Reimagining Europe:

A Christian Reflection

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March 2026

Table of Content

1. Introduction

The world is changing at a rate that would have been considered inconceivable only a decade ago. Not only are serious questions being raised globally about how political, economic and military power are – and should be – exercised, but the basic rules underlying international relations appear to be up for grabs. The conventions established in the aftermath of two world wars – considered to be the essential building blocks of any potential just and peaceful world order – have been dropped by some of the most powerful players on the planet. New alliances are being forged, but based on (or in response to) ideological and pragmatic rationales that upset previous moral and behavioural assumptions.

Europe finds itself severely challenged. Economically, the continent has been in increasing decline. Socially, demographic shifts have contributed to growing uncertainties about national and regional identity. Politically, conventions that provided the contours for civil discourse have been cast aside and challenged by a 'might is right' ethic. Motivations for managing change and building a distinctive European identity have been transformed as new political movements (and parties) have disrupted 'business as usual' and introduced language that would have been regarded as undiplomatic not long ago.

Derided by President Trump's 2025 US National Security Strategy as facing 'civilizational erasure' and diminished by other major powers, Europe now faces challenges to its identity, purpose and place in the emerging world. The powerful alliances of the last eighty years no longer offer security for the future, and transnational bodies (with the treaties which shape them and give them legitimacy) face being disregarded or dropped completely. Europe is increasingly squeezed between a 'differently-globalist' USA, a powerful China, a resurgent and violent Russia, and a realigning Middle East and Asia.

One academic interlocutor (from the Czech Republic) observes that the more aggressively globalist (rather than isolationist) USA now poses an existential threat to Europe – provoking the stark choice: will Europe become a single political actor or be squeezed between Western and Eastern powers that are very clear about their own national identity, their vision for how the

world should be run, and the merely utilitarian value of 'partners'? If Europe faces such powerful challenges now, what might it look like in decades to come? And who shall shape it … according to which ideologies and priorities … rooted in which values and ethical assumptions?

This report addresses some of these challenges and poses some questions that might shape how we in turn shape our continental future.

Since the Brexit referendum in 2016 it has been almost impossible in the United Kingdom to have an intelligent conversation about Europe without being caricatured as a 'Remoaner' or 'Brexiter'. Neither term was meant positively. However, in 2024 the discourse seemed to have turned a corner, allowing, after time had passed, the real consequences of Brexit to be named and discussed. It was in this context that we (I and colleagues) decided the time was right to conduct a light-touch inquiry into the future of Europe. Not, the future of the European Union (EU), but the continent – and what it might mean in the future to be European.

Three anecdotes prompted me to attempt this exploration of potential European futures.

Kazakhstan

I returned from a global interfaith conference in Kazakhstan in 2006 during which I had done several radio interviews with young people. At that point the country had been independent since 1991 and had built an economy – largely from oil, gas and finance – that allowed visible growth of infrastructure in cities such as Astana, the capital. Growth, both substantial and fast, was evident wherever you looked. During one conversation I questioned the enthusiastic young interviewers about alleged corruption, presidential 'dictatorship', and so on; the response was immediate: "But, look what is happening around us – massive physical and economic growth and development."

These young people felt the country was investing in a confident future, despite the deprivations and hardships of the nation's early years. When I flew back to London via Frankfurt I found myself wondering what my children and grandchildren are *building* – rather than simply

inheriting - in Western Europe. Those young Kazakhs (at that time, at least) appeared to tolerate corruption and political nepotism in light of what they saw as successful nation building. What would European young people be willing to sacrifice in order to build a better future for the continent?

This was just an anecdotal stimulus to wider questions and cannot represent the totality of values or concerns. The point for me was that Kazakhs were building something, whereas western Europeans seemed to be asking their young people to hang on to a legacy of the post-Second World War settlement. Where was the vision of a better future, other than what looked like a fossilising of the recent past? Who might be the people to re-describe current reality and re-shape it for a different future?

My generation cannot do this. A new narrative for Europe must be written by the generation of people who, investing in shaping the Europe of the next century, consider it worth committing to a renewed vision with their imagination, their lives and, if necessary, their blood. (This assumes, however, that we are what we inherit and need visionaries who can see behind and beyond the 'inheritance' in order to imagine and create a different settlement.)

Brussels

I was invited to take part in a roundtable discussion in Brussels with the then President of the European Council, Herman Van Rompuy. He did a brilliant initial lecture on European values, starting with theologian Martin Buber before going on to the current EU project. During the discussion I suggested, based on my Kazakh ruminations, what a new (or renewed) 'narrative' for Europe might look like if it were to command the imagination and commitment of, particularly, younger Europeans. He was clear that no new narrative is needed. "We have a narrative and it is 'solidarity'". I asked him what 'solidarity' means for a young Greek man who might never work? This was in 2009 in the wake of the global financial crisis and the collapse of the Greek economy. Van Rompuy didn't respond, but took the discussion in a different direction – which was understandable in the circumstances.

But, this left open the question about how young people might imagine their future as Europeans in the twenty-first century and beyond. If a future is not imagined, explored and shaped (by those whose politics emerge from clear and 'loving' values), then it will emerge from the commitments of people and groups who might have less noble or humane motivations for creating a society that works for their own interests alone.

