

# A CONSIDERATION OF CHRISTIANITY'S ROLE IN A PLURALISTIC SOCIETY

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IN THE WEST, whose ever more diverse societies embrace multiple cultures, the overt Christian heritage is fading. Therefore clarity about the nature of the unique contribution that Christianity and the Christian Churches make to such pluralistic societies is critical to enable them to continue making that positive contribution today. This does not mean that we should attempt to construct a unique justification for their existence purely in terms of what they offer to human society, but rather that we should search to identify that unique thing they do offer, and clearly and succinctly express the meaning and implications of that uniqueness, in humility and respect.

I shall start by considering the nature of pluralistic societies and the underlying assumptions that Western culture, in particular, brings to their evolution. I shall also consider two proposals defending European Christian civilisation, and another which attempts to respond to the immediate migrant and refugee crisis in the West through Christianity's resources. With the input of these three approaches I will outline the unique offering that I see Christianity as making to pluralistic society, which can best be understood through the simile of yeast.

## ***Western Pluralistic Societies***

The pluralistic nature of Western societies has arisen in the most part from economic migration resulting from the need of advanced economies for both skilled and cheap labour. Such societies are driven by the Western economic model that necessitates continual growth to sustain itself. Even today, in the midst of the unprecedented refugee crisis, this dynamic remains. Shortly after the German Chancellor invited migrants to Germany in August 2015,<sup>1</sup> the president of the Bundesbank, Jens Weidmann,

<sup>1</sup> See Allan Hall and John Lichfield, 'Germany Opens Its Gates: Berlin Says All Syrian Asylum-Seekers Are Welcome to Remain, as Britain Is Urged to Make a "Similar Statement"', *The Independent*

defended this invitation, citing Germany's demographic challenge: the failure of Germany's population to replace itself, leaving a gap in the future workforce threatening the country's ability to maintain its living standards.<sup>2</sup> He was supported by Peter Sutherland, former chairman of Goldman Sachs and United Nations special representative for international migration. Sutherland tweeted on the 16 September 2015: 'The population of many EU states need a crash course in demographics. Their people are aging and economies are threatened.'<sup>3</sup>

Most of the economic migration into the European Union comes from non-Christian cultures. We invite migrants into our societies for our own economic benefit, which also provides them with economic opportunity, and the resulting challenge is to find an equitable way of living together for both existing communities and migrant ones. The transition from a Western secular to a pluralistic society is one that has been continuing over the last decades, if not centuries. Nonetheless, with the recent arrival of large numbers of people from other cultures, who often have different values, questions will be asked of Western society that will require it to reconsider the validity and basis of its core assumptions. What was assumed can no longer be assumed.

Some of the potential problems with conflicting sets of values were highlighted by Trevor Phillips, founding chair of the UK Equality and



(24 August 2015), available at <http://www.independent.co.uk/news/world/europe/germany-opens-its-gates-berlin-says-all-syrian-asylum-seekers-are-welcome-to-remain-as-britain-is-10470062.html>.

<sup>2</sup> See the original interview: 'Das stärkt mir den Rücken', Jens Weidmann, interviewed by Maurice Zydra, *Süddeutsche Zeitung* (15 September 2015), available at <http://www.sueddeutsche.de/wirtschaft/jens-weidmann-das-staerkt-mir-den-ruecken-1.2648708?reduced=true> 15.

<sup>3</sup> <https://twitter.com/pdsutherlandun/status/644064750482141184>; and see "'Refugees Will Strengthen Germany': Bundesbank', *The Local.de* (16 September 2015), <http://www.thelocal.de/20150916/germanys-top-banker-calls-for-refugee-integration>, accessed 14 April 2016.

Human Rights Commission, in *Race and Faith: The Deafening Silence*, the April 2016 report by Civitas, the UK Institute for the Study of Civil Society. Phillips describes the current situation in the UK as 'superdiversity',<sup>4</sup> in which over a dozen significant ethnic groups or ethnocultures exist differentiated by 'deeply held values and behaviours'.<sup>5</sup> Some members of these ethnocultures, he argues, hold attitudes to sex, religion, belief and the rule of law that are incompatible with the West's, creating friction among existing and new cultures in British society.

