

Keeping Faith in the EU?

The Centre for Theology and Public Life (TRiPL), University of Winchester, 9 April 2016.

Why we need a proper debate on the EU

Jonathan Chaplin, Director, KLICE www.klice.co.uk

Writing in 2006 in a collection entitled *Religion in an Expanding Europe*, Peter Katzenstein concluded that “the core of secular Western Europe has preserved Christianity largely as glimmering embers that are no longer able to generate...much heat”.¹ Yet religion, he acknowledged, still continued to “lurk underneath the veneer of European secularization”.² Less than a decade later, Brussels-based political scientist Francois Foret opened his book *Religion and Politics in the European Union* by announcing that religion had “dramatically re-emerged within European politics”.³ Even when drafting the introduction to our edited book *God and the EU* just last summer Gary Wilton and I implied that Foret might have been overstating the point.⁴ If we were writing it now, in the wake of tumultuous events like the attacks in Paris and Brussels and the catastrophic refugee crisis with its unexpected religious dimension, I think we would have to agree with him. God is certainly back – at the very heart of the most secularized continent in the world.

Yet recognizing the influence of religious factors in political phenomena remains problematic for many political scientists and commentators. This is in part because many see it as methodologically difficult to identify independent cultural or ideational variables in multi-causal processes such as the origin, evolution and functioning of complex political institutions like the EU. But it is also in part because, as Katzenstein ventures, “A secular liberalism is deeply ingrained in the self-understanding of most Europeans and in the interpretations of most scholars of European politics”.⁵ That stance has in the past inhibited serious investigation of religious factors that are operative in the EU and that should form part of a wider explanatory account. Witness, for example, the serious neglect for many decades of Christian Democracy as an ideologically distinctive movement, as compared to the extensive treatment of other European political movements (such as Social Democracy, Liberalism and Conservatism), even though Christian Democracy was long the most electorally successful movement in Europe; that neglect is now being remedied. Indeed there

¹ T A Byrnes and P J Katzenstein, eds, *Religion in an Expanding Europe* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2006), 2.

² Byrnes and Katzenstein, *Religion in an Expanding Europe*, 33.

³ F Foret, *Religion and Politics in the European Union: The Secular Canopy* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2015), 1.

⁴ Jonathan Chaplin and Gary Wilton, eds, *God and the EU: Faith in the European Project* (London: Routledge, 2016).

⁵ Byrnes and Katzenstein, *Religion in an Expanding Europe*, 7.

is now a welcome broader revival of scholarly interest in religion as a genuinely explanatory factor in the EU's origins, evolution and practice. The literature is expanding substantially.⁶ For example, Brent Nelsen and James Guth, in their 2015 book *Religion and the Struggle for European Union*, successfully apply the notion of a “confessional culture” to the European political movements shaped by a universalist Catholicism and a nationalist Protestantism.⁷ They present the factor of confessional culture as one element in what would need to be a complex multi-factoral analysis of the obstacles in the way of constructing of a distinctive EU-wide political identity – an element which perhaps, casts light on why the UK now for the first time faces the serious prospect of Brexit.

So religion is certainly back in the life of the EU and is now registering its presence in academic debates about the EU. Now we need no reminder that religion is back as a twisted inspiration for violent and murderous deeds by extremist Islamist movements, presenting extremely difficult and complex challenges for national and EU institutions alike. Getting the policy responses to those challenges right will be crucial in the years to come.

But I want to focus on the positive contribution that religion, and Christianity in particular, might make to the debate about the EU. What follows is, I hope, informed by basic insights of Christian political theology, although I won't make those sources explicit because Gary Wilton and others will be doing that later on in the day. And I want to think about the contribution of faith not only with the horizon of the referendum in mind but well beyond it. For whatever the outcome, the UK is going to have to engage with EU institutions and policies for decades to come. Let me come clean and say at the outset that I am firmly in the ‘remain’ camp, and I admit that my account of the debate will inevitably reveal that tilt. Yet I hope it will raise issues that may resonate with people on all sides of the debate (and there are not just two).