Vienna

Behind all these ruminations lurked the ghost of a visit to the Judenplatz in Vienna. Rachel Whiteread's Holocaust Memorial was opened in October 2000. It is an inverted concrete cast of a library, its books facing outwards, commemorating the 65,000 Austrian Jews murdered by the Nazis up to 1945. It is a powerful piece of work that demands silent perusal by the visitor.

However, the arresting element, for me at least, is found in a statue of Gotthold Ephraim Lessing (1729-1781) standing only ten metres from the Holocaust Memorial. Lessing is one of those eighteenth-century Enlightenment thinkers whose principles came to underlie future Germanic literature, education and culture. Stand between the two structures and the obvious question hanging over the square is: how did an Enlightenment culture go from Lessing (Goethe, Schiller, and others) to Buchenwald in only a few generations? Behind this is a question that runs through this report: what happens if, when we lose our cultural memory, we also lose our identity and purpose?

Underlying this, however, is another easily missed reality: there have always been many different 'Europes'. Timothy Garton Ash divides recent European history into three phases: 1945-89 (the end of the Second World War to the fall of the Berlin Wall and the Soviet Empire); 1989-2022 (post-Communism to the Russian invasion of Ukraine); 2023 ongoing. But European stories go back well before the twentieth century.

The times, they are a'changing

My hesitation about Van Rompuy's response to my question was whether those who currently run Europe (whatever that might mean) have become complacent, assuming that the liberal European project is the peak of civilisation and will inevitably survive into the future. Events in

the years since the Brexit referendum, the second election of Donald Trump, and the rise of populist Radical and New Right parties in Europe suggest that such complacency is seriously misplaced. What takes a century to build up can be demolished in a week; fast destruction is easier (and more satisfying?) than slow construction.

Since we began this inquiry much has happened in the world. Vladimir Putin sought the reinstatement of the *Russkiy Mir* (Russian World) when he invaded Ukraine. He denies the existence of Ukraine as an independent nation, even rejecting the particular reality of the Ukrainian language itself. The invasion, begun in February 2022 and expected to lead to a quick victory and 'recovery' of Ukraine, has descended into a war of attrition and continues at the time of writing this report. (An excellent explication of the history behind these events can be found in Sixsmith, M & Sixsmith, D, *Putin and the Return of History*, Bloomsbury, 2024.)

The presidencies of Donald Trump (2017-21 and 2025-) have changed the world and the norms of diplomatic and political relationships and behaviours. His demagogic and narcissistic approach to conflicts and power have left European leaders casting around for appropriate and effective means of engaging with him, the USA, the wider world and each other. His erratic behaviour at Davos in January 2026, coloured by threats, insults and falsehoods, emphasised powerfully the need for Europe to re-define itself, for itself. A day earlier, Canadian Prime Minister Mark Carney perhaps articulated as clearly as possible where the future of Europe might now lie.

Recent increases in defence spending commitments by European governments concretise the need for Europeans to defend Europe into the future, not depending on the USA as global policeman - perhaps even, bizarrely, having to defend Europe from US aggression. Trump's disruptive shock tactics have had both positive and negative impacts on Europe and the wider world. One of the positives is to shift European thinking and strategy away from huge dependency on the USA and stimulating the need for new relationships on the European continent itself.

Add to all this the growing power of China, India and Asia and it is clear that the globe is now spinning differently from how it has been since 1945. Conflicts in Africa (Sudan, Eritrea, DRC, for starters) and the Middle East (Syria, Israel-Palestine, Gaza) have led to mass-migration into Europe, and genuine concerns about migration have led to radical new questioning about human rights legislation, basic human values, and the desirability of democratic sustainability in a context of climate change. It feels to many in Europe that assumptions about what is 'normal' in the world have been turned upside-down, with no clear way forward.

Against this background, many Europeans feel a growing sense of despair that 'things' have somehow gone horribly wrong, that our best days are behind us, and that the only way to right the ship is to recover and re-embrace traditional hierarchies and ways of being. New political movements feed off this despair by offering simple solutions that play to a nostalgia for a mythical past where the world was strong, orderly and prosperous. Long held assumptions about how we relate to one another and order our communities and political life are being contested in ways that arguably make it that much harder to respond to the internal and external challenges that Europe faces.

It is a given, then, that what happens in Europe is inextricably intertwined with what happens in Africa, Asia, the Middle East, China, and so on. Furthermore, it is equally clear that the old world order will not be coming back; a different future needs to be forged.

The churches

Reference to the role of churches at this point is neither random nor misplaced. It is easily forgotten in a secular society that churches played a substantial role in the development and shaping of post-war Europe and the global post-war settlement. The ecumenical movement across the continent, disrupted by the conflicts of 1914-18 and 1933-45, persisted despite everything. The fact that Christians, fallible in every respect, believe that human beings are created in the image of God, underpins relationships at the best and worst of times. For example, one only has to look at the courage during the1940s of Bishop George Bell who opposed the mass bombing of German cities and advocated – against the opprobrium of many – for German civilian dignity, all rooted in his friendship with the young German theologian Dietrich Bonhoeffer (executed at Flossenburg in April 1945).

In the post-war years Christian churches established international ecumenical relationships (between different denominations) that didn't aim to whitewash theological, ecclesiological or cultural differences, but strove to embody what mutual love might look like in a challenging world. Those relationships established before World War Two were essential to the resumption of encounter and engagement in the decades that followed. Whereas the United Nations grew in importance politically, the churches united in the World Council of Churches and, more locally, the Conference of European Churches.

