A Christian Europe(an): the forgotten vision of Robert Shuman

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‘We are called to bethink ourselves of the Christian basics of Europe by forming a democratic model of governance which through reconciliation develops into a ‘community of peoples’ in freedom, equality, solidarity and peace and which is deeply rooted in Christian basic values.’

Robert Schuman (1958)

Anyone familiar with today’s European Union knows that, while it has continued to attract member states, and has facilitated countless dialogues that in the past were settled by violence, thus upholding peace for 60 years, it falls short of Schuman’s original dream of a ‘community of peoples deeply rooted in Christian basic values’. Whatever happened to that dream?

The overwhelming trend in Europe over the past sixty years has clearly been one of secularisation, and that has been reflected in the general tenor of EU policy-making. Biblical values have been considered by many to be outdated, quaint, passé and irrelevant. Secularists assumed that religion was doomed to die slowly on the sidelines as Europeans grew more enlightened.

That assumption, however, has proved to be ill-founded. Now the term ‘post-secular’ is being used increasingly to describe our times. God and religion are making a comeback on to the European scene, a subject of much recent debate in the media. Islam’s renewed presence in Europe has been but one factor causing the debate on religion and politics to resurface.

A brief survey of the development of the European Union since 1950 will help us understand what happened to the dream.

The European Union story, 1950-2010

Schuman’s declaration on May 9, 1950, was the dramatic breakthrough that virtually overnight created the conceptual architecture of the European House within which half a billion Europeans live in peace with each other today. It was a modest but concrete step, containing the embryonic elements that would be expanded eventually into today’s EU. After much negotiation and consultation, the European Coal and Steel Community was signed into existence through the Paris Treaty on April 18, 1951. France, Western Germany, Italy, Belgium, Luxemburg and The Netherlands were the founding members.

The institutions established by the Paris Treaty are still the four pillars of the EU today: The High Authority (now the European Commission), the Council of Ministers, the Common Assembly (now the European Parliament), and the Court of Justice.

The initial success of this venture led to the expansion of cooperation among the member states into the European Economic Community (EEC), at the Treaty of Rome in 1957; or more correctly, the Treaties of Rome. For at the same time, treaties were signed for cooperation in developing nuclear energy, the European Atomic Energy Community (Euratom), and for a customs union.

Behind these developments, French initiative continued to play a key role. This is all the more remarkable given the volatile nature of the contemporary French political scene, with communist and Gaullists agitating on both extremes, while Christian Democrats and
socialists cooperated in the mid-field. Fragile pro-European majorities could be sufficiently swayed by the extremes, which led to the rejection of the proposed European Defence Community, denounced by Gaullists as ‘the only known example of the conqueror demanding and obtaining parity with the conquered’.

No sooner had the nationalist de Gaulle become president in 1958, having vigorously opposed all the European treaties, than he surprised all by promptly endorsing them. The logic of his *volte-face* was that the best way to contain France’s ‘hereditary enemy’ was to embrace him.

The complex De Gaulle continued to baffle his European colleagues, acting as the most pro- and anti-European of his time simultaneously. In the 1960’s, his commitment to deepen the European project fuelled his fierce opposition to widening it with British entry. The general, who never shared Schuman’s conscious Christian values, was consistently hostile to any form of supranational integration and loss of French sovereignty. While declaring support for a strong Europe, a ‘European Europe’ not controlled by America, his fear of strong European institutions caused him to weaken the decision-making process. Some blame de Gaulle for delaying the European project some twenty years, and greatly increasing europaralysis.

In 1967, the communities of the Treaties of Rome were merged into a collective identity called the European Communities, more commonly the European Community (EC), through the Merger Treaty.

Following de Gaulle in 1973, President Pompidou welcomed the first new intake of members, Denmark, Ireland and the UK; (Norway’s voters elected to stay outside). Never bosom-buddies with his leftist West-German counterpart Willy Brandt, the Frenchman fell back on a balance-of-power mentality, seeing Britain as a counter-weight to German influence, and sandbagging any supranational development in the community.

However, his successor, Giscard d’Estaing, renewed Franco-German relationships the following year working with Helmut Schmidt to move the community forward economically and politically. The European Monetary System was set up, linking the currencies of participating members, a first step towards the later introduction of the Euro. In 1979, voters in member states had their first opportunity to vote directly on a European level in elections to the European Parliament.

In 1981, Greece became the tenth member of the EC. That same year, the rising politician who had succeeded Schuman as Minister of Justice in 1956 was voted into the French presidency in 1981. Francois Mitterand was now over sixty years old. He was to become the longest serving French president, until 1995.

