

The recent momentous changes in Central and Eastern Europe have led to an intense discussion about the identity and the destiny of Europe. Churches consider themselves as being entrusted with a special responsibility for building up a new Europe.

In the opinion of some influential church leaders, only the message of the gospel could provide the spiritual coherence able to provide the basis for a new Europe. They speak about Europe's Christian legacy, about Europe's Christian soul and aim at reconstruction of a "Christian Europe", and consider as the main task of the Church - in the words of Pope John Paul II - to re-evangelize Europe, not only by addressing individuals through religious education and catechesis, but especially by taking the lead in shaping the fundamental values of society. In their view, the Church should assume spiritual leadership over society and demand from the state that it enforces Christian values in society. Their ultimate aim is the Christianization of society.

I should like to approach this issue from the angle of Christian rethinking of the church's relationship to the Jewish people in consequence of the bankruptcy of European culture and the collapse of fundamental human values which led to the Shoah, the destruction of European Jewry. Those involved in this rethinking realized that the Shoah was not just an accident of history, but was part and parcel of European history and culture and of the contribution of the churches thereto. As the churches have been to a great extent responsible for creating a climate of opinion in which the Shoah could take place and its teaching of contempt of the Jews helped prepare the ground for anti-Semitism, they have forfeited the claim towards the spiritual and moral hegemony of Europe. Ever since the church had come to political, social, and cultural influence in Europe, anti-Judaism and anti-Semitism accompanied its actions, its teaching and preaching. Has a real diagnosis of the disease of anti-Semitism and anti-Judaism taken place?

One of the deepest causes of this hostility seems to be that the Jews through their very presence among Christians challenged the church's contention that the decisive turning point in the history of salvation had already occurred, namely in the coming of Christ on earth. This challenge was all the more severe as it came from the people, with whom this history of salvation had started, from the people elected by God to be God's witness in the world.

Is not this gap between claim and reality one of the weakest points in the Christian world view? In order to satisfy the claim, reality is violated. In order to defend the truth as the church sees it, other insights, other experiences of truth are excluded and people who hold them dear are persecuted.

The coalition of state and church in the Middle Ages and early modern history has often suppressed cultural heritages that were not to the liking of this coalition. It was these suppressed heritages, or elements of them, that brought about the

revolutions of the 18th and 19th centuries including the whole movement that advocated universal human rights and democracy.

One of the suppressed heritages of Europe was the Jewish heritage. Christians may acknowledge the Jewish roots of their religion, yet they often understand this to mean that anything worthwhile that has grown out of these roots, is Christian, but do not realize that out of the same roots an entire separate tree has grown: Judaism and the Jewish people, and that after Judaism and Christianity had parted ways, Judaism has been a very important and creative factor in the building of Europe, often in the form of dissenting voices that called for openness when everywhere there were closed systems. Europe does not have only a “Christian soul”, but its soul is composed of many elements; and each of them has a great deal to contribute to the Europe of the future.

A serious problem is indeed that there currently exists a vacuum with regard to fundamental values able to guide Europe — whether formerly Communist or not — into the future. It is indeed a problem for most parts of the world. But the solution cannot be that only one element of the European soul should claim exclusive leadership.

The tremendous challenges posed for us to shape the future character of our world, in accordance with truly humane fundamental values, can only be met through an intensive dialogue among all who have to offer wisdom and insights of truth. We are one world. Jews, Christians and Muslims believe in One God. Because there is One God we may believe that he has not left himself without witness among all people of the world who in different ways express what insight of truth they have received from the One who holds the one world in his hand. Being open to what others have to offer us is being open to the One God, who has created others and imparted also to them gifts of his grace and truth. Therefore contrary to what is often maintained - monotheists cannot be exclusivists but must be inclusivists, since all are under the grace and judgment of the One God.

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