ASSESSING CHRISTIAN CONTRIBUTIONS TO THE EU REFERENDUM DEBATE

By Simon Barrow

CONTENTS

Abstract (page 1)
1. Our starting points: belief, nation states and Europe (page 2)
2. Resources and research from a Christian perspective (page 3)
3. Church comment and interventions in the EU debate (page 5)
4. Christian Eurosceptic voices (page 8)
5. Hope in Europe: an alternative Christian perspective (page 10)
Notes, references and further reading (page 13)
The author (page 16)
About Ekklesia (page 16)
Copyright notice (page 17)

ABSTRACT

This document follows on from our longer paper on the EU referendum and beyond (Ekklesia, 13 June 2016), significantly supplementing, adapting and excerpting parts of What kind of European future? It sets out some of the main positions taken by the churches in the United Kingdom referendum debate about staying within, or leaving, the European Union. It provides an overview of key interventions by Christian bodies and individuals. It also references and analyses data and research on different Christian attitudes to European integration. Here we also set out, from Ekklesia’s perspective, an understanding of the ethical and theological dimensions of engagement with the European debate in and beyond the referendum. This includes Ekklesia’s ten core principles (which can be shared by Christians and others of good faith) for assessing the claims and counter-claims of the different camps.
1. OUR STARTING POINTS: BELIEF, NATION STATES AND EUROPE

The debate about the future of the European Union has not been a primary concern for Ekklesia since it was established nearly fifteen years ago. But many of the issues we have commented on and made policy proposals for (economy and environment, migration, welfare and human rights, including the rights and dignity of disabled people, among others) have significant European dimensions, or involve specific consideration of EU policies and positions.

Likewise, it is Europe (both within and beyond the bounds of the present European Union) that provides the context for the continuing shift away from a ‘Christendom’ order towards a variety of post-Christendom settlements. That is, the lessening of the institutional and cultural power of religion, responses to those phenomena, and the relocation of Christian impulses in both reactionary and liberating ways as alternative sources of engaged values within increasingly plural European societies.

Back in 2002, when Ekklesia was getting off the ground, we published our first booklet, in collaboration with Sarum College. Penned by the Rev Dr Richard Franklin, it was entitled Towards the abolition of the nation state. With a deliberately provocative title, it situated a more reflective ethical and Christian argument for European cooperation and the withering away of the ‘big state’ form – not the end of nations per se, but a shift in the focus of polity towards local communities, towns and cities, regions, people groups, small countries and different levels and structures of continental and global collaboration. Much has changed since then, but the need to make power (both political and economic) accountable to where people live, move and have their being remains a continuing concern for us in changing times.

In 2003/4 Ekklesia, focusing specifically on a concern within the European Union, made submissions to the UK government and to the European Commission on the preamble to a proposed new constitution for the EU. The particular religion and belief issue in contention at the time was the dual question of whether to name God at the beginning of the document, and whether to make specific reference to Christianity as a key inspiration for the foundation of the EU. From a nonconformist Christian perspective, we took the view that putting God into any political constitution was not only problematic for the many non-religious persons now living in the continent, but also theologically wrong. It made God a component of the human order, thus risking instrumentalising the divine for particular political, social, economic and cultural purposes.

Similarly, singling out one religion or belief within the emerging European polity was tantamount to making the EU a confessional body rather than a shared civic/political space, and confuses freedom of religion or belief (which we strongly advocate and defend) with privileging one kind of religion or belief. In short, Ekklesia does not believe in a ‘Christian Europe’ any more than it believes in a ‘Christian Britain’. Faith cannot and should not be imposed on a state, nation or supranational confederation. Belief should remain the free, associational...
choice of people, families and confessional communities. Instead, our concern is about how Christians can work alongside others in civil society to reshape local, national, regional and supranational bodies towards the ten core, ecumenical principles we set out in section five below.

Many would argue (as we did during the Scottish independence referendum campaign from 2012 to 2014) that the kind of political and economic union represented by the present United Kingdom continues to be skewed towards certain regions as the expense of others, and the haves at the expense of many have-nots. It sees rapacious consumerism taking precedence over economic and environmental responsibility; colludes in the diminution of a welfare society, and stokes increasingly xenophobic attitudes towards guests, migrants, refugees and asylum seekers. If the UK is to survive, it requires radical change. Much the same, of course, could be said about the European Union. We set out these issues in our What kind of European future? paper. The two unions are not, however, of a similar kind. One is of a unitary state with measures of devolution. The other is essentially confederal. The choice for or against is therefore different.

### 2. RESOURCES AND RESEARCH FROM A CHRISTIAN PERSPECTIVE

The churches have not played a headline-making role in resourcing or influencing the European Union debate in the short run-up to the 23 June UK referendum on membership. But there have been initiatives such as the Church of England and Church of Scotland ‘Reimagining Europe’ group blog and website encouraging debate and discussion from a variety of perspectives.