Unlike Schuman, Mitterand was happy to serve in the Vichy regime; yet after the war he joined a French delegation to Caux, even before Schuman’s visit. One commentator described his life as ‘played out under an immense question-mark’; and as a man who ‘did not accept the principle of contradiction’ (Bourlanges, *Eminent Europeans*, pp130-132).

Mitterand initiated grandiose architectural monuments in Paris such as the Grand Arc de la Defense, large enough to totally encompass Notre Dame Cathedral. George Weigel, author of ‘The Cube and the Cathedral’, sees this as a deliberate humanistic statement of the superiority of reason over faith, and reflecting a secular culture ‘downright hostile’ to Christianity. ‘European man has convinced himself that in order to be modern and free, he must be radically secular.’ Weigel continues, ‘That conviction and its public consequences are at the root of Europe's contemporary crisis of civilizational morale.’

Euro-sclerosis peaked in the mid-80’s. Enlargement was on hold. A democratic deficit, economic problems and British vetoes on EU projects produced widespread apathy and pessimism.
A welcome sea-change came however in 1985 with the arrival of Jacques Delors in Brussels as the president of the European Commission. The *International Herald Tribune* credited Delors with rescuing the EC from the doldrums:

‘He arrived when Euro-pessimism was at its worst. Although he was a little-known former French finance minister, he breathed life and hope into the EC and into the dispirited Brussels Commission. In his first term, from 1985 to 1988, he rallied Europe to the call of the single market, and when appointed to a second term he began urging Europeans toward the far more ambitious goals of economic, monetary and political union.’ (Merritt, 1992, *International Herald Tribune*, 21st January)

Soon after his arrival, the Schengen Agreement opened borders without passport controls between several member and non-member states. The following year Spain and Portugal brought membership to double the original size, adding further momentum to the European project.

Delors presided over the European Commission for three terms spanning the years 1985-1994, the longest of any president. His commissions are seen by many as the most successful in EU history. He introduced qualified majority voting to break the stranglehold of the veto through which one member state could impede progress. His first commission injected new momentum into the process of European integration, and laid further foundations for the Euro.

He came to personify the European project, and instilled widespread faith and trust into its future direction. Mitterand was still French president and Delors, his former minister of economics, president of the European Commission, when the Iron Curtain fell in November 1989, totally reshaping the political landscape both of Europe and the world.

Despite the resistance of some anxious French politicians (who said they loved Germany so much they preferred two of them), the two Germanys reunited, opening the way for further expansion of the EU.

With a number of former communist satellite nations seeking the safety, welfare and values of the European Community, the Copenhagen Criteria were agreed on for membership, and negotiations began. Each applicant had to have achieved stability of institutions guaranteeing democracy, the rule of law, human rights, respect for and protection of minorities, the existence of a functioning market economy as well as the capacity to cope with competitive pressure and market forces within the Union.

Delors and his commissioners prepared the way for the Maastricht Treaty, after which the community formally became known as the European Union, on November 1, 1993.

Two years later, Austria, Sweden and Finland joined the Brussels club, pushing the membership up to fifteen.

Although a socialist, Jacques Delors challenged long-standing secular tradition by practising his Catholic faith openly, as had Schuman. He tried to rally European citizens, and Europe’s religious leaders in particular, to the quest for ‘the soul of Europe’, arguing that if Brussels could not develop a spiritual dimension into the EU, it would fail. Echoing Schuman’s earlier warning, he stressed that the EU would not succeed solely on the basis of legal systems and economics.

His very last official words as president of the European Commission were: ‘if in the next ten years we haven’t managed to give a soul to Europe, to give it spirituality and meaning, the game will be up.’

The success of the Delors commissions was contrasted with the Santer Commission which followed in 1995, but was forced to resign over allegations of corruption.
The next commission, led by Romano Prodi, also failed to measure up to the Delors standard, despite overseeing another historic milestone in 2002, when the Euro was introduced in twelve of the member states. The Eurozone, expanding to sixteen by 2009, was the most important European initiative since the Treaty of Rome.

The Prodi Commission also presided over the Union’s biggest ever enlargement in 2004, when Cyprus, the Czech Republic, Estonia, Hungary, Latvia, Lithuania, Malta, Poland, Slovakia and Slovenia became members. Romania and Bulgaria were admitted in 2007, almost doubling the membership in three short years. These additions were widely criticised for risking serious dilution of the European ideals, and moving too fast. Fears were expressed that the project would fail under the weight of its own success.

It was clear that the old rules, created for the original six, needed drastic revision. Plans for systemic reforms to streamline procedures and structures to cope with the much enlarged membership were presented, along with a proposed constitution.

