

Religion, politics and the European Union

By John Bruton

A speech delivered at an Iona Institute, Studies seminar on November 16, 2009 in the Alexander Hotel, Dublin 2.

IN THIS SPEECH, I would like, as a practising Catholic who has been involved in politics, to address the relationship that should exist between the Christian churches of Europe and the European Union.

My basic thesis is that the European Union is open to be influenced by people of faith; that getting involved on a day to day basis with its work is the best way to promote Christian values; and that opting out in an effort to recreate an imagined utopian past will lead nowhere. Essentially, just as one fights one's corner on the Irish political scene on a daily basis, one should do the same in the European Union.

What should the relationship be between the churches and the European Union?

Secularists might claim that there should be no such relationship, that the European Union is a political institution for all the people and that, as such, it should operate in a separate sphere from churches, who should neither influence, nor be influenced by, political institutions which should remain strictly secular both in their form and in the influences brought to bear upon them.

I believe this secularist view is naive in its understanding of human nature. Voters do not divide their minds up into watertight compartments, marked "religious", "political," "personal," "family" and so forth. What goes on in one part of their mind influences what goes on in the other.

Furthermore, no one will, I believe, deny that ethical beliefs can, and should, influence the actions of political institutions whether at national, local or European level. It would be very difficult, if not impossible, to separate ethical beliefs from the religious source from which many people's ethics spring.

That is not to say that people with no religious belief have no ethical beliefs, of course they do, often very strong and considered ones, but it is to say that those who have religious beliefs draw heavily on their religious heritage and practice in formulating, and more importantly in holding themselves accountable, for how they follow their ethical beliefs.

Humans are social beings. They do not live atomised lives as sole individuals. They live in society, in multiple overlapping communities of families, of neighbourhoods, of workplaces, political parties, nations, sports clubs, and for many...in the community of a church. The ethos of society is formed, in varying degrees, in all of these

communities. And without a shared ethos, it is very difficult for a society to function. Laws are obeyed not only out of fear of retribution but just as importantly out of a sense of a shared ethos, an ethos that forms a basis for trust, an ethos that thus makes government and governance possible.

Therefore I suggest that as long as religious belief exists, and there is every reason to believe it will always exist, a secularist notion that religion and politics should be kept entirely separate is simply unrealistic, even naive. And naive beliefs pursued relentlessly, as they often are, lead toward either tyranny or the breakdown of the pluralism that is required for democracy to function.

Of course, secularism did not appear out of thin air. It was a reaction to an excessive and immoderate intertwining of religion and politics in the past, but secularists should now beware of committing the same errors of immoderation, of the sort they justly condemn in churches in the past, in pursuit of their own cause today.

For example, to seek to use the power of the state to remove every symbol or sign of religious belief from the public space would be just as immoderate as were past efforts to harness the powers of the state to push one religion on people.

It is worth recalling too that the European Convention on Human Rights, agreed to in 1949 before the EU came into existence, guarantees to every European the right, in its words, to “manifest his religion, with others in public or private, in teaching, practice, worship and observance”.

This right is not subordinate to other rights in the Convention. The Convention must be read as a whole. And the EU submits itself to the whole Convention, including to this article about how people may exercise their religious freedom.

I hope I have shown that it is not possible entirely to separate the religion practised by a significant body of its members or citizens from any political entity such as the European Union, or vice versa.

But there are clear distinctions of function which must be respected, as the Lisbon Treaty puts it, the Union “respects and does not prejudice the status under national law of churches” and “shall maintain open, transparent and regular dialogue with these churches”.

Now that the Lisbon Treaty is finally passed, that dialogue is formally required of the Union under its Treaties and such dialogue would only make sense, and the Union would only have committed itself to it in the most solemn way possible, if the European Union was serious about being open to be influenced by the churches. What other purpose would the Treaty required dialogue have?

Equally churches have an obligation to respect duly constituted political institutions exercising their proper functions.

The Catholic Bishops of the European Union put it very well in their document on “The Evolution of the European Union and the Responsibility of Catholics” when they said

“ It is not, of course, a matter of wishing for the confessionalisation of institutions ,nor to regard political institutions as sacred, but of measuring how the Social Doctrine of the Church can assist both discernment and commitment on the part of citizens of the EU.”

Discernment and commitment are key words here. Indeed they are what is required of active citizens in any state or association of states, like the EU.

