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Christian Belief between 'History' and 'Contemporary'

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Introduction

My introduction to the EAAE was in September 1986 in Edinburgh. The theme of the conference then was "Equipping God's People". The Office for Christian Education of the Church of Scotland informed us about all methods and materials for courses and programs about the relevance of the Christian faith. Not the Christian faith itself was a problem. Most people in Scottish society in the eighties had had a Christian education and were more or less familiar with the Christian tradition. But for a lot of people a gap has widened more and more between everyday life and the Christian faith. The Christian faith had lost its self-evident relevance for a lot of people in post-war industrialized society. So the Christian education of the church was focused on the relevance of the well-known gospel in the modern society.

Nowadays this approach would be rather useless, at least in the Netherlands, because most people didn't grow up with a Christian education and most people do not know anything about Bible or Christian tradition. In a quarter of a century the situation of church and gospel has changed so fundamentally, that we need a totally other approach for reflecting the Christian faith and Christian education. When this is the case in 25 years, it must be a bit arrogant to pretend to give an overview of the Christian belief between 'history' and 'contemporary', suggesting that it would deal with the history of Christianity as such. I cannot offer you more than a modest impression of developments in The Netherlands since WW II. And I invite you to compare the development in the Netherlands with the developments in your own country.

Two pillars

But before talking about rather recent developments I would like to remind two pillars of Christian education in their situation. Because it can help us to realize that the teaching of Christian faith is an old subject, about which a lot of outstanding men (most men) have thought. We are not the first who think about and we shall not be the last.

Though you may expect, I am not mentioning Maarten Luther and John Calvin, though they both made a marvelous contribution to the understanding of the Christian faith and the Christian education in protestant tradition. But because they both are rather familiar in our tradition I would like to bring to memory two other giants. The first man I would like to mention is Jan Amos Komensky, better known as Jan Amos Comenius, who lived from 1592 till 1670. He was born in what is now Tsjech Republic and grew up in de Bohemian Brotherhood, a protestant denomination, enduring severe persecution in a context of war and terror. He was reflecting the problem of Christian education in an period of each contesting churches, wide spread illiteracy, the absence of social stability, the uncertainty of life. How to talk about God when God has become the cause for war and terror and when all authority to teach God has lost credibility? He developed a method based on experience, on looking around: what do you see in nature and cosmos and society. His method is based on the strong belief in God the Creator of all. Because God created everything, you can see God in everything, but then you must learn to look in the right way. And when we can look in the right way, we see what God has created, how it is meant to be and what we have to do to help realizing this divine intention. His method was an combination of fighting illiteracy, spreading knowledge about nature and developing an ethical attitude in society. But first of all his drive was the Christian education, teaching the love and will of God. In doing this, he had a enormous influence in the development of school system and the theory of education in Europe.

The second to mention is more familiar. It is Immanuel Kant (1724-1804). He had to reflect on Christian belief in the time of the rise of Enlightenment in Europe. There was a growing tension

between belief and reason, faith and science and several philosophers pleaded for the abolition of Christian religion because it was incompatible with the results of science. This plea was reinforced by the rigid position of the churches, with strong support of the states in several European countries. The churches and their theologians rejected all contributions to find a new understanding of the gospel in relation to the new scientific discoveries. In this situation Kant pleaded for adulthood with reference to St. Paul in his letter to the Galatians (chapter 4) in which he mentions "the state of minority". Kant's answer to the question "What is Enlightenment?" is the famous sentence: "It is the way out from the state of minority which we have to blame ourselves." And he continues that all men should have the courage to think for themselves. That means: be self-confident in what you think and at the same time: be self-critical about what you think. So do not listen to church or state or authority without using your own human ability to think.

The Christian belief in the Netherlands after WW II

So far two examples of our common European inheritance. Now I give you a sketch of the development in the Netherlands after WW II. I split up this period in three phases: 1945-1970, 1970-1995, 1995-now.

1945-1970 Restoration

As in most countries in Europe, the Dutch were disoriented after 1945, both in church and society. Youth didn't find guidance with their parents, parents feared the loss of values with their children. Communism had a strong political influence all over Europe, existentialism had a strong influence among intellectuals and students. And after some years of poor living a period of strong economic growth began, with a new rapidly growing industrial sector, stimulating consumerism and making the welfare state possible. New industries with full-continuing-labor processes caused a fundamental change in the social relations in family and church and society.

In the churches these years gave rise to two different, conflicting attitudes. In the first place the effort of restoration. This effort was guided by the conviction that only the church-theology and the education of the Christian faith as it always has been was the only answer to the confusion and disorientation in church and society. So ministers and elders were told to take good care for the true Christian education in church and family. Lay-people were not expected to have any influence in church-life, they had to obey the authority of ministers and elders about faith and life-style. The other reaction was the acknowledgement that the old securities had gone, that the church could not withdraw in itself but had to take responsibility in society by means of all church members and their responsibility to be good Christians wherever they had responsibilities in society. This approach of renewal of the Christian life meant the effort of community-building. The Christian community was seen as the place to learn and to teach and to reinforce the ability to take responsibility as a Christian in society and politics. This second approach of Christian education got little influence in this period. Its influence began not before the second phase.

1970-1995 Political awareness and consciousness-raising

This period can be characterized as the period of emancipation. Emancipation worldwide, liberation of colonialism, imperialism, racism. Emancipation on national level of women, gay-people and in the churches of lay-people. It is the period of cold war, conflicts about nuclear weapons, liberation movements all over the world, student revolts in Europe and the development of liberation theology coming from Latin America. It is the period of liberation from old dogmas and old institutions like the churches. At the same time it is the period of flower power, all you need is love and the discovery of the self. Psychology and the psychological vocabulary becomes popular among all levels in society and there is a huge development of courses for consciousness-raising. (Also to mention here the high number of kids going to higher education, also from labor-parents. And the developing of the anti-conception-pill, which became in short time widespread.)

