

God is greater

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Kloster Kappel June 9, 2016.

For many years Israel has been one of the countries taking part in the Eurovision Song Contest. According to most definitions Israel is not geographically part of Europe. Georgia is also taking part, far out east, but on the other hand it is for millennia part of Christendom. This year even Australia took part, as some sort of Honorary Europeans. Europe seems to be attractive, at least for the music industry. I know there are discussions about expanding the contest also to North America, where the finals in fact were broadcasted already this spring. Or perhaps it isn't Europe which is attractive but the music? But on the other hand: the fact that there is a common musical taste reveals something about a common discourse. What of this is Europe, money, music, or what are simply human basic obsessions with love and all that?

Well, I for sure don't know, but obviously there is a common European discourse, or rather several common discourses, that churches too have to relate to. Popular music is a public discourse, it is a combination of things coming from above, from music producers and others, and of shared interest and co-creation among the public.

A popularly based and public arena for the Europeans who share a Christian commitment sounds like a good thing to me but I am sure there are many things you have to think thoroughly about before you get set.

For example: Is Europe falling apart or is it integrating? Are we now witnessing the end of the great European saga of growing together? Nationalism steps out on the scene in a way scaring to many of us. Or are these reactions reactions which have to come when a strong development continues, in this case towards a more integrated Europe? Well, what do you think?

Let me now continue with five parts: Why Europe, What Europe, The Trinity, The Church and, finally, Your Plan.

Why Europe?

Because we are used to it is an acceptable answer, I think, but it would only be given by those Europeans who experience Europe as a positive thing. All Europeans surely don't look at it that way. Too many feel that Europe has made their lives more complicated, more limited and more threatening to their traditions and lives.

Those of us who favor the European ideas and institutions, on the other hand, often think that the wider communion will build peace, make room for local diversity and freedom and that common political and judicial frameworks will fence in the greediest forces of raw capitalism. Only together can we stand up for human rights and rule of law.

But honestly, many of us, who want to think that way, are presently very, very disappointed and worried. Where is the solidarity between our countries when thousands seek refuge? I know we cannot have open borders – but we need to share burdens. I know living standards differ between countries and that cannot be leveled off easily but living standard and human rights are not the same thing. Human Rights are universal. We are also worried because of the silence about basic, important values, because of the continuing democratic deficit, because of a challenged credibility of politics and politicians and because of the lack of expressed inspiring goals for the European institutions.

Many of the European institutions were born out of disasters. When disorder and humiliation had replaced order and decency it became clear to many that something new had to be built. You don't miss your cow until the booth is empty, as the traditional saying goes, at least in my land. But now it seems as if those memories from the wars, from colonialism and totalitarianism are lost by far too many.

Our responsibilities, as humans – and Europeans, are immense. Our resources are beyond the limits we usually recognize. Our knowledge is unevenly divided and our wisdom even more so. Our traditions can be challenging in all kinds of ways – but traditions are there, and they always have to be built upon, in order to form a future. Built upon but transformed. That is what we have done with them, all through history, to lesser or greater degrees. Our responsibility is to continue that, with knowledge and wisdom.

Christians and other people of God should still be guided by the recurring and central words, found in the beginning, in the middle and at the end of the Bible. *“You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your strength, and with all your mind; and your neighbor as yourself.”* Neighbors are constantly multiplying as the neighborhood is growing. Family, village, province, country, Europe and the entire inhabited world – *oikoumene*.

The Great Commandment is a commandment for Christians *and* for all other people of God. And all other people of good will, not believing in God, surely have to be guided by the second part of the commandment: *Love your neighbor as yourself*.

As a theologian and church-leader I am liberal enough to spell this out as our common ground. It is also a constructive ground. When time has moved on, we do see, in hindsight, that this is precisely how responsible churches and people of God have tried to act. It has involved change. Change, not without discussion, not without conflicts. No, of course not. That is the way all matters in life, not least religious matters, have to be dealt with.

Responsible people of God and responsible churches have also realized that God works in manifold ways. Oftentimes the church has been far less important for the actual implementation of the will of God, than other institutions, groups and individuals. The church has instead been more into the interpretation and maybe discernment of what actually could be God's work and will. That is the way it very well could be!

What Europe?

