



European Forum of National Laity Committees
Maynooth, Ireland, June 24th, 2016

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Study Assembly
“Our lay vocation: Being merciful to each other”

Dialogue with those of other faiths or convictions
Societal and political focus
Remarks by Steven VANACKERE, Senator, Belgium

(Please check against delivery)

Many thanks to ELF President Peter Annegarn, for his kind invitation and for the hospitality I have already experienced in beautiful Maynooth. I am very grateful that the European Forum of National Laity Committees presents me with the opportunity to share some ideas about the societal and political dialogue with those of other faiths or convictions. It is a pleasure that I can do this in the presence of such an engaged audience.

There will be three parts in my contribution. First, I will start by examining a sometimes neglected fact of life: nobody can engage in an authentic dialogue without having established what he or she thinks in the first place. Building bridges is an activity that requires at least two shores. Perhaps this sounds a little too self-evident to your ears. But fulfilling this condition in the dialogue between Christians and those of other faiths or convictions might prove to be more problematic than what we consider as comfortable. This applies particularly when the debate leaves the safe zones of abstraction and enters into the adventurous realm of very concrete societal and political choices.

In a smaller second part I will ponder a few questions as to what might be the objective of such a dialogue. It will come as no surprise that – since I am a politician – I will put a strong focus on the potential societal and political added value of the outcomes of such a





dialogue. Determining the objectives of an undertaking helps to identify the critical conditions which need to be respected.

Finally I will suggest that the first subject matter for the necessary dialogue is in fact a meta-question: “How much room does exist for confessional convictions in the societal and political debate?”

Let’s start with the first question. Can we honestly say that we are capable of engaging in a true dialogue unless we ourselves first establish clearly what our own position is on some crucial issues?

This debate has become very tangible in the Flemish part of my home country Belgium. Some 62% of Flemish pupils attend school in the so-called “free” network, essentially built on catholic initiatives (alongside a very limited number of Jewish, protestant and other ‘method’ schools). Both schools in the free network and those depending on public initiative get subsidies, although some inequalities still remain. So we see a quite surprising fact: although church attendance in Flanders has dropped dramatically, still 6 out of 10 children go to catholic schools! Surprising indeed, when only 8,7% of all Belgians consider themselves practicing Catholics. The dominant market share of catholic schools cannot be explained solely by a possible attachment to catholic values being taught at school. In fact, it is the higher quality of education that seems to be the more preponderant factor when parents are asked to motivate their choice for a catholic school.

There is even a small paradox that pops up: due respect for spirituality and religious practices is becoming a significant argument for *Muslim parents* to explain why they are keen to send their children to *catholic schools*.

Now, a small media war has broken out in the Flemish Community, as a result of some public comments made by Lieven Boeve, the CEO of the organization that tries to associate all the organizing powers of these free and catholic schools. He proposes to evolve towards what he calls “catholic dialogue schools”. His plea is to take more into account the fact that we live in a secularized, hyper diverse society. According to him this calls for a stronger focus on dialogue, even when this dialogue starts from a specific religious inspiration, in casu the catholic one. The examples he gave in the interview (room for Islamic courses on a voluntary basis, allowing headscarves in class, etc.) inspired the leader of the largest political party in Flanders, the nationalist Bart De Wever, to the criticism that the catholic network was giving up catholic education altogether.





This criticism was exaggerated. A strong identity does not shy away from respectful encounters. These encounters neither take the form of annexation or surrender. The example of Christ in his uncompromising but open encounters of “the other” (the Roman officer, the woman of ill repute, ...) is quite telling in that respect.

But it is also true that the somewhat late, but extremely fast secularization in my country has led to an unfortunate situation: even in catholic schools, the religious illiteracy of the teaching staff has expanded greatly. And sadly the generalized dissemination of postmodern and relativistic convictions as well.

A couple of years ago, I was invited in a catholic college to give a testimonial for a large group of 16-17 year olds. In the framework of the Religion course, I was asked to explain what ideas inspired my political action. In my talk I made references to some parables (of the Talents, of the good Samaritan, ...) and to the Sermon on the Mount. Afterwards I heard that the pupils had found it quite interesting, although “they didn’t know *these stories*”. Of course I confronted the teacher and asked him why kids of 17 in a catholic college lacked knowledge of these references. Surely, weren’t they already indispensable to understand something about European cultural heritage? Let alone their irreplaceable value in a christian educational project? The Religion teacher responded laconically that he preferred to build his classes around stories these youngsters – quote – “could relate to in their daily life”.