These bodies sought not only to bring Christian churches together in a common peace, but also to develop means of engaging constructively and prophetically with political and cultural powers at every level. Importantly, in the same way that European institutions were never solely founded within the European Union (consider the OSCE, Council of Europe, UEFA , etc.), so the churches established ecumenical bases in places with other (not political) significance (for example, the Conference of Protestant Churches in Europe in Vienna). It should be noted that the motivation behind this was not to bolster the power or status of Christian churches, but, rather, to contribute – sometimes sacrificially - to the shaping of a safer continent and planet, rooted in particular convictions about human rights and obligations.

As Europe and the world continue to change, and as the norms of the last eighty years are now being shaken and stirred, the churches also need to reflect on their language, roles and relationships. At the heart of Christian theology and practice is repentance – literally, from the Greek, a 'change of mind'. Churches should never be afraid to question, debate, re-think, and, in humility, learn to see differently in order to live differently. Yet, churches are always embodied and constituted in particular places with particular histories and cultures. Self-examination and mutual recognition do not come easily. Change can be slow and, sometimes, in the wrong direction. But churches coloured by humility can help shine a light on how difference can be embraced as people of good will seek a common way forward in building a common European future.

Overview

Living in an increasingly multipolar world brings challenges. A global shift in power to a larger number of actors makes for widening complexity. After decades of some coherence in

assumptions about the nature and role of a state, we now see growing contestation – both within and between states – about how best to (re)order relations between states. This is having a powerful impact on Europe.

It is a given that there have always been differing understandings of what Europe means and what it promises. Shaped by history, geography and language, these understandings have previously co-existed; now they are starting to rub up against each other, causing conflict and debate. Brexit was one phenomenon in this scenario.

As indicated already, external shocks such as migration, military invasion and changing politico-financial priorities have challenged norms. Allied to this is the growing division within states as to the purpose of the state itself. This all challenges established orthodoxies and contributes to the universal sense of a world – and a Europe – in radical flux.

Some of the questions this throws up are the following:

- Can multilateralism survive in a multipolar world where (a) the divide between major powers and (b) competition between different understandings of world order (including the rule of law) frustrate efforts to find joint responses to global crises?

- What might a politics for the common good look like in this situation – and what role might Europe play in shaping it when its own self-understanding is under pressure from both internal and external forces? (And does 'common' imply 'monochrome'? Or should we look here for the commonality of singularity?)

- What might a Christian vision for Europe look like, and how might the Christian churches speak with a confident humility into this context? How might the churches contribute to a hopeful vision for the future that offers something exciting and good rather than the absence of something bad – and reduces fear of change or new settlements?

- How can an honest memory of past European stories make space for an inspiring vision for the future to combat the deep sense of despair that many Europeans currently feel about the future?

It is helpful, before proceeding, to recognise that Christian churches have long experience in dialogue with diverse parties, including opponents. Key to global interfaith work is the distinction between two levels of questions: (a) what do we believe *about* God, the world and us? and (b) given that we don't agree about God, the world and us, how then shall we live together? For the sake of clarity, the questions faced in this report pertain to the demands and challenges of the second category.

This inquiry

This is the developing context in which this inquiry has taken place and the questions that it tries to address.

I have talked with over sixty people or groups across Europe in the course of the last two years. I have tried to cover a spectrum of experience and opinion, but not all those I approached were willing to talk – principally those politically on the New and Radical Right. I am hugely grateful to those who did, ranging from academics and school students to politicians, diplomats, theologians, journalists and anthropologists. Every conversation opened up new trains of thinking and enquiry.

As the world continued to change, so did the nature and range of our questioning. What started as an exercise in trying to articulate a Christian vision for Europe post-Brexit morphed into an exploration of a Christian vision for Europe in a post-liberal world order. Inevitably, we had to conclude at some point, recognising that there is much more to be explored and there are many more questions to be posed ... in a world that never stands still.

The following report aims to survey and suggest. Any conclusions are provisional. I hope it makes a contribution to widening the thinking of politicians, thinkers, churches and other

bodies as we seek to shape a European future, derived from our learning from a challenging past and aimed at imagining and building a continent worth living in.

2. Political and Democratic Trends

The most significant and impactful development on the continent of Europe since the Second World War was, arguably, the fall of the Berlin Wall in 1989 and, with it, the unravelling of Communism. Liberal democracy seemed triumphant. Democracies sprouted in Central Europe. Apartheid fell in South Africa. The Oslo process seemed to herald peace in the Middle East. Many commentators and politicians asserted the unrivalled power of the United States and, along with it, the ultimate vindication of Capitalism. Fukuyama's 'end of history' observation, though often misunderstood, taken out of context or misapplied, proved in retrospect to be somewhat hubristic. The twenty-first century has cast a more challenging light on what happened in the final decade of the twentieth and its assumption in the West of a unipolar world order.

The first quarter of the twenty-first century has been marked by repression, turbulence, and the rapid erosion of democratic institutions. Tribalism, populism and authoritarianism are now on the march while the number of democracies declines year on year. Radical and New Right parties have grown in number and political influence. What would have been unthinkable only two decades ago – denigration of the rule of law, outright public lying, and deliberate mis-/disinformation on the part of western leaders and governments – is now openly manifested ... without relation to historical memory or, in some cases, any moral framework.