In the ecumenical movement we constantly live with the tension between Europe as EU or as those territories covered by the European Institutions. Europe easily is seen as part of the West, but Europe

sure is more than that. CEC must go beyond the demarcation lines between Orthodoxy, Roman-Catholicism and the reformed traditions, if it is to be relevant for peace and understanding.

Five friends and I keep on trying to find out what is Europe. We have travelled to the periphery and we have tried to find centers. I must admit that the studies have varied in depth and the intensity hasn't been that impressive. But by now we know very much about different beers, wine and other drinks, and also about local dishes and monuments. We have read some history and listened to each other and others lecturing, trying to learn and teach. We know so much more by now – and therefore we all realize how little we know by now and how dependent upon our pre-understandings we have been and are. All six of us have different academic backgrounds. With different backgrounds different things do become visible, sometimes remembered – often forgotten.

Is it the universities which have developed what we deem as Europe? Is it the monasteries that are the deciding factor? Is it the Roman legal tradition? Is it the renaissance? Is it the expansionism? Is it the nationalism? Is it the four seasons? Is it The Migration Period or the many migration periods, including the present one? Or is the wars? Well, by now I am sure it is none of them separately and perhaps not even in combination.

On the other hand I have heard so many Europeans moving back from Asia, Africa and the Americas, not to their European country of origin but to some other European country, saying that this is to come home. They discover shared traditions and world-views which carry a feeling of home and inclusion. But which are these factors, really, and what do they go back to?

I still don't know, but I might test an idea on you. One can surely never find a single reason but I think one prominent reason, which hardly anyone talks about, could be the Trinity. The Holy Trinity: God, who is Father, Son and Holy Spirit. Before the Enlightenment, Europe was seldom referred to as Europe. Instead it was called Christendom. A Christendom characterized by its belief in the Holy Trinity.

The Trinity

God; Father, Son and Holy Spirit, that concept and reality, is probably a prerequisite for the most successful of Christian off-springs and exports: The idea that there is something secular, that culture and religion is not totally the same.

My successor as primate of Church of Sweden has her motto from the First Letter of S:t John 3:20: *"God is greater than our hearts, and he knows everything."* Actually, on her coat of arms, only "God is greater" is written. In the tense times with growing islamophobia this was brought up by some as a hidden way of allowing Islam into Christianity – and that obscure interpretation spread. God is greater – that must be Allahu akbar! Well, I guess all Arabic-speaking Christians would read out the sentence *"God is greater than our hearts, and he knows everything"* using the words Allahu akbar, but that is because Allah is the name of the God-head in Arabic. It sure is for Christians who speak Arabic, and, later on, it also became the name Muslims use.

When Archbishop Antje uses this, it is of course to remind us that God goes beyond. God goes beyond our understanding, both of justice and compassion, both of power and love, both of magnitude and humility. God goes beyond. God is more. And more is less – and less is more. God goes beyond.

God is more than the reality of any society. God is even more than the ideals of any society. God is more than what can be encompassed by any church. We want to lift up God but we know that none of us can come close to understanding God without both a Theology of Glory and a Theology of the Cross. God will never stay limited by our interpretations.

The concept of the Trinity offers help when we try to understand God and the many sides of God, which often are, at least on the surface, in conflict with each other. But the three persons are united by love. What by us might be seen as conflict, impossible to solve, is indeed expressions of a God who always goes beyond – and whose essence is love.

Many of our religious traditions just celebrated Holy Trinity, one week after Pentecost. The sermon I listened to was given by a retired bishop. She gave us all the common explanations about God as One and One in Three, but concluded: These explanations are hard to understand. They don't make me any wiser. Well, I could have challenged her there, because I think they do make us a bit wiser, but her point was somewhat different, and that one I fully agree upon. She said that if we make God explainable and graspable we will be left with a small God, a God of our own projections. And what good is there with a tiny God like that? A tiny God like that is frightening and dangerous, because that is a God whom we use for our ambitions. A constructed God of that kind can make people do the most horrible things. History and current times show us that.

God goes beyond. Therefore we cannot identify God's will with any system, society or ideology. Systems, societies and ideologies might be, and usually are, necessary steps on the way, but never the fulfilled reality. Of course religion is culture and culture is religion to a far greater degree than the current discussions mostly reflect, but the concept of Trinity also gives a strong reason to distinguish between them. God goes beyond and is the judge of all systems, societies and ideologies – and churches – if we allow God to be that judge and also our own personal judge – and Savior. That, I think, is an extremely important point for the future of Europe. Europe needs many personal Christians who uphold the basic value of love, love of God and love of neighbors, and HOPE.

