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THE ROLE OF THE FIGHT AGAINST POVERTY IN THE MISSION OF CHURCHES IN SECULARISED EUROPE[2]

ABSTRACT

In Europe, churches are no longer privileged partners of the state but contribute to public life in a way similar to that of other institutions of civil society. This article investigates the way in which ecclesial bodies present themselves in their statements in relation to the fight against poverty. More specifically it analyses two major ecclesial documents from the first decade of the twenty-first century that seek to answer to the question as to what is the calling of the church in secularised Europe. Special attention is given to the role for the fight against poverty. The two selected texts represent two of the major Christian traditions in Europe: the Roman Catholic Church in Europe and the Communion of Protestant Churches in Europe (CPCE).

A SHIFT IN THE MISSION OF THE CHURCHES IN RELATION TO THE COMMON GOOD

In a recent monograph on *Church, state and civil society*, David Fergusson, Professor of Divinity at the University of Edinburgh, demands renewed attention for the rich tradition of Christian political theology (Fergusson 2004).[3] His central argument is that the past relationship between church and state as a configuration of two dominant institutions that exist in a close and exclusive relationship might be over, but that a more differentiated approach positioning the church in positive relation to other institutions within civil society offers a new perspective for an effective public significance of the church (Fergusson 2004:1).

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[2] A contribution to the consultation on *Religions and the Eradication of Poverty in the Context of Economic Globalisation* at the Faculty of Theology, Stellenbosch University, 19-20 May 2008. The consultation formed the second leg of a four year Research Project on *Religions in the Search of the Common Good in Pluralistic Societies* with research partners: the Beyers Naudé Center for Public Theology (Stellenbosch University, South Africa), Mkar University (Benue State, Nigeria) and the International Reformed Theological Institute (VU University, Amsterdam).

[3] This work is based on Fergusson's 2001 Brampton Lectures at Oxford.

A historical overview reveals different understandings of the Christian view of the state. Within the early church, both church and state were subordinated to a theological vision of divine rule in history and its eschatological outcome. When persecutions and hostility diminished, a shift from the concept of "alien citizenship" to "subordinated citizenship" became apparent. In the second half of the Middle Ages, the emergent concept *bonum commune* revealed the awareness of the rule of God that surpasses ecclesial forms – our neighbours were no longer merely within the church. Furthermore, the idea of the common good was not limited to a narrow political understanding of the church's relation to the state, as became apparent in the Reformed version of the concept of "the common good". Every relationship within the household, the church, and the parish can be sanctified by obedience (individual and collective) to the Word of God. However, the gradual breakdown of the organic unity of church and society at the end of the Middle Ages and during the era of the Reformation, forced churches to reflect anew on their relation to the state and their political theology (Fergusson 2004:45-46).

Fergusson acknowledges the contribution of liberalism to arrangements that are ineluctable in our current situation, such as freedom of worship, association, political action, and more recently, a commitment to the equality of the sexes. However, he refrains from attributing the merits of this to a philosophy of political liberalism that attaches a primary significance to the autonomous individual. Not so much philosophies of the Enlightenment, but distinctive theological arguments for religious tolerance form the basis for the commitment to some of the features of liberal society (Fergusson 2004:69-71). Fergusson refers to the themes of peaceful coexistence, the irrationality of state coercion, the freedom of the act of faith, and the prospect of civil conversation with others unlike ourselves, from whom we have a good deal to learn. In his opinion, these motives better guarantee tolerance within pluralist societies than the approach to tolerance of political liberalism, which tends to result in indifference and scepticism (Fergusson 2004:92-3). Fergusson then analyses two important texts of twentieth-century Christianity, the Barmen Declaration and *Gaudium et Spes*, to prove that the church can make a public contribution to the common good of society on the basis of its own insights and standards (Fergusson 2004:139).

