

Faith in the Future of the EU

Well thank you for inviting me here today, I am delighted to be here in Belfast for the first time for a discussion which is obviously timely, with the referendum approaching, but I think is also important on a wider level as we examine the sort of country we want to be and the sort of Europe (not EU but Europe) in which we want to sit.

As you have heard, I am the author of 'A Soul for the Union', a new report by Theos (a Christian think tank) that tries to look at the European Union, its history and how it has developed historically. I am not here as a representative of either the Remain or Leave campaigns, but nor, of course, am I a neutral. I have a stance, an opinion on this referendum which you may well detect from what I say, and I wouldn't want to insult your intelligence by telling you otherwise. What sort of a commentator would I be if I had not arrived at an opinion?

This topic - the EU - is one which you do not need to be told is a very contested space. An awful lot of ink has been spilled and words said about the EU, the UK, whether we'd be better in, out, a bit less in, in but different, and a host of other positions on a broad spectrum.

But while I do have my own stance today, I want to try and do something a bit different and avoid much of what has been before. It is my intent to try and *reframe* this debate, which to my mind has thus far, on the whole, been intellectually vapid, dishonest and focused almost invariably on the wrong issues. My intent is to try and introduce a new way of thinking about this debate which may lead you to vote in or out - but in a sense it matters more to me that you make that decision for the right reasons, than which conclusion you reach.

To that end: I have a set of basic principles for this evening:

1. I will make no effort at all to predict the referendum result. I am not a pollster and judging by the recent election I don't think they're any good anyway.
2. I am going to try and avoid the scaremongering that has characterized the debate. Either scaremongering about what happens if we leave - or scaremongering about the future plans of the EU (though recognising that some of these fears on both sides may well be legitimate).
3. I am going to try, as much as possible, to avoid political and sociological jargon - and also cliché. No technocratic waffle about stabilism mechanisms, and no butter lakes.
4. I am also going to try and stretch the terms of debate significantly beyond that which has dominated thus far, and in particular to try and move beyond the utterly destructive discourse on finance and economics as the be all and end all of the debate - more on that in a moment.
5. Finally and perhaps more awkwardly I am on the whole going to try and avoid talking about the UK and the referendum.

The reason for that last point is that what I really want to have accomplished here is to broaden the conversation out from the choking and rather tired debates that fill our newspapers, into a more fundamental question about what the EU actually *is*, what it was *designed to be*, and what it *ought* to be. The UK referendum is a side show – an important one, but ultimately the wrong place to look at the future of the EU as a whole. It's only, I would argue by getting a clearer idea of the EU as a whole that a sensible decision can be made for the UK.

What this organization is will never be defined by the needs and interests of a single member state, it is necessarily broader than that, and the question is as much, in fact more, a philosophical and ethical one than it is an economic or political one. The EU is not about maximising national interest – it is about meeting challenges, and we cannot debate the latter only by talking about the former.

However, I shall dwell very briefly on the debate in the UK because it does set the context for what I'm saying more broadly. Because the debate here in the UK is symptomatic of a wider malaise and a very serious problem.

Out of interest can we do a show of hands, has anyone been onto the website of the official "In Campaign" Britain Stronger in Europe?

If you do so, what is the first thing you see? A video starring the conservative peer, Apprentice TV show star and business woman Karren Brady, who with a bunch of friends from a range of other well-known brands proceeds to drily repeat that the EU is necessary for British jobs, GDP, companies and finances. I'm not going to comment on whether those claims stand up or not – because frankly I think that's a pathetic argument. Just as I don't want to comment on whether Nigel Farage is getting his sums right when on the front-page of one of the most prominent "Leave" websites he proclaims that the EU costs the UK £55 million a day.

It is frankly absurd to my mind that this is what the debate has been reduced to. If the best that the In Campaign can muster is a series of economic statements told by wealthy white people to the unenlightened then they might win the referendum, but they will certainly have lost the argument. The EU is not, and never has been, only an economic club, it is about far more than that. It is dishonest to claim otherwise, but more broadly shows a depressing lack of vision for what this truly ambitious international entity is or could be.

