

Faith in Europe – what's been said so far

Richard Seeböhm

This is a picture of the past of Europe which shows us all as neighbours



Our Faith on Europe group has had the future of Europe as a continuing issue for year after year, so we aren't approaching it from scratch. But we are approaching it with our own background of religious teaching – basically, interdenominational Christianity, but welcoming insights from our other faith partners.

The findings I want to present now are things that we want to see happen, not just reflections and criticisms. Some of them point to actual changes in practice. In other cases, we call for a change in attitude or perception.

The European Commission has set out a check list of topics that contributors to the Conference might focus on. These are:

- Building a healthy continent
- The fight against climate change and environmental challenges
- An economy that works for people
- Social fairness
- Equality and intergenerational solidarity
- Europe's digital transformation

- Migration challenges
- Security
- The EU's role in the world
- The Union's democratic foundations and how to strengthen the democratic processes governing the European Union

We can't cherry pick any one of these and ignore the others. Our own approach has been given shape by our Research Director, Rev Professor Ken Medhurst. Our list starts with

Service

This is one of the perception points. The point of having a European Union is to serve the member states, to meet needs that they collectively agree are best handled collectively. The national governments deliberate in the Council of Ministers. The EU is also a servant of its populations or voting publics whose views are expressed in the Parliament. Furthermore, the Commission is best seen as the servant of the member states. We hope that this is a helpful concept that can stand on its own feet. We hope that our faith communities can be seen as offering a service within the EU under Article 17 of the Treaty on the Functioning of the EU which invites them to take part in an 'open, transparent and regular dialogue' with 'the Union'. I am personally of course left with the question, who exactly takes part on each side of the dialogue. We can reasonably claim that the EU actually provides a service to the wider Europe and indeed to the wider world. For example its standards of design and safety save them from having to invent these. And the EU's standards of the rule of law and integrity of conduct are (at least in intention) helpful as criteria for the governance of other nations – even if they see fit to differ. Perhaps all that the European countries need are institutions dedicated to their service, but there is more to be said before we get there. Firstly there is

Solidarity.

An underlying principle of the EU is that what is done within its competences is for the common good. The common good, translated into faith terms, is the requirement to love your neighbour. How this is manifested depends on having common values of what love requires of you. There are mixed views on where loyalties should lie – is this to all humanity or more to one's perceived or known neighbours. Our plea is not to abandon the more local but to widen it as well. This doesn't mean a one size fits all approach. The diversity of cultures and histories within the EU – and among the closer of its neighbours – makes the publicised fear of creating a unitary superstate – a sheer phantasy.

The coherence of the EU (more of that later on) makes us think of

democracy generally. The EU Council of Ministers can only be a coalition. Party politics as a priority – keeping an eye open for electoral consequences – may apply to some heads of state at times but it does not dominate decisions at the EU level. Some member states have a range of parties such that they can only form a stable administration by sharing power amongst several of them. Others have had two strong parties alternating in majority from time to time. What concerns us is the sight of a single dominant party or authoritarian leader taking steps to marginalise all opposition, often with a populist political approach. We are relieved that the EU is countering such developments in Eastern Europe. We hope we can still say that Europe can serve as a model for the wider world.



This is a picture of the European Parliament's hemicycle in which all shades of political opinion can be deployed with even-handed fairness.

One particular thing we hope for is that proportional representation will find a place in the electorates that don't now have it. We recognise that this is a hard call for political parties whose aim is to be entrenched in power.

When you widen the solidarity idea you come into the field of human

rights. Groups can tighten their hold on their members by giving them an outside group to belittle or even hate. This is the essence of political populism. If you demonise a minority amongst you, you undermine everything the EU and our faith communities stand for. I very much hope that other contributors to the Conference have come forward with more practical steps to counteract this. Quite apart from other human rights issues, We are not alone in insisting that gender and ethnicity awareness should be built into and effective in all aspects of public, business, and indeed private life. The EU Charter of Human Rights and the Council of Europe's Convention on Human Rights (and indeed its less known Social Charter) seem now to be faced with challenges by populist and totalitarian political activists. We hope that the Conference will resist vehemently pressures to abandon or downplay these functions. We also urge attention and respect (and recommend more funding) for the Organisation for Security and Cooperation in Europe (OSCE). This like the Council of Europe has a Parliamentary Assembly which we in the civil society sector ought to cherish. You can see its range of functions below.

