

# Christian faith and European Culture

Very briefly, I would like us to step back and try to gain some perspective, by thinking about The Past, The Present, and The Future.

## 1. The Past

We ignore history at our peril. Our context is shaped by where we have come from. Christians ('People of the Book', as Islam calls us) especially are reminded again and again in that Book (the Bible) of the importance of looking back. The Passover celebration now replaced, in the Messianic Community, with the Communion Table, teaches us to remember, looking backwards.

As we look back on Europe's history, it is clear that there are two defining roots:

**Greco-Roman** Greek Philosophy, especially Platonism and Neo-Platonism have shaped our cultures and all our thinking deeply.

The Enlightenment, for example would, arguably, not have been possible without Platonism. The dualism from which we all suffer to one degree or another is a fruit of neo-Platonism and its impact on the Early Church. Even the radical secularists' commitment to excluding all people of faith (except the faith of radical secularism) from public life also finds part of its justification in the same place.

The Romans' organisational skills carried this Greek Philosophy around the continent, and provided the legal framework that is the basis of much of our legal system even today in many of our countries.

**Judeo-Christian** Judaeo-Christian thought has also shaped values and society in millions of ways, seen and unseen. One example is the awareness that many (most?) people still have of the value of a single human life: so that a person on a bicycle cannot be knocked over without anybody caring. Or someone digging a garden can kill a worm by accident without consequences: but if they were to kill a *person* by accident that would be a very different story!

That distinction is not as clear in parts of the world that have been shaped more by, for example Hinduism or Islam. Sadly, in many places life is 'cheap': because humanity is not understood to be made in the image God, and precious to Him.

And many movements have their roots Christian people...e.g. the hospice movement, Alcoholics Anonymous, the Red Cross, the Geneva Convention

## 2. The Present.

(a) We are suffering from **collective amnesia**. As cultures, we do not want to admit that a lot of the good in Europe has its roots in the work of people of faith, and that Christ has done our cultures immeasurable good.

There are many reasons for that. One reason is because we rightly reject bullying institutions (among them Churches), which, like all other powerful institutions, have a

mixed history. Institutionalised religion has sometimes been a curse and people have done terrible things even in Christ's name.

BUT: the Living God is described in Scripture (1 Timothy 4. verse 10) as 'The Saviour of all people, and especially of all who believe'. He has mercifully saved millions from disease, injustice, war and poverty; and has also been merciful and gracious and provided help to millions of others who have suffered from those things, because of the evil of humanity.

And still we refuse to acknowledge Him. Partly because we reject Absolutes: apart from the absolute conviction that there are No Absolutes. That's deeply inconsistent! And even if you allow the internal logic of this illogical position, we are not consistently against absolutes anyway: because people believe that some things are always wrong: for example paedophilia, and possibly murder.

**(b)** We are struggling to find our **identity**. Who are we? What kind of society do we want to build?

That has been a central theme in conversations about the preamble to the EU Constitutional Treaty, and in the French Presidential elections. It is the theme of lots of books, including one by Philip Jenkins ('God's Continent: Christianity, Islam, and Europe's Religious Crisis'). He makes some interesting observations:

- For example, the stimulating thought that secularism has the potential to reshape Islam, as it has reshaped Christianity.
- And that the death of Christianity in Europe has been trumpeted far too early: and that actually there are signs of growth. Just one example I have discovered. In 2004, 141,000 people left the Protestant State Church in Germany. The same year, 118,700 people joined. Those who left are, presumably, people without Christian convictions. Those who joined are presumably people of conviction.
- That the influx of people into Europe from the Global South may have done more to revitalise the Church than it has done to establish Mosque.

Of course we could say much more about the present state of Europe.

For instance we could discuss secularism, and especially fundamentalist form.

We could talk about the parallel existence of post-modernity and modernity, about globalisation, the searches for spiritual reality and for meaningful relationships, urbanisation and alienation, aging populations, and so on.

If we were to summarise the **spiritual** challenges of Europe, as a category, we might mention materialism, secularism, and the fact that God's People are also deeply infected by those things. And we would mention that most people have no idea who Jesus is, or what He's done: but that some of those people **think** that they do!

And we would mention neo-paganism, Hinduism, and Islam. But time is short, so:

### 3. The Future.

Interestingly, the regular celebration of **communion looks forward** as well as backwards: 'for whenever you eat this bread and drink this wine, you proclaim the Lord's death until He comes' (1 Corinthians 11 v. 26).

In other words, to live well in the present, we must live in the light of both the past and the future: not living in the past or the future, but living in the light of both.

So what kind of future do we face in Europe? That is the big question, isn't it?

One thing is certain: we can choose to help to shape that future, or we can choose to sit back and complain about an increasingly ungodly context. And the reality is this: our impact will be **much** greater if we stand **together**. We are much stronger together; and much weaker apart.

So, my plea is simple: let's engage, together.

Remember the first three centuries of the Christian era, and consider the impact that a Christian minority had in those centuries. Why should we also not have a massive impact, as they did, in Europe today, as salt and light and openly and graciously proclaiming Jesus? May God have mercy on our continent, as we stand together, for His glory and the good of humanity!

Gordon Showell-Rogers  
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# CHRISTIAN FAITH AND EUROPEAN CULTURE

## *Questions for discussion*

- Our title is 'Christian faith and European Culture': what do you understand by 'European culture'?
- Does it matter that the Lisbon Treaty does not mention God, or Europe's 'Christian Heritage'? If you think it is important: why? If not, why not?
- Why is cultural analysis so important?
- The gospel is **always** contextualised: or should be. Jesus was a first century Palestinian Jew: fully contextualised. The gospel writers translated a Hebrew message into a Gentile (1<sup>st</sup> century 'European') context.

We can't do that for today, unless we think about two things: the context into which we want to communicate the Good News, and our own cultural context. **Nobody** is culturally neutral. It is impossible to be culturally neutral: we all come to the text of Scripture (and every other text) in **our** skins, with **our** history.

- What cultural (or sub-cultural) factors have influenced your opinion of the European Union?
- What cultural (or sub-cultural) influences have shaped your attitude to politics?
- What are our responsibilities within European 'culture'?
- What other questions should we raise in this session?