

# Christian Hope in Europe's Future

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Europe's recovery from the destruction of World War II was slow, and achieved only with massive U.S. aid. Europe was shattered psychologically as well as physically. Since the late 19th century the major European powers had lost their economic lead to the U.S.A., and probably also to the dynamic Russian Empire. But Russia's isolation after 1918 and American isolationism had obscured this reality until the end of the war, when these two countries emerged, to many it seemed overnight, as nuclear super-powers, glowering at each other across a prostrate Europe. It seemed as if Europe had been definitively side-lined as a major player on the world stage.

The post-war attempt to unite western Europe economically and politically was designed to challenge what seemed to many to have been an inexorable shift in the global power balance. But even if European unity were ultimately to be achieved through this process—and at first the most that seemed attainable was a limited measure of economic integration between six of Europe's thirty-odd states—it appeared unlikely that this could ever produce much more than a slowing down of the process of Europe's relative decline vis-à-vis the new super-powers.

Yet forty years later the Europe thus launched is being called in aid by a collapsing Soviet Union to save it from disaster and possible famine. Moreover within Europe itself the attractive power of the European Community is proving embarrassingly strong, with applications for membership currently threatening to overwhelm it. And it is towards the much more open economy of western Europe rather than towards the U.S. that many countries in the rest of the world now look when seeking to improve their trading opportunities.

Although far behind the U.S. in military power, and no more able than the rest of the world to compete successfully with the emerging industrial genius of Japan, Europe nevertheless has now unquestionably re-emerged as a potentially dynamic centre of influence and leadership in world affairs.

How can we hope that this recovered role will be exercised? What is there in Europe's past or in its present development that can give us hope that the continent in which infant Christianity was implanted will provide in the future a moral and not just an economic or political leadership?

We can view the Europe of the last two millennia either positively, as the place where Christianity developed and endured, and from which its gospel of love was dispersed world-wide, or negatively, as the place where religious fanaticism flourished, contributing in its final most distorted form

to the Holocaust, as well as to colonial exploitation of non-Christian peoples worldwide .

Each of these themes can be endlessly embroidered and rhetorically embellished. The problem is to draw a fair balance-sheet between two such enormous columns of assets and liabilities. And let's be fair: as Christians and Europeans we tend in our assessments to rely heavily on the 'goodwill' item in the assets column.

It is indisputable that the civilisation established in Christian Europe, although it was in certain respects inferior to aspects of others elsewhere in the world, ultimately became technologically, and thus economically and politically, the dominant world culture. For good or for ill, in the second half of the second millenium of our era, Christian Europe, together with its late heresies of collectivism and liberalism, largely shaped the modern world.

This dominance was cultural as well as technological, economic and political. Although in origin some of our measurements are Babylonian, our alphabet Phoenician, our monthly calendar Roman and our weekly one Jewish, and our numerals Arabic, it is Christian Europe's adoption of these tools and its own formative genius in so many other spheres that has imposed a particular shape on the modern world to which all other cultures have felt obliged to adjust themselves in greater or lesser degree. We of Christian Europe have much to answer for but also much in which we can take modest pride.

First, whatever the distortions introduced into the application of the Christian ethic by human agents in our continent, the basic Christian doctrine of unselfish love is the purest ethic ever devised. Second, in its balancing of the unique importance of each person, mirroring God's image, with a powerful sense of social morality, this Christian ethic established a powerful bulwark against the extremes of collectivism and individualism, even if the imperfect human agents whose role it has been to safeguard and promote this unique balance have all too often failed to carry out this role adequately.

In promulgating and promoting an ethic, one must steer a course between excessive generality, which can weaken the impact of the message on human behaviour, and excessive specificity, which can distort and undermine the credibility of the message. There is often a tension between the need to safeguard and ensure the integrity of the message through some continuing source of authority and the need to avoid undermining the ethic itself through the imposition of such constraints on the messengers as may force them into a hypocritical, and consequently repellent, conformity with accretions and minutiae imposed by over-zealous agents of authority.

Without some authority, the message may be dissipated and lost; with too much constraint on the messengers, they become non-credible exponents of an imposed party line, rather than prophets of essential truths.

