

A pro-EU reply to Michael Schluter's article 'Brexit Unless ...'

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Introduction

I read with great interest Dr Michael Schluter's piece 'Brexit unless... Three fundamental conditions for staying in the EU'. In particular, I appreciated the author's identification of five biblical principles to help frame the current EU referendum debate. While acknowledging the relevance of these principles, I would add that we are commanded as Christians over and beyond such principles to 'Love Our Neighbour' and I believe this should be the most important basis for our actions, also in our attitude as UK Christians towards the EU. Just as we should not live as individuals according to our self-interest, so as a nation we should not act simply according to narrow national interest.

This reply to Dr Schluter will explain why I disagree with his view that the EU significantly breaches the biblical principles he identifies (together with his implication that the UK itself somehow better respects them) and his proposal that the UK should therefore leave the EU unless it agrees to meet three conditions he puts forward. Dr Schluter begins his piece by calling for the UK to leave the EU on the basis that 'No one stays in a building which is on fire and in danger of collapsing unless there is some reasonable chance of rescuing others or preventing calamity'. While I agree that the EU is on fire, and that there is even a danger sometime in the future that it may collapse, I believe that the UK's leaving, more than any other factor, may ultimately lead to its collapse, for reasons I will briefly set out in this introductory section. This would have very negative consequences both for the UK and our European neighbours.

In my view, it is not an exaggeration to say that, from its founding in 1958 over the next half century, the EEC and then the EU achieved more in terms of peaceful cooperation between nations than had ever been achieved in world history before. It not only made a major contribution to peace and prosperity in Western Europe following the Second World War but also served as a lighthouse for the countries of Eastern Europe through the dark years of communism and has now given them a new home where they can also enjoy the same blessings of democracy, stability and relative prosperity as we do.

However, since 2008 three major crises have broken out which are shaking the foundations of the EU. Firstly, the global financial crisis, the biggest such crisis since the 1930s Great Depression, has shaken the foundations of the world's financial system. It should be remembered that not only the eurozone but also the UK financial system has been seriously threatened by the crisis and both the UK and the rest of Europe continue to struggle with it. Severe austerity measures are still being taken in the UK as elsewhere.

The second major crisis the EU is facing is the mass influx of refugees into Europe since 2015, largely as a result of the horrendous Syrian civil war. This represents the largest refugee movement in Europe since the Second World War. In contrast to the global financial crisis, the UK has been comparatively little directly affected by this new crisis. This is due both to its privileged island position but also its reluctance to show solidarity with the rest of the EU and take in refugees in proportion to its size and economic wealth. In other words, the UK has sought to confine this part of the fire to its neighbours' area of the EU house rather than helping them to put it out.

The third major crisis that the EU now faces is sadly caused by the UK itself. As David Miliband recently noted, for the UK to leave the EU would be an act of political arson and, indeed, a Brexit would greatly add to the fires caused by the other two crises. For other EU countries the desire for Brexit is incomprehensible, not only because it will seriously weaken both the UK and the rest of the EU but also,

more fundamentally, because it represents the UK turning its back on the family of European nations which make up the EU. How can the UK not only abandon its neighbours in a burning building but actually contribute to the fire? I would now like to look at each of the five biblical principles and argue that they point to a decision to remain in the EU rather than leave it.

Principle 1 – The identity of peoples and nation-states

Is the EU really undermining nation-states and national identity, including culture and language, as Dr Schluter suggests? On a simple level, I am always struck as I drive across 'borderless' Europe by the uniqueness and individual natural and architectural beauty of each country. I do not think the EU has done anything to reduce this. On the contrary, it has actually in some ways promoted the development of national features. For example, the EU's Regional Fund finances the restoration and enhancement of many attractive sites in individual regions within EU Member States, in order to strengthen local and national economies through increased tourism.

The EU as a threat to the preservation of national languages is surely hardly an issue either. The EU institutions translate all official EU documents into the 23 officially recognised languages of the EU Member States so they can be read by anyone. Beyond these national languages, there are more than 60 further regional and minority languages within the EU spoken regularly by up to 40 million people.¹ While national governments are the main decision-makers on language policy, the EU helps fund projects and partnerships designed to raise awareness of minority languages, promote their teaching and learning, and thereby help them survive.

On a cultural level, the UK is arguably the EU country which has had its cultural roots undermined the most, but not by the EU, but instead by American influences. Indeed, the EU, notably through Member States such as France, has tried to defend national and European cultural traditions in the face of the spread of American culture.

Principle 2 – Solidarity of Family and Local Community

While I personally think that as Christians we should indeed promote the spirit of Old Testament Jubilee Laws, we have to recognise that we live in a largely capitalist world where such approaches are simply not accepted at any level of government. To blame the EU for this is simply not fair. Indeed, within the EU it is mainly the UK that has been pushing for more 'Anglo-Saxon' free market principles, often in the face of opposition from other Member States where social market economy models, which place less emphasis on individual competition and more on collective solidarity, are often favoured.

