

Future perspectives drawn from past experience

November 2009: for people in Europe a time for remembrance. A few days ago we celebrated the 20th anniversary of the fall of the Berlin Wall. Many of us will still have a vivid memory of what happened that particular night. In my memory this event is linked to a meeting in a village near Magdeburg where I had been invited by the local pastor Markus Meckel to speak about the work of the European Ecumenical Commission for Church and Society (EECCS), known now as the CSC of the CEC. This visit took place in the week preceding the fall of the Wall.

The day after my return to Brussels, I received a phone call from a senior civil servant, Jerome Vignon, who was then heading the think-tank of the European Commission - the Forward Studies Unit or Cellule de Prospective - explaining to me that he wanted to have some inside information about my visit to the DDR. I tell you this story, for it illustrates the kind of relationship which had been established over the years between the small secretariat of the Churches' Commission and the European Commission.

I arrived in Brussels in September 1966 - coming from Haarlem. The General Secretary of the Nederlandse Hervormde Kerk, Dr. Emmen, performed my induction in Brussels in September 1966. And then began a long and adventurous journey which would last for 33 years. I entered a long learning process, meeting the world of the European civil servants at their places of work, but also in their family lives.

This bi-focal approach - imposed at the time by budgetary constraints - was to prove beneficial for the later work of the Centre, for it gave me the human face of a world which the media mostly describe as abstract and technocratic. In the Centre, I could rely on a group of civil servants which came together frequently. They were all people of great dedication and conviction, determined to give form and substance to our work and helping to establish the contacts needed to implement the agenda which the Board of the Centre was spelling out.

The main concern was: how were the Churches of the Member States of the EEC (as it then was) to be involved in the work which was developing in Brussels? Here I have to mention the crucial role played by a group of people belonging to the central offices of the member Churches and with whom the Brussels group shared a common understanding of the new challenges which the EEC was addressing to the Churches and to society at large. These people carried on an uphill battle within their respective Churches - which were still inclined in those years to adopt an attitude of wait and see vis-à-vis the European Community. Their fear was, would a stronger commitment towards Brussels not impact on the solidarity they wanted to maintain with the Churches in Central and Eastern Europe, which were in a minority position? In Brussels one was aware of the seriousness of this concern but to play down the political and ethical significance of the prospect of a reconciled Europe was not acceptable either.

In order to capture the interest of the Churches who participated in this initiative, we invited them twice a year to assemble in Brussels. Each time a main theme was selected of which the ethical implications were relevant for the Churches and which was on the agenda of the European Commission. European civil servants participated each time in those assemblies. The variety of the themes extended the circle of people in the Churches now familiar with European issues. These meetings were formalised from 1964 on; they convened as the "Consultative Commission of Churches for the European Communities".

This opening towards the Churches and/or Councils of Churches in the member countries was mirrored by another initiative directed towards Church organisations - which were issue-oriented and had gained experience in working together at European level. Step-by-step working relations were established with groups like the European Contact Group on Urban and Industrial Mission, the Ecumenical Network of European Academies and Laity Centres, the Commission of Churches for Migrant Workers. As with the Churches, most of those "issue-oriented" groups had to be convinced of the growing impact the EU policies would have in the fields of their activities. The decision was taken by the Commission of Churches to invite a representative of those Church organisations to attend its General Assemblies as consultative members.

All this led potentially to a rich mix of people (delegates from the Churches, people coming from Church organisations and European civil servants) learning to listen to each other, sharing a common concern: how to respond to the new challenges the EU was addressing to society at large and the Churches in particular?

Building up a solid network of Church people who were convinced of the major challenges the EEC was addressing to the Churches was but one aspect of the work.

Another task had to be tackled on the spot in Brussels: how to establish a dialogue of real substance between the Churches and the European institutions which were continuously enlarging their fields of competence, affecting directly the scope of the Churches' social responsibility?

The answer to this question was the creation of working groups. We started to establish working groups focussing on issues which were not covered by issue-oriented Church groups working at European level. This was the case for agriculture, for although the agricultural policy was worked out and decided on at EEC level no European Church group on agriculture and rural development existed. Helmut von Verschuer who was in a key position in the Directorate General for the CAP could tell us more about this. The same was true for the North/South issue - even though this issue was high up on the Churches' agenda.

