

Comment: Christendom and after

“The British are not quickly going to be converted to the theology of Europe”, *The Economist* warned its readers recently.

Let us ignore for a moment that ill-treated word “theology”, now turning up so very often as a Wilsonian pejorative in politics and journalese that this use of it (colloq. or joc. or derog.) is sure soon to get into the *C.O.D.* We will first focus on “Europe”.

What, though, is there left to say about it that is at all interesting? During the past months Western Europeans (especially the 270 million in the EEC) have been bombarded with literally millions of mainly tedious words about the future of their part of the continent, and especially about the future of the EEC. It would not be cynical to say that, whatever views you hold on what the future should be or will be, if you are a persistent reader with a moderate mastery of languages you can assemble seemingly clinching evidence to support your position. For imponderables abound.

The Europeans on the other side of whatever happens to be our local national border are not going to drop out of our lives if we try to ignore them: this was the hunch that led to the setting-up of the EEC in the 1950s. The first aim of the founding fathers was to find a way of stopping Western Europeans from massacring each other. Their further aim was to make Western Europe a Third Voice in the developed world. It is common knowledge that in fact so far the EEC has been run in such a way as to make the strong stronger, widening the gap between rich and poor individuals and regions, and many of the old barriers and a lot of the old distrust survive; Western Europe is still a long way from speaking with one voice. And now once again a narrow nationalism (emerging on the left in some countries, but mainly on the right) is threatening to weaken the “European idea” further. Western Europe, already under the shadow of the nuclear threat, could become an even more dangerous place to live in.

Across Europe commentators on the EEC have been telling our rulers to concentrate on practical measures and skip the rhetoric. But even humdrum collaboration depends on trust, and that at least partly depends on the sharing of a common basic cultural language. Rhetoric does have its uses—we can say that without underplaying the importance of economic factors. Arguably what is wrong with the so-called “theology of Europe” is not that it is rhetoric but that it is poor rhetoric, because it has frail foundations.

Bishop Stimpfle of Augsburg, writing recently in the right-wing Catholic magazine *Die Neue Ordnung*, says that economic problems

hide Europe's true crisis—namely, the shrinking capacity for “shared intellectual and spiritual values”. Christianity gave birth to Europe and encouraged its growth, he says. He believes that if Europe were to repudiate this inheritance it would lose itself. He sees the answer to be “a new evangelization”.

His diagnosis is probably half true, but who is going to do anything except laugh or weep at the thought of the cure he offers? The idea of a ‘Christendom’ had its roots in Catholicism, and admittedly, of the original six members of the EEC, 76% of the population identified itself on paper as Catholic, and Christian Democrats formed part or most of the governments in EEC's early years. But Christendom had been long dead, and surely contemporary European Christianity is in even a worse plight than the EEC? According to a survey which has just appeared in the Catholic weekly *La Vie*, 83% of the French admire John Paul II, but only 8% in the 25–34 age bracket practise their religion (merely a quarter of these weekly and fewer still in the cities) and 78% of the French think that the Church is “bien souvent dépassée”.

In fact, even during what we call “the age of faith” Christianity largely failed to bring peace and unity to Europe. On the other hand, even in this secular society of ours theological ideas can, we contend, have power.

We are not thinking here first and foremost of, for example, “the principle of subsidiarity”, which had its origins in St Thomas's doctrine of man, turns up in Pope Pius XI's social encyclical of 1931 *Quadragesimo Anno*, and very recently has taken on a surprising new lease of life in the European Parliament, in discussions on how sovereign states could fit into a politically united Europe. We are, rather, thinking about how theological ideas can help to strengthen that “common basic cultural language” already mentioned. So we are thinking about the contributions of many and scattered theologians towards what could be called a new “theology of Europe” (using the word “theology” properly here). The task is riddled with ambiguities—everybody agrees about that. Theological ideas can help to build barriers as well as break them, and the most recent debates over Latin American theology (or even, for that matter, the debates over the little book *The Kindness that Kills*, discussed here two months ago) have reminded us all too sharply that theological ideas can promote unjust societies quite as well as just ones.

One thing seems certain: no “theology of Europe” is going to make a long-lasting impression today if all it is going to do is try to resurrect, in some disguise or other, the idea of a “Christendom”. It would be fair to say that all dreamers of a new Christendom (and there are quite a lot in certain right-wing Catholic circles) distrust pluralism. The theology that underpinned past Christendom stressed the

importance of sameness: it was because certain institutions and structures were identical that Christendom, in spite of all that was different in it, at least theoretically hung together. Today we have better ways of controlling people, if that is all we want to do.

Pluralism need not, though, be just an unfortunate reality which we can learn to live with, like noise in a great city (an assumption in some mission theology). Nor need it be just something harmless but which we could as well do without (an assumption in some of the more dreadful ecumenical writing). What is amazing about Europe, and continues to amaze however often we cross it, is the enormous cultural variety in it—even today, when winds from the Atlantic have blown quite a lot of the variety away. This is Europe's distinctive feature, and a new "theology of Europe" that was going to have any kind of impact at all in this old and crowded continent, and could contribute to that "common basic cultural language" so important for the growth of mutual trust, would have to wrestle with it.

Almost certainly at its core would be the idea of the possibility of pluralism being itself a sign of unity—an idea that can be found in fairly early Christianity. Theologians who are sensitive to what is happening in today's world increasingly tend to see the Christian faith as dynamic, not as subject to the arbitration of a static outside power; growth, arguably, is from "within", and the wholeness, the unity, at the heart of the gospel is not something finished and unchanging but something that the Christian community is called constantly to journey towards. And—so some of these theologians are also stressing—this does not happen apart from "the world". Individuals and, today, even whole nations, "find themselves" (in other words, grow towards wholeness—which, among other things, means growth in distinctiveness) especially through their often painful interrelating with other individuals and nations. And the challenge present in the modern European situation is possible a unique one. This authentic growth in unity, which admittedly is always in danger of going wrong, strengthens what is particular in us, and in fact is stimulated to further growth by that particularity. It is, then, the very opposite of that submergence of all that is different which both individuals and nations often suspect "unity" to be, and which they rightly guess will not lead to real growth at all.

A "theology of Europe" having at least some of its origins in reflections of this kind would not only emphasise very powerfully the importance of mutual service and mutual respect, but would also stress a new way—a non-paternalistic way—of relating to the rest of the world, and especially the Third World. But is it all already too late?

J.O.M.