

## *The Wounded Soul of Europe*



This sculpture of Zadkine was made after the second world war for the city of Rotterdam, to keep in memory the bombing of the city at the beginning of the war. The heart of the city was completely destroyed. It was a city with its heart cut out and it can only lift up its arms in despair.

When the sculpture was uncovered, Zadkine himself was present and said, “I hope that birds will come and build a nest in that empty space. New life at a place where nothing but a hole was left.” This sculpture has become an image not just for Rotterdam or Holland after the last world war, but of much more. The sculpture transcends the actuality for which it was made. For me it expresses the spiritual state of Europe. To explain what I mean by this I need to review some history.

Historians, both Christian and non-Christian, agree that the origin and existence of Europe cannot be understood apart from Christianity. One historian said, “If there had been no preaching of the gospel, Europe would have remained an insignificant peninsula of the continent of Asia.” At the time of the New Testament, northern Europe was a dark and remote corner of the Roman Empire. The pagan religions that dominated most of Europe at that time did not create unity. From the moment the apostle Paul was called to Macedonia, through that remarkable vision (“Come over and help us,” Acts 16), up to the baptism of the Icelandic people in the year 1004, the Gospel changed the whole outlook of a pagan European culture influenced by the Greeks and the Romans. We remember how, on 5 June in the year 754, the Irish missionary Boniface was murdered for cutting the holy oak as he baptised the Frisians. They paid a price for changing a pagan Europe into a baptised Christian continent!

This is at the heart of each European city and village: the church with a cross on the tower that symbolises the heart of Europe. European thinkers no longer believe that history is cyclical. No European politician takes his starting point outside of what are originally Christian values. In spite of all the wars and splits, one European culture emerged with one European heritage.

It is a sign of extreme alienation from its own heritage that, in the preamble of the new constitution of Europe, in the form that was accepted in 2004, Christianity was not even mentioned as one of its spiritual roots. This is the affirmation of an overwhelming fact, namely that Europe has lost its heart. As the prophet Hosea said (Hosea 2: 8) to his adulterous wife, “She has not even acknowledged that I was the One who gave her the grain, the oil and the wine.” Cut off from God, Europe has lost its heart.



In the middle of the European flag is an empty space. The stars symbolising each of the participants of the European Union are grouped around what? Just an empty circle? What will be the future heart of Europe? What will keep us together? Will it be the market? The euro? Our weapons? A strong leader? Our culture? Our values? Who will define them?

We live in a time in which the European nations must decide about their own positions: Do we want to join the European Union? Will we accept the new constitution? What will be the borders of the new united Europe? Will Turkey be part of it? How can we answer such questions if we do not know who we are? Thousands of people from other cultures take refuge in the welfare “paradise” of the present Europe. We want them at least to be integrated in our own culture. We don’t want them to become an alien subculture in our midst or, worse, a kind of Trojan horse. But how can we help them integrate into the European culture if we do not ourselves know who we are?

My hope is that the empty place will again be filled with new life, with the birds of the Kingdom (Matthew 13:32). Only that can fill the vacuum that arose when the people of Europe turned away from their Maker. The root of the problem was and is not in the first

place in the intellect of the European thinkers, not even in their morality, but it is in their “uprootedness.” The average European is cut off from the main root that was foundational for the European culture. One can conclude this by reading the leading European thinkers of the last century, starting with the “masters of suspicion.” It became visible in politics, economics and art. But beyond these outward appearances of the European culture, it is felt in an underlying emptiness, a feeling as if God does not exist, that He is irrelevant. It is a feeling many times more powerfully present in the belly than in the mind, an *inability to believe*.

How can we see Europe with the eyes of God? How can we look at the history of Europe through the spectacles of the Scriptures? The past 20 centuries of European history have produced shocking and horrifying events, culminating in two world wars. Yet European history has also produced great events, riches and wealth, the development of science and technology, and the resulting welfare society. We can see both curse and blessing.

What is the secret, if any, behind all of this? What is the current spiritual state of Europe? What is our Christian calling today? What should we say to the postmodern Western European? What should we say to the post-communist Eastern European?

Comfort can be taken from the comparison of Europe with Israel. In both cases God has tried to reach out to a lost world through a supernaturally changed culture. Of course there is no equality, only similarity. Israel’s calling was unique in that it was called to bring forth the Messiah. But one of the ways God wanted Israel to be instrumental for this was by being different as a culture in its earthly national existence, thus foreshadowing the coming of the Messiah and his rule. It is in this respect that there is a parallel between Israel and Europe. In the same way that Israel was called to be a foreshadow, European countries were called to be an “aftershadow” of his coming. We

are a culture that would bring forth the fruits of the coming of Christ, fore-shadowing the coming Kingdom! That is what moved our Christian ancestors when they worked for a Christian culture. Even when they were not personally converted (or as one can say “reborn”) Christians, they still demonstrated what Francis Schaeffer called “the fruits of the fruits of the fruits of the Spirit.”

