Europe's early vision: how Christian Democratic morality shaped the EU

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*In the first of two extracts from Theos' new report on the EU, A Soul for the Union, **Ben Ryan** examines the origins of the three concepts that propelled the early dream of European unity – solidarity, subsidiarity and moral and religious vision – and how they were expressed by Europe's founders.*

The content of the early dream

The essential content of what characterised the early European project can be summarised in three areas:
1. Solidarity
2. Subsidiarity
3. Explicit moral/religious vision
Each of these three areas has different components, but together they characterise the essential ideology of the European project in the 1950s.

Solidarity

> *Europe will not be made all at once or according to a single plan. It will be built through concrete achievements which first create a de facto solidarity.*

Those words are drawn from the famous Schuman Declaration delivered in May 1950. This public declaration by Robert Schuman, then French Foreign Minister, led directly to the negotiations which culminated in the Paris treaty and the establishment of the ECSC.

The explicit aim referred to repeatedly throughout the early integration process was that of solidarity. What that actually means is less obvious but it seems to have a number of elements – one was peace (or solidarity between nations for mutual benefit). A second was solidarity with workers and the poor (i.e. not so much between nations as between classes). Finally, there was a concern to create political harmony by limiting the power of national politicians.

Peace between nations (and particularly France and Germany) was an obvious starting point for European integration. The failure after the Great War to maintain peace for even a generation and the extraordinary scale of not only military but civilian death in the Second World War made peace an absolute priority. What marked out early European integration was the extraordinary commitment that extended beyond treaties to assuring a basis for peace by making militarisation via coal and steel impossible. In Schuman's words, "the solidarity in production thus established will make it plain that any war between France and Germany becomes not only unthinkable but materially impossible," because the ECSC required a pooling of sovereignty over the two industries necessary for arming a military and prevented Germany from rapidly outstripping the French industrial sector.

German soldiers examine an abandoned "Churchill" Canadian tank in Dieppe, August 1942. Photo: Canada BiblioArchives via a CC 2.0 licence.

This was a remarkable development, one that surprised and delighted the Americans, who had never thought the French would accept any such proposal, never mind propose it. Crucially, the aim was always peace and solidarity; the potential economic gains were a secondary objective. The German chancellor Adenauer made it quite clear in the Bundestag in 1952 that he felt all six governments involved "realise… that the political goal, the political meaning of the European Coal and Steel Community, is infinitely larger than its economic purpose."

Peace was the primary aim of solidarity, but that did not mean prosperity was excluded, and indeed a concern for prosperity was particularly clear in the Treaty of Rome that established the EEC (European Economic Community) in 1958. However, it is notable that this prosperity was conceived differently than it seems to be today. The focus was on making workers and citizens wealthier, healthier and safer whereas today's focus seems to have lost the recognition that economic prosperity only matters if it improves the lives of citizens.

The commitment is explicitly to "the constant improvement of the living and working conditions of their [member states'] peoples." This commitment is referred to extensively in both the Treaty of Rome and of Paris (see, for example, Articles 2-3 of both treaties), and in Article 117 of Rome which states that "Member states agree upon the need to promote improved working conditions and an improved standard of living for workers."

It is something of an irony that the founders of the European project were the architects and greatest supporters of the developing welfare states in their respective countries, when today Europe seems to be one of the threats to the welfare state – whether in the form of immigration seeming to undermine the system in the UK, or in austerity being imposed on Greece and Spain at the expense of parts of the welfare state. Certainly that (admittedly sometimes rather paternalist) commitment to the welfare state was present in the early stages of European integration.

A final constituent element of solidarity is the commitment to political harmony. In contemporary debates over the EU much is made of the "democratic deficit" – that is, the extent to which European institutions fail adequately to demonstrate their democratic accountability. The early European institutions were designed in part precisely to avoid democratic clashes of the Westminster parliamentary style. The Commission was meant to be a-political and based on consensus (there was also no majority voting). This reflects a wider concern among the founders of the European project to prioritise harmony (a term that appears remarkably frequently across the two treaties in question).

