

**Response of prof. dr. Manuela Kalsky to Ernst Hirsch Ballin's lecture:
Christianity and the Future of Christian Democracy: Salting politics with compassion**

I am greatly honoured by the organisers' invitation to respond to my colleague Hirsch Ballin's 'scholarly *cri de coeur*' about the future of Christian democracy. Why do I call his lecture a 'scholarly *cri de coeur*'? Because it is passionate about compassion; because it is about committed scholarship, which combines heart and mind in a fruitful way - two sides of the same coin which are, in my opinion, too often unjustly pitted against each other in scholarly circles.

I am convinced: those things that touch me profoundly, that are precious to me and give meaning to my daily life, are the things that are also important for my thoughts and deeds, my work, my social and political actions. The personal is political; the only question is whether this personal, this 'me' is still embedded in a 'we', which safeguards social cohesion and connections between people within a plural society.

I agree: we need 'politics with compassion', and this insight is not only reserved exclusively to political parties with a 'c' in their name. Similar voices are heard within other parties, for instance in 'De Linker Wang' (The Left Cheek), the working group on religion of the Green Left party (Groen Links) - which I myself am involved in.

'Politics with compassion'. The beauty of this is that 'compassion' is not only a value found in Christianity; it is also grounded in other religious and philosophical traditions. The British writer and religious scholar Karen Armstrong has propounded this a few years ago in her *Charter for Compassion*. She calls on us to put compassion in the very heart of moral actions and religion, which is to say: to care for each other and make connections beyond thinking in terms of 'us against them'.

When the *Charter for Compassion* was launched in the Netherlands on 12 November 2009, the Dutch economist and co-initiator of the Charter in the Netherlands, Herman Wijffels, said in his speech:

"We are facing the next task in the process of civilisation. After the stage of working on emancipation, the development of individuality, the point is now to connect individuality, to take responsibility for the whole. Compassion is an indispensable ingredient of this task."

In a time when unrestrained self-interest reigns supreme and self-enrichment has taken on enormous proportions, a different attitude can also be discerned - perhaps as a result of their consequences, such as the economic crisis. There is a longing for connectedness, for shared interest. The focus on 'me' makes way for the search for living relations, connections with each other, the search for a new we.

The Golden Rule

And the beauty of compassion is that it enables connections beyond our own Christian circle. Compassion is a core value which is present in all religions.

In the Jewish tradition there is a rule which comprises law and prophets - the entire Thora - in one sentence. *One* sentence passed on from generation to generation, understandable for everyone and applicable time and again in your own era and your own life, the so-called Golden Rule: "Do not treat others in ways that you would not like to be treated." This ethics of reciprocity forms the foundation of the Sermon on the Mount in the New Testament.

A Golden Rule which isn't only found in the bible, but also in other religions and philosophical traditions.

In Islam, for instance, it says: 'None of you is a believer before he wishes for his brother what he wishes for himself.' And if we read 'brother' inclusively and assume that you would also wish for your sister what you wish for yourself, looking away from elementary violations of human rights becomes impossible.

And the Hindus say: 'One should not behave towards others in a way that would be disagreeable with oneself. This is the essence of duty (*dharma*). All other things proceed from selfish desires.'

And the Golden Rule as the American Indians phrase it: 'Great Spirit, grant that I will not judge my neighbour before I have walked a mile in his moccasins.'

In a political sense, philosopher Hannah Arendt summarises all this quite to the point. She says: "Politics is the application of love for the world."

The command to love one's neighbour is not other-worldly. It is not asking for mere altruism. Love your neighbour as yourself. In short: love for one's neighbour and love for oneself belong together. Nothing is wrong with enlightened self-interest. It is founded in reciprocity and it helps not only to transcend the 'us/them' contrast in the personal sphere, but it can also lead to new political insights in these times.

For instance, online barter is very popular. Young families help each other in looking after the children. There is a website, wego.nu, which enables to rent out your car to neighbours in order to diminish your own costs and at the same time promote sustainable use of cars. House-swapping in the holiday season is also very popular. These are all initiatives in which mutual interest and forms of reciprocity are connected. People are forming small new we's, keep up their social contacts, build new relations and trust and thus serve the common good.

The financial crisis has dampened our love for the market. The space for debate and action in the public domain about what is valuable and enduringly meaningful for the future seems to increase. People's own creative problem-solving ability should be more encouraged by politicians and it should be supported, for instance by minimalising bureaucracy.

Although we do not exactly know the way forward, there is no way back. Individualisation and secularisation have changed the Dutch religious landscape drastically in the past hundred years. While only two per cent of the Dutch population did *not* belong to a church at the beginning of the 20th century, today about sixty per cent of the Dutch indicates that they have no affiliation to any church. We can safely call this a landslide. A large part of the former constituency of the CDA had disappeared.

