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“WHAT IS THE SPECIFIC CONTRIBUTION OF THE CHURCHES TO THE EUROPEAN PROJECT – HOW CAN THIS CONTRIBUTION BE MADE ?”

by Rev. Arlington Trotman

1. INTRODUCTION

The churches may ideally be placed to engage the crucial multi-faceted debate about a new and visibly different European identity. The acceptance of visibly different peoples which now present to Europe both an opportunity and a challenge are not to be considered temporary manifestations. Addressing the present reality requires a focus on the values of dignity and respect, economics and responsibility, and healing and reparation. Churches already recognized that Europe is in transition, but how church and society generally respond to the prospect of a more diverse European identity is not unconnected with a proper theological and moral analysis of these values.

1.1 Europe in transition

All communities are in the process of change. They have internal diversity, disagreement, challenges and opportunities linked to DIFFERENCES in gender, generation, religion, ethnicity and culture. This has always been true of Europe, but it is estimated now that there are approximately 24 million people considered migrants living in Europe – challenges and opportunities.

1.2 New communities

Historically people have always moved to and from Europe for very different reasons. Through most of these people movements, accepting or receiving societies have had to meet the challenges, but also appropriate the opportunities. As Bhikhu Parekh said in the report on the Future of Multi-ethnic Britain:

‘People have the capacity to maneuver between distinct areas of life and to be “cross-cultural” navigators.’¹

1.3 Historical formations

Countries like Holland, Britain and France have had a distinct history of involvement with people of many different cultures and ethnicities, mainly for the benefit of European societies. Today and over the last 60 years, many of those people once colonized have been either invited to work or sought by other means to live their lives in Europe. But there has been a distinctive difference about how those people and communities have been received.

1.4 Living with difference

¹ Bhikhu Parekh, *The Future of Multi-ethnic Britain*, The Runnymede Trust, (London: 2000), p. 29.

The one difficulty has been and continues to be that vast numbers of immigrants have been African, Asian, or poor, refugee, nomadic. The challenge is how settled largely white communities live with them: Roma, Indigenous peoples, Africans, people of African descent, people seeking asylum and refugees.

1.5 Europe's crossroads

There are international trading arrangements stacked in favour of rich countries, exerting consequent financial pressures weighted against poor countries in the Southern hemisphere. There are also systematic human rights abuses tolerated by rich countries according to their vested political and economic interests. This is further aggravated by the disruption of natural disasters that make people movement to Europe inevitable and long term. People movement is certain to continue, and old Europe is challenged to make critical decisions at its political, social, cultural and religious crossroads.

1.6 Key question of living with difference

The key question therefore for me is how do mainstream Europe – not just 25 member states of the EU – will live with difference? There has always been a form of multiculturalism or ethno-religious diversity which constituted European identity. The challenge to integrate emerging differences in ideology, politics and religion, and the new challenge of ethnicity, colour and religion makes the church's contribution to the shaping of new Europe critically important living together.

2. MAKING THE MORAL ARGUMENT: LIVING EQUAL BUT DIFFERENT?

2.1 The churches would do worse than to promote and support the positive functions of multiculturalism, and ethno-religious diversity. Multiculturalism and ethno-religious diversity have assisted Britain's development as an ethnically and religiously strong country. But challenges remain, since 9/11, which has put multiculturalism on trial. This is illustrated by the following statements:

It is perfectly possible to be integrated in a wider British society while also holding on to your faith and values.

(Inayat Bunglawala, Muslim Council of Britain)

Britain has pursued a policy of multiculturalism - allowing people of different cultures to settle without expecting them to integrate into society: "Often the authorities have seemed more concerned with encouraging distinctive identities than with promoting common cultural values of nationhood. (Shadow Home Secretary David Davis)

Both these statements have serious implications for identity, integration, racism and racial discrimination, far right ethnic cleansing, ghettoisation, equality, the differential application of the law, and the securitization of society since 9/11 (7/7). Multiculturalism has become a serious debating point and problem only after these incidences, but it has become divorced from the challenge of equality and reality of multi-ethnicity in Europe.

2.1.2 Equality and multiculturalism are complex and diverse, as is the core of discrimination, but the experience of it is very different. The desire for acceptance is the same for everyone, but a white homosexual man does not encounter the same acts of discrimination as an Asian woman. A white disabled woman does not experience the same discrimination as a black man. Similarly, the acts of discrimination we have to fight today are not only overt and explicit but covert and institutional.

2.1.3 Multiculturalism in Britain is somewhat different from that in Sweden and Denmark, for example. Britain's long history of immigration and cultural influences from all over the world, which this gives the country a unique character, has also made Britain a strong nation, both politically and financially. However, Britain still has a long way to go before it reaches full equality and integration of its different minority ethnic communities. Despite the challenges, Britain to a large extent grasped the opportunities offered by immigration and people of 'difference'.

