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European Theology in World Perspective

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It is my privilege and honour to welcome you here in Europe, this old continent of many complex traditions, to a first joint conference between the Fellowship of European Evangelical Theologians (FEET) and the Theological Commission (TC) of the World Evangelical Alliance (WEA). We are dealing with the general theme: 'European Theology in World Perspective'. Let me make a few remarks introducing this issue of Europe in the context of a globalized world today.

1. What is Europe actually?

Europe is a crazy continent among the other continents of the world. If

we take a rough look at a world map, we can easily make out the continents of North and South America, Asia, Africa, and Australia. But, what is Europe? It is just an appendix of the Asia land mass. You cannot say that this is a continent of its own. But, what is meant by Europe? Europe is not a geographical unit which can be separated from other continents in the same way as, for instance, the Americas. But, Europe is an historic place with a very specific tradition of ideas and culture.

2. Europe is built on three hills

But, what does it mean to speak of Europe as a cultural entity? The first president of the Federal Republic of Germany after World War II, Theodor Heuss, once mentioned that Europe was built on three hills. The first is the Acropolis in Athens, which stands for the strong Greek and Hellenistic emphasis on science and philosophy. The Acropolis is the symbol for human reflection about God, the world, and, last but not

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least, humankind itself. Ancient Greek tradition is the source of political vision, of scientific experience, and philosophical reflection. The second hill which makes up Europe's origins is the Capitol in Rome. The Roman Empire stood for the idea of the courage in the ancient known world around the Mediterranean, symbolizing political power, judicial structures, and technological advancement. The power question is one of the important origins of Europe's self-understanding and self-esteem. The Capitol, in the so-called 'Eternal Rome', represents the strong will of the European nations to rule and to exercise power in the world horizon. The third hill upon which Europe is built is Calvary, which means the Jewish-Christian tradition, the understanding of the one God who offered his Son to die for our sins.

3. Christ's special foreknowledge and interest concerning Europe

According to my reading of the Scriptures, it is quite significant that the Roman citizen and Jewish scholar Saul of Tarsus became, by God's grace, the most important missionary in church history, an apostle empowered by the Holy Spirit. It was this very Saul, or Paul, who got a special call from Christ himself to leave Asia Minor and turn to Europe. When we read this passage in the New Testament Scriptures, Acts 16, this was a traumatic turn in the course of all of history because, about six hundred years after Christ, the Islamic conquerors overran Asia

Minor, Palestine, Syria, and North Africa, which were already Christianized areas with churches of strong and lengthy traditions. If Paul had concentrated his missionary work, continuing in Asia Minor as was his objective, then churches probably would not have come into existence in Europe. Therefore, Christ called the missionaries from Asia to Europe to begin a very specific history of the church that was of predominant importance up to the 16th century. So, I think that in this Macedonian call to Paul, 'Come over and help us!', was the call of Christ to start a Christian church and tradition beyond the old and primary regions of early apostolic Christianity.

4. European theology represents the first contextualization of the Gospel

When we reflect on this illustration of the three hills on which Europe was erected, the Graeco-Roman traditions on the one hand, and the Jewish-Christian tradition on the other hand, this guides us in our understanding of European church history and the history of theology to two different dimensions. First and foremost, the step from the Semitic background to the Hellenistic world was the first and most important contextualization of the gospel throughout history. The spirit of Greek philosophy deeply shaped theological reflection and made possible this form of theology as we know it. Using the instruments of philosophical terms and notions, the first and elementary Christian dog-

mas were created as the reflected understanding of biblical teaching. Christology and Trinitarian theology were formed by biblical testimony, on the one hand, and by philosophical reflection, on the other hand. These very crucial dogmas are, in substance, the bond of unity between all Christian church traditions. Of course, even Evangelicals relate and refer to these dogmas when they claim for their theology that they just want to obey and continue with the historical Christian faith. What Christian theology and dogma is all about can be seen in this elementary process of theological thinking and in the decisions of the first ecumenical Christian councils. I think the question of whether or not this reflection of the Church Fathers and apologetes was adequate biblical thinking is crucial.¹

5. European theology shaped Christian theologizing generally and formed its identity

Now let us turn to the second dimension. When we refer to the very characteristics of European theology, we have to realize that the foundation of early dogma led to a strong identity of Christianity throughout the centuries. What we call the Christian Occident (Western Christianity) as a development out of the first ecumenical councils, for one millennium from about the 5th to the 16th cen-

tury, is a continuity that makes Europe what is still today—not just a geographical area, but a cultural entity. After the Fall of the Western Roman Empire with the Latin language, there was no longer political unity. But in the fifth century the Frankish king Clodwig conquered the tribes of the Alemans and the Gauls on the western bank of the Rhine River, creating the political and historic centre of Europe. (Woelmersen, the site of our conference, is located in what was the nucleus of Europe's future at that time.) Three hundred years later, there was a one-time event in the history of Europe, when Charlemagne, the powerful Frankish king, after his coronation by the Pope in the year 800, created a European kingdom in modelled succession to the Roman Empire. However, after his death, there were only diadogues and powers that divided up this kingdom.