In terms of wider resources, aside from articles in the church press, in Christian Today, and from some NGOs, perhaps the most notable contribution has come from the Joint Public Issues Team of the Free Churches in Britain (Baptists, Methodists, United Reformed Church, with some collaboration with the Church of Scotland and the Quakers). JPIT has produced an excellent information and discussion pack on the EU referendum (with support from the Scottish Churches Parliamentary Office) aimed at churches, small groups and individuals, which Ekklesia is happy to commend.

Churches Together in Britain and Ireland (CTBI), the official ecumenical body, has provided a helpful summary of the resources available from various Christian sources. Christians in Politics has produced an ‘EU quiz’ and other commentary. The Evangelical Alliance in the UK has been publishing a series of articles looking at key issues relating to membership of the EU and how Christians might approach the vote, entitled ‘What kind of EU?’ The Kirby Laing Institute for Christian Ethics (KLICE) has a resource page dedicated to the EU referendum. Theos has reflected on moral and religious aspects of the debate in its paper A soul for the union. Ekklesia has maintained regular commentary and news briefing on Europe and on the EU referendum, as well as producing this paper, What kind of European future? and a response to the BBC consultation on referendum coverage.
In April 2016, the Rev Dr Keith Clements, former General Secretary of the Conference of European Churches (CEC) and former International Secretary of the Council of Churches for Britain and Ireland, CTBI’s predecessor body, wrote a short paper entitled ‘The EU Debate and the Gospel’, which sets out a pro-EU position based on the theme of unity. 17

Christians for Europe 18 defines itself as “are a group of Christians in the UK who are pro-European. We come from all political parties and faith traditions. We believe that our faith calls us to a life together, loving our neighbours – whether individuals or nations. We are convinced that working together is vital for our human family. Our vision is for a world where all people live in peace with the opportunity to thrive. We believe that Britain’s membership of the European Union is a key way we can help make that happen.”

In relation to research, there have been three studies of significance in assessing the impact of religion on decision making about the future of Europe. First, based on data from the latest European Social Survey (ESS), 19 Dr Margarete Scherer, associate at Goethe University, Frankfurt, Germany, has posited 20 that citizens of European countries with a Catholic heritage are more likely to support the European integration trajectory of the EU than citizens of historically Protestant countries.

Dr Scherer concludes: "Religious historical background still shapes contemporary political attitudes towards the EU", and represents "a deep layer of public support for European integration". 21 This is perhaps not so surprising, given the prominent role Catholic Social Teaching played in conceiving the ‘European project’ as it emerged after the Second World War in the 1940s and 1950s. She adds: “The Reformation and the resulting church-state relations still have implications on the political cultures of today. Religious background is a deep layer of public support for European integration while religious doctrines have shaped people’s support for and/or opposition to government intervention in social protection for centuries.” 22

However, as commenter Duncan Pugh notes: “I’m not sure the correspondence holds. Lutheranism, Calvinism, Anglicanism, Baptists [and] Methodism represent a vast array of views which are not always antagonistic to Catholicism. [S]urely the debate that needs to be had is exactly that of subsidiarity or federalism in Europe[?]” 23

Georgetown University academics Dr Brent Nelsen and Dr James Guthalso contend that: “Religion shapes a confessional culture that lingers long after the vibrancy of faith has diminished.” That seems true on a differential basis across the continent. The extent to which the EU itself is seen as a ‘religious issue’ is less certain, however. The question for many from a Christian cultural background who take a view on the desirability or otherwise of European integration and accession is often framed, from the perspective of ‘civic religion’, in terms of the assimilation and mutation of beliefs and values, particularly as a result of migration (which has often been portrayed as benefiting Catholic communities while disadvantaging Protestant ones). 24
In Britain, however, those for whom Christianity of various kinds is a primary identity marker tend to lean in a Eurosceptic direction, according to a survey conducted in April 2016 by the Wales Institute of Social and Economic Research (WISERD). This indicates that some 54 per cent of those identifying as Christian were more likely to favour the UK leaving the EU, compared with 43 per cent of those with no religious affiliation – allowing for the effects of political partisanship, region, age and education. Evangelicals seemed more likely to be on the skeptical side of the debate than those of more liberal or catholic persuasion.

Possible differences in voting intentions between Christians and those of other or no religions may also be detected from a survey of adults in England conducted by Populus in May 2016 on behalf of the Hope not Hate anti-fascist campaign group, the aims of which Ekklesia is pleased to support.

In the Populus survey, nearly 51 per cent of those identifying themselves as Christians said they either would, or were more likely to, vote for the UK to Leave the EU. This compared with 41 per cent of those of no religion, 38 per cent of Muslims, and 13 per cent of Hindus. Sample sizes for Sikhs and Jews were too small to draw conclusions from. Voluntary surveys within the Jewish community suggest a majority for Remain.