### **The Rise of Europe**

Did Europe fulfill God’s plan? In the beginning, yes, there was a hopeful start. When the gospel came to Europe, a cyclical pagan culture received a hopeful calling. The cyclical lifestyle of the pagans was broken and a way to the future opened up. Relationships were renewed, monogamy became the norm, and the family assumed a central place. Authority became delegated authority, such as we read about in Romans chapter 13. Christian values of justice, compassion, human dignity, and responsibility created a completely different culture.

That which was good in our European history was the belief in the cultural implications of the Gospel. God wanted Europe to be an echo of the proclamation of the Gospel through the working of the Holy Spirit. That echo was the renewing effect of the Christian faith in all the areas of life. He planted the fruits, and out of that the fruits of the fruits of the fruits of the Spirit came forth. The early Christians in Europe already, around the beginning of the Constantinian era, were accepting responsibility in government, responsibility for education, for public life, for social care, and for economic growth. That was not the fall of Christianity as some people believe; that was God-willed renewal of the culture. In spite of all the disasters that have come over us, there is a common Christian heritage that we need to protect and renew.

## Europe's Decline

However, we must simultaneously recognise that in many ways Europe has not been a good example. We Europeans should never have the attitude of, "Look at us, see how well we did." Rather we should say, "Look at us, see how we failed. Let's learn from our mistakes." In fact, when making up the balance of so many centuries of European history, today we should all feel very sorry. From the beginning there was a deep sinfulness and violence in European culture, in which church and state conspired together. The same Charlemagne who, for the first time created a form of European unity in 800, in one day killed 4500 Saxons who did not want to become Christians. Later came the crusades. Then the religious wars. Then slavery. Then colonialism. And, finally, in the 20<sup>th</sup> century, Europe burst into flames during two world wars. Hardly a history to be proud of at all!

Europe's history has always been a synthesis between real Christianity on one hand, and paganism influenced by the Greco-Roman civilisation and humanism on the other. A well-known Dutch theologian, Miskotte, said, "Europe has always been a synthesis, and it is doubtful whether Europeans at any time gave their hearts fully to the Lord." He then quotes Amos, the Old Testament prophet, who asked the Israelites, "Did you ever turn to me with all of your heart?" That is the question which should be asked of all European nations of the past. In a way, the Europeans ran away with the secondary Christian values: equality and justice and liberty and brotherhood; but we stayed away from the primary Christian values: the cross of Christ, sanctification and the coming of the Kingdom.

So we should not look at European history as a Christian history. It has always been a synthesis, with Christianity for centuries as the top-layer, and paganism and humanism as

the undercurrent. At the time of the Enlightenment this began to change. By the 20<sup>th</sup> century, the undercurrent of paganism had become the top-layer, and Christianity had become the undercurrent. We could perhaps see this as God's judgment on Europe. Observing the beginning of 21st century today, our response should first be one of real mourning, of repentance and of prayer. We have become like the people of Israel, led into captivity. In most European countries Christians have become a minority in a non-Christian society, just as the Israelites were in Babylon. That is reason for mourning as the Israel did in Babylonian captivity. Remember Jeremiah, in Rembrandt's famous painting, weeping over Jerusalem. As Byron said, "They who know the most must mourn the deepest."

### **The Two Waves**

The enlightenment in Europe came in two waves. The first wave at the end of the 18th century was mainly French, with thinkers like Voltaire and Rousseau. This wave moved the majority of Europeans away from theism to deism. The second wave came over Europe from England and Germany at the end of the 19<sup>th</sup> century and took the leaders of the European culture from deism to atheism.

### **The First Wave (1750-1795)**

The first wave had its origin and political application in France. It spread over the whole of Europe, but also hit the United States full force. Because of the rise of science it was deeply impressed by the power of reason. Several of the American founding Fathers were enlightened thinkers (especially Thomas Jefferson). They had sympathy for France and the French revolution. They shared the faith of the European Enlightened philosophers in

God, virtue and immortality. But the values of the Kingdom of God, the Cross of Christ and the work of the Holy Spirit were lost. They were deists.

