

LUBLINEINDVERSIE01

## LIVING TOGETHER WITHOUT FEAR. A CHALLENGE TO DUTCH SOCIETY

A.LASCARIS OP

### INTRODUCTION

Fear is becoming an important feature in Dutch society. Though statistics show that the number of violent crimes does not increase very much, there is a general feeling that people are becoming more assertive and aggressive. The causes may be manifold; they are partly related to Dutch history, partly to international developments. The so-called 'pillarisation' has come to an end: in the nineteenth and twentieth century Churches and movements such as socialism and liberalism built a 'pillar' to support society by organising political parties, schools, the media, trade unions, and youth movements around themselves. In this way, they offered safety to their followers. At present, we are in a process of decentralization. Membership of clubs, unions, political parties and Churches is decreasing. Individuals reject the hidden repression of the rules of communities, groups, clubs, villages, cities, civil authorities, and Churches. Christian faith is weakening, partly because it has become difficult to see Churches as witnesses to Christian love, and partly because we live in a world that invites us to flourish without a reference to a form of transcendence. At the beginning of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, only 3% had no Church connection, but in the 21<sup>st</sup> century, 60% do not relate to any Church. Migration is changing the composition of the population of the Netherlands; some people feel like foreigners in their own neighbourhood. There are seventeen million people in our country; almost one million are Muslims, they come mainly from Morocco and Turkey; there are about 800,000 Christian migrants, of these 120,000 are Polish; and the majority of them come from the Middle East. Many people have a multiple identity: they are Turkish Dutchmen or Dutch Moroccans.

All these elements contribute to an atmosphere of uncertainty and fear in the Netherlands and in western civilisation at large today. It may be the price of our liberation from the ties of living in closed communities. This freedom makes individuals more lonely and life more risky. However, only a few people would like to go back to the past. Freedom is dear to us. Freedom means that we can desire everything and can try to achieve everything we desire.

What can a theologian say about fear, freedom, and desire? His or her contribution can only be modest. The main source of theology is a small library of books, called the Bible. I try to read Scripture as an anthropological text, a text written by people about their relationships with one another and with God.

Right at the beginning of the Bible, we find a story about human desire: the story of the snake, which makes a piece of fruit desirable for the woman, who subsequently makes it desirable for Adam. (Gen 3) At the beginning of human history the theme is, how do we cope with desire? This very story shows how great the gap is between this ancient text and us. According to the biblical story, there are certain things that should not be desired, while one of the basic rules of modern society is that in principle everybody is allowed to desire everything. This principle is the heart of politics and economics today.

Would we not need to ignore this story in order to find our freedom? Historically, Christianity was mostly a conservative force in coping with desire. It took two revolutions, the French revolution and the industrial revolution, to set desire free and thus, ourselves. I invite you to look at these two revolutions from the perspective of desire.

## THE FRENCH REVOLUTION

When we compare our society with pre-modern society, the society before the French revolution, it is clear, that the latter limited human desires. Pre-modern society maintained certain differences and divisions; those differences may have differed depending on the particular cultural tradition, but they were present and

were considered important. In our western culture, society had a hierarchical structure. The most important differences were those between women and men and between the aristocracy and the common people. It was almost impossible to cross the barriers between female activities and typically male tasks and between the aristocracy and the common people. Those divisions dominated daily life. For example, a common person could not wear fur, because this was a privilege of the aristocracy. Also, the range of human desire was limited: while it was accepted that people could rise within their own class or sex, it was almost impossible for a farmer to become a baronet. People were supposed to keep within their station in society. The Church supported the establishment by admonishing the faithful to limit their desires. But at the same time, the Church showed that a farmer's son could become a bishop or a cardinal.

The violent French revolution put an end to hierarchical society; since this revolution people are supposed to cherish equality, freedom and fraternity; all become citizens, at least in principle. General conscription replaced the army of aristocrats and their mercenaries. Every individual could have any place in society, though women had to wait until at least the twentieth century when their contribution to the First World War led to their emancipation.

