

United in Diversity: A Christian view on the European Union

Sander Luitwieler, Transcript from Breakfast seminar ILE, 5 April 2014

Perhaps the most important book I've ever read is "Life of the Beloved" of Henri Nouwen (in Dutch 'Een parel in Gods ogen'). Maybe you have read the book or seen the three sermons on which it is based.

In this book, Nouwen argues that my identity is not what I do, not what I have and not what other people think of me, but that I am the Beloved child of God. The same words that the Father said to Jesus when He was baptised He says to each of us: 'You are my Beloved, on you my favor rests'.

Following in the footsteps of Henri Nouwen, I believe that life is essentially about being and increasingly becoming the Beloved. Step by step, I begin to realise that God loved me first. I would like His love to be the basis of my love for myself, for God and for others. Indeed, as Nouwen points out, I am chosen, blessed and broken to be given.

What has this to do with Europe and the EU? Everything! Just as God's love motivates us in our personal lives, it may also motivate our attitude towards Europe and the EU. And just as God's love is the basis of my personal identity, it is also an important source of Europe's identity and culture, as we shall see.

Europe stands at a crossroads. The euro crisis moves the debate on the future direction of the EU to the forefront. Participants in this debate are inclined to take an extreme position. We see this also in the current campaign for the European Parliament elections of 22-25 May.

For example, the prominent Members of European Parliament Daniel Cohn-Bendit and Guy Verhofstadt maintain that this is the moment to make a quantum

leap in the direction of a 'genuinely united and federal Europe'. Populist parties, on the other hand, cling to the nation state: Vlaams Belang, Front National, PVV. What position should Christians take? For a Christian, neither the nation state nor a supranational EU is in itself problematic. At the same time, a Christian needs to cling neither to the nation-state nor to the EU.

There is an alternative. This is a positive-critical view, which combines the importance of integration with the attachment to the cultural diversity between the member states. The point is to find the proper balance between unity and diversity. Let 'united in diversity' precisely be the official motto of the EU. How does a positive-critical view look like? What perspective does it present on the euro crisis and for the future of the EU?

First of all, it is good to acknowledge openly the significance of various traditions and their contribution to Europe's culture and values. Five traditions have particularly made an important contribution: the Greco-Roman tradition, the Judeo-Christian tradition, Humanism, the Enlightenment and Romanticism.

According to the Canadian philosopher Charles Taylor, these traditions have given rise to three sources that are at the core of our Western and also European identity: God's love (*agape*) and grace, reason and what he calls the 'voice of nature' (you may simply call it 'feeling'). Can you imagine which tradition has produced which source?

The five traditions have also produced five common values of Europe: freedom, equality (or rather equal dignity), justice, community and diversity. Europe is a 'community of values'.

The EU is also a community of values. For the 'founding fathers' of the EU, such as Robert Schuman, these values played an important role in striving for European unification. The five values mentioned can also be found in the Treaties of the EU and in the Charter of Fundamental Rights of the EU.

Yet we must also be critical about European culture and about the way in which it deals with its sources and values. In our culture, an individualistic view of man has become increasingly dominant. This stems from the Enlightenment and Romanticism and, in its aftermath, the cultural revolution of the 1960s.

An individualistic view of man has two dimensions, a horizontal and a vertical one. Horizontally, it puts under pressure relationships between people. Vertically, the idea that there are norms or an authority outside man is getting out of sight.

The paradox is, however, that the individualistic person of today is still looking for a larger whole to identify himself with (a collectivity, or collective authority). This may take different forms. For my purposes this morning, two forms are particularly important: economism and nationalism.

The dominance of an individualistic view of man culture raises the question whether we are still able to keep up our common values in Europe and the EU:

- Some values are put under pressure (for example, community, justice?)
- Some values are put into practice in a way that we might find problematic (for example, freedom)
- Finally, are our own sources powerful enough to realise our values or do we need Gods transforming love and grace for this?

