Being a Christian in Europe

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What do we mean when we say 'Europe' and write about Europe as 'a challenge to Christians'? What does it mean to be a European Christian, or rather to be a Christian in Europe? What is the identity of Europe? Identity is closely linked to memory. When a person loses his or her memory, this person's identity is in danger of getting lost as well. There is a common European memory. This memory is weaker than our national memory and our personal memory, but it exists. It is built up out of numerous elements including: the boundaries of Europe, interdependence, cultural heritage, technological civilization, justice, individualism, fear of Islam, and the Christian past.

Boundaries are vital in determining one's identity. They fulfil the need for belonging and help to structure life. The boundaries of Europe, however, are very uncertain. When I arrived in Oxford in 1966 as a postgraduate student, I was told that this city of dreaming spires and towers was not a part of Europe. Europe was 'the continent'; the British Isles did not belong to Europe. Ten months later I travelled to Spain. I learned that, surely, Oxford belonged to Europe, for everything north of Spain was Europe; Spain, however, was not a part of Europe. When I lectured for some days in the Catholic University of Lublin, Poland, in 1988, I was told by my hosts that Poland really is the heart of Europe. The little medieval chapel of Lublin castle was supposed to prove their point: gothic on the outside, Byzantine on the inside. It was only in 1833 that the producers of maps put the Eastern European frontier at the Ural mountains, before that the river Don was the frontier. Europe is not a geographical entity, it is an idea.[1]

European countries are very much interdependent. They have ever been. Trade and traffic have always been intense in this part of the world from prehistoric times onwards. According to recent genetic research, human beings are quite homogeneous in Europe. The European populace is a mixture. The countries in which the population is mixed most— where people are truly European we could say—are: England, the Low Countries and Denmark. In this sense they are the heart of Europe. Europe has always been a multilingual and multicultural area, a meeting place of strangers and foreigners. This interdependence of the peoples in

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Europe is now stronger than ever. Economically and politically the countries in Europe depend on one another. However, they are not only interdependent within Europe, they are interdependent worldwide. Europe is a part of a global financial system. This system does not only depend on European countries but also on New York, Tokyo, Singapore, on the Arab states and, though this is less so, on countries in Africa and Latin America. Europe is dominated by American press agencies such as Reuter and CND; are they going to determine Europe's identity? Europe is receiving new strangers in its midst; the process of multicultural exchange continues with people flocking to it from all parts of the world. In the sixties they mainly came as a cheap labour force, later as economic and political refugees.

Europe has its cultural heritage. This heritage cannot easily be defined. European literature and art are marked by a development from uniform illumination to leaving meanings obscure, from uninterrupted connection to abruptness, from displaying unmistakable meanings to a multiplicity of meanings and the need for interpretation.[2] Moreover, people in Europe read authors from other parts of the world with great pleasure. Music from the United States, Latin America and Africa have a profound impact on modern European music.

Europe's technological civilization is original in the sense that it broke down the social and cultural barriers between thinkers and technicians, between reason and crafts, between theory and practice. However, it turns out to be less manageable than people in the eighteenth century thought. We have become aware of the fact that the future is as predictable as the English weather. The better the computer, the more difficult it is to make any weather forecast, for the better the computer the better it will inform us of the many contingencies involved. Reality is immensely complex. Social systems organize themselves in a game of numerous interactions, the outcome of which cannot be predicted. Minimal changes on the molecular level can bring about changes in weather conditions. In similar ways minimal changes, for instance a decision of some individual somewhere in the world, may transform the course of human history. We have to take decisions and we take them, but we cannot control all the consequences. We often do not know what we are doing. Political ideologies, economic models and moral theories[3] are melting away, confronted as they are by a future that cannot possibly be predicted.

Europe contains several states which all want to be based on justice. One of the most important assets of the European Community is the possibility for individuals, non-governmental organisations and groups to undertake legal action against the state to whose jurisdiction they

