

THE STRUGGLE FOR THE SOUL OF EUROPE.

Contribution to the Netherlands Meeting of the St. Georgs-Orden on April 7th 2022

1. Introduction.

As a non-professional, but devote historian I have always been triggered by the fascinating odyssey of the Habsburgs through the ages, in Central Europe, in the whole of Europe and through parts of the world. I admired Otto von Habsburg for his vision and efforts to foster a United Europe decades before others dared to endorse this concept. And my confrontation from the late eighties onwards with the new realities in Central Europe till in former Galicia today does awaken a sense of historical witness ranging from emotional happiness to deep sorrow and anxiety. How much dimensions of human struggle and suffering and of reconquered freedom can one hear each time in the crunching and beeping of the streetcars in the cities of Central Europe. And alas new immense devastations of human life and a generation's hope.

I am honoured that your reverend Orden has invited me to contribute to this discussion on the soul of Europe, probably the most important item we have to deal with in our days! Apart of course from the direct physical aggression today on the sovereignty of a country on our continent. Your Orden, which – in my opinion – has a more relevant function than ever and which has a long-time as well as contemporary history of brave and courageous behaviour. Thank you for this opportunity!

But there is another reference point over the past years which comes to my mind, now that I may join the most qualified speakers on the subject of the soul, or as some say "the finality", of the European experiment. And that is the conference in the Knight's Hall in the Hague in the fall of 2004 during the Netherlands Presidency of the EU, under Prime Minister Jan Peter Balkenende. Your Honorary Knight had developed the vision and the courage to devote his Presidency to the issue of values and society, so indispensable but so exceptional in political life and he had that issue concretised in the question about the soul of Europe. And it was Rob Riemen with his Nexus Institute who organised and inspired that Convention of Heads of State and political leaders from all over Europe in the said Knight's Hall and in a number of other places in Europe. For me it was an extremely important initiative, although to be frank, I had some mixed feelings. As Speaker on Foreign Relations of the Dutch Senate I was seated next to the then Prime Minister of Norway, Bondevik. Former pastor Bondevik was personally very much convinced of the need to discuss deeply the question what are the values that keep our societies together in an age in which religion in general and Christianity in particular are less and less commonplace for our populations. That was obviously the reason for still coming to The Hague as the leader of a non-member country. But listening to the key note of George Steiner he gazed at me in disbelief: was it really necessary at an occasion like this to attack the Pope and to underline the irrelevance of his message with a reference to the disobedience of even his Roman flock in matters of sexual ethics!

2. *The Böckenförde Paradox.*

But this irritation should not overshadow the importance of Steiners remarks and observations about the actual spiritual, better to say existential challenges and crisis of "the idea of Europe" and the moral foundations of our laws, our institutions, our policies. Is e.g. the ban on killings or theft as embodied in the law just only based on fear of reciprocity or is it based on more. This question is so clearly stated, as you all know, in the so-called Böckenförde Paradox, after the German philosopher of law and member of the German Constitutional Court.

What if our moral convictions fall short to produce a system of justice, is his central issue? The lawmaker, better the liberal secularised state lives by prerequisites which it cannot provide itself. There is in the end no substitute for a constituency which is enough nurtured and convinced in socio-ethical convictions about human dignity, about freedom, the need for solidarity, social responsibility and so on. In other words, the values which were dear to the Founding Fathers of Europe and which are the foundation of a real European Culture. But that is exactly the vulnerability of the European Project. Who guarantees us *not* a repetition of 1933 when all those values became of null and void. Who and what guarantees us, that we remain a continent of civilisation, when our underlying convictions have been eroded or have become rusty? When outside threats or internal temptations pressure us to set away certain protective measures, certain liberties, certain treaties? When above all, and that is the issue today, the sources, the fountains, which do feed and flourish these central values are drying up. Is there in other words a substitute, an alternative to Christianity in a secularised Europe for its role of a moral substratum to our society and politics? What is the soul of Europe and what or who keeps it alive and warm? It is this fundamental question which really bothered Steiner. And a number of other philosophers and observers of the spiritual developments in Europe. The cathedrals and abbeys, which according to many were the landmarks and the sometimes literally constitutive formations of Europe, do not dominate any longer the skylines and profiles of our cities and villages. At the turn of the 19th to the 20th century in the mind of some they were already replaced by the coffeehouses of Vienna and Prague, but these too ceased to be relevant quite soon after. And what next?