And while overt bigotry is no longer prevalent in Britain, society is becoming ever more stratified by racial, ethnic and cultural characteristics such that social class is now differentiated by skin colour *and* by cultural symbols.<sup>6</sup> The problem Phillips sees is that this new situation is a significant barrier to the process of integration within British society. He contends that the current approach to integration is seriously flawed, and he asks his fellow liberals whether 'we stand by our fundamental values at the risk of offending others; or should our desire to preserve social unity be allowed to compromise much of the social progress of the past half century?'<sup>7</sup>

Unless society addresses these cultural problems head on, there is danger of,

... a catastrophe that will set community against community, endorse sexist aggression, suppress freedom of expression, reverse hard-won civil liberties, and undermine the liberal democracy that has served this country so well for so long. Worst of all it may destroy popular support for the values that have, in my opinion, characterised the greatest political advances in my lifetime: equality and solidarity.<sup>8</sup>

The urgency of Phillips's analysis is that for him, 'a society without realistic prospects of genuine integration is a society that, sooner or later, will give in to majority fears and prejudices'.<sup>9</sup> In response, and to defend the values of equality and solidarity, he argues for a new approach, what he calls 'active integration'.<sup>10</sup>

<sup>4</sup> 'Superdiversity' is an idea introduced (independently) by Steve Vertovec of Oxford University and Phillips almost a decade ago.

<sup>5</sup> Trevor Phillips, *Race and Faith: The Deafening Silence* (London: Civitas, 2016), 2–3, available at <http://www.civitas.org.uk/content/files/Race-and-Faith.pdf>, accessed 6 August 2016.

<sup>6</sup> Phillips, *Race and Faith*, 3.

<sup>7</sup> Phillips, *Race and Faith*, 4.

<sup>8</sup> Phillips, *Race and Faith*, 4.

<sup>9</sup> Phillips, *Race and Faith*, 61.

<sup>10</sup> Phillips, *Race and Faith*, 5.



Phillips makes the case for going beyond empty platitudes that offend no one, and directly addressing values and associated attitudes and behaviours. The solution he proposes to the problem of values, attitudes and behaviours that conflict with those of the UK's liberal democracy operates through the *activity* and *process* of integration. His assumption is that, through paying conscious attention to integration, conflicting attitudes will be resolved and different ethnocultures will (eventually) all coalesce around the equality and solidarity he identifies with liberal democracy. He rightly diagnoses the problem—conflicting values and associated attitudes and behaviours—but his solution does not address the core of that problem.

In a response to Phillips's report, the *Economist* magazine shows similar reticence. It frames the debate as one between optimism and pessimism, highlighting the optimistic 'nudge approach' to integration being pursued by Newham council, which organizes events to encourage people to mix, offers free English language lessons and provides no funding for single-religious or ethnic activities to discourage sectarianism.<sup>11</sup> But here again the core issue is not addressed. Rather the view is that if we all mix together—intermarry and live in the same areas—integration will occur of its own accord and eventually resolve any value conflicts.

<sup>11</sup> 'Integration Nation: Are Britons of Different Backgrounds Coming Together or Drifting Further Apart?', *The Economist* (19 May 2016), available at <http://www.economist.com/news/britain/21699178-are-britons-different-backgrounds-coming-together-or-drifting-further-apart-integration?>.

To understand the reluctance—perhaps inability—of both Phillips and the author of the *Economist* article to engage in direct discussion of values and associated attitudes and behaviours, and instead to remain safely at the level of the activity and process of integration, it is necessary to look at the assumptions underpinning their approach. But what is evident in any case is that in Western pluralistic societies different value sets, some in conflict with each other, do exist and will continue to exist side by side; and this presents a significant challenge to the assumption that movement towards a unity of congruent values—that is liberal democratic values such as equality and solidarity, freedom and tolerance—through the activity and process of integration is normative. A choice for economic migration has been made in Western society but the consequences of that economic policy remain at arm's length.