This is a global phenomenon. Even in Europe and North America it feels today that democracy is not assured, that it has enemies from within and from without, and that once again it has become contested.

Our politics appear to many people to be not just polarised, but broken. (Clearly, also, some of those politicians who 'broke' it take little responsibility for their destructive role whilst expecting to be trusted to repair the damage they did.) The language associated with this brokenness is now routine – Orwellian in many respects. In what has been termed a 'post-truth' society, we now have elected officials who shamelessly ignore facts, reframe reality in their own terms and to their own advantage, and pay little or no attention to truth or integrity. Basic

decency has been expunged from much public political discourse and behaviour. Governments brazenly threaten the independence of the judiciary and curtail the rights of the press. Corruption and cronyism are unashamedly commonplace. The space for civil society to protest is not assured. All at a time when there are growing levels of economic inequality and insecurity.

The German novelist Thomas Mann wrote in 1938 that the biggest mistake that people in democracies can make is 'self-forgetfulness.'[1] He feared that it was dangerously easy for societies to take democracy for granted (assuming, that is, that we think the faithful inheritance of 'democracy' is self-evident?), erasing from the collective memory the difficult process of creating the institutions underpinning self-government and assuming that these institutions were invulnerable. As observed earlier, one vital historical lesson was consciously abandoned: that what takes generations to build up can be demolished very quickly.

Might it be that we are currently experiencing and witnessing another moment of self-forgetfulness across Europe: of failing to uphold and cherish our inherited forms of democracy, the duties of citizenship, and the goal of shared prosperity? Has complacency created a generation of 'democrats by habit', who no longer understand why democracy must be defended with a fervent faith and sacrificial commitment?

What, then, should be the response of those who still value democracy, democratic institutions, public ethics of truth-telling and mutual service for the common good? How might democracy renew itself - and what role might Christians (and other people of goodwill and religious conviction) play in this process?

The answer rests in part in recognising that democracy is not just about rules, procedures or political systems, but that it is a deeply spiritual and moral possession. It is the only system built on respect for the infinite dignity of each human being, of the commonality of singularity,

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[1] Mann, T. (1938) *The Coming Victory of Democracy*. Alfred A. Knopf

of each person's moral striving for freedom, justice and truth, all of which are essential conditions for human flourishing. It is an approach to collective human being that did not fall out of a neutrally secular sky, but emerged from fundamental assumptions – derived from Greek and Judeo-Christian traditions – about what it is to be human in a society with competing values and priorities.

The trumping of democracy

Whichever way you slice or dice it, democracy around the world is in retreat. This isn't some new phenomenon, but reflects a worrying long-term trend that is evident in all parts of the world.

It could be argued that the high-water mark of democracy was in 2006 when three-fifths of all the countries on the planet adhered to a system of government in which people could choose and change their governments by free and fair elections. Compare this state of affairs, where democracy became the predominant form of government, to the situation today.

Freedom House, a non-profit organisation based in Washington DC with over 80 years' experience in tracking political freedoms and civil liberties, reported in its 2025 annual report that freedom declined around the world for the 19th consecutive year in 2024.[2] In 2024, a year characterised by numerous elections around the world, 60 countries experienced deterioration in their political rights and civil liberties, and only 34 secured improvements.

This picture is bad in itself, but it is not as bleak as the more granular analysis presented by the V-Dem Institute. Based at the University of Gothenburg in Sweden, the Institute uses a multidimensional and disaggregated dataset that reflects the complexity of the concept of democracy by going beyond simple electoral measures. In its March 2025 report, V-Dem concluded that the level of democracy for the average world citizen is back to 1985 levels and,

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[2] Freedom House, (2025). *Freedom in the World 2025: The Uphill Battle to Safeguard Rights.* (2025)

by country averages, is comparable to that of 1996.[3] The most popular type of regime today isn't a liberal democracy or even an elected democracy, but an elected autocracy covering 46% of the world's population (3.7 billion people). Today nearly 3 out of 4 people in the world – 72% – now live in some form of autocracy (allowing for the statistical skewing by the population sizes of China and India).

European trends

As indicated, this democratic decline has global reach. Admittedly, the extent of its decline is uneven across regions; but all regions, Europe included, have been affected. This crisis of democracy cannot be dismissed as a non-European concern, but one that European governments and civil society need to respond to as a matter of urgency.

Following the failed Soviet experiment in Communism, and after a series of mostly successful liberal and patriotic revolts in Central and Eastern Europe in 1989-91, the region has experienced a number of authoritarian and illiberal challenges or regression.

In Poland, the Law and Justice Government, in power between 2015 and 2023, captured Poland's democratic institutions and installed loyal allies in key positions, including in the judiciary, the prosecution services and public media. It accomplished much of this institutional capture by restricting the rights of women and smearing civil society organisations and protesters.

In Hungary, Prime Minister Viktor Orban and his Christian-nationalist Fidesz party have, since assuming office for a second term in 2010, turned the country into an elected autocracy – or, to use his own language, an 'illiberal democracy', with the incremental rolling back of checks and balances. The Protection of Sovereignty Act of 2023, which allows for arbitrary scrutiny and unlimited access to personal data is a recent example of the ongoing derailment of democracy.

