A Christian & Continental Perspective on the Brexit Debate

Good Evening, Ladies and Gentlemen,

Thank you for inviting me back to this Cathedral. I have many happy memories from serving here as a lunch-time chaplain during the summer tourist season back in the 80s and early 90s in my spare time from a day job in Winchester. As well as coming to diocesan occasions as a Reader from the parish of Overton.

I now have the honour to serve as EU Attaché to the Right Reverend Dr Robert Innes. In euro-jargon he would be referred to as being ‘double-hatted’. He both serves as the Archbishop of Canterbury’s official Representative to the European Union and as Diocesan Bishop for the Church of England Diocese in Europe responsible for some 350 Anglican churches spread over 42 countries of continental Europe and beyond from Reykjavik to Vladivostok and from Casablanca to Yerevan. Because of the heavy workload generated by running such a widespread diocese Archbishop Justin agreed to my appointment as Attaché to take as much as possible of the burden of EU liaison work off Bishop Robert’s shoulders, leaving him to concentrate on the more formal high level meetings.

When it comes to the issue of the current referendum campaign these hats are not in total alignment. The Archbishop of Canterbury has spoken many wise words on this subject, but without coming down formally on either side in the campaign, so neither can Bishop Robert acting as the Archbishop’s official Representative. However, as bishop of the diocese which will arguably be the most negatively affected of all if the vote is for Brexit he has felt it right to take a stand and come out in favour of the Remain side. Although our congregations are now highly international with British citizens by and large in the minority, they are still a substantial minority and their anxiety about the future if the UK votes to leave the EU and there is a calling into question of their freedom of movement rights, transferable pension and health cover rights etc – all of which are provided for under EU legislation. This is rightly a matter of strong pastoral concern to him. I will try to steer a middle way between these two positions in my talk tonight!

[1] Europe is constantly at the forefront of the news. There are many within Europe, and especially within the UK, who think Europe is a wreck: an attempted super-state run by faceless bureaucrats intent on banning lead in organ pipes and making you buy straight bananas. Elsewhere, however, Europe is regarded as heaven on earth. For many who live outside Europe it is the Promised Land. For thousands of refugees, Europe appears as a paradise, a stronghold of peace, prosperity and civilization. Those who have lived a long time in the EU seem weary of it. But those who aren’t able to share the alleged European comforts, want to get here at any price to join us. ‘What is it that some have yet no longer want, and for which others yearn so deeply?’ So we have this deep paradox, on the one hand you have those who are willing literally to risk life and limb – whether dying in a hail of bullets in Maiden Square Kiev wearing blue armbands with the 12 stars logo or risking a watery grave in the Mediterranean. On the other hand you have longstanding Members of the Club who no longer feel it suits them and want to leave.

What is Europe? Is it merely a certain geographical land mass and the diverse peoples who happen to live within it? Or is it also a certain project that aims to help those peoples to live together harmoniously and prosperously with a set of shared values? And if we want to be
‘out’ of Europe, is that a statement about our feeling disconnected from the continent or is it saying that we don’t want to participate in certain shared political institutions? Or both?

This evening I am going to take us through some of the contradictions and challenges of Europe. We’ll look at why we have a continent of Europe at all. We’ll consider the triumphs and tragedies of 20th century Europe. And then we’ll look at where Christianity, and particularly the Anglican Diocese in Europe, stands within Europe today and how Christians might think about Europe as we face, along with other British people, a big decision about our future in Europe – or not.

European Origins and Christianity

[2] Geographically, Europe is a pimple on the western edge of Asia, the second-smallest continent, occupying just 2% of the world’s land surface. Unlike other continents it is not geographically separate from other continents, it is separated only by culture, religion and history. I would argue that a chief factor in giving it a separate identity of its own within the Eurasian land mass is the fact that for more than 1000 years ‘Europe’ and ‘Christendom’ were synonymous.