3. *What next?*

In his historical speech for the Bundestag in 2011 Pope Benedict XVI dealt at length with this question and the need for deep reflection. Of course the scholar in him, which he also is, was aware of the extent of the secularisation process in Europe, which is a.o. so detailed and pro country described in the Atlas of the European Values Study of our Tilburg University. It outlines in a unique way over a period of fifty years the far-reaching changes in the value awareness and moral convictions of our citizens and it underscores in this way the concerns of Steiner, Pope Benedict and so many others.

What next? No, a return to the days of a dominant Christianity in Europe is highly unlikely and – let us not forget – these periods were not a guarantee in itself for upholding the democratic values! And the question itself implies that also other sources than Christian religion can contribute to that necessary societal ethos.

But Pope Benedict and so many others.... President Pompidou demanded in despair: "what will hold the French society together without religion?" And he, who was not known for a strong attachment to his Church, is supported by a range of politicians and scholars of completely different background. The last one I expected to be obsessed with this challenge was Gregor Gysi, the former Prime Minister of the DDR and leader of Die Linke in Germany: "I do not believe in God, but I am very afraid of a godless society!" Said this once staunch communist and the son of the Minister who was put in place by Stalin to oppress religion....

Fear, despair or a call, a search, better a common itinerary to those conditions, provisions, which can foster the moral, the ethical awareness of the European peoples in favour of a common ethos of justice, democracy and the common good. Or in other words: how to preserve the concept of the dignity of the human person as the basis, and the common good of all of them the final goal.

Here I want to refer to the son from a small village between Tongerlo and Averbode, who was obsessed with this paramount question. Since this Louis Dupré became a Professor at Yale University he lectured about the limits and failures of the Enlightenment, about the false antagonism between rationalism and spirituality, and about the threat to the identity of Europe by radical secularism. Is it possible to revive the spiritual dimension of Europe in our days when the European Parliament declined any reference in the preamble of its Constitution to the Christian contribution, although it is so obvious in its history and in its post war efforts for peace and reconciliation.

Is it possible to refresh that indispensable moral substratum? Dupré, who contributed to the Nexus discussions as well, is convinced of the need for awareness building, a.o. through a much more central place for history in our formation. Our shared and divided history, with its successes and failures, and above all with its efforts to build a common sense of purpose. *A common sense of purpose*: that is again the question. Dupré refers to one philosopher in particular who can guide us on this itinerary: the Czech Jan Patočka, one of the fathers of the Charta 77 Movement. And here we come to the core of our debate "Let us not despair of Europe, let us not despair of ourselves.Seek the Truth...." was his central call. Or in other words: "Europe as Europe was born out of interest in dealing with the soul. It died when it allowed this interest to be covered with a cloak of forgetfulness" (Daniel Epstein). We all cannot contribute more to the search for the soul of Europe, than seeking the Truth; each of us from the heart of his or her own convictions and beliefs, according to Patočka.

And to facilitate that, we have to start to look critically at our educational system. This is the correct answer to the confusion and the cloak of our time to marginalize the central issues where we stand in time (history), in place and amongst the world cultures (geography) and in reflection (catechesis and philosophy)!

4. But there is more.

There is still another thinker and politician who has interfered in this debate. It was the social democrat Jacques Delors as the then President of the European Commission, who

incited the Churches to give a soul to the Europe of today. And he, standing in the best tradition of French philosophers and academics, like Jacques Maritain en Paul Ricœur, did open another perspective and mission for the Churches and their adherents: yes, religions can make a probably indispensable contribution to the moral awareness of the European citizens and let abide their laws to the basic principles of the human dignity and a flourishing society.

But is, in the framework of our discussion, this answer satisfactory enough, even this far-reaching answer? Is there not more than the law? Is the law always identifiable with justice and righteousness?

