

FIVE STEPS TOWARDS UNDERSTANDING

THE STATE OF EUROPE

Jeff Fountain, Director of the Schuman Centre for European Studies

AS WE ATTEMPT TO SURVEY THE STATE OF EUROPE TODAY in the light of Robert Schuman's vision of Europe as a 'community of peoples deeply rooted in Christian values', let me try to describe it in terms of *one book, two splits, three images, four apps and five crises*.

ONE BOOK:

The single greatest influence on the development of European culture and society has been *the Bible*. When Paul stepped ashore at Neapolis on the northern Greek coast and made his way to Philippi where he met with a group of women worshipping by a stream, he started a revolution that was to transform the peninsula we call Europe. Messengers bringing the story of this book about one God and his one Son Jesus Christ introduced a totally new worldview: of God and of man, of the spiritual realm and the physical realm, of the dignity and value of human life, of linear history and time as past, present and future. This understanding transformed the lifestyles of people groups from Armenia to Ireland, and from Cyprus to Iceland. Jesus became worshipped in many different languages by Greeks, Romans, Gauls, Celts, Scots, Angles, Saxons, Franks, Friesians, Allemanni, Suevi, Slavs, Rus, Balts and, eventually, Vikings.

This book shaped our art and music, agriculture and gardening, architecture and design, language and literature, law and justice, politics and democracy, healthcare and hospitality, education and training, ethics and morality, marriage and family, science and technology, business and economics far more than any other single influence.

We don't have to be believers to recognise this fact. Even a die-hard atheist like Richard Dawkins says you cannot understand European history without understanding Christianity and the Bible. Jürgen Habermas, secular German philosopher says that our western 'universal egalitarianism' from which democracy, human rights and rule of law derive, finds its roots in the Judaic ethic of justice and the Christian ethic of love. We still draw our sustenance from these sources, he admits, and no alternative has ever been found. Anything else, he contends, is post-modern chatter!

In the light of the above, if the Bible is not given its due place in our European school curricula, that has to be the result of either ignorance or prejudice. It cannot be professionalism!

The paradox of Europe is that it is the 'continent' that has been most shaped by this book, and also by the rejection of this book! For, from the time of the Enlightenment onwards, various '-isms' have attempted to replace the Bible as a source of worldview: rationalism, humanism, socialism, communism, fascism and secularism, to name a few. And yet unconsciously they have assumed presuppositions drawn from biblical revelation, such as a linear view of time, the dignity of man, the purpose of life. Even in reacting to the Bible, these '-isms' still assume certain biblical insights.

TWO SPLITS:

Both in the eleventh and sixteenth centuries, major church splits occurred which even to this day continue to shape our headlines. Western Europeans are far more familiar with the latter split, better known as *the Reformation*. Or, should we say 'Reformations', as we need to recognise also the Catholic Reformation and the Radical Reformation, movements which also brought major upheavals in political, economic, social and spiritual areas of life across western Europe.

In 2017, the 500th anniversary of the Protestant Reformation will be commemorated in many places and ways, hopefully not as a triumphalistic Protestant event but as a respectful occasion looking at the positive legacy of this period. We must emphasise that what we have in common is greater than what separates us, while recognising the pain and suffering caused by this split in the Body of Christ, resulting in decades of religious wars.

Much reconciliation has been effected in recent years, especially through the efforts of recent popes, and the signing of the Joint Declaration of the Doctrine of Justification (JDDJ) in 1999 between Catholic and Lutheran leaders, and the unprecedented declaration by Pope Benedict XVI in St Peter's Square that 'Luther was right' about justification by faith.

The earlier split of 1054, called *the Great Schism*, is less known in the west. The profound influence of this family feud within the Body of Christ, occasioned by an argument over the Trinity (whether the Spirit proceeded from the Father or from the Father and the Son), has created a deep spiritual faultline across Europe from the Baltics in the north to the Balkans in the south, with profound social, economic and political consequences.

Vladimir Putin, for example, is deeply resentful of the role Pope John Paul II played in the demise of communism and thus the implosion of the Soviet Union. As we commemorate the centennial of the First World War, we recall how it was triggered right on this faultline in Sarajevo. The more recent Balkan wars of course were fought across this line. NATO, the UN, the EU are powerless to heal this spiritual rift; it is a matter for spiritual leaders.

The story of Europe cannot be understood without recognition of the deep impact of both of these ruptures in church history and their ongoing influence on politics, economics and society.

THREE IMAGES:

Fast forward to 2014 and we can describe Europe in terms of three images. The first is *a vase of wilting tulips*, ready to be thrown out. When placed in the vase they would have been truly beautiful, but from the moment they were cut off from their roots, they were doomed.

Roots nurture and stabilise. Yet European society cut off from its Judeo-Christian roots is a cut-flower civilisation. Hence, instead of drawing life, it draws from a culture of death. Europeans have decided to die out. Abortion, euthanasia, suicide, low birth-rates all contribute to a crisis of demography. No European country has the birth rate of 2.1 sufficient to sustain its own population. This fact carries serious consequences for Europe's future: economically, socially and politically. Yet a neo-liberal, secular pursuit of constant economic growth and ever expanding GDP without regard to relational implications tends to undermine sustainability.