[3] Jesus was a Jew who was born in Palestine which in the first century was part of the Roman Empire. From the life, death and resurrection of Jesus grew a religion which spread fast around the Greek-speaking Mediterranean. Christianity was initially persecuted by the Romans, because of its belief in a single God and a crucified saviour.

[4] In 313AD the Emperor Constantine became a Christian, and Christianity was made the official religion of the Empire. 50 years later, all other religions were banned so Christianity was the only religion of the Empire. Rome became Christian. The church developed its own hierarchy of full time paid officials – priests, bishops and archbishops with one bishop, the bishop of Rome, as pope. The church developed its own system of canon law. And the church ran its own system of taxation. As Rome became Christian, so Christianity became Roman (the Roman Catholic Church as we call it today).

But though the western empire fell during the 5th century, Christianity did not. It preserved its hierarchy. And it preserved Greek and Roman learning. The Germanic warriors who overran the western Empire did not destroy the church. And gradually they themselves became Christian.

[5] Martin Luther initiated the 16th century Reformation which brought an end to a united ‘Christendom’. There is a stained glass window to him in the church where our Anglican congregation meet for worship in Leipzig, East Germany. We celebrate the 500th anniversary of Luther’s Reformation next year, 2017. Luther articulated growing dissatisfaction with a church that had become rich, powerful and somewhat corrupt. Luther emphasised salvation by faith not works, and doctrine that was derived from scripture rather than tradition. Luther was excommunicated by the pope, but sympathy for his teaching rapidly spread through Germany, aided by the newly invented printing presses.

The Reformation sparked huge antagonism between Protestants and Catholics right across Europe. For over 100 years both sides fought each other, literally, in wars. Each regarded the other as totally wrong, not as a different sort of Christian but as anti-Christian. It was better
that a Catholic or Protestant be killed, than that they preach a doctrine offensive to God. Yet after fighting each other for 100 years, with neither side winning, a sort of truce arose and gradually a sense of toleration. Firstly, it was accepted that there could be Catholic countries and Protestant countries. And then it was gradually accepted that different sorts of Christians could live peacefully together in the same country.

Protestantism undid the synthesis of Christianity with Greco-Roman culture. After Luther, the church was not merely the Roman Catholic Church.

At the beginning of the twentieth century, Europe was still a continent with deep Christian roots. Yes, the Reformation had split Christianity from its associations with Roman order. And the Enlightenment had proposed a religion that was within the limits of reason alone. But few would have doubted that the Soul of Europe was Christian.

[6] Much changed in the next few decades. Rising nationalism, military competition and a complex set of alliances led to World War 1. I live in Belgium, where a large proportion of the battles were fought. There is a picture showing the terrible battle of Ypres which left hardly a building or a tree standing. Some 70 million combatants were mobilised in the Great War. Nine million soldiers and a further 7 million civilians died. For years afterwards people mourned the dead, the missing and the many disabled. For the first time, war memorials appeared on village greens across Britain listing all those who had died. World War 1 raised very sharp questions about how it was that so-called Christian nations could hurt each other so deeply.

World War 1 was said to be the ‘war to end all wars’, but just 20 years after it ended, Europe and the World was again plunged into war. World War 2 was a global war that involved the vast majority of the world’s nations. It was the most widespread war in history and directly involved more than 100 million people from over 30 countries. In a state of ‘total war’ the major participants threw their entire economic, industrial and scientific capabilities behind the war, erasing the distinction between civilian and military resources. With an estimated 50 to 85 million fatalities, World War 2 was the deadliest conflict in human history.

Europe emerged from World War 2 in a state of ruin. Its economies were either shattered or deeply in debt. Much of its infrastructure was destroyed. Supposedly Christian nations had fought each other to death and dragged the rest of the world into their conflicts. And there was the emerging horror of what had been done to the Jews. For Christians in particular there was a massive question around what kind of Christian culture was now possible in Europe.

