The dark continent

Giving a soul to Europe

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MOST OF CHRISTIANITY'S CAREER HAS BEEN European, and so it is tempting to see the spiritual itineraries of the Church and of the Old World as coterminous, a fact which hardly helps when it comes to retrieving a specifically European spirituality. Yet today, we are witnessing a great ecclesial phenomenon: the de-mediterraneanization of the gospel and its implantation in new soils all over the globe. To ask if there is such a thing as a European spirituality at the beginning of the twenty-first century is an inquiry which takes as its context the ferment of regional spiritualities and religiosities in Latin America, Asia and Africa.

It is striking that the spiritual revivals of other continents often take a political reality as their starting point, generally that of the poor, the marginalized or the colonized. Europe, having been more often than not the perpetrator of injustice and aggression throughout the world, seems forced back into an apologetic stance. This, in itself, does not mean that she is denied the chance to generate a spirituality from her own political experience; but when the decisive political event of the last half century is the founding, first of all, of the European Economic Community, and then of the European Union, it is hard to be optimistic. What spiritual sense can be made of something as apparently unpromising? This article takes such a pessimistic intuition to be misguided; by teasing out the cultural context of European integration, we shall try to show the ramifications for spirituality of a certain political and cultural understanding of Europe.

'They do not want you in the East, and they do not want you in the West, either'

We commence with a 'composition of place'. Agnieszka Holland's film, *Europa, Europa* (1991), tells the story of Solly Perel, a 13-year-old German-Jewish boy, who, separated from his family at the start of the war, survives by serving first with the Komsomol, and then (after the German invasion of Russia) lying his way into the Hitler Youth. At the close of the film, and the end of the war, Solly survives to meet his

brother. Where, after all that has happened in Europe, are they to turn? 'They do not want you in the East,' says a passer-by, 'and they do not want you in the West, either.' Even though they have survived, even though both see themselves as German, and even though they have never lived anywhere other than in Europe, they do not fit. They are neither wanted nor needed by this motherland.

Stories like this, of dispossession, displacement and despair, are the fault line cutting through virtually all of European history; the depiction of the innocent victim, the refugee, the ethnically cleansed, from the Bayeux tapestry to footage of Srebrenica, is a recurring image of Europe's narrative. In the twentieth century, the fact of Sobibor and Treblinka has proved that it is our talent for industrialized murder, massacres and pogroms, every bit as much as the achievements of the Renaissance and the Enlightenment, which define what it is to be European. Europe's recurring darkness is one which casts others out; countless millions have been crushed by the hard edge of a European idea. It is a constitutive element of the powerful – if undefined – mystique of the very term 'Europe'; no other geographical or cultural designation feels so exclusive.

Giving a soul to Europe

It was with the knowledge and images of the 'Final Solution' fresh in their minds that the founding fathers (for 'fathers' they were) of the organization that would become the European Union set to work – labouring in the hope that a novel political structure could be found to lead to peace across the continent. 'France and Germany must become friends,' as Churchill put it.

The exact depth and the shape of that reconciliation, that 'ever closer union', has been a source of ongoing dispute and negotiation. Among European intellectuals, there has often been a regret about the shameless materialism of the enterprise, an assertion that any civilization worth the name should be a community of destiny, a union of spiritual aspiration, rather than merely of agricultural policy. Such, too, was the conviction of Robert Schuman, the French foreign minister, who said of the newly created European Communities that the project 'needs a soul, the awareness of its historical moment and of its present and future responsibilities, a political will at the service of a common human idea'.[1] The *Instrumentum laboris* of the Second Special Assembly of European Bishops takes a similar line: 'many concerned and responsible persons on the continent, recognising and revitalising [Europe's]

valuable heritage, have recommended . . . that the Europe in the process of being born today needs an "added soul" '(51). In like vein, Jacques Delors, when President of the European Commission, gave the go-ahead to a very small but symbolically important initiative: 'Donner une âme à l'Europe', in recognition of the need to open up dialogue on the spiritual dimension of European integration. Along with political union and the single currency, this modest venture is a bequest of a visionary European politician.