The gap between Brussels and national governments on the one hand, and the general public on the other, became very evident when firstly the French and then the Dutch rejected the controversial proposals in a referendum.

The constitution, in which mention of God or the Judeo-Christian heritage of Europe were conspicuously absent, was shelved. Finally on December 1, 2009, just months before the 60th anniversary of the Schuman Declaration, the Lisbon Treaty was signed, salvaging the remains of the reform proposals, and creating a permanent President of the European Council.

How would Schuman feel about the EU if he could see it today? There would be much for which he would be very grateful, perhaps most of all the 60 years without the wars he had himself twice experienced first-hand. The level of economic and political cooperation, with consultations on all manner of subjects constantly taking place in many languages in the specially-built facilities in Brussels and Strasbourg, would surely be almost overwhelming for him.

But his chief concern no doubt would be for the missing spiritual dimension which Jacques Delors had fought in vain to recover, the search for Europe’s soul.

Talk of Europe’s ‘soul was a direct echo of Schuman’s own plea in the year of his death. The emerging identity of a New Europe, he wrote,

‘cannot and must not remain an economic and technical enterprise: it needs a soul, the conscience of its historical affinities and of its responsibilities In the present and in the future, and a political will at the service of the same human ideal.’ (Schuman, 2010, For Europe, p58)

Although ‘basic Christian values’ have indeed shaped many of the European institutions, the predominance of materialistic values in Europe today and the quest for immediate gratification, sensual pleasure and trivial pursuits would cause him deep concern for Europe’s future. The false ethic of greed in the financial sector, and the ‘culture of death’ expressed in youth suicides, abortions, euthanasia, low birth rates, rising murder rates, would be signals of deep spiritual poverty.

Having stated that ‘the European Movement would only be successful if future generations managed to tear themselves away from the temptation of materialism which corrupted society by cutting it off from its spiritual roots’, what would he conclude today?

**Meanwhile, where were the Christian ‘players’?**

As we have seen, devout Christians have been engaged in the unfolding process at various stages, particularly Catholics. The Christian democracy movement has strongly influenced EU thinking and language, ‘subsidiarity’ and ‘solidarity’ being two terms permanently adopted
with specifically Christian origins. The moral principle behind subsidiarity, for example, was once described as ‘that it was wrong to steal others’ responsibilities’.

Mainstream church leaders have enjoyed a long-standing official relationship with the commission president, with formal consultations taking place regularly. Catholic bishops and ecumenical church leadership councils have maintained permanent lobby offices in Brussels and have actively engaged in presenting submissions to shape EU policy and decision-making. Article 52 of the rejected EU constitution addressed the status of churches and non-confessional organisations and would have guaranteed an ‘open, transparent and regular dialogue with these churches and organisations’. This was the first time the churches would have been legally recognised as such at that level.

Christians have carried and continue to carry key roles in the EU, bringing their influence to bear where possible. Both the current presidents of the European Council and of the European Parliament are confessing, devout Christians, the Belgian, Herman van Rompuy and the Pole, Jerzy Buzek, respectively.

Van Rompuy regularly retreats for prayer and meditation in a monastery. On the question of Turkey’s membership of the EU, he stated: ‘It's a matter of fact that the universal values which are in force in Europe, and which are also the fundamental values of Christianity, will lose vigour with the entry of a large Islamic country such as Turkey.’

Buzek, hindered from moderating the European Parliament Prayer Breakfast last December due to the signing of the Lisbon Treaty in Portugal, sent a letter apologising for his absence to all participants saying: ‘it is wonderful to think that so many people of different nationalities and churches were able to gather together in the European Parliament around the person of Jesus Christ.’

Over the years, numerous Christians from many countries have served as members of the European Parliament, as well in Commission departments. The story of my visit to the European Commission building in 1991 revealed a network of Christian workers meeting regularly for prayer.

Evangelicals have had a much lower profile in Brussels than ‘mainstream’ Christians, often attributed to being a smaller proportion of Europe’s population, perhaps 15 million in total. However that is about equal to Holland’s population, and yet the Dutch seem to be able to make a very visible impression.

Paul van Buitenen’s tale, who later served in the European Parliament as a one-man party, Europa Transparant, also illustrates what one person can do—even if at great personal cost. Shortly before I first met him in Brussels over ten years ago, his exposure of corruption and cronyism involving Former French Premier, Edith Cresson, had caused the resignation of the whole of Jacques Santer’s European Commission. At that stage he was just one of thousands of office workers in the European Commission. But before his allegations were proven to be true, van Buitenen had been suspended, his salary halved and he faced disciplinary action.

