-connections? Second, in what way can the Debrecen call serve as a model? Can we detect something of this specific language of faith in the launching and the follow up of the call?

First I want to tell you something in general about that striking reformed tradition of articulated and time related confessions. Then we will look into some of the insights which came out of the Debrecen process. On that base we will return to the question of the possible coherence between the big global problems of our time, and I hope to end with drawing some conclusions for our international task.

Confession and confessing in the Reformed tradition

I. Let us first briefly address the theme of confessing and confessions in the Reformed tradition. Time-and-situation-related confessions are one of its characteristics, and the call of Debrecen must be understood against the background of this tradition. In the course of their history, Reformed churches have often responded to political or social threats by issuing a confession of faith. What were the factors and reasons inducing or tempting them - both could be the case - to articulate their faith through an explicit confession? The answer can be short. They felt obliged to respond in this way when the future of their society, or of the world as a whole, was at stake. Where such situations arose, they simply could not stay silent.

Let me, for instance, quote from the Scottish confession of 1560, which is related to the life and work of John Knox. In a time of brutal violence and oppression it declared clearly, "to obey orders of princes, rulers and superiors as long as they are not contrary to the commands of God asking us to save the life of the innocent, to repress tyranny, to defend the oppressed, to live in soberness and temperance. Acts to the contrary are sins, by which God's anger is kindled." Whenever serious crises arose in society, Reformed churches or individual Christians have always sought to interpret the deviation as some kind of disobedience or resistance against the living God and his sovereign will. Just think of the *Barmen Theses*, the hallmark of the Confessing Church in Germany at the time of rising Nazism in the 1930s, or of the *Belhar confession* in South Africa through which one of the Reformed churches condemned Apartheid as a heresy.

Today, in the non-industrialised world of the South, millions of people live in misery and even die because their problems are not taken into account by the international community. Confronted with this fact the General Council of the World Alliance of Reformed Churches in Debrecen sought to revive this tradition of confessing, it was especially the member churches of the countries in the South which alerted the worldwide community of Reformed churches to this question. Does the neoliberal type of globalisation, so they asked, not force all churches to take a clear stance on the basis of their allegiance to Jesus Christ? In the eyes of many their argumentation cuts ice. For, so they said, no human power, be it a state or the market, should ever be allowed to become the ultimate ruler of our lives. In one of the preparatory papers for the General Council, formulated in Kitwe in 1995 we read: "It is evident that this global market-economy has been sacralized and elevated to an imperial throne, and now claims for itself a freedom that belongs to God alone". And then the text refers to two types of sacrifices required by this imperial power: the ongoing sacrifice of human lives and the ongoing sacrifice of nature. The African participants in the Kitwe consultation thus saw the issues of economic injustice and ecological destruction as interconnected in their roots.

Sacrifice and Idolatry

II. But what is the relevance of this debate for a better understanding of the connection between the worldwide threats obscuring our future? In my view it is highly relevant. The notion of sacrifice needs to catch our attention. This is because we often witness today that economic injustice as well as environmental destruction and the use of violence are often rationalised by the consideration that sacrifices are required for the good of society and therefore unavoidable.

The debates since then following the 1997 call of Debrecen seem to confirm the relevance of the notion. Several consultations were arranged in various parts of the world in order to reach more clarity on the issues involved. In 1999 representatives of Southern countries, especially of Asia, met in Bangkok. They decided to address a letter to the churches in the North on behalf of the churches in the South. The notion of illegitimate sacrifices returns in this text. It is even suggested that they are the expression of an idolatry existing in today's world as a whole and more particularly in Western society. The letter speaks of a choice between God and Mammon. At a recent meeting in Buenos Aires (2003), which brought together people from all Southern continents and in which I had the privilege of participating, the same consideration was repeated. The notions of sacrifice and idolatry were in the centre of the common reflections. The final document ends with the following statement of faith: "We worship God, not Mammon. For Mammon demands limitless sacrifice for its own existence".

In my view these considerations on the part of churches in the South must be taken seriously. The fact that representatives of the South unanimously speak of the presence of idolatry in Western society is a message that cannot be ignored. Very often, not always, such statements include also the churches of the West. Though it may sound strange to us, they are in their eyes under the spell of idolatry. The accusation is so serious that we have no right to reject it *a priori*. All the more as we need the mirror of the South to gain a better understanding of the connection between today's global threats.

Their voice is the entry point and can sharpen our awareness of what is at stake. Let us also not forget that a number of ecumenical pioneers such as Dietrich Bonhöffer or Karl Barth came to the conclusion that modern society can succumb to idolatry and referred to specific deviations as contrary to God's will. The notion of idolatry seems to offer the possibility of an in-depth analysis of the present situation.

Let me try to formulate it in my own way. As soon as some political or economic goals or targets are considered by the powers in society as compelling absolutes, a discourse of legitimation follows. Specifically, the means required to realize these goals will be legitimated. In this process the means no longer remain simple means but will sooner or later be elevated and sacralised. They become part of the noble cause to be pursued by society and are turned into collective idols.