ARMS CONTROL

BORDER MANAGEMENT

COMBATING HUMAN TRAFFICKING

COUNTERING TERRORISM

CONFLICT PREVENTION AND RESOLUTION

CYBER/ICT SECURITY

DEMOCRATIZATION

ECONOMIC ACTIVITIES

EDUCATION

ELECTIONS

ENVIRONMENTAL ACTIVITIES

GENDER EQUALITY

GOOD GOVERNANCE

HUMAN RIGHTS

To go back to our theme, one place where we need solidarity is in the matter of refugees and asylum seekers. Most of us live well in Europe, and this must appeal to those whose lives are marginal elsewhere – from the calamity of war to the ruin of a habitat, to the tyranny of a maladministered state, through to sheer lack of opportunity. The long term answer, which we Europeans should treat as seriously as the environmental crisis, is to make life worth living in all the countries of origin – and this need not and must not have a taint of neo-colonialism. We say, and it is easy enough to do so, is that there is that of God in each of us. But what that translates to is the motto I had when I worked at

QCEA in Brussels: no one is of no account. It is easier to welcome a single stranger than a trafficked horde. Under the solidarity heading, we hope the EU will get its act together, recognising that some member states are more in the (almost literal) firing line than others, and that it isn't fair when non-EU nations can pass the buck to the EU. If we had clear policy proposals we would offer them, but we can't. We hope and expect that other contributors to the Conference will address this urgent matter. But the UK could solve its manpower problems by letting immigrants work.

Subsidiarity

Is next on our list. This is a matter of not trying to micromanage matters that people further down a management tree can decide upon, without damaging the overall interest of their institution – ranging from the EU to the branch of a shop. The European Commission has a 'REFIT' programme trying return freedom of action to member states on selected product and other regulations. Member states should resist the temptation to undermine process – indeed Brexit is an opportunity! We see the encouragement of civil society as a feature of daily life that needs protection in states with populist or authoritarian administrations. Churches, chapels, mosques and synagogues, are part of civil society, but so are sports clubs, debating societies, litter pickers, and pubs or bars.

Freedom of religion and belief comes under this heading. We hope the OSCE will rejuvenate its under resourced programme for this. (In my screen list it was subsumed under human rights.) The believers in some faith communities reckon that all who don't follow them are mistaken and perhaps faced with existential risk. But when in some regimes we see penal laws or outright force applied to impose religious uniformity, we for our part insist that humans have a capacity for diversity which no teaching can ultimately extinguish.

There's something that follows on from freedom of worship, which comes under our next heading which is

Stewardship

We would like to see respect and protection for places of worship made a concern for all communities and authorities. But that isn't all there is to stewardship. Ultimately stewardship should mean the upholding of values in public, private and commercial life. For us, our values come from our faith teachings, but we claim that they can justly claim to have universal validity. If the faiths had not preached love for your neighbour over the years, the Western Europe so-called Enlightenment would no doubt have done so. Where the principle gets lost, self-

interest will dominate. either as sheer greed or of the lust for power. In both cases there is a lack of a stewardship concern for neighbours (in both the wide and narrow sense. I have already put forward the need for democracy. Capitalism is often seen as the manifestation of these risks. Yet commerce is necessarily a medium for serving the public, identifying needs and meeting them. The market as a means of allocating and rewarding isn't intrinsically harmful. An economy based only on public sector salaried officials can keep an existing way of life afloat but it may not be so good at meeting new needs or abandoning services that are no longer relevant. But as of now we certainly see the excesses of the market, and urge the European and national administrations to maintain and support competition laws and regulatory systems – to say nothing of the combatting of fraud and criminality generally. We worry about the emergence of wealth beyond even any capacity to spend it, and note that the most extreme beneficiaries are the most active in shielding it from legitimate taxation. There is also the powers that media systems have developed and enhanced. In all aspects of public life where there is the exercise of power, it should be challenged when it can be shown to be unfair.

