

Christians and Europe

(13) What can Theology say?

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WHEN, in 1930, the young Dietrich Bonhoeffer published his doctoral thesis, it sank without trace. Scarcely no one bought it, read it, or reviewed it and his family had to pay the costs of publication. The book, *Sanctorum Communio*, subtitled 'a Dogmatic enquiry into the Sociology of the Church', sought to relate his own version of Barthian theology to the very secular discipline of sociology. On reading it a cousin wrote to Bonhoeffer offering an explanation for the unfortunate start to his writing career. 'There will not be many who really understand it; the Barthians won't because of the sociology, and the sociologists won't because of the Barth.' Since his cousin offered this perceptive advice some theologians, to be sure, have made a good fist of exploring the relationship between theology and sociology. Other kinds of 'secular discourse' have been less blessed by theology's interest. As theologians, like many other academics, write more and more about less and less, the larger picture and the wider issues are increasingly forgotten. Many theologians seem reluctant or unable to face up to pressing social and political issues. Take Europe: with a few respectable exceptions, theologians have failed to engage either with the development of the European Union or with the dramatic changes since 1989 in central and eastern Europe. Perhaps they are right not to; perhaps theology is literally talk about God, and anything not explicitly about the Divine is not theology's concern. But who believes that? In reality, the theologians are not 'reading' Europe because of the politics. Meanwhile, theology has become so specialised that even well disposed politicians are likely to find it impenetrable and unhelpful.

For these reasons, the series 'Christians and Europe' has been an adventurous theological enterprise; a brave attempt to get theologians stuck in to the context in which they live. The purpose of this final article is to ask what the series has achieved.

The Articles

When the Editor of the *Epworth Review* launched the 'Christians and Europe' series, it was not his intention simply to intrude into a theological journal articles that could have been better published in a political journal. While 'we are not, of course, disinterested in the political debates as to what power should be held at what level of political organisation' in Europe, he wrote, 'our main interest is in seeing what the Christian vision and faith can contribute to the emergent New Europe.' It is, he continued, something which is going 'to have vast effects upon our ordinary lives'. Yet, for Christians, no less than for other Europeans, writing intelligently about the European continent is not at all straightforward. Europeans remain 'woefully ignorant of each other'.

Since May 1995 the *Epworth Review* has printed twelve articles in the 'Christians in Europe' series. Taken together they cover nearly a hundred pages. The authors of the articles live in eight different countries on either side of the

former 'Iron Curtain'. Fewer than half the contributors are Methodist. Three focus explicitly and almost exclusively on the European Union; five focus explicitly and almost exclusively on countries or regions in central and eastern Europe. Most contributors are ordained, and most male. The number twelve falls rather short of the requirements of a thorough opinion poll of European Christians: nevertheless the breadth of opinions solicited by the *Epworth Review* makes the 'Christians in Europe' series significant by most standards.

The first three articles deal with the Europe meant by most Britons when they say 'Europe', the European Union. This is the Europe which the political analyst Timothy Garton Ash has called EEurope. The raw and sometimes startling statistics of the European Union are outlined by Catherine Paulson-Elli.² EEurope's economy is dominated by the service sector. EEurope's population is ageing. Keith Jenkins,³ writing shortly before an important Inter-Governmental Conference, sought to recapture the vision, a vision partly inspired by the Christian tradition, that sparked the post-war development of European political institutions. Both the key principles of democracy and subsidiarity, he shows, have roots in Christianity. And, Jenkins believes, the Churches, with others, still have a contribution to make in developing the vision which is the soul of the European project. Unfortunately, suggests John Nurser,⁴ it is a contribution the Churches appear unprepared to make, and the thousands of Christians whose work connects them intimately with Europe are being denied the theological and spiritual support they deserve.

