

United Protestant Church in Belgium Working Group on Church in Society

Some comments on the CEC Open Letter on The Future of Europe

Introductory remarks

- The UPCB would like to express its appreciation for the initiative of the CEC to send an Open Letter to the member churches, and wholeheartedly agrees with the assessment that the future of Europe is a very timely and urgent issue which fully requires the attention of the churches. We were also happy to learn that the issue of Europe will figure prominently on the agenda of the CEC Assembly in 2018.
- In view of the importance and urgency of the matter, the UPCB would like to encourage the CEC to contact the CCEE and/or COMECE to see whether/how Christian witness concerning the issues at stake can be coordinated with our Roman Catholic sisters and brothers. More is needed, in our view, than an open letter to our member churches.
- We underline the importance of emphasising that the EU is/ought to be a 'community of values'. At the same time, the crises in which the EU finds itself these days shed doubt on the question whether these values are really shared by all of us, and shows that these values are losing their power to 'glue' us together in the Union. It is clear that the 'soul of Europe' is more than a combination of values, and should include building a common European identity. Therefore, we underline the importance of elaborating a 'common story', a discourse focussing on Europe as a project of reconciliation and of reconciled diversity.
- The question of common values also applies to the CEC. All churches functioning in the context of nation states and some of the member churches seem to be closer related to their nation state bodies than to the ecumenical family of churches. This may prevent us to speak out with a common voice on certain issues, and is a constant challenge to the way in which we perceive union and 'unity'. The issue of refugees and how we respond to that in the various EU member states is a case in point. For us it is clear that there is a need for churches in Europe to think again and to discuss with each other how we see and value the relationships between church and state. In other words, the future of Europe is not only a political issues, for us it is also an ecclesiological issue.

Chapter II Context:

- after « climate change, pollution, add migration
- Also add something to the effect that illegal trade in small arms crosses national borders
- *"A key question in this context is how the obvious need for international cooperation and joint policy making can be reconciled with the legitimate desire of many people to own and control policies that affect their daily lives.*

It is clear that within the churches and between Christians different opinions exist on detailed policy questions and on how to organise ourselves in Europe. Also on bigger issues such as to stay in or leave the European Union, Christians find themselves on different sides of the divide. Such differences are perfectly legitimate.

For the Conference of European Churches (CEC) the key question is how we can make sure that the fundamental values that should guide political processes on our continent— respect for human dignity, peace, justice, freedom, tolerance, participation, solidarity, and sustainability—can be maintained in times of change. CEC holds that no compromises can be made with regard to these basic values. Even if policy choices may differ, unity in Europe is rooted in these values."

Comments:

- The open letter recognizes “the necessity to reconcile international cooperation and joint policy making with the legitimate desire of many people to own and control policies that affect their daily lives”. What puzzles the reader of this text is the response given to the “how” question. The open letter response is here to recall the list of basic values to which the paper refers several times and for which the churches stand. Thus this sufficient? Those values do they not have to get flesh and bones in the daily reality of life; i.e. taking hold also of the political context especially as the letter recognizes in a “time of change”? How does the appliance of these values function when “*bigger issues such as to stay in or leave the European Union, Christians find themselves on different sides of the divide. Such differences are perfectly legitimate*” We are not denying that each individual may have his or her personal opinion but precisely on this item leaving or staying in the EU one should expect that the Board of CEC, who in the same open letter salute the courageous and imaginative initiative taken by some Christian politicians to have launched a political project allowing Europe to rise again from its ashes after two bloody world wars, would commit itself and take stand precisely in a time were forms of extremist nationalism are getting political momentum.
- Another point which may need some clarification. While the European Union is a political entity clearly defined, what is meant when the paper speaks of “Europe”? Is it the geographical concept- European as continent? If we speak about a political Europe is Russia part of Europe? Do one speak of the European Council which includes Turkey?
- In this part of the open letter the authors speaks of the present trend of a growing gap between rich and poor people in our society, we share with you our concern and will come back to this reality later in our comment. Ought we not to be careful to take over the so-called populist opposition between elite and people? The EKD Synod last week in Magdeburg warned their members not to give way to this sort of biased comment.
- Churches ought to remind people and if necessary governments that national sovereignty can be misused as a concept and may have its dark side as history has learned

Chapter III:

- Paul Henri Spaak was not a Christian.