Clearly, in those fields there was a distinct vacuum. We - that is the local Ecumenical Association and EECCS - decided to establish working groups on these issues. Over the years, those working groups became the real motor of the Churches' presence vis-à-vis the European institutions. I will come back to this later. Let me just add that with regard to the North/South issue, this group was under the common chairmanship of EECCS and OCIPE (our Catholic partner run by the Jesuit fathers) with whom EECCS worked closely before the creation of the COMECE.

Before closing the first part of this exposé devoted to a review of the past, I'd like to come back to the role the working groups have played in the whole set-up of the Churches' presence in Brussels during that period. I shall not speak of any working group in particular - each has its own story, and maybe we shall hear some of these stories from members of the panel. For the time being let me share with you some lessons. I said earlier that it was the working groups that largely generated a clear profile for the Churches' concern at European level at this time - which the European institutions came to identify and eventually recognize: a recognition which has now been made explicit in Article 17.3 of the Lisbon Treaty.

Why was the format of working groups chosen to promote a dialogue with the EU institutions? Was there not the risk of a non-committed kind of dialogue given the nature of the working groups' membership? - for the participants were generally lay people sent by their respective Churches whose qualifications as members of a working group lay primarily in their personal expertise in the matter being discussed in that working group and not on their position in the Church. As for the partners in this

dialogue, the choice of civil servants was formally approved by their respective hierarchies, but in most cases it was also the result of the network of contacts which the local Ecumenical Association had been able to develop – given that the members of the Ecumenical Association were, for the most part, linked professionally to the European Commission.

This constellation of people created the necessary conditions for good dialogue: trust and openness were present on both sides. On the European Commission side, these people came with a dimension of added value which was their own interest in the discussion. As civil servants, they were confronted daily with all kinds of lobbies defending first and foremost specific interests: but here they met people whose first concern was the people actually affected or at risk of being affected by the policies of the EU. On the Churches' side, the input was from practical experience and knowledge of the local situation combined with precise and well-argued expertise.

The working groups proceeded in a rather discreet fashion: it was a mole's job of looking for possible "loopholes" in the proposals in the Commission's pipelines. But the task given to the working groups was not limited to this kind of dialogue; eventually the results of the dialogue would be passed on to the Churches' leadership where, once the results had been accepted, there would then follow a request for dialogue with the top civil servants responsible for the topic concerned. This model - combining serious preparatory work with a public commitment on the part of the Church leadership to enter into open dialogue with the Commission - has proved its effectiveness on several occasions.

What do we mean exactly when we use the word "dialogue" to designate the relationship between the Churches and the EU Institutions?

I do not want to theorize on this subject but will draw rather on the experience we have built up over these years. One of the points of contention between the Churches and the Institutions which surfaced from time to time was the Churches' desire to be recognised as Churches and not as NGOs. This request became an issue when the number of NGO's started to grow in the Brussels context, the EU being inclined for obvious practical reasons to put NGO's and Churches in the same box. That Article 17 recognizes the "identity" and the "specific contribution" of the Churches is the result of considerable efforts made by the Churches to be seen as a category apart.

But this recognition raises another question, namely: What do Churches have in common which distinguish them from other dialogue partners? Again, from the experience gained in the working groups, some elements of an answer can be discerned.

1) The need to make clear what we speak and stand for. On a number of occasions we were challenged by our EU partners to speak as people from the Churches. We should never forget that this is precisely what the people working in the institutions expect from us.

2) Questions raised by the Church participants were an important part of the dialogue. Our experience here was that a well-formulated and precise question carries authority in itself. Much attention should be given to the preparation of such questions. Here the participation of lay people proved crucial: the dialogue was taking place between "equals".

3) It was our experience that the interest shown by civil servants was in direct proportion to the number of countries represented in any working group. Indeed a working group composed of nationals from just one country would raise among the EU delegation the question as to why these people were coming here and not addressing their demand to their own government? The EU is a trans-national type of institution and its natural vis-à-vis is the Member States and their citizens.