Even a good slogan means different things to different people. 'Giving a soul to Europe' could ring restorationist bells for some: might not a spiritual agenda bring the force of Christian, and perhaps other, eschatologies, to the images we use to construct and model Europe, and the opportunity of truly building the new Jerusalem? If the material grounding of Europe offers the benefits of full employment, social legislation and modern, functioning infrastructures, if it offers a rich series of cultures manifested in elegant northern European capitals, with cafés, and horse chestnuts in bloom in early summer, light Scandinavian furniture and bright colourful exhibitions, then does not the spiritual foundation hold out to us nothing less than the possibility of redemption? Consciences could be sharpened, scandals diminish in frequency and scale, debts be rescheduled, and humanity placed at the heart of government. The picture of Europe changes: the smug, bourgeois metropolis gives way to the walled, hill-top *polis* in the Palladian middle distance, as the eye is drawn ineluctably to the fields before us, where the Virgin dandles the Christ-child on her knee . . .

But coming back to reality for a moment, it is clear that there is, on the Church's part, no interest in restoring a 'Christian' polity. Giving a soul to Europe, in the current outlook of the magisterium, could only mean drinking at the well of that Christian personalism which draws together a discourse on rights and freedoms around the concept of the common good, and which is, in particular, the central plank of the social teaching of John Paul II. If the post-war Church has been able to throw its weight behind the struggle for human rights, it is not in the name of libertarianism that it does so, but with a view to constructing a particular social good whose scope is greater than the sum of the good of individuals. Such a vision will always look to the needs of the weakest and most vulnerable first and foremost. It will also generate a spirituality of the person and of person-centred social action. Such will be the Church's vision of European soul-making.

All well and good. But the underpinning of an Enlightenment vision of the person with a theological humanism issues in a spirituality which

offers nowhere to place the darkness at the heart of the continent's collective psyche. If the new evangelizers of Europe are to do their work effectively, they need to dialogue with a culture at its roots, and that means moving through the shadows of its memory as much as it demands a proper ordering of its understanding and a strengthening of its will. And the telling truth which no one can afford to ignore, and to which the Church herself has only lately woken up, is that she has been implicated in that darkness.

'The Pope! How many divisions has he?' (Stalin)

There is no shortage of European liberals and republicans on hand to chant the litany of the Church's sins: the crusades, the Inquisition, pogroms, Galileo, institutionalized misogyny, fanaticism and downright intolerance. The standard liberal response is a staggeringly naïve assertion of the innocence of secularism and the demand that the Church apologize herself out of existence. Whatever we may think of this line, the politically operative notion of the Church as an organized and disciplined body, the custodian of a collectively held orthodoxy, has been a feature of European polity since the heady days of Constantine. By the Middle Ages, Christendom and Europe had become synonymous; the very concept of 'Europe' was first invoked during the crusades against Moorish Spain, and the resulting dominion of 'Most Catholic' Spain was maintained first by the conquest of the peninsula through warfare, bloodshed and violence, and then, in the sixteenth century, by the exclusion of those who remained.

Through much of European history, the notion of a church whose boundaries coincided with decisive political frontiers has underlain the moral justification for crusades, lynchings, slaughter and what might now be termed 'cultural cleansing', from the Synod of Whitby and the absorption of the Celtic Church into the Roman, to the annihilation by war of the Albigensian heresy; from Edward I's expulsion of the Jews from England to the French expulsion of the Huguenots; and on into the twentieth century. Europe's talent for exclusion and expulsion seems to have harnessed the Church's own self-understanding, as the *one* Church of Christ. Even the appearance of nationalisms preserved intact the claim to a kind of ecclesial, inner totality. Luther's contribution to German nationalist thinking is clear; more quaintly, a 1719 translation of the Psalms thought nothing of replacing the word 'Israel' systematically with 'Great Britain'.[2]

In secular fact, the single, coherent entity of 'Church' has never existed, any more than has a genuine European unity. 'The Church' has always been marked by division, plurality, schism and heresy. Even the crusades, which feature in our European mind's eye as a great collective campaign against external threats to Christendom, were plural; the knights went to war not only to combat the Saracens, but to slaughter Cathars, too, and it was they who finally sacked that 'other' Europe, Constantinople. The political myth – as opposed to the theological truth – of the one Church has functioned as a prop to political government. (It is a habit of mind that persists in everyday discourse about 'the Church', as in 'the problem with the Church today', when it should read 'the churches' or of 'the leaders of the Church of England'.)