### **The Second Wave (1848- 1918)**

The second wave of the Enlightenment touched the United States, but did not, until today, hit it with full force, as it did Europe. This took place around 1900 in Europe and it shook the foundations of the spiritual state of Europe. Four men, the masters of suspicion, together played a crucial role in this deeply destructive process: Darwin, Marx, Freud and Nietzsche. They together caused a wave of suspicion: Creation does not come from God, authority can not be trusted, morality and conscience are not deep realities because God planted them in us, and piety was, in fact, always the weapon of the loser. Suspicion complete!

All these masters of suspicion were atheists who believed that God was a projection of the human mind, following Feuerbach's view that God was nothing but the ideal image that human beings cherish about themselves. Genesis was, for them, just a story. We now had the gospel according Darwin. Morality, authority, and Christian character were all undermined and felt to be dirty, driven by suspicious motives. All the sacred institutions, including the church, its offices and sacraments, were hidden means to help people to feel good about themselves. Priests and pastors were there to exercise power over people.

"Religion is the opium of the people," said Marx. The conscience of man, the most untouchable sanctuary of men, as Kant had been teaching, was in Freud's eyes driven by motives that were not conscious to us. Even the most impressive teaching of the Bible, the Sermon on the Mount, was basically weak, the morality of a slave, said Nietzsche.

These masters of suspicion succeeded in sowing a seed of distrust about everything that



sounded religious. They fed a mentality that believed that the only thing you can trust is science and, especially, natural science and the technology that flows from it.

### **Loss of Any Foundation.**

It is very hard to talk about God or to preach the gospel in such an atmosphere of suspicion. Someone compared it with talking about sex in the Victorian age. A taboo hangs over it. Travel on a train in Europe and try to talk about God. It does not work. And if it does, you will in most cases find that you first have to talk about basics with nothing on which you can build, no authority or feeling or tradition or conviction that you can presuppose to have in common with the person with whom you are speaking. This is not so on other continents, in Africa, Asia, or even in America. Even where Americans are Western, they are still different because this second wave of suspicion did not touch them as it did Europe.

### **Shattered Dreams**

A very important factor should be added: modernism with its methodic atheism came with big dreams! Mankind could be set free from ignorance, injustice and hunger. If only man would take destiny in his own hands! Use Reason! This is in a moderate way the ideal as the philosopher Kant phrased it in 1845. The modernist dream! But after a century of living under the rule of *ideologies*, the dreams were shattered. The older generation built all their hope on one or another ideology, but whether it was Socialism or Nationalism or National Socialism, it all turned into a disaster. Two world wars caused millions of deaths and, after decades of recovery, people are deeply aware of the fact that war and poverty, indeed all of the world's problems, are not even one step closer to a solution. Yes, we are *postmodernists*.

This makes it a step harder to talk about God in a European setting. It might look as if on the outside people are happy consumers in a welfare state, but when we touch a deeper layer in the European soul we feel two things: suspicion and disappointment. For many the truth about God is just too good to believe. Like the dwarves in *The Last Battle* of C.S. Lewis' Narnia tales, they "have been taken in so much that they cannot be taken out any more!" Whenever God comes into the life of the European people, these are the areas in which healing is first needed. In a way, the times of Jesus have returned: no preaching without healing. Working through the past, feeling the wounds!

The problem of Europe is not just having lost the truth; it is having a wounded heart. Or even, like Zadkine's sculpture, an empty spot, a vacuum, instead of an energising centre. People are fearful of being trapped again. They are suspicious. C.S. Lewis argued that explaining the gospel to a European in the modern world is like trying to reconcile a man and his wife after a broken marriage. There is a painful history, full of fear and raw emotions. The process is far longer and more complicated than the start of a marriage!

This might even be true for the masters of suspicion themselves. The formulation of their unbelief is more a rationalised afterthought of this felt "absence of God" than a conclusion that logically flows out of their scientific work. Feelings about the absence of God were already expressed by novel writers around 1800.

This observation, however, does not make talking about the reality of God easier in Europe today. Doing so has to focus more on the underlying doubt, suspicion and disappointment, than on the intellectual argument, although the refutation of the last will always remain an important task. Nevertheless, if we really want to touch the heart of the Europeans, they must be touched in a deeper way. The wife must be reconciled with the

husband after a time of divorce. It will never happen without understanding why she was so disappointed, angry, or confused. A deep work of healing must take place.

The reality of God should become convincing. In the book of Acts we see that this is the work of the Holy Spirit, convincing the heart of people through words, through acts of healing in communities, and through signs and wonders. Without that we will go nowhere: not outside Europe, and certainly not within Europe.

