

FAREWELL SPEECH BY OUTGOING CHAIR, EIMERT VAN MIDDLEKOOP, TO THE NIMD NETWORK

My dear friends from the NIMD family, here in The Hague and in the country offices.

In a few weeks' time, I will step down as Chair of the NIMD Supervisory Council. At the request of Thijs Berman, our NIMD Director, I would like to speak to you on the topic of “faith and democracy”. I am very happy to do this. Over the years, I have been a parliamentarian, senator and minister and have always carried out those roles based on my Christian outlook on life and worldview, and social and political principles that stem from those.

I have chosen these words carefully. I live in a European country where the public debate is dominated by liberal, strongly secular values. In liberal discourse, religion is an irrational, individualistic belief that is of little consequence in the public domain. With all due respect, this is liberal, secular nonsense. It is also a minority view worldwide.

This observation is also intended to serve as a warning. People from Africa, for example, should realize that the average Western person no longer has any idea what religion is or what it means. That can lead to misconceptions. Many Muslims in our countries know that experience. They are treated with incomprehension and mistrust. Because they are religious.

Is faith, in my case the Christian faith, relevant to politics? Is it relevant to the rule of law, and the way we think and act in a democracy? I've been asked this many times and have always found it a strange question. A non-believer is never asked whether their atheism is relevant to democracy and the rule of law, or whether their atheism even poses a threat to these systems. There are actually good reasons to ask these questions. I can perhaps best illustrate this with an observation I found in American philosopher Francis Fukuyama's go-to book on politics, “The Origins of Political Order”. When speaking about authoritarianism in China through the years, Fukuyama argues that the fact there is no transcendental religion in China hinders the development of the rule of law, and democratic rights and freedoms.

This is an important observation. Christianity - and also Islam – is based on knowledge that is imparted, transcendental or “from above”. Therefore, religion holds not only

the spiritual, but also basic information about what a person is; how people should interact; the natural world; history; what a marriage is; what constitutes a state; the law; and more. In Christianity, knowledge is imparted, for example, about the natural world as a creation of God, for which we have a responsibility as stewards.

Long ago, I was on a working visit to Japan as an MP. There, we noticed that Japanese and European environmental policies differed greatly. In Japan, priority was given to measures that were good for people, first and foremost. They were people-centred. For example, a lot of attention was paid to clean air and low-noise cars. There was hardly any investment in treating contaminated soil. After all, this was not something that directly affected people. And there was also no problem hunting unsustainably numbers of whales. In the West, it was the opposite. The Japanese pointed out to us that they were not familiar with the notion of “stewardship”, which is a Western concept, borrowed from the Christian philosophy.

The normative structure of the state has also been handed to me by religion. My view on this has been given to me, it is not a product of thought. It is a normative structure for public life. A normativity that is at the service of people and their society, it is about public justice.

The legitimacy of government authority is also set out in my religion. The fact that this power is often misused does not detract from that. That is why political power never has the last word. In this view, all power must be tested against the normativity of the state and against the law. This keeps the state in its place, and limits its powers.

This view is an accepted truth in Western cultures, which have been deeply influenced by Christianity and classical humanism. However, if you look around, you will see that, throughout history and in the present day, this view cannot always be taken for granted. In Russia and China, for example, power rarely needs to be accounted for, power is barely limited and the law does not rule. In some African countries, the power of leaders is a personal asset and does not require accountability to the public. Hardly anyone remembers this, but kings and emperors were deified in ancient times. Roman Emperors were gods to whom unconditional reverence was due. It is Christianity that made them people again – it secularized emperors and kings. Because there is only one God.

Roman Emperors may have disappeared, but there are still charismatic and autocratic leaders who imagine themselves to be demigods. Who see the people as machines of

applause. Demons can lurk within these leaders. They are a threat to democracy and the rule of law.

My views on democracy are also partly shaped by my Christian view of people and society. In modern secular discourse, democracy is the foundation of the political life of the state. The state is the contract that the people make with themselves. This view has no historical or empirical basis. It is a construct. It is as arbitrary as faith is to liberal secular eyes. I do not believe in this product of thought. In fact, it is dangerous to put "the people" on the political throne. The people are often an erratic and unpredictable political actor. Because they simply do not have to answer to anyone. Brexit is a prime example.

My vision of democracy is instrumental. Democracy is not a value in itself. It is important to the structure of a political system. It is through that democracy, or institutional channel, in this case parliaments, that citizens gain influence over government policy and legislation. No more and no less. There is a christian view of people behind this. Namely the belief that people live in a broken reality. People, citizens can be selfish, corrupt and power-hungry. We live outside of paradise and we know it. That is why collegial governance is preferable to rule by a single person. This is a protestant view, but it was also taught by Aristotle, the famous Greek philosopher. That is why a parliament is not a value in itself, but an instrument to control power, to resolve political conflicts, and to ensure the legitimacy of the government. Because, in all countries, power needs to be controlled. This conviction is also behind the separation of powers.

At the heart of the Christian faith are the commandments: "Love God and love your neighbour as yourself". What does this mean politically? Because of these commandments, there is strong pacifism in Christianity. So the first question I got when I became Secretary of Defence was how I could reconcile my position with my Christianity, specifically with the commandment "You shall not kill." It was a good question. Incidentally, every Minister of Defence must be able to provide a justification for the use of military force not only a christian one. But I admit that the question is more exciting for a christian politician. I have found it a privilege to partake in an age-old tradition of reflecting on this question. As early as the 4th century, the theologian and philosopher Augustine asked himself how the command of love could be applied in a world full of violence, injustice and evil. Since then, many thinkers have asked themselves the same question. These include Thomas Aquinas in the 13th century and, very recently, Pope Francis.