In a nightly discussion under Jan Peter's chairmanship on board of the clipper of Frits Goldschmeding, a very successful entrepreneur and philanthropist, a prominent Dutch banker confessed his struggle between the law and what he felt was not justified. Just before the financial crisis of 2008 he got a proposal from a client which could earn his bank about 300 million Euro with one certain transaction. Completely legal, but he sensed intuitively: this could not be good, just, appropriate. Still, he gave in and cooperated.... Situations which each of us have to cope with, albeit not in this scale I suppose! Law versus what is right. To overcome this classical dilemma, which comes up so explicitly e.g. in the debate about the environment and corporate social responsibility, a new moral awareness is needed, and a personal formation of our conscience about what is desirable nowadays. Sometimes this awareness leads to new laws and the recognition of new limits, but a codification of these moral convictions will never fully cover one's own responsibilities and ethical orientations.

I suppose Delors was very much concerned about the emptiness of the soul of Europe. A space that needs to be filled with warmth, consciousness and inspiration. Otherwise – so was his own experience – the indifference, the looking the other way, would lead to the same misjudgements and complicities he had observed by "bourgeois France" during the German occupation. A similar fate could now affect the whole of the European Union, now in 1990, when the communist threat had evaporated.

But why the Churches? Were they not complicit in a comparable way as citizens, politicians and business interest in wartime France and elsewhere by giving in to other priorities than upholding and defending human dignity and freedom?

I think you can find the answer in exact the understanding Delors had built up during his long experiences of the core message of Christianity: the conversation of the Lord with a wealthy young man. Tell me, what must I do more than abiding to the laws and doing justice. And being an honest person. "I do all of this already, what more is needed?" And the simple answer was not a denial of that record, but an addition: do give away to the poor everything that you possess and follow me. Follow me in what I tell you in the Sermon on the Mount....

That was too much for him and for most of us as well. But in the end the special appeal of Christianity is exactly that: do more than obeying the laws and doing justice. The

added value is that of a vocation to overcome self-interest, to show magnanimity, compassion and practise generous charity. The vocation for us as a person, as entrepreneur, as politician. Without pretention, because the daily life of most of us does not justify any kind of self-aggrandizement, but as something to aspire to. And that could be exactly the added value to which Delors obviously referred to: the warmth, the vision, the responsibility. Is there more than self-interest? That could be the discerning path to a Europe, that really has a soul!

5. *Strasbourg, the beacon.*

Your Orden is connected in a special way with Strasbourg, and its Cathedral.

It must have been in the beginning of the fifties of last century, that the Netherlands Catholic Broadcasting Company (KRO) together with similar organisations from a number of countries in Europe took the initiative for a remarkable combination of modern technique and spiritual deepening. On the eve of Pentecost millions of the faithful across the still devastated European countries became connected with the *life* broadcasting of the Veni Creator Spiritus, as the evening song from the, "your" cathedral In Strasbourg – unique for those days – and they became connected in a common multi-language prayer for peace, the restoration of Europe, and the reconciliation amongst themselves. As a teenager I listened, and I prayed in this new participative moment in aspiration for a better Europe, a better world. Millions felt, began to feel, began to grasp something of the soul of Europe and it certainly contributed to the way and the enthusiasm European politics were not and should not be only something of the production of coal and steel, the economy, the free trade, the finances.... In those years Europe's history has taken also another path than that for more than a millennium.

Christians may not have an exclusive claim on magnanimity, on charity, on self-sacrifice, certainly not, although this appeal is the discerning point or should be of their convictions. Wherever that appeal is honoured it can make the difference. For our personal life, but not only. It should also contribute to the work and character of our common efforts, our associations, cooperatives and enterprises, and to the choices and priorities of our politics. Is there a possibility of a difference, a discernment from the dominant handlings and policies of pragmatism, of short term results, of consumer satisfaction.

Now, again, peace is at stake, peace and security, social cohesion and inclusion. And together with that the care for the Creation and its consequences for policies of integral ecology and humanisation of the globalisation process. What we stand for is the transfer of the best of our own history to a next generation. In other words, long time vision and responsibility are needed.

Your Orden with its rich history and its grand intellectual and spiritual capabilities can add a special dimension to this discussion and dialogue about the soul of Europe.

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