### ***Implicit and Explicit Dynamics and Assumptions of Western Society***

It is uncontroversial to acknowledge that modern Western society is defined by four principles: freedom, democracy, economic development and material progress—although the latter two play a significantly greater enabling role for the first two than is generally acknowledged. Underpinning each of these four are the assumptions of a relativistic, instrumental intellectual framework in which human reason alone is valid and objective *truth* tends to be replaced by *knowledge*—a knowledge that is judged by its accuracy or inaccuracy, and its ability to help us do what the knowledge itself determines can be done.

Regardless of the rejection of objective truth, however, there is always truth; even in the denial of truth by absolute relativism there remains a truth-claim—the truth being that there is no truth or that all claims to truth are equal, and so forth. There is always truth, and that truth orientates individuals and societies. Clarity on the nature of our own truth-claims is essential so that we are not incapacitated by our failure properly to critique our own intellectual framework. The notion of reason itself is also impoverished by these assumptions. Reason as reflecting or associated with a greater creative reason or intelligent agent—as understood by Plato and Aristotle—or reason as an aspect of the Christian *logos*—generative, creative and innovative—is put aside. Models are built, processes are mapped, but more fundamental explanations are abandoned. Instead, reason is treated as something that procures knowledge, which has been utilised to create economic development and material progress.

A 'progress' paradigm of modernity, which sees continual improvement from the past to the present, is underpinned by the very tangible economic and material development evident all around us. It does not in any way negate the achievements of the modern world, indeed it helps us to comprehend what that world truly offers—and what it does not. However, where this paradigm is overlaid upon areas unconnected to economic and material development, significant confusion is generated.

In particular, there is a danger of religious faith coming to be seen as an element from the early stages of human development, which is superseded as humanity embraces the enlightenment of reason. In such a scenario, any discussion that would compare religious and secular values and beliefs, their roots and their implications does not make sense. All religious values appear ultimately the same in nature, and differentiating between them is nothing more than a matter of chauvinism. The acceptance of religions—or pluralism—on these terms is a form of stop-gap until everyone catches up with those who have evolved to rely on their reason alone: not a tolerance based on respect and acceptance, but condescension towards those still considered to be on the journey of evolution to a stand-alone human reason.

From a human perspective, moreover, the progress paradigm contains a paradox, owing to the freedom it attributes to humanity. Individual freedom means that each human being can choose, for better or worse, his or her own way. As individuals and as societies, we can choose freedom, equality and solidarity, human dignity and respect, or reject them. The

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impact of a stand-alone reason in conjunction with freedom and democracy leaves many fundamental questions open. What responsibilities does individual freedom entail? In a democracy, what makes law more than the arbitrary free will (or indeed the tyranny) of the majority? What is the place of justice? Furthermore, what makes human rights truly human rights, in the sense that they are not given by the consensus but are beyond any consensus? What forms and orientates freedom, such that it is more than the freedom of power? How do we prevent tolerance from tolerating intolerance; and what provides the basis of the universal nature of values so that they are more than what we happen to think at any point in time?

In Western society we construct a world-view within a zeitgeist which includes certain 'reasonable' assumptions—a world-view that we would not construct without that particular zeitgeist, because the assumptions provided by the zeitgeist are as important as the world-view itself. Remove the zeitgeist and you remove the stabilising assumptions of the 'reasonable'

world-view. And despite the progress paradigm, Western society still feeds on assumptions and values emanating from its historical Christian heritage, a heritage that is now rejected by many, tolerated only as one religious belief-system among others. We are close to the point where the assumptions and values that stabilise the current Western world-view have become so disconnected from that world-view that something altogether different exists from what we assume.

The greatest barrier to dialogue about values exists, not for cultures which have clear identities and values with associated attitudes and behaviours, but for those who have made value assumptions dependent on a zeitgeist no longer acknowledged or integrated into those assumptions. Western society is post-Christian—but post-Christian in the sense that its existence is dependent on having passed through a Christian phase, and not in the sense that Christianity no longer influences and orientates it.

To date pluralism seems to be a pragmatic solution to multiculturalism arising from the needs of a specific economic model. But, as the dominance of the historical cultural reality known as the West, with its Christian heritage and values, fades, unless the West can get to grips with the zeitgeist on which its values depend, it will be unable effectively to defend those values except as an intolerant rejection of those who are different.