### **Conclusion**

By the 20<sup>th</sup> century, the undercurrent that had always been there, paganism combined with the Greco-Roman classicism, had become the top-layer, and Christianity had become an undercurrent. We can see this as God's judgment on Europe.

**1.** Standing at the beginning of 21st century today, our response should first be one of real mourning, of repentance and of prayer. We should feel what God feels with the prophet Hosea. The Lord commanded him to marry a harlot. In this way the Lord wanted him to feel in his own marriage what God felt in His covenant with his people. This is the first thing we learn from the prophets of Israel in the time of captivity: *Come let us look to the Lord our God and with contrite hearts return; our God is gracious, nor will He leave the desolate to mourn.*

**2.** Secondly, we need healing. That was the message of Malachi (Malachi 4:2): "the Sun of righteousness will rise with healing under his wings." Suspicion and disappointment with all that is included must be acknowledged, brought out into the open air. It must be met and healed. How? I do not know! This is part of the revival for which we are praying. But here is an observation. Where non-Christians come to Christ in Europe, it almost

always happens in the framework of healing communities, shared meals (the secret weapon of the alpha-course), personal care and good apologetics.

3. Thirdly, we should resist the temptation of Esther. She could have remained hidden. Yet God does not want us to remain hidden in our own Christian subcultures, but to step out like Esther. When she stepped out of her hiddenness, He did! Let us be genuine Europeans. From ancient times God's people have accepted responsibility for the culture in which the Lord has placed us. Jeremiah's words in his famous letter to Israel in captivity (Jeremiah 19: 4-9) were NOT, "Form a subculture, stay away from Babylonian civilisation, wait for God, save your soul." No, he said exactly the opposite! He told them (verse 4), "*Build houses and settle down, plant gardens and eat what they produce; marry, have sons and daughters; increase in number there, do not decrease; and seek the peace and prosperity of the city where I have put you into exile.*" Let the truth of God become visible in a different lifestyle and renewed culture, and take responsibility for that culture.

May God use us again in a different period of Europe's history, less perhaps like a David or a Solomon, but more like an Esther or a Daniel, who were the salt in their world at that time!

### **Vision for the Future**

Where do we move from here? Three steps are crucial: mourning, healing, and being salt once again! But, going from here to the new European community of 24 members with Eastern and Western parts, I believe our message to the Western Europeans should be: *Go back from the fruits to the roots.* To the East, however, just the opposite: *Grow from your roots to the fruits!*

If the Lord would address the European Parliament in Strasbourg today, in answer to the question, “What shall we do in our present moment of history?,” he might say something like Micah said to the Israelites: “I have shown you, oh man, what is good and what the Lord requires of you. It is to act justly, to love mercy and to walk humbly with your God.” The basic problem with Western European man is not that he does not know what justice is. He does know. And he knows what mercy is. But he believes that he can achieve them without walking humbly with his God. That is the key point today. It is crucial that we teach Western European man that this is the biggest mistake he ever made, to think that he can keep enjoying the fruits without the roots, without walking humbly with his God.

To the Eastern European we should say, “Go on from your hidden roots to the fruits.” In Eastern Europe we should turn the message around. All over the East we see a new openness. Eastern Europeans are searching for their roots, and that is a marvelous development. Even the former Soviet minister of foreign affairs, Edward Shevardnaze, who was removed from the presidency of Georgia, told Dutch television that he had been baptised into the Orthodox Church. Many are returning to their roots. Many are asking for help to remodel their society according to Biblical principles, as in the West.

However, we should realise that Byzantine Christianity has always been very mystical, and other-worldly. An Eastern Orthodox Church is filled with symbols of a heavenly future and a heavenly reality. There has been no one who has told the Orthodox peoples how to renew a culture on the basis of the Bible, what we learned from the Reformation. What they primarily need in Eastern Europe is not Western evangelists, but deeply committed Christian businessmen, politicians, doctors and farmers. They need people who can help them to work out a Biblical worldview in areas such as management,

political structures, democratic rule and medical ethics. Such is the fruit that needs to grow out of their own hidden roots. In that way, Western Christianity can enrich the Byzantine background of the East.

In short, Western Europeans need revival; Eastern Europeans need reformation. If this does not happen, all our fears for the future of Europe could come true. Europe could become a fortress of luxury protected by a silver curtain in place of an iron curtain, as Lech Walesa has warned. Europe could disintegrate into many nationalistic countries and squabbles as we have witnessed in the Balkans. Europe could fall into a new ideology by putting itself in the centre of the world. All this could be prevented if Europeans would listen to the prophets, as we are trying to do.

May God use us in promoting revival in the West and reformation in the East.