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Christian Social Ethics in the Benelux Countries

The Dynamics of European Unity in Diversity

In memoriam Frans Vosman (1952–2020)

Abstract

The Benelux countries are more frequently presented as a unity in tourist guides than in academic life. Belgium, the Netherlands and Luxembourg are nevertheless bound together by a specific historically founded position within the EU with consequences for the conditions and topics of Christian social ethics. Although it rarely exists as an autonomous discipline, the tension between old universities with religious traditions and a widely proceeded secularisation provides an ideal starting point for innovative research and teaching at the heart of Europe: with an access to the English speaking world and a bridge between German and French influences. All over the Benelux countries, social ethics combines an international profile with regional rooting.

Zusammenfassung

Die Benelux-Länder werden eher in Reisebüchern als in der Wissenschaft als eine Einheit wahrgenommen. Dennoch verbindet Belgien, die Niederlande und Luxemburg eine spezielle historisch gewachsene Position innerhalb der EU mit Auswirkungen auf die Bedingungen und Themen Christlicher Sozialethik. Obwohl das Fach als eigenständige Disziplin nur an wenigen Orten existiert, bietet die gesellschaftliche Spannung zwischen Universitäten mit großer auch religiös geprägter Tradition und sehr weit fortgeschrittener Säkularisierung einen idealen Ausgangspunkt für innovative Forschung und Lehre mitten in Europa: mit Öffnungen zur anglophonen Welt und einer Brückenfunktion zwischen deutschen und französischen Einflüssen. Sozialethik ist überall in den Benelux-Ländern mit internationalem Profil und zugleich regionaler Verwurzelung verbunden.

Christian social ethics as a clearly defined area of academic teaching and research is well established at German and Austrian universities. Although it does not exist in exactly the same way in many European countries, this does not mean that it has no equivalents. The overview in this article tries to show how social ethics can be identified at various degrees in Belgium, the Netherlands and Luxembourg – a densely populated region with nearly 30 million inhabitants. This is more than the population of Denmark, Norway, Sweden and Finland together and half of the population of Italy.

1 So Close and yet so Far

From a German perspective, the three small countries in Western Europe represent a reality that seems to be a little bit unfamiliar, and yet also not spectacular enough to be regularly in the focus of the media. Most cities can be reached in day trips and welcome their visitors in different languages. The effort to learn Dutch is underdeveloped even in the neighbouring region of North Rhine-Westphalia. The inhabitants of countries with less common languages are used to a minority status in international relations and transform it into a strength by becoming polyglot and culturally flexible. Whenever we think to know a foreign region sufficiently well, there is a high chance of not being sensitive to some special features.

Belgium shares a border with France, the Netherlands with Germany and Luxembourg with Germany and France. But all three are first of all global players, proud of their history and not amused with the arrogance of neighbours and the lack of real willingness to recognise the independence of the European partners. Many Germans who work in the Benelux countries should still be aware of the trauma of World War II that has not been forgotten. More than 75 year after the liberation from German occupation, it is impossible to ignore the memory of the past. This collective remembrance is structured differently in the three countries. Belgium commemorates the *rape of Belgium* in 1914 and is less focussed on the Shoah. The burning of the university library of Leuven by German troops in August 1914 became a symbol of a barbarian attack. Belgians were not surprised when the uncivilised neighbour was back some decades later and they considered the new invasion as the sad confirmation of a hopeless case.

Resentments and stereotypes have an impact on the complicated relations of the Benelux countries with the rest of Europe, in particular Germany. In order to put an end to the hostilities of the past, the three countries became the birthplace of modern European structures. Many key institutions of the EU are hosted in Brussels and Luxembourg. Many people working in these capitals do no care enough about the authentic environment that is so much more than a place for bureaucracy and lobbying. That is why the undeniable advantage of such international hubs is unfortunately linked to a superficial attitude towards the culture of the place.

2 An Imagined Unity

This article takes a serious risk when it brings together three countries which are indeed officially linked by the label of *Benelux*. This cannot be interpreted as a homogenous cultural space and unified political structure (cf. Schürings 2017). Belgium, the Netherlands and Luxembourg are sovereign states defending their specific interests and looking at a history full of tensions and divisions. In spite of their diversity, they came together already in 1944 to sign the first treaty of the Benelux-Union in order to prepare a customs union and further intergovernmental cooperation. This was the visionary idea of a new European order before the end the war. The pragmatically defined project has proved to be efficient without necessitating the search for a common identity. People in these three countries are sometimes surprised to be considered by outsiders as members of a unique federation. They do not stick to it emotionally but they are aware of good reasons for strong interaction, cross-border mobility and market integration. All diplomas and degrees are automatically recognised within the Benelux countries.

