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Europe' s discussion about justice problems – perspectives – visions

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Europe's Discussion about Justice Problems – Perspectives – Visions

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Introduction

My wife and I were kept waiting at Schiphol Airport for our son to arrive from Accra. He had been there for three weeks as a steward at WARC's General Council in August 2004. We saw that the KLM flight had landed so we could expect our son to come at any moment. It took a long time since he had decided to drink a coffee with a few of his fellow-stewards who had an ongoing flight from Amsterdam. In the mean time the delegation of the Protestant Church in the Netherlands (PKN) had arrived. Knowing them I had a short conversation with them. They were clearly unhappy with many aspects of the past General Council. Not in the least with how the acceptance of the Accra Confession had gone. It was a short conversation but it showed a condensed level of bitterness and concern.

In the months thereafter the evaluation of the Accra meeting and its outcome was done, at least in the Netherlands, in a more balanced and in a 'less first reaction, emotional' way. Critique on the Accra Confession and the way it was accepted by the General Council was streamlined in an attitude of taking up the challenge and working with it in the Dutch context.

The Netherlands is just one country in Europe and the PKN is just one of the 215 member churches of the WARC, but the reception of the Accra Confession there is a good starting point for a more general reflection on Europe's participation in the covenanting for justice work of the World Alliance of Reformed Churches. What have been the problems? What have been perspectives and what are the visions?

Problems

In May 2009 I had a consultation on Communion and Justice in Sao Paulo for WARC's Latin American member churches. There were around 30 participants. In general they were staunch supporters of the Accra Confession and the covenanting for justice work. They were also clearly inspired by liberation theology models and they wanted the outcome of the consultation to show that as a

basis. However it was also honestly said, that the liberation theology model had not been so helpful in a country like Cuba. That reminded me of reactions you can hear in Europe concerning the Eastern European context.

Although nowhere in Europe Communism has the same position now as during the years of the Iron Curtain and the Cold War, the division between Eastern and Western Europe is still highly noticeable. It can be noticed also in the evaluation of the Accra Confession. The general feeling among Eastern European WARC member churches is critical, to say the least. One can hear sometimes that the language being used in the Accra Confession and also in the overall covenanting for justice work reminds one of the Marxist ideological language so favoured by the former communist regimes. Some also feel that there is no room for a critical approach as there was neither in communist countries. Above all many feel that the world wide economic models they now are part of, have improved their level of welfare far more than during the communist era. Of course not all are critical in this way and opinion has changed quite a bit during the recent credit crisis. But in general the word 'capitalism' has no longer the same pejorative connotation as often as in the global WARC context.

The Western European situation is different. First of all a good number of theologians and economists within WARC member churches have been involved and have supported the so-called processus confessionis leading to the acceptance of the Accra Confession. Many European member churches were greatly interested in matters of global justice and sought to have this also worked out from a theological perspective. However in the run up to the Accra General Council and in the process after, there was a dominant feeling of not being heard and being misunderstood. The following factors played a role in this critical evaluation:

- Europeans felt that in Accra the blame for injustice was put too easily on the shoulders of the global North. There was little criticism of actors of injustice within the South and if it was mentioned, it was also directly linked again to the dominance of global North actors.
- There was the feeling that the floor in Accra was very much dominated by a very outspoken part of the WARC member churches without them listening to other voices or even preventing dissident voices to be heard.
- The word 'empire' as defining the source of evil and injustice was not seen as helpful, especially when it was seen as uncritically linked to concrete regimes like the USA.
- Within Europe it was felt that parts of the world with the loudest support for the Accra Confession were not doing much with it while within Europe more was being done notwithstanding the critical evaluation of Accra 2004.
- An often-heard opinion is that there is a theological deficit within WARC's covenanting for justice process.
- Europeans felt that their critical questions were not taken seriously or that they

were being seen – because of this – of not standing behind the commitment to justice.

The above-mentioned factors played a role in the relation between the WARC and its European member churches. However in the reception of the Accra confession and the involvement in the covenanting for justice work there are other problematic factors directly linked to the European context:

- Europe is for many of its countries part of the global North from the perspective of economic wealth. As such Europe is directly profiting from the global economic situation that causes economic injustice for many of the poor countries.
- Looking at the global ecological situation, Europe as a whole has a very large so-called ecological footprint and is as such most probably the cause of pollution and climate change.
- European countries have played a dominant role in colonising countries in the global South and still play a role in neo-colonial situations.
- Also European churches and especially many of its members are directly profiting from the lack of balance of global economic wealth.
- European theology has often played a role and still plays a role in justifying situations of economic and ecological injustice.
- European churches have often played, not the least by using their financial powers, a dominant role in the ecumenical movement hindering equal global involvement.