Ben Ryan, a researcher for the think tank Theos, identifies the problems drawing conclusions from this poll. But he adds: “At its crudest the data would seem to suggest that the two sides of this debate have serious issues in reaching some groups in particular. The Leave campaign is not resonating with minority religious groups (with the interesting possible Jewish exception), and Remain has a serious Christian (potentially primarily Anglican) problem.”

It is important not to draw fixed conclusions from these rather different surveys and studies. Firstly and crucially, none of them investigated whether or not respondents made an intentional, explicit or preferential connection between their religious commitment or culture and their attitude toward the European Union. The differences within and between religious affiliates could as easily be explained by differential religious and social factors as by anything that can be bracketed off as ‘religion’. Secondly, it is near impossible to calculate the comparative influencers on voting patterns on the data available. Thirdly, some of the data (ESS) dates back over two years and may not reflect changes in the pattern of debate since then.

3. CHURCH COMMENT AND INTERVENTION IN THE EU DEBATE

While the extent of discussion or consideration by Christian congregations in the UK seems to have varied enormously, with reports not suggesting a high level of engagement, church representatives, councils, departments and synods have been making comment both within their denominations and into the public
The great majority have tended to be sympathetic to the aims and aspirations of the European Union.

The **Church of Scotland** reaffirmed its own position in favour of EU participation back in February 2016 and then again in May. The Kirk’s outgoing Church and Society Council Convener (now CEO of Christian Aid in Scotland), the Rev Sally Foster Fulton, welcomed the Church of Scotland General Assembly’s continued backing for membership of the European Union. She said: "For the last 20 years we have recognised the European Union’s achievements in promoting peace and security. We [have now] reaffirmed that position. We are saying as a Church that much has been gained by being a part of the European Union, and we believe there is a great deal we can do in the future as an integral part of Europe. We recognise it is not perfect, but the EU is a work in progress and not the finished product. The only way we can continue to be part of the transformation is to remain within it." 

The **Catholic Bishops of Ireland**, who work across the two jurisdictions of the island, find themselves in an interesting position where they might end up relating to two states, one inside and one outside the EU, depending on how the UK referendum goes. While remaining ‘officially neutral’, they have in effect made the case for a positive approach to the European Union, arguing that it is based on ‘gospel’ values – including that of subsidiarity.

The **Quaker Council for European Affairs** (QCEA) is a source of informed and intelligent comment. “QCEA brings a Quaker vision of just relationships to European institutions. Quaker values include testimony to peace, equality, simplicity and truth.” In 1987 QCEA made a statement on European values and institutions in the light of peace and justice commitments, re-circulated in Quaker communities in 2016. It declares: “Our vision of Europe is of a peaceful, compassionate, open and just society, using its moral influence to encourage other countries and peoples towards the same goals. It is of a community of peoples which acts towards individuals and other communities as we would have others act towards us. As Quakers we seek to be sensitive to that of God in others and in ourselves, whose needs have the same validity as our own. Hence the right sharing of the world’s resources is central to our thinking.”

The **Catholic Bishops of England and Wales** have collectively resisted becoming directly involved in the debate, instead issuing a bipartisan statement on 15 April 2016, underlining “the historic nature” and potential impact of the vote. They wrote: “In our view, three things are essential. That we pray for the guidance of the Holy Spirit; that we all inform ourselves of the arguments on both sides of the debate; that we each exercise our vote with a view to the common good of all.”

The bishops drew attention to how the European project of integration was born out of “catastrophic” war, how “trade was harnessed to peace” and highlighted Pope Francis’ emphasis on the ideals which shaped the EU (peace, subsidiarity and solidarity).
The referendum is “about much more than economics”, they contended, and reminded voters of the Christian roots of the continent, acknowledged the “justifiable concerns” of increasing integration, and the need to reflect on cherished values with “mutual respect and civility.” Scottish bishops have also declined to come down on either side, instead urging Scots to “engage positively” in the vote and calling on God “to guide us and bless us in whatever choice we make in good conscience.”

Archbishop of Canterbury Justin Welby (Church of England) has mostly chosen the path of questions rather than propositions to make his contribution: “How can we revitalise ideas such as sovereignty and subsidiarity – ideals formed out of Christian faith whose political dimensions capture their meaning only in part – and help encourage a clearly values-based approach to Britain’s future relationship with the EU; one that includes, but does not end with, economic and political perspectives?” 39

He told The House parliamentary magazine in March 2016: “My hope and prayer is that we have a really visionary debate about what our country looks like. From those who want to leave; what would it look like? What would Britain look like, having left? What would be its attitude internationally? What would be its values? What are the points of excitement, of contributing to human flourishing? How does that liberate the best that is within us? And from those who want to stay, how would we change the European Union? How would we make it more effective if we remained in it? What’s our vision?” 40

The Archbishop of Canterbury also issued a welcome and stern challenge to UKIP and its leader over the damaging impact of fear baiting, scaremongering language about immigration. Late in the debate he appeared to lean more towards a Remain position, stressing bridge building, peacemaking and cooperation between nations as part of the distinctive inheritance of the EU brought about by Christians and others.

