

Looking for the Soul of Europe

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On 5 November 1990, a delegation of Protestant and Anglican Church leaders met with a delegation of the European Commission, including its President Jacques Delors, two other Commissioners and several high-ranking civil servants. The full day meeting concluded with a session with Delors in which he appealed to the churches to contribute to “the heart and soul of Europe”. As the Dutch historian of the event Laurens Hogebrink makes clear, the idea for the meeting on 5 November 1990 had not come from the European Commission. It was a joint initiative from the Presiding Bishop of the Council of the EKD, Martin Kruse, and the Anglican Archbishop of Canterbury Robert Runcie. It was the first encounter of its kind. It led to “regular informal meetings” between the churches and the European Commission about topics of common interest and eventually to the legal provision in the Treaty of Lisbon committing the European Union to “maintain an open, transparent and regular dialogue” with churches and religious organisations as well as philosophical and nonconfessional ones. I have participated in many of these dialogues myself.

Delors did not see the churches as the sole guardian of European spirituality. He certainly didn't intend turning the clock back to earlier centuries of church influence in Europe. But Delors was concerned about European integration becoming too technocratic, lacking the sense of belonging and the solidarity required for a real community. He saw a need for spiritual and intellectual reflection on the meaning and future of “the European project”. His appeal was aimed at a wider constituency than the churches. It included scientists and “people of culture”. And in 1992 he re-iterated his appeal: *“If in the next ten years we haven't managed to give a soul to Europe, to give it spirituality and meaning, the game will be up.”*

The evidence suggests spiritual and cultural leaders struggled to respond successfully to Delors appeal. In 2014 Pope Francis addressed the European Parliament in Strasbourg. He expressed concern that Europe was no longer open to the transcendent dimension of life, and that it, in fact, risked both losing both its own soul and the humanistic spirit which it still loves and defends. The pope recalled the 2000 years of history which links Europe and Christianity with its mixture of goodness and sin. He famously described Europe as being like an elderly lady. He saw a beauty which is reflected in the architecture of Europe's cities. Europe, he said, “urgently needs to recover its true features in order to grow, as its founders intended, in peace and harmony, since it is not yet free of conflicts.”

Last year, in a paper given at Lambeth Palace, Piers Ludlow (Professor of International History at the London School of Economics) reflected on the links between Christianity and the European Union. He noted that the links are typically understated and underplayed. References to the importance of the continent's Christian heritage are more notable by their absence than their presence. Few European politicians have chosen to dwell at length on the role of faith in their actions; and the European institutions themselves have been even more reticent on the subject. There is he summarised: ‘a resounding silence about religion, in both the discourse within the European structures themselves, and in the wider debate about them’.

Now, given the prominence of Christian Democrat politicians, in particular, in the making of Europe, that is an anomaly that needs to be explained. Why should there be this silence in regard to religion? It was quite simply, argues Ludlow, that religion in general, and Christianity in particular, was not usually seen as a unifying force but more typically as problematic and divisive. Those seeking to initiate the process of European integration were highly aware that

they would only succeed if it were possible to build a broad, multinational and transnational coalition in its favour, and that in such circumstances the potentially divisive topic of religion was best downplayed, or avoided altogether. Moreover, religion was seen as a divisive force in key member states – whether in Belgium and the Netherlands, with their Catholic, socialist and liberal ‘pillars’, in Germany where the Roman Catholic based CDU needed to be careful to position itself as a broadly Christian party, or in France with its commitment to *laïcité*. It was therefore much safer to focus either on the technocratic aspects of building Europe or, if a more idealistic objective needed to be pointed to, concentrate on Europe as a peace project.

So, what would be needed if the Christian churches were to be able to answer Delors’ appeal in any substantive way? What would be the pre-condition for Christian faith to contribute substantially to a renewed European spirit and soul? It would, first of all, be necessary for the churches to be and to be seen to be a source of unity and togetherness. Without giving up their distinctive message, they would need to be perceived as an active force for reconciliation both internally and ecumenically, and indeed amongst those of other faiths and no faith. And, of course, that is a huge endeavour, when in the public imagination religion is still identified with division - and at worst with violence.