The dangers of such a bureaucratisation of religion are ever-present. In the case of Christianity its astonishing initial success in penetrating and

converting within three centuries one of the most powerful states the world has known faced it with this danger at an early stage. The outcome we know: the nexus between church and state of post-Constantinian Rome and Byzantium; the role of civil authority thrust on bishops in key areas of western Europe in the early middle ages; the emergence of Rome's claim to universal civil as well as religious supremacy; the close alliance of church and state that was a feature of much of Catholic continental Europe in the period before, and indeed to some degree even after, the French Revolution.

As a result of the triumph of Protestantism the Catholic Church in Britain and Ireland was spared this last experience, but in much of continental western Europe the political system still reflects this history. Today's western European Christian Democratic parties represent a post-World War II response to the 19th century anti-clerical and laicist reactions against the Church's identification with the state, reactions which had taken the form of continental liberalism on the right and of socialism on the left. Meanwhile in eastern Europe the Byzantine, and later Russian, experience served to identify Church with state in a different, but, perhaps, even more long-lasting manner.

The Reformation and Vatican II were western Christianity's two attempts to tackle the negative impact on religion of this unfortunate historical experience. The former unhappily produced negative as well as positive consequences—a deep division in the Church, the religious wars of the 16th century; and a heritage of sectarianism, the late embers of which still glow in Northern Ireland and which were extinguished only within living memory in the Netherlands and parts of Switzerland. The latter produced an almost instant reactive response from the millennial bureaucracy in Rome, a reaction the ultimate outcome of which we have yet to see.

But despite the accretions and distortions of doctrine and the bureaucratic legalism of much moral teaching in the Roman Church, despite the loss of moral authority and doctrinal clarity in Protestantism, and despite the virtual silencing of the Orthodox voice in Russia and south-eastern Europe under Communism, as well as the abandonment of religious practice and even faith itself by a majority in most European countries, the Christian message, even if often in a post-Christian humanist form, remains a powerful underlying force in Europe and, indeed, largely through Europe's continuing influence on the rest of the globe.

Let me identify three major developments which have started to emerge in Europe in the second half of this century which I believe may powerfully influence the world of the future. The first is the creation of a Code of Human Rights and of international institutions to whose decisions on such issues European states defer. The second is the emerging rejection of violence—specifically war—as an instrument of policy. The third is the substitution for colonialism of a concept, however inadequately implemented in practical terms at present—of a duty on the part of the richer nations to assist the poorer.

Fifty years ago none of these developments was conceivable as a practical policy of governments. Human rights were not an issue in international politics. War was then a normal—if increasingly apocalyptic—instrument of governments; for some, despite the creation of the League of Nations, it even seemed a *preferred* instrument in cases where war could be expected to yield a more decisive outcome than diplomacy. Although by mid-century colonial regimes were becoming more benevolent, they nevertheless remained based on a fundamental unspoken assumption that European countries had a right to rule the world and to draw substantial material benefits from the poorer countries they ruled or dominated.

The reality and worth of the jurisprudence which emanates from the European Convention on Human rights and from the Commission and Court set up by it is incontestable, but I know that my theses about European rejection of war and of colonial exploitation will be greeted by many with scepticism. Conflicts ranging from the undeclared Yugoslav civil war to the Falklands war or the recent Gulf War will be offered in rebuttal of my 'rejection of war' thesis, and the continuing perverse net transfers from poor to rich countries, arising from the excess of interest payments on loans to developing countries and returns on private investment over development aid payments to these countries, will be proposed as evidence against my second proposition.

But before I am accused of starry-eyed naivete let me develop my thoughts a little further.

I am *not* suggesting for one moment that the two processes I have described have been completed; what I am suggesting is that they have *begun*, that where they have taken root they are *irreversible*, and that they are *benevolent* infections, the spread of which will ultimately prove as irresistible as the most potent plague.

First: war as an instrument of policy. It remains such in many parts of the world and not least, as we can see daily on our television screens, in a corner of Europe, the Balkans, that has yet to recover from the consequences of having been torn away for many centuries from its Christian roots. But who now believes that states in western Europe will ever again seek to settle disputes amongst each other by violence? And has not this virus shown signs of infecting much of north-eastern Europe—Hungary, Czechoslovakia and Poland, for example? May it not even have started to infect Russia itself?