This reductionism in the debate down to a baldly economic assessment is crippling to the European project. If the debate in the UK were to be the whole debate for the whole of Europe then the EU would be absolutely doomed.

UKIP and their Eurosceptic fellow travellers have at least got a little more to say – immigration being their big weapon and we might return to that later, while the more intelligent have interesting things to say on sovereignty and democracy. But let there be no doubt that the battlefield on which the UK is fighting out its

debate has really been all about the bottom line – money. And let there be no doubt that that is a serious problem.

And for now that's it – that's all I really plan on saying on Britain specifically. Instead I want to chart you a very different vision for and of Europe and the EU. This is not particularly difficult, nor does it require a vast imaginative process, instead I simply want to chart the original vision of the European project, prompt some despair by describing how it's changed, and then attempt to inject a tiny bit of hope at the end.

The European project begins in 1950 with the Schuman Declaration (a speech delivered by French foreign secretary Robert Schuman) that led to the Treaty of Paris and the establishment of the European Coal and Steel Community (ECSC). It had six members, France, Italy, West Germany, Luxembourg, Belgium and the Netherlands. A few years later, following the Treaty of Rome it developed into the European Economic Community – the EEC, still with the same members but with a much broader remit.

It was never, despite those who will tell you otherwise, a socialist project (Iain Duncan Smith I have noticed has recently been peddling this myth and it's simply wrong) – in fact Britain did not join precisely because the post-war Labour government saw it as undermining some key socialist principles. The West German socialists resisted the early European project because they saw it as undermining the re-unification of Germany and as innately anti-socialist. The Italians and the West German Christian Democrats, who were in power, were desperately opposed to any hint of a socialist takeover of Western Europe. Given all this, how plausible could it possibly be that the European project was a socialist plan?

It was also never, despite those who will tell you otherwise, an American project. Certainly the Americans were delighted when a solution to reconciling France and Germany was proposed, but it was not their idea, and the historical documents of the time reveal their complete surprise when it is proposed. This was European designed and delivered, the Americans were little more than cheerleaders.

And it was never, despite the current popular myth, simply a free market or a trading body. In fact it is to this day not a “free market” and those claim it is misunderstand what that term means. Konrad Adenauer, the West German Chancellor is among a number of sources who would have told you (as he did in a speech to the Bundestag in 1952) that “the political goal, the political meaning of the European Coal and Steel Community, is infinitely larger than its economic purpose”.

What this project actually was, was the realization of an intellectual and political movement that began back in the 1930s called Christian Democracy. Christian Democrat politicians, almost all of them Catholics and with the fervent support of

the Pope, had been meeting throughout the 1930s and 1940s even during the war. They came from all the original 6 member countries plus a few other countries, notably Austria. They discussed a vision for the reconciliation of Europe. The key figures, Robert Schuman (originally from Luxembourg, French Foreign Minister, later French prime minister), Konrad Adenauer (West German Chancellor), Alcide de Gasperi (Italian Prime Minister), Jean Monnet, and others had all known each other for years, the ideas were already in place. And in the early 1950s Christian Democracy dominated European politics in the original 6 member countries. That's the context. The actual content of the vision is based on 3 main principles:

1. Solidarity
2. Subsidiarity
3. Overarching the other two, that this project would have an explicit moral and religious vision to it.

To briefly examine those 3 themes:

Solidarity meant two things - 1. Peace between nations. It is no accident that the first formalised aspect of the European project was around coal and steel. Without the independent ability to produce those materials it was impossible to militarize. This was made clear at the time - Schuman saying that they were trying to make war between European nations "materially impossible". For all the talk of NATO and nuclear weapons guaranteeing peace in Europe, this should not be overlooked.

The point was also to go beyond that though. It is not just, as other treaties have been, all about dis-incentivising war as much as actively fostering real solidarity between nations. This is where the economic aspect of the project begins to be seen - it becomes, with the ECSC, significantly more profitable to get on with your neighbours than to be afraid of them. Economics is a tool in the cause of peace and solidarity. And, it is worth noting, no other international treaty or military alliance has ever succeeded in creating that in Western Europe.