Roger Stubbings,⁵ in an impassioned view of Europe from its eastern edge, enters into some of the pain experienced by Christians whose foundations have been shaken by the collapse of Communism. Resurrection, he reminds us, is as painful as dying. The extent of change in central and eastern Europe is further explored by Károly Tóth.⁶ Tóth explains that Central-Eastern Europe must, under no circumstances, be regarded as a monolithic unit. Europe is not now, nor ever was, divided into two neat parts: East and West. Europe is (as Norman Davies also shows in his excellent *Europe: A History*)⁷ a crazy-paving of cultural and religious boundaries which defies neat assumptions. Tóth, Laurens Hogebrink⁸ and Hermann Barth⁹ each offer impressive programmatic essays summarising what the challenges facing Europe are, and suggesting why and how Christians can respond.

Jakub Trojan,¹⁰ one of Europe's leading Reformed theologians, also lists issues which must be addressed, but he is explicit about how and why these challenges are theological. His concern is for a theology that is 'relevant, open, dialogical, responsive' to the changes he has witnessed. Ion Bria¹¹ writes from an Orthodox perspective, a Church tradition which in recent years has felt itself increasingly marginalised by shallow and prejudiced interpretations of it by western Churches and theologians. The first woman to be a Methodist Minister in Bulgaria, a predominantly Orthodox country, Margarita Todorova¹² laments the detrimental influence of Marxist-Leninist styles of leadership on leadership within the Church. In another local example, but from Ireland at Europe's westernmost edge, Norman Taggart¹³ relates an evangelical response to militant nationalism. Finally, Manfred Marquardt¹⁴ suggests that in many parts of Europe, Christians feel that the traditional confessional divides between Protestant denominations, or between Protestants and Catholics, are losing their significance. He details one of the several ecumenical agreements between Protestant Churches in Europe, the Leuenberg Agreement, by which member

Churches, including the Methodist Churches of Europe, enjoy mutual recognition of Ministries, and table and pulpit fellowship. How curious is it that an English Anglican Priest and a British Methodist Minister both have their Ordination recognised by a German Lutheran, but are still estranged in their own country?

The Issues

Not unnaturally, given the diversity of perspectives from which the articles have been written, there are tensions between the contributions. The strongest of these lies between the view point from within the European Union and the view-point from central and eastern Europe. Within the EU, the progress made towards a unique economic and political entity has bound its fifteen member states together far beyond vague notions of a common European inheritance; those who have joined 'Euroland' will become closer still. To the rest of Europe the EU can seem self-satisfied, self-interested and unable to learn from the experience of 'poorer' countries beyond its southern and eastern borders. Like Roger Stubbings, I sympathise with the frustration of those who think of themselves as 'European' but who are not yet, nor have any immediate prospect of being, citizens of the European Union. The centre of Europe is not Brussels, or even Berlin: it is Warsaw, Minsk or Kiev. If this is true geographically it is also (*pace* the Conference of European Churches) the case ecumenically. The Churches of western Europe have yet to learn to think beyond Lambeth, Rome and Geneva to take in Moscow and Istanbul/Constantinople. Nevertheless, within these articles there is a striking consensus about which are the key issues facing Christians in Europe, and even some agreement about how to deal with them. Amongst these, three issues stand out.

a. Christians and politics

Unless one believes in theocracy, as Calvin once did in Geneva, it is clear that 'political institutions can hardly be based solely on the precepts of one religious tradition.'⁵ Even if this were desirable, Europe is now too plural and too secular to make this practical. Significantly, none of the contributors sought a return to the *corpus Christianum* or expressed nostalgia for Christendom or the Holy Roman Empire. In each of the contributions dealing with church/state relations, the language of dialogue was characteristic.