At this point I'd like to spend a moment to mention Pope Francis's recent encyclical, *Fratelli Tutti*, best translated as *Brothers and Sisters All*. It covers almost the same ground as our own findings which I am trying to report now. This includes particularly the neighbourliness aspect and the need for civility and kindness in public life. The Conference would do well to receive it as a submission to the debate.

Europe has been at the mercy of weaponry in the past. What I turn to now is

Security

I once heard Commission President Romano Prodi talk about a visit from a high level Chinese official, who said, 'It's amazing how you maintain the coherence of the European Union, especially without using the army.' The EU began as a peace project, to say never again to the antipathies and animosities that led to the two world wars. We do not see that a difference or dispute can be resolved by seeing who can kill enough combatants or destroy enough infrastructure for the other side to submit. Exhaustion followed by a countdown to vote will not cure the underlying grievance. Resentments can be generational or more. Blessed are the peacemakers is what we are told Jesus said.

The European Commission has a scantily financed capacity to engage in peace negotiations and peace monitoring (by unarmed observers). It has the European External Action Service with capacity to get people talking

and to coordinate competing aid programmes. But it also has a European Defence Fund to promote weapons research and to encourage the arms trade. It now has the so-called European Peace Facility which actually provides weapons and arms training to third party armed forces to (I apply inverted commas) empower partner countries. We see these well resourced policies as gravely mistaken. Weapons are perfectly likely to fall into the wrong hands. We contest the idea that the economic activity of arms sales is desirable for a peaceable community or indeed continent. We recall the achievement twenty years ago of banning the use of land mines. We see the use of armed drones as equally undesirable. It can't be long until terrorists start to deploy them. Nuclear weapons, thankfully, don't feature in EU discourse, much as they may among the nuclear armed member states. But we can't understand how anyone can decide to stockpile enough warheads to end the viability of human life on earth. Be all that as it may, external military threats don't just vanish. We have NATO. But they don't come out of the blue. All we can say is, please go on talking.

And at last we come to

Sustainability

The fate of the planet is such a vital concern for all of us that we could devote much of today's event to it. But other contributors to the Conference will almost certainly have addressed the issue in enormous, if sometimes contradictory detail. We can usefully add that the earth is the Lord's and all that therein is. There is that of God not only in humans but in all life forms. There isn't just climate change but food and farming, land management techniques, population movements, sustainability of lifestyles, and concern not just for us alive now but for our children and our children's children – look up Psalm 103 in the Bible.

Identity

perhaps deserves a final section. I have already hinted at 'us and them' attitudes that allow groups to be marginalised and wars to be fought. I have already spoken of human rights and the rule of law. I mentioned the OSCE. This has a High Commissioner for National Minorities in the nation states which arouse most of its concerns. In some European countries there has always been a dismissive attitude to the Roma communities and an undertow of anti-semitism. Islamophobia has understandably been prompted by the jihadist fringe of that faith. We have noted the cultural independence of individual nation states, both in the EU and outside it, but some countries have diverse sections within them which do not always sit easily with each other – as well as obvious minorities. The distinction sometimes may be a matter of religion, sometimes of economic patterns and past history. We hope that the

ministry which we exercise within our faith communities can recognise and mobilise all the capacities we have for reconciliation.

Finally, many of us taking part in this event may not be around for the climate change target dates. So we urge the Conference to look for the voices of youth – our successors who will have to live with our mistakes.

RHS 20.10.21

Richard Seebohm is a member of the Religious Society of Friends and of the Committee of Faith in Europe. He is a former representative of the Quaker Council for European Affairs in Brussels.