The second half of the twentieth century has witnessed the demise of Christendom and the concept of the national church; however, according to Fergusson, the calling "to seek the welfare of the city" has remained. At the same time, terrible twentieth-century experiences of authoritarian states have revealed the need for the recognition of institutions that mediate between domestic households and the machinery of the state, such as trade unions, political parties, community groups, and religious and cultural organisations. Thus, Fergusson feels, it is as groups within civil society that churches, no longer assuming a triumphalistic "the-church-knows-best-attitude", will continue to contribute to the common good in partnership with other institutions in society, recognising divine wisdom in other places.

THE MISSION OF THE EUROPEAN CHURCHES IN THE FIGHT AGAINST POVERTY

Although Fergusson offers one many issues for further discussion, for this contribution I shall limit myself to the question whether his central thesis – the continuation of the public role of the church no longer in privileged partnership with the state but as a contributing institution of civil society – is reflected in the way ecclesial bodies present themselves in their statements in relation to the fight against poverty. In order to do so, I shall analyse two major ecclesial documents of the first decade of the twenty-first century that seek to answer to the question of what is the calling of the church in secularised Europe. I will give special attention to the place of the fight against poverty. The two selected texts represent two of the major Christian traditions in Europe: the Roman Catholic Church in Europe and the Communion of Protestant Churches in Europe (CPCE).

This article has to be read together with a contribution I made at the first conference of the *Institute for Public Theology and Development Studies* on the Theme of *Theological Education for Nation Building* in Mkar – Gboko, Benue State, Nigeria (28 February to 2 March 2006).[4] That conference had been instrumental in preparation for the project on the role of religions in the search for the common good in pluralistic societies. In that article, I analysed the Accra Confession (2004) of the World Alliance of Reformed Churches as an example of public theology by Reformed churches worldwide, contributing to the debate on the devastating effects of globalisation on the economic and ecological position of many people. I focused on the ecclesiological implications of this statement and I compared it to the way the current Pope, Benedict XVI, spoke out on Christian charity in his first encyclical *Deus Caritas Est* (2005). The emphasis was on the way churches understood themselves in their public statements on economic justice and issues of poverty, in relation to the tasks of governments of nation states.

This current contribution deals with similar issues, namely churches and their role in the fight against poverty. However, the focus here is specifically on the way in which European churches understand their role in a highly secularised milieu, in which poverty remains a problem but does no longer constitute a the major issue. Thus, the main theme of both documents is not poverty as such, but being the church in secularised Europe – and the two research questions when reading these documents are: (1) How is secularisation evaluated? (2) What role do churches see for themselves in their mission in Europe?

Many European countries have laws to protect the poor. Still, poverty is not a thing of the past in Europe. Some groups, countries and regions on the continent are more isolated and more vulnerable to poverty. Churches are among the agencies that are involved in this struggle to eradicate poverty in Europe. At the same time, churches have their own specific struggle. They also fight for survival. During the previous century, especially in the past forty years, people have turned away from churches en masse, mainly because of secularisation. This has forced churches to reconsider their mission.

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4   This article, entitled "The Accra Confession: An example of the ecclesiological implications of public theology", is published elsewhere in this volume – editor.

ECCLESIA IN EUROPE

The first document to be analysed is *Ecclesia in Europe*, the post-synodal apostolic exhortation, published in 2003, four years after the Second Synod of the European Bishops in 1999. Its author, the late Pope John-Paul II, expressed a profound interest in Europe. Inspired by the Book of Revelations, he explores the theme of hope in the midst of despair. He talks about the loss of Europe's Christian memory and heritage that is accompanied by practical agnosticism and religious indifference (John Paul II 2003:Par. 7). The Pope observes a fear of the future, expressed in inner emptiness, loss of meaning in life, and points to its fruits: a diminishing number of births, the decline in the number of vocations to the priesthood and religious life, and the difficulty, if not outright refusal, to make lifelong commitments, including marriage. He then refers to the existential fragmentation revealing itself in, for example, family crises, the resurfacing of ethnic conflicts, the re-emergence of racism, and an obsessive concern for personal interest and privileges. This spread of individualism has led to an increased weakening of solidarity, "with the result that many people, while not lacking material necessities, feel increasingly alone, left to themselves without structures of affection and support" (8). According to the Pope "the root of the loss of hope is an attempt to promote a vision of man apart from God and apart from Christ." European culture creates the impression of "silent apostasy" (9). The pope is also very negative towards secularism, which he calls a poison (26, 38).

