

Loneliness, socio-political crisis and extreme right populism: A challenge for christian churches

Johan Verstraeten

One of the main components of the contemporary crisis is loneliness, not as subjective emotion, but as a social alienation which dehumanizes individuals in the economic, cultural, and political sphere. It is about being ignored as human beings in need to be heard, to be seen, to be cared for, to have agency and being treated with respect. Inspired by Noreena Hertz, the chapter focuses on how social loneliness is manipulated by right wing populism and the far right. The next section criticizes the pretended right wing populist adherence to Christian values and symbols, and it shows how it leads to the construct of an antagonistic ideology that scapegoats migrants and Islam. The final section concludes that Christian churches and individual Christians can contribute to humanizing the crisis context, not only by way of community building and a critical participation in the civil society, but also by taking a courageous stand against dehumanizing political ideologies and practices.

In “normal” times crises can be solved with managerial tools. Today, however, the established methods don’t work anymore because we are confronted with a complex cluster of simultaneous crises: climate disruption, the Covid-19 pandemic and its impact, radical right wing populism, polarization, increasing inequality, and massive human rights violations. These developments are intertwined and generate a comprehensive mega-crisis shaking the foundations of western civilization and democracy. According to Otto Scharmer and Katrin Kaufer we have entered an “*Age of Disruption*” the root of which is a combination of ‘three divides’: the ecological divide, the social divide and the spiritual-cultural divide (Scharmer and Kaufer 2013, 1–4). They are the emanation of a triple alienation: being disconnected from nature, from others, and from our deeper self.

In what follows I will focus on one crucial component of the mega-crisis: the *social* divide with its implications for politics and the ethical-cultural sphere. I will do this via a lens provided by Noreena Hertz in her “enlightening, engaging and compelling” book: *The Lonely Century. Coming Together in a World that’s Pulling Apart* (2020). Based on con-

vincing empirical evidence Hertz interprets the age of disruption as a crisis of *loneliness*. Starting from her analysis of social loneliness and its political consequences, I will focus on the link between the different aspects of loneliness and on how they allow extreme right parties to take advantage of the crisis. Subsequently I will criticize their use of references to ‘Christian culture’ or ‘Christian values’ as language of legitimation. Finally, I will suggest how Christian churches can and should respond to both the crisis of loneliness and the political manipulation of it by extreme right movements.

Social loneliness and its impact on the society

Loneliness is not simply an emotional or subjective state of mind. According to Hertz it is a collective state of being that’s taking “a huge toll on individuals and on society” as a whole. It is a phenomenon that “(...) poses a potent threat to tolerant and inclusive democracy” (Hertz 2020, 226). Loneliness is not only “feeling bereft of love, company or intimacy”,

but also feeling “unsupported and uncared for” by fellow citizens, employers, community, or government. It’s about being “disconnected not only from those we are meant to feel intimate with, but also from ourselves” (Hertz 2020, 7–9). In other words loneliness is “both an internal state and an existential one—personal, societal, economic and political”. It makes people “powerless, invisible and voiceless”, being “ignored as human beings in need to be heard, to be seen, to be cared for, to have agency and being treated with respect” (Hertz 2020, 7–9).

The main catalyst of this loneliness is what the Flemish psychiatrist Paul Verhaeghe has described as neoliberal madness. Hertz narrates how the neo-liberal ideology and its practices have dominated the world for decades, and replaced community-oriented values by individual ones, putting emphasis on individual achievements interpreted in a meritocratic perspective. In a neoliberal society everyone has to be his or her own entrepreneur and there is no space for mistakes or weakness. One is either winner or loser. Individuals are not collaborators any more but competitors, not citizens but consumers, not givers but takers (Hertz 2020, 14). Hertz’ critique of meritocracy is not an exception. Several scholars have come to a similar conclusion, as, for example, Daniel Markovits who, according to Lenfield writes in the *“The Meritocracy Trap”* that “meritocracy creates an endless, soul-deadening treadmill of competition” (Lenfield, 2020). According to the same reviewer Michael Sandel calls meritocracy a “tyranny threatening the common good”, a tyranny that leads to “cultivating insidious self-satisfaction among the ‘winners’ who believe they fully earned the fruits of their work without appreciating the luck, circumstances and public goods that allow intelligence and hard work to blossom” (Lenfield 2020). Sandel’s judgment is quite negative: “A perfect meritocracy banishes all senses of gift or grace” and “it diminishes our capacity to see ourselves as sharing a common fate. It leaves little room for the solidarity that can arise when we reflect on the contingency of our talents and fortune” (Lenfield 2020). Finally Paul Verhaeghe argues that neoliberal meritocracy transforms higher education as much as business into a ‘rank and yank’ appraisal system (Verhaeghe 2012, 19, 20, 24).