[7] The idea for a European community of nations was birthed at a time when the continent was reeling from multiple crises following the end of the Second World War. Food shortages were endemic, there were vast flows of displaced people – not just prisoners of war and concentration camp victims – trying to find their way home, to reunite with family, or to find a new home because their pre-War one was no longer there. Major and costly reconstruction was needed of most of the great cities of the continent. Virtually every national economy was in need of a bail out. Germany alone had half of its national debt written off. There was also the simmering resentment of those who had lived under enemy occupation – both against collective punishments and general suffering of the civilian population and the injured pride of those who had done their patriotic duty and resisted occupation seeing those who had prospered from collaboration with the enemy seemingly keeping their ill-gotten gains.
It was into this febrile atmosphere in the mid-twentieth century that a small multi-national group of devout catholic Christian statesmen representing countries from both sides in the conflict dared together to pray for, dream of and proclaim the possibility of a better way, a way for the diverse peoples of Europe to live and prosper together in peace. But this hope could only be realised if people and nations were prepared to accept core Christian values at the heart of the Gospel message. French Foreign Minister Robert Schuman was outspoken that reconstruction was only possible in a Europe ‘deeply rooted in Christian values’. Love your enemies, forgive others as you are forgiven, share with your neighbour. Reconciliation and solidarity were the watchwords.

So when Schuman made his famous Declaration on 9th May 1950 it was met with a positive response from West German Chancellor Konrad Adenauer, Italian Premier Alcide de Gaspari, Belgian Foreign Minister Paul Henri Spaak and many others. At its heart was a message of forgiveness on behalf of France and the offering of an olive branch to Germany in the form of a new multi-national entity to conduct the affairs of Europe in which the two long time protagonist nations would stand together as equal partners.

In the decades since then the initial Coal and Steel Community (bringing together reconstruction and supply planning for these industries, which would make hidden rearmament impossible) has transformed first into the European Economic Community (1957) and later the European Union. From the initial six core Member States it succeeded in enlarging to embrace first neighbouring countries in western Europe, then the southern countries just emerging from military dictatorship for whom it had a key role in helping to embed their new found democracy and then the former Communist countries of central and eastern Europe. The institutions and structures originally devised for six nations appeared to prove their durability, with occasional treaty adaptation, for containing disagreements between nations in the negotiating room and away from the battlefield and entrenching respect for the rule of law, democracy and human rights across the continent, in co-operation with the Council of Europe and its European Court of Human Rights in Strasbourg.

The Conference of European Churches in its Charta Oecumenica gave support for this process of seeking to bring Europe closer together. “On the basis of our Christian faith, we work towards a human, socially conscious Europe, in which human rights and the basic values of peace, justice, freedom, tolerance, participation and solidarity prevail.” Churches in the same document boldly stated that “without common values, unity cannot endure.”

[8] After 1989, and the end of the bi-polar world of the Cold War, Europe opened new vistas of freedom and hope for millions of people. There was a sense of excitement about the future. The healing of wounds and division became the central story. Noting that the European Community was at a turning point, the President of the European Commission, Jacques Delors, envisaged that states would be called upon to create a new European order. The European Union seemed to him the world’s most powerful invention for advancing peace. “Europe united, or re-united, in diversity”.

[9] Delors offered regular informal meetings between the churches and officials of the European Commission. These eventually led to a legal commitment on the part of the European Union to maintain an open, transparent and regular dialogue with the churches, other major religions and non-confessional philosophical organisations. This provision was

1 For the full text, see Charta Oecumenica, the joint document of CEC and CCEE, Strasbourg 2001
built into the 2007 Lisbon treaty. It is based on this provision that Bishop Robert and I are welcomed into the corridors of power in Brussels and our views together with those of the other major churches and religions in Europe are sought and listened to.

[10] In 2014, Pope Francis addressed the European Parliament in Strasbourg. He expressed concern that Europe was no longer open to the transcendent dimension of life, and that it risks losing both its own soul and the humanistic spirit which it still loves and defends. The pope recalled the 2000 years of history which links Europe and Christianity. He acknowledged that this history was not free of conflicts, errors and sins. But he saw also in it, a desire to work for the good of all, and a beauty which is reflected in the architecture of Europe’s cities. Europe he said, “urgently needs to recover its true features in order to grow, as its founders intended, in peace and harmony, since it is not yet free of conflicts.”

