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CIVIL RELIGION. A REFLECTION ON SOCIAL COHERENCE

The polder model

These years the Netherlands, my country, have become noted in the scientific entourage of those who philosophize on sociology and economics because of what is presently known as the "polder-model", that is, the so-called polder-model of socio-economic activity. What is implied by this novel term, which has become noteworthy in the world of the interactions between industrial management, the labour unions and the related role of the state?

To explain the term and its frequent use today, it is first of all necessary to define what is understood as a "polder", a word that may not be not known to everyone. According to Webster's Dictionary, a polder is "an area of low lying land reclaimed from the sea or other large body of water and usually protected by dykes"; here a dyke (or dike) is defined as "a raised bank constructed to prevent flooding, especially to prevent the encroachment of the sea". On the basis of these definitions the so-called polder-model of socio-economic activity can be understood to refer to life, as it is lived, with special emphasis on its inherent socio-economic activities, in an area which is protected by dykes because of the permanent threat of the sea, a (big) lake or a river. The Netherlands clearly are such an area. More than one third of the surface of the country is, in one way or other, under the permanent threat of water. And it is well known that an all-over rupture of the dykes would threaten a considerable part of the territory, which would immediately be uninhabitable, directly affecting about 70% of its total population, which today amounts to over 16 millions.

In the preceding lines I have used the word "would" more than once, and in doing so I have indirectly given an indication of the probability of such disastrous event nowadays. It is not very probable indeed! But why is such a disaster so improbable? Not because of the sea, which today - and in the near future - may be more threatening than ever. For, as is well known, the sea level slowly rises globally, as a result of the over-all warming up of the earth's climate, while at the same time the soil of the Netherlands - very slowly - sinks, partly because of desiccative processes in the soil that cannot be prevented, and partly because

Scandinavia rises as a result of its melting ice caps. So, in fact, the sea is more threatening than ever, but, at the same time, our means to defend the country have become more powerful. And that is why we can feel safe in our towns and at home!

But, technology only is not enough. For, if the means to defend the country have become more powerful, success in using these means is only guaranteed if there is, in addition, a basic will to work together! This has led, since times immemorial, to several formal and informal ways of organisation in order to carry the responsibilities for the creation and maintenance of all the necessary waterworks, at whatever costs and exertion. Thus, since the earliest times when the inhabitants of the delta area of the rivers Rhine and Meuse, which later became the Netherlands, have protected their places of living by dykes, they have also found ways of cooperation, forms of cooperation that remained possible even when there were deep-going disputes dividing the communities in question. For, to all of the population of the area, it has always been obvious that anyone, without exception, would have to join hands with others in the case of a basic threat to bare existence! And this is what today is called the "mentality" of the polder. From this follows that the polder-model of socio-economic activity refers to that way of cooperation where disputes will never go so far as to disrupt the minimal coherence required to maintain some fundamental level of existence of the parties in conflict. This clearly implies that it has always been beyond dispute that the parties in conflict constitute a community, for better for worse! Thus, the polder-model of socio-economic activity refers to a form of basic coexistence, which as such is the fruit of a sense of social coherence. Again following Webster's Dictionary, coexistence is defined as a way "to exist together, to live at peace with one another despite conflicting ideologies". In other words, coexistence presupposes a form of deeply felt social coherence!

A common European currency

So far some remarks on the polder-model to introduce the question what binds people. It was an introduction with a down-to-earth flavour, as it referred to the material conditions of human existence, that

is, the possibility of a basic coexistence. In the following, the same question will be introduced again in a way that, at first sight, seems to be just as much material, but yet is not. It is a way that deals with money.

