

THE EU DEBATE AND THE GOSPEL

Revd Dr Keith Clements, former General Secretary of the Conference of European Churches

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“Faith has no bearing on it – it’s a purely political matter.” So, in words to that effect, is what one minister wrote about the EU referendum recently. A very strange comment for a minister, or any thinking Christian, to make. For Christianity is about relationships, fundamentally and most deeply of course our relationship with God but equally with one another as human beings, from the most personal and intimate level to that of communities in their interaction with one another, and to the life of whole peoples and nations inhabiting the same earth. It’s about loving God and loving our neighbour: “He [God] has told you what is good; and what does the Lord require of you but to do justice, and to love kindness, and to walk humbly with your God” (Micah 6, v8). The fact that doing justice and loving kindness gets more complicated as we move from the personal to the larger social level and then to the international and global scales is no excuse for saying that faith has nothing to do with the “political” area. Either God is God over all our life, or not God at all.

The EU referendum debate is about relationships and that is why it is a matter on which we need to seek insights from our faith. The questions are those of how the United Kingdom is in future going to be a neighbour to the other 27 countries of the European Union – and equally, how we as individual citizens are going to be neighbours to the citizens of those countries. The fact that the question is about relationships has not been very apparent in the public debate so far. It has largely been about how prosperous we shall be, in or out; how “secure” we shall be, in or out; about how much “freedom” we shall have, in or out. If the arguments thus far have been frustrating and boring (and I think most of us, in honesty, would say they have been) it’s because they have largely been on the level of economics, with politicians and financial gurus bandying figures and predictions about, which leaves many of us feeling confused and distrustful to the point of suspecting no-one really knows what the consequences will be. Or, they have tossed around words like “freedom” and “sovereignty” with very little content or clarity of meaning attached to them. Christians will have no particular wisdom to offer if this is all that is at stake.

Here is where I will try to choose my words carefully. Christians, like everyone else, will have to make up their own minds how to vote on June 23rd but I do think that in faithfulness to the gospel we have certain values and concerns which we are called to place higher than others, and the highest value at the national and international level is that of promoting peace with justice among the peoples of the world. How we are going to live together with our neighbours, peaceably, fairly and creatively is the paramount concern prompted by the gospel, and the key issue in the referendum debate is whether we think staying in or coming out of the EU is the better of way of serving *that* concern. That of course still leaves room for sincerely held opinions to differ on whether the EU is in fact a serviceable instrument for God’s purpose of justice and peace in the world.

I would be less than honest if I did not declare myself a “remain” person but I also have to say that some of the reasons I hear for staying in do not measure up to the values I have just mentioned. Sheer self-interest, whether personal or national, is not an adequate guide, nor are economic issues (important though they are) what it is all about. After all, why does the EU exist in the first place? What is now the EU had its origins in the vision, strongly imbued with

Christian conviction, of people like Jean Monnet and Robert Schumann who after World War II wished for Europe to put an end to its nationalistic rivalries, especially those between France and Germany which three times since 1870 had resulted in increasingly devastating wars in Europe and, especially in 1939-45 had wrought havoc in the wider world too. Its comparatively modest beginnings in the 1950s as the European Coal and Steel Community was based on the idea of making the basic industries of France and Germany dependent on each other, not in competition with each other. From the start until now, therefore, it has been a venture in solidarity and reconciliation, not one of purely materialistic benefits. Its growth into what is now a community of 28 member states comprising a single market with the free movement of peoples, services and goods is, for all its faults and mistakes, a remarkable achievement like no other in a world beset by conflicts in so many areas. The challenges it now faces, especially with the refugee crisis, are indeed daunting but it does mean that, given the will, the countries involved do have the means of facing and solving them together.

The best of the EU's leaders have always recognised that to be true to itself the EU must continually retrieve and uphold its core founding values. In the early 1990s the then President of the EU Commission Jacques Delors several times addressed leaders of the churches and other faith communities with the call to help "give Europe a soul". He was significantly recognising the role that the churches were already playing in the European project. In fact from its inception the churches (including in Britain) have closely followed the development of the EU, never wholly uncritically but recognising that the development of a European community of peoples based on the principle of cooperation is vital for the peace not only of Europe but of the world. In Brussels the Conference of European Churches (CEC) which I was privileged to serve as general secretary for eight years has its Commission on Church and Society, which relates closely to the EU Commission, as to the other European institutions, for dialogue on every aspect of human welfare affected by EU policies and legislation. Indeed, the 2009 Treaty of Lisbon, which is now the effective constitution of the EU, commits the EU Commission to "regular, sustained and transparent dialogue" with the churches and faith communities. No single member state of the EU is so explicitly committed to attending to the churches within its own borders! For their part, in 2001 the European churches (including the British) adopted the Charta Oecumenica, a statement of basic aims and priorities for their common mission in Europe. A key paragraph runs:

The churches support an integration of the European continent. Without common values, unity cannot endure. We are convinced that the spiritual heritage of Christianity constitutes an empowering source of inspiration and enrichment for Europe. On the basis of our Christian faith, we work towards a humane, socially conscious Europe, in which human rights and the basic values of peace, justice, freedom, tolerance, participation and solidarity prevail. We likewise insist on the reverence for life, the value of marriage and the family, the preferential option for the poor, and in all things compassion.

It's possible to argue of course that the original peacebuilding role of the EU is now obsolete. But parts of Europe, especially in the East and the Balkans, are still fragile. During my time in CEC I saw how important an attraction was the EU for people in the Former Yugoslavia who were tired and sickened of the violence and conflicts there in the 1990s, and were looking for a different way of life from those former divisive nationalisms. This was especially true of younger people who looked with hope to eventual membership of the EU. In 1999, during the Kosovo conflict, I would never have dreamt that by 2007 the secretary for human rights at the CEC Church and Society office in Brussels would be a young Serbian

Orthodox woman – but so it has proved! The EU is a peacebuilder and as such has also a vital role to play in the wider world where the challenges are immense.

Approaching Jerusalem Jesus said, “If you had only recognised on this day the things that make for peace!” (Luke 19, v42) Come June 23rd, each of us will have exercised ourselves on all the arguments for staying in or coming out, both the ones that seem clear and those that are imponderable. We need to be clear that neither option of itself is going to make for an easier life. Whichever route the country chooses, life in our changing and uncertain world is going to be difficult in many respects. Let us at least weigh our thoughts against the claim of our ultimate commitment to love God and our neighbour and ask ourselves what is the best way to seek peace, and pursue it.