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belong, though only if the state against which such an application has been lodged, recognizes the competence of the European Commission of Human Rights to receive such applications. The nationality of the applicant as such is irrelevant, but he or she has to come under the jurisdiction of the respondent state. The individual applicant must himself be the victim; he may not make complaints relating to other individuals. The individual right of complaint is a necessary expedient for securing the rights and freedoms of individuals against the states. *The European Convention for the Protection of Human Rights and Fundamental Freedoms* was signed in Rome on November 4, 1950.[4] The contracting states wished 'to take the first steps for the collective enforcement of certain Rights stated in the Universal Declaration' (of Human Rights, proclaimed by the United Nations in 1948). The Convention contains rights and freedoms such as the right to life, freedom from torture and inhuman treatment, freedom from slavery, right to a fair trial, freedom of thought, conscience and religion, freedom of expression. It has its limitations, for it covers mainly civil and political rights, and not even all of them (the principle of equality before the law, the right to enjoy asylum from prosecution in other countries, the right to a nationality are not included), and fundamental economic, social and cultural rights are not part of it. Moreover, applications of individuals, organisations, groups and (rarely) states can easily act as a weapon to promote interests of their own over against the just demands of other individuals and groups. Law is born out of conflict and is often transformed into a weapon in the next conflict. The rights and freedoms of European individuals do not offer any solace to those outside Europe; even within Europe people under the jurisdiction of one state may find it hard to get permission to live in another European state.

Individualism has become a major feature of European culture. In the philosophy of the Enlightenment the 'individual' is granted fundamental autonomy and receives the right (and even the duty) to compete with other individuals. In the process of western society the individual tried to free him/herself from all structures and ideologies that enforced on him/her certain duties which had to be fulfilled, even if they were against his/her will or even ran counter to his/her own interests. The individual being liberated from family, village, town, local culture, Church, and (sometimes unlimited) state power. This process is still continuing (women are now in the process of emancipating themselves—European culture always was patriarchal as all other known cultures[5]), and is spreading all around the world. In present-day Europe this autonomy of the individual is the central value in society.[6] This causes great pressures on the individual who has to look for his or

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her identity autonomously, and has continually to defend him/herself against potential and actual rivals. Because the individual is being liberated from his/her (violent) past, history seems unimportant (in the Netherlands history is losing its foothold in the school curriculum); the individual is in danger of losing his /her roots and is robbed of the possibility of making a new and alternative beginning, for the future can only be envisaged with a glance at the past. This form of individualism makes many politicians, in particular Christian ones, and Church leaders' call for a 'moral heart for Europe'.

It is in the story of how a raid of Arabs was repulsed—the much overrated battle at Poitiers in 732 AD—that we come across the word 'Europeans' for the first time. The 'Europeans' are the members of the victorious army. Charlemagne's court theologian Alcuin formulated a definition of Europe as the 'continent of Christian faith'. The idea 'Europe' was born. Europe was Christendom. As such the word 'Europe' had defensive overtones. Europe was the Christian continent over against the Islamic world, represented first by the Arabs, later by the Turks. It was a continent under siege, sur rounded by enemies. Today the fear of Islam is very much alive again. Shortly after the fall of the Berlin wall, I heard several people saying that the next cold war would be with the Moslem states. Now, unlike the Middle Ages, Moslems are living in our midst. Some years ago my mother and I were walking around one of the largest markets in Amsterdam, and I had the impression that the two of us were the 'real' foreigners. Actually, I quite enjoyed it. However, we are aware of many open and hidden conflicts. We see the fear of Islam, rather than Islam itself, as a threat to the future of Europe. In my opinion the present tensions are not primarily due to religious differences. The new immigrants often come from the countryside, and move from an agricultural culture to an industrial society. It is natural in this situation that religious customs become important to them whether they are obligatory by the standards of the Koran or not.

Europe has a Christian past, but it is not easy to define this past. Christianity is not an unchanging ideology. It is a living reality, changing all the time, assuming different forms in each nation, in each person. Contemporary Christianity is very different from medieval Christianity. Christians cannot provide a uniting Europe with a moral heart. Christians are neither Jew nor Greek, neither Europeans nor Africans. In a sense Christians do not have an identity. So they cannot provide Europe with a moral heart in the sense of an identity. Theologically the process of European unity cannot be considered to be a part of salvation history. Christians have to relate to the process of European economic unity for this is the reality in which they live, but

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the economic and even political unity of Europe as such is not a Christian concern. As far as European unity is tuned in to economic survival in a competing world, it is a process that is to be criticized rather than legitimated; in this sense it is a concern for Christians.

