

The Political Challenges Confronting Churches Engaging with a Changing Europe

Address from WCC president for Europe, Anders Wejryd at the Conference of European Churches (CEC)-colloquium in Brussels, Belgium.

Reasonable people react slowly. Extremists are quick. It obviously takes time for the many that enjoy the fruits of open societies, free movement, judiciary systems honouring international law and human rights, religious and political freedom, to see what is at stake when nationalism, sentimentality and xenophobia mix with varying doses of fascism. That F-word is feared, partly because it has become empty as it too often has been used against anything which one despised, and partly because it worries us to admit that maybe this is really serious. I think it is, and I think churches can make some difference.

Right and left are not where they used to be. West European and Nordic churches which defended the present in olden days, fighting change because change threatened what the church had been co-builder of, are now sometimes identified as threats to what is established. The majority of church-goers used to vote to the right. In my country, and we are not unique, it is now the opposite. It is both society and church that have changed. Today's societies surely are not only products of what the church has taught – and when churches are not part of the establishment as much as before, they often rediscover the radicality of the prophets and of Jesus. Being careful with nature used to be a conservative position. Now that position is more often found among greens and even among social democrats. Churches had reasons to fear collectivism. Now many think that we have reasons to fear individualism. No party used to say that growth and economic success was the ultimate goal, they were usually seen as means to another end. Now even conservative parties, who used to be very sceptical of that, feel free to say it. We surely see a changing political landscape.

There are reasons for the rise and success of xenophobia and nationalism. Many of them are quite logical. It is neither my task to list and give examples (so many others do that), nor to despise voters. Unemployment and structural changes are ruining the lives of many. What used to be virtues, not least for men, are not even sought any more. “And what will happen with our lands when all these others come in, like they have done and do in some European countries?” is asked, mainly in countries where not many newcomers have come. And the traditional political parties are not at their best in all of Europe presently. Maybe there is a reason why the economy has become such a central issue for all parties, and made means an end? Maybe it is because the ideas worth striving for are not expressed, much less carried out?

When we as churches are to face the political challenges in a changing Europe, I think we are best advised if we try to fetch the water deep down in the well. Our traditions are, for example, not only expressed in traditional answers to ethical questions. The reasons for traditional answers were surely there when they were first given – but all answers are given at a given time, to real people living at that given time. We cannot stand on the side-lines repeating what already has been said. We have to wrestle together and find the main directions from which we can orient ourselves and others. And we are probably wise if we allow

different churches and different voices to talk tentatively – not always as if they or we had the final answers. Looking for main directions, I want to read two well known passages:

In the beginning when God created the heavens and the earth, the earth was a formless void and darkness covered the face of the deep, while a wind from God swept over the face of the waters. Then God said, “Let there be light”; and there was light. And God saw that the light was good; and God separated the light from the darkness. God called the light Day, and the darkness he called Night. And there was evening and there was morning, the first day. *Gen 1:1-5*

In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God. He was in the beginning with God. All things came into being through him, and without him not one thing came into being. What has come into being in him was life, and the life was the light of all people. The light shines in the darkness, and the darkness did not overcome it. *John 1:1-5*

The first text we associate with all things created. Earth, universe, all beings etc. The second one, more with the believers. But why? Are there reasons for that? They are both universal, and together they help us to keep the Trinity together in our minds – Wind, Spirit; Word, Son and the Father as the creator and upholder of it all.

Light is important in both texts. Light is good – and separated from darkness. And in the text from John: “All things came into being through him, and without him not one thing came into being. What has come into being in him was life, and the life was the light of all people.” *And the life was the light of all people!* We have a theology of life to share! And when we take part in the deliberations of our time, we should fetch water from this well of life. Life, which is the light. The right of life is central for us – and for many others. When there is life there are still options and responsibilities. And responsibilities make us human and mature. Why don't we lift that up more clearly?

We mainly seem to do it in discussions on abortion and euthanasia. And all of us who have taken part in such deliberations and dialogues know that very general, clear-cut answers are not sufficient. Let us also include in the issues of right to life issues of migration, development, unemployment, education, health care, social standards, climate change, justice and so on!