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[3] V-Dem Institute, (2025). *Democracy Report, 2025: 25 Years of Autocratization – Democracy Trumped?* The University of Gothenburg.

Although Western Europe remains one of the most democratic regions of the world, it too is under pressure from nationalist, populist and illiberal political agencies. Whether it is the rise of the *Alternative für Deutschland* (AFD) in Germany, the *Brothers of Italy Party* in Italy, Geert Wilders' *Freedom Party* in Holland, *Reform UK* in Britain or the *Front National* in France, the political allegiances of Europe's citizens are shifting away from mainstay or centrist political parties. Even if these changes are gradual, over time they become cumulative. The V-Dem Institute estimates that by country averages the levels of democracy in Western Europe are now back to 1983 levels.

In Greece, often referred to as the cradle of democracy, Prime Minister Mitsotakis's government is increasingly resorting to autocratic methods by making lying and misrepresentation an essential component of politics and in so doing is destroying the foundations on which a democratic discourse can take place. Since 2019, Greece has seen a gradual weakening of the rule of law and increased attacks on media freedom. Greece's very own Watergate scandal in 2022, when the government wiretapped opposition leaders, journalists and even members of its own government, is a case in point.

Even in Britain, the home of parliamentary democracy, democracy has come under pressure. Under Prime Minster Boris Johnson (2019-22), Britain witnessed an assault on parliamentary sovereignty, the independence of the judiciary, the independence of the BBC and the individual right to trial by jury (now also being questioned for pragmatic reasons by the Labour Government). By the time of Johnson's resignation, his government had undermined public confidence in all institutions of governance to an alarming extent. This was a government and a prime minister that used the language of the 'national interest' to pursue its own interests to the detriment of the interests of the state, often lying and enriching themselves in the process. If Britain is broken, who broke it and how?

Signs of hope?

This is a bleak picture; but, there are also signs of hope. Elections in Poland in 2023 reshaped - at least in the short term - the nation's political trajectory, with important implications for the future of Europe. The victory of the democratic opposition is a testament to the resilience of

Polish civil society, especially amongst women and young people, in the face of government attacks and mounting illiberalism. However, the status quo is fragile.

At the time of writing, Serbia is in the midst of a deep political crisis, but the autocratic system established by President Aleksandar Vučić and his Serbian Progressive Party (SPP) over the past 10 years appears to be on the brink. Student protests in Serbia against the government's botched investigation into the collapse of a canopy at the renovated Novi Sad rail station which left 15 people dead, have become, with its slogan of 'We are Changing the System', a lightning rod for wider popular protest.

An indication of what change might look like is illustrated by what is happening at a local level. Citizens in Belgrade, Niš, Novi Sad and many smaller cities have repeatedly attempted to organise boycotts of local council meetings, hosting alternative citizens' assemblies known as *zborovi*. Similar pictures of popular protest are apparent in Georgia, Turkey and even Hungary. Of course, none of this is to suggest that these countries will break free of their democratic recession or that other countries might regress. Much here depends on the persistent efforts of civil society and the depths to which autocratic leaders will go in order to seize and hang on to power.

In Serbia, authorities responded to a peaceful demonstration on 15 March 2024, involving an estimated 325,000 protestors, by using a long-range non-lethal acoustic device to emit high-intensity sound waves to cause disorientation and pain. In advance of national elections in 2026, Orban's rubber stamp parliament has passed further restrictive laws governing free assembly. In a speech to mark Hungarian National Day on 15 March 2025, he gave one of his ugliest speeches to date calling for an Easter 'clean up' and labelled his opponents 'bedbugs' – echoing, to Hungarian ears, Hungarian fascist speeches from the 1930s and 1940s. (To other ears from other parts, it recalls the dehumanising language used by fascists in the 1930s and 1940s, and those who instigated the 1994 genocide in Rwanda during which Tutsis were labelled by Hutus as 'cockroaches'.)

History does not stand still. These storylines are as yet unfinished, and history shows that nothing can be taken for granted. There must always be space for imaginative re-visioning and creative new institutional forms of polity and civic order. Even where the tides of illiberalism are reversed, as in Poland's case, evidence suggests that, after years of severe backsliding and entrenched state capture, restoring democracy is a daunting task, with no guarantee of success.

Towards an understanding of the democratic recession

How do we make sense of these changes? Why does democracy appear to be in retreat? And what explains Europe's renewed dance with autocracy? Why do people vote for what they know history tells us is a dangerous capitulation?

Obviously, context is all important and the answer varies from country to country and region to region; but certain factors stand out. Research by polling institutions such as Gallup and the Pew Research Centre suggests that while the majority of people continue to prefer democracy as a system of government over others, they are increasingly frustrated with how it functions in practice. A primary driver of dissatisfaction appears to be a sense that governments favour 'elite' interests (such as big corporations, financial institutions and media corporations as well as academics and a new liberal managerial class) over those of ordinary people. Frustrations with the political systems often seem to dovetail with citizens' concerns about the health of the economy and dwindling levels of economic and social equality. These have sharpened since the Covid pandemic. And they are notoriously short-termist – looking only to the well-being of the current generation and not a long-term future.