This rejection of war as an instrument of policy has, I believe, begun to spread from the realm of intra-European disputes to that of disputes external to western Europe. True, the two great nation-states and major colonial powers, Britain and France, have yet to be much affected by this virus; one cannot ignore the reality not merely of the Falklands War but of the near-enthusiasm with which it was embarked upon by some sections of British opinion, including much of the media. Nor can one ignore the readiness with which Britain, and to a lesser extent France, undertook their roles in

the Gulf War.

But nor should we ignore the incomprehension, even incredulity that British *enthusiasm* for the Falklands War—as distinct from the actual decision to resist aggression by force—aroused in much of continental Europe, nor the patent reluctance of European countries other than Britain or France to involve themselves more than marginally in the Gulf—an attitude that evoked a dismissive and contemptuous reaction from some *macho* British and American circles. There are clear signs that in much of western Europe there is less and less stomach for armed conflict, even when it can be presented as being in the cause of resisting external aggression.

This development, which I believe to be one of the greatest revolutions in world history, is a distinctively European phenomenon, deriving directly from the horrifying experience of the two world wars. While these two wars and the Holocaust have been seen by many humanists as the ultimate vindication of their scepticism about the Christian inheritance in Europe, later centuries may take the opposite view, seeing the abandonment of war as an instrument of policy in late 20th century western Europe as the belated final acceptance of the Christian message of peace, an acceptance owing much to the underlying Christian basis of European society.

The coincidence of this development with the abandonment by European governments of capital punishment—even in defiance of majority opinion in some countries—reinforces my belief that in recent decades we have witnessed in Europe, largely without realising it, the beginning of one of the most fundamental revolutions in history—a revolutionary rejection of state violence—that will ultimately, though perhaps not for a century or more, become a world-wide phenomenon.

There is, of course, another side to this evolution of European attitudes. The rejection of state violence is not the same thing as a commitment to the preservation of human life. The widespread acceptance of abortion and the trend towards tolerance of medical euthanasia, demonstrate that negative forces, specifically an individualist philosophy that is pragmatic rather than principled, are at work in an opposite direction.<sup>1</sup>

My third revolution is the replacement as the prevailing orthodoxy, effectively within a single generation, of colonial exploitation by a system of official and private transfers from wealthier to poorer nations.

I do not pretend that such aid is adequate or even that much of it is well-directed. I don't challenge the fact that the flow of aid to many developing countries is more than offset by capital *outflows* to industrialised countries. Much 'aid' consists of armaments and much is 'tied' to the purchase of goods or services from the donor country. Having said that, what interests me is the revolution in public attitudes to the relationship between rich and poor countries and the pressures and constraints that this has imposed on government policies.

This shift, in both emphasis and policy, has been far greater in Europe than elsewhere. Because the U.S.A. successfully deluded itself into thinking that the possessions acquired from its 1898 war with Spain were not

colonies, one cannot speak of America as abandoning a colonialist philosophy in the way Europe has. American aid is extremely limited in comparison to its GNP and overwhelmingly strategic in motivation. Apart from aid to Israel, America's aid programme does not have the same emotional importance to the public as it does in Europe. Something similar can be said of Japan and the U.S.S.R.

Formerly uninhibitedly colonialist, Europe, shorn of almost every colony it ever possessed, is today, with Canada, *par excellence* the principal provider of non-military aid to developing countries. The Netherlands and Scandinavia allocate 1% or more of their GNP for aid.

Despite remnants of neo-colonialism and protective tariffs, no one in Europe now *defends* the exploitation of poorer countries by richer ones. The language of colonialism has been replaced in Europe by the language of philanthropy. After 2000 years the concept of 'neighbour' in the parable of the Good Samaritan has at last begun in Europe to be given a global application. This is as great and as sudden a reversal of European attitudes as has taken place with respect to war.