This review summarizes a period of the Churches' presence in the form of EECCS which extended from the end of the sixties to the end of the eighties. During this period the work was mainly supported by the local Ecumenical Association and the Churches' Commission. The interaction between the two entities laid the basis for the future. However during this same period the cursor moved from the local Association towards the Churches, which were gradually strengthening their presence and commitment in Brussels and Strasburg. This was reflected in the changing titles: to begin with a "Consultative" Commission (revealing a degree of diffidence) and moving in the eighties to become the European Ecumenical Commission for Church and Society, better known as EECCS.

The decade which followed - 1989 to 1999 - has to be the "golden age" for us. With the Treaty of Maastricht on the horizon and the prospect of a Single Market, the Churches of all denominations reinforced their presence at Brussels headquarters. Under the strong hand of Jacques Delors, the Commission acquired a clear profile. All this was to gain momentum with the meeting which took place in November 1990 between the President of the Commission and the Church leaders of the Member Churches of EECCS. A year before, in November 1989, the political situation had changed leaving no stone of the European landscape unturned. The European Community would become the European Union; from 12 Member States it would grow eventually to 27.

Challenges. The changes in the political arena had their repercussions on the Church organisations operating in Europe. EECCS and CEC were both affected. So far relationships between the two organisations had existed – but had been low key. From now on CEC and EECCS entered a process which resulted eventually in EECCS and the Peace, Justice and Human Rights department of the CEC becoming the Church and Society Commission with special status within the CEC. A small group of people appointed by EECCS and CEC started to negotiate the terms of a merger. In April 1996, after several months' work, this group came to an agreement which was formally adopted in 1997 by the General Assemblies of EECCS and CEC.

I should add here that the staff of EECCS and CEC met together (March 1997, October 1997 and April 1998) in order to look at the more practical aspects of the merger. Reading the minutes of those joint staff meetings, I have singled out some of the issues:

- In March 1997, after an extensive exchange of information between EECCS and CEC, a good deal of the meeting was devoted to the question of what do we mean when we speak about "Church and Society" from our different traditions? The merger of the two entities entailed a much stronger participation from the Orthodox tradition.
- In October 1997 the question was raised about the future of the Collegium which had been a salient characteristic of EECCS, with every member of the senior staff being responsible for his or her field and co-responsible for the whole of the work, and one person having the task of co-ordinating the whole and being the "face" of the staff. Was it going to be possible to maintain this with an enlarged staff?
- In April 1998 mention was made in connection with the unification process of the existence of "two different cultures". Whereas EECCS had been able to work with the concept of Church and Society as developed by the WCC since 1968, CEC, due to the political context which prevailed in Eastern Europe, was limited in its approach to society issues.

I'd like to add another point which was the subject of discussion in one of the Joint Staff meetings, namely: are all the international institutions (EU, Council of Europe, OSCE, UNO) of equal importance for the Churches? In that discussion, the staff of EECCS insisted that Churches ought to recognise the "sui generis" character of the EU institutions which demanded from the Churches an approach which took stock of the particular nature of the EU institutions.

Looking back, it is clear to me that the open and frank spirit which reigned in the joint staff meetings – nothing was off limits - would prove beneficial for the future work of the newly constituted CSC of CEC. Success was not guaranteed; EECCS and CEC were very different entities as concerned their mandate, their priorities and their “modus operandi”. The merger succeeded without falling prey to frustration; both partners soon became convinced that it was a win/win situation. Nor did the staff have the impression that “things” had been decided from “above”. They felt that they were part of a democratic process. I am keen to underline this for I am aware of the fact that the hierarchical structure of the Churches could well have prevented those first concerned from participating in the process.

So far I have given you a rather sketchy overview of the 40 years which preceded the creation of the CSC/CEC. If I had to respond to the question: What, amidst all the turmoil of changes that occurred during those 40 years, would emerge as being permanently present in the minds and actions of those players actively engaged in this enterprise? I would mention a degree of tension: seeking to convince the Churches that both their commitment and critical solidarity were required in the face of the European construction as an emerging centre of power; but, simultaneously to convey the message that the “sui generis” character of the European Community as it was then called, ought to be recognised. Or to put it in other words: seeking to extrapolate the existing national models of Church-State relationships into the European institutional system would fall short relative to the possibilities the very existence of the EU offered to find new avenues for the Churches independently of their influence, big or small, and to learn to work together in a spirit of “critical fellowship”, to quote Visser't Hooft. This may sound very idealistic. I don't think so. To be effective in the implementation of Article 17 of Lisbon the Churches will be obliged to put their acts and their resources together. If every Church follows a route of its own, Article 17 will remain void. Reading between the lines of this Article we can easily discover the ecumenical challenge lying before us.