### **Responses to Pluralistic Society**

The evolution of Western society away from its Christian heritage towards pluralism has led to attempts to reconnect it to that heritage, to protect the benefits of Christian civilisation and provide a bulwark against negative effects of the transition to pluralism. To assess if these attempts help us to identify the unique contribution of Christianity to pluralistic society I will consider three different proposals, by Pierre Manent, Marcello Pera and Hermann von Rompuy.

*Pierre Manent: Europe as the Historical Entity Carrying the Nation, the Covenant and the Common Good*

Pierre Manent, a former director of studies at L'École des Hautes Études en Sciences Sociales in Paris, has expressed concern at what he sees as the collapse of the European nation state, particularly the French nation state, and the embrace of a post-political form for Europe.<sup>12</sup> Europe today,

<sup>12</sup> Pierre Manent, 'Repurposing Europe', *First Things* (April 2016), available at <https://www.firstthings.com/article/2016/04/repurposing-europe>. This essay gives an overview of Manent's book *Beyond Radical Secularism*, translated by Ralph Hancock (South Bend: St Augustine's, 2016).

he argues, is understood by the *élites* as an ‘abstract social space where the sole principle of legitimacy now resides in human rights, understood as the unlimited rights of individual particularity’. Nothing common exists in this space save human universality; ‘anyone and anything’ can find space within it. No intermediate communities such as nations or Churches are recognised, indeed, they are seen as ‘*pretended realities* that recalcitrant “reactionaries” invoke only to block newcomers’.

He calls this the ideological lie of new secularism: we are obliged ‘to pretend to be nothing but citizen-individuals who are permitted common action only for the sake of “humanity”’. While the nation and the Christian religion are rejected, Islam—even though its moral practices are alien to those of post-political humanity—has ‘unhindered’ presence in Europe. This unhindered presence, Manent argues, is, in fact, seen as a triumph of European ideals of universal humanity and its rights, validating Europe’s post-political self-image.

The response that Manent puts forward to this emptying of the idea of Europe is the recovery of the nation and of the Judaeo-Christian Covenant: ‘the confidence that the Highest Good oversees and perfects the common good of our nations’. For Manent, the Covenant is ‘not a simple rational notion, to be sure, but it is not exactly a religious dogma. It is a certain

way of understanding human action in the world’ that enables humanity to ‘exceed a sober assessment of our powers’. Manent is advocating a political form in which collective action for the common good is the foundation of civic life; and, for France, he argues that this necessitates a Christian nation in which the historical form of nationhood is conserved. Only within this form can other religious realities, such as Islam, find a place as distinct communities and not simply as groups of citizen-individuals with guaranteed rights.

The problem that Manent diagnoses is primarily an internal





problem for France and Europe: a loss of both the idea of the nation state and the way of life offered by Christianity, and the subsequent embrace of post-political reality with the universal humanity and the citizen-individual as the subject of rights at its heart. A secondary problem that arises from the peculiarities of the first is Europe's incapacity to respond appropriately to the rise of Islam, viewed as a threat to Europe as a historical entity.

Manent's solution is to look to the past, to the history of the European continent. The renewal of France and Europe that he advocates is based on the template of the past, of Christian nation states, in which what he calls Covenant and the common good are essential components. This scenario, however, ignores the challenges of the past and of the future, which have led European nation states to share sovereignty. Indeed, Manent is conflating Christianity with specific political entities. The past certainly provides pointers to managing the future, but we cannot conjure up the past into the now or project it into the future. The past was created by dynamics that no longer exist.

Moreover, the loss of faith cannot be remedied by a political and cultural programme. Only a rejuvenation of faith itself—a renewal of conviction in the veracity and efficacy of Christianity—can remedy a loss of faith. Such a renewal seems unrealistic in relation to the strength of the forces aligned against it. But there is no means of establishing the Covenant and the common good while circumventing Christian faith itself. The fruits of Christian faith emanate from that faith alone. To introduce the Covenant into a society without Christian faith would lead to distortions of both nation and Covenant.

