Summary of the Presentations and Discussions at the Faith in Europe Conference 'European Identity: Who Do We Think We Are?'

Philip Walters

The Presentations at the Conference

"It's your story that's being told": Europe our Autobiography
Alastair Hulbert, former Coordinator of the European Commission initiative 'A Soul for Europe: Ethics and Spirituality'

"Europe" in an Era of the Intensification of Identity
Richard Roberts, Honorary Professor in Residence in the Department of Religious Studies at the University of Stirling

Brits or Scots – Who Do You Think You Are?
John Purvis, Scottish MEP, 1979-1984 and 1999-2009

Response to John Purvis
Matthew Ross, Executive Secretary/ Brussels, CSC/CEC, seconded to CEC by four UK churches

Where Next?
Sheilagh Kesting, Secretary, Church of Scotland Ecumenical Relations; former Moderator

What is 'Identity'?

Two of the points we kept on making were that identity is not static but constantly developing, and that it is not single but multiple.

We recognised that identity is always a project in construction. Participants working with young people reported that the young people see it as important to find out where they've come from in order to know where they're going. One Scottish participant said he felt very strongly Scottish, and that this was a necessary precondition for a feeling of belonging to anything else.

In his presentation Matthew Ross surveyed the history of the political relations between Scotland and England. He observed that countries have become independent from others throughout history and that there is no reason to think they will stop doing so. He raised the question: Do we need a political structure to embody and/or protect our identity? He observed that in Scotland enthusiasm for the EU is often a cloak for something else – mainly a desire to escape control from London.

Do we in fact ever notice anything about our (national) identity until someone else points it out? The formation of identity is also done through interaction with others. The sociologist Jürgen Habermas suggests the theory of 'communicative action' to promote interaction among the nations of Europe while also preserving their distinctiveness.

One participant spoke about 'European Citizenship', which is a legal status with various rights and obligations attached. The very existence of this category creates exclusion, particularly amongst immigrants to the EU, and hence it is potentially divisive. However, her discussions with her students on this subject had moved on from discussion of problems to discussion of the rights and duties of citizenship. Her view was that EU citizenship was a category with the potential to inspire people with aspiration, and hence had a moral dimension.

We talked about the tension between the reality of complexity on the one hand and the drive to simplicity and constant cries for simplification on the other. The constraints of the present make it difficult for us to hold on to more than one identity at a time. Nevertheless, during the conference we had become conscious of identity differences *within* Britain as much as of differences in Europe as a whole. Our little identities within the larger Europe run very deep. Part of the challenge of Europe is perceiving these within a larger whole. John Purvis asked participants whether they felt they were citizens of the world, or of the EU, or of particular countries, or of regions, or of their local area; most felt two or more. 'Reconciled in Diversity' was to be the motto of the Constitutional Treaty, and we regretted that this had been abandoned, particularly as it echoed the ecumenical call of the 1990s, in the Conference of European Churches (CEC) and elsewhere.

Another theme connected with identity was that of language, which came up again and again. In 2004 ten new languages were added to the EU; while adding to the complexity of communication this paradoxically made the EU more 'European'. We discussed whether the diversity of language, an essential feature of Europe (as opposed, say, to the USA) was a cultural resource or a barrier to the formation of a European identity. (Or both at once.) We talked about the challenge of making our citizens bilingual or trilingual, which would be a good thing; and also discussed the need to recognise and nurture minority languages as a vehicle for, and outward sign of, concern for ethnic and social minorities and their rights. One test of a democracy is how it looks after minorities. One participant had reason to think that the EU was deprioritising minority languages. In his view everyone in the EU should have the right to primary education in their mother tongue. It was very important that the EU continue to use its variety of languages, which will be a counter to 'Globish', the simplified form of American English which is increasingly the lingua franca of the globalising world.

In his introductory presentation, his commentary on a wealth of visual material (art, architecture, maps), Alastair Hulbert had shown us Europe in all its diversity and had spoken of his hope for a time when Italians would speak without difficulty and spontaneously of 'our Bruges', Germans of 'our Stockholm', French of 'our Kraków'. A central question remained unresolved in our discussions: is there some 'European' identity towards which we in the EU should aspire; or is 'European identity' essentially a complex of local/regional/national identities? And if it is the latter, is this a cause for regret or for rejoicing?