Dr Schluter in particular seems to consider the EU's internal market as damaging this biblical principle because it enables people to leave their family and local community and migrate to other EU countries to work. However, this misses the key point that most often the reason for this kind of economic migration is to secure a job in more prosperous EU Member States in order to be able to send money (remittances) to support one's family back home. Such migration often comes from economic necessity rather than choice and is, of course, not confined to the EU but is nowadays a worldwide phenomenon. While there is a risk that, in so far as people migrate long term and without their families, family and community ties may be damaged, migration is nevertheless a key mechanism for redistributing wealth in our very unequal world.

Principle 3 – Avoidance of Concentration of Economic and Political Power

I believe it is again wrong to blame the EU for causing a concentration of economic and political power. The EU has had a long term commitment to the promotion of small and medium size enterprises (SMEs) which in its policy documents it describes as the backbone of the EU's economy and the key to

¹ One might also note that far from dying out or being killed off, some smaller languages have been gaining ground in the last half century, such as Luxembourgish, Gaelic and Catalan to name but a few.

revitalising it after the global financial crisis.² It is true that the EU also seeks to facilitate large businesses but this should be seen from the perspective of enabling such businesses from the relatively small countries of the EU to compete with companies from much bigger countries, notably the USA, China and Japan. Moreover, many SMEs owe their existence to their role as suppliers to these large businesses.

Concerning political concentration, it should be stressed that EU decision-making is carried out not by unelected 'eurocrats' in the European Commission but by the EU Member States' elected heads of government and ministers in the European Council. Moreover, this is done increasingly in conjunction with the European Parliament whose members are directly elected representatives from each Member State. Although turnout for European elections is only in the order of 35-40%, local elections in the UK only attract a similar voter turnout: the so-called democratic deficit is partly due to citizens' own reluctance to assume their democratic rights and responsibilities at whatever level of government.

While, at times, the EU may have become too involved in Member States affairs, there is an increasing recognition on its part of the need to pull back and it strictly reviews all proposed new legislation to ensure it complies with the principle of subsidiarity. All Member States, not least the UK, rigorously defend their sovereignty against unnecessary encroachment from the EU. Unfortunately national governments tend not to provide feedback to their citizens on the often very positive things they have achieved at EU level but instead prefer to use the EU as a convenient scapegoat to blame when things go wrong.

Principle 4 – Effective Stewardship of Resources

There is perhaps less to be said on this point given that the general consensus among economists is that it would be much better for maximising long-term economic growth, employment and wealth creation if the UK remained in the EU. As far as the sustainability of growth and our stewardship over the environment is concerned, it is widely recognised that the EU has championed environmental issues across Europe and been a global leader on seeking to protect the environment and combat climate change. It has been able to take a stand against both the USA and China, which to varying degrees have put the economy before the environment, in a way that individual European countries, including the UK, could not do if they acted alone.

Principle 5 – Equity in Distribution of Wealth and Income

Again it is surprising that the EU is linked to causing harm – in this case inequality – with the implication that the UK is therefore better off leaving the EU. Levels of inequality vary significantly within EU Member States but a 2015 report by the EU's Dublin Foundation for Living and Working Conditions found that the UK had the most unequal distribution of income of any EU Member State and more unequal than the USA. This suggests that it is UK government policies rather than EU policies that are causing inequality.

It should also be noted that one of the cornerstones of EU policy is to reduce economic inequality between Member States through the EU budget. Countries pay into the budget and receive funds from it basically according to their relative wealth (which is why the UK amongst others is a net contributor). In particular the EU Budget seeks to support less developed regions in the EU and more vulnerable sections of the population such as by financing measures to tackle youth unemployment.

Three Conditions for Remaining in the EU

By way of introduction to this section, I would say I believe that the UK should show more selflessness and solidarity in its dealings with its EU neighbours. For the UK to demand the three conditions stated

² The overwhelming majority (99.8%) of enterprises active within the EU's non-financial business economy are SMEs – approximately 20 million – and together they account for around two out of every three jobs.

in Dr Schluter's article would neither show appropriate humility and respect towards our EU neighbours nor further the five biblical principles.

Condition 1 – Dismantle the euro

First of all the obvious should be stated: the UK is not part of the eurozone. Nor has any other country been forced into joining the eurozone. It therefore seems rather high-handed to demand that the dismantling of a mechanism to which the UK does not belong should be a condition for it staying in the EU. Moreover, in so far as in the future the euro may require 'ever closer political union', the UK government's February 2016 deal with the EU also secured the UK's exemption from this process. I would also add that in many respects the euro has been a success and popular in the countries using it.³ Greece itself was free to leave the euro but the clear majority of its population preferred to keep it.