The sense of belonging to the economically successful structure called Benelux is relatively weak. However, it becomes more relevant when it is defined as different from France and from Germany. Culturally speaking the three countries communicate more easily with the UK and the USA because of the use of English as a lingua franca and feel close to Scandinavian nations because of a similar linguistic challenge. The cohesion of sovereign states is based on a kind of imagined community that can be experienced by a closer look on common features. The European identity is certainly an important part of the Benelux narrative dealing with topics like *the heart of Europe* or *Europe in a nutshell*. Bringing together the *Germanic* (Dutch, Luxembourgish and German) and *Latin* (French) traditions, it already represents the cultures of the six members signing the Treaty of Rome in 1957.

According to the European motto *united in diversity*, it makes sense that there was no need for further harmonisation within the small Benelux patchwork family. This union is born out of internal conflicts and clashes with powerful neighbours. It has to be mentioned that all three countries are constitutional monarchies and at the same time modern liberal and multicultural societies and globally interconnected economies, countries with recognisable traditions and with an

important immigration from former colonies in the case of Belgium and the Netherlands and from all over the world. The consequences of migration and the transformation of industrial societies have largely contributed to an accelerated secularisation which is often perceived as more advanced than in other parts of Western Europe. A close look at what happens today in the Benelux region might give an idea of future trends elsewhere.

All three countries had been traditionally influenced by Christianity, with a more Protestant influence in the North and predominantly Catholic regions in the South. This denominational divide is still a relevant cultural factor. The other dividing line is the linguistic border running through Belgium without pushing Flanders politically closer to the Netherlands (or Wallonia closer to France or the German speaking parts of Eastern Belgium or of Luxembourg closer to Germany). The patchwork of identities constitutes a fragile equilibrium. It would be interesting to investigate how language, religion and secularisation influence the specific ways of doing social ethics in the academic institutions of the Benelux countries. On the basis of the introductory remarks, it is already clear that all three societies deliver fascinating material for case studies and that they could be a paradise for the humanities. Due to a quickly progressing dechristianisation, the situation is far from being comfortable and it has to deal with a lot of pressure and new scenarios for future contexts of social ethics within of theology.

3 Cultural Diversity and Different Contexts of Academic Life

If we want to get a differentiated perception of the institutional frameworks for ethics, theology and religious studies, we have to analyse the national situations one by one before discussing some connecting elements. In spite of the attempts to create a common space of higher education in the European Union, all member states still have their specific regulations as a result of their own history over many centuries. As the report is far from being complete, it first of all wants to provide the basic details with which interested readers can continue their discoveries on websites that are easily to be identified.

3.1 The Netherlands

Social Catholicism is a characteristic feature of parts of the Dutch society as a reaction to injustice and the exploitation of workers in the 19th century. But Catholic social thought remained the expression of a minority culture at the scale of the whole nation (cf. Caspers/Hübenthal 2015; Becker 2009). The Netherlands were mainly considered as a Protestant country with universities established in this tradition. The Catholic emancipation started late with the founding of denominational universities. The most famous one goes back to 1923: the Catholic University of Nijmegen. A Roman Catholic University of Commerce was founded in 1927 in Tilburg. The destiny of these two institutions reveals a lot about the profound transformation of Dutch Catholicism across almost one century. Nijmegen has played a major intellectual role on the international scene through the inspiring work of theologians like the Belgian Dominican Edward Schillebeeckx and Catharina Halckes, a founding mother of feminist theology. The Faculty of Theology always had an important offer in the field of social ethics in dialogue with social sciences. Theology in Nijmegen is still performing at a very high level with Christoph Hübenthal as a professor of systematic theology dealing also with topics of social ethics. But the institutional frame has been modified significantly. It is now part of a Faculty of Philosophy, Theology and Religious Studies within Radboud University, the new name since 2004. After years of difficult struggles, the Bishops' Conference of the Netherlands revoked the title "Catholic" in 2020 so that RU now functions entirely as a public university. As the theology programmes are no longer approved by the Apostolic See, canonical degrees can no more be delivered directly, only within the framework of an arrangement with the Catholic University of Leuven.