The 'just war theory' emerged from the tradition of pondering this question. This theory posits that violence can sometimes be justified by a legitimate government, as long as all possible measures are taken to ensure that the use of violence is as proportionate and disciplined as possible. This explains, for example, the need to prevent civilian casualties. As a minister, I have benefited a lot from the christian tradition pondering this issue. Through this tradition of thought, an inner tension within religions has been brought to a fruitful solution. Indeed, accepting compromises is very much in keeping with both christian ethics and political doctrine. A democracy cannot do without such compromises.

The Bible is not a handbook for doing politics. Those who think this are missing the point. In my long political career, I have rarely used the Bible to form directly an argument in the political arena. I come up with a substantiated view of people, society and political views. This may be derived from my thinking about the Bible, but it is always within the framework of the democratic debate. The very fact that, according to christian beliefs, people are much more than individuals, but essentially social creatures, can be fruitfully applied in many political debates. I love the raw world of the Old Testament, a love deepened by my experiences as a minister with the tribal world of Afghanistan. The Old Testament is about the history of the people of Israel, a people freed by God from slavery in Egypt. That is why these people are constantly told they must not take their freedom for granted; that they must keep God's commandments; and be good to strangers, widows and orphans, and to the poor. After all, they themselves lived in slavery. These are age-old stories, but their moral and political teachings can be relevant in the present day. Think of issues such as migration, financial debt and poverty alleviation.

The Preamble to the UN Universal Declaration of Human Rights speaks of "recognition of the inherent dignity and of the equal and inalienable rights of all members of the human family". This formulation is due in large part to the ethics of the Roman Catholic Church. If the liberal influence had been stronger at the time, it would probably have spoken of people's "autonomy" instead of "dignity". And this would be to its detriment. Either way, in both cases, the citizen is guaranteed freedom from state influence.

These freedoms historically began with the freedom of conscience, religion and expression. In European history, this state-free space has been of particular interest to the church and monastic orders. Based on this freedom, the institution of the church has become a critical counterforce of the state. This has been of the utmost importance for enshrining rights and freedoms. The principle of the separation of church and state therefore occupies an important place in many constitutions. This principle is, to a large extent, inherited from Christianity. It is not formulated so

explicitly in other world religions. The separation of the public realm (or the state), and the spiritual realm (or the Church), is based on the word of Jesus Christ: "give to Caesar what is due to Caesar and give God what is due to God". European history is also an age-old tale of the struggle between church and state. Our modern democratic constitutional state is based much more on the outcome of that struggle than the concept of democracy from classical, Greek times. This outcome also represents the recognition that a human being is a dual being, who lives both materially and spiritually. These are separate areas; one cannot rule over the other.

In a modern democracy, citizens with very different views come together in an empty arena. In my opinion, everyone's input should be respected in that arena. It is about public justice and not just the will of the majority. That often sounds better in theory than it is in practice. The arena can be threatened by power-hungry political leaders, dangerous ideologies, or the issues of the day. The church has no say in that arena, but is free to criticize. Even if doing so is dangerous. Many believers in the world know what that means; they are persecuted. In the West, we are in danger of forgetting the cultural and moral contribution of the church to public life. Take, for example, politically relevant core concepts such as "reconciliation", "forgiveness" and "social harmony". These concepts, very popular in the United Nations, for example, do not arise in a secular democracy as a matter of course. They are brought in from the outside. By the Christian Church, but also by other doctrines. The same church that rejected class struggle in Europe in the 19th century and successfully kept workers out of the grip of communism. I am a Protestant, but I advise you all to read some of the Papal Encyclicals, especially on social issues. A democracy cannot support itself. It relies on moral and social beliefs brought in from the outside.

Of course this speech is also an *oratio pro domo*. I am a Christian politician and these are my principled and historical identities. They are valuable. It is therefore short sighted, unhistorical and dangerous for modern liberals to want to reduce faith and religion to the subjective, arbitrary beliefs of individuals. That is a secular prejudice. I don't share that. More importantly, modern liberals, including socialists, must realize that Christian Democracy is an important ally in the struggle for democracy, the rule of law and human rights. Christian Democracy is the only political movement in Europe without a revolutionary past. It is fundamentally democratic.

A central theme in thinking around democracy has always been how to prevent a tyranny of the majority. Constitutional rights are a first line of defence. Respecting the institutional rights of churches is next. Just as much as the freedom of schools, companies, associations, etc. In short, a pluralistic society. It is therefore unfortunate that, in modern democracy, the Christian Democrats have become defensive about their stand on socio-ethical issues such as abortion, euthanasia and the so-called gay

marriage. These are indeed the issues of secular, autonomous individuals. As a politician, I have suffered defeats in these areas. Acceptance of those defeats is a democratic duty. Nobody has to explain that to me. I just want to make it clear that faith, in my case Christianity, has been - and still is - of great significance to the theory and practice of democracy and the rule of law. It is not only about morality.

Europe has also had experiences with secular, atheist ideologies such as fascism and communism. Because these ideologies were atheistic, the state could be absolute. When that battle was over, it was Christian Democrats and Social democrats who wanted to bring Europe together in peace. The result was the European Union. There may be a lot of criticism surrounding this institution, but it has established democracy, peace and prosperity. And inclusiveness and dialogue, to name a few of NIMD's themes. Such concepts don't just appear out of nowhere, unless I'm mistaken.

All my life I have found it a privilege to be politically active and uphold Christian principles. These principles are an inexhaustible source of moral, social and political wisdom and insight. After my retirement from politics, I have also considered it a privilege to serve NIMD.

Thank you for listening to your outgoing Chair.

God bless you all!

The Hague, December 15, 2020 Eimert van Middelkoop
(Chairman of the Supervisory Board of NIMD)