The Church

Secularization means that church is released from the necessity to defend and explain what societies with Christian roots have achieved. That is a relief for many of us, but we are not allowed to leave it only with that. We, as Christians, are here to examine ourselves and our societies, to realize that God always goes beyond and to make use of the power that lies in God's forgiveness, given to us through Christ Jesus. Creative criticism. We are supposed to be in the world – but not of the world...

I have already mentioned reasons to stretch out the meaning of neighbor in the Great Commandment in a changing and growingly interdependent world. Let me elaborate that a bit more. I am convinced that this movement from the isolated unit to the larger community will continue, but with variation in speed and recurring backlashes. Europe is with other words here to stay. Churches, not least protestant National Churches, have often in history been bearers and fortifiers of forceful nationalism. On the other hand Christendom has always gone beyond nations. Ever since Peter's revelation in Acts, Paul's mission and the apostolic meeting in Jerusalem, knowledge about Christ and becoming part of the Body of Christ is something for all people, for *oikoumene*. Already in the Hebrew Bible that knowledge is there, the God of the chosen people is also the God of all creation, upholder of all there is. Anchoring Human Rights in our communality, regardless of nation and so called race, is a strong antidote to

nationalism and distrust, and the Christian Churches have better access to this remedy than anyone else. “We believe in one God the Father Almighty, Maker of heaven and earth, and of all things visible and invisible”, as the Nicene Creed sets out.

The Great Commandment also has to be stretched out in time. The neighbors don't only exist now. They have existed, and they will, God willing, continue to exist. While the concept of a wider world has become more included in politics, ethics and business, through a geographical stretch-out of the neighborhood, at least as long that doesn't challenge our wealth and comfort, the understanding of a need for a larger time-span, seems to shrink. We talk more about coming generations, climate and resources, the need for sustainable civilizations etcetera but mostly the time-perspectives have shrunk. Financial reports are still given per year or quarter of a year and costs for pollution and use of non-renewable resources are never on the balance sheets. With the dynamic times of today, today also becomes extremely interesting and involving. Yesterday and the farther future gradually disappear.

The church has another view of time. We know history is long and it might continue for long also, God willing. With the Trinity we encounter eternity. “Glory be to the Father, and to the Son, and to the Holy Spirit. As it was in the beginning, is now, and ever shall be, world without end. Amen” The last sentence doesn't say that things won't change. Of course they will, for sure. It says that in all times what is to be thanked for is to be thanked God for. And we are to relate to that. Church has a living relation to history. It is our responsibility to lift that up, in order to put our development and situation into a larger perspective, into an expanded time frame.

That was two reasons why Church is necessary on present day Europe and why a Christian Convention might be a good idea. There are many more.

Let me mention one. An immanent (as opposite to transcendent) world-view runs the risk of absolutifying values that really are not more than means. Means are easier to measure than love, quality of life, sense of belonging and so on. Then means easily are seen as ends – and change might then appear as very threatening. The Church could uphold a transcendent world-view, which make change possible and linked to hope. Immanent world-views easily become conservative, quite the opposite of what many think.

Today's Europe needs the Church. Tomorrow's Europe will need it even more.

Your Plan

That is what you are here to discuss. To me it seems important and possible. I have understood that the Graz-meeting is seen as a good example and the *Kirchentag* even more so. I myself have never taken part in any German *Kirchentag*. But I have met many people who have, and they have all been overwhelmed by the richness, the wide perspectives, the spirituality, the quality, the media coverage and the room for grass-root initiatives. But Germany is already one. It is already a shared discourse. Can that feeling be expanded to the rest of Europe? Maybe it can, but a European meeting must then also be a factor itself in constructing this discourse as the discourse still is weak or not even there yet.

I took part in the Graz-meeting and I was not overwhelmed. It was good but, simply, it was too far from my situation.

This plan for a European Christian Convention, as I understand it, is something you want to build without being locked up by the present leadership of the churches. All right. There are good reasons for that – but you also have to realize that outside *der deutschen Sprachraum* it is probably impossible to reach the church-people to any extent, without using the channels of the churches. Some of these churches are used to free debate and ongoing discussions, don't fear them, others are not. The ecumenical movement surely is, though.

So, may your coming deliberations be blessed!