The other aspect of economics is the frequently overlooked obsession of the early European project with working and living conditions. Christian Democrats were centre right parties (those that still exist are less so now), but with a very paternalist edge - they were all great exponents of the welfare state. This ties in - Europe was to be founded as a space in which the lives of citizens were meant to get better. By creating a treaty that committed member states to protect workers there was a conscious desire to prevent a race to the bottom. In the eyes of European Project's creators capitalist states could not be trusted to look after workers. Left to their own devices they would undermine working conditions in favour of the desires of big business and to get a market advantage over other states. By putting working conditions into the economic community rules there was an attempt to prevent this race to the bottom and so to provide a transnational solution to this issue.

Theme 2 – subsidiarity. What is subsidiarity? It is a term consciously taken from a papal encyclical *Quadragesimo Anno*. At its most basic it is the idea that decisions should be taken at the most appropriate level. So for big problems that can only be solved internationally, you need an international agent. For national issues, a national agent, for local issues a local one. But in all cases it is meant to be taken at the level closest as possible to the individual citizen. Often overlooked in this was a desire to protect the local from the industrializing state.

The much-maligned CAP policy that provides subsidies to farmers was designed originally to protect rural communities. The 1950s was seeing significant movement of peoples into cities from the countryside and there was a concern that communities and families were being destroyed. By providing subsidies, the hope was that they might be better protected. Now again, as to how well subsidiarity has worked subsequently we'll return to that.

Finally – an overarching moral and religious vision. This is to reiterate that this whole endeavour is not and was not ever intended to be anything other than a moral project with the aim of creating a better global system of government. The political goal was to create a morally based project that would provide transnational solutions to issues that states had proven unable to solve individually.

Scott Thomas, an international relations expert, has called the entire enterprise an act of “theopolitical imagination”. That is the vision of Europe’s foundation. At its heart it really is an idea of the common good. Just as in ordinary life we as individuals consent to inconvenience ourselves or let others be in power over us, because in so doing we help everyone in society to live in a safer, more harmonious place that ultimately benefits everyone – so that too was the theory behind the European project.

So the question is what has happened to it? How did we get from there to here? Because we have certainly moved and on a number of those notes I think the EU has demonstrably either failed or at least fallen short of expectations.

Now to be clear we would expect any organization celebrating 65 years of life to have changed. After all the world of 1950 looks very different in some respects from the world of 2016. We do not have for example 6 members any more – we have 28. Of those members we have gone from a context in which Catholicism or at least Christianity was in a position of absolutely undisputable social dominance to one which is broadly secular. We may, in Turkey, Albania, Bosnia or Kosovo before long get our first Islamic majority state member. Even of Christian majority countries there is a significant theological and political gap between for example the Polish Catholic church of today and the Belgian Church of 1950.

History and commonality has changed drastically too. In 1950 those 6 states had an identical recent history and similar political system. Today that is not the case. 11 and a half (Germany is the half) of current members are 1 generation

removed from communism. 2 (Spain and Portugal) are two generations out of authoritarian dictatorship. 1 (Cyprus) is divided in half.

Change is inevitable, it does not mean it has necessarily been accomplished well.

In practice the guiding principles on which I have proposed that this project were founded have in many cases been muted or declined.

On peace – though we must recognise the astonishing achievement of keeping peace within the EU's borders, and I simply don't buy the line that it's all down to NATO – European history has demonstrated that strong military alliances do little in practice to deter war. The role of the EU in Northern Ireland has also been important – yet despite these achievements as an advocate for peace the EU in the past 25 years has had a string of failures.

In Bosnia the EU (then still the EEC) made the dreadful mistake of listening to the advice of the then British Foreign Secretary Malcom Rifkind. Rifkind urged his European colleagues not to intervene, despite Margaret Thatcher from the backbenches condemning it as “accessory to a massacre”. She was right, Europe failed.