Other senior church figures recently set out their Remain case, based on Judeo-Christian principles, in a letter to The Times, to be published on the week commencing 13 June 2016. They write: “The British Isles have been inseparable from Europe’s history, its culture, its economy and its soul. We have been an integral part of Europe’s glories and its shame. We have benefited from its arts and sciences, its literature and its learning, and contributed much in return.

“Europe’s wars have been our wars. Now we share its longing for peace and rejoice in the reconciliation achieved since 1945. Had we not stood firm against tyranny in 1939 there would be no democratic Germany at the heart of the European Union, imperfect but a remarkable achievement. Europe is ‘us’, not ‘them’. Our European neighbours want us to stay.

“Europe is part of our Judeo-Christian heritage, now enriched by other faiths. Not only does our prosperity attract others, but also our vision and values, freedoms and tolerance. Europe matters to a world needing solidarity, peace, social justice and care for the environment. It would be irresponsible to walk away.
“To leave the EU would be a vote against a community from which we have much to gain and to which we have much to contribute. Brexit would be a vote against ourselves; a political, economic, cultural, and spiritual self-inflicted wound.”

On 28 May 2016 the former Archbishop of Canterbury, Dr Rowan Williams, led a short but powerful plea for continued EU engagement from Christian, Jewish, Muslim and Hindu leaders. It declared: “As leaders and senior figures of faith communities, we urge our co-religionists and others to think about the implications of a Leave vote for the things about which we are most passionate.

“The past 70 years have been the longest period of peace in Europe’s history. Institutions that enable us to work together and understand both our differences and what we share in common contribute to our increased security and sense of collective endeavour.

“What’s more, so many of the challenges we face today can only be addressed in a European, and indeed a global, context: combating poverty in the developing world, confronting climate change and providing the stability that is essential to tackling the migration crisis.”

Last but not least, the National Justice and Peace Network within the Catholic Church, while seeking to be even-handed, has posed tough questions about what a Brexit would mean: “Whereas a vote to Remain faces us with broadly a continuation of what we know or have in the pipe-line, a vote for Brexit is to sanction a definite change in our situation. Would such a change lead to the UK’s Overseas Aid budget being cut or increased? Would a change lead to a more or less sympathetic attitude to migration and asylum? Would a change improve the working conditions of the lower paid especially, or put them at risk? Would the new UK be arguing for stronger and sooner measures against Climate Change, or not? With the current mind-set so firmly looking at our commercial and financial wellbeing, would Brexit herald improved environmental standards in our working practices or not? Would incoming overseas investment face stricter standards or be offered incentives to the disadvantage of our workforce or environment?”

4. EUROSCÉPTIC CHRISTIAN VOICES

Those who have expressed concern about the European Union in terms of its increasing secular polity and resistance to a privileged naming of God and Christianity in its constitution are conservative Catholics and Anglicans. For example, another former occupant of the See of Canterbury, Lord Carey, has set out his opposition to the EU in the right-wing Daily Mail newspaper. In particular, he has cited national sovereignty and control over immigration (on which he takes a restrictive view) as two of the main reasons behind his decision to press for Brexit.
**Christians for Britain** is a campaigning group advocating Brexit and a religiously coated British nationalism, and appears to be supported by voices mainly from the right, but with some from the left. 43

Among those putting the anti-EU case in contrary left-leaning political and ecclesial terms has been the Rev Dr Giles Fraser, 44 a media standard bearer for progressive Christianity. He sees the European Union as essentially an un-reformable neoliberal club, as opposed to those who contend that abandoning the argument for an alternative economic practices within the world’s largest trading bloc is an unwarranted act of political pessimism. 45

Fraser also wants to see open borders, and is against current restrictions imposed by the EU. But the present UK government desires even harsher, less humane immigration policies, the Leave campaign has made reducing immigration its biggest argument – and much of the Labour opposition, divided and weak, appears to buy into a basically fearful paradigm about migration. Only Scotland, which Fraser ironically wants to keep within a Conservative dominated UK, offers a different perspective, with a more open approach being meaningfully advocated by the Scottish National Party (SNP), the Scottish Green Party and Scottish Labour.