On a broader scale, there was a deliberate intention to limit the power and sovereignty of nation states. Following two world wars and, from the perspective of the Catholic Church and Catholic politicians, a long culture war, the temptation to blame the state for the ills of the modern world was high. Indeed, it was the deliberate efforts at curtailing national power and sovereignty (along, interestingly, with a fear of how the unions would respond) that prevented the UK's Labour post-war government from signing the treaties at the time.

Subsidiarity

Subsidiarity, according to the glossary of the EU website, is a concept that:

> [E]nsures that decisions are taken as closely as possible to the citizen and that constant checks are made to verify that action at Union level is justified in light of the possibilities available at national, regional or local level. Specifically, it is the principle whereby the Union does not take action (except in the areas that fall within its exclusive competence), unless it is more effective than action taken at national, regional or local level.

Interestingly, despite being at the heart of the European debate since the foundation of the European project, the term only first appeared in a treaty in the Maastricht Treaty of 1992 which established the European Union. The term was adapted from the 1931 Papal Encyclical Quadragesimo Anno (QA). Wolfram Kaiser notes that at least as early as the Nouvelles Équipes Internationales (NEI) congress in Tours, 1953 (a meeting of Christian Democrat politicians from across Western Europe), the French politician Pierre-Henri Teitgen suggested basing Christian Democratic policy on Quadragesimo Anno. It has an explicit grounding, therefore, in Catholic Social Teaching (CST). Critically not only was this seen as an issue of governance, but one of justice. Indeed, in QA Pope Pius XI summarised the concept of subsidiarity in terms of justice:

> It is an injustice and at the same time a grave evil and disturbance of right order to assign to a greater and higher association what lesser and subordinate organisations can do.

This is tied into a broader conception of how society should function. Christian democracy as an ideology emphasised 'personalism', the idea that all people are fundamentally relational and tied to others. Humans are not atomised individuals but are essentially bound into social structures and particularly families. The emphasis on supporting families and local communities while resisting centralised power found in the doctrine of subsidiarity is one that it is critical to the model of Christian democracy and, therefore, the early European project.

Moral and religious vision

To say that there was a distinct moral and religious vision can sound more sectarian than perhaps was the reality. So far I have argued that the early European project was defined largely by the priorities of Christian Democrats, with a focus on solidarity and subsidiarity that was based on a particular conception of justice

and morality.

However, it was never intended to be exclusive in its focus. De Gasperi characterised the Christian aspect of the project by saying:

> *When I affirm that Christianity is at the origin of the European Civilisation I do not intend to introduce any kind of exclusive confessional criterion into the evaluation of our history. I refer to the common European heritage, to that unitary morality that puts emphasis on the human being and his responsibility.*

This, then, was a vision that came out of a particular ideology and religious tradition that emphasised human responsibility, but was not intended to be limited to any one group. The early European project has been called by the academic Scott Thomas "an act of theopolitical imagination." Even in its earliest days, when the key protagonists were overwhelmingly Catholics from Christian Democrat parties there was a broader sense among observers of the necessity of a legitimately moral and spiritual vision.

Winston Churchill, no Christian Democrat, and certainly no Catholic, commented in his famous Zurich speech:

> *We must build a United States of Europe. In this way only will hundreds of millions of toilers be able to regain the simple joys and hopes which make life worth living. The process is simple. All that is needed is the resolve of hundreds of millions of men and women to do right instead of wrong and gain as their reward blessing instead of cursing… There can be no revival of Europe without a spiritually great France and a spiritually great Germany.*

There was something of a consensus in the 1940s and 1950s, even among those countries that did not join the early integration process, that this was a body that, while it might have particular weaknesses (the Americans were concerned about the possible creation of business cartels, the British about a European bloc inimical to their own interests), was certainly a project of moral integrity and importance. This sense – of the critical part that morality, spirituality and indeed religiously-inspired-politics – is something that has significantly waned since the origins of the European Project.

This post represents the views of the author and not those of the BrexitVote blog, nor the LSE. It is an extract from A Soul for the Union, where full references can be found.

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