The first of January of this year, 2002, at midnight, zero hour, 12 European states have effectuated to the full their earlier decision to accept from now on a common currency, the Euro; approximately, 1 US\$ = 1,1 € (=Euro). Also the Netherlands participate in this financial union, which implies that our national currency, the "gulden", that is "guilder" - originally a gold coin, but

mostly struck in silver - has now been replaced officially by the Euro, by equating 1 guilder to (exactly) 0,45378 Euro. The different Euro-coins and Euro-banknotes circulate freely in all 12 countries that participate in the financial union up to this day - other European countries being welcome as soon as they fulfil the pertinent conditions. All coins to a certain value, of, say 2 Euro, are identical on one side, while the reverse sides may be designed differently in different countries. Thus, the coins, that as such demonstrate the (financial) unity of 12 states, all at the same time also demonstrate striking differences between the states, differences that refer to particular characteristics of their national cultures. The basic Dutch coin, that was current until the beginning of the present year, the guilder, a coin with a diameter of 25 mm and a thickness of 1S mm carried an inscription on the rim, running as follows: "God * zij * met * ons * (etc.)", which in translation reads: "God be with us (etc.)"; the same inscription on the rim was found on the Dutch coins to the values of 2S and of 5 guilders. As no other country possessed coins with typical inscriptions on the rim, it became a question in the consultations taking place, whether there could be Euro-coins, struck in the Netherlands, with this inscription, an inscription that we considered typical and that in fact had been on some of our coins since the year 1816. The result of the discussions was that, generally, the Euro-coins to the value of two Euro were agreed to possess an inscription on the rim, and this in addition to the effigy on the reverse side of these coins, which was characteristic for the country in question. Thus, in fact, each of the twelve countries obtained the right to have a characteristic inscription on the rim; because of technical reasons no other coin could have an inscription, or the like, on the rim but only the coins to the value of two Euro.

The fact that the Netherlands asked for a special position with regard to a coin that was to circulate freely in all 12 countries gave rise to discussions on the European level - with the result as indicated. But "at home", inside the Netherlands, there was also some discussion. It appeared that many wanted the mentioned inscription to be kept, but many also wanted the inscription not to be continued on any Euro-coin. Some people, who often declared themselves to be "humanists", explained that a reference to "God" was out of place in a state that was principally secular, and that the transition to the Euro was an opportunity to get rid of a relict of a past which, in their opinion, had for long become obsolete. Others, who often confessed a (Christian) religion, in the first place many "right wing" Protestants, explained that the inscription reminded anyone using the money that, in addition to the domain of matter, there also was the domain of spirit! Our minister of finance, and with him his department, defended keeping the inscription by referring to its intrinsic value of history, a value that, in their opinion, was relevant as such because it contributed essentially to our identity. And I think this position was and is taken by most Dutchmen, though there has not been any special investigation directed to this point so far.

The civil religion of the Netherlands

I already remarked that the inscription mentioned before was on (some of) our coins since 1816, the year after the battle of Waterloo and the closing of the Vienna Conference, when the Netherlands and Belgium had to make a new start, together, as they had been fused, in 1814, into one state. As a coin the guilder had existed since about 1680, but now it was to become a new coin valid in all the territory of the new (combined) state, which was also called the Netherlands. The function of the inscription on the rim was thought to be a practical one first of all; it would be an obstacle preventing criminals to grind the silver coins and take away some silver in order to use it for other purposes. Clearly, to this end any inscription might have been chosen. The one that was taken was the shortened version of a text which had already appeared as part of the effigies on

several coins struck in the Netherlands in the 16-th century, namely during the war to obtain the independence from Spanish rule.

But the inscription, which because of its history proved to be generally acceptable, soon got a more specific meaning, in fact because of its very history. In contrast to the pre-Napoleonic times, the new state, in existence since the year 1814, was principally a secular state, and, following the revolution that had taken place in France, religion had come to be considered as something essentially private, not having any function in the state. In this connection it must be emphasized, however, that the cultural movement called the Enlightenment, which gave rise to the idea of a secular state,

was not so much against religion as such, as it was openly directed against clerical power. Hence, religion as such, that is without a power structure, could remain important. And that is why, all-over the country, religion was not heavily criticized and remained acceptable in the public domain. Besides, it so happened that religion, which no longer had a place as a centre of power in the domain of the state proper, was still considered to be useful for the state, namely to help providing the right moral basis in every person in order to be a true citizen; that is, religion was expected to help creating a moral basis to the effect that anyone, as an independent citizen, would be ready to accept the secular state, and use his or her privileges of personal freedom and majority in a way to stabilize this state and cooperate in it as well as with it. This implied, that, in fact, the secular state was considered to presuppose a particular level of morality, a special level of education shared by everyone, that is, a kind of "moral enlightenment" that would be specific to the purpose of stabilizing the state. And the established religions, in the Netherlands first and foremost the Protestant one, but soon also the Roman Catholic religion, were to take the lead in this matter; this development was also supported by the liberals, who as a political party favoured the individual liberties and generally maintained a neutral position in matters of religion.