There is another reason to refuse a straitjacket approach to the European institutions. If I had to differentiate between the average international institution and the EU institutions I would define the latter as being of an organic nature. What I mean to say here is:

a) That there is a constant interactivity between the institutions: Council, European Parliament, Commission, Court of Justice. Politics play a role and define where the cursor should be.

b) Moreover the EU is a mobile target. It is in a continuous process of metamorphosis as concerns the ever-growing field of competences and the territory it covers.

For the Churches all this pleads for a model which remains flexible in its approach in order to respond in timely and purposeful manner to the evolving nature of the EU institutions.

In 1996, the joint working group, mentioned earlier, adopted the so-called “Paris document” in which the main steps leading to the merger of EECCS and CEC were set out and the mandate and structures of the new CSC were outlined. The fact that this document was adopted by the two General Assemblies of CEC and EECCS confer on it a special significance. Defining the mandate of the Commission it states in order: study and examination of Church and society questions, monitoring of the European Institutions (EU, Council of Europe, OSCE) and, I quote, “dealing with the specific responsibility of the Churches in the Member States of the EU for the internal policies of the EU”. Further on in the text one reads, “this undertaking would be expressed by public positions taken by the Commission”. With regard to the structures, one reads that “the priorities of the Commission would be established in agreement with the Central Committee of CEC”. In this consensus document EECCS could recognize its own ethos.

During its General Assembly held in Graz, CEC confirmed the special position the CSC should have in the CEC structure. The proposal which was adopted declares: "that to change the mandate of the CSC or to dissolve it, a two-thirds majority of the General Assembly is required"; and secondly, that "the CSC is authorized to make public statements in its own name and in the field of its own competence in consultation with the General Secretary"; and thirdly, that "the CSC is entitled to nominate an Executive Committee and create working groups in the framework of the programmes approved by the Central Committee and in the limits of its budget".

That was the situation when we, who are here today as witnesses from all those years ago, left the playground. We all I'm sure left with the feeling of having done a good job and passing to the next generation a tool with which they could achieve the aims and goals of the mandate entrusted to them. The main change which had occurred was the ecclesiastical context in which the staff and its Executive Committee would have to operate.

Since then I have taken some distance from that work, a distance which it seemed to me wise to take. But each time I had the opportunity to be in contact with the rue Joseph II, I had the feeling I was entering a beehive. This metaphor is justified because the present climate predicts heavy weather and we all know that bees are an endangered species. There are good reasons to sense some anxiety as to the future.

It is a truism to say that we currently live in a time of rapid and radical changes which impact on most of what we have taken for granted in the past. Churches - as part of society - are affected by these changes. With regard to CSC I have come across two papers: one from the Churches in the UK and one in the form of an EKD motion submitted to and adopted by the last General Assembly in Lyons. The first paper directs some very harsh criticism at the CSC; the second is calling for a **constitutional** General Assembly to be held in 2013, and to this end, it has been decided to set up a working group before the end of this year; this working group will have the task of preparing a revised CEC structure. Taking both these now together, it is certain that some process needs to be launched to sort out what will be CSC's future role and action. The CSC, considering the position it has in the overall CEC structure, is therefore called to participate actively in the discussions to come. I'm sure all present here are aware of what is at stake. Let me put the challenge before us in the form of a question: what are the arguments which justify the mandate to be given now and in the future to the CSC?

As I understand it, we who were involved in the preparatory work (EECCS) which led to the creation of the CSC in 1997 have been asked to express our hopes and wishes as well as our anxieties for its short-term future. We were all actively involved in that process, so we share your concern and sense of responsibility.

Let me set the ball rolling:

1) One notices a parallel between the present developments in the Churches and those taking place in the EU; in the Churches, a process of re-confessionalisation is underway which threatens the ecumenical movement; with regard to the EU there is a clear trend towards re-nationalisation: evidence for this is the absence of any common reaction to the financial and economic crisis. The European Commission whose first task is to be the initiator and the motor of the EU machine is tending to become the secretariat of the Council.

