



After Brexit - Can we find a broad and middle way? A call for a public, political theology

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Some years ago, a professor of psychology at the University of Louvain took an interest in how people feasted and celebrated. As part of his research, he asked one of his students to write a thesis on the following subject: 'How do children, aged 9 to 11 years, experience the phenomenon of *feast*?'. The student approached the subject in a number of ways - one of these consisted of showing a control group of 100 children three drawings of a different birthday feast.

The first drawing depicted a child alone, before a mountain of gifts waiting to be opened. In the second drawing, the child was surrounded by just a few family members, plus a birthday cake, ice-cream, and other treats. But there were many fewer presents to open - in fact only one parcel, and not very big at that. In the third picture, the child was surrounded by wider family, friends and neighbours, and there was more food. But there was no gift or parcel in the picture at all, so nothing to open. The children were asked simply: 'Which of these birthdays would you rather have for yourself, and why?'

Seventy percent of the sample chose the third picture, and they explained, as children might, that this was the real feast. Others said, 'in the third picture, everyone is happy - in the first picture, only I am happy, and in the second picture, not enough people are happy'. The children, in other words, grasped something authentic about humanity and sociality - that by being together, and only by being together, can we be truly happy. True, this takes organisation, and can be headache for the organisers. But a feast, to be a feast, needs people. A feast is not about 'what's in it for me' or being self-fulfilled. It is about others, as much as ourselves.

A true feast, in Christian terminology, is a communion with God, *and* a communion with people - the two are indivisible. We cannot share at the

common table and only be self-interested, any more than we can share in a common feast of the word, and be only there for ourselves. When God bids us welcome - to the feast that George Herbert speaks of in his poem *Love Bade Me Welcome* - we are invited into a meal and an experience that is collective in character, because God's love is shared. God's feasts are gracious in character; sublime in their fullness, greatness and capacious vision. They draw us in; and they send us out. They are profoundly communal.

Perhaps, like me, you have despaired - and perhaps been depressed - in recent months over the quality and character of debate around whether or not to stay in Europe. I have mourned how easily the word 'community' and 'union' - two fine words and concepts that remind us of our bonds with our neighbours - have been neglected. We seem to have gone out of our way to make a virtue out of being un-neighbourly; told ourselves that sharing - giving and receiving - is risky.

The debate, at times, has felt like an advocacy for the first two birthday pictures I described earlier. We are better off on our own (or better off with just a very few friends) and if we can't control the numbers at the table, perhaps the answer is not to feast at all. Yet the feast that Jesus regularly refers to in the gospels - that of the Kingdom of Heaven - is inclusive, widespread and open. And the early church understood this not only in its liturgy, but also in social and political terms. So the first Christians looked after the widows, orphans and poor, and treated them not as objects of charity, but as equals. They did this to foreigners, friends, neighbours, slaves, free, male, female, young and old. As John Chrysostom wrote, '*ubi caritas gaudet, ibi est festivitas*': 'where charity rejoices, there we have the feast'. The early church was committed, in other words, to that third picture. The birthday of the church was Pentecost: many nations; many tongues; one Lord; one faith; one hope; one union. Europe, though flawed, was a nonetheless profoundly 'Christian project' - dating from at least the Holy Roman Empire.

The church, in other words, was always for others, and perhaps, we might say, Europe is not only there for what we can get out of it - it is there for others too. It is a shared enterprise, built on profound notions of charity, reciprocity, giving, receiving and grace. True, it has not always lived up to its calling. The divisive strident nationalisms in two world wars, and more recently in the Balkans, shows us what can happen when naked nationalism asserts itself over the common good.

Indeed, that phrase, 'common good' has been used by modern Catholic theologians throughout the twentieth century, though its origins are older. I declare an interest here, as a sometime lecturer and tutor at the Said Business School - an association I enjoy and find immensely enriching. So here's a question I ask students: 'What is the oldest constitution in the world that people still live by today?' Many students approaching this assume it might be somehow British - the mother of all parliaments, and all that. Some braver souls suggest Iceland - that is the world's first parliament, formed in 930 AD - the *Althing*.

But no, it is not that either. The answer is *The Rule of Benedict*, written around 540. So yes, catholic, European, and designed to regulate life and how we live together. It begins with a simple word: 'hearken', or 'listen' - and goes on to tell us that if we want to lead a body or a group, we must first of all listen to it. It advocates charity, compassion, grace, hospitality, hope, holiness. It preaches regard and respect for neighbours, and for the poor. It tells us how to live together, despite our differences.

The essay I then set on the basis of this is straightforward: 'Write a book review on a text that teaches us about leadership'. But there's a catch: you can only write a review of a book that has been in continuous print for at least 300 years. This cuts out all the modern dross at a stroke - those tiresome books at airport bookshops that brashly claim to be the latest fad and breakthrough in leadership studies or management theory. They are all barred from this exercise.

