

**The Response of ‘Faith in Europe’ to the Document  
*What Future for Europe? An Open Letter of CEC  
to Churches and Partner Organisations*  
Sent 9 November 2016**

The Conference of European Churches (CEC) open letter was issued only days before the referendum which, by a relatively narrow majority, approved the United Kingdom’s (UK) exit from the European Union (EU). This response from ‘Faith in Europe’ emerges against that background. The response obviously represents a distinctively British viewpoint, albeit one that raises issues of wider European concern.

**‘Faith in Europe’**

‘Faith in Europe’ is a national organization that is principally though not exclusively Christian (Islam and Judaism are represented within it). It is concerned for Europe’s well-being and the role of faith communities in shaping its future. Its members and constituent bodies (which include most ‘main-line’ Churches) are generally though not uncritically supportive of moves toward greater European integration. Its core members were greatly dismayed though not wholly surprised by the referendum’s outcome.

Nevertheless, we recognize that this bitter experience provides an opportunity for reflection and the learning of lessons having Europe-wide relevance. We trust that CEC will contribute much to such a learning process.

**The UK’s referendum**

CEC’s recent document obviously identifies the EU’s major achievements as well as significant obstacles impeding the realization of its potential. This response does not cover the same ground. Britain’s referendum, however, offers much specific evidence, of EU-wide relevance, concerning present and possibly future difficulties.

At the risk of over-simplification two main factors may have driven our referendum’s outcome, namely nostalgia and resentment. In both cases particular mind-sets may have been involved of which our elites (secular and ecclesiastical) have perhaps taken insufficient account. A danger has been patronizingly to dismiss the relevant concerns rather than respectfully engaging with them. A similar failure to engage may underlie a discernable trans-European disenchantment with the status quo which, if left to fester, could produce further fragmentation.

***Nostalgia***

The nostalgia involved may have some distinctively British roots. Is it related to a now largely anachronistic British exceptionalism fostered by our island status; our freedom from foreign invasion and, above all, past ‘imperial glories?’

In England especially huge changes in our circumstances have provoked something of a national identity crisis involving a sense of loss and resistance to still relatively new

European entanglements. (The distinctive historical trajectories of Scotland and Northern Ireland have pointed toward generally more positive responses to the new realities.)

### ***Resentment***

Nostalgia has been accompanied and sometimes fuelled by resentment. It is the resentment of those feeling excluded from the material benefits and opportunities afforded by globalization and of those victimized by growing inequalities between and within nations. (This is certainly a Europe-wide matter). In Britain, as elsewhere, a particular focus for accumulated grievances was the matter of immigration. Post-referendum developments suggest that racism and xenophobia play a part in this ('Brexit' led some people to believe that they had permission to express anti-foreigner sentiments) but the problem goes further. It is also a question of people perceiving unsettling change and fresh competition for jobs or welfare provision.

### ***The outcome: division without clarification***

The net effect, made strikingly clear by the referendum result, is a disturbingly divided UK. Divisions were exposed along national, regional, class and generational lines (young people were generally more inclined than their elders to see the EU as a hopeful rather than a threatening phenomenon). The EU's incipient fragmentation, heralded by the UK's departure, may be accompanied, if not prompted, by fragmentation at the national level. Any residual sense of an international or national 'common good' has been imperilled.

The UK's referendum campaign could be cited as an example of how not to engage with the issues at stake. The debate was more an illustration of the challenges confronting the EU than an adequate response to such challenges. Those advocating Britain's continued EU membership relied heavily on anxiety-laden appeals to narrow and short-term economic interests rather than heralding the institution's major achievements in the realms of human rights, the rule of law, the extension of democracy, and, in particular, the bringing of peace to Europe. There was little in the way of a convincing narrative appealing to the imagination or to the emotional and spiritual dimensions of our being. The advocates of 'Brexit' did make some such appeals but often on the basis of spurious claims or by tapping into long-standing prejudices. Our media, particularly the press, probably made matters worse.

The result was an often poorly informed and confused electorate. Many apparently voted on grounds having little or nothing directly to do with the EU. Truth was frequently a casualty. An opportunity to educate, to bring clarity or to offer a positive appealing vision of Europe's future was lost.

### **General European lessons to be learnt**

Those concerned for Europe's well-being need to ponder the factors underlying 'Brexit', as well as the behaviour of Britain's elites, in order to head off further disintegration.

