CULTURES AND CHRISTIANITY A.D. 2000

Introduction to the Symposium-2000 of the Association for
Reformational Philosophy
21-25 August 2000, Hoeven, The Netherlands

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Introduction

At the turn of the second to the third millennium A.D. Christianity faces a situation very different from that at the turn from the first to the second. Vibrant centres of the Christian church today are found in areas of the world which a 1000 years ago were wholly unknown to Christendom. Moreover, through the developments of technology, science, and a worldwide economic market has made the many cultures of the world become part of one global village. Within this village, the Christian church has become a multi-cultural community of its own. While since the 6th century Christianity had been tied mainly to the European world, ever since the 19th century the Christian faith has been established firmly within a host of very different cultures.

This situation confronts the Christian church with a double challenge: 1) how will she respond to the unifying tendencies of the modern world, determined as they are by Western technology and capitalism? 2) how will she relate to the diversity of cultures in which the Christian religion has been accepted: will she have an impact on the cultural life of the people, and, on the other hand, will she be able to benefit from the cultural heritages that people will bear with them as they accept it?

These questions are particularly urgent for Christians whose roots lie in the Reformation of the 16th century. Christians of this tradition have never been satisfied with a peaceful niche within the culture they found themselves in. For a long time the church, supported by monastic movements, mainly emphasized the importance of Christian virtues for the daily life of people. With the Reformation the transformation of the entire culture came into view. The Kingdom of God was understood as relating not only to inner spiritual life but to human life and the world as a whole. Within the broad Reformational-Evangelical tradition this ideal has been alternately weak or strong. A more avertive strand has given way to a more ‘world-formative’ one and vice versa.

One tradition in which the emphasis on transformation has been particularly strong is what has become known as ‘Neo-calvinism’, starting in the 19th century with Dutch political and ecclesiastical figures as Groen van Prinsterer and Abraham Kuyper, and branching out in a broad transforming movement in very diverse areas as politics, labour-relations and science and philosophy (the so-called Reformational philosophy).
At the turn of the millenium, in a global context, the Reformational-evangelical emphasis on transformation has to face new questions regarding the scope and nature of the Christian presence within the world: what is the impact of the Christian faith going to be in the present situation? The Christian faith holds that the world is God's creation which will be renewed when Christ comes back to establish his Kingdom in its definite form. How is this going to affect the Christian life and calling in the world? Is every culture to be shaped on one mold? Is there one ideal 'Christianized' culture or is this 'transformation-process' always a highly contextualized process? If the latter is the case can Christians from one culture learn from the experiences of others in another culture?

Questions such as these were central to the conference 'Cultures and Christianity A.D. 2000'.

Orientation

By its very nature Christianity is a transforming religion. People who through the power of the Holy Spirit are touched by the life, death and resurrection of Jesus Christ not only are reborn into a living hope (1 Peter 1:3), but also enter into a process of transformation and renewal (Romans 12:3; Eph. 4:22f.). From its beginning the Christian church has struggled with issues related to the nature and scope of this transformation.

The New Testament is clear about the primary focus of the Christian's renewal: it is someone's inner life, alternately and quite unsystematically called the 'heart' (e.g. Matt 22:37; Acts 15:9; Rom 2:29; Eph. 3:17; Hebr. 8:10), the 'mind' (e.g Rom. 12:2; Hebr 8:10), the 'spirit' (e.g Rom. 8:15, 16; Eph. 4:23), the 'soul' (e.g Matt. 16:26; 22:37; Hebr. 6:19; 1 Petr. 1:22). And the direction of this transformation is also very clear in the New Testament. Much later this direction was summarized admirably by St. Augustine, who spoke about a movement away from the love of self (amor sui, which implies a contempt of God and a denial of one's neighbour) toward the love of God and the neighbour which implies amor Dei, the denial of self.

The challenges which the church encountered regarding the nature and scope of the Christian transformation roughly regarded four (distinguishable but closely related) areas everyday life (1), cultural diversity (2), state and societal institutions (3) and science and philosophy (4).

(1) One of the first challenges which the incipient church encountered was whether someone's outer life, one's everyday life, in one word the body was also an integral part of the process of renewal. Letters from St. Paul (esp. 1 Cor; 2 Thess), St. John and St. James explicitly addressed this challenge by emphasizing the integrity of the Christian life, both the inner and the outer life are involved.

(2) People who enter into the Christian community bring with them their own upbringing, their own cultural heritage. The Christian faith first spread in the larger cities within the Roman Empire. At that time the bloody spectacle of