But this is the Week of Prayer for Christian Unity, and we as Christians, can and should at least look at our own theological and spiritual roots and consider afresh the theological imperative for unity. The 20th century has rightly been described as the ecumenical century. At the 1910 Edinburgh Conference on World Mission, the Protestant churches realised that they had become competitors on the mission field and determined they must do something about it. The First World War laid bare the terrible effects of supposedly Christian European nations drawing the world into armed conflict. During the twentieth century not only were their increasing bi-lateral and multi-lateral ecumenical conversations, but churches of all kinds developed a renewed theological confidence rooted in the Western rediscovery of an essentially Trinitarian God. So Karl Rahner, who had a pivotal influence on the preparations and conduct of Vatican 2 powerfully restated the doctrine of the Trinity as indispensable for our understanding of salvation and practice of spirituality. And the greatest 20th century Protestant theologian, Karl Barth, placed the revelation of the Trinity as the foundation of his dogmatics. Flowing from this renascent theology was a renewed ecclesiology: communion generates communion. A God who is constituted eternally as a communion of persons should be mirrored in a new communion of persons in society and in the wider creation. And so *koinonia* became emblematic of the ecumenical movement.

Moving into the 21st century, it seems to me that the outworking of the church’s essential *koinonia* after the pattern of the Divine Trinity takes the form of reconciliation. It may even be, that as the 20th century western church rediscovered the doctrine of the Trinity as the heart of theology so in the 21st century we will rediscover that reconciliation is the heart of the gospel.

For myself, I am starting to consider that reconciliation is not merely a part of the gospel: it *is* the gospel. The Archbishop of Canterbury has set reconciliation as one of the three key elements of his ministry both on practical and theological grounds. For those of us who see the gospel in this way, a key biblical source is 2 Corinthians 5: ‘God was in Christ reconciling the world to himself...and entrusting to us the message of reconciliation.’

The church is a highly diverse institution. 1 Corinthians 12 gives us a picture of the church as a body with many members and many functions. Holding that diversity together in unity

requires the continued activity of reconciliation. Only a reconciled church can be the authentic witness to the world for which Jesus intercedes in John 17: ‘that they may be completely one so that the world may know you have sent me’. 2 Corinthians 5, 1 Corinthians 12 and John 17 give us a trinity of biblical passages that impel and empower the church to be true to itself in a diverse unity for the sake of the world.

In November last year, the American Anglican mission theologian Titus Presler gave a powerful lecture entitled ‘Re-Centring Mission in God’s Reconciliation’. His address was rooted in his own experience of working as a missionary in Pakistan, India and Zimbabwe. In his lecture, Presler distinguished Christians who centre their missionary practice on the proclamation of the kingdom, and there are Christians who are centred on the cross of Christ. Yet both, he argued, are theologically rooted in reconciliation. Jesus’ proclamation of the kingdom is concerned with crossing boundaries with compassion, reaching out to prostitutes, lepers and tax collectors. Many of Jesus’ parables are about reconciliation: The Prodigal Son, the Good Samaritan, the Pharisee and the Publican. Likewise, the cross is fundamentally God’s endeavour to overcome the barrier of sin and to reconcile humanity with its creator. So Presler argues that capacity to bring reconciliation should be the authentic test of our Christian missionary endeavour.

Now let us come back to the situation of contemporary Europe. We face a continent that has been deeply divided by austerity, that has been unable to meet the challenge of migration and where versions of the Christian gospel are being used to support narrow forms of nationalism that exclude and divide. Something I never thought I would see in my lifetime is the rise of the far right in many European countries. The European project is under great strain. As Frans Timmermans remarked at the last high-level dialogue with religious leaders: ‘The next European parliamentary elections will determine not just the form of the European Union but whether there *is* a European Union.’

Well what right does an Anglican have to comment on this? Especially a British Anglican! Have we not voted Brexit, and is not Brexit a significant part of the problem? So, let me offer some reflections on why Britain has a stake in Europe, notwithstanding Brexit, and what the Anglican church in particular might contribute towards the project of reconciliation.

The undeniable geographical fact is the Britain is a part of the continent of Europe. Anglicanism, as the church of English-speaking people has a deep and enduring historical relationship with the European continent, from the commissioning of St. Augustine by Pope Gregory to convert the Anglo-Saxon pagans in the 6th century, through the Reformation in the 16th, to the present. Henry VIII’s outlook was focused clearly on Europe. He did not envision of a breakaway English Church cutting itself off from the rest of European Christendom. The identity of Anglicanism as colonial and subsequently Commonwealth came much later and derives from legacy of the 18th and 19th century British Empire.

Few people have expressed British and specifically Anglican involvement with Europe as eloquently as our former prime minister, Margaret Thatcher. Speaking in Bruges, just over 30 years ago, Mrs Thatcher said this:

“Europe is not the creation of the Treaty of Rome. Nor is the European idea the property of any group or institution. We British are as much heirs to the legacy of European culture as any other nation. Our links to the rest of Europe, the continent of Europe, have been the dominant

factor in our history. Visit the great churches and cathedrals of Britain, read our literature and listen to our language: all bear witness to the cultural riches which we have drawn from Europe and other Europeans from us. We in Britain are rightly proud of the way in which, since Magna Carta in the year 1215, we have pioneered and developed representative institutions to stand as bastions of freedom. And proud too of the way in which for centuries Britain was a home for people from the rest of Europe who sought sanctuary from tyranny. But we know that without the European legacy of political ideas we could not have achieved as much as we did. From classical and mediaeval thought we have borrowed that concept of the rule of law which marks out a civilised society from barbarism. And on the idea of Christendom - Christendom for long synonymous with Europe - with its recognition of the unique and spiritual nature of the individual, on that idea, we still base our belief.”