I dare hope that my experience was exceptional. But it is crystal clear that any dialogue in which Christians wish to engage runs the risk of getting completely askew, if the Christian in this dialogue is incapable or lacks the courage to verbally express the fundamentals of what Christian faith has to say to the world today. Of course I know the beautiful council of Francis of Assisi: “Give testimony on the teachings of the Gospel. Do it every day. And if you cannot do it otherwise, ... do it with words.” Probably our deeds will go a longer way to inspire others. But notwithstanding Francis’s witty remark, Christians need to speak as well, especially in these times of continuous noise, which effectively seems to drown our relative silence on matters of faith and spirituality.

My next thought will be that even when we try to put into words our Christian faith, we can easily fall victim to the triumphant train of thought that Modernity has successfully enshrined in our brains. *It is not that easy* to pick up our end of the dialogue, even in a society that is still very much marked by its Christian history. No, we will definitely need some discipline. And some inspiration of course.





What is at stake here? Most of us tackle the problems of our world through a particular lens, i.e. the lens of rationality. Modernity, with its compelling focus on goal-instrumental action, does that for us. In my remarks, I will suggest that we must take a certain distance from rationality, at least in the way Modernity has been framing this rationality in all of our minds.

A century ago, Max Weber wrote that instrumental rationality (*Zweckrationalität*) was taking over as the *highest form of rational conduct*. In his view this was happening at the detriment of the three other ideal types of rationality: (1) rational action in relation to values (*Wertrationalität*), (2) affective or emotional action, and (3) traditional action.

So do not worry. It is the last thing on my mind to plead for *less rationality*: I suppose we all appreciate the fruits of Enlightenment. Current times demand less – not more – dogmatic thinking. But I am convinced that a *less economized* rationality can give us more than a hint for some authentically new directions. We need a rationality with stronger focus on values, on emotions and even on tradition (or if you prefer: on the fruit of the shared human experience throughout history).

After all, there is a very peculiar assumption at the core of instrumental rationality. It is epitomized in the *rational* choice theory. It presumes that the behavior of rational agents simply consists of always seeking maximization in the pursuit of their own material wealth. It claims that an act that is *not* motivated opportunistically is to be judged as *irrational*. This view is morally problematic.

In the light of rational choice, a large chunk of the recommendations in the Gospel (e.g. Matthew's full day's wage for those who were hired at 3 o'clock in the afternoon) are downright irrational. Or could they be inspirational by creating greater awareness that it is not only pure economics that account for all of the choices of human beings? In *Not just for the money. An economic theory of personal motivation*, Swiss political economy professor Bruno Frey illustrates how deficient the rational choice paradigm is when it comes to understanding human motivation.

I must say I have always found it somewhat puzzling that in economics and politics, the frequently used concept *moral hazard* is not defined as the risk that the behavior of the strongest and richest towards the weakest and poorest would not up to the highest *moral standards*. No, when economists or politicians speak about moral hazard, it is about making sure that nobody takes advantage of you. It is designed to guarantee that one's solidarity is sufficiently anchored in the old Roman saying *Do ut des*: I give in order for you to give (back).





I know that the famous ethnologist Marcel Mauss defined the gift as deeply rooted in a game of reciprocity, but I suggest that civilization is often better served when brackets are put around this reciprocity: I give – or I refrain from taking advantage of you – not because you are able and willing to *reciprocate*, but because you, as a human being, are *worth it*. The Flemish priest Jozef Cardijn spoke about people with ‘arms too short, legs too short’ to be able to really pay back. At that point, “fair exchange” becomes a matter of fraternity, which is quite remote from traditional commercial or economic thinking.

In a sense, it is about “de-economizing human relationships”. Are we capable of doing that? Are we ready to accept the consequences of such an attitude? Do we have the courage – as I read on the ELF website when preparing my speech – “to go against the tide of this culture of efficiency, this culture of waste.”?

Modernity is (at least rhetorically) in favor of justice, interpreted within a canvas of well-established and quantified reciprocity: “getting what you deserve”. Modernity has more problems with mercy, which is “getting what you supposedly don’t deserve”. It was a very inspired idea to hold an extraordinary Jubilee year of Mercy, but I wonder if all the catholic opinion leaders in academia, politics, media and business fully grasp the revolutionary scope of this concept.

In his apostolic exhortation *Gaudium Evangelii* (55), Pope Francis comments on the devastating hardship that came about in the aftermath of the crisis. He says: “One cause of this situation is found in our relationship with money, since we calmly accept its dominion over ourselves and our societies. The current financial crisis can make us overlook the fact that it originated in a profound human crisis: the denial of the primacy of the human person!”

The conclusion is simple and sobering. Although most economic rules seem defensible and hard to criticize from a rational point of view – sensible things like “pay your debts” or “respect another man’s property” – there is a revolutionary call sounding from the words of the Gospel. These words say that it is unfair when half of the food wasted in industrialized countries would suffice to feed the 800 million hungry on this planet. It is unfair when a country like the US spends three times as much on cosmetic surgery than the money needed to completely eradicate malaria, a disease that still kills 50 people per hour, mostly children.