Britain's situation may be a very particular case of a process whereby the EU, in general, has, to a marked extent, lost its way. Across the continent the initial post-World War II vision of a Europe aiming at political convergence and shared prosperity has, in significant measure, given way to preoccupation with a particular economic model that, in practice, has tended to subvert the EU's declared long-term purposes. It may even be tending to subvert the basic values upon which the whole European experiment ultimately depends. The neo-liberal economic model in question has perhaps had its most damaging consequences in 'the Euro-zone' but its effects have been experienced elsewhere, not least in the UK. Reliance on liberal free market economics, in the absence of an adequate international political and institutional framework, has tended to exacerbate all those divisions revealed in the UK's referendum. Accompanying attempts to impose austerity have worked to the same end. The whole experiment, moreover, has been driven in top-down fashion. In the process democratic legitimacy has been undermined and much wasteful human suffering caused. Similarly, the priority accorded to private (especially financial) interests over more general public concerns has tended to weaken the very sense of national and international solidarity which the EU, in principle, seeks to foster.

### **Challenges for faith communities**

#### ***A prophetic voice***

For faith communities committed to 'the European Project' this presents a particular challenge. Arguably, they need to discover an ever stronger prophetic voice which not only questions particular outcomes of the current economic fashions, such as mass youth unemployment, but also challenges, root and branch, the validity of the entire enterprise. Equally, there may be a need more strenuously to advocate an alternative set of priorities that does not succumb to that current form of idolatry that prefers financial interests over human welfare (It seems ironic that an institution designed to leave political idolatry behind has given way to an idolatry which exalts 'the market'). Thus economic arrangements may again be made that are more clearly means to an end rather than ends in themselves. Some observers already perceive moves away from the predominant model. If they are right then, arguably, faith communities need to encourage such moves. At a deeper level such a journey may more readily enable Europe to give life to that 'Soul' for which some plead. An ethically driven vision for Europe's future may ultimately hope to re-engage the loyalty of citizens, to reduce the so called 'democratic deficit' and to overcome the apathy or hostility recently made evident in the UK.

#### ***Sharing with 'secular' partners***

Though perhaps a priority for faith communities this needs to be a task shared with 'secular' partners. Part of Europe's tragedy has been a split between (in particular) Christian bodies and their ostensibly secular adversaries both embracing some values which have ultimately shared origins. The recovery of momentum behind 'the European Project' perhaps partly depends on a more than ever active partnership between these divergent bodies of opinion.

A vital area in which such a partnership may pay particular dividends is that of safeguarding diversity and promoting tolerance. The hugely pressing questions of

mass migration and Islam's place in Europe obviously makes this a special long term preoccupation. By no means least, there can be a shared concern with boldly reminding rulers of their duty to protect the vulnerable.

Challenges arising from mass migration and from the existence of religious or cultural pluralism are inevitably mixed up with the contemporarily vexed question of national identity – a live issue in the UK but also in a number of other European countries. Faith communities, in dialogue with each other, and with other interlocutors, may have a valuable contribution to make to the clarifying of this issue. Serious theologically inspired reflection on the issue may help in the collective task of debunking misleading myths and harmful stereotypes – myths and stereotypes that can fuel xenophobia and destroy trust between as well as within nations. Equally, on the positive side of the account, faith communities, even now, may, over the long run, help in the articulation of more well grounded yet open-ended identities. In this context, CEC should encourage international church twinning and international pilgrimages, providing examples of best practice where needed for guidance.

### ***Historical awareness***

Questions concerning identity are very obviously linked to the study and the proper use of history. Britain's referendum underlines the dangers involved in any widespread lack of serious historical awareness. In the UK invocation of the past generally involved distorted narratives appealing to divisive prejudices. Faith communities as custodians of long established traditions that, at their best, have a passionate concern for truth have a creative role to play on this front. Unexamined histories can leave Europe's peoples as the prisoners of their past. Alternatively, greater historical awareness can facilitate a liberation from imprisoning constraints that may open up an acceptance of fresh possibilities. England, it seems, needs liberation from nostalgia. Perhaps Germany needs to be freed from (understandable) fears of inflation stemming from the 1920s.