Churches do not take over the role of a state, or of its citizens, but they can help them discern what to do, and have the patient commitment to carry it through/

Or as Pope Benedict put it in his latest Encyclical, “Caritas in Veritate”

“The Church does not have technical solutions to offer and does not claim to interfere in any way in the politics of states. She does, however, have a mission of truth to accomplish in every time and circumstance”

I believe that the Catholic Church has been very helpful in this role from the very beginning of the formation of the European Union. Recently the Catholic Bishops of the EU identified the core motivation of the Schumann Declaration, the declaration on 9 May 1950 of the French Foreign Minister which led to the setting up of the European Union, as

”essentially an appeal for mutual forgiveness”,

and as such a profoundly Christian act, a Christian duty too ,but one too often neglected in relations between states and nations. It is all too easy to get support for demands for apologies for this or that historical wrong committed against ones nation, but rarely does one hear calls for full and final forgiveness to be granted. That is the unique element in the EU that the Bishops identified, it was an act of mutual forgiveness between the European nations who adhered to it, a point that seems lost on some nowadays.

The Catholic Bishops of the EU also identified the EU as being driven by an impulse of solidarity, solidarity between European states and between the people of Europe, a solidarity not confined within national frontiers.

What does solidarity mean?

As the Pope puts it in the Encyclical,

“Without internal forms of solidarity and mutual trust, the market cannot completely fulfil its proper economic function. And today it is this trust that has ceased to exist, and the loss of trust is a great loss”

This is a very important insight. All markets depend on trust. Without trust, we would find ourselves spending so much on lawyers to check one another out, that trading with one another would become incredibly expensive.

But where does trust come from? It comes from a shared ethos or belief system. And where, for many people, does their ethos come from? To a significant degree, it comes from religious beliefs.

A number of economists are coming around to this view on the importance of trust to the functioning of markets too. National, European and international Regulations alone cannot create the degree of trust and confidence necessary for markets to function properly. There has to be trust too. Ask business people about doing business in China today and they will tell you about great opportunities there that are severely mitigated by symptoms of lack of trust, like corruption and intellectual property theft.

This underlines the importance of what the Pope says about solidarity and trust being necessary to the proper functioning of markets. Even in the narrowest economic sense, his words make sense. They illustrate in a very real modern way what a shared religious heritage, and its consequential shared ethos, could contribute to Europe's success.

To summarize my argument so far, this is what the Catholic Church can contribute to the process of building the European Union,

an understanding of the project's moral and spiritual roots ,

an insight on the need for the mutual trust necessary to build a common market,

the patience and wisdom that comes from being a 2000 year old institution
and

a perspective on our responsibility towards future generations yet unborn.

But is Europe prepared to listen?

Is Europe a cold place for Christians? An unsympathetic bureaucratic structure driven by politically correct ideas of rights that leave little space for the transcendental, or that prioritizes rights arbitrarily ?

I believe it is none of those things and I will show why I believe that ,but, of course, it could become so, if people with other views refuse to engage with the EU, either

because they would prefer the EU did not exist at all, or because they find it more comfortable to retreat behind a barrier created by exclusive ethnic nationalism.

The Catholic Bishops of the European Union counsel against that approach, citing the story of the Good Samaritan who did not turn away from an injured man because he was of a different nation. They call for a compassion that transcends all frontiers. That is the course that Irish people of faith should now take. A path of full engagement with the institutions of the European Union.

If Irish people of faith take that course they will find that they are not alone. Let me cite the example of the biggest party in the European Parliament, the European Peoples Party. Its basic programme, the 1992 Athens Programme on their website currently, contains the following statement.....

Many citizens, whether adhering to a religion or Church or not, are willing to collaborate, to be committed and to demonstrate solidarity. Christian Democracy, on the basis of its political tradition, seeks to appeal to what is "best", to the "constructive" aspect which exists in each human individual, and to give contemporary expression to the ideals of social Christian personalism.

I will quote further from this programme, and from the EPP's more recent Berlin "Union of Values" document, not to make a party political point, but to illustrate the extent to which the teachings of the church have entered into political discourse about basic values in the European Union. The words I have just quoted would not be out of place in a Papal Encyclical

Other paragraphs show how church thinking influences political thinking on issues such as the right to life and the essential dignity of each person. Of course it is possible to agree with these values without belonging to any religion, but it is a fact that these values are also central to the beliefs of Catholics

In the Athens Programme, the EPP says

103. Each human being within society depends on others. Because they are free, responsible and interdependent, people must take part in the construction of society. For many of us, what lies behind this commitment is the belief that we are called on to contribute to God's work of creation and freedom.

There is also a close concordance on matters such as subsidiarity, the relationship between church and state, and the need for political parties to remain true to their basic values. I quote three more paragraphs from the Athens programme to illustrate the point.