[11] So far I have had a focus in highlighting the role of values in the formation and identity of Europe. Amongst other things I am conscious of the remarks by the Archbishop of Canterbury when interviewed by The House magazine before Easter about giving priority to vision and values in the Brexit debate ‘My hope and prayer is that we have a really visionary debate’ he said. But so much of the debate on Brexit has focused on economics: would we be better off in or out of the Union. Although I recognise that one side of the debate does now seem to have weightier professional support backing it on this issue, it should not for me be the determining issue from a Christian perspective. The critical question for me, is whether for us British leaving or staying in the EU will make the greatest contribution to the common good? Are we committed to those founding European values of reconciliation, peace-making, neighbourliness and solidarity? Is the EU now so hopelessly adrift from the founding values that we can make a better contribution to the wellbeing of our own population and global equity by withdrawing from them rather than keeping our seat at the table? Do we want to stay in because we see the dominance of neo-liberal thinking in the governance of the Single Market as a triumph for Anglo-Saxon Common Sense or are we fearful of weaker protection of working conditions and the environment if we move out from under the European umbrella? Should we put our shoulder to the wheel in helping to offer Europe the leadership it desperately needs at the current time, or do we think it is beyond redemption and it would be best for Britain to leave others to bear this burden because it is doomed to failure?

[12] Besides economics, there has been much debate around the issues of sovereignty and democracy. Particularly the attribution of critical decisions to ‘faceless bureaucrats’ in Brussels. A few months ago Bishop Robert was on a platform with Romano Prodi, the former president of the European Commission. He said to him: “when I came to Brussels, I did not know whether the prevailing administrative culture would be German or French. To my surprise, it was neither. It was British”. His point was that the British brought to the European Union the highest levels of administrative professionalism and thereby exerted an influence much greater than their compatriots sometimes realised. We have a lot to contribute to Europe in the field of political and administrative expertise. In our congregation at the Anglican Pro-Cathedral in Brussels we have many serving EU officials, neither amongst them nor in my frequent visits to the EU Institutions over more than 14 years have I ever met one without a face! But I have recently observed a number of long faces amongst British officials who were transferred here from the UK civil service years ago to do their public duty and now see the value of their work denigrated and their futures becoming insecure.
As far as democracy goes I would appeal for folk to try to find authoritative sources for the way the EU decision-making process functions and not believe the tripe so often peddled by the tabloid press which has no factual basis. What the EU does is governed by Treaties which all Member States have signed up to. Under their provisions the European Commission (the executive arm) can only ever propose laws (and that within the restrictions of the subject matter prescribed in the Treaties), it is for the Council of Ministers (indirectly elected) and the European Parliament (directly elected) to dispose – ie to accept, amend, or reject laws proposed by the Commission. And every year a number of the ‘bureaucrats’ proposals bite the dust and are not heard of again. So far from being outvoted and outmanoeuvred by the other Member States, the UK has found itself on the losing side in only 6% of decisions on new EU laws in the Council over the last 5 years.

I am very willing to come back to these issues in the Q and As later. But I wish to concentrate in my remaining time on what to me is the litmus test. Which option on 23rd June helps both Britain and Europe to do the most in pursuit of the Common Good?

**The EU and the pursuit of the Common Good**

Our current era is marked not by recovery from violent conflict but the shared experience of global economic inter-dependence. The relevant question today might be how far the EU succeeds in bringing people together to share the fruits of economic prosperity - the extent to which those founding values of forgiveness, reconciliation and neighbourliness are manifest in present day dealings across European countries as they were in postwar reconstruction?

Three current crises are challenging the sense of European solidarity.

[13] **The first challenge is migration.** Migration is the crisis that confronts us, on our TV screens, in our newspapers, in our political discourse. Migration will not go away.