The Context

As the context for the theme of the conference, one of the recurrent issues in presentations and discussion was the relationship between the responsible individual and the structures of the European Union as they are continuing to develop in a globalising world.

Richard Roberts saw the move from the Constitution to the Lisbon Treaty as a move away from the idea of getting populations behind consensus about the identity of Europe and towards the idea that Europe should be 'managed'. The Lisbon Treaty lacks the inspirational preamble of the rejected Constitution. Richard saw 'managerialism' as a pervasive ill in the postmodern context, affecting all areas of life including education. A charismatic figure such as Tony Blair would be a suitable President of the EU in its present form, but he had nothing in common with the convinced Catholics who lay behind the founding of the EEC. John Purvis said that in 1979, when he had first been elected an MEP, the task of the EU was still to deal with the problems left over from the Second World War, but that this had now changed. One participant said that her experience with work with young people had shown her that a new discourse was needed. The idealistic impetus behind the founding of the European Union had been overcoming the legacy of the Second World War; but for young people today the Second World War is as distant as the Boer War is for us.

In the various discussions on Richard's presentation we recognised the pervasiveness of the 'managerialist' model he described, inter alia in the churches with their increasing bureaucratisation. We noted the countercultural role of managerialism, and some argued that the managerial approach was intrinsically unchristian in that it worked against individuality while at the same time eroding trust.

We identified the context of managerialism as the globalising economy. Alastair Hulbert pointed out that just as in the eighteenth century 'Enlightenment' had been seen as a the ideal, a concept for general application throughout the world, so had 'Development' in the twentieth century. He noted the general assumption that 'There Is No Alternative (TINA) to the dominant economic and technological ideology of the age', and posed as his question for discussion groups 'How are we to insinuate doubt (counter-culture) about this model in the mind of the citizen?' One group noted that after 9/11 people started asking 'What have we done wrong?' but that this question was suppressed by the authorities. The same was now happening with the global financial crisis. So what kind of catastrophe will be necessary to act as a wake-up call? Another group noted that the market needs to be maintained, otherwise individuals have no choice, but it needs to be controlled and made socially responsible.

Groups noted that society was increasingly divided into, on the one hand, economic and managerial elites, and, on the other hand, groups who wouldn't want to join them. This obviously raised serious questions about the possibility of the formation of identity. Triumph is a tragedy for society: what do you do when you've won, and what happens in a society where everything is looked after? Richard Roberts noted the creeping phenomenon of 'anomie', recognised by Emile Durkheim: the individual's lack of an internalised sense of law. A set of practices has supplanted ideology in the current age. Marketised spirituality offers tools for survival or doing well, rather than offering truth, as traditional religions purport to do.

Richard Roberts lamented the elimination of trust and its replacement with the rule-book. The capacity of individuals to carry responsibility was being undermined. Groups identified the pernicious nature of the idea that we are responsible to a rule-book rather than to a person. The appeal to a rule-book is 'I did what was expected of me'. It is the system that expects this. In this context one participant drew attention to the importance of the concept of 'subsidiarity', derived from Catholic social doctrine and endorsed by the EU as the best

model of governance : the need to make sure that issues are dealt with at the most appropriate level.

In his presentation John Purvis, speaking from his experience as an MEP, noted the increasing role of the media, for good or ill, in the globalising world. He thought that the role of the churches in the EU - former, potential and actual (the latter less than it should be) - was being made ever harder by the burgeoning of larger systems of communication. In this context, we noted that, paradoxically, some individual still needs to be held responsible for what goes wrong: scapegoating is to a large extent a result of the demands of the media, who want a person for a story.