So what can you write on? Well, Machiavelli's *Prince*. Shakespeare's tragedies such as *Lear* or *Macbeth*; both have plenty to say on leadership. Though I think I prefer the deft, reflexive leadership that you find in Shakespeare's comedies, which bring order and reconciliation for everyone - all out of apparent chaos. As well as Benedict's *Rule*, there is also Gregory's *Pastoral Rule* - the textbook on how to be a bishop, translated by Alfred the Great - mostly unknown to and unread by today's bishops. Goodness, it's 1500 years old... what could people possibly know about being a bishop in the sixth century? Or you could read the Bible. Or you could try some other texts.

These are some of the great treasures of Europe - and they are shared. The essence of the problem today is just that: sharing. But the coming weeks and months will be all about leadership, because the political debates and disputes that lie ahead are potentially dangerous, divisive and toxic. The EU Referendum has not ended a process - rather, it has opened a deep wound in

the body politic and in our society, and it will take considerable energies to bring about processes of healing and reconciliation. If we fail to see the enormity of the task, the wound will simply fester; the pain and potential for political poison will only spread, going deeper. As *Deuteronomy 15* has it,

If among you, one of your brothers should become poor, in any of your towns within your land that the LORD your God is giving you, you shall not harden your heart or shut your hand against your poor brother, but you shall open your hand to him and lend him sufficient for his need, whatever it may be...

The EU Referendum produced alarming maps of human geography. Almost 75% of our young people voted to remain. Two-thirds of our pensioners voted to leave. Our maps show divisions between young and old, rich and poor, shire and city, region and province, county and town. We need a new national leadership that brings healing, compassion, comprehension and wisdom. What does *Deuteronomy 15* say in all this? Simply:

for there will never cease to be poor in the land. Therefore, I command you, 'You shall open wide your hand to your brother, to the needy and to the poor, in your land.'

Lessons from the Church?

Yet what is happening in society today is hardly news to the Church. The average Anglican's 'mental map' of the Church has witnessed a remarkable change through the temporary triumph of neo-conservative Anglicanism. It used to be a simple triptych: High, Middle or Low. The High Church party had a distinctive theology, vocabulary, liturgical aesthetic – and even, for clergy, modes of dress. The Low Church party was just as easy to identify, yet quite different. And in the middle was the Broad Church – neither High nor Low, and capable of blending and infusing the best elements of either wing – it was, crucially, passionately committed to holding the centre ground.

The Broad Church was, at its best, the primary vehicle of generous, orthodox, inclusive Anglicanism. It was not Laodicean – a tepid compromise of warm, balmy Catholicism with the chilly climes of Calvinism. The Broad Church was, quite simply, temperate and measured – reflective, cool and capacious. It was an embodiment of the faith in the church as an open, non-membership-based institution. It eschewed sectarianism, and sought, above all, to serve the whole of society. It was clement and mild – and so perfectly suited to the pastoral climates it served.

The neo-conservative revolution of the last fifty years has seen both the High and Low wings of Anglicanism entirely out-narrate the middle ground (i.e. the Broad Church), and re-brand it as 'liberal'. In turn, the term 'liberal' was swiftly allotted a consistently negative value in ecclesial climes. For Catholic conservatives, and a handful of conservative Evangelicals, this began with 'Gender Wars' (i.e. the debate on the ordination of women). The vast majority of clergy and laity who desired (and eventually voted for) women priests found themselves re-positioned as 'liberals'. On sexuality, a gradual acceptance of lesbian, gay and bisexual Christians, and an eventual (still growing) acceptance of same-sex marriages has also led to the Broad Church and middle ground being labelled, once again, negatively, as 'liberal'.

What is intriguing in all of this is that this Broad Church element within Anglicanism merely holds sensible views on gender, and progressive (note, not radical) views on sexuality. The Broad Church, such as it is, tends to be entirely orthodox on creeds, doctrines (e.g. the physical resurrection of Jesus), articles of faith, liturgical proclivities, church polity, Christian practice and canon law. They practice what I call 'generous orthodoxy' – or 'Broad Church'.

These Broad Church elements within Anglicanism tend to be, if anything, theologically orthodox. And they view the High and Low elements of the church as rather more sectarian - and inclined towards 'membership-speak' - than the more inclusive, 'public' ministry that they would seek to embody and practice.

The shift from High-Middle-Low to a crude Liberal-Conservative dialectic has been one of the great ecclesial 'confidence tricks' of the last fifty years within Anglican polity - an almost Farage-like exercise in character. But like all such tricks, it had a purpose. It was an attempt to persuade a gullible public and media, and people who already inhabited the wings (whether High or Low, Catholic or Evangelical), that the *true church* and *real faith* was only to be found in those more intense, sectarian expressions of Catholic or Evangelical persuasion, and that the middle-ground – which is largely where the population as a whole resides, with their innate spiritual proclivities – was in fact starved of 'real' religion and faith, and needed evangelising or catechising. Indeed, secularisation, and the failure of evangelisation or catechisation, is often (still) blamed on the centre ground of the Broad Church.