Kosovo once again was a failure to intervene as a force for peace within Europe's own sphere of influence, Tony Blair as a result attempted to get going a European foreign policy and even intervention force, ultimately he failed to do so (not helped by lukewarm reaction from his own party – particularly one Jeremy Corbyn).

More recently Ukraine is seeing the same scenario unfold. In North Africa the EU has outsourced its commitment to peace by throwing money at the African Union. These troops tend to be badly equipped, badly led and have a poor track record in de-escalating conflicts, purely economically it would also be cheaper to use European troops than to constantly fund failure. These are failures in the moral vision to protect peace.

Working and living conditions. A great success – Europe has seen conditions increase over the past 50 years like never before in human history. This has been underpinned by the charter of fundamental rights attached to the 2009 Lisbon Treaty.

But, as a concern that seems to have taken at best a secondary consideration in the past 7 years since the Eurozone crisis began. In Greece enforced austerity measures now see 45% of Greek pensioners below the poverty line. Greece was a mess – but is the solution the right one when in the short- to medium-term it completely compromises working and living conditions – a founding pillar of the European project? I would suggest not. For Greece, you could also read Spain and its youth unemployment, or Malta, or Cyprus, or Portugal, or Italy.

On the subject of solidarity – the migrant crisis is a catastrophe; in itself, but also in the response. It is ludicrous and it is irresponsible in security terms that the entire burden for policing and processing asylum claims in the Mediterranean has

fallen on those countries least able to pay for it. Greece cannot sustain at present a stable civil service yet is expected to manage tens of thousands of arrivals from the Mediterranean. The inevitable result? Worthy claims are dismissed. Others are waved through without the proper checks and balances. This is an affront to justice – it is also innately dangerous given the terrorist activities of the Islamic State.

It is an affront to justice that a failure of European countries to properly coordinate their naval and maritime power – and the UK is especially culpable in this – means that in the Mediterranean there is no EU search and rescue service worthy of the name. It is possible to get a \$50 ferry from Syria or North Africa to Europe that is perfectly safe. The lunacy is that refugees cannot take that ferry because you can only apply for asylum when you reach Europe and until you claim it you are an illegal and so unable to take the ferry. As a result they pay thousands of dollars to tricksters and pirates who put them in dangerous uncrewed boats. This is why we see such a scale of death, and it could be significantly ameliorated, very easily indeed, with a proper search and rescue service and a reform of asylum policy to allow applications from abroad.

What about subsidiarity? Here too there are failures. With each treaty change we get new powers for the parliament but no noticeable improvement in democracy and far too much tinkering that should never be done at the European level. We are now living in what the philosopher Jurgen Habermas calls a “technocratic hegemony” – again it is a failure of the original vision.

But underpinning all of this – the real problem at the heart of the EU, and which has been constantly manifested in the debates here in the UK – is a new economic orthodoxy. This orthodoxy is completely self-destructive for any political entity.

This liberalism or neoliberalism or market fundamentalism – depending on the particular jargon you prefer, I tried to avoid it but it is difficult! – has reduced Europe (not only the EU but national European governments across the continent) to an obsession with GDP, with propping up the Euro and with reducing sovereign debt. All other concerns have been increasingly kicked to the curb. Greece, Spain, Cyprus etc. There were other solutions. We could have pursued other ways of mitigating the disaster in those countries which were rejected. They were rejected because they would have been a less instantaneous salve to the market, though in the long-term they would have successfully met the same ends while protecting solidarity.

The fact that Greece was almost forced from Europe because of an economic dispute is appalling. This was a project that was meant to invite people in and ever grow, not kick them out to meet the needs of sovereign debt.

The damage of this move is enormous. For the first time in 65 years more Europeans distrust European institutions than trust them, not news in Britain –

huge in the Balkans. Resentment of European policy, and particularly of Germany, is growing across the continent. And it should be – when it comes to the Euro a MckInsey calculation shows that of all the economic benefits derived from the new currency across the Eurozone 50% have gone to Germany, the rest almost entirely to Austria, the Netherlands and Finland. Most others break roughly even, but Spain, Portugal, Italy and Greece are actually worse off. No wonder there is resentment when Germany then imposes austerity politics to those same countries.