These factors do cause uneasiness in the European context when, like with the covenanting for justice work and the Accra confession, only a self-critical process can be the right answer. If the global South really gets a voice, and that was the case in Accra 2004, then there is no easy message to digest in e.g. the European family of churches. No wonder many feel tempted to put the blame only on procedural mistakes and one-sided critique.

Perspectives

The long list of problems could lead to the conclusion that the position of the European member churches within the WARC is of a critical nature and that due to this plus the European economic context the involvement of the European Churches in the covenanting for justice work is merely problematic. This however would be a totally wrong conclusion. Looking at the years since Accra 2004 many things have happened that give a positive perspective.

First of all there has been an open ear from the side of WARC's governing body and its secretariat in Geneva to look with a critical eye at the decision making process in Accra 2004. There has been careful listening to critical voices also from the European member churches. For this it has been helpful that there has been explicit critique.

In general the European member churches have not let themselves be dominated by frustration but have seen the importance of the commitment to justice. Many also within the churches, ministers in congregations and others were only inspired by what happened in Accra and church leaders in general were wise enough to look at what is in fact only important: Gods justice for the world! The covenanting for justice work played a great role in new bilateral relations, e.g. between German and South-African WARC member churches.

Discussions about the language used in the covenanting for justice work have lead to more understanding and more acceptance of some of the definitions being used, e.g. the word 'empire'.

A lot of work has been done to make it clear that being committed to justice is something of the heart of (Reformed) theology. It is the call to God which justifies us and sanctifies us to do justice in the world. The Calvin anniversary year 2009 yet again made clear how deeply rooted this commitment is in the Reformed tradition and as such – it is believed – in the Word of God itself.

The credit crisis, due to its often catastrophic impact, made it clear that the global economy has many sinful aspects that can only be condemned.

In 2009 the WARC organised eight regional consultations on Communion and Justice, the first one in Europe. Nowhere, most certainly also not in Europe, was there any movement of putting the commitment to justice in the background. With all regional variety the passion for this commitment is dominant everywhere. In Europe it also gave room to seeking clearer understanding. The same is valid for the global consultation on the Accra confession and the covenanting for justice work organised in Johannesburg September 2009: the discussion was open, honest and helpful for strengthening commitment.

The merger between the Reformed Ecumenical Council (REC) and the WARC that will lead to the formation of the World Communion of Reformed Churches in June 2010 makes it very clear as to what the mission of the organisation is: "Called to be a Communion of Churches, committed to justice"! In no way can it be feared that European member churches will be an obstacle to obey that call, on the contrary!

Visions

Europe is one of the most secularised parts of today's world. In all countries mainline churches are declining. In most societies church attendance has gone down very much over the past decades. The position in society is often marginal. Still in many ways the Church has a financial position that reminds us much of the past when the Church had a more prominent position in society. In Germany and many parts of Switzerland Churches are financed through state tax benefits (Kirchensteuer). In Scandinavian countries, except for Sweden, the Lutheran Church is still a State Church. In a country like the Netherlands

Church and State are fully separated but Christian education is still 100% financially state supported. Many Churches and especially mission organisations have accumulated a lot of wealth over the past centuries. Although all European Churches have problems to meet ends financially, compared with the rest of the world – with the exemption of maybe the USA – the financial position of Western-European churches is still very strong. However the future for many European churches looks bleak. In the Netherlands e.g. the number of those visiting a Church service at least once per month has gone down 50% since 1971. If this continues at the same level then sometime in the forties of this century the last churchgoer will switch off lights. In conjunction with this decline of church attendance the relevance of the Church and its theology has very much gone down as well. This is valid also for WARC member churches. In this aspect we have to be aware however that a great deal of young people who have left the Church, still favour highly Christian values and are often very active in justice movements such as Green Peace, Kairos etc...

In Eastern Europe the situation is different. There the position of the Church has become stronger. However this is valid mainly for the Orthodox Church. The Reformed WARC member churches are – except for Hungary – small churches that cannot have a prominent position in their societies. Their financial means are also very limited.

What can, against this background, be the vision for a commitment to justice in the European member churches of the WARC and after June 2010 the WCRC? A few ideas listed below can help to develop a vision.