Finally, the universal human, citizen individual with ever-increasing rights, of whom Manent is so critical, in fact directly emanates from the Christian faith: no matter what creed we follow, what race or tribe we are from, our common humanity arises from God's creation of human beings as narrated in Genesis; God's calling to humanity comes later. The faith that gives rise to and provides the meaning for the universal humanity has been eclipsed, but the fruit of that faith remains in universal humanity, even if the individual citizen is a distortion of the communal, relational universal humanity of God's creation.

*Marcello Pera: the EU and the Christian Roots of Europe*

In his lecture 'Relativism, Christianity, and the West' at the Pontifical Lateran University in May 2004, Marcello Pera, agnostic and former president of the Italian senate, responded to the challenge for Europe represented by the loss of Christian assumptions in political, social and

intellectual life. Pera, like Pierre Manent, sees the problem as being the intellectual and spiritual emptiness of Europe. He asserts that Christianity is 'consubstantial' with the West, creating an interdependence between the two. He goes as far as asserting that all the West's achievements derive from or are influenced by Christianity:

In truth, without this message, which has transformed all human beings into persons in the image of God, individuals would have no dignity. In truth, our values, rights and duties of equality, tolerance, respect, solidarity, and compassion are born from God's sacrifice. In truth, our attitude towards others, towards all others, whatever their condition, class, appearance, or culture, is shaped by the Christian revolution.<sup>13</sup>

Pera describes the crisis of Europe as a relativism that sees all cultures and values as equal and equivalent, claiming that there are no grounds for our values nor solid proofs that one set of values is more valid or better than another. 'What has changed', he writes, 'is our belief in the foundations, proofs, justifications, and good reasons'.<sup>14</sup> This loss of faith in values creates an intellectual and spiritual vacuum. Relativism, according to Pera, arises from two philosophical trends: contextualism, which sees a plurality of values that cannot be judged by comparison; and deconstruction, which exposes inconsistencies and gaps in universal concepts. Against this Pera argues that there is always a value choice underpinning intellectual and political positions. Such a choice is the starting point of all intellectual positions so that 'what remains in the end is moral faith'.<sup>15</sup>

The rise of relativism has profound implications for the West as consubstantial with Christianity. Jesus Christ as God's self-revelation is the truth. But 'if faith contains no truth', as Pera asks, 'how can we be saved?' However, to argue for truth, and that Jesus Christ is the truth, is seen by relativists as 'dogmatic and anti-historical'. Again in this denial of truth Pera sees profound consequences for Europe. Democracy is based on the values arising from Christianity: 'the values of individual dignity, equality and respect'.<sup>16</sup> Deny the truth of these values and, for Pera, you deny democracy. He questions the basis of dialogue in a relativist framework where there is no truth, and contends that Christians

<sup>13</sup> Marcello Pera, 'Relativism, Christianity, and the West' and 'Letter to Joseph Ratzinger' in *Without Roots: The West, Relativism, Christianity, Islam*, translated by Michael Moore (New York: Basic, 2006), 36.

<sup>14</sup> Pera, 'Relativism, Christianity, and the West', 23.

<sup>15</sup> Pera, 'Relativism, Christianity, and the West', 22.

<sup>16</sup> Pera, 'Relativism, Christianity, and the West', 26.

are in danger of apostasy when, in such dialogue, they do not hold to the truth of Jesus Christ.<sup>17</sup>

To address the problems facing Europe, Pera contends that 'a broader and deeper spirit, a general conceptual framework' need to be found to support Christian values, as well as people who 'will be the bearer of this spirit'.<sup>18</sup> He believes that a civil, non-denominational Christian religion is needed to instil its values throughout society without interfering with the separation between Church and state, and that Christians and secularists must work together. Importantly for this alliance he maintains that:

The main difference lies in the origins that each group ascribes to their values. For secularists, values come from elsewhere: evolution, education, reason, natural light, social influences, or other factors. For believers values come from Revelation: they are a divine gift, given to us through transcendence. While for secularists values are constructed by human effort—through immanence—for believers they are given by God.<sup>19</sup>

Pera's underlying concern is the intellectual coherence of European civilisation, of which values and culture are an integral aspect. The secularity he argues for is in fact utterly dependent on Christianity. Pera is attempting to defend European Christian civilisation, its value system and the fruits of that value system against the twofold threat he sees in relativism and in Islam. However, Pera's insistence that the basis of European Christian civilisation is Jesus Christ and his simultaneous reticence about embracing the God-Man beyond the intellectual level creates a degree of dissonance in his arguments. He seeks what Christianity offers without fully embracing Christianity.