And these developments are occurring precisely at a time when the established Churches in Europe are pushed to the margins of society, and the EU has to adapt its software in order to respond to a world which has become multipolar and is confronted today with a multidimensional crisis.

Nobody will dispute this; but what is interesting is the parallel specifically if you look at it from a CSC perspective. You discover that the CSC is occupying a strategic position: it is at the crossroads where the avenues of the Churches and the EU meet. That is the first point I want to make. In the reform processes in which CEC is engaging itself one should not lose sight of the fact that the Churches have here direct access to one of the most tangible power houses in Europe (notwithstanding its present incapacity due to its lack of vision and absence of political will to give form and content to the mandate it has received). In this respect I must say that I'm worried by the argument put forward in the Church of England's paper which draws the conclusion from the absence of support in English public opinion at large that less importance should therefore be given to the work of the CSC. I want to recall here that the Churches in Britain were part of the process aiming to assure a Church presence in Brussels from the very start, even before the UK became a member of the EEC. I do not believe that fixing the agenda of the Churches according to the ups and downs of public opinion is theologically valid.

2) The second point I want to raise is related to the ecumenical dimension of the Churches' commitment at European level. I am personally very sensitive to this aspect of the Churches' presence in Brussels. What I am going to say may well sound overstated, but my age, and the experience I have had the privilege of building up over all those years, have convinced me that the Churches have a debt to pay towards Europe. Not only did they contribute to the divisions - and for that reason bear responsibility for the bloody conflicts which have raged all over Europe, but they nourished and justified extreme forms of nationalism. The Czech philosopher Jan Patočka spoke of the "shaken": the men who in 1919 came back home from the trenches where they had lost so many of their comrades. A quarter of a century later our continent was once again the theatre of immeasurable and inexpressible suffering. More writing on the wall of European history. Would this be the last?? Would this continent whose roots are claimed by the Churches to be Christian, which has been such a great place of creativity and the arts - cease to have any relevance for future generations? For those who suffer amnesia this may sound an overstatement. Those who know where we are coming from will understand. For them the decision taken to focus on the production of coal and steel (staple products in the economy in those days and for arms production) was a signal that Europe - although gravely injured - was not dead. It was seen as the beginning of a new way of looking at politics: my security depends on the security of my neighbour. Obviously it was no more free than any other human endeavour from ambiguity and second thoughts. But the Churches understood the far-reaching consequences of this initiative. They were aware that to be credible and to speak with authority, they also had to do their homework on the reconciliation process. They presented themselves "e pluribus unum". If you take the first list of members, you will find there Councils and Federations of Churches signalling their concern to present themselves in the European arena as acting together. My recollection here is that it took some time for the participants to learn to look beyond their national and confessional borders and arrive at what Visser't Hooft used to describe as "critical fellowship". One should not underestimate the difficulties that can arise. Indeed in each country the Churches' position with regard to the society at home differs. Substituting a "case by case" model instead of the "conciliarity" approach which has so far been favoured would, despite its inherent difficulties be, I believe, a seriously retrograde step; in terms of the ecumenical agenda, the minority Churches would be the main losers and it would moreover undermine the credibility and authority of the Churches' presence vis-à-vis the European institutions.

3) Thirdly there is the need for the Churches to raise the mid- and long-term dimensions of the policies presently being discussed in the EU institutions.

As I mentioned earlier, this concern was felt in the European Commission. Given its role of conceiving policies for the EU, there was an element of forecasting built into the mandate given to the Commission. Unfortunately this concern has faded away. The so-called FSU was an attempt to reinvigorate it but that was dismantled after some years.

This is a worrying fact. Especially at times of great changes, there is a need to sit down before building a tower. But despite the numerous "mene-tekell" signs that appeared on the "wall" there is, as Alastair Hulbert remarks in his presentation, no place for doubt among decision-makers. Business as usual. I do not believe that the vocation of the Churches nowadays is to sit on the balcony of the world scene, neither should they limit their commitment to providing a first-aid service however important and justifiable such action may be.

Churches should remember the answer Jesus gave to the Pharisees who wanted to know when the Kingdom was going to be established. He replied: "It is not a question of how and when for the Kingdom of God is here among you now" (Luke 17, vv 20-21), meaning in our world.

