



RE-ROOTING EUROPE

by EVERT-JAN OUWENEEL



Jewish Ghetto Memorial, Warsaw

EUROPE OVER THE LAST DECADES HAS CLEARLY DRIFTED AWAY FROM ROBERT SCHUMAN'S VISION OF 'A COMMUNITY OF PEOPLES DEEPLY ROOTED IN CHRISTIAN VALUES'. HOW TO RESPOND TO THIS AS CHRISTIANS? SHOULD WE GIVE UP ON SCHUMAN'S VISION? CAN WE DECHRISTIANIZE OUR MOST RESPECTED VALUES – EQUALITY, SOLIDARITY, FREEDOM AND PEACE – WITHOUT ANY LOSS OF STRENGTH AND SIGNIFICANCE?

Europe, I believe, has certainly paid a price for disconnecting these values from their Christian roots. Dignity and solidarity have become hollow notions, freedom and peace are suffering from 'imperial overstretch'. But more than considering this a tragedy, I would like to take it as an opportunity. The Christian faith can prove again its vital contribution to European society through the values of equality, solidarity, freedom and peace. No-one wants to return to the old days of cultural Christianity in Europe. But there is no reason for us to be timid about the Christian roots of Europe's most respected values.

Equality as divine grace

Hebrew belief that only one God is worthy of adoration was profoundly original. In Biblical times, rulers in the Middle-East were adored like gods. But the Hebrews remembered their kings in all their weakness and kept their hope in the one true God. Centuries later, Jesus spoke of God making His sun rise on the evil and the good (Mt. 5:45). All are equally dependent on God's grace! The early Christians, therefore, refused to worship the Roman emperor as a god. Centuries later still, the idea of human equality advanced the rise of democratic thinking in modern Europe. However, philosophers disconnected human dignity from

relation to God and connected it to knowing truth and acting rightly. Now, again centuries later, we're in trouble. With a violent history of oppression and ideological bankruptcy, the human race has displayed an inability to make right choices. Dignity has become a hollow notion. Here lies a tremendous opportunity. Post-modern disappointment can prepare for the Christian idea that human dignity is not built on human strength but on

human weakness. All are equally dependent and can equally benefit from God's loving grace!

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Solidarity as family duty

From Constantine to mediaeval Germany, the Christian faith was considered a source of unity. Empires were united under emperor and pope. Faith united people as brothers and sisters. Church membership was not so much a matter of individual free choice

but primarily a matter of loyalty and solidarity to one's people. We may not like this, but for centuries it had a strong advantage: since church membership was a national affair, so also was solidarity. Already in the 8th century, Charlemagne obliged his subjects to pay church tithes so that the church as a national institute could take care of the neediest in society. From the 16th century, also Protestant churches—like the Lutheran Landeskirchen, the Church of England and the Dutch Re-



formed Church—became national churches. Charity became chiefly a concern of national churches.

At the time of the French Revolution, people turned the notion of ‘brotherhood’ into a political notion, uniting participants of a social contract in a free pact. Solidarity became disconnected from the old family duty and connected to free will. After World War II the state primarily considered itself responsible for its citizens’ welfare. Several decades later, the welfare state turned out to be too expensive. Civil society was then given a more prominent role. And now we are in trouble. Today our notion of solidarity also has become hollow. On the basis of ‘free will’, we started celebrating the ‘brotherhood’ of giving way to boundless individualism. Here lies another opportunity for us. Solidarity can again be firmly based upon the Christian belief that all humans share the same origin as brothers and sisters in a God-given family. And within that world wide family, some have come to know the One in whom they live as ‘Abba! Father!’ (Gal. 4:6). And one day,

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the whole of creation will benefit from the solidarity expressed by these ‘children of God’ (Rom. 8:19)!

Freedom as community affair

The Christian faith also nurtured Europe’s appreciation for liberty. Luther declared that all should follow his or her own conscience. What he defended as Glaubensfreiheit would slowly—very slowly—turn into one of the basic values of Euro-

pean society. But Luther never disconnected freedom of faith from a community of faith. He knew very well: we need a community of faith to know what faith to embrace and to persevere in our faith. In the 18th and 19th centuries, the emphasis on personal conviction advanced the discovery of individual authenticity, of ‘expressing yourself in your own way’. Authenticity became more and more associated with one’s unique identity. ‘Being yourself’ became ‘being original’. ‘Freedom’ became connected to originality and originality became a competitor to traditional church life. Many quit church and started following their own spiritual path through life. And

now, we are again in trouble. The freedom of ‘doing it your way’ leads easily to a lonely and disorientating journey. New generations were raised without any compass or community. Social isolation and spiritual disorientation were the result; along with greed, the exhaustion of the environment, polarisation in society, and a sense of purposelessness. Here lies a third opportunity for the Christian faith. We cannot invent our own beliefs. We need a community of faith to know what faith to embrace and to persevere in our faith. Today’s ‘imperial overstretch’ of free choice can prepare for the ‘Body language’ of Christianity. For in the end, faith and the authentic diversity of ‘doing it your way’ will only flourish in a Body where the arms, legs, knees and hands support and complement each other.

Peace as fullness of life

In the Bible, the word ‘shalom’ represents peace in its perfection, including wholeness, health, welfare, safety, soundness, tranquility, prosperity, rest and harmony. In Christian belief, Shalom is not the fruit of mere human effort. Shalom is related to God’s grace. (Num. 6:24-26: ‘The Lord be gracious to you... The Lord give you shalom.’) In the tough life of the Middle Ages, the church was a holy place of refuge, a place to experience God’s shalom in the midst of death, illnesses, hunger and poverty. As daily life improved through the ages, people felt more in control of their own lives. Earthly progress even became a moral imperative. ‘Shalom’ became connected to human capacity and gradually disconnected from being an expression of God’s grace. Yet as Europe progressed in health and wealth, it also became the most violent continent on earth. The arrival of gunpowder literally blew up the feudal system and created anarchy. Europe was stuck in bloodshed, not only on the continent but in every corner of the earth.

As Europe conquered the world, it claimed God was on its side. But God wept for the oppressed. He did not intervene when Europe destroyed itself in the first half of the 20th century. Only after total—moral, political, economical and spiritual—bankruptcy, was there an attempt to rebuild Europe as a community of peoples living in equality, solidarity, freedom and peace. This resulted in an amazing fact: the bloodiest continent over the last 500 years became one of the most peaceful continents over the last 60 years. Yet today Europe is again confronted with living up to its own professed values. Europe is facing new global challenges: poverty, pollution, migrations, pandemics, climate change, global terrorism, international criminality, nuclear weapons, an energy crisis, economic crisis and food crisis. Like our freedom, our value of shalom is suffering from ‘imperial overstretch’.

Once more we see an opportunity for the Christian faith to prove its vital contribution. What Europe needs is a vision of a community of peoples centred on shalom, where individuals, families, communities and nations live in harmonious relationships, dependent on God’s grace; enjoying equality and solidarity based on being children of the one Creator-God, and enjoying the freedom of individual diversity in spiritual unity. So, there is no reason to be timid about Schuman’s vision and the Christian roots of Europe’s most respected values. And there is every reason to continue witnessing to the Good News that, one day, the whole world will experience the true meaning of equality, solidarity, freedom and peace.

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