This led to remarkable consequences. For, although the state had become secular, and the structure of the state republican, and the monarchy effectively taken the place of a (hereditary) presidency, the kings or queens, who were not considered (absolute) sovereigns but constitutional monarchs "by the grace of God", came to be seen as symbols, embodying the pursuit of the right moral attitude required for any citizen of this secular state. In other words, the monarch, that is the king or the queen, did not govern, but, as it was said, "reigned" in a moral way, being the "cornerstone" of the country's morality, and not possessing the right to interfere in the administration of the state. The situation in question was, from the early years of the 19-th century until the present time, often expressed in a condensed form by the slogan that could be heard on special occasions, "God, Nederland en Oranje", that is, "God, the Netherlands, and Orange" - "Oranje" being the name of the dynasty of the Netherlands. This dynasty goes back to Willem I, that is, William I, also called the "Taciturn" or the "Silent", Prince of Orange, thus named after a town in southern France, who, as a commander in chief, led the struggle for independence from Spanish rule in the 16-th century till his assassination in 1584.

In the preceding a sketch has been given of what may be called the civil religion of the Netherlands. In addition it should be mentioned that the national anthem, which opens by referring to Willem I, has since long been accepted as a religious hymn in the hymnbooks of several churches in the Netherlands. This anthem, consisting of 15 stanzas and composed in the 16-th century, describes, largely from a moral point of view, the struggle for independence from Spanish rule, an independence that naturally implied religious freedom. Though this struggle as described in the hymn, also because of the language used, is not immediately clear to the average citizen today, and although at most only the first and, occasionally, the sixth stanzas are sung, the anthem still stands as it has always stood.

In the Netherlands, until today, the civil religion, as sketched above, has continued to exist. It was/is a religion, or, in a way, a typical nationalist ideology, "unchallenged" in the eyes of most people, the only exception being those who consider(ed) themselves as "true republicans". Attachment to this civil religion sometimes found characteristic ways of expression, as for instance by those who compared the three words of the slogan, which I just mentioned, by referring to the

book of Ecclesiastes or the Preacher, where it is said (see Ecclesiastes ch.4, v. 12) that a "threefold cord is not quickly broken".

But with the gradual change taking place since the Second World War, the three words of this slogan, which were believed to express the guarantee of a stable state, have nonetheless become more or less obsolete in the present time. Despite that, the inscription on the rim of the two Euro-coin has been maintained; hence, these words will continue to remind us of the centuries that have gone before. The historical value symbolically brought out by the inscription recalls values to be kept, even cherished, in order for the secular state to be stable. And it does so by referring to "God", which in this context means "history", that is the period of history when the Netherlands were constituted as an independent state, a state which was principally secular only since 1814. Thus, the state of the Netherlands, in order to be a "workable" possibility, presupposed "something" that could bind people, so that they would be ready to behave as citizens of this state. The question, what binds people, implies a standing challenge which must be taken serious for the years to come now that our country, with all other countries in our corner of the European continent, is becoming multi-ethnic - that is, however, not necessarily multi-cultural - to a degree that was unimaginable some decades ago. Will the main lines of the history of the Netherlands still be understood after, say, half a century, and, if not, what will characterise our identity then? Will the Netherlands still be a "nation"?

A European identity

However, this challenge does not exist on the national level only. It exists also on the level of the European Community as such, which is in the process of establishing itself more and more, that is, not just as a financial unity by introducing a common currency, but also as a unity of societies, each one with its own identity, societies that recognize and accept each other as part-takers of the "something more" that we believe to have in common. At a distance, maybe only in time [!], the problem can be compared to what in a state like Russia is understood as an individual's "nationality" (for instance, "Komi", "Nenets" or "Russian") in contradistinction to his or her "citizenship" (to wit, as a citizen of the Russian Federation).