Richard Roberts said that Durkheim had thought that societies go through periods of effervescent change when something new is born. Richard noted a deep suspicion of this in the modern world. He said that Jürgen Habermas argues for a 'cool' legitimisation of social structures, perceiving the dangers of 'effervescence', for example in the former Yugoslavia. Why has a sociologist like Habermas become concerned with the identity of Europe? Because one of the issues motivating him was how to save Germany from slipping back into Nazism or going over to Communism. In Richard's view Habermas de facto provides sociological input into what is essentially a theory of public relations: we can't risk effervescence, or vigorous and unpredictable social participation; everything has to be organised from outside in a managerial way. Richard lamented the fact that there seems to be no place in today's world for 'hot' or even 'warm' legitimisation. The most promising candidate for such a rallying-cry seemed to be ecology; concern for saving the planet was the only viable form of 'hot' legitimisation. Here he looked to 'shamanism', or using his preferred term, to 'the shamano-ritual complex' and its connection with the environment, as a starting point for reflection.

Richard argued that society today could more profitably be interrogated anthropologically than sociologically. We should pay attention, for example, to certain so-called 'undeveloped' societies which are capable of looking after their members while still maintaining order. Sociology has evolved in such a way that it is effectively the handmaid to the development of global capitalism.

Where is Religion in All This?

Self-Defensive Churches

At various points in our discussions participants asked 'where is the theological perspective on this question of identity?' We had sociological, anthropological, linguistic, cultural perspectives... But our body was called 'Faith in Europe'!

We wondered whether religion in Europe today was too self-defensive and not in fact capable of rising to the challenges. Matthew Ross' question for the discussion groups was 'Christianity, ethnicity and nationality: do they make dangerous bedfellows?' We noted a tendency towards protectionism. John Purvis said that the churches in Scotland had been supporters of the European project right from the start, but Sheilagh Kesting identified the problem of problem of growing conservatism in those same churches. We discussed the danger that churches are becoming too concerned for their own survival in a secular world to look outwards and become involved in universal human solidarity.

Do We Need to Cast off Religion?

And so we came to a crucial question, presented explicitly by Richard Roberts in his question for the discussion groups: 'Can Europe ever escape its conflictual and aggressive past and present without first abandoning – or transforming – its religious identities?'

The answer from the groups was resoundingly to reaffirm the potential of religion. The direction religion takes often depends on historical circumstances. It was important that churches throughout Europe were formally endorsing the European project.

Specifically, the groups identified the potential of religion to establish peace through reconciliation. Participants talked about a range of encouraging examples of what was being achieved: recent discussion in Ukraine on the Holocaust, until recently a taboo subject there; the Letter to the Pope from Muslim bodies; the Pope John Paul II centre for young people in Loreto; the anti-poverty organisation Faith in Community Scotland; other examples of conferences and workshops involving young people. One potentially fruitful phenomenon in the debate with secularism is the 'theological turn' among former secular or even Marxist philosophers such as Terry Eagleton, who are now recognising the (positive) role of religion in history.

These concrete examples were a timely reminder to us that we shouldn't miss the green shoots when looking at the forest as a whole. And in all this we took note of the fact that the self-defensiveness of the churches is very much a Western European phenomenon and that the picture is quite different not only in the rest of the world but also in parts of postcommunist Central and Eastern Europe which have recently become part of the EU.

Religion Needs to be Universal

One of the concrete examples was provided by Matthew Ross. He had brought together a group of people from the former Yugoslavia and other countries to talk about conflict management. An important outcome was that while all the participants started by claiming that their situation was unique, after discussion all kinds of common uniting factors emerged.

People have conflicting memories of the same events, and it is therapeutic to get to a commonly agreed truth. We discussed the need for religion to remove boundaries. If all churches and other faith bodies could speak about values common to all humanity, questions about identity would fall naturally into place. Earlier we had talked about remedying the 'democratic deficit' in Europe by promoting the evolution of cross-border 'public space', with transnational interpenetration rather than supranational unity imposed from above. Sport and its reporting was an example; another area of potential for the future was concern for the environment. Environmentalism was building bridges. Global ecology and universal human solidarity go together. The EU needs to look outwards, and here religions can help.