One of the main consequences of neo-liberal madness is “a significant rise in income and wealth gaps” (Hertz 2020, 12). According to Otto Scharmer the “disconnect between the Haves and the Have nots...has given rise to an extreme inequity bubble

in which the richest 1 % of people in the world (adults with incomes over US\$ 500.000) own 40 % of the world’s wealth while half of the world’s population own just 1 % of the world’s household wealth” (Scharmer and Käufer 2013, 6). Hertz gives as example of the earnings of CEOs: “in 1989 CEO’s earned on average fifty-eight times the average worker’s salary, but by 2018 they made 278 times as much” (Hertz 2020, 12). The consequence of the increasing inequality is that a great number of people feel “left behind, branded as losers in a society that has time only for winners” (Hertz 2020, 12). Their traditional safety nets are eroding and their status in the society diminishing.

Another consequence of the neo-liberal madness is that the workplace has become a place of disconnection. Work conditions change and jobs provide diminished social status and standing. The loneliness at the workplace is “not only about feeling disconnected from the people we work with, whether our colleagues or our boss. It’s also about feeling bereft of agency, feeling powerlessness” (Hertz 2020, 145). This is reinforced by the fact that our lives are more and more governed by algorithms and surveillance systems. We live in the “Age of surveillance capitalism” (Hertz 2020, 154). We are not only watched, but also permanently rated, and this increases the feeling of not being good enough and a loss of self-respect (Hertz 2020, 158).

Another catalyst in the production of loneliness is the influence of the new social media. We spend so much time online that it diminishes opportunities to meet real people in person: “Every moment in which we are on our phones, scrolling, watching videos, reading tweets, commenting on pictures, we are not present with those around us, depriving ourselves of the multiple daily social interactions that make us feel part of a wider society” (Hertz 2020, 93). According to Hertz smartphones erode the ability to feel empathy, fragment our attention, create a splintered self. Indeed “our devices estrange us from people we already know, including those we love and care for” (Hertz 2020, 91).

Hertz further observes that entire cities and neighborhoods are invaded by ‘cold anonymity’ (2020, 57). “We live and eat in rootless neighborhoods” (Hertz 2020, 65). That is not seldom the result of what she calls “hostile architecture” or “urban design with a focus on exclusion, especially of the poor and homeless” (Hertz 2020, 74, 77). This is a dangerous development in the light of the fact that it is precisely face-to-face interaction with people



different from us “that makes it easier to see what we have in common, rather than what sets us apart” (Hertz 2020, 80).

But, the most dramatic evolution described by Hertz is not economic, technological, nor a matter of urbanization, but political. Something really disastrous is happening: “the bonds of connectivity break down,” and “a growing number of people feel isolated, alienated, disconnected both from their fellow citizens and from national governments who, they feel, have not been listening to them or looking out for their interests” (Hertz 2020, 35). Many people experience the system as unfair and they feel abandoned. Their loneliness increases anxiety, which is both symptom and cause (Hertz 2020, 27).