Let me be more explicit. It is often said that Western society has reached the end of all ideologies. But is that really true? In fact, goals like the guarantee of safety, the quest for material prosperity and the lust for power are not only wide-spread but also often considered by many persons, states and corporations to be absolutes providing meaning to life. This then implies that the means required to realize those goals must be, at least partially, legitimated in advance. Examples can easily be given. In principle, science and technology are instruments, and so are the army, money and last but not least the mechanism of the market. These means are today legitimated in advance because they alone seem to have potential to reach the goals set by modern society. To make legitimation coherent, values need to be developed and accommodated. But history teaches us that these instruments of legitimation will sooner or later turn into dominating powers. The means begin to rule. They squeeze human life and nature into their own straight-jacket - e.g. the straight-jacket of an enforced market-oriented material progress. Or they dictate the aggressive measures which are said to be necessary for ensuring our safety or protecting the vital interests of the dominating power. Developments of this kind are normally not perceived as forms of dominion by the people living in the industrialised countries of the West. They are, on the contrary, inclined to accept such consequences believing that no life, no safety or happiness is possible outside those means. But people in other parts of the world may think quite differently. For their societies are not, in the first place, enjoying the blessings that go with power and dominion, but instead are confronted with a demand to bring *sacrifices*.

Idolatry of Western Society

III. But we need to push our analysis still a little further. What does 'idolatry' concretely mean? What are the traces we can find, especially in the midst of Western society?

Phenomenologists of religion tell us that idolatry has at least three general features. We find them also referred to in Scriptures. *First*, idolatry is always accompanied by some degree of narrow-mindedness. In the perceptions of the followers, the real world is reduced to what is relevant for the interaction with the idol. All forms of idolatry lead to a kind of hypnotic illusion which colours the

outlook on the real world. *Second*, where idolatry is present, that means are not only transformed into ends but are looked upon as having their own inner life. They are treated by their advocates as if they were gifted with their own will or endowed with an infallible steering capacity that ensure that they can indeed be chosen and followed as trustworthy guides, even if they are to be feared. Idols indeed always create fear because of their demand for sacrifices. Calling for sacrifices is, indeed, their *third* characteristic.

If now we turn, somewhat audaciously, to the usual approach chosen by Western politicians and intellectuals to global threats, these three features indeed seem to fit to some extent. Very often, we find a striking narrow-mindedness in dealing, for instance, with the mechanism of the so-called free market; instead of appreciating it as a useful instrument it is transformed into a guiding compass which has to be followed under all circumstances. Even stronger is the attachment of many politicians and scientists to the illusion of the necessity of an ongoing economic, technological and scientific progress and economic expansion, as if that could save humanity from all present and future miseries. And parallel to these beliefs we often find a deep trust in modern military means which, however frightening they may be, are nevertheless considered to be the best guides to a world of guaranteed safety.

As we begin to look in this way upon the fundamental convictions of the Western world, their negative consequences for our time in history also become apparent. Their traces can be found, for instance, in the growing domination of global financial markets over all real economies; global markets are treated as if they had a superior steering capacity. They can also become manifest in the way in which western governments, banks and financial institutions use the magic formula of strict adaptation to the global market forces as a panacea for all countries in the South. Or we can see these convictions prevailing in the Western approach to the question of how to preserve the natural heritage of mankind, the ecosystem. The focus and major concern of Western policies is not the care for what exists as a gift of nature. It is far more the trust in what can be dynamically invented, produced and used for the further advance of technological and economic efforts.

At the same time the rapidly emerging paradoxes within Western society itself deserve our attention. New forms of poverty are developing in almost all rich countries of the West. It is a type of poverty which is clearly related to exclusion. In a society increasingly obsessed by the values of dynamism and efficiency and devoted to competition, the number of drop-outs is bound to grow. And why do our societies tolerate that consumer-habits are more and more moulded by commercial and industrial interests? Because the illusion continues to reign that only an expanding consumption in the rich countries can guarantee a sufficient economic growth in the world as a whole. Western consumers should therefore be urged, or if necessary forced to support the goal of a constantly rising standard of living. Commitment - or should I rather say enslavement? - to an illusionary cause is called for. Though it is clear to reasoned thinking that such a permanent expansion of consumption must end in the full destruction of nature and the exhaustion of its resources, and will in turn lead to new military adventures such as in Iraq, this madness is broadly accepted or even defended, often in words and terms of a new secular religion with its new definitions of evil, mission, and faith in the future.

The negative consequences are not limited to the life of human beings. We must not ignore that the entire life of God's creation is at stake. Think only of the animal species. Today, more species became extinct per hour than thirty years ago per day. The world climate shows signs of increasing instability - obviously because we give

preference to the stability of our own material progress. Indeed, the time has come for the churches to unmask at least three broadly supported illusions. The first is the illusion that continuous economic expansion is still possible on this finite and vulnerable planet. The second is the illusion that safety can ever be reached or guaranteed by the use of more violence. And the third is the illusion that happiness can and will reach us through increasing abundance of material goods. It is the power of this set of three deadly illusions, which in my view constitutes the root-connection between the three major global threats of today, i.e. between ongoing global injustice, ecological destruction and more and more systematic violence. This power of illusion, or hypnosis, is the fruit of modern idolatry, which drives our present world over the rim. These illusions are often defended by many leading politicians and scientists, but are also - and that is even more painful - are somehow upheld in the hearts and minds of many deeply pious western Christians. Jesus once said that faith is capable of moving mountains. Well, here you have such a mountain.