Chapter IV: Achievements

- When speaking of the unification of most of Europe in peace and freedom since WW2 which Europe is meant?
- Listing the different existing Charters, Court and Convention existing in Europe, the Court of Justice of the European Union which encompasses the whole judiciary on which the EU rests and to whom each European citizen may apply should be added.¹
- With the “*political*” aim of original 6 Member States
- “*How imperfect the CAP may be...*” In what way is it imperfect? Ought a word to be said with regard to the original aim of the CAP i.e. to reach food self sufficiency for the people. If one want to justify the word imperfect one could add that today this mode of intensive agricultural production has reach its own limits regarding ecological constraints.
- Quote at the end of the sentence : “Regarding climate change and nature protection the EU plays a leadership role...”
Comment: It has been the case but COP 22 in Marrakech has shown that the EU is losing ground and is taken over by China.

¹ Sweden introduced in 2015 an action for failure to act to the Court of Justice of the EU which condemned the EU Commission for not respecting the rule of the Union by not responding timely (end of 2013) to the question related to the identification criteria of the endocrine disrupting chemicals .

Chapter V:

- Europe at a crossroads; the title of this chapter is almost identical to chapter VIII
Question : why in V Europe and in VIII EU?
- *"Jacques: Delors, even called upon churches and religions to actively contribute to creating 'the heart and soul of/for Europe'"*
This sentence can easily be misinterpreted suggesting that Delors' appeal was primarily addressed to the churches.
Addressing a delegation of the Protestant Church in Germany (February) 1992 after having said that Europe could not succeed on the basis of legal expertise and economic know-how alone he added: "If in the next ten years we haven't manage to give a soul to Europe, to give it spirituality and meaning the game will be up"² Laurens Hogebrink remarks explicitly that "Jacques Delors was concerned about European integration becoming too technocratic, lacking the sense of belonging and the solidarity required for a real community.. his appeal was aimed at a wider constituency than the churches".
The precise wording of Delors' appeal is : " The door is open for whoever can give it a heart and a soul".

Chapter VI: Multiple and interacting crises

Violence and terrorists attacks:

- "Regarding the conflict within the Ukraine... tension between the EU and Russia" The draft document "Future of Europe" added the sentence : " As well as within the EU". This sentence was cancelled in the "open letter".

Migration

- *"EU Member States are blaming each other for creating pull factors, as was the case for Italy with the Search and Rescue Operation Mare Nostrum, or Germany's Chancellor Angela Merkel for welcoming all refugees"*
Could one not add to this sentence after the words EU Member State, "*increasingly put under pressure by populist movements* are blaming" ? Enquiries show that a large part of the citizens in Europe is willing to accept refugees.
- In this part of the letter devoted to the item migration one should mention that the hostility shown by a part of our citizens with regard to those seeking refuge in Europe is nourished by a latent islamophobia.
- We are of the opinion that somewhere in the "open letter" the Search and Rescue Operation Mare Nostrum and the German Chancellor Angela Merkel should be recognized as true witnesses for those values for which the Churches stand.
- We wonder why in the "open letter the sentence "*the harsh deterrents adopted by some central and eastern (Visegrad countries* which was in the draft document (cf III.2 Migration) has disappeared in the ' open letter.
- Speaking of "Africa" instead of "North Africa" corresponds better to the African reality of emigration; we regret that in the " open letter" climate change has no longer be mentioned as one of the causes for migration.

Economic developments and Euro crisis

- The 'open letter" states that the economic recession started with the banking " collapse" in 2008; *de facto* the economic recession started in the EU in 1974, shortly after the first oil crisis in 1971 and the same year of the collapse of the Bretton-Wood system. One of the consequences was that capital went no longer towards productive investments but towards

² Laurens Hogebrink : "Europe's Heart and Soul. Jacques Delors' Appeal to the churches. p16 CEC globethics.net

hedge funds. This was the beginning of the so called decoupling of the real economy from the cash economy.