I am aware that this point of view is not a popular one. The 1991 synod of European bishops claimed that the Christian faith belongs for ever to the enduring and fundamental basis of Europe.[8] Pope John Paul II is very much the advocate of the Christian past of Europe.[9] In this he remains close to the Democratic politicians. Their politics is inspired by a combination of accepting capitalist (liberal) economic principles and of clinging to a personalist anthropology. Personalism[10] shares with liberalism the idea that a person is an autonomous individual being in continuous progress, but it differs from it in that the person, this 'spiritual universe'[11], makes him/herself available to other persons, in particular to the Transcendent; a person is both a goal in him/herself and orientated towards humankind. From nationalism the Christian-Democrats borrowed the notion of 'rootedness' in a family, a commune, an ethnic group. They expected that it would be possible to create a new Christian era, though different from the medieval past.[12]

The 'Christian Middle Ages' are, however, as much a myth as the myth of the 'Dark Ages', invented by the advocates of the Enlightenment, or the myth of Ancient Greece as the culmination point of human civilisation. (The existence of human sacrifice was always hidden from the school boy learning Greek, as well as other rituals such as smearing the seats of the members of the assembly with the blood of castrated pigs before its meeting as was the custom in ancient Athens, a custom that is reminiscent of Papua New Guinea.) The myth of a Christian Europe was a Roman Catholic invention of the nineteenth century. Christians should live in truth, not by myth. In the last century the industrial revolution conquered Europe and destroyed agricultural society with its rich diversity of numerous small cultures. Many people were uprooted, often literally. In this situation nationalism emerged.[13] It suggested to people that they had their own identity. For this it referred to ancient traditions that were partly invented. In this way it promised people that they would be able to survive in a changing world. As a matter of fact, nationalism promoted the transition from agricultural society to industrial society, for it created the same homogeneity the industrial revolution demanded.

Most Churches reacted to the upsurge of nationalism by becoming national Churches. The Roman Catholic Church could not do this very well. So it did what nationalism was doing: it created an identity for its members by appealing to the past, to the so-called peak of Christian

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culture, the Middle Ages. The concept of a Christian Europe was born. Meanwhile the Church was profoundly transformed. Between 1850 and 1900 the Roman Catholic Church changed from a loose federation of Churches with the pope in the chair into a modern rigid bureaucratic organisation with a common culture that had to include all Catholics. The first loyalty of Roman Catholics ought to be to the Church and the pope. In the name of the myth of the Catholic Middle Ages, all remaining structures of the medieval Church were destroyed.[14] Today, confronted by modern individualism in and outside Europe, the Vatican continues the same policy.

The papal and Christian-Democratic concept of personhood suggests that Christians are superior to other human beings because they have a relationship with the transcendent. In my opinion, marxists and liberals have a relationship with the transcendent too, but they interpret the transcendent in a different way. In this personalist anthropology the relationship with God is emphasised at the expense of the relationship with world and history that is somehow driven out.

According to a German scholar 182 plans were published to unite Europe from 1300 till the end of World War II.[15] But only one political attempt was moderately successful. On 9 May 1950 Robert Schuman foreign minister of France proposed to form a Coal and Steel Community. In 1952 six countries joined this community which marks the beginning of the Common Market. What inspired Robert Schuman in his plan? He was born in Lorraine served a brief period as a soldier in the German army during World War I and was a devout Catholic. Though he was aware that the Churches had not always supported democracy he saw Christianity as its source. No democracy without Christianity.[16] Born in an area disputed for centuries between the French and the Germans he sincerely sought peace. He was convinced that the only way in which peace could be guaranteed was to incorporate Germany into Europe. Germany should be prevented from embarking on a course of its own. For the Germans his policy offered the possibility of becoming accepted again by the other European states. Schuman's goal was to create a political unity not an economic one. But right from the beginning the partners in the new community, under the influence of Jean Monnet, placed all the emphasis on economics. Schuman had to accept that the six countries rejected the spiritual and political basis of cooperation.[17] The economic reconstruction of Europe was paramount in the face of the powerful communist block in Eastern Europe. Since the eighties, in particular after the downfall of the Soviet empire, the Common Market has been the economic power of the U.S.A. and Japan. Europe should be able to compete with these powers.

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It is afraid to fall behind. Democracy, a European parliament with real power, is not all that important. What matters is to create a free market for 340 million people. Europe may have a social charter but this has to serve its economic goals. It cannot avoid the environmental issue but it would prefer to do so if it were possible. Economic growth is the overriding issue in the Common Market. Europe is growing into a large economic market. It is doubtful whether this will ever mean a complete political unity. For it is more useful to be represented in for instance the United Nations with twelve states than with only one.

Looking back on the uncertainty implicit in the eight elements of the common European memory and on the idea of Europe as a political and economic unity, I have to conclude that Europe is a concept of fear: Europe uniting itself against the economic hegemony of America and Japan. Europe owes its existence to its enemies, to its rivals, to its competitors. Admittedly, European integration has several positive aspects, the absence of war between France and Germany since 1945, the declining importance of borders, and the growth of common European projects such as the the environmental issues, but Europe does not have a heart of its own. Its identity and unity depend on what is seen as foreign. Words such as 'identity' and 'unity' may be helpful here.