Regarding the European Community, the question must clearly be asked, what is this "something more", this comprehensive identity that binds us, Europeans? With regard to this question, some are of the opinion that this "more" is immediately evident, as a matter of fact, if one considers that part of the world which was united already in the period of time of the Roman Empire and its successor states after they had been christianized; of course, in this connection, the loss to christendom of Anatolia and the minority position of christianity in many other parts of the old Ottoman empire must be accounted for, and so must be the extension of christianity to the North of Europe. Obviously, it must be admitted that the resulting territory coincides almost exactly with what is roughly understood as "Europe", that is however, Europe in a narrow sense as - wrongly [!] - Eastern Europe has vanished from sight. Thus, there may be something like a common cultural past that binds the countries of Western and Central Europe, which helps defining a corresponding European identity. But there is a further question that cannot be avoided, namely, as regards the position of the Christian religion in Europe nowadays. For, in some European countries, its dominating cultural position is, at the surface at least, no longer unchallenged as a consequence of the increasing secularisation of the societies in question. Moreover, other creeds, present in the form of small minorities so far, gain in importance because of the increasing numbers of their adherents. Besides, referring to christianity raises the question of principle, whether, with the years, a country like Turkey could become a member of the European Community - a question which directly points again to the principal question, what is the "more" that binds the countries of the Community together. In this connection, the fact must be acknowledged that European Christianity, when it was dominating and also later, was characterised by forms of cohabitation - though warlike and very cruel at times - with the Jewish and the Islamic religions, which have remarkably contributed to its flourishing. Clearly, the question asked regarding Turkey presupposes an answer to the query, what a - peaceful - cohabitation is to mean in the present century.

The problem to define the bounds of the Community remains unsolved till now, and to make the Community more than a financial and economic - possibly socio-economic - union is a task that provides a standing challenge. Being "governed without a government", the Community finds itself in a process of steady growth! In this sentence I reach a topic that needs to be discussed at length, which requires consultations that will extend far into the present century.

Individualism and its intrinsic limitations

If it is difficult to define the identity of what is "Europe" by having recourse to history, it is also difficult to define this identity by exploring what it is like in the minds of those living today. These decades, in all countries of the Community, the everyday aspirations of many citizens appear to move in the direction of increasing personal freedom, including increasing his or her share in whatever consumer interests that exist and will exist. Individualism is cherished indeed, that is, the promotion of the mentality of self-assertion, with, generally, a neglect of history and values inherited from the past. It implies a social or ethical doctrine, which mostly remains implicit, that stresses the importance of the individual rather than that of the group, let alone that of the society at large, a society that is to be European. Evidently, this mentality does not provide a sufficient basis for the creation of a (European) Community - unless this (European) Community restricts itself to the management of matters of finance and economy, and the furthering of the wealth of those already rich.

Are there intrinsic limitations to individualism? Societies clearly become a jungle if there are no valid regulations, whatsoever, between different human beings and between human beings and the state that is responsible for maintaining a minimal order. In this connection the universal declaration of the rights of the human being should be mentioned. This declaration has been drafted and, officially at least, accepted world-wide. It supports the human being in so far as his or her individuality is at stake. The declaration, which is to be implemented in the constitution of any state, specifies that there should be freedom for human individuals to come together for group activities to take place, for instance in order to establish political parties to defend common interests - and it is in this way that individualism encounters a practical limitation. Evidently, the universal declaration of the rights of the human being is a necessary condition for constituting forms of social coherence. But, doubtless, it is not a sufficient condition. Whether human individuals unite, depends on the initiatives which are taken by the human beings concerned, whether they transcend their individualism, maybe only out of their self-interest, may be also out of their interest to contribute in the constitution of a viable European community. Here the possibility of an intrinsic limitation to individualism becomes crucial.

