

Is the Expanded EU More Receptive to Christian Voices? Jonathan Luxmoore

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Is the Christian heritage of Europe being disregarded or ignored? Despite all the evasions and prevarications of recent years, can we be confident that the EU still embodies some kind of Christian purpose?

Three years after the major enlargement of the EU, controversy over the religious heritage of Europe and the specific Christian contribution appears to have calmed, and we are now in a more settled situation. There is clearly a deep reluctance to acknowledge Europe's Christian heritage directly. As expected, there was no reference to God or Christianity in the EU's new Reform Treaty, adopted at the last Inter-Governmental Conference in December to replace the ill-fated Constitution. But it is also clear that churches and religious communities are being listened to, at least sometimes! I personally don't believe that we are witnessing 'mass apostasy' or 'spiritual suicide' in Europe (with due respect to Benedict XVI, George Weigel and others). The situation is much more complex and nuanced.

After its last two expansions the EU now comprises 27 member-states with a combined population of 488 million: about twice the size of the USA, and twice the size of Russia and the CIS together. Of the twelve latest new member-states seven are traditionally Catholic, two Protestant and three Orthodox. But all are varied, and all are in their way secular societies, facing the same pressures and tensions as the previous fifteen EU countries.

Although four out of five Europeans still describe themselves as Christians in surveys, this clearly bears no relation to active membership and participation. But there are dynamics at work beneath the surface. Sociologists have identified a process of re-spiritualisation, and even of religious revival in a country as apparently secular as the Netherlands. Meanwhile traditional churches (especially the Roman Catholic and Orthodox churches) are benefitting numerically from current Eastern European migration, even if this also brings tensions.

The various organs of the EU are now regularly in contact and consultation with organisations representing all the Christian traditions, including the

Conference of European Churches (CEC) and the (Roman Catholic) Commission of the Bishops' Conferences of the European Community (COMECE). A number of leading figures in the EU, including René van Linden and Hans-Gerd Poettering, and politicians such as Angela Merkel in Germany and Nicolas Sarkozy in France, have acknowledged the importance of the voice of the churches.

Churches and faiths were not mentioned in the 'Presidency Conclusions' of the Brussels summit last June which set out the mandate for the new Reform Treaty. But much has been reproduced from the Constitution, which was shelved in 2005 but which was ratified or approved by 18 countries, and which was also supported by all the major churches. So it is worth reminding ourselves of what the Constitution said about churches and faiths.

The Preamble acknowledged the continent's 'cultural, religious and humanist inheritance', and this acknowledgment is kept in the new Treaty. Article 1-52 formalised the EU's relations with churches by recognising 'their identity and specific contribution', and pledged an 'open, transparent and regular dialogue'. Meanwhile the Charter of Fundamental Rights reaffirmed the rights to 'freedom of thought, conscience and religion', as well as to marriage and family life, assembly, association and education. It also barred discrimination on grounds of religion or belief, and re-committed the EU to 'respect cultural, religious and linguistic diversity'.

Seven-eighths of the 780 pages of the Constitution were about economic and technical arrangements. But there were also passages setting out the Constitution's system of values, and these provoked argument.

Articles 1-2 drew a distinction between values already established (respect for human dignity, freedom, democracy, equality, the rule of law), and values which can only be aspired to (pluralism, non-discrimination, tolerance, justice, solidarity and equality). Since no ontological basis for these values was given - something an *invocatio Dei* would have supplied - critics say this amounted to a 'sociology of values' only - a list of existing norms 'common to member-states', rather than of permanent principles. Others have been more positive, however, commending the Constitution as a worthy attempt to find common ground between competing viewpoints and traditions. Even without a metaphysic of absolute values, it echoes the ethical principles embodied in the national constitutions of member-states. If these have not been stated publicly for fear of discord, they are implied all the same, and said to be indivisible and universal.

So one can argue that the Constitutional Treaty did in fact provide a basis for ensuring that Christian voices were heard; and all the references to religion which were in the Constitutional Treaty are included in the Reform Treaty.

So how have the voices of the churches been heard during the consultation period since the Constitutional Treaty was shelved?

The area where there has been the most obvious input is on social and economic issues. In a letter of December 2006 to EU leaders, COMECE highlighted priorities shared by all churches: promoting social justice and sustainable economic growth; maintaining living standards and job security; restoring and promoting family and community life in the face of rising unemployment and demographic change. There has been discussion involving the churches on such topics as energy security, climate change, asylum and immigration, Third World aid, fair trade and the Millennium goal of halving global poverty by 2015. There has also been input from the churches in working groups with EU officials in these areas. COMECE's committee on global governance, which commended the 'values and principles of Christians social teaching', was headed by Michel Camdessus, former MD of the World Bank, with input from the WTO, ILO, Citibank and other organisations.

Input from the churches appears to be less accepted in a second area, that of moral/cultural issues such as abortion, euthanasia, stem-cell research and gay marriages, although these are highly important issues for the churches. Some say that the Catholic and Orthodox churches are coming closer around these issues, at the expense of their relations with Protestant churches. They are constantly stressed in statements and declarations. Bishop Hilarion, the Russian Orthodox Church's EU representative, called two years ago for a full-blown 'Catholic-Orthodox alliance' against the 'secularism, liberalism and relativism prevailing in modern Europe', and to 'act as an authoritative partner in dialogue with international organisations, and represent "traditional Christianity" in dialogue with Judaism, Islam and other world religions.' This hasn't happened yet, but clearly a gap has opened up between these leading churches and current mores.

