

László Kiss-Rigó¹⁷

The Role of Religions in a Changing Europe¹⁸

We can analyse and evaluate the role of the churches or religions in the changing Europe. It would be the ideal thing in general if changes would be positive meaning evolution, which – thank God – can be said about Europe and the whole world in many respects. Science and technology evolve, but unfortunately humankind and the human quality itself does not evolve in parallel, they remain to be eternal problems.

I will not approach the topic from this angle now, but rather I will interpret it as the changing of society, sticking to the issue of evolution, since it is – despite every problem and hardship – unquestionable. On this side of the Iron Curtain it often comes to mind what we have been implanted with during the communist dictatorship about religion and church being the opium for the people, i.e. an obstacle and a barrier of societal development and primarily of class war. There might be truth to this from many aspects because the organised communities of religions, primarily the Catholic Church is a giant institution, which – similarly to a giant ship – can be steered with difficulty, it accelerates and slows down harder, changes its course with more difficulty, but once it does then for the duration. This is said in the positive sense, although undoubtedly it has negative effects as well, but we all are well aware that the church, the religion is not identical to the institution, albeit it might be a necessary part thereof. The choice of name by Pope Francis refers to the fact that in the Middle Ages not the popes have influenced – and also catalysed – the processes of societal development in a positive sense, but those like Saint Francis of Assisi. We must see it clearly that the churches, the religions as institutions should exercise significantly more modesty and self-criticism, while in the meantime they should also experience their own identity in a very conscious fashion, and put this to the service of the whole of the society and Europe.

About the church, the religion – and concretely about Christianity – they say that rather it impedes societal development. We shall hereby refer to an interesting process: we are very happy about the changes taking places twenty years ago – and I say this consciously again so that you can understand what I mean – on this side of the Iron Curtain, but many times we tend to complain to this date that many things did not change from those that should have. A great advantage of all this is that a bloodless revolution took place, a transition that did not cause harm to human life. However, if we strive to remedy the negative effects thereof, we face a lot of misunderstandings in society, both within and beyond our borders. Meanwhile, we can merrily

¹⁷ László Kiss-Rigó, Diocesan Bishop for Szeged-Csanád

¹⁸ On the basis of the lecture delivered at the conference entitled “Cultural Identity: the Role of Religion in Europe” (25th April 2013)

declare that in this part of Europe, there was no bloodshed, tragedy; there was no sacrifice of human life in the past twenty years. A great many things were done for this by Christianity and the churches, many times criticised – obviously in hindsight – for not being more radical, for not generating a revolution. I refer hereby to the passive resistance of Mahatma Gandhi, whose person and methods are disfavoured by many, and although it is not the only solution in resolving conflicts within society, nonetheless it shall be appreciated.

One of my most interesting experiences in this respect was when at the beginning of the 90s I was asked to chair a committee with the participation of a history teacher from ELTE, a trade union leader, one of the leaders of *Open Society*, while I represented the churches. We went to South Africa for two weeks tasked with comparing transition from communist dictatorship to democracy with what defined transition from the apartheid dictatorship to democracy. This meant us comparing the then current European events to the characteristics of the few weeks' period before the first free elections in South Africa. We had very interesting experience, from among which it can be emphasised that the religion, the church contributed to a large extent in South Africa to avoid bloodshed during the transition, for which they were then acknowledged.

In Hungary, the official standpoint before the transition was that the religion and Christianity are decadent ideologies and the enemies of society, nonetheless they must be tolerated, they will extinct by themselves anyways. In the meantime, however, certain menial roles, or such that were not undertaken by others, can be assigned to the churches, by fulfilling which they – so to say – see through socially beneficial duties, based on which they can be tolerated, albeit it is true that they spread all sorts of foolishness, and they are class-aliens, etc. Beyond all this, I would like to provide an overview of the tasks and missions – may it not sound too majestic –, that should primarily be fulfilled by religion, its institutions, its communities, and by Christianity, or what is could fulfil, and what if fulfils for the benefit of the society and the whole of Europe.

I will state three standards, one of which is the emphasis on values. This was already touched upon by the keynote speech. What happens today in Europe amidst the circles of certain bureaucrats and non-bureaucrats and mainly politicians, is none other than self-destruction, when we voluntarily and without hesitation give up our own identities and wonder why others will not take us seriously. Not Europe is at fault for that, at most the European Union can be criticised and mended. It does not hurt positive criticism, if they react thereon.

I refer hereby to some slightly over-emphasised phenomena, when e.g. a few years back in Oxford or Cambridge the local council forbid in an internal regulation to display the word 'Christmas' in order to avoid offending those of other religions. The reaction of the Muslim mufti and those of other religions to this action was that the local council should rather avoid being a laughing

stock, and it does not offend them at all. In Italy a lawsuit was filed in order to have crucifixes removed from state schools, of which we all know exactly that they are far from serving the purpose of proselytization. In Brussels, it was deemed inappropriate to continue the tradition of erecting a Christmas tree – to be euphemistic – in order to avoid offending people from other religions.