The mentality of the polder, which was mentioned in the beginning, introduced a kind of practical limitation to individualism. For, in fact, its basic directive or guide-line was that human beings are to help each other, else most of them will die! Reflecting on it, it is clear that this mentality also reveals an intrinsic limitation to individualism. It points, for instance, to something like social equality, to equality for the law, to what is generally called democracy. In the end, the guide-line that human beings are to help each other, which is a maxim of ethics in order not to die, calls to mind the commandment "Thou shalt not murder", one of the commandments of the Decalogue (see e.g. Deuteronomy, ch.5, v.6-21). Is this moral maxim only a kind of practical regulation, given through an authority and subsequently imposed? Is it just a reasonable rule, that must be followed out of one's well-understood self-interest? Without doubt, this commandment is a practical regulation that is imposed. But it is also an intrinsic limitation to individualism. For, as phrased by Emmanuel Levinas, the commandment can be "read" from the face of the threatened being who, perhaps without using words, asks not to be rejected but, instead, to be recognized as a fellow-being. The face of one's fellow-being which manifests itself presents the authority that, as it appears, we all need in order to be ready to cooperate and build a minimal structure of social coherence. It is the provoking authority of this basic confrontation that transcends the limits of each individual, and asks him or her to accept the (elementary) community [!] that is offered. Thus, if seriously applied,

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the result will be the constitution of a European Community that, moreover, will not be like a fortress which protects its riches and, in doing so, rejects those who are in need of help.

The commandment, not to murder but to recognize one's fellow being, is explained further in the way of an almost Kantian categorical imperative in Jesus' words "And as ye would that men should do to you, do ye also to them likewise" (S. Luke, ch.6, v.31). These words, together with the moral maxim, not to murder, generate the basic trust between human beings that fosters a minimum of social coherence on which to build a society that can be called a Community. In this connection in particular, I propose to use the term "civil religion" in a most basic sense. In my opinion, this Civil Religion is the only Hope mankind possesses in an epoch, publicly often dominated by tycoons who claim to speak for the sake of the future of a global humanity, but who in one breath emphasize to increase all-over competitiveness to further continual growth.

A corollary in closing

In the Netherlands, in December 2001, a conference was organized by the department of economic affairs to discuss requirements and possibilities of industrial innovation. A speaker, an economic celebrity invited from the USA, emphasized that, among other things, abolishment of the polder-model in the Netherlands, and its procedures of consultation, was a necessary condition to be fulfilled in order to further the industrial growth as needed and to increase competitiveness!

The question, which urges itself upon me straight away, is, what is the sense of this - pretended - advice? What is the sense of abolishing consultations where social and economic interests come together, and turning instead to open confrontations of the conflicting parties? For, as a result of the unavoidable tensions and - a thing not to forget - the role of the media, the conflicting parties may easily lose sight of their basic coherence. All-over competitiveness breaks what belongs together! Besides, what is the sense of the maxim to further continual growth? Is it necessary to increase the speed of industrial development, not only in the Netherlands but in the "western" countries in general, expecting that the human beings concerned will correspondingly increase the "speed" of their lives in quest of the possibility to (re)organize their remaining "quality time", or else drop out? Don't we rather need trying to succeed in obtaining a new equilibrium, a new balance, in order to find, what some people call, a "liberated time"? Such a new equilibrium implies counteracting the "juggernaut" of the present economic development, that is, to find ways to creatively resist the powers in the world which - in line with the corresponding Indian belief - must indeed be considered to be destructive beyond comparison.

But where and how to start such a counteraction? Can one - a state, an (big) enterprise - "survive", now that short term thinking seems to predominate and shareholder values are globally being maximized, otherwise than by adopting the very same mentality? Besides, in this connection, what is to become of the antagonism between the two models of "capitalism", respectively called "Anglo-Saxon" and "Rhineland" or "Continental (European)"? In its economic philosophy, the latter model of capitalism accepts the (social) role of the government and the influence of society at large in addition to the so-called forces of the market, whereas the former model only accepts the workings of the market, which should be entirely free from interference by any other forces. So far, the antagonism has remained unsolved, and the battle is drawn.