Now I'm going to pause for a moment in case I am being misunderstood here as some sort of Alexis Tsiparis type neo-Marxist. I am not. Let me clarify, it is absolutely essential that the EU has an economic element to it, it is crucial that as far as possible it makes things better economically for its members; the market is a crucial part of that. This is not a proposal for some sort of cloud cuckoo land utopia free from the evils of money.

It only becomes problematic to have an economic focus if that focus exceeds its remit and begins to negatively impact upon other aspects of the purpose of the EU – of which I would argue these moral criteria are critical. We should never disparage economic success or deny that that is a factor in why nation states ought to value the Union. But just as in its origins economics was a tool in a greater purpose – so it should be now. The order of priorities is what has gone wrong.

In fact this is part of a bigger point. Political bodies – of whatever sort and size – cannot rely for their whole purpose and popularity on economics. Or to be more accurate, they can, but only so long as the boom times continue. If your entire case for existence is that you make people richer then that is fine so long as it is true. However, we live now in a global economy where frankly almost regardless of what the UK or EU do they will be subject to ups and downs – economics is variable. At the moment it is a tough sell to a Greek pensioner or a Spanish teenager that the EU is making them richer.

So for this union to be truly sustainable – for anyone to have any faith in the future of the EU – it needs to be based on more than that. It needs a soul – something fundamental that can be clung to and respected, perhaps even loved, in the bad economic times as well as the good. For the EU to have a strong future it needs, therefore, to own its own origins, to own its status as a moral project shaping the world.

I saw a good quote from the French writer Andre Gide “it is better to be hated for what you are than loved for what you are not”. I think that is true, and the EU is failing that test. It has tried to be loved, or at least consented to, as an economic silver bullet. It was a moral project and it has the hope of being so still.

The good news for Europe is that those original principles never went away – in fact they are enshrined in the various treaties. There have been successes, great ones, and many of them. If you are going to have faith in the future of the EU you must commit to that moral mission – the soul of the European project, it's fundamental essence and purpose. Then you might just have something worth saving.

Not least when the *need* for transnational solutions in today's world is increasing, not decreasing. The environment, Islamic extremism, Putin, increasingly economics (the recent crash has shown how important common approaches on taxation, money laundering, banking regulation etc. are – we cannot afford to let one rogue state's financial sector spark off a worldwide crisis).

All these issues and more require common solutions. You really do need some sort of proactive international measure to tackle those problems. That is an issue of morality – all of those issues touch on the idea of JUSTICE. What is the just response to such issues.

It is possible to form collective agreements on each issue, but if you are a Brexiteer you should not kid yourself that that will be easy, or that it will necessarily work. Treaties without genuine integration are just words – look at most environmental treaties for evidence. A truly morally committed transnational body would be far more effective – and any such body would be made far more significant if the UK were in it and driving it. Of course, whether the EU can actually become that body again is the real debate. Perhaps you think it is too far gone to take on that mantle again.

I said I would try to avoid speaking about the referendum and Britain, but I would finish on that point. We need a better European debate about the role and the purpose of the UK. Do not be suckered into a debate about economic calculations – or even to think that this debate is just about what the UK can get out of Europe. We are dealing with something far deeper than that, a question on morality and of politics for a new age, and whether the EU is the body to do that or not.

Just before I finish, I hope you will forgive me the briefest shameless plug. The report on which this talk has in part been based, is called *A Soul for the Union*, and is available to buy on the Theos website theosthinktank.co.uk, or I have a few copies with me for a very reasonable £5 fee.

We are a Christian think tank, we work on a wide range of issues to do with religion and society, if you'd like to be kept up to date please give me business cards so I can add you to our monthly newsletter, or look us up online. We are on social media – you can find us on Twitter and Facebook. We rely very much on the generosity of our supporters and if you were interested in pursuing that please do talk to me. More broadly we want to raise debates and change society and I would urge you to look us up, see what we're working on and tell us what we're getting right and, more interestingly, wrong.

Thank you very much.