

Thinking Creatively about Europe

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Faith in Europe AGM, 9 July 2015

Text compiled from notes by Philip Walters and approved by Rowan Williams

I would like to focus on a number of aspects of European identity. Two obviously important constituents are the Classical heritages of Greece, to which we owe the idea of democracy, and of Rome, which has mainly meant organised militarism. However, it not enough to think of European identity just in terms of these two legacies. There is also the Christian legacy, and other legacies.

There were no weekends in Ancient Rome. This is not a frivolous point: weekends are markers for the passage of time in a religious context. With weekends we mark the reliving of the human story of the life of Jesus weekly and yearly; and this is tied in with the evolution of the European individual. Boris Pasternak said that Christ is a human life printed on the world. Nobody is exempted from this image: slaves, the poor, women. Yes, this legacy lies under the debris of patriarchy; but as Thomas Aquinas said, there are some areas of human life that are ineradicable.

Europe also has its Muslim and Jewish legacies. Christianity, Islam and Judaism are a family quarrel rather than a clash of civilisations. We need to remember that Medieval Catholic theology was crucially informed by influx from the Muslim and Jewish peripheries.

The mix of legacies means that Europe has had a history of at best conversation and at worst confrontation about authority: who should we listen to, who should we obey? In debate over the rights of state and church the insight persists that there are two schemes of reference, the political and the spiritual: they overlap but they are not the same. It is not necessary to go into detail about the differences between Eastern and Western Europe, or between Catholic and Protestant: the above generalisations hold equally for all of them. To take one example, John Calvin's ideas on the relationship between realms of power are more like those of Thomas Aquinas than they are like those of Martin Luther.

One of the problems we face today is the idea of the clash of civilisations, and the suggestion that one of those civilisations is Western democracy. This idea forgets the interactions throughout history which have created that very Western democracy. Without an understanding of history, the idea of the superiority of Western democracy seems to be self-evident. 'Over There' dwell peoples who do not know the self-evident benefits of democracy; and the reason usually given is that they are religious. One of the effects of modernity is strangely enough to drive people to radicalism. ISIS is an example of how the introduction of Western values in the form of confrontation leads to simplification of a heritage, in this case Islamic. There is no place for approaching any modern problems from a standpoint of triumphalism. What we can say is that a series of providential insights have been given within Europe which are to be shared with other parts of the world.

All this is relevant for a consideration of Britain and Europe. There is no way we can talk about British values which are opposed to European or indeed wider values. My fear is that if Britain steps back from Europe it will be stepping back from its own heritage. In Britain we have not done too badly in sharing with and learning from others. In talking in isolationist terms we run the risk of nailing our colours to a myth.

Questions and Answers

Q: What would White Van Man with a St George's Cross on his house think of what you have said?

A: He would say it was irrelevant because Britain is under threat. He is frightened; and this presents

a difficult calculation to politicians. The questions to ask him are what specifically are you frightened of, and why? By the way, St George was a Palestinian.

Q: Can any group be defined as 'the Other'?

A: All three Abrahamic religions claim that God has done one decisive thing, of which they are result, but at the same time all place great emphasis on the importance of diversity and debate. Eliminating the 'Other' is not the answer. We need to treat difference positively: this is the key to the world's wellbeing. Rabbi Jonathan Sachs in his latest book points out that the book of Genesis is full of stories about sibling rivalry, and how it keeps getting overcome, and the apparent winner becomes the actual loser, or servant.

Q: Does a Syrian want to get to Europe because he believes in our ideals?

A: Yes; but more than that: he challenges us to be true to our own ideals.

Q: How do we know what is 'providential insight' rather than just prejudice?

A: I used these words with caution, and I don't want to sound triumphalist. If people think something is a 'providential insight' they should be prepared to put it to the test and see if it passes.

Q: Is there anything we can do about religions which are not hierarchically organised? Who do we talk to?

A: There is no short answer to the question 'who is the leader', but this is not something for governments to intervene over.

Q: What do we do about the fact that there is still no acknowledgment from the Orthodox Church about its complicity in massacres such as Srebrenica?

A: A problem with the Balkans is that everyone has done bad things to everyone else. 'Competitive suffering' fuels conflicts the world over. I am very impressed by Donald Reeves and his Soul for Europe project in the Balkans, which is getting people of different communities to work together on reconstruction.

Q: Is the new-found ability to say sorry for past bad deeds making it easier, counterintuitively, to commit more bad deeds?

A: Saying sorry is meaningless if it doesn't involve reparation and/or restoration work. Here we can take a lesson from the Buddhist concept of karma, which means living with the consequences of your decisions.

Q: The idea that economics has its own laws and that the market is omnipotent and omniscient has become an idol. Does the current Greek crisis need a theological response, and if so, what should it be?

A: Economics is something human beings do, not the reverse. We have so often resigned our agency.

Q: In this context, I am shocked that all the debate in run-up to the referendum seems to be in economic terms; the only exception, sadly, is the discourse of UKIP.

A: I hope that the debate will be widened. It should be in terms of being held to our best selves and the ideals we claim to believe in.

Q: There is a contrast between the Christian Democratic origin of the European Union, when the debate was about values, and the current debate which is all about the market and the economy.

A: Yes, I agree. There was an extraordinarily creative period after the Second World War when religious values were articulated in human terms.

Q: What about markets? The market mechanism does raise people out of poverty. But Pope Francis seems to be taking an anti-market stance.

A: There is a difference between 'creating lively markets' and fostering a belief in 'the Market' as a fetish. I am not entirely in favour of state direction, and I am not an enemy of 'markets'; but what I