

Of Fish and Altars

Europe, the Churches and the Flourishing of our Culture

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ABSTRACT

European issues need to have a higher place on the agenda of the Church of England. Europe presents a common destiny, values and culture in which the churches are called to participate. Ecumenical exchange should reflect the cultural settings in which it takes place, otherwise the Christian contribution to political, social and economic realities will be limited. Approaches to federalism with their characteristic suspicions of centralised power mean all have to move and change if we are to discover fresh resources for shared living. We have important allies among the churches, politicians and peoples of Europe as we wrestle with matters of unity.

THE silence of the churches on the subject of Europe is disturbing if not deafening. A crucial debate is taking place in the heart of our culture about our future. It is being conducted in terms which run the risk of making the task of the church harder in the future. The presenting issues of beef, common currencies, federalism and social chapters are symptoms rather than the substance. We are in danger of allowing arguments about technicalities to obscure the deeper challenges in front of us all.

One of the people who has been persistently seeking to raise the level of debate is Vaclav Havel, that visionary and remarkable President of the Czech Republic. In a speech delivered in Aachen on May 15th 1996 and reported in full in the *New York Review of Books* he raises the question of what is meant by 'Europe'.

This Europe represents a common destiny, a common complex history, common values, and common culture and way of life. More than that, it is also, in a sense, a region characterised by particular forms of behaviour, a particular quality of will, a particular understanding of responsibility. As a consequence, the borders of this Europe may at times seem fuzzy or variable: it cannot be defined by looking at a school atlas or studying a list of members of the European Union or of countries that could join if they wish, such as Norway Switzerland, or Iceland. This is why any discussion of this... Europe is more difficult, and occurs less often. Yet this is precisely where all debates about Europe and its future should begin.¹

1 *New York Review of Books*, June 20th 1996

That is where the churches should enter the debate. This leads into the critical spiritual and ecclesiological matters which are inescapable to a responsible discussion about Europe. This is a matter for the hearts and minds and souls of the peoples of Europe. It is from this common sense of identity that the technical issues of politics and economic order must be resolved.

This debate needs to be informed by the experience of the churches. Some very important things have been taking place within the ecumenical movement. The Church of England has endorsed the Porvoo Agreement and so entered into full communion with our sister Churches of the Nordic Lutheran tradition. The Meissen Agreement has established deep bonds of fraternity with the Reformed tradition in Germany. In the European setting it seems that there are movements which emphasise the commonality of our Christian culture and offer a vision of a better and more united future. There is the sense that we belong together.

Yet again the leaders of the churches can sometimes be tempted to sound the wrong note. Rome can appear to pour cold water on hopes for unity with the Reformed traditions of the northern part of Europe. Whatever the difficulties, the church has to get behind the problems to the roots of our common life.

The significance of these things goes well beyond the immediate borders of the church and of the issues of church order. Christianity has played a long and deep role in the formation of both our national and our European culture. Divisions in Europe between peoples, cultures and religious traditions have left wounds which, when they have been allowed to fester, have contributed to war and bloodshed. Disharmony and the divided state of Christendom have weakened the foundations of a genuinely Christian culture. So the possibility of new and recovered bonds of love and commonality across the ecclesiastical divisions of Europe carry with them messages of hope and peace for all.

If what is being achieved between Anglican and Protestant traditions can move on to the larger ground of both Catholic and Orthodox traditions the significance for the unity of our diverse European culture is enormous. It can be seen that the current debate about the future shape of the European Union to a large measure parallels the struggle of the churches to develop a common life.

The political debate in Europe concerns both the internal nature of its unity and the extent of the boundaries of the union. This latter question has been brought to the surface in a particularly sharp form by the sudden collapse of the old corporatist Leninist order which had dominated the Eastern half of Europe since 1945.

We would be foolish, however, to think that the problems lie in the East and the solution in the West. The issue is not about the way Eastern Europe is integrated into the western experience. As we all know, if honesty is allowed its head, all is not well in Western Europe. We too struggle with building effective democratic societies which encourage responsible

citizenship. The unity of Europe can only be approached by each part learning from the other. Unity is gained not by the absorption of the East into the West but by a coming together born of the need each has of the other. The reconstruction of the economic and social life of the former Communist countries might help us tackle the inheritance of materialism and individualism which have sapped the moral strength of our societies. We too need to learn how to manage social change in ways which build rather than destroy community and culture. Western Europe knows the experience of alienated peoples and generations. Because the recognition and responding to these things is painful, involving our need to change, it can only be sustained by a deep sense of vision which undergirds the process.