A second image of Europe is that of *a field full of rocks, old tree stumps and junk*. No farmer would go out to sow seed in such a field without preparing the soil first by taking away the rocks, stumps and junk and ploughing the ground. Yet some efforts of evangelism attempt to do just this. Methods that are fruitful elsewhere in the world are sometimes attempted in Europe without recognising the different state of the soil.

Yet a third image is of *a squatted house*. Most Europeans today are like squatters living in a house without being prepared to pay the rent. They have no idea of the Judaic-Christian foundations of the European house, or try to live in denial of them.

FOUR APPS:

How do we then approach such a continent in need with eyes of faith, hope and vision? Let me suggest four 'apps' to download into our hearts and minds.

The first is the '*God's will*' app. Perhaps I'm being very simplistic, but it seems logical to me that it is always God's will for his will to be done. In other words, it is never God's will for his will not to be done. So why do so many Christians seem to believe that it is God's will for his will not to be done in Europe? That Europe is doomed to become 'the beast'? That things *have* to become worse and worse towards the end of times?

When Jesus taught us to pray the Lord's Prayer, was he really serious? Did he really want to see the Father's Kingdom come, the Father's will being done on earth, in Europe, as it is in heaven? Or was he just teasing us?

When we believe the future has been predetermined in this way, we find ourselves caught like rabbits in the headlights of a car, paralysed by fatalism and pessimism, believing we can do nothing to change the future. This can become a self-fulfilling prophecy in which things do get worse, not because God willed it but because we failed in our role as salt and light in the world.

The second app is that of '*the wheat and tares*'. Jesus told the parable of the man who sowed wheat in his field, but his enemy came at night and sowed weeds, or tares. The two grew up together and the man's servants asked if they should pull them out. No, the man said, wait until the harvest time.

Good and bad things are happening all around us. The media tends to emphasise the negative. The paradox of the wheat and tares is that both grow together.

Look at the twentieth century. It was surely the worst century ever, the century of Satan! Think of the two world wars, a devastating depression, a cold war, the holocaust, the invention of the atom bomb, and names like Lenin, Stalin, Hitler, Mao Tset Tung and Pol Pot. More people were killed by their own governments in this century than in any other. What a terrible century!

Yet at the same time, it surely was the best century ever for the spread of God's Kingdom! It began with revivals: in Wales, Azusa Street in Los Angeles beginning the Pentecostal movement, in East Africa, Indonesia, Argentina. It saw the world's largest churches emerging in countries like Korea where the gospel had only come a century ago; or in Nigeria, Brazil and other non-western nations. China surprised the world when it opened up to reveal a large, dynamic growing church. More people came into the Kingdom than in all the other centuries put together! Surely this was the century of the Spirit!

Wheat and tares, the good and the bad growing up together. We need to learn to discern what God is doing in our world. We hear how bad the situation is in Europe for the church: empty churches, churches closing or becoming mosques, widespread desertion of the faith in many countries as Europeans pursue materialistic and hedonistic lifestyles. But that is not the full story. God is also at work in new, unexpected ways: new spiritual hunger, new prayer movements, new expressions of church, new Europeans – migrants from Africa, Asia and Latin America – restoring lost gifts of bold proclamation, colourful worship and spiritual discernment; a new ecumenism of the heart and also a new realisation that the gospel is not simply about getting a ticket to heaven but about seeing heaven, God's kingdom, invading every sphere of human life.

A third app is the '*death and resurrection*' app. Christianity is all about death and resurrection, most centrally and supremely of course, that of Jesus. His resurrection is the starting point of God making all things new. It is the reason for our hope, as we look forward to the restoration of all things, when creation will be liberated from the bondage to decay.

Yet all through history, there has been a death and resurrection pattern, similar to the apostasy and renewal pattern of the book of Judges. God's people have experienced times of falling away and then renewal as the Spirit of God raised up new movements within and outside of established Christianity. He is committed to the fulfilment of his own purposes in history. He is working towards his goal of 'the knowledge of the glory of God covering the earth as the waters cover the sea' (Habakkuk 2:14).

Therefore, as people of hope, we can look beyond the negative circumstances of any given period in anticipation of what the Spirit will do next. We are expectant people, pregnant with the future, as we look forward in hope to God's ongoing work in human affairs. Our hope is not based on current headlines, trends or events. It is based on God's character and purposes, the two 'unchangeable things' talked about in Hebrews chapter 6, verse 19.

Fourthly, there is the '*faithful minorities*' app. God has always chosen to work through obedient, available minorities. The Bible is full of stories about people and families, not economic and political theories. God's ways are relational and he works by starting with an Abraham, a Moses, a Daniel, an Esther, and so on. He uses the weak to confound the strong, the foolish to confound the wise.