Public indignation over his treatment eventually contributed to the fall of the Commission in March 1999. Later he was named ‘European of the Year’ by Reader's Digest magazine and the Australian Broadcasting Commission.

Three or four years before his exposure, van Buiten en had become a believer. His personal commitment to a God of truth and justice remained the driving force behind his investigations over the years, despite the constant cold-shouldering and stonewalling he continued to experience in the European Commission.

Van Buitenen battled on. During his parliamentary term from 2004 to 2009, he brought to light many instances of corruption in EU-institutions. None of these revelations however led to any further investigation by the EU antifraud department OLAF. Instead, complained van
Buiten en, the European Commission, the Parliament and OLAF simply looked the other way. After proposals for increased supervision of OLAF by an adequate independent body went unheeded, van Buiten en decided not to stand again for the European Parliament.

Yet the European Union requires democratic structures, checks and balances, at the European level. As long as prophetic voices like van Buiten en's remain crying in the wilderness, the European project is headed in the wrong direction.

Sir Fred Catherwood's is a different story again. A rather unique figure in the British evangelical world, which tends towards euroscepticism. He was president of the Evangelical Alliance in the UK, and also served as vice-president of the European Parliament, 1989-1992. He made the case for Christian engagement in shaping the European Union in his book, *Pro- Europe*?

In his address to *Europa 92*, a gathering of evangelical leaders from across Europe convened in Brussels in 1992, referred to in the following chapter, Sir Fred shared a panoramic oversight of European history making it quite clear why Christians had a responsibility to shape Europe's future.

Europe's unity had been made possible only by the common Christian view of life developed and applied progressively over 2000 years, he began. It had curbed the war-like paganism of the northern tribes, the greed and ambition of principalities and powers. Christian influence had been the overwhelming influence in our Europe, as evidenced in the wholly Christian inspiration of the European Convention of Human Rights. 'Go through each item and you'll find a Christian doctrine backing it up,' he challenged all present. Whatever the many faults of the church and of individual Christians, the leaven of the Christian faith had worked through the lump of our society for 2000 years, he stressed.

We owed even our rational science to the Christian faith, he claimed. Four hundred years ago, Christians came humbly to the Book of God's Works, creation, as they came to the Book of God's Word, the Bible. They came with certain presuppositions without which you could not have had our present natural science: that there was one God, not a pantheon of gods. So there would be one natural law in the universe and not conflicting laws. The unity in the natural laws is one pillar of the scientific method.

Above all, we believed in a good, benign God, not a hostile God, who has given the universe to us for our benefit. We were therefore to work out these laws for 'the relief of man's estate', as the founding father of science, Francis Bacon, had said. So natural science had arisen from Europe, not from Africa or Asia. Pagans did not believe in one God, but many. Pagans did not believe in an orderly, rational, stable universe. If paganism came, science went, he argued: 'Let's be very clear about that.'

Similarly, Christian belief in the dignity of each individual had led directly to the development of democracy, the rule of law, education and to social care. The Christian belief that we should love our neighbour as ourselves was the antidote to tribalism, nationalism and racism.

The rise of pagan nationalism in the twentieth century had cost Europe 50 million dead in two world wars: *the greatest slaughter in the entire history of the human race!* The rise of militant atheism in Eastern Europe had frozen it into a long sleep for over three generations.

We had swept our European house clean of fascism and of communism, he stated at the 1992 consultation. We now had democracy and freedom of speech from the Atlantic to the Urals. But we also now had a Europe emptier than before of the Christian faith. In the words of Christ's parable, Europe was a house swept clean, ready for seven devils worse than the first to come in, he warned.

Only if we recovered our common Christian faith would we have the cement of a common belief needed to hold our European Union together. Common cement among people came not by treaties signed by governments, however good they were. Neither from a common
currency, a common social policy, or a society empty of belief. A common belief was what held us together. We did not have a common belief anymore. Secular up to a point, the state could really only work if society itself had a well-rooted belief system. Without that the entire whole would fall apart. But today's intellectual leaders lacked that common faith.

Yet the power of the Gospel was God’s Holy Spirit. We didn’t need the monopoly of Christendom. The message had a power of its own. Pagan Rome was not overcome by giving Christians a monopoly. Pagan Rome was overcome by the Christians’ lives, the consciences they pricked and the Spirit revealing truth.

The power was just the same as it had been in the early Church, he declared, and in all the great works of conversion which had swept Europe.

Then he added confidently, ‘and will certainly sweep it again!’

These sections are excerpted from Jeff Fountain’s book on the life of Robert Schuman Deeply Rooted, published by the Schuman Centre. It is available to download from their website at http://www.schumancentre.eu/2010/05/deeply-rooted/#more-196

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