## THE INDUSTRIAL REVOLUTION

The so-called industrial Revolution around 1760 in England preceded the French revolution. Originally, this revolution had nothing to do with the use of machines, but it started when the great landowners, most of them belonging to the aristocracy, initiated a process of re-allotment of ground. They wanted to be able to compete with the merchants who had become rich because of their trade with the colonies, and subsequently tried to get greater political power by buying land. The members of the aristocracy felt threatened. They enclosed their fields and made them more productive, often by turning agricultural fields into grassland for cattle. The new rich followed suit. Numerous small villages

disappeared; the former inhabitants were impoverished and left for the cities. In the towns and cities, the rich started to try to improve the production of cloth. Soon factories appeared, originally without machines. They were places where many people work together instead of at home, so that production could be controlled and increased, and the owner could make a profit.

‘Profit’ is the keyword here. Taking a profit and growing economically were forbidden in pre-modern society, unless you traded with foreigners. Every form of profit making was seen as usury. Someone who saved up his grain, harvested in September, to sell it at a higher price in March was committing usury: he was enriching himself at the expense of the buyer. Buying and selling were a matter of exchanging one object for another object without making profit. Prices were set. A discussion was possible on the quality of the object to be exchanged so that one could get the price reduced, but the price itself stood. Whoever received something in pre-modern society, had to give back something with the same value. Because it was never clear that it was of the same value, the process of giving and receiving could go on forever. Gifts kept society together, but they are also poisonous: if you have plenty to give, many people may become obliged to you. Someone who wanted to become rich, should try to give away as much as possible, for his network would grow and everybody in this network had obligations towards the ‘generous’ giver. The rich man was the one who stood in the centre of his community and who was able to share out abundantly what he possessed, and thus would receive abundantly from his dependants. Property was never completely private; rather, it was something for sharing out. In conformity with the ban on profit making, all pre-capitalist societies tried to restrict production and trade. One should not try to get most out of the land; one produced less than would be possible. Local administration and central government limited the times and places of exchange: for instance, a market could only take place on a Friday in this or that town. Again, human

desire was to be limited. The Church supported society in resisting profit making by preaching against usury.

The Industrial Revolution in England - a revolution of the rich - and the political Revolution in France - a revolution of the middle classes, the citizens - these two revolutions set human desire free for the first time in human history. This was a slow process at the beginning but it gained momentum. I think that the sixties of last century saw the breakthrough of this desire, set free, in all the corners of the western world. The same thing happened in the Netherlands, where the so-called 'pillars' came down and individuals became free from ecclesiastical oppressive rules and women got the same rights as men. From this perspective communism was a conservative movement rather than a progressive one. It was an attempt to maintain a pre-modern economic system in a non-hierarchical society.

#### WHO IS AFRAID OF DESIRE?

Why was pre-modern society afraid of desire? A classic definition of desire is that it is a psychological movement, a movement towards something you do not possess.<sup>1</sup> But, you do not desire to possess everything. What makes you desire to possess that house, to have a relationship with that woman or man, or to have that job? Is your choice merely accidental? Or do your genes make the decision for you? The French literary critic René Girard developed the concept of 'mimetic' desire on basis of the texts of some classic novels such as those by Flaubert, Stendahl, Dostoevsky, Proust, and on basis of texts of the Bible. Mimesis is the Greek word for imitation. You desire a particular house, not because of the genes you inherited or because of your taste, but because someone pointed out the house to you. He or she said, for instance, that an important person lives there or that it is nicely situated, or that it is expensive. A house may be desirable because it looks like the house in which you were born

---

<sup>1</sup> Thomas Aquinas S. Th I II, q. 33, a. 2.

or in which you had a happy time. Why did I fall in love with this woman? Because someone pointed her out, perhaps not consciously, but by making some remark and suddenly she became the centre of my attention, or, she reminds me of my mother or sister or of a nice person, I once met.

We do not desire spontaneously, but we imitate the desiring of other people, those who desired before us or possess already what we desire and hope to possess one day. Our desire is always copied from the desire of somebody else. We may think that our desire is very personal and unique, but, as a matter of fact, we are imitating the desire of other people. I fall in love with a woman who I think is exceptional, but, though she may be exceptional in some way, she corresponds to a series of cultural models that our society has presented to me. In this way, society with its media and advertisements suggests to me who I shall choose. We imitate one another's desires.