Within the general context of politics, the faith of many contributors in democracy is strong. The fragility and novelty of democracy in much of Europe does not diminish the hopes placed in it. Keith Jenkins believes in the Protestant foundations of democracy. Indeed, he argues, 'it is difficult, starting from a Protestant position, to conceive of political institutions which are not based on democracy.'¹⁶ But this is surely overstated. Protestants until very recently indeed, particularly in Germany, have shown themselves able to be simultaneously committed to democracy in and for the Church, but not in and for the State. Even that watchword of Church Freedom, the Barmen Declaration of 1934, permits the State to choose its own form insisting only that the State is not the Church nor the Church an organ of the State. 'Fear God and honour the Emperor' (1 Peter 2:17) reads one of the Barmen Declaration's biblical headings, which is what the majority of its signatories did, though that 'Emperor' was Adolf Hitler. Jakub Trojan is more circumspect about the wonders of democracy. He does suggest that 'theology in our region should

hasten to assist in the creation of truly democratic structures in both the churches and society' by contributing to the spiritual and moral foundations of democracy.¹⁷ But Trojan also makes one further and profoundly theological point. Above our lives (and presumably above democracy) there is a sovereign truth in God:

In the face of this post-modernist mood, theology must persist in the conviction that, despite all relativities, truth counts. The moral and spiritual ideas we strive for under the pressure of truth are the supporting pillars of the life of society.¹⁸

It is not the least inconsistent for Christians to support democracy and democratic institutions while at the same time insisting that democracy is not the answer to all society's problems. Similarly, Christians can insist on tolerance within civil society, but maintain the absolute claims of the truth of the gospel. The nuances of Trojan's approach, from a theological perspective, thus have advantages over the less restrained enthusiasm for pluralism expressed by Hermann Barth.¹⁹

In the emerging democracies of central and eastern Europe, then, the Churches are seeking to sustain democracy. Meanwhile, the Churches situated within the EU face a peculiar difficulty. This is the famous 'democratic deficit' which troubles even the more enthusiastic advocates of the EU.²⁰ The European Union, supposedly the champion of democracy, makes a poor guardian for it. As Anthony Giddens has written satirically, if the EU applied for membership of itself it would be rejected on the grounds that it is insufficiently democratic or accountable.

b. Nationalism

A second recurrent theme within the series is nationalism. The traditional association between Church and nation in most European nations makes this a particularly sensitive area. National conflict is one of Tóth's three 'delicate' issues facing the Church. He understands why nationalism has erupted in countries where legitimate national sentiment has been long suppressed, but adds that 'Christians should never get tired of emphasising that Christian theology makes no qualitative distinction among nations.'²¹ Hogebrink makes this a moral point: 'nationalism is perverted when it becomes a kind of faith.'²² Hermann Barth is keen to emphasise that regional feelings within a larger multi-national Union must be given space, but that the two are not mutually exclusive.²³ This insight is perhaps more fully developed by Trojan, who argues that:

theology, as it attentively follows the transformation of society, must itself reflect upon the question of nation and nationality with a certain head start so that, with the support of the ecumenical community, it might help its fellow citizens to find the right orientation.²⁴

Clearly, it is artificial to compress the choices into a simplistic either/or decision between nationalism and internationalism. In both eastern and western Christian traditions in Europe, options exist in support of a spiritually oriented compassion for one's country which is open to the needs of strangers and to other nations.²⁵

c. Ecumenism

Thirdly, the contributors identify ecumenism as an area of great concern. How can the Churches be expected to put Europe in order when their own house is in such disarray? For British Christians with little knowledge of ecumenical relations at the wider European level, it is difficult to understand just how serious is the crisis facing European ecumenism. Manfred Marquardt's view that western Christians are finding traditional confessional differences increasingly meaningless may be true in Germany and in some west European countries, but it is not true in most of Europe. Internationally, ecumenical relations are now as tense as they have been for decades, and for at least two reasons. Hermann Barth draws attention to the first: proselytisation. This is one of the most sensitive areas of ecumenical difficulty: 'Rights of possession to hereditary confessional areas should not', Barth insists, 'exist any more. Religious freedom permits different Creeds and Religions to address people with their message,' though he also urges ecumenical sensitivity. Hogebrink adds that if nationalism can become a faith, then, just as surely, faith can be perverted into a kind of 'nationalism.'²⁶ From the Orthodox perspective Ion Bria argues that Protestant and Catholic missionary activity in traditionally Orthodox countries is based on a false impression that a 'religious vacuum' exists within them.²⁷ Little wonder, when western missionaries think in terms of returning religion to Godless lands that the historic Churches in them should take umbrage.