The practical implications of Pera's and Manent's critiques of a European crisis of self-identity can be seen in the failure of the EU to acknowledge the Christian character of Europe in its treaties and foundational law. Pera describes the references to the 'cultural, religious and humanistic inheritance' and 'spiritual and moral heritage' of Europe, rather than to a Christian Europe, in the then proposed European Constitution and Charter of Fundamental Rights as 'like referring to a human being rather than an Italian citizen'.<sup>20</sup> The problem he sees is that, on the one hand, if Europe is Christian by virtue of the values expressed

<sup>17</sup> Pera, 'Relativism, Christianity, and the West', 28, 45.

<sup>18</sup> Pera, 'Letter to Joseph Ratzinger', 95.

<sup>19</sup> Pera, 'Letter to Joseph Ratzinger', 99.

<sup>20</sup> Pera, 'Letter to Joseph Ratzinger', 84.

in the EU's founding treaties, why refer to those values as 'religious' and not Christian? On the other hand, if these values are not named as Christian, they 'are left hanging from a thread since they are proclaimed indistinctly, declaimed as if they were fatherless, created *ex nihilo*'.<sup>21</sup>

The terms 'spiritual' and 'religious', he argues, are used—and are found acceptable—because they are generic and vague, whereas the word 'Christian' is 'an identifying adjective: appropriate, precise, and therefore suspected of arrogance'.<sup>22</sup> While I personally regret the lack of recognition for the Christian heritage of Europe in these EU documents, I also recognise that the practical reason for it is straightforward: a significant section of European society simply does not identify itself as Christian, and many see the roots of their European culture in the Enlightenment, not in Christianity. For these Europeans, however, two questions remain open: what makes the notion of the inalienable dignity of the human being more than the notion of current consensus? And what makes it universally applicable to each and every human being?

*Herman von Rompuy and a Christian Response to the Refugee Crisis*

Turning now from political and philosophical responses to the transition to pluralistic societies to practical engagement with the immediate refugee and migrant crisis, I will consider the talk by Herman von Rompuy, president emeritus of the European Council, at the conference on the role of Christians in today's Europe held in January 2016 at the Chapel for Europe in Brussels.<sup>23</sup>

Addressing the responsibilities of Europe in relation to the unprecedented refugee crisis, von Rompuy argued that 'Christians should remain *personalists*', who acknowledge and respect human dignity and the irreplaceable value of each human being. Personalism, he contended, provides principles and guidelines for treating others and determines the role the state plays in society.

Our Western civilization is built on democracy, the rule of law, gender equality, not discrimination, the separation between Church and State, the social market economy. Within this framework there should be room for many beliefs and cultures.<sup>24</sup>

<sup>21</sup> Pera, 'Letter to Joseph Ratzinger', 85.

<sup>22</sup> Pera, 'Letter to Joseph Ratzinger', 86.

<sup>23</sup> Herman von Rompuy, keynote speech, 20 January 2016, Chapel for Europe, Brussels, available at [http://www.resurrection.be/IMG/pdf/20\\_01\\_2016\\_HvR\\_The\\_Role\\_of\\_Christians](http://www.resurrection.be/IMG/pdf/20_01_2016_HvR_The_Role_of_Christians), accessed 8 August 2016.

<sup>24</sup> Von Rompuy, keynote speech, 2.