Tilburg as the second place of the Catholic renewal has a different and even more complicated history. The programmes started without theology and focussed on a wide range of social sciences. Theology was taught in a Church-run progressive institution called Theologische Faculteit Tilburg, inaugurated in 1967 (cf. Leesen 2014), with renowned ethicists like Karl-Wilhelm Merks and Jan Jans. The integration into the university structure was a painful procedure. Some staff members got transferred to a Department of Religious Studies in the Faculty of Humanities, others to a new Faculty of Theology that became the School of Catholic Theology in 2007 following a merger with the Catholic University of

Theology in Utrecht. Located in Tilburg and Utrecht, this institution is nowadays the only remaining academic place in the Netherlands recognised by the Holy See and the Bishops' Conference. Ironically, it is linked to a university that has struggled not less than Nijmegen with its denominational identity. The new official name is Tilburg University, in English! In spite of the brand redesign, it still considers itself in the Catholic tradition. Social ethics is not taught as a special discipline. Some of its themes appear in moral theology and in sociology of religion.

The developments in Nijmegen and Tilburg are obvious symptoms of the deep crisis of Catholic theology in the Netherlands. Catholic universities do not at all guarantee the future of complete programmes in theology when different views on public institutions and the relations between State and Church make the confessional visibility less attractive. Tilburg University is not less secularised than Radboud University, but surprisingly came to a deal with the Bishops; it agreed to put some staff members in a fragile position, as they were not welcome as academics in the new School of Catholic Theology. Things have changed since 2007 and they have developed to a more open-minded profile. The situation remains nevertheless disturbing because the public sphere cannot remain indifferent when it regards the strategic influence of religion in publicly financed institutions. Whereas Radboud University had to pay the price for the trouble with the Catholic label, Tilburg University managed to concentrate the label in a faculty slightly disconnected from the rest of the programmes.

The Royal Netherlands Academy of Arts and Sciences, a national institution giving advice to the Dutch government on science and research issues, found the situation of theology and religious studies alarming enough to ask for an experts' report on the analysis of the crisis. The document published in 2015 starts with a double thesis. The scientifically based research in the field of religion is today more important than ever before if we want to understand societal transformations and global challenges. However, this expert knowledge is becoming rare at Dutch universities where the number of students in these programmes declines dramatically. Formerly successful departments are not certain to prepare a bright future for young talents and specialists who will be needed as advisers in the conflicts of culturally no-longer-uniform societies.

The Academy report (KNAW 2015) distinguishes three different cases: universities offering theology with a classical denominational profile, more secular universities offering only religious studies and finally universities

with both orientations without always being clear about the articulation of the two paths. The question is how to bring the competing approaches together in order to make them more attractive for potential students. Ethics could be a bridge between the secular and the religious approach, but it is not systematically part of disciplines contributing to non-denominational religious studies. A remarkable exception from the rule can be found at the Department of Philosophy and Religious Studies at Utrecht University, where Christoph Baumgartner, trained as a theological ethicist, works on religion in the public sphere, tolerance, freedom of religion, citizenship (cf. Baumgartner 2017), climate change and other topics of social ethics.

Colleagues in Utrecht, Nijmegen and Tilburg are highly esteemed partners in philosophical debates and thus open to exchange beyond the narrow path of Catholic Social Thought. They are involved in secular discussions and in encounters with the Protestant traditions of the country. And they have to face the multi-religious dimensions of contemporary society (cf. Kennedy/Zwemer 2010; Molendijk 2017). All this makes the jobs of social ethicists diverse and exciting. The problem is that only very few academic positions approximatively fit into this scheme. The Vrije Universiteit Amsterdam, founded in 1880 by orthodox Protestants and now with an open profile based on Christian values, has just created an endowed chair for Christian social ethics at its Faculty of Religion and Theology and thus sends a strong signal concerning the importance of a theological voice in ethical debates in contemporary society.