What to do with Christian education under these circumstances? At the one hand the approach I mentioned before. So in many congregations a culture is developed of adult-education during the

winter-season. People meet each other in groups to talk about Bible, faith, ethics, politics. The congregation is seen as a learning-community where the meaning and relevance of the Christian faith has to be studied and discussed. Most participants of those learning-groups also had the conviction that the church should make clear statements in the public sphere about social and political issues. The church should act as a kind of counter-power against the more or less hidden powers in society, such as capital, multi-nationals and other powerful interest-groups. Most of the learning-groups supported nation-wide the resistance against nuclear weapons and cold war. The other concept of adult-education in this period is focused on the maxim, that everyone has to develop a personal relationship with God, the Bible, the Christian tradition. Everyone has to liberate oneself from old authorities and useless theology, everyone has to do its own personal development, has to grow in faith and awareness. The church only can offer a place and can help with pastoral care and theological knowledge to develop. The church has to stimulate that everyone takes responsibility for his or her own development in the Christian faith and the congregation might be an instrument, but church-commitment is not an aim.

1995-now, the self as a project

And now we live in 2012. What had happened in the last 17 years? The world has profoundly changed. The end of communism, a real war in Europe since WW II, the "end of history" (Fukuyama), free development of the liberal ideology, clashes of cultures and religions, culminating in 9-11-2001, new balances of international power under influence of upcoming states as China and Brazil, the vast growing information technology, economic growth worldwide and finally the collapse of the thought-to-be almighty financial world. After ten years in the 21st century we see a world in disorder and confusion.

And the churches? In The Netherlands in 2004 finally the process of reunion of three Protestant churches came to an end after about 40 years. That was really a moment of joy and new inspiration, but the number of church-members of the new Protestant Church in the Netherlands went down and is still going down. A lot of free churches has arisen, very attractive for members of more traditional churches, because of their low-profile hierarchy, their emphasis on individual conversion and salvation and because of a strong anti-institutional sentiment in society, especially concerning churches.

This period is the period of the ongoing secularization. Despite all efforts congregations become smaller and smaller and most of the members is 50 years of age or older. The church is no longer seen as relevant in social and political issues. The church has tumbled down to the lowest rank on the scale of trustworthy institutions in society. Most of the people in this country does not know anything about Christianity and the Christian tradition. But at the same time there is a widespread interest in religion and spirituality.

Does this mean that everyone in society is pure selfish and egoistic, not interested in social welfare, pollution of the environment, neighborhood-care and the like? No, on the contrary! But in our society there is no longer a more or less common language to talk to each other about ideals, about personal ethics, about choices to make to participate in social-welfare-projects. And especially for the new generation of young-adults of about 30 years of age this is a confusing situation. They grew up in a booming economy, trees growing to heaven; and in a liberal climate with strong emphasis on personal responsibility for one's own future and development. These young adults now have to make choices about career, family, bringing up children and so on, without a clear social environment with a more or less common ideology, belief and language to reflect on these choices to make.

What does this all mean for Christian education? More and more for myself I am becoming aware of the necessity of change. A lot of what I thought to be relevant for the Christian belief is I do think less important for the new generations. I have to realize that I am a product of the after-war period, the period of the ecumenical movement world-wide, the period of new theology, which was developed

in close relationship between the academic theologian world and the Christian congregation as a learning community, the aspiration of my generation to play as church an important role in society. This has all gone. The new generation is looking for a comfortable community which enables them to think with each other about the meaning of being a Christian in their personal lives. They are not interested anymore in theological debates about what the church should be or should do, without any direct relation with their personal commitment and interests. And they need not to liberate themselves from old authorities, as we fought for, but they are looking for guidance by people with a clear vision and opinion. Not to copy them as new authorities, but to develop themselves in critical reflection and debate with others. And above that, they want to experience something with others in church. The Christian belief is not longer merely a matter of knowledge and conscience and reflection, as it was taught to me, but has for them also a lot to do with emotions and spirituality.

Christian belief between history and contemporarily

I come to an end. We have always known that the Christian belief is not a fixed and unchanging set of dogmatic theses. But it is always again and again difficult to realize that the times they are changing and the time always changes more rapidly than “the establishment” wants to acknowledge.

Over the last 70 years we can distinguish in the Dutch Protestantism at least four different approaches for Christian education. I mentioned:

1. Restoration; back to traditional theology and the authority of ministers and elders to teach all lay-people.
2. Pastoral care as a help for personal growth; growth seen as the liberation from old authorities, the invitation to find your own way in religion, going from minority to spiritual adulthood.
3. Community-building; the development of the congregation as the place to discover with each other the meaning of the gospel for everyday life and about how the church has to be and should do.
4. Self-development, learning in critical self-reflection about what others can teach you; the congregation as an opportunity to meet people with whom you can develop yourself in being a good Christian.

I hope this gives you an instrument to reflect about your own experiences in your home country and about the experience you get during this conference. Please keep in mind that again and again we have to rethink Christian education. Because in each cultural climate we as Christians have to try to offer people an opportunity to develop each for themselves a personal relation with the God of the Holy Scripture and we have to find a way to invite them to participate in the people of God, the local congregation. In this way we may see ourselves as the modest successors of great men like Komensky and Kant who both showed us in their work and writings how the renewal of the Christian education is again and again in each period of history an effort and a joy for everyone who gets involved in.

Thank you for your attention.