### ***Overcoming fear***

Underlying many of Europe's crises is a pervasive fear or anxiety. The EU's policies and priorities have significantly contributed to the creation or reinforcement of such anxieties. The first duty of rulers may be to underwrite the security of citizens but on the currently decisive economic front, at least, the institution has often fostered insecurity. A great challenge for faith communities is to draw on their traditions for the purposes of offering a well grounded hope, that transcends any current or passing difficulties.

### ***Relating to practical endeavours***

The resulting encounters lie primarily in the realm of fundamental values and lasting visions, albeit values and visions with the capacity to inspire current endeavours. Such endeavours include the attempt to fashion institutions that embody reconsidered values and are guided by reimagined visions. In other words, faith communities

should not confine their public interventions to matters of general principle but also, albeit in humble, non-triumphalist and considered fashion, contribute to debates concerning institutional reforms – reforms with the power to give substance and credibility to calls for acceptance of our values. Under this heading could come reforms designed unambiguously to assert the primacy of politics over economics; to render decision-making bodies more transparent and accountable; to establish shared trans-European welfare standards; to provide for more variety and flexibility within current institutional arrangements and to breathe greater life into the principle of subsidiarity. (Could the latter contribute to a resolution of the problems posed by Scottish, Catalan and other separatist movements?)

Without major changes the EU's long-term future looks problematic. As things stand its real potential for enhancing the lives of Europeans and for positively contributing to the causes of global justice, order and good governance will not be adequately realized. Current tendencies to fragment, of which 'Brexit' has been a hugely important example, signify the advent of a major crisis that, as CEC's document indicates, could add up to decisive moment of truth, or 'Kairos', with ramifications extending well beyond the immediately obvious issues. Some suggest that a disappointing feature of Britain's recent experience has been a general failure on the part of our Church leaders to perceive the gravity of the issues at stake and a failure adequately to rise to the relevant challenges. Some individual leaders identified the issues involved and, very notably, the Church of Scotland and Quakers made known their reasoned support for 'the European Project'. There has, however, been a relative absence of considered collective interventions on the part of leaders of religious opinion.

It is to be hoped that CEC will provide a forum within which Christians of different traditions, in dialogue with those of other faiths and none, may grapple at ever deeper levels with the issues at stake – issues that, ultimately have not only European but also global implications. Within CEC, we hope, Churches will come together as the servant of Europe's people, but also as servants and educators of each other.

## **Conclusion**

A feature of post-'Brexit' Britain is the palpable absence of a plan for guiding our nation through the crisis we have visited upon ourselves. There is huge uncertainty about the direction to be followed: the complexities of problems to be solved are multiplying and it is not even clear whether the UK should follow a 'soft Brexit' or a 'hard Brexit' solution, nor how far the rest of the EU is willing to negotiate. At the same time, EU citizens from other countries living in the UK and UK citizens living in other EU countries are very anxious about their future position and the former are extremely concerned about the rise in hate crimes since the referendum.

In this crisis, and amidst the huge challenges facing Europe as a whole, there is an ever greater need for strong prophetic voices to emerge from faith communities. Arguably, the EU's current difficulties have been particularly caused by too readily addressing the demands of Mammon and insufficiently heeding the visions and values of the 'European Movement's' original architects. In the spirit of loving solidarity, in the manner of faithful servants and with the boldness of trusting prophets people of faith can contribute to the renewal of a great project. It is a project requiring a

recognition, on the part of nations and their leaders, that all humanity, more obviously now than ever, is interdependent.

By the same token, it is a project requiring us to move beyond narrowly conceived understandings of national self-interest and toward understandings whereby nations learn to be servants of each other and of a 'common good' transcending national boundaries. The task is obviously immense but the deepest insights of Christianity, and other faiths, point us in this direction. We trust that CEC can contribute to such ends. Not least we hope that members of British faith communities may constantly be reminded of the spiritual and cultural inheritance shared with fellow Europeans. It is an inheritance still binding us together even amidst our transient yet serious difficulties.

It continues to inspire the vision of an enduring and widely shared European home. That vision still has many advocates, not least in Britain (and amongst members of 'Faith in Europe').

The exact final shape of that home remains unknown. What seems clear, however, is that its survival will depend on secure popular and, ultimately, spiritual foundations.

#### **Note**

This text was drafted by Revd Canon Professor Kenneth Medhurst, the Research Director of Faith in Europe, and approved by the Faith in Europe Committee as its joint response.