I think many of us will agree that the quality, tone and focus of the UK debate about the EU has fallen far short of where it needs to be; indeed that's probably one reason why you're here today. The debate needs enriching from many sources, of which I hope Christian political thought will be one. The deficiency of the EU debate is in part simply a reflection of the narrow scope of British political debate in general, but it also reveals the seemingly studied refusal among those who shape public debate to engage seriously and consistently with European political issues. For example, even after 40 years of EU membership we in the UK still remain vastly more fascinated

⁶ See e.g., L N Leustean, ed., *Representing Religion in the European Union: Does God Matter?* (London: Routledge, 2013); L N Leustean and J T S Madeley, eds, *Religion, Politics and Law in the European Union* (London: Routledge, 2010); R McCrae, *Religion and the Public Order of the European Union* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2010); L Zucca, *A Secular Europe: Law and Religion in the European Constitutional Landscape* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2012).

⁷ B F Nelsen and J S Guth, *Religion and the Struggle for European Union: Confessional Cultures and the Limits of Integration* (Washington, DC: Georgetown University Press, 2015).

by American politics than European politics (we might, perhaps, be excused for being so just at the moment, although for the wrong reasons, like an appalled audience at a Victorian freak show). Turnout at European elections remains almost as low as at local elections. While there is today extensive and deep expertise in the academy about EU matters, little of it seems to shape the content or priorities of ordinary political and media discourse. Indeed more to the point, little of the vast experience of EU affairs many British politicians now inevitably have accumulated, on account of their regular participation in EU debates and processes at many levels, gets much airing in public debate.

Many factors are at work here, of course, but the result of our longstanding aversion to taking ‘Europe’ seriously is that we are now facing the most momentous constitutional debate Britain has known for decades, one with far-reaching implications for our destiny, without remotely adequate intellectual and discursive resources to do so effectively. And, to be honest, Christian political theologians have been part of this neglect.⁸ As far as I know there isn’t a single available academic monograph on the EU by a British political theologian – even 60 years after it was created.

This neglect of ‘Europe’ is at least part of the explanation of why the referendum debate is struggling to rise above the level of the net economic benefit of staying or leaving. That isn’t a trivial issue; and theologians and clerics must avoid affecting what, in the past, has been a rather lofty disinterest in or even disdain for wealth creation (but having the first ever economist in the see of Canterbury has clearly helped in this regard!). Certainly, Britain’s economic capacity is essential to whatever larger goals British governments or citizens wish to pursue, alone or in the EU. So if there were conclusive evidence that our economic performance would be substantially damaged by Brexit, or indeed by staying in, that would be a major material factor in the decision. But while I’m no economist, it seems to me that the outcome of this particular debate is going to be rather similar to that marking the debate about the Scottish referendum: in the public mind we’ll end up with a statistical stalemate, with neither side being able to deliver the knock-out blow proving that either outcome will cause drastic or sudden changes in our economic circumstances. (But economists speaking later in the day may take me to task on that judgment.)

It is true that the referendum debate is at times rising above economics. Yet when it does, it’s all too often still couched in the restrictive and insular language of the ‘British national interest’ – as if we knew exactly what we were talking about when we use that phrase; as if it were a self-justifying objective – a kind of argument-clincher; and as if British citizens could not be brought to

⁸ See <http://www.reimaginingeurope.co.uk/the-eu-and-the-culpable-silence-of-english-speaking-political-theology/>. See generally the Reimagining Europe blog hosted by the Church of England and Church of Scotland: <http://www.reimaginingeurope.co.uk/>

care about the wider interests of Europe at a time of multiple and serious crises, or indeed the interests of those of the wider world in which the EU is major global player and in which the UK could exercise significant leadership if it finally resolved its relationship with the EU. But most political leaders fear inviting British voters to raise their sights to those levels. They pass by opportunities to pose the question that Archbishop Justin Welby did pose recently in an important interview, namely, ‘how can Britain best continue to offer its distinctive services to Europe and the wider world?’⁹ The result is a mutually reinforcing shrinkage of horizons.