There remains a third area, which surfaced especially at the 2002-5 European Convention. This is to do with 'identity issues'. This includes acknowledgment of Europe's Christian roots and heritage – withstanding the drift to what John Paul II called a 'unilateral civilisation' which saw the world solely in scientific or technological terms and lost sight of the 'transcendental dimension'. In this area it is difficult to judge how open the EU is to Christian voices.

To return to the question I asked at the beginning: can the EU still be said to embody some kind of Christian purpose?

On the question of how far Europe is still Christian, I take a maximalist view. I still think a 'spirit of Christendom' exists even without being acknowledged.

Christianity was a foremost influence on Europe's formation - the only religion to have played a direct and consistent part in the emergence of its institutions of law and governance, and to have placed a coherent stamp on its cultural and social traditions.

In *Ecclesia in Europa* (2003), John Paul II talked about the 'multiple spiritual roots' underlying Europe's commitment to human dignity, freedom of thought and speech, and promotion of the common good:

These roots have helped lead to the submission of political power to the rule of law and to respect for the rights of individuals and peoples... Yet it must be acknowledged that these inspiring principles have historically found in the Judaeo-Christian tradition a force capable of harmonising, consolidating and promoting them.... In the process of building a united Europe there is a need to acknowledge that this edifice must also be founded on values most fully manifested in the Christian tradition. Such an acknowledgement is to everyone's advantage.

In our book *Rethinking Christendom: Europe's Struggle for Christianity* (2005) we use a river analogy to explain Christianity's historic role.

If European history is a verdant plain... then Christianity is the river which flows through it. It is a river with various sources: Judaic tradition, oriental faiths, Greek philosophy, Roman law. But it has also been broadened by incoming streams over two millennia - Celtic, Germanic, Slav and Finno-Ugric culture; Islam, humanism, Romanticism - embracing and redirecting them, while in turn being enriched and deepened by them.

Thanks to Christianity, Europe already had a constitution of sorts a thousand years before the EU's Constitutional Treaty. What is its legacy for the present and future?

One is the concept of natural law, which upholds the inalienable dignity of every individual and predates and supersedes secular laws and statutes.

Another is the notion of a realm of personal conscience, existing independently of the will of the state, which ensures that secular and spiritual power structures are separate and must compete for human loyalties.

Another is the realisation that faith and reason, though autonomous, are complementary and should be linked in mutual respect.

These three concepts were unique to Christian civilisation. Knowingly or not, by asserting the moral value of the individual, Christianity planted the seeds of democracy and human rights, and was fated, step by step, after centuries of struggle and conflict, to undermine unjust, dictatorial systems of rule.

Even those who presented radical secular alternatives to Christianity were themselves in debt to Christianity. The Enlightenment, Darwinism and Marxism all came out of the Christian tradition of free thought, imagination and enquiry.

As TS Eliot pointed out in 1945, only Christianity could have produced a Voltaire or a Nietzsche. To quote Eliot further:

I do not believe the culture of Europe could survive the complete disappearance of the Christian faith.... I am talking about the common tradition of Christianity which has made Europe what it is, and about the common cultural elements which this common Christianity has brought with it.... It is against a background of Christianity that all our thought has significance. An individual European may not believe the Christian faith is true; and yet what he says, and makes and does will all depend on the Christian heritage for its meaning.

Eliot was broadcasting to a defeated Germany. And significantly, this was also around the time when the prototype EU institutions were being planned.

We can show how Christian norms and values influenced the statute of the Council of Europe in 1949, as well as the European Convention on Human Rights in 1950, the European Coal and Steel Community in 1952 and the Treaty of Rome in 1957. Here Christian values underlay such concepts as subsidiarity, popular sovereignty, the common good.

That was the past. Can the same be true today?

I think, despite everything, that the EU still reflects this Christian legacy, and is still fundamentally open to Christian voices - at least as a coherent, authoritative alternative to prevailing secular orthodoxies.

These may be difficult, challenging times for Europe's churches, and times of isolation and even harassment for Europe's Christians. But in its December 2006 letter to EU leaders, COMECE insisted the EU's core values still all corresponded with Christian teaching. And I suspect most if not all EU leaders still see Christianity this way, even without saying so - not just as

something which has shaped Europe's past, but as a dynamic, organic reality which still plays an essential role in inspiring citizenship and civic engagement, and in critically refining what we understand to be Europe's values.

So it is a messy situation, often frustrating, sometimes alarming, always uncertain. But we should stick with it. To quote COMECE's Irish Secretary-General, Mgr Noel Treanor:

The Christian community has recognised the uniqueness of the European project. It hasn't done this in a bleary-eyed way, but critically, seeing in it a new methodology which offers key elements to the evolving mechanisms of global governance. It is, by any standards, a singular ethical achievement in human history, which is worthy of Christian support - notwithstanding its fragilities and failures, its contradictions in policy areas such as trade and development, and the numerous dimensions in which new steps are needed to render EU policy more coherent.

So the churches will continue to do what they've always done - to monitor and comment on policy-making from the point of view of Christian social teaching, supporting it where we can, and questioning it when necessary.

Perhaps we could best summarise the necessary role of the churches in the simple phrase 'critical solidarity'.

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