” On the basis of these values, the Christian Democratic vision of society is based on the principle of subsidiarity

...we reaffirm the link that exists between, on the one hand, Christian values based on the Gospel and Christian cultural heritage and, on the other hand, the democratic ideals of freedom, fundamental equality between men, social justice and solidarity.

If it rejects, forgets, neglects or dilutes its values, the European People's Party will be no more than an instrument of power, without soul or future....”

The Berlin Programme says

”Every person counts. The future development of the Union must have at its core the dignity of the human person. “

”The EPP follows the principle of the protection and promotion of human dignity and consequently, respects the right to life and the uniqueness of every human being from the moment of conception to death”.....”

”the dignity of the human person implies that science is subservient to the human person and the human person is not subservient to science”.....

“The EPP refuses to concede that that abortion is a “solution” to the problem of unwanted pregnancies”

That is what the EU’s biggest political party has to say political party says. It shows that those who are anxious to promote their religious and social values within the EU will have much to work with, and many potential allies, in the political sphere. That does not guarantee success, of course, but it is a start.

What about the basic documents of the EU itself? Do they provide a basis for engagement with the EU?

The Charter of Fundamental Rights, which binds the EU institutions in regard to what they may and may not do in their own sphere of work but does not interfere with the laws of member states in their proper sphere, says .

Article 1. Human dignity is inviolable. It must be respected and protected

Article 2. Everyone has the right to life. No one shall be condemned to the death penalty, or executed”

From a pro life perspective, the reference to human dignity is important because a human embryo is human and no one can deny that, as is clearly the view of the EU,s largest political party in the passages I quoted earlier..

Of course, these concepts will not be automatically reflected in what either the EPP does, or in the EU itself does. Nothing is automatic in politics. Everything requires effort, and vigilance.

Making sure that political parties and political institutions live up to the ideals they proclaim is most likely to happen if citizens stay active and informed and engage constantly with the EU on an ongoing and constructive basis, rather than sitting back and waiting to find fault when there is a crisis, or when a referendum is there to be defeated.

That is how active EU citizens can get involved.

They can scrutinize EU Commission Green and White papers on proposed legislation (usually available on the Commission website long before anything concrete emerges).

They can provide research to the members of the Dail to help them use fully the new powers they will get under the Lisbon Treaty to head off undesirable proposals that breach the principles of subsidiarity or proportionality.

They can make representations to the Government to appoint Judges to the European Court of Justice of the EU in Luxembourg, and to the European Court of Human Rights of the Council of Europe in Strasbourg, who respect the values I have cited from EU documents

It is important to recognise, in passing, that the judges of the Strasbourg Court have to win the approval of the Consultative Assembly of the Council of Europe, on which a number of members of the Dail and Senate sit and vote. In the United States judicial appointments get a lot of scrutiny from elected representatives, and a similar facility is available to the Consultative Assembly if they wish to use it.

The European Union is work in progress. It always will be. It is a human institution, with all the frailties that that implies. It is fragile. It depends for its continued existence on freely given consent by all its members.

But its weakness is its strength. It is partly because it is a voluntary Union, which states know they are free to leave, that there is such a long line of states trying to join.

The other great Union of states, the United States of America in which I lived for the last five years, is much stronger than the European Union. No one can deny that. But once a state is in the United States, it cannot leave. That was put beyond argument in 1865. But there is no line of American states waiting to join the United States, as there are European states lining up to join the European Union. Even Puerto Rico is unclear if it wants to become a US state, while the European Union's problem is one of controlling the impatient queue. That is something that critics of the EU should reflect upon.

Before I conclude, I would like to say something about the contribution the European Union can make to solving a problem referred to by the Pope in his recent Encyclical "Caritas in Veritate".

Speaking of the world economy, he said

"The principal new feature has been the explosion of worldwide interdependence, commonly known as globalisation"

He went on to say that, without the guidance of charity in truth, globalisation could cause unprecedented damage and cause new divisions in the human family.

I believe that the EU provides a unique model of voluntary pooling of sovereignty between states, guided democratically by a directly elected European Parliament, that may help states in other parts of the world to ensure that globalisation is guided by charity in truth. Imagine, for example, how much more difficult it would be to reach a climate deal if the EU did not exist and the 27 member states were all negotiating separately.

To sum up, people of faith have made the EU what it is today. It reflects their values. But it is a human instrument, and subject to human weaknesses. That is why people should involve themselves with it in a critical but supportive way.

John Bruton is a former Taoiseach and EU ambassador to the United States.