A UK vote to Leave the EU, Giles Fraser has said, is not a vote for the Leave campaign – which is almost wholly dominated by neoliberal, determinedly anti-immigrant forces. This is a view that could come to haunt those who have been persuaded by it. But it is not they who will pay the greatest price for the belief that trailing with an overwhelmingly reactionary, xenophobic campaign will not put reactionary xenophobes and their policies in a far stronger political position. That price will surely be paid by those imperiled most through the rise of such movements. It seems a fancifully idealistic position to take. 46

Fraser’s stronger theological and ecclesial argument is that dissenting Reformation principles, which he strongly supports, point towards leaving the kind of European Union that now exists. 47 But this view has been strongly rebutted by Diarmaid MacCulloch, Professor of the History of the Church at the University of Oxford, 48 who writes: “There was no idea of little Englandism in such Protestant reformers as the main author of England’s Book of Common Prayer, Thomas Cranmer, who is absent from Giles’s argument.

“Cranmer, the first Protestant Archbishop of Canterbury, was aiming for the English Reformation to resemble as closely as possible his favourite movement in Europe, that of a mainland European city called Strasbourg (though German Reformers, and Cranmer, the English Archbishop with a German wife, would have called it Strassburg).

“Why did Cranmer admire Strassburg’s Reformation? Partly because he got on well with its chief reformer, a former friar from Alsace called Martin Bucer, but mainly because Bucer and his Strassburg colleagues were especially energetic in their efforts to stop Protestants across Europe quarrelling.
“This unity is also seen in the language of the Reformation: Latin, an international language. It is a mistake to think of Latin simply as the language of Roman Catholicism and its liturgy. It was more truly a universal language, a genuinely effective Esperanto, than English is today. You needed to learn it, certainly, but learning Latin was the main point of schools at the time, and once you had it, you truly were a citizen of a single culture. Without Latin, Protestantism simply couldn’t have spread across local boundaries.”

Baptist minister the **Rev Dr Ian Tutton**, based at The Free Church, Hampstead Garden Suburb, has taken a not dissimilar view to Fraser, arguing *inter alia*: “I do not believe that the decision whether or not to remain in the European Union (EU) either carries with it any overriding theological expedient, or that it is to be decided according to any particular moral imperative. For it is a purely political matter and as such any Baptist Christian should make up her/his own mind accordingly, and that Baptist Christians can find themselves on either side of the argument without feeling that the other has been compromised in any way.” 49

5. **HOPE IN EUROPE: AN ALTERNATIVE CHRISTIAN PERSPECTIVE**

Ekklesia subscribes neither to the view that such issues as those involved in this EU referendum are “purely political” (as if the realm of politics was somehow sealed off from that of belief in action) nor to the idea that we can appeal to abstract and questionably imperial “Judeo-Christian values” in determining our stance – less still to the idea of a ‘Christian’ nation or continent. 50 We see far greater significance for guidance to Christians (and illumination to those of others beliefs) in arguments developed out of the long tradition of Catholic Social Teaching, 51 the justice and nonviolence orientation we share with the peace churches, 52 and the practical commitments of the growing Christian environmental movement. 53

These theological and ethical stances do not offer definitive conclusions on issues like the polity of the EU, but they do set out the applicable principles of sharing, peacemaking, human solidarity and care for creation upon which illuminating Christian arguments – in creative dialogue with those of other beliefs and convictions – can take shape.

Dr Keith Clements has set out the contrast between the mean nature of the arguments that have taken place leading up to 23 June 2016 and the generous way they need to be framed: “*The EU referendum debate is about relationships and that is why it is a matter on which we need to seek insights from our faith. The questions are those of how the United Kingdom is in future going to be a neighbour to the other 27 countries of the European Union – and equally, how we as individual citizens are going to be neighbours to the citizens of those countries.*

“The fact that the question is about relationships has not been very apparent in the public debate so far. It has largely been about how prosperous we shall be, in or out; how ‘secure’ we shall be, in or out; about how much ‘freedom’ we shall have, in or out. If the arguments thus far have been frustrating and boring (and I think
most of us, in honesty, would say they have been) it’s because they have largely been on the level of economics, with politicians and financial gurus bandying figures and predictions about, which leaves many of us feeling confused and distrustful to the point of suspecting no-one really knows what the consequences will be. Or, they have tossed around words like ‘freedom’ and ‘sovereignty’ with very little content or clarity of meaning attached to them. Christians will have no particular wisdom to offer if this is all that is at stake.”

What Ekklesia seeks in political and civic engagement (not just at elections or referendums) is a renewed society where self-interest increasingly gives way to common interest, and where sharing and forgiveness are the basis of common life. We would cite the ten core values/principles developed by Ekklesia in December 2014 as good measurements of the issues at stake in the EU referendum and the wider, longer debate about the future of Europe. Namely:

1. A commitment to favouring the poorest and most vulnerable
2. Actively redressing social and economic injustices and inequalities
3. Welcoming the stranger and valuing displaced and marginalised people
4. Seeing people, their dignity and rights as the solution not the problem
5. Moving from punitive ‘welfare’ to a society where all can genuinely fare well
6. Promoting community and neighbourhood empowerment
7. Food, education, housing and sustainable income for all
8. Care for planet and people as the basis for human development
9. Investing in nonviolent alternatives to war and force as the basis for security
10. Transparency, honesty and accountability in public and economic life

These principles are underpinned by strong theological as well as political markers in our ‘Vote for what you believe in’ paper, published in 2015. They are designed specifically to bring together Christians, people of other faith and people of ‘good faith’ but no religious faith in a common endeavour to seek a better politics.  