According to Hertz the situation is so serious that it can pave the way to totalitarianism. Her contention is based on Hannah Arendt’s solid analysis of “*The Origins of Totalitarianism*” (1968). Quoting Arendt, Hertz writes that “for those who feel they have no place in society it is through surrendering their individual selves to ideology, that the lonely rediscover their purpose and self-respect” (Hertz 2020, 37–38). Still following Arendt, Hertz continues that “for those who feel that they have no place in the world anymore, who feel a lack of belonging and absence of solidarity, for those who fear for their futures and feel abandoned and alone, hatred of others can become as Hannah Arendt saw in Nazi-Germany, a ‘means of self-definition’ that mitigates their sense of aloneness and restore[s] some of their self-respect... formerly derived from their function in society” (Hertz 2020, 54). Even if one would think that comparisons between our time and the Nazi era are not fully adequate, one must admit that loneliness is an important driver of radical right-wing populism, and that there is a correlation between social isolation and votes for the far-right (Hertz 2020, 38–39). To say it metaphorically: “Loneliness and right-wing populism are (...) close bedfellows” (Hertz 2020, 6).

Radical right-wing propaganda plays with resentment (Todorov 2012, 210) and amplifies the populist followers’ feelings of abandonment or marginalization. Simultaneously it promises change by giving people the impression that they can again belong to something. Hence permanent referrals to words such as ‘people’ and ‘community’. But the identity of a community is defined in contrast with ‘the others’ who do not belong to it (Todorov 2012, 210). These others are especially the so-called elite and the migrants. In fact the discourse of national

or cultural unity promotes “tribalism against people who are different” (Hertz 2020, 50), or, to express it with the words of pope Francis, “a culture of walls” (Francis 2020, nr. 28). “Blaming and demonizing others” becomes a political instrument (Hertz 2020, 53). In short, Hertz believes that the causes and consequences of loneliness “are right **at the heart of the biggest political and social questions our society faces**” (Hertz 2020, 54).

For Christians and their churches this is one of the greatest challenges, particularly because radical right populism justifies its antagonistic identity discourse by way of pretending to defend Christian values or the Christian identity of the European or North American society which creates a dangerous confusion. Hence my second point on using Christianity as legitimization.

Christianity as justification of radical right populism?

Political scientists argue that one of the most important components of politics is legitimacy. Democracy is indeed not only a matter of winning elections, constituting a majority or acting in accordance with constitutional law but also a matter of legitimacy, of spontaneous moral approval by the citizens. The less people approve a policy spontaneously, the more political leaders need coercive power or violence to stay in power. Hence the necessity of a public moral justification. Even Machiavellian or amoral politicians are obliged to justify their policy or decisions in moral terms, and radical right populists do not escape from this problem. However, according to Todorov, in the case of radical or extreme right-wing populism, the discourse of legitimization is not based on ethical or reasonable arguments, but on demagoguery (2012, 207). Extreme right propaganda speaks a language of enmity in the name of defending an imaginative uniform and dominant cultural identity, which Germans call *Leitkultur*. Radical right populists propagate such a *Leitkultur* as the alternative for a multicultural society, which they don’t understand as a reality but, inadequately, as a political program of their opponents (Todorov 2012, 220). This concerns us directly, particularly as European theologians, because the radical right discourse interprets this *Leitkultur* as ‘Christian’, or, as based on ‘Christian values’. Many recent examples confirm this. The leader of the radical right *Vlaams Belang* recently mentioned in the same breath that he pre-

fers a culture based on being “Christian, Flemish and white”. The populist Hungarian prime minister Victor Orban calls himself “the most Christian and thus the most European of all Europeans” (Courtois 2021, 1). In 2018 the German home office minister of Bavaria endorsed the presence or placing of crucifixes in public buildings as an “expression of the historical and cultural character of Bavaria” and as affirmation of “a visible engagement with regards to the fundamental values of the law and the social order” (Roy 2020, 152). His argument was sharply criticized by Cardinal Marx. In Italy, the leader of the Lega Nord appears in public with a rosary. In Austria the FPÖ puts the cross of Christ on propaganda posters with anti-migrant slogans. Cardinal Schönborn reacted vigorously against it. All these examples show how much radical right populism tries to legitimate itself as a defender of “the Christian identity of Europe” (Roy 2020, 156).

