Addressing the EU's Crisis of Purpose in the Face of Declining Legitimacy and Rising National Populism

In the light of Brexit and numerous other internal and external challenges to its very *raison d'être*, the EU must more clearly articulate its distinctive political identity and purposes. If it fails to do this, its long-term legitimacy, even existence, will be imperilled.

I say this as an unrepentant British Remainer deeply concerned about the future of the EU, whether or not the UK rejoins (I sincerely hope it does, though the prospect currently seems very distant). In the meantime, the UK must urgently recommit to engaging with the EU constructively; the current direction of policy is myopic, corrosive and self-defeating. But as we look beyond these present discontents, we should remind ourselves that the UK remains a fully European nation with much to offer to the future of the continent, albeit for now from the diminished platform of a third country absent from the EU's most powerful tables. Even as an outsider, it could and should seek to contribute to the EU's own clarification of its purpose, if only because – to adapt the words of an ancient Hebrew prophet – 'in the EU's welfare, it will find its own welfare' (Jeremiah 29:7).

Brexit underlines the existential crisis facing the EU because it is has made believable among many discontented European publics that a nation-state could deliberately and (more or less) democratically repudiate the sixty-year European Project. Even though no other member state is imminently threatened with their own version of Brexit, many of the large minorities of EU-wide voters alienated from a seemingly remote and unresponsive EU are venting their anger by supporting populist, xenophobic and authoritarian political movements that are hostile to the EU and deeply corrosive of constitutional democracy.

It needs to be acknowledged that at least some of the perceived grievances of these voters – sustained economic deprivation and social exclusion due to globalisation; the experience of threat to cultural identities in the face of rapid, large-scale migration; a widespread sense of political impotence – are genuine and cry out for effective responses. Those tasks fall, of course, first to the relevant national (and sub-national) governments. The EU can

play only a limited, indirect and inevitably time-lagged role in responding to these sources of discontent. Yet while the EU is not primarily to blame for such domestic conditions, it will continue to be a target of much voter resentment.

In response to these are other challenges, it will not be enough for the EU merely to streamline and coordinate its own internal decision procedures (as is already occurring). For the sake of its future, it must bend every effort to reclaim – perhaps for many, claim for the first time – its popular legitimacy. That task will be much longer and more onerous than adjusting its institutional machinery. The Conference on the Future of Europe must succeed in decisively advancing that task.

To better define the 'European Project', the EU needs to come up with a lucid and compelling answer to the question of its central purposes. These are first of all political, not cultural, purposes. Elite political institutions cannot themselves directly create the supporting common European political culture that the EU undoubtedly depends on. That must be generated from other sources in national and European civil societies that are much better equipped for the task: religious communities, educational institutions, trades unions, the media, cultural associations and more.

But nor should the EU's central purposes be framed in a narrowly economic way, as was so during the intensive period of Single Market integration in the 1990s and 2000s. The warning issued already in 2004 by a wise group of senior European figures document in the document _The Spiritual and Cultural Dimension of Europe_, still applies:

> Economic integration simply does not, of itself, lead to political integration because markets cannot produce a politically resilient solidarity. Solidarity – a genuine sense of civic community – is vital because the competition that dominates the marketplace gives rise to powerful centrifugal forces. Markets may create the economic basis of a polity and are thereby an indispensable condition of its political constitution. But they cannot on their own produce political integration and provide a constitutive infrastructure for the Union.

Brexit was one piece of confirming evidence: it has rightly been dubbed a triumph of 'identity over economics'.