For von Rompuy the number of Muslim migrants who come to Europe is not important. Maintaining that defence of 'values' can be a pretext or alibi for racism, he argues for the vision of 'One Civilization, many cultures'.<sup>25</sup>

To make such a vision work he understands that dialogue is needed, so as to look for common values and acknowledge differences, to find common ground so that we can live in harmony. 'Dialogue leads to convergence .... Integration is not assimilation.' Von Rompuy insists that Christians must contribute to the dramatic societal changes of the present time, which include not only migration but also technological and medical developments, and globalisation. He holds that Christians need to remain hopeful, adopting Barack Obama's campaign slogan: 'yes we can'.<sup>26</sup>

Von Rompuy articulates his solution to the refugee crisis in his espousal of personalism, the acknowledgement and respect for the irreplaceable dignity of every human being. This principle transforms any set of policies for the refugee crisis, or for any crisis, from simple pragmatic solutions to a political problem. Where von Rompuy's argument is less convincing—indeed I would go so far as to say dangerous—is in its failure to link the values of Western civilisation ('democracy, the rule of law, gender equality, not discrimination, the separation between Church and State, the social



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<sup>25</sup> Von Rompuy, keynote speech, 2.

<sup>26</sup> Von Rompuy, keynote speech, 3.

market economy') to that very principle of personalism or, more precisely, to the root of the principle of personalism in Christianity.

Protecting the principle of personalism, so that the values that generate it are defended and sustained, is essential for personalism to remain the principle underpinning European solutions. Von Rompuy is absolutely right that many who call for a defence of values use that defence as cloak for racism. Nevertheless, the failure to engage in a discussion of values, the roots of those values and the specific dynamics they create, and the very real differences between the values of the West and those of other cultures, is highly remiss.

If we do not have the courage to enter this dialogue and face accusations of racism, the field is given over to those who actually are racists. Equally, it is anti-intellectual; simply to speak of values, as if all values were ultimately the same, and not to take the hard road of exploring the basis and applicability of different values, means that they can end up meaning anything and everything, and so nothing of concrete substance. Other civilisations have very different attitudes to the core tenets that von Rompuy identified as those of Western civilisation. This makes the question of values not simply one of avoiding racism but, with the increase in communities with non-Christian heritages, a question that is unavoidable for the European consciousness. Only by openly discussing this question, with Christians engaging on the basis of the personalism that von Rompuy advocates, can the real concrete concerns of the whole population be addressed.

#### *Values and Cultures in Pluralistic Society*

Von Rompuy, Pera and Manent offer important reflections for Europe today. Underlying the arguments of each is the importance of the Christian element for European civilisation. While Islam, for all of them in different ways, typifies the issue of differing values, it is not the principal problem. The principal problem is the movement in Western thought from objective truth, creative reason and faith to knowledge and capability, which makes engaging with values beyond process and activity extremely difficult.

The danger, as I see it, in the proposals put forward by Manent and Pera is that Europe, in response to external challenges, may define its Christian culture politically and intellectually, treating Christian faith itself—the ultimate source of that culture—as a mechanism to protect a historical, cultural and political entity and pursue its interests. The problems of the present and those we see in the future can only be addressed as we move into the future. The past is not where solutions

lie. Taking the personalism of Christianity and applying it wherever we find ourselves and in whatever circumstances is the solution to our challenges. But that necessitates more than a value system espoused for its attractiveness and usefulness; our value system must arise from conviction by faith in the God of Jesus Christ. We need the passionate embrace of universal humanity to be integrated with the faith and values from which it springs and which make it something more than the current consensus—something universal for each and every human being. Every Christian is called to apply that personalism to all human beings irrespective of race or creed.

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Engaging with values in pluralistic society will necessitate talking about difference within a framework that rejects intolerance while speaking for what is unique. Currently we neither have the language nor the intellectual disposition to talk about difference. Such language must be found or constructed by those committed to the dignity of the human being. Talking about difference among Western Christian and non-Christian faiths and cultures should not be about fear, but a call for reasoned dialogue in which each is critiqued and challenged, and critiques and challenges in turn.