2.1.4 Segregation or choice? It is almost inevitable that a measure of segregation is implicit within some religious/cultural traditions, which make those communities homogeneous. But living in mixed communities entails without condition a further measure of integrated existence at many levels. The most significant forms of segregation occur where majority communities choose not to live amongst or integrate with people who are visibly or socially different: Statistics in Scotland and Northern Ireland, for example, show that around 65% say that they would prefer not to live beside Travellers, black or Asian people. Yet Scotland is pursuing a very welcoming and positive immigration policy. There is a move to grasp the opportunities.

2.1.5 We must not regard visible minorities in Europe as merely ‘deserving’ respect and inclusion, but re-educate ourselves in order morally and socially to embrace our common humanity whilst rejecting racism and discrimination as the sin² of exclusion, disrespect and ‘segregation’. This could be done by European Churches and society grasping, cherishing and living with the fact that economically and culturally Europe is interdependent and inherently shares in the dignity of the Being of God.

2.2 A Policy for a Time?

2.2.1 Jasmin Alibi Brown in *After Multiculturalism* said that more than ever ‘we need a national conversation about our collective identity. We need to concentrate our energies on the ties that bind us and use this to create a new British identity. Diversity is an inescapable condition of modern life and respect for this is essential. That respect will have to apply to everyone, black and white. But respect for different ways of life cannot be allowed to destroy any sense that we live in the same country.’

She said that ‘once multiculturalism has been laid to rest, we can concentrate on developing a strong, diverse British identity rather than retreating into ever-smaller tribes.’³

2.2.2 But this is to misrepresent the values and rights which multiculturalism is capable of upholding at times of threat, discrimination and social exclusion of people who appear different from the majority. Multiculturalism ensured that the rights and needs of marginalised people, mainly those from British colonies in Africa, Asian and the Caribbean could no longer be ignored by institutions including the churches.

2.2.3 But Multiculturalism today is not enough, given the diversity of communities and the immediate and complex challenges. Any inherent weaknesses such as its exposure to abuse, the apparent disenfranchisement of many voters by political swings toward Far Right tendencies in Europe, and the inability to effectively address inequalities based on differences, serve only to strengthen the Far Right. Though these might be temporary they could be longer term far Right political hate forces in Europe. The Churches’ contribution to a new European identity must begin with its moral stance on the nature of values such as dignity and respect, economics and responsibility and healing and reparation.

3. RESPECT

3.1 A vital feature of our lives together in this global village is our ability simply **to respect** one another other, the person, the human being, not the ‘asylum seeker’ the ‘refugee’. These are regarded by political systems as indistinct, impersonal categories of human cargo and are often treated as such. Churches must understand and reject this ethnic and cultural dissonance: to show esteem; to have honour to; to look to; to face towards; to relate to; to refrain from violating and treat with consideration.

² Churches Together in Britain and Ireland, *Redeeming the Time*, (CTBI, London: 2003), p. 4ff.

³ Yasmin Alibhai-Brown, *Daily Telegraph*, 23 May 2000.

3.2 Churches must effectively ensure that the value of respect is the **core value** of individuality and diversity in Europe in regard to individuals, communities and nations: Respect for the environment, natural resources, and all human life. This is true regardless of culture, ethnicity, beliefs, choices, nationality, citizenship or social status.

3.3 Respect also entails **social action** of a vicarious nature: the key to social action takes seriously the call to act justly regardless of ‘difference’. Far right political solutions are no solutions at all. Europe as inherently Christian will give further voice to the far right because Europe appears to be renegeing on its core Christian values. The command to social action is central to the Christian Scriptures:

When I was hungry, you gave me something to eat
When I was thirsty, you gave me something to drink
When I was a stranger, you invited me in (Matt 25: 35-36).

3.4 **The challenge of dealing with difference**

Ghandi once said: ‘Often respect for the person and disrespect for their deed is the responsible option.’ Social action in terms of respect often costs something: Man and his deed are two distinct things. Whereas a good deed should call forth approbation, and a wicked deed disapprobation, the doer of the deed whether good or wicked always deserve respect or pity as the case may be.’

Living equal but different demands just action and attitudes, and justice is rooted in our ability to respect one another. At local, national and European levels, respect should not be used as a political weapon or a fragmentary system of economic value. Respect for the dignity and equality of the ‘other’ is a transforming and redeeming deed which brings new cultural, economic, political and social benefits to all. This would only be realised and bind all Europe’s peoples in a way that expunge all forms of destructive physical and mental violence and bloodshed. Respect is not a gimmick, but it entails responsibility.