To me it is not natural why certain issues are widely accepted as ethical or political issues which religions are accepted as having a say about, and others are not. The accepted ones seem to pertain to family, roles of men and women and issues about the role and freedom of religion in society. But economic justice, criminal justice and punishment, health, rights of minorities, equality and so on are not seen as natural for the church to get involved into. Some may say that this is because theology is not to become a matter of political ideology, and the church should not steer a country. Of course, they are right. In a European context, we should indeed embrace the idea of the secular state; so far, theocracy has always led astray; but in that democratic, secular state churches and individual Christians should take part, deliberate and speak out, and not merely in tentative ways. The declarative way in which churches so often have spoken has seriously reduced our credibility and relevance.

Perhaps CEC has an important role here as broker, a broker between society and church but also a broker between churches. CEC was created in a position to expand, yet the risk with organisational expansion is always that CEC may become an office and not whole churches together. As the European discourse is being ever more widely shared, churches could be greatly helped by mutual acquaintance of each other's work on issues of today and tomorrow.

We might appreciate the safe-haven-model of Church. We could be left in peace, not being questioned on difficult points by those who do not understand. That is what I fear. It is often the world which keeps the church sane. I am afraid that the safe-haven-model is an egoistic model and a model which effectively marginalizes the church. The church must be, to borrow an old WCC-expression: A Church for Others. But: churches can only be churches for others if they are grounded in an ongoing, central, deep inner life. What would we otherwise have to add?

With the move to Brussels, I guess CEC is where it has to be and where CEC has the best chances of affecting European politics and realities. But Europe is more than the European Community. The term Europe was not widely used before the Enlightenment. Before that, it was more common to speak about Christendom. And then we are quickly all the way to Georgia, just to take one example. Still, Europe ends far further east than we normally think. The renaissance and what followed upon it did not affect those areas as it did western and central Europe. We often talk past each other when understandings and experiences are so different, but for the sake of peace and justice we have a calling to build and repair the Common European House. To us church people, Europe is more than the EU.

For CEC to remember this, in all its advocacy work, is, I think, an important task for CEC, and obviously more and more so as tensions in Europe are becoming more visible. Churches can be and are forces that push for justice and motivate societies to take steps to equality, dialogue and justice in order to strengthen social cohesion and avoid conflicts and outbreaks of violence. Our tragic historical experience is that churches normally have been of little help in European wars. Then they become parts of their nations and their nations' rhetoric. But as prevention before and alleviation during conflict – and also in reconciliation processes – churches and other faith groups are of utter importance.

With our concept of the Trinity, we know that God is not only with the believers of our sort but with all humankind and creation. We know that God influences and governs in other ways, too. The church is necessary for us and probably for God, but God is not limited to the church.

When the concept of Human Rights is challenged, we have an immense theological well to scoop from. Human Rights have often been unproblematic because we have been used to live with people of similar backgrounds. That is changing now and the foundation of Human Rights needs respect for Life as something given to humanity, that life is something greater than whatever things we ourselves can pick and choose among. Then religious convictions are important, maybe necessary helpers.

If I then, at the end, go back to the EU, I would like to note the large international development work to which the EU is committed. I think CEC has a responsibility in that also, reminding the European Community that the world is larger – and that the rest of the world can be partners, not only recipients whose priorities are decided by the donors. Speaking generally, like this, may always be questioned, but those who are in this field of work know that I am talking about important issues for the international ecumenical bodies.

So finally: Let us dare to use our wells, let us be more present in ongoing debates speaking tentatively, not *ex cathedra*, and let us remind ourselves that Europe is larger than the EU – and the world is even greater.

I often come back to the Golden Rule as a very useful tool, which opens us to cooperation with people of other faiths or no faith. Let us use it and stretch it!

We can bring in:

- Long term historical perspective, based in the Golden Rule, stretched out in time, history and future. We remember how devastating wars have been, for example.
- International perspectives, based in the Golden Rule, stretched out in geography.

We do this and are helped to do this because

- We are helped to uphold the Golden Rule through the knowledge that we can love only because of God, who through Christ loves us, offers salvation to mankind and continuously lets the sun shine over both good and evil, and over those who love and those who despise God.