- It is not helpful when the discussion about justice in Europe is being dominated by a sense of guilt. Of course there is no doubt justification for ‘feeling guilty’: involvement in the two World Wars, (neo-) colonialism, paternalistic mission relations etc... There is no reason at all to deny the negative aspects of the past and where they are still valid in the present to do away with them. But in conjunction with this it is necessary to be first of all inspired by positive aspects of the past and present. Mission work in the past has contributed a great deal to the development of the Church and Society in global South countries. Many of those active in mission fields were also in the forefront of pleading for independence of European colonies. The ecumenical justice movement can be grateful for many contributions of European church leaders, theologians, economists etc... A document like the Accra Confession has played a great role in WARC European member churches. Most WARC member churches in Europe have also played a great role in matters of gender justice. In brief: Europe can be and should be inspired by a great deal that has happened and is still happening within its Churches concerning their commitment to justice. In the discussion about justice it is good to be aware of this great contribution.
- In discussions about justice it is for Churches of utmost importance to be

aware of the fact that here the heart of faith is at stake. In Reformed tradition sanctification is a very important aspect. One could almost say more than justification. Reformed traditionally does not focus on 'how' God has justified us but 'whereto' he has justified us. Therefore the focus on sanctification and the concrete aspect of that is our call to do justice in the world. This theological basis is fundamental. It has to be believed otherwise churches are committed to justice within – for them at least – a vacuum. Secularisation in Europe has indeed often meant a loss of sense of transcendence. It is a caricature but still it can be said that in some church circles, also in Europe, it looks as if the 'J' of 'Jesus' has been replaced by the 'J' of 'Justice'. If so then in the end a church will have nothing to say anymore. The call to justice within churches should always be heard in conjunction with Scripture and Confession. Only in this way will we experience this call as a holy matter.

- In line with the previous argument it is necessary to use in the analysis of situations of justice and injustice definitions that have their origin in Scripture and Confession. An example is the word 'sin'. There should be no hesitation to use this word in matters of injustice. It is prophetic language that should not be used in a too frequent and as such inflating way but for the evil situations that are catastrophic and have human causes there should indeed be no hesitation to speak of sin. Only then we can also talk about grace and forgiveness. It is also helpful to be inspired by the Christian eschatological visions e.g. of the Kingdom of God. Not as an alibi that our work here on earth is in the end useless but to make us aware that we are part of Gods work and that therefore we should not be desperate if things here and now will not be perfect.
- For European Churches it is important to be actors in the call to justice but also to be listeners. Not only in the sense of listening to the Word of God but also in the sense of listening to Churches and their representatives in other parts of the world. It is not first of all the call of Europeans to analyse the situation of justice and injustice in e.g. Africa. Even when comments could be justified that the blame is put on the shoulders of e.g. Europe too easily it is still important to wait and to hear how voices from other parts of the world will contribute to a balanced analysis of the global situation. Having said this we should be aware of the fact that the division in global South and North can be misleading. There is a global South in the North and a global North in the South. Not all in Europe are profiteers and not all in the global South are victims. The word 'empire' used as a definition in matters of injustice has a global connotation. But it is helpful in the European discussion about justice to have some patience and to hear what others have to say about their situation.
- The commitment to justice should also have its place and find its inspiration in the spiritual life of the Church. Liturgy with all its components of sacraments, preaching, praying and singing is the place where life and justice are being celebrated. Where also suffering and injustice is being brought before God.

The Reformed tradition with the openness for the Old Testament and its theology, with the Psalms being part of the singing tradition, with the great contribution to church music has a lot to give inspiration in obeying the call to justice. It is important that European Churches play a role in the ongoing development of Reformed worship. There is a tendency to ‘evangelicalise’ Reformed worship, not the least in Europe. This may happen out of a feeling that the evangelical movement will bring success also in declining European Reformed Churches. It is however very doubtful whether this success – if there is one – will not only be a temporary matter. There is enough in the Reformed worship tradition to be inspired by and it gives certainly a good voice to the awareness of injustice and the hope for a better world to come.

Conclusion

This short overview is meant to analyse part of the background of the discussion about justice in especially WARC member churches in Europe and to give some ideas for the ongoing development of a vision. WARC member churches in Europe want to be part of the World Communion of Reformed Churches after June 2010 and they want as such to be part of a Communion of Churches that sees the obedience to the call to justice as a deep part of its faith in God the Father, Son and Holy Spirit. This with the awareness that the word of God has as its ultimate goal, that all may have life in fullness.

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