An individual generally develops an identity by comparing him/herself with other people. I am not like him, like her; I do not behave like him, like her, I do not have the same qualities. I am a male, so I drive out all feminine qualities that may be mine. I am a heterosexual, so I expel everything that may give the impression to myself and to other people that I might like people of the same sex. I am an intellectual; you cannot expect that I can do anything with my hands. I am casting out certain qualities I may not like, as if they are bad demons. I know who I am by trying to make myself different. Groups and nations develop an identity and bring about a homogeneous culture by comparing themselves with other individuals, groups and nations, and by rejecting certain behavioural patterns they do not like.

The same applies to the word 'unity'. The call to unite is often ideological, used as an instrument to suppress views and practices that threaten the interests of the ruling elite. A Europe without Jews, without Moslems, without Hindus, Buddhists, atheists, an ethnically pure Europe with a very homogeneous culture without gypsies, West-Indians, Africans, Asians, Americans, Australians, a European culture that is predominantly patriarchal and is supposed to be superior to any other, so that the whole world should be centred on Europe, would go against the deep Christian conviction that all human beings are equal before God and are called to be in communication with one another. The identity of

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Europe cannot be based on the struggle against Islam or against any other group.

Confronted by the inability to develop a European identity, we may lapse into fear and doubt. We may even be tempted to try to make our doubt the new core of European identity.[18] Or we maintain that dialogue is the heart of the European identity though we have to admit that this dialogue is empty of content and even that there was little dialogue in the past.[19] I propose that we refuse to look for a European identity. It seems to me more fruitful to ask ourselves what Christians in Europe and elsewhere can contribute to the emergence of a peaceful participatory and sustainable world. They may only hope to briny about minimal changes. The idea that they can force this process in this or that direction is presumptuous. Christianity cannot be the heart of Europe but it can add some leaven to the European dough and in this way have an impact on the future of Europe.

In my opinion Christians should try to add the leaven of unconditional forgiveness to the dough of European unity.[20] Jesus accepted people into his company who were sinners and were not able to fulfil the demands of the Torah. He forgave unconditionally. He offered communication to people without asking anything from them beforehand. From an anthropological point of view Jesus can be said to have referred to the human experience that infants have a right to exist without paying anything back. According to St. Luke Jesus forgave his enemies on the cross 'for they do not know what they are doing.' (Luke 23:34) This same power to forgive unconditionally he gave to his disciples. (John 20 23)

The unconditional forgiveness of sins is at the heart of Christianity. It changes the course of justice it transforms human communication it overcomes human fear. The Christian Churches should see their own violence of the past and the present in the face.[21] Fundamentalism discrimination against women and homosexuals defending the stronghold 'Church' have to be given up and the uncertainty has to be accepted that is proper to faith and trust. The Churches have to support the protest of individuals against physical, sexual, verbal and economic violence in families groups schools states Churches, and in the world of finance and business. By establishing centres of spirituality and social commitment which are open to guests and newcomers the Churches could offer to individuals in particular to the young a model of building up networks and communities in which individuals can relate to one another without oppressive violence or competition. Ecumenism and the dialogue with world religions could provide an example of how people from different cultures can live together. For neither (forced)

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assimilation nor incorporation nor exclusion seem to offer a solution to the challenge how to live together in one geographical and economic region without violence and discrimination. Rather than integration, dialogue in which the differences are enjoyed rather than rejected, will offer new ways of living together.

Forgiveness means remitting foreign debts which western countries forced, at least partly, on poor countries. The phrase from Our Lord's Prayer 'and forgive us our trespasses' originally means as well: 'and forgive us our financial debts.' Christians can only accept economic growth as far as it promotes just relationships between human beings, both for men and women, for people within and without Europe, and does not cause irreparable damage to our natural environment. Christians cannot accept that Europe builds unassailable walls between itself and the numerous refugees from all over the world. If it does not want to be invaded by streams of refugees, afraid that this may cause chaos and havoc, its politicians have to use all their creativity to build a just economic and political house world wide.

From the viewpoint of unconditional forgiveness Christians can look again at the way justice is executed in our countries, in Europe, in our world. Is imprisonment the right way of dealing with criminality?[22] Concerning our political future, Christians are bound to uphold that everybody should have a voice and that everybody is to be listened to, especially those who find it difficult, for whatever reason, to make themselves understood. States and nations have to forgive one another the past of their wars and find ways to prevent a global economic war.

