European Democracy: what can the Church contribute today?

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The origins of the European Union are not to be found in a Catholic conspiracy led by Schumann, de Gaspari and Adenauer driven by the arch-federalist, Jean Monnet and the Dutch Foreign Minister, Johan Beyen. Nor in a Catholic-Socialist plot with Paul Henri-Spaak and Sicco Mansholt. But as a response to the experience of total war, the Nazi occupation of Europe, and the rise of Stalinist communism. A *Nunca mas* - never again – lay behind an emergent consensus around democracy and cooperation involving some pooling of sovereignty, as an ethical and political imperative for post-war Europe. Earlier, the European resistance movements, Czech and Polish notably, in exile in London during the war years, had developed similar thinking and motivations.

Nonetheless, some of the intellectual roots that nourished the European project drew on the "sap" of Christian tradition expressed most clearly in the thinking of Jacques Maritain, a Catholic layman, Catholic enough for Pope Paul VI later to want to make him a cardinal. Maritain sought to reach across the secular divide through the concept of integral humanism, and to reflect what Weber might have called the "elective affinity" (a little less than a causal link) between Christianity and Democracy. Most importantly Maritain tried to integrate Aquinas, with his positive, socially constructive scaffolding of law, with realist accounts of the actual practice of politics that acknowledged, in an Augustinian understanding, the sinfulness of the human condition. "I do not share the romantic optimism which ascribes to the people a judgement which is always just and instincts which are always upright", he wrote in *Christianity and Democracy*.

The Church in the very different circumstances of today badly needs a contemporary Maritain. (1)

Retrieving Politics

This European past is indeed another country. (2) There prevails a pervasive lack of historical humility. Outside cloistered academic circles, the practical wisdom of the past,

particularly if it can be rejected as religious, is widely ignored. This absence of the wisdom of Christian tradition becomes evident when the fast changing and particularist world of national, sub-national and regional politics meets the universalist world of faith; and, in addition, when ideological walls create binary oppositions between political and religious realms. When the cry goes up "the Church should not meddle in politics", the future of democracy will not be the primary concern.

It is no less true that the Church struggles to engage its practical intellect with visionary insights into what a Christian politics might mean in practice. A creative imagination does not often cohabit with clear principles and the political nous about how to implement priorities and strategies, the long march through the institutions. The common good, justice, peace, civic virtue, when not comforting rhetoric remain tantalising tasks, a glorious colouring book, outlines but no coloured pencils provided to fill in the detail.

The daily grind of achieving beneficial incremental change is the perennial work of the politician who can easily, in frustration, if secretly, come to wonder if vital national institutions, parliaments, judiciaries, a vibrant civil society, and the demands of a democratic culture are an impediment to progress. A key is put in the door marked fascism. How much has the material developmental success of the Peoples Republic of China, and in Africa, the authoritarian regime of Rwanda, influenced both intellectual and popular confidence in the model of European democracy? How much did the scandal of parliamentarians' fraudulent expense claims undermine the reputation of "the mother of all parliaments" in the UK? In a competitive world dominated by economism, democracy can seem not to have the best tunes.

The pressures of social media on print media in competition for advertising revenue, have pushed many newspapers into becoming an echo chamber for extreme voices marketing binary oppositions. Both have the potential for becoming a global sounding board for intensifying resentments. Political parties in everyday conversation are casually deemed to be "all the same", politicians "in it" for entirely venal reasons, and politics the domain of manipulation, unaccountability, half-truths, lies, and corruption. When politics is defined in this way, as the antithesis of the pursuit of justice and the common good, then "not meddling in politics" seems like good counsel. The Christian

Democrat Parties, which have been the primary political outcome of Maritain's vision, despite German economic success and reunification, have in Italy had a chequered history undermining their own principles.

Against this background, theology joins politics on stage in the drama of sin and grace, universality and singularity, the majestic utopian politics of the *Summa* and the manipulation of contemporary spin doctors selling mundane policies. A usable theology has to hold this tension in balance, allowing space for the imagination to conjure up a new and better *polis* and realistic ways of working towards it. Yet, this will only be feasible if the Church calls European democrats to read more astutely the signs of the times.