How can this answer be put understood in the context of the EU institutions? During the General Assembly of the WCC in Canberra (1991), structures were recognised as a new mission field. The CSC is thus on the right track. The question is: how to put this in practical terms, what is the comparative advantage of CSC not only vis-à-vis the NGOs but also vis-à-vis the EU institutions?

a) Regarding the NGOs - whose fields of action are limited to single issues - Churches have a holistic approach to society.

b) Regarding the EU institutions, the advantage of an entity like the CSC is that it can draw on a capacity to put the issues under concern into perspective, in other words to bring the present demands into tension with the long-term interests of the community at large.

At the Ecumenical level, the Churches committed themselves in Basel in 1989 to Justice, Peace and the Integrity of Creation. The question to CSC is: how can those concepts be made operational in the dialogue with the EU Institutions? One way to proceed is to instil into the dialogue with the EU institutions (in the spirit of Art 17) the mid- and long-term dimension of the policies which are presently on the EU's agenda.

The outcome of this will not only be that between the short- and mid/long-term, conflicting interests will surface, but moreover that contradictions between policies will emerge. Let me give you some examples:

With regard to the justice issue:

In the field of immigration: the EU seeks today to establish policies designed to limit immigration. Are such policies compatible with a greying society?

How can we explain selective immigration policies alongside the financial aid which the EU is donating to developing countries? In this field another point should capture our attention: the absence after 50 years of a consistent social policy for which the EU should have obtained both competence and a budget. The Norwegian sociologist Stein Rokkan has found a correlation between the creation of the modern nation state and the existence of social security systems: people have rediscovered a sense of solidarity one with another and gone on to acknowledge their indebtedness to the public authorities for this. We know now that the founding members of the EU were not prepared to take the gamble of such indebtedness as an outcome, by ceding the monopoly for defining and managing the social security systems they had put in place. This imbalance has seriously damaged – and still is doing - the image of the EU in public opinion. I am convinced that the rejection of the referendum on the Constitution in France and the Netherlands is due for a large part to the imbalance in competences in the fields of social and economic policies between the Member States and the EU. The "desaffectio societatis" to which Jacques Delors drew attention when he met Church Leaders in 1990 originates to a large extent there.

With regard to the integrity of creation:

There is a field where the EU has taken the lead compared to other regions in the world: the environment issue (Kyoto; the strenuous efforts made to arrive at agreement next month in Copenhagen). But at the same time the traditional concept of growth as the motor for our economic model remains the basic point of reference. (0.3; 0.7; 0.4). This inconsistency is even more difficult to accept now that there is a general consensus in society that an alternative development model has to be found. The socio-ecological dilemma is pointing up the limitations of the present model; the poor are the hardest hit by ecological changes.

With regard to the peace issue

- I remember that in the seventies EECCS and OCIPE organised a series of consultations centred on the question of the goals and aims of European construction. Today this topic has disappeared from the EU agenda, as well, I have to add, from the Churches'. We know the reasons why this topic is systematically overlooked. And this has contributed nowadays to a widespread feeling that nobody can tell us where Europe is going. Hence my question: do the Churches, who claim to be an integral part of Europe's destiny, not have to initiate with other partners some systematic reflection on what kind of Europe we would eventually like to see emerging? I am aware that this is a hot issue. But if we want to get the EU afloat again we cannot but consider the need for such a debate. There are times when Churches have to fulfil a vicarial role even in the political realm. The Churches are no longer setting the agenda for society, their influence is decreasing, but I am convinced that they still have the capacity for launching such a debate.

We could extend this list. The point here is that the Churches should, in the dialogue with the EU, highlight these inconsistencies which occur time and again. They are in a position to do so. I should even add that my experience is that this is what is expected of us by our partners in the dialogue.

I should like to conclude by expressing my gratitude for the possibility given to share both my concern and my expectations with all of you who are responsible in one way or another for the future of the CSC.

I hope that I may have succeeded in putting over to you something of my own enthusiasm and that of my former colleagues and friends. You have a fantastic task ahead of you. In a time where even those in power seem to be locked into their own certainties, you have to explore new ways in accordance with the mandate given to you by our Lord, and, by raising the right questions help your partners in dialogue experience for themselves the liberating force of daring to doubt.

Marc Lenders / November 2009