Offering unconditional forgiveness can inspire people to ask for unconditional forgiveness. Life in Europe could be profoundly changed if it would ask Islam and our former colonies for forgiveness. Perhaps this is what Europe needs most: forgiveness, i.e. to receive the ability to create new relationships which are just. This entails that we do away with the myth of a Christian Europe, and oppose scapegoating, be this in forms of nationalism or racism.

The things I mentioned may sound rather abstract. This can hardly be otherwise, for they have to function as minimal changes in a very complex world. I am convinced that they can be translated into practical policies which become concrete when they are formulated by people with their specific cultural background in very different contexts. Those living in Europe with its blurred frontiers have to rediscover that we do not create our identity, but that we receive our personal wholeness from other people. Rather that looking for its identity Europe is challenged to be a part of the world in which it gives and receives. Forgiveness is what Christianity has to offer: the capacity to grant forgiveness and to ask for

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it when needed. It cannot be foretold how the new relationships between Europe and the rest of the world will look like when forgiveness is asked and granted. For what is truly new is as yet still hidden and unknown.

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2   E. Auerbach, *Mimesis. The Representation of Reality in Western Literature* (Princeton, 1974 (1946)), p. 23.
3   Cf. A. MacIntyre, *After Virtue. A study in moral theology* (London, 1985).
4   P. van Dijk and G.J.H. van Hoof, *Theory and Practice of the European Convention on Human Rights* (Deventer, 1984).
5   M. Grey, 'Till they have faces, Europe as a sexist myth and the invisibility of women,' *Concilium,* 1992-2, pp. 12–19.
6   J. Stoetzel, *Les valeurs du temps present: une enquête européenne* (Paris, 1983): 'Il est bien clair d'abord que pour beaucoup d'Européens la valeur centrale réside dans la personne, c'est à dire dans *ma* personne.', p. 292.
7   E.g. J.-M. Lustiger, *Nous avons rendez-vous avec l'Europe* (Paris, 1991).
8   Declaration: *Ut testes simus Christi qui nos liberavit.* Vatican City, 1991.
9   Acta Apostolicae Sedis 75 (1983) pp. 328–333, p. 329.
10 E. Mounier, *Le Personalisme* (Paris 1953 (1949)).
11 'Une personne, c'est un univers de nature spirituelle doué de la liberté de choix et constituant pour autant un tout indépendant en face du monde, ni la nature ni l'État ne peuvent mordre sur cet univers sans sa permission. Et Dieu même, qui est et agit audedans, y agit d'une façon particulière et avec une délicatesse particulièrement exquise, qui montre le cas qu'il en fait: il respecte sa liberté, au coeur de laquelle, il habite cependant; il la sollicite, il ne la force jamais'. J. Maritain, *Humanisme intégral. Problèmes temporels et spirituels d'une nouvelle chrétienté* (Paris, 1936), p. 17. For J. Maritain see: P. Nickl, *Jacques Maritain. Eine Ein führung in Leben und Werk* (Paderborn, 1992).
12 'En parlant d'une nouvelle chrétienté, nous parlons d'un régime temporel ou d'un âge de civilisation dont la forme animatrice serait chrétienne et qui repondrait au climat historique des temps ou nous entrons.', J. Maritain, Ibid., p. 144.
13 E. Gellner, *Nations and Nationalism* (Oxford, 1983).
14 P. Raedts, De christelijke middeleeuwen als mythe. Ontstaan en gebruikvan een constructie uit de negentiende eeuw, *Tijdschrift voor Theologie* 30 (1990) pp. 146–158.
15 R.H. Foerster, *Europa. Geschichte einer politischen idée. Mit einer Bibliographie von 182 Einigungsplännen aus der Jahren 1306 bis 1945* (München, 1967).
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17 R. Poidevin, *Robert Schuman. Homme d'Etat 1886–1963* (Paris, 1986).
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19 E. Morin, *Penser l'Europe* (Paris, 1987).
20 Cf. A. Lascaris, 'An Antidote to Violence?', in *New Blackfriars* Vol. 74 (1993) pp. 345–355.
21 Cf. F. Kerr, 'Christian Memory and National Consciousness,' *New Blackfriars*, Vol. 73 (1992) pp. 14–19.
22 Cf. M. Foucault, *Surveiller et punir. Naissance de la prison* (Paris, 1975).