Our International Task

What does this analysis imply for “our international task today”? What steps need to be taken? Or has history already gone beyond the point of counter-measures? Is the situation hopeless?

This is certainly not the case in the eyes of the churches in the South. Their message is clear and simple. If it is true that idolatry is at work and has created a world of illusion, there is need to affirm with a new commitment that the living God is higher than all idols. In their view the Christian faith can even today lead out of the deepest global threats.

Let us pursue this line for a moment. Three *possible elements of our international task* almost immediately come to the fore.

First to be mentioned is the spiritual task of churches to break through illusions wherever they have a hold in public life and even among Christians themselves. This implies that the place of the church in these bewildered times should not be primarily on the side of idealism. It should be on the side of realism. We have to urge politicians and all other people to come to their senses, and rise to the present reality. For, God works in reality. Together with all really concerned non-governmental movements and organisations, churches should again and again refer to the concrete and disturbing facts of our time. For concrete facts can be used to demonstrate how often damage, misery and other problems arise as the shadow of careless expansionist dreams and illusions, often also defended by international organisations like the International Monetary Fund and the World Trade Organisation. The inspiring words of the ecumenical pioneer J. H. Oldham can perhaps help us here; he wrote already in 1937: “Only as the Christian Gospel is brought into a close relationship to the realities and actual problems of the world today, can we expect mankind to recognize in it a living word of judgment and redemption.”

But there is also a second task. We saw already that whenever self-chosen goals become absolutes, a process of adaptation takes place in society. Norms and values are re-defined. Notions like freedom, justice, sustainability and even economy are given a new content, just to make them more suitable for the legitimation and sanctification of the existing powers. In his book ‘The Subversion of Christianity’, Jacques Ellul explains that these redefined norms and values are in fact always ‘stolen’. They are deprived from their deepest meaning which they have as fruits of the cross-tree of Jesus Christ. This in his view implies, and I share this view, that in idolatrous times the church should always be prepared to go back to the original

meaning of those words. For they would not have been stolen, if there had not been an intrinsic healing power in them. Just to give some examples:

Justice stands originally for the breaking of all chains of slavery, poverty and exclusion. Its meaning is therefore quite different from the idea of a somewhat improved distribution of economic results on the base of a maximum economic growth which first has to be realized.

Similarly *freedom* in its biblical roots does not primarily stand for striving for autonomy, but for struggling against all forms of personal and collective enslavement.

In the Scriptures *happiness* is always related to enjoying the richness of sufficiency. *Growth* never stands for infinite expansion, but for blossoming on the base of contentment. The notion of *sustainability*, taken in its true meaning, refers to the need to test each form of human dynamism and activity whenever it constitutes a threat to nature and humanity. Its meaning has deviated if it is used in the form of an adjective *sustainable* and attached to an already existing economic dynamic *development*. God is ultimately the source of all true sustainability.

Words can indeed indicate the road to follow. They can serve as keys to doors which otherwise would stay closed.

The third and last task is related to hope. It is based on the conviction that the existence of a spiral of death must not be considered to be the last word. If it is true that we are confronted with a spiral of death, and I think it is, there must be, by definition, also a spiral of life. In the beginning of my contribution I referred to the fact that today's pressing global threats can be said to aggravate each other. But if problems are re-enforcing each other, then also their solutions should be sought in a similar awareness! Openings must therefore be explored. Real attempts to diminish the structural debt of the countries of the South is for instance one of the best contributions to diminish violence. Less poverty and less violence together imply in principle also a real contribution to a better ecological care. Step by step a way-out of the present predicament can become visible, as a spiral of life. Especially if the steps are allowed to follow each other on the road. I think here of Bonhoeffer's comment on Ps 119:96 "I have seen an end to everything, but Your ways are always widening."

One concluding remark is still needed.

In referring to these last possibilities Christians and churches of the West must be aware that real ways of Exodus presuppose a deeper level of giving and sharing than we are used too. It is for instance a phantom to expect that the present materialistic style of living and of using resources in the North can indefinitely go on to the same extent. This would sooner or later mean going beyond the carrying capacity of this vulnerable created world. Or in other words: Justice, sustainability, *oikonomia*, solidarity, are not cheap words but ways to walk with. And therefore they presuppose always some kind of openness toward real change in practical behaviour. "The rich should live more simply, so that the poor can simply live", said Charles Birch in the Assembly of Nairobi (1975). Churches should go further than explaining the need for that. They should also be willing to express this message in forms of a joyful covenanting. For while sacrifices belong to the cult of idols, sharing with open hands belong to the delight of following the Way.