In her prescient book, *The Precarious Organisation: Sociological Explorations of the Church's Mission and Structure* (The Hague: Mouton & Co. 1976) the Dutch ecclesiologist Mady Thung suggests that national churches in northern Europe

have come under increasing pressure in the post-war years to become 'organisations' - 'nervous activity and hectic programmes... constantly try(ing) to engage' members in an attempt to reach 'non-members'. She contrasts the 'organisational' model and its frenetic activism with the 'institutional' model of the church – the latter offering, instead, contemplative, aesthetic and liturgical frameworks, that take longer to grow, are often latent for significant periods of time but which, she argues, may be more culturally resilient and conducive than those of the activist-organisational model. She concludes her book by suggesting that the model being adopted by many national churches – a kind of missional 'organisation-activist' approach – is what drives the population away. It leads, eventually, to sectarianism.

What we need now is a conversation about the Church of England, and whom it is for? If it is for a small, depleting group of activist members, who simply want to go on perpetual recruitment drives, then it will become a kind of suburban sectarianism. But if there is another, broader vision of the church, this might significantly impact on the public, and also on our church leadership.

The Church of England has presided over its own 'Balkanisation' - reactive conservative forces have been allowed to emasculate intelligent public and political theology - and all in the name of conservatism, traditionalism and faux-orthodoxy. Those who have advocated breadth, openness, comprehensiveness and charity have been relentlessly labelled and lambasted as 'liberal' - demonised, and then marginalised. The result in the church has been the collapse of the broad centre, and the rise of self-righteous sectarianism. What the church has done with itself, society is now seeing writ large.

Conclusion

So, let me return to my three birthday pictures, and perhaps have half an eye on the upcoming US elections in November. In a recent article for the *Wall Street Journal* (15/04/16), the analyst Michael Barone points out that Donald Trump's support comes disproportionately from those low in what the scholars Robert Putnam and Charles Murray call 'social capital' or 'social connectedness' - people who are not likely to participate in civic activities, or regularly attend church or social clubs. Republicans with high social connectedness - most notably Mormons - give Trump very few votes. Trump's supporters are, it seems, angry individualists.

This is ironic when you think that research consistently shows that joining groups and participating in them - whether as a volunteer for a charity, or indeed as a church - improves your health. It matters more that you participate together, it seems, than what you believe. And health experts and other researchers suggest joining a group and participating in voluntary work adds two years to your life.

Perhaps this is what Trump supporters are so angry about; as out-for-themselves individualists, they have lower life expectancy. But I must not jest, for the times ahead are serious, and if we don't have the right political and ecclesial leadership, the consequences will be alarming, and possibly permanently divisive. So what is to be done at this point in our life together?

I think we may have to re-examine the possibility of a broad, social-progressive political party, that is true both to the original spirit of the Liberal and Labour movements. It would need to be authentically rooted in modern, progressive socialism, and equally true to modern, progressive, democratic liberal values. Only a broad, social-progressive political party can hold together a nation that is irreversibly multi-ethnic, multi-national and broad. It does not matter so much what this 'child' is christened, as to be clear about its parentage: both socialist and liberal; broad and generous; defined, yet open. Such a party requires a thoroughly ecumenical spirit to get it moving, and it may require Christian foundations, but these must be broad and wholesome, designed to serve the body politic, and not to be formed out of an agenda for theological or ecclesial protectionism.

The last election saw the Liberal Democrats almost wiped out of Parliament. Labour lost too, of course. Some Labour supporters may feel that all is now needed is a change of their leadership, while some favour continuity. But for both positions, a far wider survey of the landscape is needed. The Labour Party was all but wiped out in Scotland, with just one Parliamentary seat held. The Labour Party cannot win a UK election without a significant number of Scottish seats. And if Scotland leaves the UK, Labour is effectively consigned to the eternal runner-up podium in any remaining English-Welsh-Northern Irish elections. If Scotland remained in the UK, the Labour Party would have to be an effective alternative to the Scottish Nationalist Party. There is no sign of that being likely any time soon. And on English soil, UKIP have made significant grounds in traditional Labour heartlands.

So the argument for a new, progressive social-democratic political party has never been more urgent. Such a party could be pro-European, inclusive,

diverse and broad; ecumenical in character, and a viable alternative to those oft-divisive appeals to traditionalism and conservatism. The churches could invest much in this, and a pan-denominational ecumenical appeal to political leaders might be just what the country needs. Ultimately, we need people of vision right now, in both our churches and in our politics - not just prepared to face the future, but to actually make a future worth travelling to and being part of. The task is to find the broad, middle way in order to arrive at this destination. We undoubtedly need a new leadership to shape the broad politics and a broad church for our multi-ethnic, multi-faith, multi-national society. And not merely a society that is fit for purpose; but one that is full of purpose, and fit to serve all the people.

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