Polls consistently show that many people feel there is a lack of fairness in both politics and economics, and that the system is weighted in favour of the wealthy and educated who make up the professional, business and political classes. Not surprisingly, instances of corruption are a visible reminder of individuals gaming the system for their own profit and not playing by the rules that apply to everybody else.Allied to this declining trust in government is the growing public perception that politicians and political parties no longer represent voters – or their interests - effectively. Political parties both on the left and the right, appear increasingly

disconnected from their historical voter base. (This raises a serious question about the future of party-based democratic order and space for newer forms.)

So, a strong feature of current political culture is the collapse of party allegiance into eclectic coalitions of interest – that is, an 'issue or phenomenon' uniting individuals and groups from different ends of the political or ideological spectrum, regardless of historic class or cultural roots. Parties are now tending to appeal across the usual class and social lines, reinforcing the trend towards non-partisanship. Many voters no longer feel a sense of belonging or connection with traditional political parties or that their concerns are heard – a sensitivity consciously and effectively exploited by agents who create 'hierarchies of victimhood' in language and popular culture in order to divide society and propagate their own power interests. A general sense of grievance is fostered, deliberately masking the irony that the language of 'elites' is weaponised by the very people who fit every description of elitism – and that would-be demagogues are enriched by the disruptions they cause.

This sense of alienation and frustration is reinforced by the feeling that there is little distinctiveness between the parties and that there are no clear policy alternatives. The ideologies of left and right have slowly eroded over the last 20 years as parties have converged towards the centre. The collapse of Communism, the end of class contestation, the discrediting of alternative models of government, and the emergence of a technocratic or managerial approach to decision making - in Europe's case often associated with expansion of the EU project - have all played their part in not only depoliticising the centre, but depoliticising government itself. This has led to a situation where a party's programme for government risks being simply that "we are more competent than the last lot or the others". In the absence of a compelling narrative vision (among other things), slogans that capture something more visceral – and, therefore, deemed to be more 'authentic' – are more appealing to a populace.

In more and more areas, the function of government appears to have been discharged to subsidiary bodies comprising unelected experts who treat the public less as citizens and more as stakeholders. This alienation and disconnect that people feel with politics challenges those representative models of democracy that we have hitherto experienced.

This challenge could be massaged and managed when citizens felt that their living standards were increasing, but since the global financial crisis of 2008 and the Covid pandemic of 2019-2023, this challenge has become more acute with many ordinary people losing their jobs, their life savings, their homes, or all three. As Thomas Piketty and Branko Milanovic note, this has all come at a time when income inequality has risen significantly in democratic countries and when there has been a historic shift in global power.[4]

Declining living standards, and growing inequality have led to large sections of society becoming pessimistic about the future and cynical about the parties and politicians that purport to represent them. The consequent political polarisation has been intensified by the mass movement of people, societies and cultures across borders. Digital technology and social media algorithms have contributed to this polarisation by eroding cross-cutting cleavages, where people increasingly identify eclectically with different groups or on different issues. This has resulted in an increase in the intensity of political conflict and diminished the likelihood of political compromise and accommodation. Distrust, bolstered and fed by social media, leads people into echo chambers and polarised grievances.

Many politicians in advanced democracies, particularly in Europe and the US, have exploited this public backlash to frame large waves of immigration as a threat to economic health, social stability and national character. All of this provides a fertile ground for politicians who propose either radical policies in opposition to the prevailing consensus or strong leadership to cut through existing checks and balances on the exercise of executive power. (See, for example, President Trump's use of Executive Orders in the USA to bypass the political and legal processes that hitherto have guaranteed civilised democratic stability and the rule of law.)

Choosing democracy?

What has been written thus far assumes that democracy is good, is threatened and needs to be defended. This does not assume that all elements of democratic systems are perfect or do not

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[4] Milanovic, E. (2016). Global Inequality: A New Approach for the Age of Globalization. Harvard University Press. Piketty, T. (2014). *Capital in the Twenty First Century*. Harvard University Press.

need urgent reform – look, for instance, at the potential for a non-party-based form of representative democracy being created. But it does argue, on the basis of historical evidence and experience, that a diminution in democratic respect and law-making is bad for individual people, communities and nations. Autocracy as a reaction against the failings of democratic practice, does not mean that democracy itself is bad ... or that a rejection of it is inevitably good.

The survey so far suggests that democracy – if deemed worth creating and recreating – is not inevitable. History teaches us that democracy cannot simply be inherited from one generation by another, but must be fought for, defended, renewed and re-valued by each generation. Building a society demands a differently engaged psychology and commitment than inheriting something created or fought for in previous generations. Democracy has to be chosen, not merely assumed.

Standing up for democracy is more than just encouraging people to vote. It requires that we create the conditions for everyone to express themselves and to participate fully within the life of a society. Everyone should feel part of the wider community - no one should feel useless or that their voice isn't heard. This means developing a politics of (what Christians would consciously call) love that offers solidarity and mutuality such that people have trust in the very institutions that govern their lives. But, what might this mean in practice?

One strategy is to advocate for democratic innovations that reimagine and deepen the role of citizens in governance structures and processes by increasing opportunities for their participation, deliberation and influence[5]. Allowing citizens to deliberate and feel they have influence over the decisions that affect them might over time diminish the frustration and alienation that feeds populist impulses. What is required here is a political renaissance that looks again at existing political structures and processes such as electoral reform while also introducing new mechanisms - such as deliberative mini-publics, citizens' assemblies and

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[55] Elstub, S. & Escobar, O. (2019) *Handbook of Democratic Innovation and Governance*. Edward Elgar Publishing

participatory budgeting - to allow for greater citizen involvement. There is a need to move beyond traditional forms of democratic consultations, such as, for example, online petitions and the standard passive form of consultation on legislative proposals, to creating new opportunities to build deliberation and wider participation into public consultation.