When we talk the language of vision we are coming close to the language and experience to which the church ought to be witness. The ultimate vision of God, of heaven and of the heavenly city stirs the imagination and the will in ways which raise the expectations of all who take the business of community building with great seriousness. Making practical sense of the choices we face is not the same as making do with second best. Vision sets the technical issues of the economy, of social order and of political arrangements in a wider setting of human possibility. If that vision is lost or forgotten then the technical matters can collapse into new conflicts which destroy rather than build. Who may catch what fish in which waters becomes not a matter to be resolved as part of the business of constantly negotiating our common life but rather a source of strife and division which raises old enmities and destructive nationalistic forces.

These political matters have a ghostly resemblance to the ancient disputes in the church about who may celebrate what sacraments in which places. The witness of the church is hindered not so much by the existence of the disputes but by those moments when we try and avoid addressing them or in times when we use them for divisive and destructive purposes. The choice is between dealing with the issues of our common life with some sense of a unifying vision or of using present political squabbles to fuel short term and selfish objectives. Fish and altars belong together in this setting.

If we see it in these terms the way forward may come from a multitude of different places. We should not think that the church will set the pace. Sometimes the politicians will find themselves able to move the story on. At other times it will come from people in the arts or those who shape the economy. Sometimes the movement will come from the places of leadership at others from within communities. It requires continual imaginative thinking and considerable interpretative skills to discern the places of growth and movement. The significance of the kingdom of God can be discovered in many settings.

The second part of the discussion concerns the internal character of European unity. The first is concerned with the borders of Europe in the post-communist era. The second invites us to consider unity in the midst of diversity. This is at the heart of the debate about the meaning of federalism. It is also central to the European ecumenical journey.

The British perspective on federalism sees it as a threat to national identity and as a process by which European institutions gain increasing power at the expense of the nation states which formed the Union – a United States of Europe, mirroring the American experience of the power of the Union over the individual states which formed it. This anxiety is real and needs addressing. The point of unity is not to centralise power in a distant bureaucracy but to find a structure in which all accept the obligations of living together in peace with mutual justice. To say it like that is to lead into the European way of thinking about the meaning of federalism.

The continental approach to the meaning of federalism emphasises providing a common framework within which all may flourish in their diversity. We should not underestimate the horror on the continent of the imposition of an alien and uniform system of power and control. Twice in the twentieth century Europe has been devastated by such a quest. European institutions must be the servant of the vision and not its master. Hence the critical importance of the balance between strong central institutions designed to hold the vision and strong regional identity which preserves the diversity and flexibility of the culture. That has led to the importance of the principle of subsidiarity – doing at the local and regional level all things which can be done effectively there and only doing at the centre what cannot be done nearer to the local community.

There is a lot in common between the British and the continental approach to federalism. Both share a concern about unwarranted centralised power and both believe that the diversity of culture and decision making is an essential aspect of balancing power in a democratic system. We must, therefore, resist the Eurosceptic desire to take us away from this debate without denying that the agenda raised by such scepticism has some weight to it. The place to argue the meaning of this is from within a commitment to the European vision not from the isolation of being left outside it.

This discussion has important ecumenical dimensions. The reintegration of the church in Europe faces the same issue. Is it about the return to a centralised church order or will it take cultural diversity and the power of the churches of Europe seriously? Concepts of federalism and of subsidiarity have much to contribute to ecclesiological debate. We need a structure which speaks of unity and of common vision. If that is about vision then it must also be about affirmation of the variety and diversity of our spiritual history.

This means that all of us have to move and change if we are to discover fresh resources for shared living. We are where we are in our divided state in the Christian inheritance of Europe because we lost some of our links with the roots of our common life. That applies specifically to the churches as well as having a broader implication for the wider European debate. The desire, present in all Christian traditions, for the unity of the church brings us back to the sense of vision from which all good things arise. The God whom we have sought to serve in this culture and with this history is One. Because, in the Christian tradition, the vision of the one God is a journey of love shared in communion with God and with our neighbours, it offers hope to both the

church and the wider community of a unity which flourishes through diversity and development. It is not, therefore, open to any to approach these matters by demands for conformity or even gracious invitations to join 'us'. The only way forward has to be through the journey of mutual exploration. Travelling together is the way the vision is given practical substance.

The churches, politicians and peoples of Europe are, therefore, about the same business as they wrestle with matters of unity and shared life. A recognition of this might help the church to make a significant contribution to the future of Europe. In that respect we can see the work done by the Church of England with its sister Churches in northern Europe as a small but clear sign of hope.

European issues need to have a higher place on the agenda of the Church of England. A vital debate is taking place all around us. We are not without allies within and without the churches. A failure to exercise some responsibility in these matters might leave the field wide open for those strident voices who use the difficulties of the issues as a reason for trying to distance us from matters which will shape all our futures.

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