From a Christian perspective, there is an alternative: a relational view of man. This view has also a vertical and a horizontal dimension, which is expressed in the two great commandments: 'Love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind. (...). Love your neighbour as yourself'.

God's love for us forms the basis. As a response to God's love, we are able to love God, our fellow man and creation. Through developing these three relationships, we become fully human, finding the 'good life'.

Putting relationships in the centre can overcome the dilemma in our culture between individualism and collectivism and allocate to the five values their proper place. As Stefan Paas puts it:

‘Personhood is not being yourself despite of or prior to relationships (individualism) and neither being yourself as a function of the relationships you find yourself in (collectivism). Personhood means that we find and express our unique self within relationships: being and becoming yourself in, through and thanks to relationships’ (*Vrede stichten*, 2007, p. 187).

Let’s now focus more specifically on the EU. For a Christian, another important reason to be positive about the EU is that it offers opportunities to strive for justice in Europe and globally. God’s call to be fruitful and rule over the earth (the ‘cultural mandate’) does not stop at the borders of our nation-states. It also applies to Europe, yes to the world as a whole.

From a Christian-political perspective, it is the task of the government to strive for ‘public justice’. The EU institutions – the European Commission, the Council of Ministers, the European Parliament, etc. – are increasingly functioning as a common ‘government’ that has significant authority in many policy areas.

This implies that just as the national governments the EU institutions stand in the service of God for the good of the citizens (Romans 13:4). The EU institutions do also have the task to strive for public justice.

What does this mean? Again, I propose to approach this from a relational perspective. From a Christian perspective, ‘justice’ is about right relationships: with God, our fellow man and creation. On this basis, we could make a distinction between personal, social and ecological justice, respectively. The government must create the public conditions for human beings to flourish in these areas.

For the EU, this means that the three types of justice may be translated into three specific objectives in policy-making: peace, well-being and sustainability.

Another important part of striving for public justice is doing justice to the cultural diversity between the member states.

In light of this, we also need to be critical about the EU and how it functions at the moment. First, the economic and financial spheres play a predominant role as a result of the EU's focus on internal market integration and, more recently, its dependence on the financial markets. The political sphere is thus subordinated to the economic and financial spheres. This is at the expense of social and ecological dimensions and non-economic policy areas.

Second and paradoxically, in following the economic and financial logic, the EU institutions are inclined to overstep their boundaries. The EU institutions have developed common policies in more and more areas that threaten to put under pressure the cultural diversity between the member states.

It has to be admitted that the way our European political leaders are dealing with the euro crisis adds to the criticism I just pointed out. The tendency to focus on the economy and the financial markets seems to be strengthened. For our leaders there seems to be no alternative: the only way out of the crisis is more integration, financially, budgetary and economically. As a result, cultural diversity is increasingly put under pressure.

Moreover, the support of the citizens for the European integration process is declining. They don't trust their political leaders anymore and cling to populist, eurosceptical parties. The euro crisis seems to bring to light a lack of solidarity between European citizens.

Yet, I have tried to show this morning that there is an alternative. Out of love for the other and hope for a better world, we can present a positive-critical view. The essence of a Christian view is a relational approach to Europe's values and public justice in the EU.

The challenge is to find a proper balance between unity and diversity. This is expressed well in the EU's own official motto: 'United in diversity'. Now more than ever, European leaders must act according to this motto to lead the EU forward to a flourishing and hopeful future.

The Judeo-Christian tradition opens for us a perspective in which the love of my neighbour is not opposed to self-love, but connected to it because both are rooted in God's affirmation of the human being. Think once again about what Henri Nouwen said at the beginning.

Charles Taylor puts the same point in the following, moving way:

'There is a large element of hope. It is a hope that I see implicit in Judaeo-Christian theism (however terrible the record of its adherents in history), and in its central promise of a divine affirmation of the human, more total than humans can ever attain unaided' (*Sources of the Self*, 1989, p. 521).

For us as Christians and as Christian leaders, our motivation and source is God's love for us and for the world. Let that be our motivation and source as we live our lives and do our work for the good of Europe and the EU.