Religion is the natural medium for the link between microcosm and macrocosm. For example, frugality is a Christian virtue at the individual level, and it was the churches which started up discussion on the global environment. Religious groups can play a positive role, both in speaking for minorities and in addressing global(ising) issues.

In their answer to the question posed by Matthew Ross, the groups recognised the danger he identified: as one participant quoted from the CEC Sibiu Assembly, 'if your god is the god of your land, your land becomes your god'. But while we need to beware of unholy alliances, we need to look for positive allegiances. There is a constant struggle in religions between chauvinist tendencies and the countervailing tendency to extend boundaries. We noted that in the EU religion is welcome formally only if it is inclusive.

The Prophetic Challenge

We identified a central challenge: how do we get beyond abstract academic discussion to a place where all this engages with the citizen? In the words of Richard Roberts, 'nostalgia won't work'. We discussed the fact that churches are in a dead end if they seek to cling to their own institutional past. We recognised the restricting nature of a tendency to concentrate on religious institutions and structures. What about all the people today who say they are Christians but don't even notice what denomination they belong to? Alastair asked: 'Where is the prophetic voice of the churches?' In his five years as warden of Scottish Churches House the powers that be had never discussed the programme, just how to raise money.

Perhaps this perspective explained why we had touched so little on (traditional) theology. One participant, asking where the prophetic voices were to be found, said that she found them most among artists, particularly where ecological matters were concerned. Alastair Hulbert, who had reminded us of the myth of Europa, raised the question of the potential of myths today, and whether the contributions of the churches can indeed be real if they are not mythic. Richard Roberts argued that if the churches are going to survive as useful entities they are going to have to relearn how to effect transformational ritual. One participant argued that Terry Eagleton was 'on the way towards Damascus' and that the philosopher Slavoj Žižek was 'fascinated by the emancipatory potential of Christ'. Christianity was a journey: 'I am the way'. One participant regretted that we hadn't had anyone at the conference bringing a perspective from Eastern Orthodoxy, because the Orthodox tradition is impelled by the eschaton, a dimension which is real for a Christian, but which is by definition the unknown. The Orthodox churches are also deeply concerned with environmental issues.

The Outcome of the Conference

One participant, who was new to Faith in Europe, and also sceptical about the European Union, spoke up critically. She said that if Faith in Europe were to make an impact it would need to have an idea about how it was going to respond practically to the issues of the day. She had seen no sign of this.

To be fair, the title of the conference had been 'Who Do We Think We Are?' rather than 'What Can We Do?' Nevertheless, it seems to me that in our discussion we moved away from the former to the latter. Perhaps the turning-point was our perception, noted earlier, that if all churches and other faith bodies could speak about values common to all humanity, questions about identity would fall naturally into place: that identity comes through commitment and action and not vice versa.

It also seems to me that we identified various areas for future action and development.

Matthew Ross noted that the Lisbon Treaty places on a legal footing the obligation for the EU to be in constant dialogue with churches and other faith communities. Religion is thus specifically called upon henceforth to be in critical solidarity with the structures of the European Union. Churches and other faith communities need to work out together what they will contribute to this discussion.

During the conference we identified many specific projects, conferences, workshops and other initiatives which are bearing fruit at local level. A specific task for faith bodies would be to investigate, through dialogue with the EU institutions, how such successful initiatives could be replicated more widely within the countries of the EU.

In these discussions we should consistently bear in mind the need always to set the EU within the context of its world-wide responsibilities.

Specifically, a major area which is of global concern, and which can also rally idealists as did the need to overcome the legacy of the Second World War, is the environment.

We also need to be alive to the way in which different areas of concern affect each other, and to look for links between issues, and to the potential of interdisciplinary approaches, for example the interplay between the environment and employment.

And to further all this, we need to promote alliances for concern and action, including religious but also secular agencies. Faith in Community Scotland, for example, is ecumenical and interfaith and is also allied with other single-issue action organisations.

There is a constant task for faith bodies in the UK to overcome apathy and scepticism about the EU at local level. We need to go back to our own parishes and equivalent faith communities and try to stimulate awareness and debate.

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