[14] Churches across the diocese in Europe have been actively involved in the refugee crisis. You may remember that for a while the main railway station in Budapest was one of the hotspots. Members of our church there collected and dispensed thousands of basic survival and hygiene kits.

[15] Our Church in Athens has been working with refugees for many years. In the centre picture you can see our priest, father Malcolm, visiting refugees in Athens Victoria square. Navid is the handsome 19 year old Afghani you can see in the right hand picture. His story is typical. He came across from Turkey to a Greek island in one of the little boats like the one you see in the left hand picture. Navid says: ‘Altogether, it has cost us 18 million Iranian Toman [approximately £4,000] to get to Greece. We have sacrificed everything to get here because there is no future for us in Iran, and our home country Afghanistan is too dangerous. The risks of being killed by the Taliban and now ISIS are too high.’ He adds: ‘The way to Germany will be difficult. We are travelling with my niece who is very young and it is getting very cold.’

Many British people seem to feel that the United Kingdom has been specially targeted by migrants. This is not so. Our opt-out from the Schengen open borders agreement has exempted us from being compelled to take our fair share of the now more than a million who have crossed the Mediterranean in peril of their lives as other EU countries are having to. But our Government has signed up to an EU effort agreed in July last year to take the most
vulnerable refugees directly from the camps in the region (Turkey, Lebanon, Jordan, etc) for resettlement – so far we have taken nearly 2,000 – this is more than any other country. Denmark is currently in second place and remarkably non-EU Switzerland has taken the 3rd largest number. Migration presents a problem across Europe, most particularly in the Southern and to some extent Eastern states. But we each see the problem that is on our own door step.

The reality is that Europe is materially rich. The European Union has been a pole of attraction for over 50 years because of its economic prosperity and because its economic model has paid some attention to the distribution of the benefits of prosperity. But beyond our frontiers, where political, economic or ecological disaster are all too common, growing populations find little hope of a good future for their families in their homelands.

Migration will not go away. The painful reality is that we have to find ways to live with it. “It is not right”, said an Ethiopian pastor living in the Calais jungle interviewed on BBC “to go to the United Kingdom illegally…OK….But if it is not right, what are we supposed to do?”

We cannot solve the issues of migration simply by putting up walls and fences, for however high the wall there will always be a ladder long enough to reach over it. And let’s be clear that that the high fences around the Eurotunnel are morally no different to the razor wire fences erected by countries along the so-called ‘Balkan route’. Migrants are not a threatening swarm, they are flesh and blood people. They are our neighbours.

We have to confront the migration reality. The reality is that:

- Birth rates across Europe have been in decline for many years, so there is now a decline in the numbers of young people of ‘traditional regional origin’
- Europe is materially rich. The European Union has been a pole of attraction for over 50 years because of its economic prosperity and because its economic model has paid some attention to the distribution of the benefits of that prosperity
- But beyond our frontiers, where political, economic and ecological disaster are all too common, growing populations find little hope of a good future for their families in their homelands. We have failed to export our successes to large swathes of the world. Nor can we deny at least a share of responsibility for their problems, with our colonial manipulation and our greed for their oil and other resources.

Migration will not just go away. The painful reality is that we have to find ways of living with it. But are we willing to find equitable means of sharing the burden of migration between different European cultures? And can Europe together manage migration so that we receive people safely and integrate people at a rate we can cope with.

Migration threatens the Schengen agreement and the free movement of peoples which has been one of the EU’s great successes.

[16] The second challenge is debt. One of the things that strikes me, as someone who travels around Europe a great deal, is the huge gulf between levels of prosperity in the north and the south. Germany and Scandinavia run impressive economies. It is very different in Southern Italy and Spain where youth unemployment has been running at 40%. And the travails of Greece as it tries to negotiate its indebtedness have occupied much of the attention of the top leadership of the European Union.
What we must recognise is the reality of the grief and pain of very real economic hardship. A 30% reduction of GDP such as Greece has known does not work out as a 30% reduction for all. It is far, far, worse for some. I know from the first-hand experience of our Anglican parish in Athens something of the economic hardship that has been experienced. The Greek economic crisis involves real grief.