According to Olivier Roy this discourse is a “rehabilitation of Christian signs... at the expense of their religious meaning” (Roy 2020, 152). It leads to a “transformation of Christian religious symbols (...) into cultural *identity markers* alienated from the religious practice” (Roy 2020, 148–150). And, instead of interpreting Christian values for peaceful purposes, the radical populists misuse them as means “to suppress the signs associated with other religions” (Roy 2020, 152). As such the appeal to Christian values and culture becomes a “means par excellence to chase the Islamic signs away from the public space” (Roy 2020, 153).

Whatever be the case, in right wing populist discourse the word “Christian” is nothing else than an “identity marker”, or, compared with what has happened in the Trumpist US, a “bumpersticker” religion (Courtois 2021, 1). Defending so-called Christian values serves as an imaginary and ideological reconstruction of the antagonistic cultural identity of a people. As such *identity marker Christianity* becomes a negation of the genuine values of the gospel. It contradicts the biblical call to care for strangers. It opposes Pope Francis’ vigorous defense of the dignity and rights of migrants and refugees. In a certain sense one could say that the proponents of *identity marker Christianity* are waging an ideological war against a genuine understanding of Christian faith.

This has tragic consequences because it leads not only to a divisive society, but also to an internal division in the Christian churches. They are divided between open-minded Christians who discern what

to do in the spirit of the gospel and a significant group of conservative Christians and church leaders who engage in an alliance with the radical right in the hope that this would be the best guarantee for the protection of their strict moral convictions with regards to gender theory, abortion, and same sex marriage. The best example of the internal division in the Catholic Church is the conflict between US bishops. Many have explicitly supported Trump and a majority of bishops have endorsed a rejection of communion to Biden. A similar conflict is present in the Protestant world: between mainstream churches and some conservative evangelical protestants (Rietveld 2021).

I am aware that in a global context other issues are probably more urgent than what I have mentioned in the first and second section of this chapter, especially the increase of human rights violence, from violence against African Americans, migrants, Uyghurs, Rohingya, and gay people, to the elimination of journalists and political opponents. In her opening of the 47th session of the *UN Human Rights Council*, Michelle Bachelet declared that we experience today the “most wide-reaching and severe cascade of rights setbacks in our lifetimes” (Bachelet, as quoted in *The Guardian*, 21 June, 2021). At least equally worrying is the nuclear proliferation and the destabilization of the international order by cyber wars. The doomsday clock has moved beyond the 5 to 12 level and Pope Francis speaks of an already ongoing ‘third world war.’ For the purposes of this chapter, I will focus on the question: what should Christians and their churches should do in response to the crisis?

The Christian response

According to Alicja Gescinska the political and social crisis described in the previous sections is mainly a *moral* crisis because of “the coarsening of the debate, (...) the spreading of fake news”, and “the legitimization of the lie”. Such a moral crisis requires a philosophical answer, the point of which is opening ourselves to a different hermeneutic horizon, leaving the narrow frameworks of interpretation behind, and always keeping in mind what Hans Georg Gadamer wrote at the end of his life: “Der Andere könnte recht haben” (“The other could be right”) (Gescinska 2020, 68) or, as the assassinated bishop Claverie said, “j’ai besoin de la vérité des autres” (I need the truth of the other).



In Alicja Gescinska's call for a different hermeneutics, Einstein's warning resonates that "we cannot solve problems with the same kind of thinking that created them" (Scharmer and Käufer 2013, 13). But thinking and interpreting the world differently is not sufficient. We need also action, especially community building and restoring the sense of social cohesion. According to Noreena Hertz: "The antidote to the Lonely Century can ultimately only ever be us being there for each other, regardless of who the other is" (Hertz 2020, 248). These words could have been written by Pope Francis in *Fratelli tutti*. The convergence is striking.

