

Christianity and Europe¹

At the present time, there are many voices, not least eminent clerical voices, being raised to remind us, as Europeans, of the danger of forgetting our Christian roots. This danger may have been less acute in a slightly earlier age. Forthright apologists for the Church, like Hilaire Belloc (1870–1953), would have no hesitation in identifying ‘The Faith’, by which they meant Catholic Christianity, unproblematically with ‘Europe’. And the expression ‘Christian Europe’ is indeed fairly standard in historical reference works: see, for instance, Hugh Trevor-Roper’s *The Rise of Christian Europe* (1966). In fact it is quite a constant theme in Western thought generally, since the German Romantics popularized it in such works as Novalis’s (1772–1801) ‘Christendom or Europe’. Yet notwithstanding this strong evidence for the Christian ‘soul’ of Europe – evidence powerfully supplemented by the virtually omnipresent, massive visibility of the influence of the Christian faith in the cities and landscapes of Europe, in cathedrals, monasteries, universities, churches, chapels and shrines – when one begins to look a little more closely at the history of ‘Europe’, some at least of the ‘roots of Europe’ may not appear as specifically Christian at all, at any rate not specifically Christian in any simplistic sense. And maybe more disquietingly, the specifically Christian ‘root’ of Europe is not itself without its ambiguities.

It is surely in no sense controversial to point out that one undeniable root of European culture owes nothing whatever, at least in its own origins, to Christianity. This is the root Europe inherited, like its very name, from ancient Greece. For Greece’s principal contribution to the identity of what was to become Europe was well and truly formed before Christianity

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appeared on the scene. Indeed the Greek contribution to the future of Europe was formed in what would appear to have been total ignorance of the Jewish tradition from which Christianity eventually sprang. The same is true of the culture of ancient Rome, another essential ingredient of what later became 'Europe'. In fact, most of the major aspects of life in Europe, even today, as their very names suggest, are Greek or Roman in origin, not Christian, Jewish or biblical: economics, law, politics, tyranny, democracy, dictatorship, philosophy, literature, theatre, history, perhaps even the concept of 'religion' itself, to name but a few.

Apart, on the one hand, from Christianity proper, which emerged from Judaism, and, on the other hand, the cultures of ancient Greece and Rome, the other main root of Europe – again, in its origin at any rate, not a Christian root – was provided by the barbarian peoples who swept from east to west through the Roman Empire in late antiquity. In those chaotic days, Christianity was only a thin overlay, a veneer that never penetrated too deeply into the barbarian humus that made up and still makes up the body of Europe. Hence the permanent validity of such truisms as: 'Civilization is only ever skin-deep', or: 'Every generation is equidistant from barbarism'.

Christianity undoubtedly provided some of the glue helping to hold the vast edifice of early barbarian Europe together, and, equally, it was the vehicle transporting some elements of classical Graeco-Roman culture to the barbarians of Europe, as Islam, in its turn, was later to do. And it is also undoubtedly true to say that Christianity has, over the centuries, inspired great civilizing achievements in the areas of education, art, architecture, music and literature; some would even argue that modern science is unthinkable without the Christian, borrowed from the Jewish, doctrine of creation. Without this doctrine, would European thinkers ever have had the confidence to believe that the world was rationally comprehensible, even if inexhaustibly so, rather than a muddled, arbitrary minefield for the human mind? But in Christianity's name too, wars, slavery, crusades, inquisitions, pogroms, and countless acts of indiscriminate brutality have also been perpetrated. Indeed, the term 'slave' itself is a reminder of its origin during and after the age of Charlemagne (742–814), when, with the connivance of

some Christian rulers in Europe, the Vikings developed a lucrative slave-trade, selling captured ‘Slavs’ to Muslim or Byzantine buyers.

In what is now called Central and South America, ‘in the sixteenth century, in the name of the church, around eighty million Indios were annihilated. Tzvetan Todorov [a Bulgarian intellectual (born 1939), who now lives in France] writes: “The sixteenth century was to witness the greatest genocide in human history”’ (Norbert Greinacher, in J. Moltmann (ed.), *How I Have Changed. Reflections on Thirty Years of Theology* (London: SCM Press, 1997), p. 51). This genocide was presided over by fervently Christian European nations. One final, dismaying reminder of the historical ambiguity of the term ‘Christian’ is the designation in Japan of the nuclear explosions that annihilated Hiroshima and Nagasaki in 1945, as ‘the Christian bomb’. To date, only the ‘Christian’ West, in the ‘person’ of the United States of America, Europe’s ‘Wild West’, has in fact deployed nuclear weapons in situations of conflict.

The question might well be posed whether, in the course of its history, Christianity has done more harm than good. This question loses none of its poignancy or power to embarrass, even if it is pointed out that the calculus needed to weigh up the pros and cons of the Christian religion’s influence accurately will presumably never be agreed upon.

Might it then be worth asking whether it could be a liability, rather than an asset, to have a religion as so substantial and so unambiguous a part of one’s roots? Would it not be safer for religion not to be too closely identified with the cultural process we call ‘history’? Might Judaism’s role in European history not offer a better ideal to aim at than the traditional role Christianity has played in the West? Judaism has acted as a moral and civilizing leaven in Europe, without being thoroughly absorbed by it, indeed being often rejected by Europe. So, might modern Europe’s rejection of Christianity, if it is a rejection, not be a blessing in disguise, for both Christianity—and Europe?

Such considerations could, however, at best, offer pragmatic reasons for soft-peddalling Christianity’s relationship to Europe. More theologically

relevant, surely, is the belief that Christianity speaks of a 'kingdom' that is 'not of this world', not even of 'Europe'.