There is also the grief of those who find that the political arrangements that mattered to them have been overturned. The grief of those who feel that they have lost control of their own destiny. The grief of those who believe that they have gone to extraordinary extremes to help but have been demonised. The grief of those who worked for policies that they believed to be sound but which have turned out to be seriously flawed.

This grief is real and it has challenged the sense of pan-European solidarity in a very deep way. The problem of debt, and specifically Greek debt, threatens the common currency, the euro, which has been another huge achievement for the European Union.

[17] A third challenge is rising nationalism and populism. It is unsurprising that, in a world that is becoming increasingly global, populations turn inwards and look to assert local identity. Very often this is expressed as hostility towards the outside world, be this in the form of migrants or legislation imposed by ‘Brussels’. Herman Van Rompuy, the deeply Christian former President of the European Council has described populism as ‘the gravest danger to Europe’. There is one sense in which national Governments must share the blame for this rising disillusion with Europe. They (with Britain the chief culprit) have each conducted their own national press conferences after Council meetings in Brussels at which they are quick to take the credit for a decision they feel will be popular back home and blame Europe for anything that might be unpopular – even though as often as not they have actually voted for it! Complaints about over-regulation should also often be more fairly directed at Whitehall than Brussels as our civil servants ‘gold-plate’ the broad law principles passed by the EU. I well remember the astonishment of a French public health inspector who came over with a visiting street market for a twinning occasion and referred to the approach of English environmental health officers as ‘le terrorisme sanitaire’. Populism tends to exist in left wing forms in Southern Europe and right wing forms in Northern Europe. Some of the most successful populist parties are Syriza in Greece and the National Front in France. Following the success of these parties, there has been a temptation for mainstream parties in other countries (such as Poland and Hungary) to adopt elements of the populist agenda. Populism is united in its distrust of central European Union institutions and its championing of local national identity.

So the third great challenge facing Europe is the political challenge of maintaining confidence in European political institutions in the face of growing populism and nationalism.

So there are several questions.

- Firstly, is there really a will in the UK want to be in the European Union or not? There is not long now before we will find out!
- Secondly, does the UK want an EU which is defined increasingly by neo-liberal market values or does it want a more social Europe, protecting the vulnerable and reducing inequalities in wealth through acts of solidarity?
Thirdly, can Europe’s Institutions actually deliver the kind of Europe which offers a real sense of neighbourliness and the common good, particularly in the face of serious challenges such as migration and the Greek debt crisis – or not?

Fourthly, can the spirit of solidarity and mutual generosity in the common good be recovered or are squabbling national self-interests to be the only determinant of outcomes in European decision-making?

The EU Treaties provide for four Summit meetings a year at which Prime Ministers and the occasional executive President meet get together. Last year they met 12 times – an average of once a month! This was precisely because of the lack of the necessary past spirit of solidarity and willingness to give and take for the common good. This has meant that the current crises have got deeper and dragged on for longer than could have been the case with a more cooperative spirit at the start.

**Conclusion**

I want to finish with some famous words, from John Donne the British poet and divine who had a major influence on the civilised and civilising development of the Anglican Church. He represents the voice of an island people, and his words offer hope to all of us as Europe contemplates its future and to the Christian church as it aspires to the particular vocation of being the soul of Europe.

[18] No man is an island entire of itself;
every man is a piece of the continent, a part of the main.
If a clod be washed away by the sea, Europe is the less,
as well as if a promontory were,
as well as any manner of thy friends or of thine own were.
Any man’s death diminishes me, because I am involved in mankind. And therefore never send to know for whom the bell tolls;
it tolls for thee.²

David Fieldsend, EU Attaché to the Bishop of the Diocese in Europe

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² from MEDITATION XVII Devotions upon Emergent Occasions John Donne