So, used as we are to the criticism that the Church has allowed herself to be distorted by the political structures of the day, the relationship is actually more subtle. If the Church has been a valuable political tool, then it is largely because she has proven more durable than any state or government in Europe. Deeply embedded in the art and culture of all our societies, the fantasy of a structure that held people in thrall from their earliest days to their death and beyond was a beguiling political theory. The Church's subtle gradations of hierarchy, her meta-languages, the strange and special clothing for her princes – the imperial purple – has for European politicians, been less a link with the apostles than a link back to the foundations of Europe – the Roman model of unity, culture and civilization – a dissipated order they desired with such atavistic hunger.

That hunger reached its apogee in the twentieth century. Although explicitly anti-Christian, totalitarian ideologies of right and left nevertheless utilized the exclusive yet comprehensive model of statehood which the Church bequeathed to Europe. Nazism found itself confronted with people – in the shape of the cosmopolitan Jews or the nomadic Roma – who literally defied national boundaries. The 'Final Solution' was so termed because the notion of Europe could not, in its antiseptic purity as synthesized by the Nazis, contain the Jews.

This, then, is the immediate historical context for the European project of Schuman and Adenauer, the bandaging up of a broken continent and the establishment of a new kind of unity, one which rejects domination and uniformity. But we must delve deeper, because if we accept that the Church has been used to establish unity, then we are faced with a question: by whom? Here we must gaze into the shadows of Europe's cultural psyche; an unmistakable figure lurks there and he needs to be unmasked.

A Promethean addiction

Societies console themselves with myth (Israel is perhaps the only society which refused to do so); at the place where they are least free, they recount to themselves a narrative which dramatizes and justifies that unfreedom – such myths parallel the rationalizations, addictive mind-tricks, which individuals concoct to explain compulsive behaviour to their battered selves. Europe has her myths too, reiterated in archetypes re-worked through the ages. None of them is more pervasive of her civilization and history than that of Prometheus, the Titan who stole fire from the gods.

Europe's gods have tended to live in rivalry with their human subjects. Zeus and Woden, in distant times, were not entirely beneficent towards the human race, nor, more recently, have been Reason or Progress. Faced with such mighty threats, Europeans have been forced to deploy a strategy – they have always sought to steal the flame, the Secret, that absolute, forbidden content which promises liberation and new mastery. Time and again, Europeans have thrown over the old order and in one revolutionary sweep installed a new one, smiting the old gods and killing their kingly representatives.

The establishment of any unity demands the silencing of discordant voices. In Europe, the first voice to be silenced is usually divine; when Europe sneezes, the gods tremble. So it was with young Constantine, that audacious young Siegfried, who, faced with crisis in the Empire, found in the Church a new guarantor of imperial integrity, and in so doing silenced the pagan complaint of Symmachus, defender of the altar of Victory in the Senate hall: 'Your fame', begs the old pagan, 'owes much, and will owe still more to Victory. . . . Permit us, I beseech you, to transmit in our old age to our posterity what we ourselves received when boys.'[3] But the altar was removed and the cross emblazoned on all the Empire's shields.

Renaissance and modernity present different Promethean visages: Faust with his devilish pact and intellectual passion, Frankenstein with his mad science, Prometheuses both, personify that profound, constant irreverence which relishes a skirmish with the divinely ordained way of things. Even Christian theologians have had to carve out a God for Europe, a deity who allows himself to be placed firmly to one side (Jüngel).

Today, the syndrome is easily located in public anxiety about genetic research. Europeans all know that ethical boundaries placed in the way of the next stage of research will scarcely have been laid down before

they are swept away in the name of 'progress'. We do not always welcome the brave new world and something in us wishes it would go away. But equally we know it will not; the behaviour of our culture, the drive to flout given boundaries, is compulsive. One might say that the European psyche is addictively Promethean. This compulsion to overthrow the divinely given has impacted on the history of the Church; Europe used Christianity, that young upstart religion, when it suited her, and then in turn tossed it aside when it cramped her style.