It is, perhaps, not entirely coincidental that the shift from colonial exploitation to development aid has been much more dramatic in Europe than in most other industrialised areas for it is in Europe that the sense of solidarity between neighbouring states has also reached its most advanced stage. Transfers of resources between members of the European Community are now quite significant. Thus in the case of Ireland transfers from our E.C. neighbours since we joined have added some 5% to our GNP each year without any *quid pro quo* being sought—not even participation in defence of our region through NATO.

Of course the scale of these intra-E.C. transfers falls well short of those that take place *within* individual states but the extension of the concept of mutual solidarity beyond the boundaries of a state is, in the perspective of history, an astonishing step forward.

Having stated three positive propositions about Europe's moral development, let me turn to a quite different aspect of the Christian experience.

Despite the decline of religious belief and practice in Europe, the political impact of religion as a cultural force can be seen today to be far more potent than many would have believed, even a few short years ago. True, it was always clear that the Protestant-Catholic division had continued political significance. Thus all the overwhelmingly Protestant states of northern Europe had great difficulty in accommodating themselves to the emergence of a European Community.<sup>2</sup>

But there is also another religious faultline in Europe the existence of which was obscured by the Iron Curtain. That faultline is the line between the states whose peoples were converted to Christianity in the mediaeval period from Rome and those who were converted from Byzantium. Poland, Czechoslovakia and Hungary, together with Slovenia, Croatia and, last of all, Lithuania and its Baltic neighbours, whose people were the last in

Europe to be converted, all received their faith from the west, whereas the Balkans and Russia were converted from the east.

Just how deep the cultural divide thus created still remains has re-emerged with startling clarity in the very recent past. It can be seen in the almost automatic orientation of Poland, Czechoslovakia and Hungary towards the European Community, and in the almost instinctive acceptance by the E.C. of the appropriateness of their accession after a suitable transitional period. This contrasts sharply with the much greater hesitancy on both sides in relation to Balkan countries such as Romania and Bulgaria, a hesitancy that is not accounted for solely by the earlier stage of economic development of those two Balkan states.

Most poignantly we see the abiding character of this historical phenomenon in Yugoslavia—not merely in the bitter conflict between Serb and Croat but, perhaps even more strikingly, in the easy acceptance on all sides that Slovenia should rejoin Europe at once, which I cannot but believe reflects its historical experience—unlike that of Croatia—of having been part of the Holy Roman Empire since the late 8th century.

The dangers of this cultural divide between Latin and Greek Europe are most strikingly evident in Yugoslavia (complicated by the residual Moslem presence), and it seems to me of vital importance that the Catholic Church should do everything in its power to mitigate the effects of this deep-seated division, and should at all costs avoid exacerbating it. In this context suggestions that the Holy See looks with particular favour on Croatia because its people are Catholic are most disturbing - above all in view of the appalling history of attempts at forced conversion of Orthodox and Moslem Yugoslavs by the Axis-dominated puppet Croat state as recently as fifty years ago.

In my own country we have experience of the interaction of the cultural force of religion with politics. The conflict in Northern Ireland is not itself a religious conflict but rather one between two ethnic groups, but one cannot ignore the fact that the maintenance of this ethnic differentiation over the four centuries since the period of the Ulster Settlement has owed an enormous amount to the barrier to inter-marriage posed by the religious difference between settlers and the indigenous population following this post-Reformation attempt at colonisation.

While it is true that at the highest level the main churches in Ireland have endeavoured to transcend this history and to cooperate in rejecting and resisting violence, on both sides there has also been a far too ready political identification with their own flocks, which at times has involved unambiguously political statements by one or other church. Moreover insistence on maintaining religious divisions in society, e.g. through the educational system, together with the Catholic Church's insistent application of its mixed marriage code, even in the muted form that this now takes, have been most unhelpful in Northern Ireland.

Surely cultural divisions at opposite ends of Europe which originated four to twelve centuries ago should not be unnecessarily exacerbated by

different branches of Christianity today. Christian churches should be healing forces rather than ancillary sources of continued bitterness and division.

Would it not be better, for example, in the Ukraine if Catholic Church authorities were to act as a break on attempts to reverse overnight the enforced post-war Orthodox settlement and to make specific provision to build new churches for minorities of Orthodox believers in places where churches are returned to the Uniates, and would it not be helpful if the Russian Orthodox authorities were to encourage a generous settlement of this problem involving a gradual transfer of churches back to the Uniates in places where a clear majority of the congregation desire this outcome?

