

Willem A. Visser 't Hooft - The Regeneration of Europe - July 1949

Bishop Neill

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The Regeneration of Europe

W. A. VISSER 'T HOOFT

In July 1944 there appeared in the press a statement that the representatives of the European resistance movements had met in a city in occupied Europe and had issued a common manifesto. This news item was not wholly correct, for the meetings had in fact taken place in my home in Geneva; the indication of another place was simply a matter of war strategy. The group was composed of men and women most of whom had played a considerable rôle in their national resistance movements. Eastern and Western Europe were both represented. There were several Italians and after a difficult discussion a representative of the German resistance was finally admitted.

Unity born in war-time

What did this queer combination of people from very different national, social and political backgrounds have to say together? They agreed in this positive conviction laid down in their manifesto in the following words: "So much sacrifice and suffering undergone for the same cause have created among us a sense of brotherhood and have created a new consciousness of the European solidarity of free peoples — a solidarity the maintenance of which will be one of the essential foundations of the peace." In its later sessions the group drew up a detailed plan for a European Federation which was submitted to the resistance-councils in several countries.

Before the war this concept of a federated Europe had remained a somewhat abstract notion. The enthusiasm of Coudenhove-Kalergi and the oratory of Briand had not succeeded in making it a vital ideal. But during

the war and in the ranks of the resistance it had become an *idée-force*, a dynamic conviction for which many were ready to fight. It came alive at the same time in the hearts and minds of the intellectual leaders of the resistance movements : Teitgen, Philip, Courtin in France ; Brugmans in Holland ; the group of von Moltke and von Trott in Germany ; the Federalists in Italy. It is therefore by no means an accident that so many of the present day leaders of the European movements are former comrades of the resistance days.

Nevertheless, the immediate post-war days did not prove to be a favourable moment for realising the new European ideal. After all, the resistance had only been a relatively small section of the nations concerned, and within the resistance movement only the élite had really become aware of the new task and the new opportunity. Among the masses nationalism was at its height ; the need to keep on the right side of Russia (which was deeply suspicious of European Unity) kept the governments from taking action. There was little readiness to consider giving any place to Germany in a European Federation. And how could Europe be federated without Germany ?

Unity forced upon Europe

In the last two years, however, the situation has changed again. Today for the first time in history European Unity becomes a matter of *practical politics*. It is true that this development affects only a part of Europe, but in that part at least definite steps are taken to set up a new inter-governmental structure. What lies behind this ? Does it mean that after all the burning conviction of the resistance leaders has resulted in a mobilisation of the masses, and that the peoples concerned are now at last clamouring for an integration of their long disrupted continent ? Unfortunately not. The *real* motives which inspire the governments to go ahead in this direction are much more pragmatical. The truth is that even this little beginning is forced upon them by

realities and conditions which play upon Europe from the outside. The determining factors are on the one hand the Marshall plan and on the other hand the pressure exerted by Russia. Compared with these factors, the inner urge, the desire for and conviction about European unity is still extremely weak.

The importance of the Marshall Plan for European Unity cannot easily be exaggerated. Secretary Marshall showed remarkable political imagination when he formulated in June 1947 the plan to aid the European nations, if these nations should work out a *joint* programme, and when he made it clear that America would not deal with the European nations on a national but on a *regional* basis. For thus he exerted a pressure on Europe which is the only pressure acceptable to self-respecting nations — the pressure to help themselves by acting together. Moreover in this way America renders a great service to itself as well as to Europe. An economically sound and politically stable Europe is also an essential American concern. There is no need to look for ulterior motives behind the Marshall plan because the object of the plan is so clearly in the interest of both Continents.

The other factor is the pressure exerted by Soviet Russia — a pressure which is vastly increased by the presence in all European countries of parties which are directly related to and effectively controlled by the Moscow authorities. It is natural that that part of Europe which is not in the zone of direct Russian influence seeks to strengthen its position by measures of common political, economic and military defence. The memory of a great power which succeeded for a time in its plan to dominate the whole of Europe by attacking the nations one by one is so fresh in the minds of the peoples that they need little convincing to make common cause in this respect.

Thus the two main factors which are in the process of uniting an important part of Europe are fundament-

ally *external* factors. Europe owes its beginnings of

integration to the political constellation in which America and Russia have emerged as the decisive forces. This is a dangerous situation. It is dangerous because a forced unity is not a lasting unity. It is also dangerous because a unity imposed by external pressure, rather than grown up from within, may easily become the wrong kind of unity — a unity which may destroy essential elements of the European heritage.