It allows us to conclude that one of the most direct and relevant contributions religions and churches can make to a process of change is community building. But the condition is that they don't absolutize their identity dogmatically and that they don't remain closed for outsiders. Church communities can contribute to both bonding and bridging (Putnam, 2000), by way of creating both an internal and inclusive sense of community and a reaching out to others. In collaboration with Christian and secular civil society movements, churches and individual Christians can intensify direct transformational action via advocacy and critical discussion in the public space. They not only *can* do this, they have an *obligation* to do so, and even to leave their comfort zones, because that is a consequence of being loyal to the spirit of the gospel and of the conviction that "action for justice and participation the transformation of the world" are "a constitutive dimension" of the evangelization (Synod of Bishops 1971). Hence the necessity of a church policy that doesn't pay unilateral attention to faith formation, liturgy, and management of church property. It requires that churches invest more energy into *diakonia* and into "fully entering into the fabric of the society" (Francis, 2013). It implies that church communities take care of local communities and reach out to people who feel excluded.

In fact there are three levels of Church action: internal community building, *diakonia* or participation in the civil society, and participation in political debates. Claiming the right to participate in public debates about political proposals and policies and, thus, claiming a public role is in itself already an antidote against neo-liberal and hyper secularized thinking that excludes religion from the public realm. Even John Rawls, who introduced the 'method of avoidance' in political philosophy, has admitted in his book on *Political Liberalism* that churches

can play a public role in view of achieving an overlapping consensus about political principles, provided that they behave as 'comprehensive doctrines,' in other words, in so far as they translate their conviction into reasonable arguments. But this becomes problematic when it would imply that they are expected to "thin out" their convictions. In normal times this can sometimes be reasonable and wise, but in the context of the groundbreaking crisis we have partially described, it would lead to extinguishing the critical potential of the gospel. In an era in which even mainstream political parties and movements, including Christian Democrats, are influenced by divisive ideas from the radical right, thinning out fundamental convictions is not adequate. Especially when the public debates are perverted by polarization, fake news, and scapegoating migrants, it becomes necessary to take a stand. As we have learned from Dietrich Bonhoeffer and political theology reflecting upon the Nazi regime, the privatizing of religion and the public silencing of authentic Christian values leads to eliminating the potential for resistance against social evil. It leads to a disconnected life in which Christians' faith life is privatized, while in the public realm they are expected to be obedient to the state, even when it imposes or allows dehumanizing practices. In the time of the Nazi's it has led to becoming guilty bystanders in a process leading to the Shoah, today it leads to non-resistance against a policy that sacrifices migrants on the altar of security and national identity (Castillo Guerra 2021) and who knows what will happen tomorrow. In our context in which even 'solidarity' with undocumented migrants can become a crime, taking a stand is not only a duty for church leaders, but also for individual Christians. They can be inspired by the words of Noreena Hertz: "*each of us has a critical role to play* in mitigating the loneliness crisis," and "reconnecting society cannot only be a top-down initiative driven by governments, institutions and big business, even if the process of disconnecting society largely was¹." (Hertz 2020, 15).

According to Pope Francis the courage to resist any sort of inhumane political practice is rooted in a fundamental 'metanoia,' an 'inner shift' that starts

1 Scharmer and Käufer would agree with this: "A new type of awareness-based collective action is emerging ... It doesn't use ... the old top-down pyramid ... In this more horizontal model, each individual node is mindful of the well-being of others" (o. c., p. 17).

from integrating “the suffering of crucified people into our own suffering”. Only when we “become painfully aware” and have the courage “to turn what is happening to the world into our personal suffering, we will discover what each of us can do about it” (Francis 2015, chapter 3). In *Fratelli tutti* Francis’ suggestion is to focus on the *vulnerability* of people. He writes this in the context of his interpretation of the parable of the merciful Samaritan. This parable not only tells us that we must always become the other of our neighbor, who is “a neighbor without borders”, but the parable also “shows us by which initiatives a community can be build, thanks to men and women who *open themselves to the vulnerability* of others”. Taking care of the *vulnerability of others* is the moral basis of transforming the society. It leads to an ethics of consideration², and the creation of a system in which everyone’s talents are valued and in which everyone takes responsibility in turn for the vulnerability of others (Francis 2020, chapter 3). It can lead to a system that restores democracy and ensures participation of all, with inclusion of the poor and vulnerable in such a way that it is not so much politics *for* poor people, but *with* and *by* them (Francis 2020, chapter 3).