Hogebrink suggests a second reason why some believe ecumenism is facing a health crisis. 'Even today', he warns, 'the international ecumenical movement has difficulties in responding adequately to the new situation in Europe since the collapse of most communist regimes.'²⁸ After the Canberra Assembly of the World Council of Churches (WCC) in 1991, a Methodist delegate reported how extraordinary he found it that the changes ripping through Europe were simply not discussed. These changes, as Hogebrink, Tóth and Bria each show, have had a massive impact on ecumenical relationships. At the most recent WCC Assembly, in Harare in December 1998, the results of these tensions were made particularly apparent in the decision by Orthodox Churches to abstain from participation in worship and from voting on most issues. Two Orthodox Churches, Georgia and Bulgaria, resigned from the WCC and from participation in other ecumenical bodies. The reasons are complex. There is the perception that western churches are proselytising. There is progressive dismay at the WCC's alleged 'liberal' views on social, political and ethical matters as well as on issues connected with sexuality. Some of the reasons have to do with the form that the WCC has taken: democracy as the form of decision making may be OK for the United Nations, but is it suitable for a fellowship of Churches? Decision by majority voting seems profoundly un-theological to Churches that have proceeded for two millennia by means of consensus and conciliarity. Churches which operate daily as hierarchies are not likely to find democratic structures easy. Hogebrink adds bluntly, 'the dominant ecumenical attitude seems to be that, after 1989, ecumenical life "can return to normal"'. In other words: we welcome the fact that you are again free fully to participate in *our* movement.²⁹ In the run-up to Harare, the WCC certainly adopted a listening posture towards these criticisms.³⁰ Yet, judging by some initial reports coming from Assembly delegates, the WCC's willingness to be transformed at a fundamental level is more apparent than real. No one underestimates the length

and difficulty of such a process of transformation, but the most acute contributors to the 'Christians and Europe' series are certain of its necessity.

Conclusions

On Europe, few conclusions can be conclusive. So much of what exists is transitory or provisional. So much of what is happening is uncertain, experimental, dependent on unmanageable and unpredictable factors. Who will succeed Boris Yeltsin as Russian President? Can peace in Bosnia survive? Can the European Union really enlarge successfully when the economies of southern, central and eastern Europe are so far behind its membership criteria? Even the launch of the Euro, one of the most historic events of the last fifty years and a huge achievement, is shot through with uncertainty, unpopular with voters, perhaps too inflexible a mechanism to meet its objectives. Indeed, what is the future of the Church in Europe? Even if Christians believed themselves to be the final arbiters of social and political affairs in Europe, as thankfully few do, how could their conclusions about Europe be other than tentative and provisional? If, then 'Christians and Europe' has left a number of frustratingly loose ends, it is unavoidable. Yet it may also be desirable. It is totalitarians who believe that all loose ends must be tied. The Gospel, as one contributor concluded, 'delivers from the delusions of the ability to renew oneself.'³¹

All the questions raised by this series, including those analysed above, are, in terms coined by the promising young theologian cited at the beginning of this article, *penultimate* questions. In this penultimate sense, the series contributors agree that with all its flaws the wider European project, with the development of a liberal democracy and the market economy, is commensurate with Christian values. As a 1991 Methodist Report put it:

Christian values to a large extent 'are shared with the liberal culture. This is to be expected – that culture has largely been shaped by Christian devotion, desire and imagination.'³²