For the question is not alone whether Europe will live but for what purpose it will live. At the present moment that question is still unanswered. We are in process of building a European skeleton without a soul — an economic, military and political structure without substance; a Europe which will be an object rather than a subject of world history and which may therefore be influenced by every new wind of ideology.

False Europes

The life and death question for Europe is then whether it can rediscover its own *specific* mission. Europe must therefore not become the prey of Russian communism. And that not because we must at all costs save the remnants of a bourgeois and capitalist civilisation; but because the truths for which Europe has stood in history and which are as true today as ever would be obscured and denied. Communism has been invented in Europe. In its original and purely philosophical form it was a heresy which showed in its dream of freedom that it was inwardly related to the doctrines against which it protested. But in the form in which it has been applied in Russia it has become increasingly a revolt against the very conception of man for which all creative forces in Europe have stood in one way or another.

But Europe must not become an outpost of America either. America and Europe have much in common,

but they have different vocations. Europe carries a heritage made up of much error and conflict, but also of much suffering; of much greed and shame but also of much sacrifice in the struggle for truth. Europe is

The Regeneration of Europe

5

responsible for this heritage and it would deny it, if it let itself be tempted by the easier ways of a young, less experienced civilisation. Europe has moreover been led out of the stage of liberalism and capitalism, partly by circumstance and partly by insight. In the present hour of European history, to be an unrepentant capitalist is to be blind. In America, however, it would seem that capitalism has not yet come to the end of its possibilities.

But Europe must not let itself be united by the obsession of mere negations and fears. There is today less danger of strong anti-American feelings but there is truth in Reinhold Niebuhr's statement: "They all fear America." There is much hidden resentment of the easily acquired wealth of America and its superiority complexes. But such attitudes are sterile. It is in the interest of Europe and of the whole world that we do nothing to throw America back upon itself. Europe's task is precisely to strengthen that part of America which has a genuine sense of responsibility for the old world, and that is not done by fear but by an appeal to the generous and far-sighted among the American people. And though Europe and America may live in different social and economic stages, they have important common values to defend *together*.

The danger of a purely anti-Russian bloc formation and of a unity directed *against* communism is much more acute. But it is also a temptation. The more we get obsessed by the great Eastern power the less we are able to see our own situation clearly. The present propaganda is already well on the way to distort our sense of proportion and our scale of values. There is already too much willingness to accept any ally, any

slogan, any method as long as they will be useful in the cold war. But all this undermines the very cause which Europe has to defend. The only true defence against communism is to eliminate the reasons for its attractiveness to the masses. The quickest way to make it inevitable is to entrench Europe in the *status quo*.

Moreover, the part of Europe which is now working out its unity must never forget that it is no more than a *part* of Europe. Somehow and at some time it will have to win back the European countries behind the curtain, and it will have to come to a true understanding with Russia. And there is no more pressing task than the re-integration of the millions of communists in western Europe itself. This it will only be able to do if it does not remain deaf to the real challenge of communism and seeks to discover how it can meet the longing for comradeship and the cry for justice which make the appeal of communism so very strong. A Europe which seeks its principle of unity in anti-communism remains finally a Europe divided against itself.

There remains the possibility that Europe becomes a battle-field of the world's most powerful ideologies. But that would be the worst of all. The terrible thing about these giant forces is that to a large extent they radicalise and absolutise each other. The fear of America makes Russia increasingly totalitarian. The reaction against Russia tends to make America more resolute and self-conscious in its rejection of socialist conceptions. This sterile dialogue will lead to armed conflict some day, unless a new element enters into the situation. And woe to those over whose heads and in whose territory the conflict is fought out. Europeans who desire war and work for it are dangerous fools. For war might well mean the end of Europe. And the real problem — the problem how to overcome nihilism in its various

forms — would not be solved but aggravated by it. On the other hand, it is conceivable that, if Europe on the one hand and Asia on the other develop a third conception of society and become independent spiritual and social forces, they may take some of the poison out of the antagonism of the super-powers. In the present situation of radical misunderstanding between these powers — a misunderstanding which makes any constructive conversation impossible — there is a crying need for mutual interpretation by a third party.

The judgment

But what then is the true *raison d'être* of European unity? What is the basis on which Europe can stand, be itself and accomplish its mission in the world? That question cannot be answered by historical or cultural analysis alone. For Europe has been visited by a great and terrible judgment of God. And the present mission of Europe can only be understood if we grasp the meaning of that judgment.