Therefore, throughout its history, the unity of Europe was not the result of a political power, but the strength of a Christian and moral framework that bound together the different European tribes, kings, dukes, and other leaders. They had a common language, a *lingua franca*, with a Latin tradition, and all scholars in Europe spoke Latin until at least the 18th century. One could transfer from one university to another, for instance, from Italy to France, England, or Germany. There was a good cultural exchange and a cultural coherence in terms of architecture, models of society, and, most important of all, the theological systems that bound the intellectual elite into a

¹ In another paper, 'A Patristic viewpoint on European Christianity in world perspective', Dr Thomas Oden will broaden our cultural view of the Early Church (see our next issue for this paper).

unity. Of course, we have to recognize that this European identity of Christendom was not identical to the Christian understanding of ecclesiology as we find it in the New Testament. It was a unity which was mainly shaped by the Old Testament idea of theocracy, represented by the Pope in Rome. But, on the other hand, this was an historical model of Christian self-consciousness throughout a period of more than one thousand years and, because of this, Europe was regarded as the Christian Occident (Christian West), or, as a Christian continent.

Furthermore, keeping these two dimensions or aspects together, the first contextualization of the gospel into the Greek and Roman Hellenistic world and this continuous identity of the Christian West that claimed to be a Christian world, is the challenge of European theology. How do we evaluate this first and early contextualization and the development of this fundamental Christian identity which arose in Europe? This describes the problem posed to us by European church history until the 16th century.

6. Western (Occidental) Christendom and European extensions since the 16th century

It probably makes sense to distinguish on the one hand the Christian West as a special and fundamental millennium in church history, and on the other hand, what we call Europe. The watershed is the 16th century when this Christian Occident expanded geographically with its

colonies to Latin America, Africa, and Asia. The explorers crossed the oceans and widened the experience of the Europeans into a world perspective. It was the intention of the European Latin Church, not only to conquer and colonize, but also to christianize all peoples, even unto the ends of the earth. Therefore, the difference between the Christian Occident at the end of the Medieval millennium and what has been called Europe even until today is the difference between the very clearly defined cultural unity of the European continent and the cultural expansion of this continent in world perspective. Moreover, throughout the world, even up to today in this global age, we find the deep traces of Europe on all continents, last, not least, in the so-called New World of North America which became, in a very special way, the second and different European model of European history. Thus, we can say that the geographical and cultural expansion of Europe was the first deep change in Europe in the 16th century.

7. The Reformation of the 16th century and secularism as a cultural shift outcome of its political consequences

The other dramatic change or shift was, of course, the Reformation of the 16th century. We as Christians and as Evangelicals strongly believe that the Reformation was an urgent necessity, rediscovering the original gospel of Jesus Christ through a fresh understanding of grace, justification, and the redeeming and atoning work of Christ and its meaning

for the individual. What the Christian church regained in a significant and unique revival movement that provoked and shook Europe as a whole was a gift of God. Yet, in this very event of the Reformation, we have already the origin of the modern secular world, not in terms of Reformation theology, but as the consequences of the political forces at work during this period.

As I mentioned before, it was the Christian West, the political and, most importantly, the cultural influence of the Roman Catholic Church, which was a stronghold of European unity, yet the basis of this unity was the Christian faith as the framework for all forms of European culture and society. However, with the Reformation of the 16th century, this unity was broken. Faith was no longer the bond of unity, but the reason for terrible religious wars. In the Thirty Years' War, nearly one-half of the German population died. It was the same in other European countries. After this war, people were asking themselves if this was the result of religious beliefs, if there was not the need for tolerance, and if there were not another basis and foundation other than religious belief. Emerging from this experience, in the 17th and mainly 18th centuries, the European intellectual elite became more and more sceptical of Christian theological traditions. It was a blend of secularism, rationalism (mainly in France) and empirical research (mainly in England). The result of this development was the conviction that the universal bond of all human beings is not any form of religious faith, but

pure reason as Immanuel Kant put it. If there is any rational approach which seems to be self-evident, also in religion, it is religion according to pure reason, which is no longer the specific biblical understanding of the revelation of the triune God. Therefore, the political results of the Reformation Age had in themselves the power to stimulate modern secularism. This is the tragedy of the European Reformation.

8. Westerners cherish democracy and the benefits of technology

In coming to the question of European secularization and secularism, we meet another deeply-rooted dilemma we have all inherited from European history and culture. Insofar as we are Westerners today, we all cherish on the one hand the fruits of modern secular self-understanding and its dynamics. We all embrace political democracy, which is rooted in the European Enlightenment with its understanding of human rights and the civil liberties of the freedom to assemble, the freedom of the press, religious freedom, and all the other aspects of freedom which we all highly welcome. The development of modern democracy is the outcome of the French and the American revolutions. Therefore, the European tradition continues on, straight ahead from the Capitol in Rome to the Capitol in Washington, DC as the world's superpower in our day. Furthermore, on the other hand, we all cherish modern science as the continuation of early Greek thinking and its results in modern

technology, industry, and all the personal and public benefits we reap from this development.