In the gospels, God’s realm of right relations is described as being “in the world, but not of it” – made flesh in actions of truth, love, justice and peace, but not aligned visibly to a power bloc or vested interest, especially among the rich and powerful.

G.K. Chesterton once wrote about the martyr Thomas Becket and his witness within the mediaeval Church: “The kings were themselves in the dock. The idea was to create an invisible kingdom, without armies or prisons, but with complete freedom to condemn publicly all the kingdoms of the earth.” And, more positively, to propose and live out an alternative to dominating forms of governance in church and state.

Judgments about the extent to which the EU is useful, reformable and capable of assisting the creation of a more just and peaceful continent and world are
shifting, contingent ones. But the principles and practices they embed as we take our primary stand are undeniably important.

In short, Ekklesia believes that power, both political and economic, needs to be brought as close to and accountable to the people it impacts as possible. It needs to be exercised with representative/participatory democratic control and through the explicit valuing of public good, the beneficial imperative of sharing, the priority of environmental sustainability, meeting the needs and aspirations of the most vulnerable, and the principle of community engagement.

There are numerous practical projects close to Ekklesia’s concerns that move in the direction of a new vision of, and for, Europe. Over the past ten years, for example, we have advocated, an alternative approach to migration. 56 We would therefore urge churches throughout the UK at this time to pay attention to, and engage with, bodies such as the Churches Commission on Migration in Europe (CCME), 57 an ecumenical organisation founded in 1984 that serves churches in their commitment to promote the vision of an inclusive community through advocating for an adequate policy for migrants, refugees and minority groups at European and national level.

“In the fulfillment of this mandate [CCME] is responding to the message of the Bible which insists on the dignity of every human being and to the understanding of unity as devoid of any distinction between strangers and natives”, the organisation’s mission statement says.

It continues: “Migration comprises an integral part of Europe’s history and an important dimension of its current reality. European citizens continue to emigrate from or move within Europe, while migrants and refugees from other parts of the world arrive to build new lives in a European home. Although there are challenges associated with the settlement of newcomers and longer-term residents in Europe, such individuals widely contribute to Europe’s economic wellbeing and serve to further enrich its diverse cultures.

“Europe’s tradition of protecting human rights, integrating migrants and refugees and cherishing cultural diversity, however, is currently under strain. By vocation, churches are well positioned to promote mutual understanding and acceptance between various communities and to play an active part in the building of a just society of cultural, racial and religious diversity.

“The Treaty of Amsterdam, which came into force in 1999, has conferred considerable powers on the European Union (EU) to act on immigration and related issues of integration of immigrants and ethnic minorities. Furthermore, the EU has been given the competence to take measures against discrimination on grounds of racial or ethnic origin and religion. This development demands an even closer co-operation of churches not only in the old and new member states of the European Union but also in the countries in the neighbourhood of the enlarged EU.”
Ekklesia wholly rejects the anti-immigration stance of many associated with the Leave campaign. This is incompatible with the gospel message of welcome, hospitality, sharing, active compassion toward the sojourner and the stranger, and preferential concern for the poor and marginalised.

Similarly, rethinking economic and financial mechanisms in Europe relates to Ekklesia’s engagement in debates about ‘sharing economy’, ‘a care economy’ and unlocking the assets of the churches for innovative social purpose. This cannot but involve questioning, challenging and posing alternatives to the current economic orthodoxy within European and global institutions. This needs to proceed not from abstract theory, but from analysis and policy based on human engagement and practice.

So where is hope to be found in a changing Europe, and in the aftermath of an unpleasant debate characterised by high levels of fear-mongering, xenophobia, misinformation and misanthropy? The watchword we need is not pessimism or optimism but hope. 58 In Christian terms this means reaching out positively toward ‘the other’ on the basis that, finally, it is the power of active love that overcomes both the fearmongering that makes us turn in upon ourselves and the love of power that makes us want to grab it in competitive, selfish and violent ways.