There are lessons to be learned here from other parts of the world.[6] In South Korea, for instance, authorities have online petition platforms that facilitate iterative discussion between citizens as well as between them and policy makers. These platforms are also structured to help link different issues together so that citizens do not focus their demands on one issue without understanding the implications for other policy areas. The aim is to encourage citizens to make specific constructive suggestions, rather than simply lodge general demands for action.

In Taiwan, participatory civic tech in the form of the 'Taiwan g0v initiative' was integrally embedded within the 2014 Sunflower protest movement, and from that also inherently linked to the push for more governmental transparency. The worlds of hacking and of organising protest fused to create more participatory online forums that involved large numbers of citizens in correcting government errors and monitoring budgets and campaign finance. Gradually the 'vTaiwan programme' has become more focused on fostering more systematic interaction between online citizenship and public-authority decision making.[7]

Alongside this more long-term strategy, further effort needs to be made at engaging (rather than ostracising) Radical and New Right/Left parties in order to gain their commitment to core democratic values. This does not necessarily mean engaging on specific policy issues, but instead seeking consensus on democratic structures and processes themselves. This would help to refocus attention on whether a party is not just illiberal and reactionary in their policy prescription, but also undemocratic in their very nature.

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[6] Youngs, R. & Godfrey, K. (2022). *Democratic Innovations from around the World: Lessons for the West.* Carnegie Endowment for International Peace

[7] European Democracy Hub. (2022). *Taiwan - Exploring Worldwide Democratic Innovations*

Such a pact should be concrete and detailed enough to hold parties to account, and it should include injunctions against the kinds of subtle democratic erosion that has proliferated in recent years. For example, it should include commitments not to challenge the equality of citizenship rights, not to support laws that criminalise or besmirch civic organisations, not to seek ways of restricting citizens' protest, and to support the democratically participative containment of disinformation. It should expressly reject minimal, majoritarian democracy and commit to deeper rights protections, tolerance and active citizenship.

Such an approach would need to take seriously the objection that such a pact might grant undue democratic legitimacy when in practice Radical and New Right/Left parties are deemed to be inherently authoritarian. While such parties don't claim in their manifestos that they are anti-democratic - indeed they normally insist they are committed to reviving democratic participation – such a strategy might, at the very least, cultivate a wider political debate about the centrality of democracy and its varied meanings.

Embedding innovations into democratic practice requires an open mindset and a willingness by governments and politicians to move away from bureaucratic and technocratic approaches and become more accountable to citizens by giving power back to them. The emphasis needs to be on deliberation, co-creation and collaboration among governments, civil society organisations and citizens. Such a strategy would help restore a shared understanding of democratic citizenship and with it the idea that for a democracy to work, citizens must assume responsibilities toward their community and institutions.

3. Europe in a Global Context

Open a newspaper today or turn on the radio and it's difficult not to be overwhelmed by headlines signalling the demise of the rules-based international order and even the West itself. These headlines might purposefully be overplayed in order to grab our attention, but they shape our perception that the existing liberal order is in crisis and the world is in flux.

President Trump's election victory on 5 November 2024, his inauguration on 20 January 2025 and the subsequent flurry of executive orders that followed appear to have upended America's role over the last seven decades as the assumed leader of the liberal world order and its commitment to trade, alliances, international law, multilateralism, environmentalism and human rights.

This is a President and an America that appears openly hostile to liberal internationalism in its current form and one aggressively committed to rewriting, if not discarding entirely, the rules that have underpinned it. Overnight, Washington DC appears to have turned the page and moved on to the next global era: that of global-power competition and strategic de-coupling.

If Trump's election in 2016 was wished away by opponents as a momentary blip in American politics, his re-election in 2024 suggests a more long-term re-orientation that we must all engage with, whether that be governments, international organisations, businesses, civil society and yes, even churches. A return to great power competition should concern us all, threatening as it does to destroy what is left of the global institutions that governments rely on for tackling global problems.

This state of affairs might not be desirable in the minds of many, but nor is it inevitable. Even, if the current set of challenges facing the liberal international order are particularly acute, its development over the last century has never been straightforward. There is no reason to assume that without proper support it might not weather these storms.

While the US has played a central role over the last seven decades, liberal internationalism is not dependent on US leadership, nor has it ever been premised on power alone. As the American foreign policy scholar, John Ikenberry has argued, the attraction of liberal internationalism has been its ability to offer others a set of ideas and institutional frameworks for mutual gain and protection – and the space in which to test these out.[8]

If liberal internationalism is to survive, and there is no guarantee that it will, then it needs the active support and investment of liberal democracies. Europe has a particular role and responsibility to play given that as a set of ideas, liberal internationalism has its roots in European political thought and given that Europe has been one its main beneficiaries. To do so, Europe must first show to its own citizens that liberal democracy offers the best model for providing for their own well-being and security.

Europe and the origins of liberal internationalism

Liberal internationalism is today widely associated with the foreign policies of the United States, particularly since the Second World War; but, in many ways, it is actually Europe's most important creation and its most successful export.