Therefore the two hills of the Acropolis and the Capitol on which Europe was built are still vivid and embraced, not only by Westerners, but are also highly-regarded and wholeheartedly desired by the peoples of the so-called Third World. This is the triumph of modern European predominance. I reiterate, this is not mainly a political power, but the stronghold of cultural and philosophical ideas. It is the outcome of modern revolution, and since 1989, we know for sure that this is the victory of the Hegelian understanding of historical revolution over the socialist, Marxist ideology. The French Revolution of the bourgeois in 1789, so warmly welcomed by Hegel, has triumphed over the Leninist Revolution of 1917.

9. What are the perspectives for Christianity in Europe?

So, we can say that the two hills of the Acropolis and the Capitol have been highly recognized. But, what about the third hill which was mingled for more than 1000 years with the pagan, Hellenistic and Roman tradition. Has the influence of Calvary been lost in Europe? Has it been overruled by modern secularism? Is there no longer a Christian message and perspective that Europe has to give to the world? The idea of human rights has its origin not in the Enlightenment alone, but it is rooted in the biblical teaching of the *imago dei*. There are no human rights without their foundation in Christian-shaped

metaphysics. Moreover, it is also one outcome of the biblical secularization of the created world by its Creator. The sun, moon, and stars are not gods, but only lamps in the sky to regulate daytime and night. Therefore, you cannot and will not have a Europe built on two hills only—without the Christian one. What will, for Heaven's sake, Europe be without its Christian heritage?²

10. Nominal Christianity and the challenge of re-evangelization

Let me just go one step further in attempting to analyse the current European situation under the conditions I described before. The outcome of European secularism is, to a great extent, nominal Christianity. We are experiencing in Europe today how the Christian churches have lost a lot of their early vital power in culture and society, and that there is only a small remainder of nominal Christianity. The good side of this insight is that it points out the urgent need for re-evangelizing the peoples of Europe. We have experienced Christianization, but we need evangelization. Today, in a free society, there are tremendous chances for evangelistic efforts—last but not least in Europe's mainline churches. But, as Protestants, we should be aware that the impetus for re-evangelizing

² Later in our conference, Dr Vinoth Ramachandra will discuss the question of modern secularism and I will try to outline this issue in my own presentation during this conference, 'The theological profile of the revival movement and its relation to the Enlightenment.' *Editor's note:* See elsewhere in this issue for Dr Ramachandra's paper.

Europe came from Pope John Paul II. There is strong moral and spiritual input from the Roman Catholic Church in western and central Europe. Moreover, there is the mighty impact and dominance of the national Orthodox churches in eastern Europe. Therefore, I have to raise the question whether or not the more liberal Protestant churches will be marginalized in the upcoming European Union, at least, in the long run.

11. Missions on six continents and mutual learning

Therefore, it is very necessary to speak of missions on six continents. In the 19th century when, from so-called Christian Europe and North America, Protestant Evangelical missionaries went mainly to Africa, Asia, and, later on, also to Latin America, we, by God's grace, experienced a strong movement of church growth on these continents. There has been a shift of Christianity from Europe and North America to the so-called Third World, a brand-new development, in terms of the long church history of now about 2000 years. This is the foundation for the very relevant partnership between the old churches and the so-called young churches, and there should be mutual teaching and learning. I think there is a great hope that the European churches will learn from the vitality of many growing, young churches around the world. On the other hand, the countries of Africa, Asia, and Latin America, while reaping the benefits of the idea of universities, intellectual and technological knowledge from Europe

and North America, are also impacted with secularism. The European churches are having now an intense encounter with modern thinking and with the pitfalls of secularism. To some extent, we have experienced and, as a result, reflected on the challenge of secularization and how to overcome it. Perhaps this can be one of the insights that we as Europeans can give to the global church.

12. Exchanges and relationships

So, let me conclude this brief introduction to our main theme: by stating that, confronted by the situation of globalization, we need the awareness of the universal church of Christ, and my prayer is that, during this conference, we will have a very fruitful interchange as evangelical theologians bearing high responsibilities for the evangelical movement worldwide. Let us take steps to do networking in order to share our experiences and spiritual vision to promote the kingdom of God in our time. My objective for this joint conference is twofold: first, *I expect an immediate exchange of theological reflection* and spiritual insights and, probably, as one result, a *stronger relationship* between the two bodies, the Theological Commission (TC) and the FEET, on a structurally-organized level. So, let us pray for this conference that God may guide us, bless us, and make our efforts together fruitful for his people, though we are weak, to build his kingdom by his grace.