However, the Pope also observes signs of hope in Europe, such as the growing openness of peoples to one another, reconciliation between countries, the opening up to the countries of Eastern Europe, forms of cooperation and exchange, a growing European consciousness, democratic procedures, a spirit of freedom, respect for human rights and attention to these rights, and quality of life (12). In fact, the influence of the Judeo-Christian tradition contributed strongly to specific elements of the European culture, such as: the recognition of the value of the human person and his/her inalienable dignity; the sacredness of human life and the centrality of the family; the importance of education and freedom of thought, speech, and religion; the legal protection of individuals and groups; the promotion of solidarity and the common good; and the recognition of the dignity of labour (19). The Pope also explicitly contributes some fundamental values to the influence of Christianity, including the affirmation of the transcendent dignity of the human person, the value of reason, freedom, democracy, the constitutional state, and the distinction between political life and religion (109).

This last element brings us to the recognition of the different places of state and church in civil society. The Catholic Church "consistently desires to respect the legitimate autonomy of the civil order" (19). The pope fully recognises the secular nature of state institutions (114) and is not calling for a return to the confessional state. However, he deplores every type of ideological secularism of hostile separation between civil institutions and religious confessions. He is convinced that in keeping with a healthy cooperation between the ecclesial community and political society, the Catholic Church can make a unique contribution to the whole of European culture (117).

How is this crisis of despair to be solved? It is in proclaiming the gospel of hope (the theme of Chapter 3 of the exhortation), in celebrating the gospel of hope (Chapter 4), but also in serving the gospel of hope (Chapter 5). Charity given and received is the primordial experience which gives rise to hope. The witness of charity possesses an intrinsic power of evangelisation. To live in charity becomes good news. Ecclesial communities are called to be true training grounds for communion, where a culture of solidarity is practised. The Pope calls for the rediscovery of Christian volunteerism (paragraphs 84-85). Next to communion and solidarity, serving men and women in society is a second dimension of serving the gospel of hope. The Church is called to give new hope to the poor through its preferential love for the poor. Particular importance must also be attached to confronting the challenges of unemployment, pastoral care of the sick, and a proper use of the goods of the earth (paragraphs 86-89). The Church can play a guiding role in building a city worthy of human beings, in which the Church's social teaching can play a role. The Church is also called to be instrumental in a culture of acceptance and hospitality towards immigrants and refugees. In the closing chapter of the document, Europe is called on directly to establish a culture of solidarity in the midst of globalisation (paragraphs 111-112).

One may, therefore, conclude that John-Paul II sees positive as well as negative aspects in the evolution of Europe. The positive aspects concern political and economic developments regarding a growing European union. The negative aspects are in relation to the socio-cultural changes, which are evaluated in very negative terms: secularism is poison. Social problems form part of the Pope's analysis and the calling to a ministry of charity is one of three specific missions for the Church in Europe, together with the callings proclamation and celebration. The roles of church and state are clearly distinguished.

EVANGELISING – PROTESTANT PERSPECTIVES FOR THE CHURCHES IN EUROPE

In 2006, the Community of Protestant Churches in Europe (CPCE) published a document entitled *Evangelising – Protestant perspectives for the churches in Europe* (CPCE 2006). The CPCE uses a broad concept of evangelism and mission; not only talk, but also action; not only witness, but also dialogue.

> It manifests itself in preaching that awakens faith and in diaconal activity as well as in the work for justice, peace and the integrity of creation (paragraph 1.2).

The missionary challenges are described with the following questions:

> How can we convincingly invite people to faith at a time of growing uncertainty about faith? How can we as Christians, amidst a plurality of lifestyles, witness to the one truth of the Gospel? How can we counter the breakdown of Christian traditions in church and society and open up for people new approaches to the great story of God? How can we live and witness to our faith credibly and attractively in the face of our own spiritual poverty and increasingly speechlessness? (1.3).