According to the prophetic vision of history — the biblical vision — each civilisation has its peculiar mandate from God. But if it ceases to let itself be used as an *instrument*, if the divine mandate is turned into a pretext for self-assertion and pride, then judgment overtakes it. It is humiliated until the world exclaims: "Is this the one that made the earth to tremble, that did shake kingdoms?" (Isaiah 14: 16). That is exactly what has happened to Europe. It had received the light of the Gospel in order to pass it on to the world. It owes its very life, its spiritual and moral energies to that Gospel. This little continent had thus become the spiritual and political centre of the world. But it said like Assur in Isaiah's prophecy: "By the strength of *my* hand I have done it and by *my* wisdom... My hand both found as a nest the riches of the people: and as

hath found as a nest the riches of the people: and as one gathered eggs that are left have I gathered all the earth and there was none that moved the wing or opened the mouth or peeped" (a most adequate description of the era of imperialism). But the Lord has come to ask: "Shall the axe boast itself against him that heweth therewith? Therefore shall the Lord send among his fat ones leanness and under his glory he shall kindle a burning like the burning of a fire" (Isaiah 10). Europe — Assur is judged — its pride must be broken. It must be reminded that it is *not* by its own force that it performed its historic mission. But judgment does not necessarily mean extinction. It *may* mean a new

beginning. For the Lord even scourgeth those whom He loves.

Such new beginning depends on the reality of repentance — *concrete* repentance which is the clear realisation of the sin which has been committed and the readiness to accept renewal. The sin of civilisations is always the same. It is to treat a God-given grace as a man-made achievement, to use that grace for self-aggrandizement instead of service.

Think of what Europe had received! Through its faith in a Creator-God Who had revealed Himself in history, Europe alone possessed that sense of the meaningfulness of history which made it the dynamic, creative force among the continents. All that Europe has given to the world is somehow rooted in that fundamental conviction which even secularists and communists have inherited from the Hebrew-Christian sources. But Europe's dynamism which was destined to be a blessing to the nations has become self-centred and therefore distorted. The *charisma* was interpreted as a privilege and as conferring the right to dominate and to exploit. Thus the salt lost its taste. And the very continent that had stood for meaning in a meaningless world is today the continent in which nihilism triumphs.

today, the continent in which humanism triumphed.

Or take this other example. Europe received the gift of the *Church* : that is of a spiritual society which was called to be a reminder of the Kingdom of God — and which was thus to keep in check and to counteract the political societies. But that Church began to think in terms of its own perpetuation as an institution and to act as a state. And when it broke in fragments the very sense of the one Church was lost and the so-called national Churches ceased even the attempt to give shape to the life of Europe as a whole. The result is that the attempts to fashion Europe again have been made in our time by demonic churches, by the substitute religions of national socialism and communism.

The one hopeful element in this situation is precisely that all these roads have proved to be blind alleys.

The Regeneration of Europe

9

Europe must now cease to be, or accept *metanoia* — a turning round. The spiritual forces which Europe received are exhausted. But that very moment of exhaustion may be the moment of rediscovery. The judgment has come — Europe is humiliated ; but that is the time when men may wake up.

That is then the unique thing about Europe today, that it is a civilisation at the end of its wits, a civilisation under judgment but therefore also a civilisation which in its life and death struggle may yet choose *life*. That makes it different from America which is not yet shaken to its foundations, or from Asia and Africa which are just beginning to enter into world-history.

And this is the bond of unity in Europe — this great common humiliation, this deadlock which calls for a new beginning, this terrible demonstration that the old has gone and that, if Europe is to live, there must be a new start. None of the old forces can do the trick. Roman Catholicism has thought too much in terms of the maintenance of its institutional life and has been too reactionary ; Protestantism too divided and too

abstractly spiritual ; liberalism too superficial and too individualistic ; scientific rationalism too bloodless ; socialism too opportunistic ; nationalism too destructive. And the classes are equally played out — above all the bourgeoisie with its eternal pursuit of false securities but also the labour class with its understandable but nevertheless sterile resentments.