Identity Politics

Europeans live in a complex patchwork of societies and economies: urban, industrial, information/knowledge, and agricultural, each with their political interests. Each historical epoch can be characterised by its dominant economy. But the pace of change from industrial to information/knowledge production has significantly exceeded that from agricultural to industrial epochs. Perhaps this is one reason why there has been no equivalent to the commitment to subsidies of the Common Agricultural Policy for Europe's manufacturing industry. Industrial workers have paid the price. Likewise, the pace of change in globalisation and technology, with the communications revolution pivotal, has resulted in a prodigious sharpening of the impact of change on all those without higher education. Communities in the UK, but not only in the UK, based on particular forms of work facing extinction, mining, steel, dock labour for example, have disintegrated.

Identities based on socio-economic groupings and networks centred on the workplace of manufacturing industry have in consequence been fast disappearing. But wellbeing for the human person, human dignity, is generated in social relationships of shared experience, history and trust. These are not an optional add-on for the mythical rational decision-making individual of market economics. They are constitutive. Despite economistic ideology we are social beings. We are living in a time when meaningful identity deficits, creating a psychological vacuum, are filled by ethnicity, religion or

nation, sometimes mutually exclusive, sometimes coterminous. Black lives matter. Islam is the answer. I am a Catalan, Scot, Orthodox Jew or Afro-Caribbean. Not surprisingly, under these circumstances, such identities have important political dimensions that can, and do, challenge higher-order associations and the state.

Yet multiculturalism in Europe is increasingly called in question - in comparison to, say, Canada, Malaysia and Australia. As Tariq Madood says, it is sowing seeds of division "to encourage strong multicultural or minority identities and weak common or national identities; strong multicultural identities are a good thing – they are not intrinsically divisive or reactionary – but they need a framework of vibrant, dynamic, national narratives, and the ceremonies and rituals which give expression to national identities". (3)

Such imbalance is politically charged in many countries. Today, a narrative such as laicité, read simplistically as the exclusion of religious expression from the state and public domain, appears as problematic as the UK's struggle to provide a positive national identity while allowing parallel ghettoised communities, not adequately integrated, to evolve unchecked over time. (4)

This underlying problem of balance highlighted by Madood has been exacerbated by significant population movements across national boundaries in the last two decades to a point where immigration and integration of newcomers with different cultures has become a central issue for the future of European politics and for democracy itself. The Church's position has been to assert the right to migrate, tempered by an acceptance of a state's requirement for the common good of reasonable limits to numbers entering, plus active concern for the welfare and integration of immigrant. What "reasonable limits" might mean in practice, of course, varies considerably from context to context, and reflects differences in government and popular attitudes. (5)

The Populist Revolt

There have been in the last century, from *narodnik* radicals emerging in Russia's agricultural society of the 1890s, to adept masters of Twitter communication today, a number of definitions of populism. In western Europe, the principal populist ideas are interconnected: a binary division of the world into "the people" and "elites", the former

characteristically ignored, resentful and disaffected, the latter seen as domineering and abusing their power. Populism throws up authoritarian populist leaders who define who "the people" are, establish charismatic relationships with a popular movement, and speak over the head of the organs of existing mainstream Parties and Government. Their speciality is the manipulation of a strong popular assertion of national identity against elites, seen as cosmopolitan, and immigrants, seen as threatening cultural aliens.

David Goodhart in his 2017 *The Road to Somewhere: the Populist Revolt and the Future of Politics* defines the main fissure line in western European societies today as between the "Somewheres" and the "Anywheres". The latter are beneficiaries of higher education, mobile in their professional employments across borders, liberal individualists who dominate government policy in their own self-interest, a hereditary meritocracy not listening to "the people". The former who have not benefitted from university education are more rooted in local communities, many of which have become the angry left-behinds of globalisation and meritocracy, confronting culturally threatening high concentrations of economic migrants and asylum seekers, and suffering from static to falling incomes and without effective trades unions. The two groupings are, of course, far more heterogeneous than this in reality, with liberal ideas being far from the preserve of the elites.

Likewise, such a division does not apply to the eastern European countries where the post-communist elites share a strong nationalism with "the people" and garner widespread support on a conservative nationalist platform of family, nation and a notion of Christian culture. On this basis *Fidesz* in Hungary, *Smer* in Slovakia and the Law and Justice Party in Poland, all arguably populist in leadership character, came to power in the last decades. (6)

Political mobilisation, in 2002 the emergence of Pim Fortuyn's LPF as the second Party in the Netherlands, and Jean-Marie Le Pen's breakthrough for the *Front National* into the last round of the French Presidential elections, drew on the above cluster of themes, divisions and discontents. Between 2002- 2014 the average share of the national vote of similar populist political Parties, for example the Freedom Party in Austria, the *Lega Nord* in Italy, and the People's Party in Denmark, doubled to 17%. UKIP, Alternativ für Deutschland, The Five Star Movement in Italy, and the Swedish Democrats were not far

behind, reaching an average of 10-15%. These votes represented millions of people who are clearly not comfortable with the outcomes of Europe's current democratic dispensation. (7)

Should this concern the Church? Many political Parties start life with strong populist elements and dynamics but mellow in coalitions or, like UKIP, flare and peter out as mainstream forces. European representative democracy is based on popular sovereignty so why should the word *populism* be laden with pejorative connotations?

There are a number of reasons. In Lincoln's Gettysburg address, the context of "government of the people, by the people, for the people" prompts the question of who are, and who are not, "the people". This was the core *casus belli* of the American Civil War. The question of who are citizens, and their rights, the legitimate boundaries of a state's responsibilities, remains critical. This is no less true of immigrants today than black slaves in the 1860s. The danger of the repeated UK government assertion in the post-Brexit period that "the people have spoken" is the implication that the 48% of voters who wished to remain in the European Union are not 'the people' - with all that this can historically imply. Direct democracy via referenda relying on a choice of a simplistic binary opposition, decided by a crude majoritarian measure, on matters of great historical importance is potentially hugely divisive and damaging.

What Goodhart ably argues is that to sustain healthy democracy good governance needs to hear and heed, what he calls, the current "decent populism". Too often the somewhere of the Somewhere is treated as a nowhere in the mental geography of the elite. (8) The stereotype of the Somewhere as a closed-minded bigot, racialist and xenophobe is as contentious as that of the Anywhere as an arrogant expert, irresponsible intellectual, banker or bureaucrat, politician or transnational corporation whose only concern is power and self-advancement, maintaining or increasing elevated salaries and privilege. Like all stereotypes, these characterisations are not entirely fictional. Such characters exist in worrying numbers. However, the danger of "decent populism" is that it provides a cloak of respectability for the 5-10% who fit, to some degree, the Somewhere stereotype.

Slippery slope arguments need to be used sparingly but there is little doubt that Europe's history allows no complacency about democracy remaining safe if political mind-sets based on exclusion, scapegoating and a culture of illusions, lies and half-truths are not vigorously countered in the public domain.

This complex set of interactions sets the state and civil society's relationship with ethnic and religious minorities at the heart of the struggle to sustain and deepen democratic cultures in the European Union. It puts the Church as well as political Parties on the see-saw of universality and particularity, a global Church and a Church cherishing national cultures, an ethics wanting simultaneously to honour both the value of cultural diversity and common citizenship, compassion for the immigrant and sensitivity to the needs of host communities, (some of whom in the UK live in areas with schools in which over 50% of the pupils are immigrants, and, as a result of the natural clustering of immigrant communities, feel that they and their families are now living in "a foreign country").

How should the Church respond?

So was UN Human Rights Commissioner, Zaid Ra'ad al Hussein, right when he declared that the populist zeitgeist is a menace for liberal democracy? Yes, to the extent that the small extreme Right in Europe wags the tail of the dog, and the dog chases mainstream political Parties into policies that do not respect the human dignity of immigrants. The issue has become particularly pressing when the Mediterranean Sea, once Braudel's benign and unifying trading link between those on its shores, has become a lethal watery passage between North Africa and southern Europe, enabling uncontrolled levels of migration including substantial numbers of trafficked slaves. The picture changes monthly. Most recently African and Bangladeshi migrants in impoverished and anarchic Libya, moving to Italy in growing numbers, have raised the knock-on threat to democracy from a populist reaction in the *Lega Nord* and Five Star Movement.

The Catholic Church is not the Methodist or Congregationalist Church. Let us be frank. As long as powerful figures still behave as if its structure were a mediaeval court with mobile phones, the credibility of Catholic interventions in support of democracy are limited in credibility. But the Catholic Church's credibility in the domain of effective

pastoral action at all levels, against modern slavery, in effective compassionate responses to reception and integration of immigrants and asylum seekers, is second to none. Indeed there is much to reflect on in the monotheistic faiths' commitment to hospitality.

Likewise the educational capacity of the Church for the Common Good and, in international development, the Global Common Good, by generating a personal commitment to building a better society, is also second to none. It enables people, in the words of Cardinal Vincent Nichols, to "express and explore that openness to the spiritual and transcendent which is the formative character of every human being" and to respond to "the call of the heart, of the pathway to beauty, of creativity and diversity". (9) This contribution of the Church, often unseen and made by small committed lay groups, provides a *locus standi* for speaking out about the *polis* - which it must be underlined is not a comparable entity to the *ecclesia* even if the citizens of Augustine's two cities can be the same.

Perhaps the first thing that the Church needs to re-iterate about democracy was said by Pope Benedict in Westminster Hall during his visit to the London Parliament in 2010. It remains now no less unpalatable to a secular society than then.   "If the moral principles underpinning the democratic process are themselves determined by nothing more solid than social consensus, then the fragility of the process becomes all too evident – herein lies the real challenge for democracy." The Church must continue advocacy in order to deepen democratic culture but this will grow out of a particular understanding of the human person.

This does not mean spurning the pursuit of social consensus in the face of clashing rights and policy disagreements. Dialogue lies at the heart of democracy. Rather it requires, when confronting moral dilemmas and particular contentious issues, deploying in prudential judgement what Alisdair MacIntyre selects as the core virtues in politics: courage, generosity, justice and truth. (10) The acquisition of these virtues is the promise of Catholic education as well as a precondition for sustaining a vibrant democratic culture. The pursuit of Justice implies the quest for economic equality. The pursuit of truth, dialogue.

The juxtaposition of the "working poor" alongside the "fat cats" is indicative of a capitalist society that has lost its way. The democratic values of equity, informed participation (Article 21 of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights), transparency and accountability are important reflections of the deployment of fundamental virtues in political life. But each needs structures and institutions to ensure they embed and prevail against counter-pressures. It is the balance of institutions that should embody these virtues, between judiciary, legislature, executive, and civil society, that provides the checks and balances essential to retaining stability in fast changing times. (11)

Peace as *tranquillitas ordinis* should be added to MacIntyre's core virtues. Peace requires the rule of law so that, amongst other conflicts, disputes about the implementation of democratic processes may be resolved peacefully, minorities' rights respected. When prioritising advocacy on democracy, attempts to curtail the independence of the judiciary, short-circuit parliamentary debate in favour of executive orders that represent the interests of factions in a ruling Party, or sectarian ideology, or smack of the tyranny of the majority, should appear high on the Church's list for "action immediate". This is not meddling in politics but working for peace.

Educating for Democracy

Goodhart's Somewheres and Anywheres share the pews in Europe's Catholic churches. Probably, given the age of the average mass-goer, fewer of the latter (less than 5% of the UK population went to university in the 1950s) than the former. Fostering, acknowledging, what is healthy and good in the thinking of each world view is a necessary prelude to denouncing what is bad. Generic abusive labels do not foster dialogue.