Doubt is expressed whether Europe, the most strongly secularised continent in the world, can or should be re-Christianised (1.5).

In contrast to Pope John-Paul II's highly negative evaluation of secularisation in *Ecclesia in Europe*, the CPCE shows some ambivalence regarding the topic:

> We maintain that these contexts are not in principle resistant to the gospel and in consequence we do not meet them with any pessimism about the culture or the Zeitgeist (1.5).

The first of these contexts described is secularisation. The negative interpretation in terms of godliness, of denial of transcendence and of loss of the church's powers, is confirmed by the almost complete loss of access to religious questions or categorical rejection of religious coinages out of an ideologised secularism, both in the West and in post-socialist countries. But, to this is added another interpretation. Secularisation is also a process of emancipation from indoctrination and ideology, from escapism into another world. It challenges individuals to a more authentic rendering of faith, and challenges churches to rethink their calling in society and to find new language and expressions to communicate faith in a secular context (3.1). Other trends in Europe are approached in the same ambivalent way: new spirituality, breaking with tradition, useful truths, longing for community, no more grand narratives, performance-orientated society, change in the European world of work, leisure time and experience, the cult of health, resentment against institutions, religious pluralism, international youth culture, virtual community, and demographic change. Not only the negative aspects are mentioned, but also the challenges that they pose.

Among the challenges facing the churches, poverty and social issues in general are hardly mentioned. Under the negative aspects of the performance-orientated society, mention is made of the social drop-out and social isolation, breakdowns, and loss of employment (3.7). The widening gap between rich and poor is referred to under the changing world of work in Europe (3.8).

The theme of the church as part of civil society is not explicitly discussed. In line with the rest of the ambivalent evaluation of secularism, re-Christianisation in the sense of the so-called *Corpus Christianum* is not considered an option: "all churches have a duty to be humble and to abandon any 'missionary imperialism'" (3.15).

Since attention to poverty and social issues is weak in this document, one should not be surprised that the fight against poverty is an issue mentioned in passing only, and also indirectly. In fact, when the text discussed globalisation, this is not interpreted negatively only – markets and jobs are not only destroyed but also created in the process. Next to this, the document admits that the churches as employers have to shed jobs themselves, that the diaconal work of the church in particular is in a state of flux, that traditional parochial structures are not adequate to deal with such global issues, that unemployed people feel themselves unwelcome in many churches, and that churches are perceived as part of the economic and political system. The answer proposed is the Protestant message of justification and God's transforming message that gives back dignity to the impoverished and unemployed (3.8).

This second document has a more ambivalent attitude to secularisation and is more strongly nuanced in its evaluation. The fight against poverty is a marginal issue in the

document's description of the problems in Europe, and it remains marginal when it reflects on the task of the churches in Europe. The document started with a broad vision of proclamation "evangelism", of which diaconal activities form part; but in the rest of the document the social role of the church is insufficiently reflected upon. The text explicitly refuses to return to a re-Christianisation of Europe, but does not make clear what this means for the relation between church and state.

CONCLUSION

Fergusson indicated that the evolution of the differentiated roles of church and state have their origins in the late Middle Ages already, and that not only political but, more importantly, *theological* arguments contributed to this evolution. The documents analysed above both show an awareness of and an acceptance of this evolution. The Roman Catholic documents are more explicit in affirming this new relationship and describing the different roles of church and state – also in relation to the fight against poverty. However, the negative evaluation of secularism creates an inner tension because the differentiation between the roles of church and state, and secularism, are both part of the growing secularisation process. The Protestant text is less clear when it comes to differentiating between the roles of church and state and is more nuanced in its evaluation of the secularisation process. In general, the latter text reveals some of the confusion and uncertainty within these churches about which direction to take. Their bonds with the nation state are still ambivalent and, while affirming the liberating aspects of secularisation, they find it difficult to find an answer to its negative aspects.

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