Epilogue

The sketch of the socio-political circumstances as given before in the main text must be supplemented by mentioning developments taking place since about 10 years ago, and up to the present time. They are developments that may strongly influence the processes which are normal in a democratic state - and, at the same time, these developments are a democratic (!) product of the malfunctioning of the very same democratic state. Restricting myself to the Netherlands, no one can but admit that the state, as an organization, grows in complexity, with the result that the distance as it is felt by the average citizen between the authorities and him- or herself increases. But not only the distance between the citizen and the government increases, also the distance between the citizens and those who are called in positions where they are to represent them, namely the members of the parliament. The complex body of authorities of every kind is losing more and more the minimal

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transparency required by the average citizen, who wants to understand the decisions that are taken but who is and remains mostly an outsider, with the unfortunate result that the body of authorities is experienced as an anonymous, entirely technocratic complex - with the authorities too often behaving in a corresponding way, that is, as technocrats. This leads, of course, to reactionary movements that attempt to criticize the existing anonymous bodies, and to bridge the distance, also as to the use of language, between what is called the political establishment and the average citizen. The result may be the formation of loose new groups, that will constitute new political parties, mainly as a reaction to the existing parties, the policies of which they reject. Do these new parties offer solutions where the existing parties fail? Perhaps, but it is the future that will judge. For the new groups often lead to the promotion of new demagogues, which implies that the disillusion of

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the citizen is guaranteed, at shorter or longer date. As yet the best one can hope is that the new (and old as well) demagogues will never be strong enough to dominate the country, whereas they should always be strong enough to compel the existing parties, and also the government as such, to become more transparent in their actions.

A major problem in the Netherlands, in particular of the cheaper residential districts of the bigger towns, concerns living in these quarters. As a whole the country is very prosperous, but, as a result of the continuing immigration, these residential quarters have become so cosmopolitan that the original (Dutch-born) inhabitants feel like strangers in the town where they have always lived. It is to be expected that, in the near future, one half of the population of the big urban areas are first, second or third generation immigrants; in the more modest living quarters, however, this ratio is much more than one half. Besides, the integration of the newly come inhabitants of these areas into the Dutch society is stagnant, to say the least. As a result, the original inhabitants feel "forgotten"; moreover, they feel insecure, because of increasing criminality all-over the country, and more especially in the urban areas. Consequently they try to leave the place where they have always lived as soon as an opportunity presents itself.

All of a sudden the preceding lines of this epilogue, written not yet two months ago, were actualized in a most dramatic way when, during his electoral campaign, a Dutch politician, Pim Fortuyn, was murdered on a parking place. Fortuyn was the charismatic leader of a party founded only in February 2002, a party that wanted to bring politics back to the average citizen.

With a view to the national elections, that were to take place on May 15th, Fortuyn appeared to take hold of the popular imagination and had just finished a radio talk when he was shot. Although the campaigns conducted by all parties these weeks, have been more vehement than ever before, there has never been any violence in the Netherlands; thus, there has not been any political murder in our country for more than 300 years! The leader of the new party, who had been a professor of sociology but was unknown as a politician until half a year ago, had on several occasions entered into public debate with other politicians and proved to be very successful in criticizing the present state of the Netherlands, in particular the problematic relation between the political establishment and (a considerable part of) the general public, who felt themselves ignored and not truly represented. Fortuyn was their beloved spokesman, because he was able to put into words what they thought but did not succeed in making clear to the authorities! (Yet, Fortuyn should not be characterized as a "right-wing extremist" of the kind of, say, Le Pen in France or Haider in Austria, though it is true that some people want to see him like that!) As a result of the brutal murder of Fortuyn the political situation in the Netherlands has become unstable. Now that the elections are over, it is "objectively" known that the party which considered Fortuyn as its leader is supported by, roughly, 18% of the Dutch population, a percentage indicating a political landslide, which will make the formation of a new (coalition) government extremely difficult. (Some other approximate figures: "Labour Party" 15%, Liberals 15%, Christian Democrats 28%, the "Greens" 7%, Party for democratic reform 5%; the Socialists 6%, the Christian Union 3%, and some other parties.) Today (May 16th) we foresee a period of political negotiations lasting several months. The country passes through a crisis indeed, but all of us trust that a healthy solution will be found in due time - we always managed!