If liberal internationalism is understood as a body of ideas and agendas with which liberal democracies have attempted to organise relations between themselves and the wider world, then it can trace its origins and evolution from the industrial revolution, the growth of capitalism and the search for new markets.[9] It was shaped by the economic thinking of Hugo Grotius (1583-1645), Adam Smith (1723-1790) and the constitutionalism of Walter Bagehot (1826-1877). A range of thinkers from John Locke (1632-1704) to John Stuart Mill (1806-1873) shaped ideas of contracts, rights and the law, while Immanuel Kant's (1724-1804) ideas on

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[8] Ikenberry, J. (2011) *The Future of the Liberal World Order: Internationalism After America.* Foreign Affairs. Vol.93, No. 3

[9] Jahn, B. (2018) *Liberal Internationalism: Historical Trajectory and Current Prospects.* International Affairs, Vol 94, No1.

republicanism and peace shaped the evolutionary logic that liberal democracies would emerge and organise themselves within a wider political space.

The fortunes of liberal internationalism have ebbed and flowed, but its central tenets have remained constant: namely, a commitment to openness, to trade and exchange, and a recognition that this requires some level of rules and institutions, whether thin or thick, to facilitate cooperation between states to deliver on their domestic obligations.

Allied to this is the commitment to some form of security cooperation between states in order to guarantee their own respective security. In so doing, liberal internationalism holds that states can move beyond power politics to a system of relations that encourages mutual gain and mutual protection. (This is the "how then shall we live together?" question.) There is an implicit expectation that a liberal international order will move states in the direction of a progressive 'liberal democratic' order.

Despite its European origins, it was only in the twentieth century with the leadership of, first, President Woodrow Wilson and then President Franklin D. Roosevelt that it became possible to identify a more coherent and distinctive liberal international agenda. The institutional experiment with the League of Nations after the First World War, gave way to the United Nations following the Second World War, with its commitment to universal rights and protections, which became more fully fleshed out with notions like the 'responsibility to protect' following the end of the Cold War.

Although the liberal international order is now deeply rooted in the societies and economies of both advanced capitalist and developing states, Europe has always been its quiet but progressive bulwark. The move by several European states to create the European Coal and Steel Community in 1951 and the subsequent European Economic Community in 1957 provided a space in which member countries could organise themselves around shared values and beliefs, as well as principles, rules and institutions, in such a way that they could negotiate contingencies and dislocations that threatened their peace, security and prosperity.

The European Community has since become an economic and political union of some 27 countries with the world's largest single market which allows free movement of goods, capital, services and people between its member states, thus allowing it to externalise its norms to shape global rules. Through its enlargement policy the EU has drawn candidate countries into its orbit by requiring them to adopt its vast body of laws. Non-member countries like Switzerland, Liechtenstein, Iceland, Norway have well-established relations with the EU which bring certain mutual benefits but without the same level of institutional belonging.

The EU represents a particularly 'thick' form of liberal internationalism, which has moved beyond being a simple experiment in intergovernmentalism to something more supranational; but there are other 'thinner' expressions in Europe today, such as the Council of Europe, the Organisation for Security and Cooperation in Europe and, more recently, the European Political Community, all of which offer differing but linked spaces, tied to a global set of arrangements, which in their various expressions represent a sort of mutual aid and protection society for its members.

Europe has been a strong supporter of multilateralism and the institutions that have underpinned the liberal international order. It played a significant role in setting up bodies like the International Criminal Court and the World Trade Organisation and in supporting the United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change (UNFCCC) and environmental agreements. Taken together Europe is the largest contributor to the UN system and a leading donor of official overseas development assistance.

Europe has in many ways become the poster image of the liberal international order, which is why the current crisis in liberal internationalism has taken on an existential significance. Essential to this is the recognition that nothing ever stands still: there are people in Europe today who have, in a single lifetime, had three or four nationalities while living in the same place (think of Lviv, for instance). Many see the post-1989 'liberation' of the East as an exercise in commercial colonialism, leaving today an impression that "Die Mauer ist im Kopf" (the Wall is in the mind).

Towards an understanding of the crisis of liberal internationalism

President Donald Trump's actions since his inauguration in January 2025 have certainly accentuated the challenges facing the liberal international order. However, it could be argued that he is less the architect and more the product of changes in the distribution of power that have taken place since the end of the Cold War.

Put simply, the current weakening of the liberal order is a result of the gradual shifts in power since the end of the Cold War. The US and the West are less strong now than when they built the post-1945 settlement. Power is becoming more diffuse. The old order, previously dominated by the United States and Europe, is giving way to one shared with non-Western states that have a different set of cultural, political and economic experiences (and memories). These states often see the world through their anti-imperial and anti-colonial past and have their own distinct visions and agendas on how the world should be ordered.

For some countries, like South Africa and Brazil, it is a matter of reforming outdated power structures and existing international institutions in order to make them more representative of current realities, whilst ensuring that the benefits are shared more equally. For them it is often a matter of making existing rules work more equitably and consistently and, thus, providing them with the checks and balances against hegemonic power.

For others, like India, it is about finding a place among the world's leading powers. Many harbour suspicions about China's revisionist ambitions and its efforts to claim great power privilege, but it is Russia, of all states, that has made most effort to upend the liberal international order. Its vision of a multipolar world made up of civilisational states with their corresponding spheres of influences is the polar opposite of a liberal international order. