

'Where do you come from?'

The impact of migration on European Identity



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It is typically claimed that European identity is rooted in its Christian heritage, Enlightenment civilisation, and Modernity.

Traditional definitions of the idea of Europe that identify our continent as the centre of civilisation, liberty and Christendom assume that all Europeans ascribe to those values, and that to be European you must ascribe to them. [1]

In a recent conversation with a senior Roman Catholic cleric in Europe I was taken aback by his insistence that Europe's experience of sixty years of peace, following the end of the Second World War, was something to be commended to other continents. In fact, he spoke of this as a gift to the wounded peoples of Africa. He and I were quite obviously reading different history books and watching different news stories. I also suspect that our evaluations of Constantine might have differed somewhat!

The concept of a European identity is notoriously slippery and the most optimistic of observers concedes that its development remains a project and a process. However, I happen to be convinced that Christians should care deeply about the development of a European identity. I believe this for no other reason than that it seems at times to have been too readily tied up with concepts of 'Fortress Europe'. A European identity that is solely identified with the European Union, the Schengen Agreement, the free movement of peoples only within the internal market, or the tightening of external border controls, is an identity that deepens an 'Us'/'Other' dichotomy. Europe's historical and recent experience of nationalisms should be sufficient warning against the dangers of defining ourselves in opposition to who we are not.

All nationalisms tend to assume that members of the nation share certain essential commonalities. Many of these are mythological in character. A similar danger lurks in the corridors of Brussels and Strasbourg. Whether these are to be found in the comments of the same Roman Catholic interlocutor who stressed the importance of referring to Europe's 'Christian roots' or of the politician who speaks of Europe's Enlightenment commitment to civilisation and individual liberty. These essentialist understandings of Europe fail to take into account our own shared history of 'barbarism', restriction of civil liberties, or of an earlier version of Europe founded in Greek's classical version of democracy (which incidentally excluded women and slaves).

As globalised citizens living in the Europe of today, we may be facing a unique pressure. In the encounter with the 'other' we discover that there is something of the 'other' in 'us'. The cultural and social pot-pourri that is contemporary Europe, makes it possible for me to buy a packet of Czech dumpling mix here in Gloucester for 99p and it means that far from experiencing European integration as a harmonising, homogenising tendency, I am able to celebrate a new emerging diversity and 'otherness' that even allows me to practice a few words of 'shopping' Czech. Citizens of the European Union enjoy the right to relocate to any of its member States for the purposes of employment or education. Many of us would be reluctant to describe a British citizen who moved from Glasgow to London for the same purposes as a 'migrant'. Were one of us to move from London to go and work in Paris we might equally feel uncomfortable were others to impose that label on us. Yet, when a Polish young person moves from Gdansk to find employment in Gloucester, they are likely to be

described as a migrant. Worse, they might be described as one of a 'wave' or 'horde' of migrants about to 'flood' the UK. The discourse of migration can be used in this way to underline the 'us'/ 'other' dichotomy and reinforce a view of Europe as culturally monochrome, civilised and differentiated from the non-European migrant hordes. Unless, that is, they are the educated or economic elites who work in European hospitals or buy its football clubs!

The time may be overdue for Christians to think more carefully about the applicability of the Old Testament vision of a just society and the teaching of Jesus (for example in Luke 4) to the current political processes that are building a temporal, fortress-like kingdom totally lacking any eschatology that offers a bolder vision of how the lion and the lamb can share the same feeding trough and the same bed of hay.

The presence of migrant peoples is an opportunity to reflect on the nature of European identity.

It is currently estimated that 1.5 million migrants arrive and settle in the EU each year. The same estimates also suggest that seven million migrants within the EU have irregular status with a further half a million of these arriving each year. In total, 4% of the EU population, or 18.5 million people, is made up of non-EU citizens

This is clearly a challenge for the political leaders of the European Union and the other European Institutions. It would be politically and economically naïve to simply open Europe's external borders to everybody who comes knocking. Equally, it is historically naïve to believe that Europe is essentially a Christian club (that can exclude Turkey solely on the grounds that its citizens are Muslims) and that Europe's historical development has taken place without any reference to, dialogue with, or borrowing from, other non-European cultures.

Philip Putnam recently wrote that, "In the short to medium run... immigration and ethnic diversity challenge social solidarity and inhibit social capital." [2] Yet he goes on to describe the social capital that develops in communities where social and cultural diversities have stimulated mutual enrichment and more encompassing identities. I feel less a stranger in a globalised world because I can turn to Russian, Italian, Spanish, and Lithuanian-speaking friends when I come across something written in a language I could not otherwise do anything with. Not everything of importance on the internet is written in English.

The political emphases of the European Union seem to stress a different approach, however. EU home affairs commissioner Franco Frattini takes the view that, "There can be no immigration without integration", a point he reiterated at a Potsdam meeting in May 2007 of the EU's integration ministers. [3] Intriguingly the meeting had been called to discuss integration with reference to inter-cultural and inter-religious problems in some of the EU states. Yet despite his apparent insistence on integration, Mr. Frattini is sufficiently pragmatic to understand that Europe's workplaces and pension funds will increasingly rely on economically productive young people from the new EU member states as well as those from Africa and Asia. "It is up to me - up to Europe - to promote and encourage highly-skilled migrants to come, if needed and where needed".

A January 2007 report in the EU Observer stated that migration from ex-communist EU states to the UK and Ireland showed no sign of slowing down, with Romanians and Bulgarians testing their new EU travel freedoms. Ninety thousand Poles registered to work in Ireland in 2006 compared with 65,000 in 2005 according to the Irish national insurance office, with over 250,000 new workers settling in Ireland since 2004. Net migration to the UK hit 400,000 in 2005 - almost double the level in 2004 and 215,000 more than officially stated by the British government.

During September 2007, Mr. Frattini unveiled his plans for the EU's own version of America's Green Card, dubbed the 'Blue Card'. Brussels is set to issue an EU-wide work permit allowing employment to non-Europeans, in any country within the 27-nation bloc. He expressed his hope that it would make Europe a more attractive work destination than the US, Canada or Australia and cut down on the severe labour shortages facing the bloc due to its aging population and declining birth rates.

I simply want to stress here that the discourse of integration fails to address the question of the lack of internal integration. With what does a person of African origin integrate in Belgium, for example; the Flemish peoples and their (diverse) customs, the Walloon-speaking peoples, or the French speaking peoples? Is Belgium sufficiently integrated internally for it to expect others to integrate into it? The issue is no less complicated for non-Federal States that nevertheless demonstrate wide regional variations and local distinctives. My American wife had to swear a monarchist oath to become a British citizen. I could not do such a thing, even though I am born a British citizen. A BBC survey in September 2006 showed that only 8% percent of migrant Poles had claimed any state benefit during the two years that on average they had been in the UK. They are, it seems, well integrated in employment and economic terms. However, 66% of them could not say who David Cameron was. Would either of these, contrasting indicators, really prove useful in determining levels of integration? Integration may be a politically useful discourse but its logic is deeply flawed and, I would suggest, susceptible to theological investigation.

In 2004 the Conference of Protestant Churches of Europe issued the Liebfrauenberg Declaration, addressing a wide range of issues relating to the phenomena of Migration in Europe. In a section titled, 'The biblical message and responsibility of the churches' the Declaration states,

"The biblical message calls the churches to responsibility for refugees and migrants in a particularly prominent way. Love of strangers and the consequent ethic are essential features of the people of God in the world. There are very few biblical commands that have the same weight and clarity as the instruction to protect strangers. When a stranger resides with you in your land, you shall not oppress the stranger; you shall love the stranger as yourself, for you were strangers in the land of Egypt (Leviticus 19:33). The New Testament raises love of the neighbour to a command overcoming the borders of difference (Luke 10:25-37). Since God does not look at a person's status, calling people of all nations and societal groups into the Kingdom (Acts 10:34f; Romans 2:10f), the community of Christians sends a signal around the world, embracing those who were strangers and overcoming any narrow, nationalist thinking and action."

Christian migrant peoples raise similar, as well as different, questions about the project of European identity.

European media seem transfixed by the image of the Islamic fanatic who lives and works in the heartlands of Europe breathing threats against the 'Western infidel'. There is doubtless a germ of truth in such a stereotype, yet it remains a crude and unrepresentative satire of the greater majority of Muslims living in Europe. Philip Jenkins' latest offering, *God's Continent: Christianity, Islam, and Europe's Religious Crisis*, [4] is commendable in this respect. He refuses to fall into the same trap of demonising all Muslims living in Europe or of characterising them as religious 'fifth columnists'.

Jenkins also shines the spotlight on the presence of many Christians among those who have made their way to Europe from Africa, Asia, or Latin America. Some of these intentionally carry their Christian faith back to the mission-sending countries that have historically planted the seed of the Gospel in those countries. In March 2006 the Reverends Hmar Sangkhuma and John Colney, from the Mizoram synod of the Presbyterian Church of India, began operating as "mission enablers" for the Indian denomination's counterpart in Wales.

Sangkhuma, aged 49, said that he saw his task as helping to remedy a "spiritual void". Others have relocated for purposes of employment or education and have revitalised almost redundant causes. Romanian migrants revived the ghost town of Aguaviva in Spain where over 100 have settled, prompting the opening of a new Orthodox worshipping community. Aguaviva's Romanian population is only a miniscule percentage of nearly two million Romanians, a tenth of the country's population, who had already emigrated to Spain and Italy before Romania's accession to the EU. In 2006 Romanians sent home more than £2bn in remittances to family members still living in Romania. In Bradford, an American branch of the Romanian Orthodox Church established a congregation in 2005 and Roman Catholic Parishes across the UK have been revitalised by migrant Roman Catholics from Poland.

In March 2007, Ross on Wye Baptist Church, in the heart of rural Herefordshire, commissioned a Ukrainian pastor to investigate the spiritual needs of the nearly 8,000 Ukrainian seasonal workers in the area. For an England vs. Russia football match, screened live at the Church, there were just under 50 Eastern Europeans from the Ukraine, Russia, Belarus, Moldova, Macedonia, Serbia & Montenegro, and Slovakia.

However, the indigenous churches of Europe should take careful note of research conducted by Vitoria University in Spain during March 2005. The results were based on more than 500 interviews with immigrants from over 30 different countries. 85% said they believed in God, but this was a decrease from 99% for those who said that they had believed in God when they first arrived in Spain. Of those interviewed, some 15% had abandoned belief in God and a further 10% were in the process of losing it. Only a small percentage, 5.8%, reported experiencing their faith grow. [5]

Understanding the complexity of the religious beliefs and practices of migrants in Europe is certainly important for Europe's policy makers but it is also highly relevant to the missionary task of the Church among and with these people. The European Union is, not surprisingly, paying close scrutiny to Islamic leaders arriving with little higher education or awareness of Europe's social and cultural traditions. An EU programme, worth €4million, offers a brand-new multi-faith approach trying to counter the exclusion of migrant communities by "familiarising religious leaders", including Islamic preachers, with the core of European values and the multicultural and multi-faith environment in the EU. Both the Council of Europe and the EU are investing heavily in programmes that will emphasise inter-cultural dialogue and encounter during 2008. However, during consultation with European churches with regard to this programme, the secular policy makers adopt a characteristic default position. Unprepared to abandon the public space to the controlling influence of the forces of Christendom, secular policy makers fail consistently to understand adequately the nature of religious belief and conviction. The desire to bring different religious leaders into religious dialogue has so far been unable to break through the iron cage of secular assumptions that are perceived by those who hold them as the only way to offer the 'value-free' space within which dialogue can take place. The value-free nature of secular assumptions is certainly contestable, but these also fail to recognise the implicit (or explicit) claims of religionists to be able to provide a more compelling vision for framing the public space. Is the superior utility of the secular framework, that presently frames inter-cultural and inter-religious dialogue, really so self-evident?

In 2001, the European Values Survey conducted an extensive set of national surveys across many European countries. Questions were asked about attitudes to migrants. The results make interesting reading. What emerges quite clearly, is that more regular church attendance tends to correlate with more positive attitudes towards migrant peoples. Cross tabulations of the data carried out by me in 2005 revealed this intriguing phenomenon. This tends to run counter to the view of the media and Europe's politicians that religious belief and practice tends to serve the cause of fundamentalism and extremism, often allied with subtle forms of nationalism. The EVS data at least casts some doubt on the truth of such allegations.

In 2004, the Church of England's General Synod, February 2004, requested the Mission and Public Affairs Council, "to consider how the contributions and needs of minority ethnic people relate to an inclusive theology in changing models of church; consider the growing contribution of minority ethnic people to mission and parish renewal; and draw upon the experience of minority ethnic clergy and laity at looking at new ways of being church".

If we can extend this discussion of ethnic minorities to include migrant, refugee, and other displaced peoples, it is entirely possible to imagine the future churches of Europe reflecting more adequately the rainbow character of the triune God, who exists in diversity, and who brings blessing to all the followers of Jesus by redeeming and transforming 'us-ness' and 'otherness' into the 'we-ness' that characterises the heavenly host.

Footnotes

1. Guerrina, R., *Europe History, Ideas, Ideologies*, Hodder Arnold, London, 2002, p6.
2. Putnam, P., 'E Pluribus Unum: Diversity and Community in the Twenty-first Century', in *Scandinavian Political Studies*, Vol. 30, No. 2, 2007, p138.
3. 'No immigration without integration says EU Minister', in *EU Observer*, 11 May 2007.
4. Oxford University Press, 2007.
5. 'Immigrants losing their faith in Spain', in *ACPress.net*, Madrid, April 5th, 2006.

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