There is, however, at least one important exception to this pattern, and that is the debate about ‘sovereignty’. Some in the ‘remain’ camp try to dismiss this as a non-issue: ‘We’ve not *lost* sovereignty, only *pooled* it’, they soothingly intone. But this can sometimes verge on dishonesty. It is and always was abundantly clear that by joining the EU any member-state accepts significant restrictions on its capacity to make autonomous decisions in areas of policy where the EU has competence; and those areas have widened and deepened substantially since 1973 (in almost every case, it should be added, with the participation if not explicit consent of British ministers or MEPs). But by refusing to engage in this issue the ‘remain’ side does itself a disservice. For the debate about sovereignty provides an excellent opportunity to ask the fundamental question, *what is sovereignty actually for?*¹⁰ What is the purpose of an independent political authority? On that Christian political thought has had a great deal of value to say. As I read the Christian tradition (or at least those parts of it I find most creative), political authority exists not to passively register the stated preferences of voters, as if governments were mere markets, nor (obviously) to feed the interests of office-holders, but to advance the realisation of justice and the common good. The purpose of political authority is not to make us rich, nor to make us more competitive under a globalised regime of neo-liberal capitalism, nor to ensure that we have a seat at some global tables. Its purpose is not to make us virtuous, nor (more controversially) even to shore up our supposedly threatened cultural identity. Rather that purpose is to promote, through a wide variety of means, in law and policy, frameworks of justice, liberty, solidarity and peace in the public realm. This is the kind of language we need to hear more of in the EU debate.

If that is so, then we can begin to have a focused debate about what these principles actually mean for the 21st century UK and Europe, for issues such as: how to express economic solidarity across nations; what is a just and hospitable response to mass migration; how to combat continent-wide environmental degradation; and many more. The next question would then be whether such

⁹ See <https://www.politicshome.com/news/uk/home-affairs/house/72877/justin-welby-eu-debate-not-all-about-us-its-about-our-vision-world>

¹⁰ See <http://www.reimaginingeurope.co.uk/what-is-the-eu-for/>

principles can best be pursued by remaining within the huge sprawling transnational entity that has become the EU or, disillusioned at its failures and dysfunctionalities, which are indeed many, by walking away from it and working independently via ad hoc or treaty-based cooperation among other nation-states (and, of course, the EU itself, but now from a position outside it).

The answers to both those questions – what those suggested principles mean, and what institutional structures best advance them – are far from straightforward. They need patient, painstaking analysis; and, for Christians, careful theological reflection. For what it's worth my own view is that such principles today do compellingly mandate some kind of transnational political authority like the EU with the capacity to act comprehensively across all member-states; that if it didn't exist we'd be obliged to invent something like it; and that we will be much better placed to pursue these principles both within and beyond British national borders if we stay in the EU we've got. We need a political authority with a remit for justice and the common good across European public space. In some cases, such as the current refugee crisis, that might involve closer integration, possibly more centralisation – although I've never been a fan of the rather vacuous and potentially dangerous phrase, 'ever closer union'. In other cases it will involve a reassertion of subsidiarity, perhaps a restoration of national autonomy. But which of these it requires depends not on some absolute preference for one or the other but on what best delivers the principles in the circumstances of our times. It also depends critically on what the citizens of Europe can realistically be brought to support, and that means addressing the ongoing democratic deficit that leaves many European citizens today feeling at best indifferent to, or at worst alienated from or hostile to, EU institutions and values – as manifested in the upsurge of aggressively anti-EU parties across much of Europe.

The implication of this line of argument is that we should stay in the EU for the long haul, argue hard, and work patiently for a much, much better EU than we have at present – one which would be much more explicitly and consistently committed to pursuing the goals of justice, liberty, solidarity and peace in European public space, and much better organised to deliver them. We are talking about a generations-long project, which our grandchildren will still be working on and arguing about. That at least is my view but I fully accept that other people of faith might draw the opposite conclusion, and we shall quite rightly be hearing from some of them today.

Let me conclude by quoting Rowan Williams, from the Preface which he kindly agreed to write for our book *God and the EU* (while not at all presuming to speak for where Lord Williams might come down in the referendum debate itself):

'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.¹¹

Whether or not you agree that sentiments like those I have presented do in fact support remaining in the EU, I hope they at least highlight the kind of debate we still need to have if we are to make wise decisions on 23 June.

¹¹ Rowan Williams, ‘Preface’, in *God and the EU*, xv.