I have learned to view history through the 'faithful minorities' lens, tracing the stories of those who were obedient to Jesus' teachings and example. Much of church history can be very discouraging. A lot of church history books should come with a government health warning on the cover: *Beware, this book could destroy your faith!* While studying history at university, I struggled with my faith while reading the terrible things done in the name of the church and of Christianity through the ages.

But when I began to focus on those movements and groups who chose to live in radical obedience to Jesus, I found myself being greatly encouraged and inspired to follow their example.

That's why my wife and I take people of tours each summer, through the British Isles and across part of the Continent, visiting places of people and movements who shaped Europe through their faith: Patrick, Willibrord, Boniface, Thomas à Kempis, Jan Hus, Luther, Zwingli, Calvin, Zinzendorf, Wesley... and many more.

Their stories encourage faith and vision of what God can do through us to help shape tomorrow's Europe.

FIVE CRISES:

At last year's State of Europe Forum in Dublin, Jim Memory of Redcliffe College presented a talk entitled: **Storm Warnings: Five crises that threaten Europe today.** We were sailing on uncharted waters, he said, and we needed help to orient ourselves. Sailors listen to the shipping forecast to find out what is ahead. To be a Christian engaged in life in Europe today, he said, we needed to understand what was happening in our societies, in the economy, in politics and in the environment.¹

The Economic Storm: The consequences of the current economic crisis are evident. In Italy, Spain, Portugal, Greece and Ireland there are paralyzing levels of debt. Measures have saved the banks but at the price of capital control. These nations have experienced all the pain but none of the gain of devaluation. Unemployment is at frightening levels. In Greece, six out of ten young people have no job prospects. Many house owners are unable to pay mortgages and face an uncertain future.

Four possible scenarios include: 1. *maintaining the status quo* – ten to twenty years of low or even negative economic growth. The current crisis will be the new normal; 2. *disorderly breakup of the Euro*, devastating countries such as the 'club med' grouping; 3. *structured break up*, in which certain countries would be 'invited to leave' and supported through the transition; 4. *full fiscal union*, unlikely to be acceptable to the whole EU.

¹ See, www.schumancentre.eu/category/inspiring-talks/ - Europe in crisis; threat or opportunity

The Political Storm: A high pressure area hangs over the EU. The long period of political stability in Europe may be over. Popular levels of trust in the EU have reached record lows. There has been a rise in nationalist, populist and xenophobic movements. Extreme right wing politicians tap into rising unrest.

The Social Storm: Migration—experimentation with models of integration not greatly successful. Secular Europe simply does not know how to handle religions, which refuse to bow at its altar. There are 6.7% of migrants in the EU. *Demographic Change*—all EU states have a fertility rate below the replacement level of 2.1. By 2060, 33% of Germans will be over 65 and the average Italian will be over 50. This will have devastating impact on population figures and an aging population will add major strain to social welfare systems, etc.

The Environmental Storm: Because of the economic storm this is being ignored. Yet the summer ice in the Antarctic is melting. Sea levels have risen by 11mm. Extreme weather is becoming more common. In the UK, four of the five wettest years in history have happened in the last 12 years. The weather is getting more and more unpredictable.

The Religious Storm: Faith refuses to leave the stage despite predictions of its demise. Europe is becoming both more secular and more religious. Younger generations are more open to religious identification (although not in traditional forms).

We find so little practice of faith in Europe because people have put their faith elsewhere (e.g. 'prosperity'). The message is, 'If we can return to economic growth, we will return to security and prosperity.' Jim Memory says: '...I think not.'

He predicts: • *a long period of economic stagnation* • *a reduced Eurozone* • *the east and south to provide migrant workers for the prosperous north* • *EU expansion to continue but also to suffer some losses* • *the UK will either leave the EU or renegotiate its status* • *independence of new states will slow down EU decision-making* • *demographic changes will create inter-generational conflicts (younger generation railing against the old)* • *age-related migration* • *extreme weather will become the norm* • *higher CO₂ levels will boost food and forest growth in higher northern latitudes* • *a resurgence of religiosity.*

These crises must shape our mission in Europe today. Economic hardships are being felt by the most vulnerable in society. The church as one of the few intergenerational communities, and where rich and poor gather in one body, must rise to the challenge to offer hope in the midst of crisis. In a Europe where many services originally provided by the church have been taken over by the state, this is an hour where the church can step back into her former role.

Care for the elderly will be a vital part of Christian mission. Chronic unemployment means 'business as mission' can become a primary avenue for bringing Christian hope, stirring the voluntary sector and awakening gifts of entrepreneurship. New types of Christian community could emerge with communal living and new monastic orders. Social justice, simplicity and sustainability will become key issues. Environmental initiatives will move from the margin to the mainstream. Secularism, Islam and Christianity will compete in offering hope to a re-sacralised Europe.

It is against this background of the state of Europe that we meet here in Athens to address specifically issues concerning economics, solidarity, migration, democracy and religious liberty. May God give us understanding and wisdom for the task ahead. We need it!