The events in Greece in terms of human suffering are deplorable. However, in the first place the blame should not be put at the door of the EU or the euro but successive Greek governments who recklessly overborrowed and mismanaged the Greek economy, failing to reform the pension system, address corruption or make the economy more productive. Greece also broke the basic rules of macroeconomic management jointly agreed by EU Member States to ensure the stability of the euro. While it is true that before the euro, constant devaluation of the national currency was a way to keep the economy competitive, this approach served as a means to put off much needed reforms.

Of course, there were also some greedy lenders but Greece was not obliged to take their loans. While we may find lenders hard-hearted in their reluctance to write off debts, we should perhaps be not too judgmental given that it is not our money at stake.⁴ Germany has been much maligned for its stance on the Greek debt crisis and the benefits it has enjoyed from the euro. However, it should also be recognised that it risked a lot by giving up its own very strong and stable currency for the euro. The alleged harsh treatment of Greece by the EU does not acknowledge the fact that the EU budget has continued to transfer very large grants to Greece for its economic development.

Condition 2 – No Internal Market for Factors of Production

The internal market is at the heart of the EU and has brought not only considerable economic benefits but also other benefits. In particular, it has facilitated much more people-to-people contact across Europe which from a relational perspective is surely to be welcomed (see also condition 3). Migration has made the UK a culturally richer and more diversified place, especially if we are ready to offer a Christian welcome to migrants. Even at the level of churches in the UK, the arrival of migrants from the EU (as well as outside it) has helped strengthen many local congregations which would otherwise be in decline.

While migration between countries is seen as weakening family ties and placing a burden on welfare systems, it should be also noted that even within countries (not least the UK which has a geographically very mobile population), grown up children often move away from local communities, leaving the welfare system to be the main provider of care to their parents in their old age.

Condition 3 – Creation of a Relational Culture

This is in some ways the most surprising of the three conditions. Research suggests that the UK is the most individualistic country in Europe (see the work of Geert Hofstede). At an economic level, as already discussed, the UK is constantly championing 'Anglo-Saxon' values of more competition and

³ It can be considered to have brought price stability, low interest rates and cheaper imported goods to those countries in Europe, particularly southern and eastern Europe, that traditionally suffered from high inflation, high interest rates and a constantly devaluing currency. It has, of course, also greatly simplified cross-border financial transactions for both businesses and individuals across the eurozone.

⁴ It should also be noted that the UK has ensured that it (and other non-eurozone countries) is not required to share the costs of any Greek or other eurozone bailout.

deregulation. While, in particular, France and southern European countries seek to invoke other less competitive approaches which can therefore be seen as more conducive to a 'relational culture', these are typically rejected by the UK as not viable in today's world. Our society suffers from rampant individualistic consumerism which even continues on Sundays when the remainder of Europe is resting. A culture of family seems to be more in decline here than in other European countries with the UK continuing to have the highest levels of teenage pregnancies in the EU and a seemingly inexorable rise in binge drinking, drug abuse and gang violence. These social ills cannot be blamed on the EU but sadly reflect the breakdown of family and community in our own society.

Conclusion

I believe it is unfair to suggest, as Dr Schluter seems to in his conclusion, that the UK has somehow been relatively distant from where EU decisions are made because the EU has kept us at arm's length. It is rather that the UK that has chosen to keep itself semi-detached. It now threatens to become fully detached. To change the fire metaphor used by Dr Schluter, a Brexit could be likened to divorcing a spouse who has fallen ill but who stands a very good chance of recovery if properly supported. Such a divorce is hardly the basis for building the deeper, more harmonious relationships with our European partners that Dr Schluter is in favour of.

Over the years, the EU as a whole has bent over backwards to keep the UK in the family by trying to accommodate the UK's 'special interests', granting it numerous exemptions (e.g. from the Schengen zone) and most recently through the 'Reformed EU' deal agreed with David Cameron. As I have tried to demonstrate, in the UK we may too often see the splinter in the EU's eye while ignoring the plank in our own. Brexit would be a selfish move which could needlessly represent a potentially fatal blow to the EU. I for one fear that it is precisely a Brexit that risks returning Europe to the nationalism and totalitarianism of the 1930s with all the horror that followed. Instead, the UK should engage more fully in Europe to help it recover from its current illness and nurture an EU based on European values, many of which have their origins in Christianity.

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Julian Chapman worked for 25 years in the European Union institutions before retiring as head of unit in 2014 and returning to the UK. He was particularly involved in assessing the effectiveness of EU foreign aid. The views expressed in this article are personal.