The European Union has two aspects, then: it is, first of all, the overthrow of those great national gods which have wreaked so much havoc in Europe. Perhaps the Church, scenting the blood of an old enemy, cannot resist getting in on the kill. But, in the second place, the Union has about it a disarming lack of pomp, a modesty which prevents our being caught up in a new European patriotism; it embraces a banality which defies idealism. Its concrete office blocks are far removed from the Baroque grandeur of the palaces of the old nation-states. Some of its citizens are left crying out for the consolation of national glamour: could we not spice the EU up a little, turn it into a super-power? Seeing Europe under the aspect of its sheer drabness is an acceptance of truth, the painful admission of the darkness that has brought us to the European Union: the paradox that ever greater political union, of a distinctly post-national variety, is the only viable solution to the horrors of the past. To attempt to turn this project into something sparkling, something to rouse the rabble with new dreams of control, is to collude with addiction.

There is too, of course, theological motivation for rejecting the sorts of political theology which have been behind all this; above all, we know from experience that the non-confessional state, by refusing to define the relationship between government and the religious consciences of her people, leaves mystery where the state church has repeatedly sought definition. For a Christian, this enigmatic social bond can be thought of as a place inhabited by the Holy Spirit, a notion which requires of its interpreter a certain reticence.[4] Trying to make Europe explicitly Christian is both futile and doomed. It never works, and past attempts have crucially played into the darkness from which the European project is trying to deliver us.

Listening to the soul of Europe

If 'giving a soul to Europe' sounds a task worthy of Dr Frankenstein, then perhaps we can now see why. The Promethean urge to animate a

scarred, composite corpse is an off-putting tendency to which Europeans are congenitally prone.

But the slogan does have real meaning. A soul is not, after all, one more entity to be attached or detached at will from the assembled organism which is the European Union. Rather, soul is 'a movement that begins whenever man [*sic*] experiences the psychological pain of contradiction'.[5] Not a thing but a movement, then, the soul is born out of the experience of dissonance, incongruity and mismatch between desire and reality, aspiration and fact. That superlative artistic monument to the contemporary European predicament, the *War requiem* of Benjamin Britten, points us in this direction; a dramatic evocation of the collapse of Europe's Christian and secular theodicies, its resting place is neither the *In paradisum* of the Latin requiem, nor the 'Let us sleep now . . .' of Wilfred Owen's caustically redolent poetry, but the profoundly unstable *Kyrie eleison*, hovering around the augmented fourth, the *diabolus in musica*. Here is the soul's beginning.

If this is soul, then in the light of all we have said, it is clear that Europe has soul – and has it in abundance – and more, that the gospel is deeply embedded there, part of the scar tissue. It is striking that T. S. Eliot's hymn to European fragmentation, *The wasteland*, and the *Instrumentum laboris* of the European bishops mentioned above, both return to the figure of the stranger on the road to Emmaus to evoke something of the mystery of God's presence to the world of this problematic continent. Situating the place where the soul of Europe is indeed being born and nurtured in a similar place of darkness, brokenness and disappointment, we can sense the way in which responsible Christian individuals and communities are called to appropriate the strange, hybrid, reality which is the European Union. We are invited to walk with it, and to cultivate soul – to be attentive to the gulf between what Europe wants to be and what she is; to listen to her and to learn her laments; to recount her shattered narratives; to mourn her broken promises. And as we listen, the European soul flickers into life.

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NOTES

1 Robert Schuman, *Pour l'Europe* (Editions Nagel, Paris, 1964), p 78; quoted in John Sweeney and Jef van Gerwen (eds), *More Europe?* (Kok Pharos, Kampen, 1997), p 52.
2 The translation was that of Isaac Watts, a Hampshire-born dissenting minister. See Linda Coley, *Britons* (Vintage, London, 1992), p 31.
3 *The Letters of Ambrose*, Library of the Fathers 45 (London, 1881), pp 94–100: 95, nos 4, 5; quoted in Anton Wessels, *Europe: was it ever really Christian?* (SCM Press, London, 1994), p 52.
4 See Christoph Theobald SJ, 'La foi trinitaire des chrétiens et l'énigme du lien social' in Paul Beauchamp, Boris Bobrinskoy *et al., Monothéisme et Trinité* (Publications des Facultés Universitaires Saint-Louis, Brussels, 1991), pp 99–137.
5 Jacob Needleman, *Lost Christianity: a journey of rediscovery to the center of Christian experience* (New York, 1980), p 175; quoted in Rowan Williams, *Lost Icons* (T. & T. Clark Ltd, Edinburgh, 2000), p 149.