The churches are getting more and more empty and we can ask ourselves who left who in the first place: is it the church which abandoned the people or did the people abandon the church? In any case, the people of Western Europe have turned their backs on the church on a massive scale. The 'subjective turn of modern times', as Charles Taylor puts it, made people into independent citizens who will no longer be told what and how to believe. They are embarking on their own quest for what gives value and meaning to their lives, and they build their own religious universe from the wisdom of different religious and philosophical traditions.

Neither church leaders nor politicians who cherish Christian values appeared to be able to bring these values closer to people in a contemporary way in the past decades. Mr. Hirsch Ballin emphasises the dialogue with tradition and bible within Christian democracy, but I think that Christian democrats forgot to aim for the dialogue with the people who are concerned. Tradition lives by the grace of renewal, but if the experiences with salvation and doom of

people in our society today are not taken seriously in the first place, the stories from bible and tradition cannot resonate.

In addition to this, while those with more than fifty years of age are often still familiar with stories and rituals from Christian tradition - even if many of them have left the churches - the young 'autochthonous' generation of Dutch people doesn't know Christian tradition from the inside anymore. For many of them, it is a mere cultural heritage. The new generation is growing up with religious and cultural diversity. This is in particular true for those from the urban regions. We do not need a historic canon of exclusively Dutch achievements in our schools, but a transnational canon which also takes the backgrounds of children from other cultures and with other religions into consideration. But good education should - beside the transfer of knowledge - also plant the seeds of mutual acceptance and respect. A globally oriented education is necessary to bring children up to become responsible world citizens. To teach them to view the world through the eyes of the other. 'The art of empathy' as a new school subject, where children can train themselves in humanity and solidarity. Would that not be a good Christian democratic idea?

Even when the daily reality around us has been pluriform for quite some time, our thinking is still programmed in unity and belief in only one truth. But we cannot escape the task of giving diversity a central place in our thinking and our view on identity. It has become clear that the solutions that were feasible in the past cannot yield the desired results with problems in a multicultural and multireligious society. In all domains of our society we will have to learn to live with differences. It is my firm conviction that the 'retro' tendencies, which are visible not only in the Netherlands but all over Europe and which aim for the restoration of clearly defined national and confessional identities, form a rearguard action. The West has lost its cultural monopoly, and it is high time to abandon the superior attitude towards 'the other', and to practise our ability to see things in perspective. Not in order to let go of western cultural Christian values and achievements, but in order to learn to understand that notions like openness, curiosity and modesty are more important now than a misunderstood notion of pride. Of course, Christian democrats can be proud of their part in promoting a humanity which aims at 'the good life for all'; of a society which brings the wealth of possibilities in people to the surface and which safeguards in a self-critical way the values of happiness, respect, reason and hope for all citizens. But prior to applying your own values to 'the others', for instance to Muslims, one should first ask oneself to what extent these values are practised in one's own circle. To what extent, for instance, have Christian parties realised the emancipation of women and equal rights for homosexuals, which Mr. Hirsch Ballin demands? Are we ourselves the shining examples in those things we demand of others? I think there is still a world to win for Christian democracy in this respect.

Longing back to an idealised past is not the way to the future. The exclusive 'either/or' thinking no longer works, and the clear-cut reality is lost to us. Identities merge into each other, they mix and mingle. Hybrid lifestyles are emerging and people are developing multiple cultural and religious identities. Mixed marriages are the order of the day and the children who are born from these often grow up bi-culturally and/or bi-religiously. Right now we need a way of thinking which looks beyond our own borders and which is able to make connections between all people in the Netherlands. This requires responsible democratic leaders who are able to call up the best in people, by allowing self-confidence and confidence in the future to go hand in hand. This requires a serving and compassionate leadership and a switch in thinking from either/or to and...and.

The point is not origin, but future, so Minister Donner said in his integration memorandum. And the point is now to translate this slogan into concrete policy. And if compassion should truly be the vision of Christian democracy, the integration memorandum should be revised with this vision as its starting point. For we only feel at home where stability, safety and opportunity can be found. Where we feel accepted and where it is possible to talk about

differences and similarities in all openness. Where we have the feeling that our talents are welcome and recognised. Society is the home we must build together, a home of shared interests, also in religious and philosophical respect. Take the values in the different religious and philosophical traditions as inspiration for a common ethics. Then diversity will mean wealth.

In the present integration memorandum this wealth is little utilised to give shape to our society in a contemporary way. Too many things remain like they were. New ways of cooperation between political parties are necessary to give concrete shape to the good life for all. It would be *hubris*, after all, to think that Christian democracy could bring 'the Kingdom of God' closer all on its own.

A 'new we' will not come to being overnight. It takes time to connect differences. Building networks of people of good will is crucial. Politicians should give concrete support to already existing citizens' initiatives in this field. These initiatives are already there - a new we is already dawning. And for all politicians - christian democratic or otherwise - who have not yet seen this: I invite you to take a look on www.nieuwwij.nl.

Thank you very much for your attention.