It added very interesting experience to the interpretation of the situation, when a few months back the foreign relations institute of our diocese received an invitation from the leaders of the NATO. I lead the delegation of our own institution along with the leader of the local Jewish community – who by the way is one of the leaders of the University –, a Reformed colleague and others, i.e. this was a consciously ecumenical, interreligious delegation. On the scene, one of the Secretary Generals of the NATO expressed an interesting thought: we could think that the NATO is on the verge of crisis because at the time of the Iron Curtain there was the picture of a common enemy and common interests, which brought the members of the organisation together, and the organisation functioned. Now we face the phenomenon that the interests of the allied forces, for instance energy dependence, to say the least are not identical but rather contrary to each other. If, in this situation, we do not find something to hold the alliance together then it will fall apart either seemingly or as a matter of fact. Therefore, it is highly necessary to declare common values – and hereby I refer once again to the keynote speech – and a lot can be done in this respect by the organisations of the civil society, the religions and the churches. To this we can answer that this is a task, the carrying out of which is the responsibility of religion and churches – in accordance with the title of this lecture: to make themselves and their environment, and thus the whole of Europe, realise how important it is to name and undertake our common values. If there are no common values, then Europe will fall apart due to the divergence of interests. In this sense not Europe or the European thought, not the European people and not the people are in crisis but the European Union, and in such a crisis that can be remedied and turned for the better in very clever and smart ways. So, one of the standards is the standard of values, not meaning that we are forcing on Europe the values of Christianity, the Catholic Church from among the religions. It is not at all about that and I want to modestly indicate that the adjective Catholic means universal. What the church and Christianity represent in Europe and around the world is a positive exhibit on globalisation, although it was not called by this name two thousand years ago. Everyone becomes part of a unity in the appearances, in diversity, by preserving their own identities, along common values. This was one of the standards.

Another standard is remedying political correctness, which might be a wording that is surprising to many of you or a bit radical – not in a political sense. I say remedying because I think what is called politically correct speech is beautiful on its own, since tolerance and casting away, avoiding

the suspicion of discrimination is the real democracy, a reference to values. The only problem is that in practice – as in the case of theoretical and practical socialism – the orators of politically correct speech behave in such a hypocritical and pharisaic way attesting to double standards that what we see in Europe today is rather a ridiculous and disgusting caricature of a degeneration of democracy that mutated in an accelerated fashion. Again, not Europe is at fault for this and not the European thought but those who are responsible for such practice thereof. A remedy against all this is the church and Christianity and not the institutions but the speech of actually religious people, our own speech as clear as the Gospel.

I'm not talking about the internal Chris-m-scented or incense-scented professional jargon but about state-of-the-art, comprehensible and clear speech, the speech of the Gospel, where the founder said that your speech shall be yes-yes, no-no, and those who accommodate his style will not be cast with not even the shadow of hatred and will not be harmed by discrimination. This should be learned, and we should at least try to realise this.

Simply put, the third standard in terms of the role of religion(s) in Europe is healing, treating conflict and cooperation therein. It would not hurt if the authentic representatives of religions, the members of their communities and even the communities themselves would set as an objective. Religious people, communities and institutions are far from completely exhausting this enormous opportunity and I shall say this with self-criticism. Here we obviously have to differentiate between those referring to religion and those authentically religious as well as such communities and institutions. For instance we, religious people, Christians, should and could do a lot more in order to finally resolve and clarify the Slovakian-Hungarian conflict – although I do not know whether to call it a conflict or not. Attempts have been made, but if those of us both Slovaks and Hungarians who really think of ourselves as religious would enter into an honest dialogue then conflict would per se be impossible. However, unfortunately, we are far from this happening. Or, for that matter, there is the Polish-Russian conflict. As it happens, only a few days ago and a few meters away from this building we have erected a monument in commemoration of naming the park surrounding the Votive Church the Park of Christian Solidarity. We also erected a few years ago another monument in commemoration of 1956 and then another Polish monument on the corner in commemoration of the double Katyn tragedy of the Polish. We intended to this in a manner – and we did – not poisoning the relationship but bringing the Russian and Polish parties together.

With our Armenian friends, we erected another monument to the Armenian genocide the day before yesterday and how beautiful it would have been if we could have invited Turkish representatives to that event as well. We gave the following task to ourselves, the religion, Christianity and the churches: we should strive to achieve that only a few of the really devout, religious and authentic Muslims and those Christians try to alleviate the conflict on this occasion, because there is an enormous opportunity to

resolve, to heal it, and on a higher level – alongside the thoughts of Hegel – to reconstruct the solution, reconciliation.

It is worth it to think through that political correctness or rather ecumenism has such a result that lead to complete reconciliation in the relationship between the Irish and the British, bombing is already in remission. We cannot discuss this issue in more detail at this point, but this has never really been a religious conflict, it was due to other reasons; however, its consequences hurt Catholics the most. The spirit of ecumenism beautifully resolved this conflict, and its religious entanglements. How interesting would it be though if now at the time of politically correct speech – without the Irish asking us to do so – we would think, in the spirit of Christian solidarity, to erect a monument to the memory of the millions of Irish casualties, the Catholic casualties, whom the British deprived from food, potato almost bordering on genocide? We would of course invite the Irish and the British Ambassadors because we know that arising out of actual solidarity it is possible to mention something that if realised correctly – does not strengthen but rather releases, heals the conflict or is able to create a higher level of true friendship and cooperation from negative history. This might seem idealistic, but religious people have all the opportunities and means to do so. It would be good if we would make use of these.

Coming back to actually religious people, the actual experience is that if we succeed in sitting down with very religious Muslim people coming from the Islamic world, then there is no conflict there. The difficulty is that it does not yet work in practice in their own communities, only in theory. Even if it would work in the community, the whole society would still have to be catalysed in this process.

Finishing off with a bit of self-criticism, I think that churches and religion have greater obligations, responsibilities and duties in this sense. I hope that this will be made use of by righteous people and communities.