It was a fine speech which I warmly commend, incidentally, to the current generation of British conservative politicians.

For myself, I am a citizen of Belgian and a citizen of the UK. I consider myself European, and I look after 300 Anglican congregations across the continent of Europe. I take continental bewilderment, incomprehension and confusion about Brexit very seriously, just as I take seriously the emotion and sentiment felt strongly by people in my diocese about what may lie ahead for them.

My diocese is strongly committed to both mission and church unity on the European continent. By way of examples, I would cite: our participation in the Syrian humanitarian corridor here in Belgium; our work with both poverty-stricken Greeks and refugees in Athens; a major conference at Lambeth Palace between leaders of the Anglican Church and EKD; and a delegation of which I was a part to visit Patriarch Kirill in Moscow. The Anglican church is a bridging church, both Catholic and Reformed, and overcoming borders is part of our DNA.

One of the key achievements of the European Union project has been to reduce the impact of national borders. Particularly if you live in a country that has had its borders altered or if you have been invaded, you know the potent significance of borders. The single biggest issue in the Brexit Withdrawal agreement agreed between the UK and the EU27 last November, and which our prime minister, Theresa May cannot currently get through Parliament, has become the question of the Irish border. The Good Friday agreement is so important because it eliminates a physical border between north and south in Ireland. The Anglican Church of Ireland traces its roots back nearly 1600 years and has maintained unity across both North and South throughout the partition of Ireland in the 1920s down to the present day. Few British politicians seem to understand the Irish border. By contrast, the most eloquent explanation of the border situation in Ireland that I have heard came from a Church of Ireland bishop. In his ministry he is constantly criss-crossing the border: there is surely a parable there.

Within Britain itself, the Archbishop is encouraging each diocesan bishop to convene regional politicians and leaders of civic society in an attempt to overcome the deep social divisions which the Brexit debate has exposed. In England, bishops still do have significant power to convene. Last week I was in Truro to take part in the consecration of Philip Mounstephen as Bishop of Truro. His diocese covers the County of Cornwall. The Cathedral was packed to overflowing. Civic leaders and leaders of the other churches, Methodist, Roman Catholic and Orthodox were present. At the end of the service, Philip stood on the church steps and publicly blessed the people of Cornwall.

The Church of England in England acts as guarantor of a public space in which people of other Christian traditions, of other faiths and even (though this is sometimes more difficult) people of no faith can gather and interact. Grace Davie has described this, in a somewhat backhanded compliment, as the particular gift of a weak established church.

There may be something in this more generally, if the churches together are going to be able to contribute to the task of uncovering afresh the soul of Europe. We will have to do this, first of all, as reconciled churches. The sectarianism of the past is still very much in the public memory. And it has to be overcome. We secondly have to demonstrate -and keep demonstrating - our ability to welcome, include and defend those of other faiths. At our best, we Christians often do this well. And thirdly, we will have to be seen to be acting from a position of weakness and humility. Europe's history has passed through revolutions and enlightenment in order that the power of the church could be curtailed. That can't and shouldn't be undone.

Years ending in 9 seem to have particular significance in recent European history:

- 1919 – Versailles Peace Treaty signed
- 1939 – WWII breaks out
- 1949 – Council of Europe (and NATO) are formed
- 1979 – First direct elections to the European Parliament
- 1989 – Berlin Wall collapses. 30 years later ...
- 2019 – Brexit (?) andwhat else?

In 2019, the future of Europe is again at stake. In this Week of Prayer for Christian Unity we are invited to celebrate and further realise our own unity after the community of the Divine Trinity. We do this both for our own good and the good of Europe. It is as we as Christians become more truly what we are, that our potential to find and uncover the soul of Europe will be made known.

References:

- Titus Presler Re-Centring God's mission in reconciliation. Unpublished lecture, 2018.
- Will Adam et. al. 'After Brexit'. Unpublished lecture, 2018
- Piers Ludlow 'Silent but Important'. Unpublished lecture, 2018.
- Laurens Hogebrink: Europe's Heart and Soul: Jacques Delors' appeal to the churches. Globalethics.net CEC, 2015.