It is far from clear that in these areas of deep-seated division the various churches are doing as much as they might be expected to do as Christians to heal divisions and to practice the Christian love they preach.

I turn now to quite a different theme. Vatican II was an event of global significance but its impact was necessarily limited behind the Iron Curtain. No doubt some news of the astonishing events in Rome penetrated to Christians in eastern Europe, but what came through to them cannot have been anything like the impact that this event had on Catholics, and also on Reformed Christians, elsewhere. In brief and limited excursions to central Europe in the last few years I have come across evidence of this difference in recent historical experience.

Thus to all the other problems which now face the Catholic Church in Europe we must add an element of east-west mutual theological incomprehension within the Church itself. The attachment of so many in western Europe to *aggiornamento* and the stubborn resistance of so many of the faithful to attempts to turn the clock back to the period before the Council must be hard for many in eastern Europe to understand.

The extent to which the lessons of the Council have been absorbed and taken to heart by the faithful in western Europe was brought home to me recently by a survey of Irish lay opinion, rural and urban, carried out by the Augustinians. Ireland is a religiously conservative country with a longstanding reputation for fidelity to Rome and for a certain literalism—some might even say legalism!—in implementing the instructions of the Holy See. Yet even in Ireland the attitude of the faithful to the post-Vatican II reaction of the past dozen years has been strikingly negative. The authors of the survey found that amongst the young and early middle-aged in particular many identify as the legacy of Christianity to their generation brutality in schools, bigotry between sects, a negative view of sex even in marriage, hypocrisy imposed from above on a clergy who are required to proclaim views on issues like contraception that they do not believe, subservience to authority at the expense of honesty, and a failure to distinguish fundamental values from accidental and all-too-often non-credible accretions to the eternal truths of the Gospel.

From these reactions you will see that in Ireland there is now something like a church underground, waiting impatiently for better days to come,



when the values of Vatican II can be re-proclaimed.

The significance of this Irish experience is, I believe, the fact that Ireland is the western European country where commitment to religion has remained most widespread, in all classes. In this respect it could be described as the Poland of western Europe. Religion in Ireland is not, as in some other western European countries, a phenomenon confined to part of the middle class, often conservative in religious as in other matters, some at least of whom may have even welcomed the ecclesiastical back-lash against Vatican II. In a sense just because Ireland is unrepresentative of western Europe in the continuing strength of its people's faith, it may provide a more significant representation of the state of the Church in western Europe in its relationship to Vatican II than may be found in some other countries where Church membership is much more narrowly based in social terms.

If, as we approach the third millennium of the Christian era, the Catholic Church is to re-discover its prophetic role in Europe as elsewhere, it will need to renew and deepen the reforms and insights of Vatican II rather than to seek to weaken and undermine them. The path on which the Church was launched in the time of Constantine involved not merely a debilitating church-state relationship, but a gradual bureaucratisation of the institution itself, accompanied by the growth of a legalistic code of laws and regulations and the use of authority to impose discipline on its ministers and members. Today the exercise of authority through these structures has all but silenced momentarily the prophetic voice of the institutional Church, although not of some of its ministers. For the Church to resume its true role, this prophetic voice would have to be liberated. Of that there is for the moment no sign, but history teaches the need for patience.

- 1 At this point Dr Fitzgerald gave a lengthy excursus on the morality of abortion too long to be recorded here. Copies of the full text of his paper may be obtained at cost from the Secretary of the Catholic Theological Association of Great Britain, 1 Meeting Lane, Towcester, Northants, NN12 7JX (ed).
- 2 Only the two northern European states which had already had to accommodate significant Protestant and Catholic elements within their own populations—viz. Germany and the Netherlands—became founder-members of the E.C. and have been comfortable within it. Even since joining the Community Britain and Denmark have been in their different ways somewhat half-hearted members. The Norwegian people rejected membership at a referendum in 1972. It is only today, four decades after the European Coal and Steel Community was launched, that Sweden and Iceland are finally contemplating accession to the Community.