The politics of hope confronting fear is something upon which Christians have a specific take, based on their convictions about the unique life-giving capacity of God in the face of death dealing. But it is also something that can be shared by those who do not believe in the same way, as the dialogue between the theologian Jürgen Moltmann and the atheist Ernst Bloch shows. 59 For the EU referendum is not just a political decision about how to share decisions, resources and responsibility – it is about who we are, as the aftermath of the tragic killing of Jo Cox MP at the end of the campaign has illustrated all too sharply. 60

Much could be said about what is needed moving forward. The regeneration of powerful pro-human and pro-ecology civic movements is certainly needed to help move our continent out of the gathering gloom and towards a renewed sense of hopefulness. If the churches can, at the same time, begin to move away from self-absorption and self-preservation in post-Christendom Europe, 61 they can have a significant role to play in helping to galvanise such movements alongside others. That is where the debate among people of faith needs to move next.

NOTES, REFERENCES AND FURTHER READING

2 By ‘confessional’ we mean, in this context, a body founded on assent to a particular body of religious belief and practice.
3 The formulation 'religion or belief' denotes both religious and non-religious belief systems and life stances which need to be freely available, but not privileged, within the public sphere of any truly plural national or con/federal society or association.
4 'Confederalism' entails the agreement of independent nations to pool sovereignty in certain agreed and accountable ways for the common good. It is a pattern which could also be considered in relation to the United Kingdom.
5 Re-imagining Europe: http://www.reimaginingeurope.co.uk
6 JPIT, 'Think, Vote, Pray': http://www.jointpublicissues.org.uk/issues/eu-referendum/
7 Scottish Churches Parliamentary Office: http://www.actsparl.org
8 Resources are available from the Joint Public Issues Team (JPIT) at: http://www.jointpublicissues.org.uk/
9 CTBI, 'EU referendum resources': https://ctbi.org.uk/eu-referendum-resources/
10 Christians in Politics, ‘EU Focus’: http://www.christiansinpolitics.org.uk/eufocus/
12 KLICE resources: http://www.klice.co.uk/index.php/eu-referendum-2016
14 Ekklesia’s Europe coverage: http://www.ekklesia.co.uk/europe
15 EU referendum coverage from Ekklesia: http://www.ekklesia.co.uk/euReferendum
18 Christians for Europe: https://christiansforeurope.org/why/
19 European Social Survey: http://www.europeansocialsurvey.org/
21 Scherer as cited by Lapido Media: http://www.lapidomedia.com/eu-referendum-religious-issue
23 Margarete Scherer, 'United by Reformation: British and Northern European Euroscepticism is rooted in religious history', LSE, British Politics and Policy, October 2015: http://blogs.lse.ac.uk/politicsandpolicy/united-by-reformation/
24 We take no view on these issues in this paper. Actual and perceived impact may vary considerably. By 'civic religion' we mean religious expression within the public square, whether it is accompanied or qualified by strong belief (patterns of believing, belonging and behaving) or not.
25 WISERD data and research: http://www.wiserd.ac.uk/
26 More comment on this issue from Lapido Media: http://www.lapidomedia.com/eu-referendum-religious-issue
27 Hope Not Hate: http://www.hopenonohate.org.uk/
28 Populus: http://www.populus.co.uk/polls/
29 For example, a survey conducted online by The Jewish Chronicle: http://www.thejc.com/news/uk-news/158086/brexit-poll-shows-big-lead-remain
31 A comment based on an informal survey of the church press and websites by the author during the last two weeks of May 2016.
32 ‘General Assembly has said it is better for Britain to remain part of EU’, Church of Scotland, 22 February 2016: http://www.churchofscotland.org.uk/news_and_events/news/recent/moderator_calls_for_eu_debate_that_promotes_peace_security_and_international_corporation
33 Reimagining Europe: http://www.reimaginingeurope.co.uk
34 Church of Scotland, ‘General Assembly reaffirms position on European Union’, press release 24 May 2016:
35 Harry Farley, ‘EU inspired by ‘gospel values’, say Irish Catholic bishops’, Christian Today, 8 June 2016:
http://www.christiantoday.com/article/eu.inspired.by.gospel.values.say.ireland.catholic.bishops/87915.htm
36 More on the Quaker Council on European Affairs here: https://www.qcea.org
38 National Catholic Reporter, USA, 9 June 2016: Read more here:
http://www.ncregister.com/daily-news-like-the-rest-of-the-uk-catholics-appear-divided-over-brexit-vote/#ixzz4BDsXn0lw
39 See the Archbishop of Canterbury’s comments in the 1 September 2015 press release from Lambeth Palace, ‘Disagreeing well about Europe’.
http://www.archbishopofcanterbury.org/articles.php/5605/disagreeing-well-on-europe-church-launches-new-eu-website
40 Welby’s full interview with The House (10 March 2016) can be read here:
41 Sourced from personal correspondence from Canon Dr Paul Oestreicher, former International Secretary, British Council of Churches (now Churches Together in Britain and Ireland). Other signatories are: the Very Rev Dr John Arnold, former President, Conference of European Churches; Canon Professor Grace Davie, Professor Emeritus of the Sociology of Religion, University of Exeter; the Rev Donald Reeves, President, The Soul of Europe; and the Very Rev John Witcombe, Dean of Coventry Cathedral.
42 Josh May, ‘Former Archbishop of Canterbury Lord Carey backs Brexit’, Politics Home, 15 May 2016:
43 Christians for Britain: http://www.christiansforbritain.org
44 For example, Giles Fraser, ‘Why our landed gentry are so desperate to stay in the EU’, The Guardian, 21 April 2016:
45 See: Maggie Chapman, ‘The EU debate: why left leave is making me angry’, 10 June 2016:
https://maggiechapman.wordpress.com/2016/06/10/the-eu-debate-why-left-leave-is-making-me-angry/
46 The point here is not to dismiss idealism, but to suggest that it needs to be rooted in firm soil, both politically and theologically. The question when issues of ‘idealism’ and ‘realism’ emerge in public debate is always, “what kind of reality, shaped by what and who?”
47 See: ‘Brexit recycles the defiant spirit of the Reformation’, The Guardian, 5 May 2016:
http://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/belief/2016/may/05/brexit-recycles-the-defiant-spirit-of-the-reformation
49 ‘Why Brexit is the solution’, by Ian Tutton, The Baptist Times, 9 March 2016:
http://www.baptist.org.uk/Articles/462960/Why_Brexit_is.aspx
http://www.stateofformation.org/2014/04/the-myth-of-a-judeo-christian-tradition/
with ideas and insights from a range of all economy, it seeks to combine transformative Christian thinking about public life and the green movement. We walk alongside those of faith and no faith."