4. **RESPONSIBILITY**

Martin Luther King:

Any religion that professes to be concerned about the souls of men and is not concerned about the slums that damn them, the economic conditions that strangle them, and the social conditions that cripple them is a spiritually moribund religion.⁴

4.1 Our purpose is to uphold justice. It seems however that when injustice gains priority in human affairs, the human spirit manifests its intrinsic good. This applies to all ethnic and religious groups in Europe. The trigger for **responsible action** is often only as a result of great human tragedies. We therefore take responsibility for the other, regardless of visible or other difference.

4.2 There is a level of responsibility that even children understand, and justice is expressed by children in powerful ways. King frequently told the story of the young girl, 10 years old, who understood the principle of justice. She said:

‘...while it should not matter I am a white girl. I heard of your misfortune, and that had you sneezed, you would have died. I am just writing to say that I am so glad you didn’t sneeze.’

4.4 Our ability to take responsibility also **determines our freedom**. When we take responsibility for brothers and sisters, we transcend the narrow confines of our selfish interests, and ensure a high degree

⁴ James Melvin Washington, *A Testament of Hope*, Essential Writings and Speeches of Martin Luther King, Jr. (HarperCollins, New York: 1991), p. 38.

of freedom. It is illustrated by the following vicarious action, taking responsibility for the voiceless, which is consistent with biblical truth:

When I need clothes, you clothe me
 When I was sick you looked after me
 When I was in prison you came to visit me.
 (Matthew 25:35-36)

4.5 Education and unlearning

4.5.1 Humanity comprised a multitude of different peoples inhabiting their own symbolic and cultural worlds. But whether differences were seen as biological or cultural, whether they were seen in terms of inferiority and superiority, racial theory and cultural pluralism were characterised by a common hostility to universalism in Europe - a belief that differences between human groups mattered more than the commonalities. In fact, difference between peoples account for far less than difference within particular people groups.

The failure of equality has led radical critics to declare that equality itself is problematic because African is 'different' from whites.

4.5.2 Politicians and policy-makers have responded to such arguments by reinventing America, for example, and now Britain and Europe increasingly as a 'plural' or 'multicultural'. This is true to some degree, but Pluralism like some features of multiculturalism is premised on the idea that America is a nation composed of many different cultural groups and peoples. But in reality it is the product of the continued exclusion of one group: African Americans. Hurricane Katrina in 2005 illustrated the point. The promotion of pluralism is a tacit admission that the barriers that separate blacks and whites cannot be breached, and that equality has been abandoned as a social policy goal. Europe need to learn again through political, academic and community education and training that the answer does not lie in these 'isms'.

Living equal and different requires an act of reparation.

5. REPARATION

5.1 Reparation **presupposes damage**, division and fracture. It is seen most notably in intrapersonal and interpersonal relationships and in our relation to the Creator. We are often damaged and divided along the lines of culture, ethnicity, religion, gender, social status. A just act is an act that brings about repair.

5.2 But to repair **entails love**, the love with which God cares for and loves us. Love here is not as an affectionate emotion, but as King said 'understanding goodwill', love which exists at the core of our being, our infinite ability to move beyond our existential situation. Love here is understood also as reconciliation. Dr King said:

The self cannot be self without other selves... The worth of an individual does not lie in the measure of his intellect, his ethnic origin, or his social position. Human worth lies in relatedness to God.⁵

Ghandi says: 'Hatred ever kills, love never dies; such is the vast difference between the two. What is obtained by love is retained for all time. What is obtained by hatred proves a burden in reality for it increases hatred.' The flawed principles upon which injustice is based seek to invert the imperative of

⁵ *A Testament of Hope*, p. 119.

God's just act and stress dualistic and contradictory conceptions of the world. But as Amos declares: 'Let justice roll down like waters and righteousness like a mighty stream' (Amos 5:24).

5.3 The churches therefore stress the need for Europe to have open minds to face the challenges, and embrace the opportunities that come with immigration within the sphere of integration. This brings benefits both to people who are migrants and the entire host communities.

5.4 Reparation is a **key aspect of reconciliation** which means that in order to live with equality and difference, which brings justice and peace, we must never fear the struggle. In his inaugural address as President of South Africa, Nelson Mandela urged:

Our deepest fear is not that we are inadequate.
 Our deepest fear is that we are powerful beyond measure.
 It is our light, not our darkness, that most frightens us.
 We ask ourselves, "Who am I to be brilliant,
 gorgeous, talented and famous?"
 We were born to make manifest the glory of God that is within us.
 It's not just in some of us.
 It's in everyone, and as we let our own light shine,
 we consciously give other people permission to do the same.
 As we are liberated from our own fear,
 our presence automatically liberates others. (Marianne Williamson)

Respect, Responsibility and Reparation are just and peaceful attitudes and acts, and are, therefore, what people must do in creating a sustainable unified new Europe. It assists in maintaining faithfulness to the new gift of freedom to do justice everywhere. Charta Oecumenica: 'Full equality and integration of every minority is essential for the maintenance of peace and democracy.'⁶

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⁶ Charter Oecumenica 2001 III: 7.