3.2 Belgium

The situation in Belgium is not completely different from the aspects described in the Netherlands. The country has gone through a high-speed secularisation within less than half a century, so that the formerly homogenous Catholic world is no longer a relevant paradigm when it comes to understanding the society (cf. Lesch 2013). Since the 19th century, Belgium has been profoundly marked by the ideological divide between socialist, liberal and Christian-conservative tendencies. The old University of Louvain, a public institution from the very beginning in 1425, became a Catholic University only after the foundation of Belgium as an independent state. This immediately triggered the creation of the Free University of Brussels as the free-thinkers' alternative. This antagonism

is still alive, although there are inter-university programmes, for example for the PhD in religious studies. The ideological confrontation is overlapped by the linguistic trouble that led to the split of the University of Louvain in 1968. It now exists as the Katholieke Universiteit Leuven (KU Leuven) in the Flemish town of Leuven and as the Université catholique de Louvain (UCLouvain) in the new town of Louvain-la-Neuve. Both institutions also have a variety of other locations in Flanders, Brussels and Wallonia so that Leuven and Louvain are still the most influential universities of the country in terms of student recruitment and alumni.

The monopoly of the two heirs, referring to each other as *sister universities* and working hand in hand for the preparation of the 600 years celebration in 2025, gives the impression that the fundamental structure of theology including social ethics is unchallenged. The research unit of Theological and Comparative Ethics in Leuven has indeed six professorships. Johan Verstraeten, now emeritus, is the most prominent colleague in the field of Catholic social ethics (cf. Boswell/McHugh/Verstraeten 2000). Ellen Van Stichel, his successor since 2020, continues this work. The corresponding research and teaching unit at the UCLouvain is smaller, with three academic positions for theological ethics: fundamental ethics, bioethics, social ethics. The Louvainist tradition at both sides of the linguistic border is proud of its impact on the Belgian bishops' historical contribution to Second Vatican Council and the theological dynamics in the decades after this event. It has to be careful not to be paralysed by its own myth of progressivity. The current reading of the signs of the times has to take place under new conditions. Leuven and Louvain-la-Neuve are the only places where social ethics is explicitly taught in the Benelux countries in the context of Catholic theology. This implies a special responsibility for the future of the discipline without forgetting the creativity to be put into new configurations of ethics, religion and society. The implementation of ethics in religious studies has only just begun and it opens new perspectives of dialogues between religious and cultural backgrounds.

3.3 Luxembourg

The report on the Benelux countries would not be complete without a final look at the Grand Duchy of Luxembourg, which had no university tradition of its own until the foundation of the University of Luxembourg

in 2003. This young institution does not have a Faculty of theology and will probably not intend to have one in the nearer future because of the State-Church relations redefined in 2015. A new government elected in 2013 put an end to a long period of Church influence in almost all areas of society and political life.

A new initiative has to be mentioned as an attempt find a place for theology and religious studies in this complex environment: the Luxembourg School of Religion & Society (LSRS) started its work in 2015 in the continuity of the diocesan seminary and the former Institute of religious education at the Centre Jean XXIII. Supported by the Archdiocese of Luxembourg and successfully applying for public funding and research partnerships, the LSRS has the ambition to become an internationally recognised institution of higher education and research in a field that would simply have disappeared in the political context after 2015. Social ethics is currently not represented by an academic position defined exactly in this way. But projects on the ethics of finance or on the ethics of public health could make it a structural necessity. The case of Luxembourg is instructive because it shows the potential of institutional imagination when the political frame seems to make such an initiative very unlikely (cf. Lambert 2020).

Erny Gillen, for a long time the best known Luxembourgish ethicist, with a high visibility in international networks, is now a private consultant with his “Moral Factory”. After an outstanding career as a professor of moral theology at the diocesan seminary, vicar general of the archdiocese, president of Caritas Europa and an important participant in the negotiations leading to 2015 Church-State agreement (cf. Gillen 2015) he has resigned from all his former positions and continues as an freelance expert of ethical leadership in healthcare and other sectors. Such a spirit of enterprise is definitely less common outside of the Benelux-Union.

4 Back to the Imagined Common Space

What we have seen in the three countries one by one becomes a more integrated reality when researchers from Flanders move to the Netherlands and vice versa and when people from Brussels and Wallonia go to Luxembourg. This mobility follows the linguistic facilities of shared Dutch or French cultural references. When this opportunity is not given, it is replaced by English as a lingua franca often used in the Benelux

countries. This makes the three small countries a dynamic hub for international contacts and networking including research on the question of linguistic justice (cf. Van Parijs 2011).

A high quality of life also contributes to the attractiveness of this environment, with culturally rich cities and quick connections to other parts of Europe. As a gateway to the English speaking world and a space at the crossroads of French and German debates, the academic institutions in the Netherlands, Belgium and Luxembourg make it easy to feel at home and to discover new horizons every day. Universities are challenged to show their usefulness in the public deliberation and in contributions to the individual and collective well-being. The ivory towers still preserved in some European countries are under pressure in a positive and liberating sense.