'What can Christian vision and faith contribute to emergent Europe?' asked the Editor when launching the series. Hopefully Keith Jenkins is right, and the Churches will go on in the twenty-first century with the contribution they made in the past to the development of a 'liberal' milieu in Europe. The Churches may recover the real meaning of 'ecumenism', a vision of the wholeness of the world in Christ which sets love of one's country in its proper place. This wholeness may then be expressed in inter-Church fellowship. But current experience offers cause for both hope and despair. If the Church can take credit for the best forms of liberal democracy, they must take their share of blame for the worst forms of nationalism, and even for the worst forms of totalitarianism with whose regimes the Churches colluded. And the Churches, declining numerically in Europe as well as arguably, in significance, must work effectively with, not against, one another if they are to have that impact on politics and society. Of course theology should have something to say to Europe if, that is, theology is understood to be an exposition of the Word of God to the world, and not, as English dictionaries would have us believe, the study of religion. Many of the insights within this valuable series offer encouraging signs that theologians are capable of intelligent engagement with Europe. Yes, theology has something to say to Europe. Whether it will say it is even less certain than the future of the Euro.

Notes

1. Hans-Christoph von Hasse, letter of 13.10.1930
2. Catherine Paulson-Ellis 'Data Sheet on the European Union', *Epworth Review* vol. 22, number 2, May 1995, pp. 84-9
3. Keith Jenkins, 'The European Union's Intergovernmental Conference', *Epworth Review* vol. 22, number 3, September 1995, pp. 21-30.
4. John Nurser, 'Can British Christians Learn to Care about Europe?', *Epworth Review*, vol. 23, number 1, January 1996, pp. 65-72
5. Roger Stubbings, 'Signs of the Times in Eastern Europe', *Epworth Review*, vol. 23, number 2, May 1996, pp. 29-36
6. Károly Tóth, 'Central-Eastern Europe – six years after the changes', *Epworth Review* vol. 23, number 3, September 1996, pp. 34-9
7. Norman Davies, *Europe: A History*, Oxford University Press, 1996
8. Laurens Hogebrink 'Heart and Soul for Europe', *Epworth Review*, vol. 24, number 1, January 1997, pp. 66-74
9. Hermann Barth, 'A view from Germany', vol. 24, number 2, April 1997, pp. 72-80
10. Jakub S. Trojan, 'Theology in the Process of Transformation', *Epworth Review*, vol. 24, number 4, October 1997, pp. 60-75
11. Ion Bria, 'An Orthodox Reflection', *Epworth Review*, vol. 25, number 1, January 1998, pp. 62-9
12. Margarita Todorova, 'Bulgaria Today: local church leadership', *Epworth Review*, vol. 25, number 2, April 1998, pp. 66-72
13. Norman Taggart, 'Facing Hard Issues in a Divided Society', *Epworth Review*, volume 25, number 4, pp. 76-9
14. Manfred Marquardt, 'The Leuenberg Church Fellowship', *Epworth Review*, vol. 26, number 1, January 1999, pp. 80-7
15. Jenkins, Art. Cit. p. 23.
16. Jenkins, Art. Cit. p. 24
17. Trojan, Art. Cit. p. 72
18. **Ibid**
19. **Barth**, Art. Cit. pp. 76-7.
20. Jenkins, Art. Cit. p. 28
21. Tóth, Art. Cit. p. 37
22. Hogebrink, Art. Cit. p.71
23. Barth, Art. Cit. p. 77
24. Trojan, Art. Cit. p. 71
25. See for example, Stephen Plant, 'Nationhood and Roots: Dostoyevsky and Weil on National Culture and Europe'. *Religion, State and Society*, vol. 26, 3/4 Sept/Dec 1998, pp. 279-289
26. Barth Art. Cit. p. 79
27. Hogebrink, Art. Cit. p. 71.
28. Bria, Art. Cit. p. 62
29. Hogebrink, Art Cit. p. 71
30. **Ibid**
31. See, for example, Konrad Raiser's *To be the Church*, WCC Publications, 1997.
32. Barth, Art. Cit. p. 80
33. *Sects and Parties: Christian Values and Political Ideologies*, Methodist Church Division of Social Responsibility, 1991