- The paragraph is primarily focussing on the monetary- Euro crisis; very little is said regarding the economic development model. Mention is briefly made of a semi depression and high unemployment. The question, however, may be raised whether the economic and social crisis Europe is facing today is of the same nature as those known in the past. Ought the question churches should raise to politicians not be: Is it sufficient to consider the monetary and financial crisis caused by the sub-primes (2008) as the main cause for the social upheaval we witness in Europe and elsewhere today? Can it alone explain that despite an increase in wealth at world level the gap between rich and poor is growing ?
- Many researchers in the field of economics are of the opinion that we are entering a "*new era of work*" which will have dramatic consequences for a large majority of people in Europe. What is meant here by " a new era of work"?
 1. that we are entering a world in which technological developments are increasingly impacting all fields of life (numerical revolution, smart robots, etc) and,
 2. that this revolution enables a concentration of immense power in the hands of a fewer number of people (take-over of Monsanto by Bayer). One of the consequences of this unholy alliance will be : a drastic increase in unskilled work.
 3. that at the national level political decision makers are more and more subjected to the dictates or pressures of those economic giants. This situation speaks for a stronger political union in Europe

No wonder that the item of a universal allocation /income is gaining momentum again. This topic may well become politically a hot issue in the years ahead. See " The rise of the robots . Technology and the threat of a jobless future" by Martin Ford.

Suggestions:

1. add a sentence calling the churches to pay due attention to those developments which will transform the patterns of our society in the coming years.
2. add a sentence in this paragraph asserting that any economic development model will have to be coherent with the constraints imposed by the biosphere (climate change, biodiversity etc.)

Democratic deficit

Usually while speaking of the democratic deficit with regard to the EU one refers to the lack of transparency in the decision making process. The "open letter" recognizes that the EU is aware of the problem mentioning that more power has been given to the European Parliament whose members are elected. But here democratic deficit points to what the open letter calls the growing gap between a " governing elite" and the people. Despite the fact that we have some hesitation to take over this simplistic and politically biased jargon, this growing gap is a phenomenon occurring in many democracies nowadays clearing the way for adventurous politicians succeeding in using the electoral power of people who feel and are marginalised. What happened in the USA some weeks ago ought to be a warning addressed to the Churches , especially as in some European countries similar developments can be observed. This does not imply that Churches should not take hold of the existence of a growing part of the society living on its margins. People feel that the political decision makers are taking refuge in short term decisions partly for reasons of electoral agendas, partly for lack of vision precisely in a time our society is challenged in the fields of economics, and ecology requiring mid-and long term decisions. There is an interdependent relationship between the powerlessness of the governments and the surge of extremists movements in many EU countries.

Suggestion:

Should we not here rather speak of "a democratic crisis"?

In an EU context, to speak of a "deficit" seems to us no longer appropriate in view of the fact that in some Member States political measures are taken which endanger the very fundamentals of our democratic regime.

Chapter VII: EU losing its appeal?

Chapter VIII: EU at crossroads.

Chapter IX: A community of values and a soul searching project.

Why is the text not more explicit here? Looking to the East-West relationships in the EU the Document " What Future for Europe " should not hide the fact that the concept of "community of values" is questioned today profiling itself in some East European countries. A CEC Document of 2009 signals the risk of this development: " *the integration process is not just a one way journey...; It should have been a two way process, recognizing and respecting different ways of life, different traditions and cultures..*"

We should not be surprised of those remarks. The integration process had to take place in the framework of the existing EU Treaties and for this reason necessarily of a very technical nature. Those who took the decisions to launch the process were confident that enlargement corresponded to the will of the people. The ambition of the EU regarding the access of the countries which were part of the Soviet Union was to allow the countries to enter in a democratic process and to create the conditions for more prosperity through transfer of resources, possibility to travel, work and study (Erasmus). Nevertheless the EU was not equipped to give flesh and bones to this process.

Here the churches can and should play a unique role.

Chapter X: The role of the Churches and of CEC in Europe

We are glad that the last sentence of Chapter X – "*At the same time... immense importance*" -has been added.

Europe should not lose sight of the fact that it is part of a world which is becoming increasingly connected. In this regard, the European Union has a unique responsibility of which Churches should be aware. Countries like China, India, Russia and Brazil shall require Europe to further a deeper structural and institutional cooperation. For the Churches which confess universality as a *nota ecclesiae*, this globalisation process represents a great challenge to which they will have to respond.

Chapter XI: Faith in action: Diaconia and Koinonia

Chapter XII: Europe: A common home

Chapter XIII: Our call

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