We need to ask how far freedom and tolerance go. Values and associated attitudes and behaviours may be permitted in the name of freedom and tolerance which in fact conflict with the fundamental nature of human dignity, of equality and solidarity. The West has yet fully to engage with these fundamental questions but, when it does so, secular society will be challenged to a much greater extent than Christianity or the other faiths, each of which has a much clearer understanding of its own values, the roots of those values and their implications for society. The lack of measure applied to the values of freedom and tolerance makes it difficult for the West to speak of difference in a way that does not present the assertion of difference as in some way a rejection of freedom and tolerance. Engaging with values beyond either general notions of 'freedom' and 'tolerance' or a 'single correct' set of values based on current consensus, which may be intolerant and negate freedom: this is the task that Western society will need to take up.

In a dialogue on difference that rejects intolerance, there must be a definitive affirmation of universal humanity, not of isolated individual citizens. This affirmation reflects the equal dignity and value of each human being in the reality of God's creation of humanity, the communal relationality of human beings who have rights that are intrinsically linked to associated responsibilities. Difference exists and must be acknowledged.

Specific value sets and their associated attitudes and behaviours create particular cultures and civilisations. Only by creating an environment in which those differences can be discussed and critiqued, in which truth and good can be asserted, can we move beyond a pragmatic pluralistic society that is driven, and silenced, by economic policy—a society in which the highest good is ‘not to offend anyone’, in which cultural groupings live side by side each in isolation from one another—towards a truly values-based society. Such a society knows its own values, their sources and the dynamics they create, and is comfortable engaging with others on this basis.

### ***Christianity and Christians’ Unique and Positive Contribution to Society***

Having considered the nature of pluralistic society and responses to it by those seeking to defend the Christian heritage of Europe, I will now outline the unique and positive contribution I see Christianity as offering to pluralistic society, indeed to any society. Authentic Christian faith, that is, faith in God’s self-revelation in Jesus Christ, arises from the human being’s encounter with God’s Word and truth, and response to them. Truth, as thought and love, opens the reality of a freedom of love, which is relatedness to others through God, and orientates us away from the lie that is the freedom of power, of the isolated individual closed in upon the self. This is the unique contribution that Christianity and Christians are called to offer every and any society. And it is from this truth that the universal dignity of each human being in humanity’s creation in the image of God emerges.

For we are all creatures of the Creator; each life has meaning; each person is loved and forgiven; and this world is not the extent of life. We have hope: not earthly hope, but true hope. It is this truth against all ideologies, all power and all interests that Christians are called to share. Such sharing can only be effected in how our life is lived and in our witness to society of that truth. Through our life lived in congruence with Christian faith the world is transformed—not through force of numbers, but through a pinch of yeast.

God’s self-revelation in Jesus Christ does not provide a ready-made Christian social system to work towards, other than the acknowledging the separate spheres of Church and state. Rather, it provides an orientation, energy and dynamism that can inform each system it encounters and each activity undertaken, and transform them like yeast. The needs of the time and place will determine the activity, but that activity will be formed and



informed by the truth of Jesus Christ and the dynamism arising from ultimate reality as revealed in Jesus Christ: from creative reason, love, freedom and personal relatedness. Each system encountered is transformed by the yeast of the love of Christ manifest in Christian lives.

This is not Christian triumphalism but service, in which the cross is the constant companion in our relationship with Jesus Christ the Son and through the Son and in the Spirit with the Father. Concluding his consideration of moral philosophy and ethics in Western society in *After Virtue*, Alasdair MacIntyre contended that we are waiting for another St Benedict.<sup>27</sup> There is, however, no need to wait: we are already called to live like St Benedict—not all as monks—but with Christ at the centre of our lives, to lose our life so that we may gain true life, and in that way give true life to others.

This perspective provides no ready-made solutions, rather it informs and orientates every aspect of human life and activity, and in doing so has an impact and influence on the whole of humanity. Equally, Christianity and Christians do not own this unique perspective; it is received and must be accepted as a gift, and so can only be passed on in the manner in which it was received: in the sacrifice of meaningful love by the God of Jesus Christ, of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob, who reaches out to humanity through human beings, seeking a positive response to the encounter that is an acceptance of God's gift of love into our hearts and lives.

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<sup>27</sup> Alasdair MacIntyre, *After Virtue*, 3rd edn (Notre Dame, In: U. of Notre Dame P, 2007 [1981]), 263.