Imitation is not a mere copying; each person is the product of many mimetic encounters. It is often not possible to say whom you imitate; you are the heir of a cultural system. For centuries, Dutch people have dinner at about six o'clock; they do not close the curtains when it becomes dark so that everybody can have a look at the interior; and they must have coffee when they have a meeting. The intention of some meetings is not to deliver concrete results, but to find out where everybody stands. For centuries, Dutchmen have made important decisions in a small group, rather than that one person makes a decision on their own. Culture is based on imitation.

Aristotle remarks that a difference between human beings and animals is that humans are better at imitating. A new-born human child can suck, relieve himself and pinch – a poor performance compared with most animals – all the other things he or she has to learn. Learning takes place by imitating other people. A baby starts imitating straight away. One of the first things a baby learns is smiling. We never learn as much as we do in the first year of our life. We learn a language by imitating. If a child is not able to imitate, we consider it

as mentally retarded. We learn to become a Dutch or a Polish citizen by imitating the cultural heritage of our nation, changing it, and transmitting it to the next generation.

But why should imitating the desires of other people create problems? Sometimes it does. For instance, you may happen to fall in love this evening. And he or she falls in love with you. You are really happy. Then, you tell your best friend about your new love, and how marvellous he/she is. And you tell your love how wonderful your best friend is. One evening you invite them both for a meal. Your best friend and the one you love see each other, both pointed out by you as exceptional people. That evening they become fascinated with each other and a year later, you will receive an invitation to come to their wedding...

Problems occur when two or more people desire the same object, the same job, the same man or woman, that unique nicely situated house. There is only one house like this; this man, woman, can only be the partner of one person; only one person can be Prime Minister. It often happens that the person, who I imitate and who is thus my model, becomes at the same time the very obstacle to fulfilling my desire. Suppose I admire the Prime Minister and I am so impressed by him that I desire to become Prime Minister. There is only one slight problem! He is the Prime Minister I am not. If I want to become Prime Minister, I have to get him removed. He is my model, I imitate him; but he is also my obstacle. He suggests that I imitate him and he blocks me when I start imitating him. If I want to become Prime Minister, I have to rival with him. And as soon as he notices my rivalling, he starts rivalling with me, imitating my rivalling. Imitation is very strong when we are rivalling. In the process of imitating one another, the rivals will become more and more alike in their desires, words and actions. The value of the object of rivalling increases every so often. For an outsider it may seem that the object is of very little value at all, e.g. a football cup. But in the eyes of the rivals, nothing is more valuable. Nobody may have had any interest in this

piece of land or in those shares at the exchange. But at the very moment I show interest and make public that I would like to possess this land or those shares, the price soars, other people get interested, conflicts may then occur.

When the rivalling starts, there is no end to it. It is very mimetic. It invites everybody to start rivalling as well. Rivalling, competition, is contagious. More and more people get involved and all may end in an outburst of violence in which everybody is a threat to everybody else.

We now can understand why pre-modern society tried to limit desire. One was aware of the mimetic character of desire, the dangers of imitating and copying the desires of other people. If you produce more than the local community needs, and if you try to make a profit and be cleverer than your neighbour is, you set the engine of competition and rivalling moving. If you abolish all the rules that limit trade, desire will be without limits and at the end, violence will rule. Violence is a situation in which all limits, all differences disappear. Violence emerges when people have things in common, desire the same things; differences help to maintain a distance. The common opinion was that rivalling would take over and dominate life when desire was set free, and so, communities, societies and states would be undermined and perish. Without this pre-modern economic system, it would not be possible to form a community, a nation, a state. Desires, set free, produce violence. Desires have to be suppressed, even by violence. People tried to prevent violence by using lesser forms of violence. They founded peaceful communities, nations, states by scapegoating other people, nations or states: we are Dutchman over against the Germans and Englishmen; we are Polish over against Russians and Germans. We are Catholics over against Protestants and Muslims. We create peace on basis of hate. The definition of a state still is that it is an organisation with a monopoly on violence.