New Foundations

That is why the time is ripe to work at *new* spiritual foundations. No mere patch-work can do what needs to be done. All movements of restoration, of clinging to the past are proving or will prove inadequate to the task. There are strong reactionary forces at work in Europe today, but none of them has anything like the imaginative conception of the European future which is required today. Only those who have drawn the

full consequences from the judgment of God will be able to speak to the condition of present-day Europe. The really important centres of life in Europe are therefore not the noisy ones and those which get the greatest publicity. It is not in conferences of the ministers of foreign affairs, not in the parliaments, not in the college of the cardinals and not in the synods of the Protestant Churches that one sees the new Europe taking shape. For in those places men speak and act *as if* they were still standing on a more or less solid foundation. It is rather where small groups of men and women realise that they are confronted by a great vacuum and begin to fill that vacuum. It is where attempts are made to break through the general deadlock in which all the so-called spiritual forces find themselves. Where socialists realise that it is not enough to give bread to the masses ; where Christians realise that it is not enough to give them moral advice or correct theology. It is where Roman or Protestant members of the clergy and the

laity leave their well defended fortresses and enter into the vast no-man's land in which so many hungry souls are wandering about. It is where evangelism is not merely an attempt to acquaint outsiders with the peculiar forms of language and life of the Christian Churches but where it is an imaginative attempt to enter into the life of the modern pagan with a Gospel which is changeless in substance but constantly changing in its form of expression. It is where immobile congregations imprisoned in an antiquated bourgeois mentality and without any true sense of fellowship are transformed in living cells of infectious common Christian living. Europe is also built where the Churches of nations which have been torn apart find the bond of community in Christ stronger than all that stands between them. It is where Churches of differing confession stand together in order to make a common witness to their Lord. Thank God these things happen in Europe. But so far they are only small beginnings. And they may yet be smothered by the wild currents of nihilism and ideological

passion. In any case, our task is to find out where this work at the foundations is being done and to help as much as we can.

That is also the true *raison d'être* of reconstruction and inter-church aid in Europe. That is why our task is not merely a task of post-war rehabilitation. That is why the most important job is still before us. Our task must be understood in the great historical perspective of the spiritual regeneration of Europe as a whole. And that is also why our task must be performed *ecumenically* — for in this cause all Christian Churches are challenged *together*.

The third race

But how can we give more definite content to such

a conception of Europe? What will be the concrete political and social substance with which this new Europe is to be filled?

Or to put it in the simple language of the man in the street: "We know what the reactionaries want; we know what the communists stand for. But we have no idea what you stand for?" This is a real challenge. It is indeed a tragedy that those spiritual forces in Europe which are on the lookout for new solutions and refuse to accept the alternative of order *or* justice or of freedom *or* community — have so far remained so abstract, inarticulate and therefore been unable to give political and social shape to their insights. But it must be remembered that the new, the as yet unrealised is always at a terrible disadvantage as over against the solid established systems. And what is more: in this present bi-dimensional world, in which we live under the daily suggestion that there are only two possibilities: the Eastern or the Western system — the voice of those who say: "*tertium datur*" — "there is a better way" — makes in the very nature of the case the impression of a voice crying in the wilderness. A dialectical attitude, an attitude of independence

in relation to the dominating ideologies seems like neutrality in a life and death struggle or as spectatorship when participation is the only virile attitude.

But it *need* not be. On the contrary: it *may* be the one and only positive attitude. It is a positive attitude, if it is based on the conviction that the two great ideologies now engaged in the great world-battle are *both* destined to pass away because neither is able to perform the task of the hour which is to give to the European masses that new sense of meaningful existence without which they cannot live. For life is *not* meaningful, if justice swallows freedom. Nor is it meaningful if a formal freedom makes justice illusory. Life is meaning-

ful when in the terminology of the Amsterdam Assembly men live in a responsible society — a society where freedom and justice have been brought in to some harmony with each other.

The old Christians were called by their adversaries a *tertium genus* — a third race. For they broke through the accepted categories of the classical world and produced new forces which shaped a completely different world. In their time they seemed an ineffective “third force” which would not let itself be pigeon-holed by the current ideologies. It would seem that our generation of Christians has reason to remember that example. For thus we see that this particular third force is not a weak compromise and not a middle position between two opposing standpoints. The example of the “third race” in early Christian times shows us that in this respect we must not think in terms of space but in terms of time. For what characterised these early Christians? Their peculiar sense of history, their conviction that the action of God in Christ had brought a completely new faith into the world and that the Church created by that action itself represented newness. In other words, the Christian force when it operates as it should is the force of *tomorrow*. It is the attitude which does not seek to return to the past or to adapt itself to the present but to point to the new day.