Searching for common points of the ethical landscape in the Netherlands, Belgium and Luxembourg, there is of course the liberal legislation on euthanasia in all three countries. The Netherlands started in 2001 with the “Termination of Life on Request and Assisted Suicide Act” (cf. Düwell/Feikema 2006). The Belgium parliament followed in 2002, Luxembourg in 2008. One might ask why exactly these three countries are the pioneers of this kind of legislation in Europe. The phenomenon has been discussed all over the world as a breaking of a taboo and a dangerous step on a slippery slope. Biomedical issues used to be handled in Germany by moral theologians. But the case shows that such a division of tasks between two separated branches of theological ethics does not make sense. The societal implications are so obvious that social ethics must urgently be present in this field.

One frequently suggested interpretation is the culture of tolerance and compromise in countries traditionally dominated by religious norms and Christian Democratic parties. This is no longer the case. All three Benelux countries have experienced the shift to liberal majorities with the possibility to introduce new perspectives of moral reasoning in the public sphere. The same is true for the recognition of same-sex marriage. It has been legal in the Netherlands since 2001, in Belgium since 2003 and in Luxembourg since 2015. The legalisation of abortion started much earlier in 1980s and 1990s, but it is still controversial like all the other already mentioned topics. The culture of tolerance has to face a severe setback by the rise of right wing populism and must be able to argue coherently in the areas of bioethics, gender relations and immigration. It would be a fatal error to consider only the last theme

as a matter of social ethics. Another specific field is the reflexion on national solidarity in Belgium where the cohesion (cf. Van Parijs 2018) is permanently threatened by Flemish separatists who would like to have their independent nation. The history of Leuven and Louvain-la-Neuve is at the heart of this never ending conflict that makes political decision making and the organisation of convincing majorities so difficult and time-consuming.

5 Perspectives for Research and Collaboration

The short report has given an overview of the obstacles and opportunities for social ethics in a changing landscape shaped by intellectual, political and economic influences. Christian social ethics can be found in activities that are not necessarily labelled as such, particularly in a very strong tradition of sociology of religion in the Netherlands and in Belgium. As social ethics and theology in general are under pressure in a rapidly changing world, it is time for sharing experiences, promising practices and new projects. At this very moment in 2021, the Faculty of Theology and Religious Studies in Leuven, probably the strongest of its kind in continental Europe according to international rankings, seems to be the only one that is fully accepted as a world class university and confirmed by its deserved reputation. It is not just the result of the preservation of privileges treasured during centuries of history, but also due a competitive style much closer to American academia than to the defensive stance of a public (or ecclesial) servant mentality.

The Benelux countries share the agenda of ethics as it is known in other parts of Europe. They have been in the spotlight of international interest because of their liberal approach to some very controversial questions of biomedical ethics with an ongoing discussion of the risks of the new options. It is hard to say whether these practices have radically changed the society or whether they just allow individual choices in some extreme situations of suffering. The debates are far from being closed and seriously need careful ethical investigations. A very promising perspective has been developed by the theological ethicist Frans Vosman (who died in 2020) in his projects on the ethics of care (cf. Conradi/Vosman 2016), first in Tilburg, then at the Universiteit voor Humanistiek in Utrecht, a young university based on secular humanist principles. There will be plenty of work for younger researchers if they are offered an appropriate

and stimulating setting. It is the duty of the senior academics to prepare this viable future that may be very different from former career tracks and institutional safeguards. The diversity of scenarios in the Benelux countries can be seen as a laboratory for new ways of studying the connecting lines between ethics, society and religion in the next ten or twenty years. *Klaar om te wenden...* (Ready to come about...) is provocative nautical title of the Dutch KNAW report from 2015. It is still not sure whether the target group of such a document wants to listen to the message or prefers to go on with business as usual as long as possible. "After us the deluge" would be a cynical and unacceptable answer in a coastal area with important parts of the land below sea level.

The European dimension of ethics in the Brussels area and in Luxembourg could be developed much more including the comparative look at the situations described in country reports of the Jahrbuch. Until now it is not obvious that the universities in the region of the Low Countries benefit in an extraordinary way from the proximity to the EU institutions or that their work takes European implications systematically into account.

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