This Church is much more than a counter-culture. The liturgy of the Eucharist reflects the mystery of the resolution of universal versus particular, the here-now and the everywhere-always, the alpha and omega, the native versus foreign, the open community yet with boundaries - reflected elsewhere as division and mistrust, urgent rejection and populist revolt. Finally, in a post-truth society with fake news to be reckoned with, and gross misrepresentation of what is happening, what is the problem, and why, the Church's basic message to voters in elections, essentially to call to mind the Church's

teaching and go out and cast their ballot, is not enough. Democracy requires *informed* participation, the beginning of some minimal skill in weighing ethical priorities based on understanding what is going on, what is meant by prudential judgement. The model of Archbishop Romero's fearless truth-telling in El Salvador comes to mind.

Democracies depend on citizens knowing when they are being misled and duped so that they can act accordingly. The Catholic school should be defined by its concern that the young person will be just as handicapped leaving without the skills to discern truth from falsehood as leaving with poor literacy and numeracy.   It is the role of the Catholic school to ensure that students have their imagination nurtured, to be able to give an account of what society they would like to live in, and to be able to use their wits, to participate in the democratic processes necessary to achieve it. In turn the state needs to make citizenship classes and school parliaments accredited with the curriculum so that students and teachers treat them as important as other subjects.

It is through sophisticated evidence-based advocacy, dialogue and the provision of its quality education that the Catholic Church in Europe can best contribute to democracy. We are at a conjuncture in Europe at which the Church cannot, and must not, let its light shine under a bushel if we are to revive our declining democratic cultures.

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(c. 3,472 text)

References

1. Maritain J. *Christianity and Democracy: The Rights of Man and the Natural Law* trans. D.C. Anson Ignatius Press, San Franscisco, 2012, 66; *Integral Humanism: Temporal and Spiritual Problems of a New Christendom* trans. J.N.Evans University of Notre Dame Press, 1973

2.   This article attempts to draw on the experience of the UK but points to some of the Europe-wide features of contemporary threats to democracy.

3. *The Guardian* 23 May 207, 32. Prime Minister David Cameron reflected these views at the Munich Security Conference in 2011: "We have allowed the weakening of our collective identity. Under the doctrine of state multiculturalism we have encouraged different cultures to live separate lives, apart from each other and apart from the mainstream…We have even tolerated these segregated communities behaving in ways than run completely counter to our values" quoted in eds. Uberoi V. and Madood T. *Multicultural Rethought* Edinburgh University Press 2015, 281. This began a significant roll-back of multiculturalism as the key policy for minorities. By 2011 20% of the UK population identified as an "ethnic minority" c.f. 12% in 2001.

4. See Dame Louise Casey *The Casey Review: a review of opportunity and integration* Department for Communities and Local Government, 2017 for empirical evidence of the situation in the UK. This report was shelved by government, another example of where truth and contemporary governance seem unable to coexist.

5. Office for Migration and Refugee Policy, Catholic Bishops Conference of England & Wales *The Church's Mission to Migrants* 10 March 2008; *Migration in the Light of Catholic Social Teaching* 30 March 2016 "nations who are able to receive them should do whenever possible"; Pope Francis on World Day of Migrants and Refugees *Child Migrants, the Vulnerable, the Voiceless* 6 January 2107 encourages immigrants to cooperate with the host government.

6. Goodhart D. *The Road to Somewhere: The Populist Revolt and the Future of Politics* Hurst, 2017, 49-69

7. Ibid. 69-74

8. Ibid. 6 and repeatedly through text. Goodhart's label not mine. The phrase "treated as a nowhere in the mental geography" of the establishment, I have taken from email discussing Goodhart's book from Timothy Radcliffe OP

9. Cardinal Vincent Nichols *Living as a Creative Minority in the UK* Benedict XVI Lecture 2016.

10. Alisdair MacIntrye *Ethics and the Politics of Modernity*, 2016, 97 c.f. the values as given in the Lisbon Treaty article 2 for the EU: "The Union is founded on the values of respect for human dignity, freedom, democracy, equality, the rule of law and respect for human rights, including the rights of persons belonging to minorities. These values are common to the Member States in a society in which pluralism, non-discrimination, tolerance, justice, solidarity and equality between women and men prevail".

11. See Human Rights, Democracy and Governance Group, FCO, *Promoting Democratic Principles and Values* Foreign & Commonwealth Office January 2007