In short, more is needed than merely “breathing life into a dying system” (Scharmer and Käufer 2013, 1). We also must heal a wounded world and be committed to “reintegrating the suffering person and to build a society worthy of this name” (Francis 2020, nr. 71–72). When Christian churches become inclusive communities, when they take their service to the world (diakonia) more seriously both in direct contact with vulnerable people, and structurally; when they take away the loneliness and frustrations that are grind on the mill of inhumane ideologies, they can become powerful transformative political and social actors. Co-creating a society in which people can feel again at home and respected, is the litmus test of the churches’ credibility.

2 There is an interesting convergence between what Pope Francis proposes and what the French philosopher Corine Pelluchon writes in her *Ethique de la consideration*, a book inspired by Bernard of Clairvaux’ text on consideration. According to Pelluchon the world needs both humility and vulnerability. Pelluchon is convinced that, when leaders accept with humility to be vulnerable like any other fellow human person, they can become capable of participating in the “recovery of the [wounded] world” (p. 119).

References

- Arendt, Hannah. 1968. *The Origins of Totalitarianism*, Part 3. New York: Harcourt, Brace & World.
- Castillo Guerra, Jorge E. 2021. “Ambivalenties in perceptie van migratie. Reflecties vanuit de theologie van de migratie,” *De Kovel*, 68.
- Courtois, 2021. Liza. Editorial. *Tertio* 22, 1114.
- Francis, Pope, 2013. *Evangelii Gaudium. Apostolic Exhortation on the Proclamation of the Gospel in Today’s World*. Vatican City: Libreria Editrice Vaticana,
- Francis, Pope. 2020. *Fratelli tutti*. Vatican City: Vatican Press.
- Francis, Pope. 2015. *Laudato si*. Vatican City: Vatican Press.
- Gescinska, Alicia. 2020. *Kindere van Apaté. Over Leugens en waarachtigheid*. Rotterdam: Lemniscaat (Maand van de filosofie).
- Hertz, Noreena. 2020. *The Lonely Century. Coming Together in a World that’s Pulling Apart*. London: Sceptre.
- Lenfield, Spencer Lee. 2020. “No One Deserves a Spot at Harvard: Michael Sandel makes the case against meritocracy.” *Harvard Magazine* September-October 2020. <http://harvardmagazine.com/2020/09/>.
- Markovits, Daniel. 2019. *The Meritocracy Trap: How America’s Foundational Myth Feeds Inequality, Dismantles the Middle Class, and Devours the Elite*. New York: Penguin Press.
- Pelluchon, Corine. 2018. *Éthique de la consideration*. Paris: Éditions du Seuil.
- Putnam, Robert D., 2000. *Bowling alone. The Collapse and Revival of American Community*. New York: Simon & Schuster.
- Rawls, John. 2005. *Political Liberalism*, expanded edition. New York: Columbia University Press.
- Rietveld, Sander. 2021. *Nieuwe Kruisvaarders. De heilige alliantie tussen orthodoxe christenen en radicaal-rechtse populistten*. Amsterdam: Prometheus.
- Roy, Olivier. 2020. *L’Europe est-elle chrétienne?* Paris, Seuil.
- Scharmer, Claus Otto, and Katrin Käufer. 2013. *Leading from the Emergent Future: From Ego-system to Eco-system Economies*. San Francisco: Berrett and Koehler Publishers.
- Synod of Bishops, 1971 *Justice in the World*. Second General Ordinary Assembly. <https://www.cctwincities.org/wp-content/uploads/2015/10/Justicia-in-Mundo.pdf>
- Todorov, Tzvetan. 2012. *Les Ennemies intimes de la démocratie*. Paris: Rober Laffont/Livre de Poche.
- Verhaege, Paul. 2012. *De neoliberale waanzin. Flexibel, efficiënt en ... gestoord*, Brussel, VUB Press, 2012.