**WAS PRE-MODERN SOCIETY WRONG?**



Was pre-modern society wrong? We are still alive and kicking after the two revolutions, industrial and political. We did not destroy one another in an apocalyptic struggle of all against all, though, admittedly, we came close to this.

One reason why we survived up to now is that we succeeded in reproducing the same objects. We are able to make many copies of the same car, electric shaver, or deep-freezer by mass production. If I envy my neighbour's car, I can buy the same car or rather a better one as long as I have the money. Secondly, we still have a lot of rules, laws and regulations around our competition. Some of them restrict rivalry and competition, the health services often do not compete. There are also European rules that prevent monopolies and force employers to compete. Thirdly, we export the products we cannot sell in the western world to poorer countries. We export chicken and other meat to poor countries and sell them at a lower price than the local farmers. In this way, we export our problems and our violence to them. In the fourth place, we create scarcity, for our desires do not have limits and thus cause scarcity: people imitate one another and everybody wants to have oil, water, energy, agricultural products, cars, money etc... Finally, we are facing great climate changes.

We may be able to defer the economic and political crisis for some time thanks to our ingenuity. However, we have to accept that the world and our lives are finite and that we who live in this world have to cope with desires that have no limits. For the first time in history, desire is set free, but this freedom is risky. We are uncertain, afraid, and fearful of the future. We do not yet know how to cope with our individual and common desires in such a way that we are not destroyed by the violence, which may result from our imitating other individuals.

## DO WE HAVE AN ALTERNATIVE?

We cannot go back to the situation of pre-modern society. We are aware that this society was hierarchical, violent and repressive. People gathered together

and formed groups, tribes and nations based on some kind of violence, based on persecuting a scapegoat. They did not know what they were doing; they did not see the violence they used. In the past civil and/or religious rites and myths, always masked violence. They covered up the violence and made it acceptable. We know, and thus we cannot form a 'we' based on violence.

Do we have an alternative to violence? Thanks to the Christian tradition, we know the phenomenon of 'love'. Love has the tremendous quality of both making people equal, setting them free from hierarchical structures, and maintaining the differences. Love reveals the uniqueness of the other person and makes it possible to meet each other at the same level. Love is enjoying that the other person is different. Enjoying differences prevents violence. In Genesis 1, God creates by making differences. The more you feel bound to one community, your community, and the more you strive after its unity and emphasize its uniqueness, the more violently you will perceive communities that differ from yours. Love takes away fear, violence, and the drive for absolute unity. Love limits our desires in a non-violent way; our desire takes the uniqueness of the other person into account. In the field of economics, this may result in introducing better ethical rules into economic activities. Pope Benedict pleads for this in his encyclical *Caritas in veritate* (45).

But, how to build a 'we', a human community, based on love is the challenge. It is not by making contracts, but by making covenants – a contract is concluded by people who are supposed to be equal; in a covenant, the stronger one defends the weaker one. Unfortunately, we do not have many inspiring models. We can look at the Church, which always is a Church of sinners. In my country, most people agree that at least the present Catholic Church is not an example of a community of love. I am not thinking in the first place of the child abusers, or of the way the leadership of the Church deals with them, but rather of the pre-modern hierarchical structure of the Church. The Church took this structure over from society and reinforced it, when in the 16th century society

started to become less hierarchical. I am thinking of the lack of respect of the leadership for the laity and for bishops or priests who do not toe the Vatican line, the refusal to make it possible for local communities to celebrate the Eucharist every Sunday, the lack of self-criticism. I have given up hope that the Catholic Church will change in my lifetime.

Our situation is difficult. Big organisations such as states and Churches are losing support. Small groups may turn to violence out of fear or out of frustration. Differences may disappear and chaos may rule. However, other small groups, Christian and non-Christian, may look for experimental ways of building a 'we' that is not based on violence. They may teach us to enjoy differences, rather than condemning them and using them to blame other people in order to make one's own group more united. They may teach us to cope with desire and to act without fear. We may discover that there are many ways to form a community and that one can belong to several communities. However, this entails that no community can be absolute; we live in a finite world. In our difficult situation, hope remains.

30-07-2010

3770 words = 32 minutes