Attempts to spell out a larger vision for the purpose of the EU are beginning to appear. For example, in 2016, the *Guardian* proposed 'social justice' as the guiding purpose that could
'relaunch' the EU. But while it lent its support behind a number of worthy individual political goals, it did not spell out a coherent account of a larger political vision that could alone give substantive meaning to such an aspiration. Here lies a strategic opportunity for European churches. Churches (perhaps even British ones!) could contribute to this task by drawing on their longstanding traditions of political theology, including both Christian Democracy and wider Christian contributions to other Europe-wide political movements. Among the central commitments of these strands of Christian social and political theology have been the following:

- the dignity of the person and the rights flowing from that dignity;
- norms of social solidarity, cooperation, reciprocity;
- the diversity of communities and institutions required for the promotion of dignity and solidarity (families, trades unions, cultural associations and more);
- the necessity of a robust realm of free and self-governing civil society institutions;
- the need to protect public convictional pluralism against both theocratic and secularist tendencies;
- the need for a dynamic market sector, yet one framed so as to promote prosperity, equality and ecological responsibility;
- constitutional democracy, popular participation, and accountable, limited government.

These ideas have been fleshed out in a series of key principles directly relevant to the purposes of political institutions. The principle of *subsidiarity* is more than a call for decentralisation, and requires the protection and empowering of the energies of civil society, to forestall bureaucratic statism or excessive individualism. The principle of the

common good requires a social architecture conducive to multi-sided human flourishing, promoted within its proper sphere by the state. The principle of *justice* is as a complex network of just public conditions protecting and promoting the common good, to which, again, the state makes a unique contribution.

In such a vision, the special purpose of political institutions at the *national* level has been understood as enable the promotion of the common good and public justice, while at the same time respecting the roles of persons and civil society institutions. But the same applies at the *transnational* level, albeit qualified according to scale and capacity. Thus, the purpose of a body like the EU is to enable justice and the common good at a Europe-wide level (and beyond). It is, however, a serious challenge to make this persuasive today in the face of widespread scepticism about the EU's perceived purposes and the record of its actual failures. It is also far from easy to get EU actors and institutions, preoccupied as they are with a constant barrage of complex technical, bureaucratic managerial and crisis-management challenges, to give sustained attention to redefining the larger purposes of all this feverish activity. It will require, for example, patiently restating the case that many of the demands of justice and the common good now routinely transgress national territories and require transnational political action – as seen in border-defying injustices and threats such as terrorism, ecological crisis, mass migration, structural inequality, or regional and global nationalisms. To make that persuasive to sceptical publics, it should not be simply taken for granted that every demand for greater transnationalism is inherently valid. For any tier of political authority, each extension of authority to a higher tier needs specific and compelling justification. Yet over the years it appears that the EU has frequently not sought this or, if it has, not communicated it effectively to EU publics; and national governments have often scarcely helped. But the EU needs to come up with compelling justifications for the existing distribution of governmental functions between it and its member states, and show that it is genuinely open not only to further upwards transfers but also ready to concede downward transfers back to national governments where the criterion of subsidiarity has not been met. The eventual outcome will not be lock-step unanimous movement towards a federal EU (and the

phrase 'multi-speed Europe' in unhelpful here, as it gives the impression that there is a clear single destination but different rates of progress towards it among member states). Yet, in face of the most pressing demands of justice and the common good such as those listed, greater integration will sometimes be demanded.

The churches may be well-placed and well-resourced to help to that end, and some are already busy working for it. A Christian social and political vision, originally birthed in the nation-state, needs again to be 'scaled up' to the European level in a new statement of the potential of the EU to make a decisive contribution to the European political common good. As Rowan Williams put it in 2016:

> 'Europe' has been its own worst enemy in the last couple of decades. The Union has failed to articulate a clear moral and political vision for itself ... If 'Europe' means to a lot of British people only a mixture of migrant workforces and incomprehensible bureaucracy ... it is no wonder that it commands limited loyalty. But ... the vision behind the EU is the intensely moral conviction that naked national competition, impregnable borders, clashing jurisdictions and mutually suspicious cultures have to be a thing of the past if we are interested in a justice and social well-being that is more than local ... The Union exists because of a recognition – more deeply grounded in Christian theology than most are comfortable acknowledging – that constructive interdependence is a consequence of certain convictions about human dignity and freedom. And if this is so, a just and sustainable world is one in which both global empires and endlessly quarrelling 'absolute' sovereign units are things of the past.

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