The responsibility of the Churches

Let nobody think that that means running away from the concrete tasks. On the contrary — it means precisely tackling these tasks realistically. In a world in which nations and parties act so very largely with their eyes on the propagandistic effect there is a crying need for men and women who conceive of political and social life simply in terms of the meeting of human needs. Berdiaev says that in the name of the proletarian

ideology real, empirical workmen may be shot. And in the name of the ideology of free enterprise very real slavery may be organised. In a world where religion is relativised and politics absolutised there is a great need for men who stand on the foundation of absolute unshakable truth but are therefore able to see politics in the true proportions, that is as a sphere of very provisional and very temporary adjustments. The best thing that Europe can do politically is to "de-ideologise" itself and thus to help the rest of the world to get out of that great obsession about the eternal value of their political systems. Now the ideological passions represent really the modern substitute for the spiritual life. And so we cannot get rid of them unless the great vacuum which they try to fill is filled in another and better way. Thus we come back to the solemn responsibility of the Churches.

If it is true that Europe can only live, if it finds again its *own* way of life ; if it is true that that way of life cannot be one of the old ways and cannot be the way of one of the powerful ideologies ; if it is further true that we can only overcome the ideological temptation by the message of a God before Whom things fall into their proper places and politics becomes a humble service — then the Christian Church has indeed an awful responsibility in Europe. Then it is a matter of life and death whether it can get out of its terrible isolation from the life of the masses, whether it can escape from its self-made prison of conservatism and

self-centredness and whether it can perform its apostolate among the masses that have no shepherd. The remarkable movements of life within the European Churches — especially during the war — the return to the Bible as the source of new insight and life — the great stirrings in theology — are reasons for hope. But it is by no means the adequate answer of the Church to God's call in the present situation. For that call — as it comes to

us through the disoriented, perplexed and often despairing masses around us — demands more. It demands not merely the renewal of the Church within its own realm but above all the outgoing of the Church to the world. We need today in Europe a movement of evangelism which in intensity, in readiness to sacrifice and above all in imaginative approach to the masses is comparable to the movement of foreign missions in the 19th century.

We dare not take it for granted that Europe has a future. We have no assurance that the gates of hell shall not prevail against it. We must count with the possibility that Europe's rôle is played out. But if that happens — God grant that it may not be owing to the failure of the Church in our day and generation. It may be that God sees Europe as the man who refused to use the talent which was given to him. In that case, Europe has no further task. But it may also be that God sees it as a prodigal son whom He would receive back. The Christian Church must hope and pray that the Father will once more receive this son, if after long wanderings he repents and returns home.

SECRET AND CONFIDENTIAL

Notes on conversations with

- 1) Father van der Mensbrugge (Paris)
- 2) Mrs. G.G.Kullman (Geneva)

On June 23 Father van der Mensbrugge came to tell me of his conversations with Metropolitan Nicholas of Moscow during the latter's stay in Paris. Father v.d.M. emphasised strongly that the Metropolitan had given explicit permission to the Orthodox in the West to collaborate with the ecumenical movement .

On the same day Mrs.Kullman came to see me and gave a detailed account of her conversation with Metropolitan Nicholas .

The Metropolitan had stated that at the Patriarchate they were deeply interested in the ecumenical movement, but that they were not well informed . He had asked many questions and Mrs.K. had given him a detailed account of the attitude of certain leaders of the World Council, especially the attitude of the General Secretary. The Metropolitan had thanked her several times for this information .

He had stated quite clearly that the Orthodox in the West should feel free to collaborate with the ecumenical movement .

Mrs.K. had raised the question as to whether the link with the Moscow patriarchate had any political implications . The Metropolitan had denied this. The relations between Orthodox in the West and the Patriarchate were to be conceived exclusively as canonical , mystical and spiritual . And there was no political obligation of any kind in the membership of a Moscow-related Church .

The Metropolitan had said that the religious revival in Russia (also among youth) was such that it exceeded the highest expectations and that the Church authorities were overwhelmed by it . In fact they were quite concerned that this turning to the Church might have unfavourable repercussions. They would have preferred to have the religious movement develop in a less visible and more secret manner . The political authorities might well use the present revival as an argument for increasing the pressure on the Church . He asked therefore that no public reference be made to these developments in Russia , so as to avoid dangerous reactions .

V 't H.

REPORT ON BEX CONFERENCE

The Regeneration of Europe
by W.A. Visser 't Hooft

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