http://www.ekklesia.co.uk/sites/ekklesia.co.uk/files/ekklesia_general_election_2015_focus.pdf

A wide range of Ekklesia discussion and policy papers, news and comment, is available on the subject of migration and people movements here: http://www.ekklesia.co.uk/migration

Churches Commission on Migration in Europe: http://www.ccme.be/


Also Simon Barrow, ‘Beyond Aunt Sally A/theism’, Faith in Society, 15 August 2007:

Virginia Moffatt, ‘Who we are: a response to bigotry in the EU debate’, Ekklesia, 17 June 2016:
http://www.ekklesia.co.uk/node/23179

Post-Christendom, referenced at the beginning of this paper, is the descriptor for a state of affairs whereby previously dominant church culture, language and institutions have lost their power and influence. From a Christian perspective, Ekklesia sees this as an opportunity rather than a threat. It allows the rediscovery of the egalitarian roots of the Christian movement and its challenge to an oppressive status quo within both church and governing authority. This has been one of Ekklesia’s key points of advocacy in the public debate about ‘religion and politics’ for the past 14 years.

THE AUTHOR

Simon Barrow is director of Ekklesia. A widely published commentator on belief, politics, social policy and theology, he has lived most of his life in England but now domiciles in Edinburgh, Scotland. He also wrote the paper What kind of European future? (Ekklesia, June 2016) is co-editor with Mike Small of the new book Scotland 2021 (Ekklesia and Bella Caledonia, July 2016), which includes chapters on Europe and the EU.

20 June 2016

Thanks to Ekklesia associate director Jill Segger for her editing and comment, and to a range of dialogue partners for help shaping the ideas in this paper.

ABOUT EKKLESIA

Founded in 2002, Ekklesia is a public policy think-tank that explores the changing nature of the relationship between politics and beliefs in a plural world. Committed to social justice, peacemaking, environmental sustainability and new economy, it seeks to combine transformative Christian thinking about public life with ideas and insights from a range of allies beyond the Christian tradition.
As a public policy and ideas body rooted in nonconformist Christian traditions (but cooperating positively with people of other faith and with those of non-religious ethical conviction), Ekklesia is committed to economic equality and sharing, social justice, environmental action and sustainability, dignity and rights for all, the path of nonviolence, welcome for migrants, bipartisan cooperation for change, alternatives to neoliberal capitalism, and policymaking procedure that draws on the experience and expertise of those at the cutting edge of these issues. For us, the litmus test of policy and politics alike, as with belief and values, is how it impacts those who are poorest and most vulnerable.

Within these overall commitments, Ekklesia brings together those of different political parties and none, those of various theological persuasions and none, and people whose stance on issues such as the future of the EU, the UK and ‘the European project’ (potentially conceived in various ways) will be as variegated and complex as the issues involved. Nevertheless, our own practical principles, outlined above, push our staff, associates, contributors and collaborators towards a certain internationalist orientation on the question of Europe.

© This publication is the copyright of Ekklesia and the author. It may be reproduced for strictly non-profit purposes under our Creative Commons policy, which requires full acknowledgement, no change to the original, and a link to our website. Commercial agencies wishing to reproduce material from this paper in part or in full should seek prior written permission and will be asked to make a suitable contribution towards our costs.