How to translate all this in sound politics in our democracies? After all, Christian faith is no political ideology – even if Christian Democracy is. Christ was not a politician,





neither a demagogue or a world leader. “Give to Caesar what is Caesar’s, and to God what is God’s” was his simple response to the Pharisees’ trap. Christianity is no –ism. It will always leave a politician (in particular the one calling himself christian democratic) frustrated and unsatisfied with himself. The appeal of the Gospel will always confront us with uncomfortable paradoxes. Paradoxes that go beyond and against ‘common sense’, be it the popular ‘gesundes Volksempfinden’ or the paradigms of well-established economic and social theories, very often strongly defended by reputable technocratic institutions.

Is Christian social tradition something of a utopia then? Perhaps. Pope Paul VI wrote *Octogesima adveniens* in 1971, calling for a renewed definition of the word ‘utopia’. Utopias should be rejected when they are a “convenient excuse for those who wish to escape from concrete tasks in order to take refuge in an imaginary world” and when “living in a hypothetical future is (used as) a facile alibi for rejecting immediate responsibilities.” But Paul VI also noted that utopian thinking can provoke what he called “forward-looking imagination”, allowing to “perceive in the present the disregarded possibility hidden within it”.

With this utopian dimension in mind, let us now briefly reflect on the second question that I announced at the start of my speech. What can be the objective of a dialogue between Christians and those of other faiths or convictions?

Is it documentary? Does the dialogue serve to satisfy our curiosity? Would it be an instrument of pedagogy, to avoid misunderstandings? Well, promoting better mutual understanding is always a useful contribution. “Un effort intellectuel n’est jamais perdu”, as my old master Herman Van Rompuy often said. But it is clear that the value of the dialogue is to be found on a higher level.

What we need is an effort to establish a common denominator. Not necessarily in the religious sense but in interpreting the ethical and political consequences of what different faiths and convictions hold dear. The dialogue then acquires a certain Habermasian quality. It will never fully exhaust the appeal of the religious ideal. But it can help to identify what is unacceptable, failing to reach an ethical minimum shared by many. Moral philosophers like Rawls have investigated such a process. It is remarkable that even Rawls encountered some difficulties to extrapolate his considerations beyond the environment of national democracies. I have come to be convinced that a dialogue that is not more inclusive, especially towards the underprivileged of the world, has serious construction flaws.





I put a last sub-question to you: are we truly prepared to accept new insights as a result of this dialogue? This might sound somewhat lapidary. It is the characteristic of a genuinely listening attitude that new points of view are welcomed and integrated in our existing mental frame. I must confess that I do not see a lot of that in the course of interfaith dialogues I had the pleasure to attend. Hopefully it does not always betray feelings of superiority. To put it planely: do we honestly acknowledge the potentialities for improving our own ideas when interacting for example with Muslims, Jews, Orthodox brothers and sisters? And if you feel compelled to answer positively, does it go both ways for our interlocutors as well?

Ladies and gentlemen, I come to the last point I want to make. Shouldn't the first subject matter for a dialogue with those of other convictions is a meta-question? This meta-question goes as follows: "How much room do we leave for confessional convictions in the societal and political debate?"

Some might see this as a waste of energy, but indeed we first need to dialogue about the dialogue itself. In several European countries – including in mine – voices are raised to interpret the principle of separation of Church and State as a complete prohibition of religious manifestations in the public space, and a banning of religion to the privacy of the home. To that effect, liberals and socialists in Belgium would like to insert a “neutrality clause” in our Constitution.

This evolution carries important risks. At the end of the road there is not only the danger that the constitutionally protected practice of religion (which intrinsically implies forms of shared and thus public manifestations) is infringed upon. It might also shut down the voices of those who wish to participate in the political or societal debate and choose not to hide the religious foundation of their inspiration. I believe this would be extremely harmful on a societal level.

As we speak, an International Interdisciplinary Conference is being held at the Loyola Institute of Trinity College Dublin. It carries the title: “The Role of Church in a Pluralist Society - Good Riddance or Good Influence?” The first question they are discussing (Has Church a distinctive voice in the Public Square?) cannot be answered but with an absolute Yes. I hope that my reflections have illustrated enough that there is indeed such a distinctive voice.

The real question is perhaps less self-evident: knowing how distinctive this voice really is (very distant from current day economic dogma and the modern myth of autonomous self-determination) and taking into account the growing Western intolerance towards





religiously inspired expressions of opinion: “How much room is there in the first place for confessional convictions in the societal and political debate?” It might be that we will find more allies to guarantee such a room if we engage with those of other faiths in an inter-religious dialogue. But the real challenge is to convince more opinion leaders who go through their lives without religious convictions that – with all due respect for their personal agnostic or atheist position and without any uncalled for proselitism – the public debate is enriched when there is room for the religious voice.

I thank you for your kind attention.

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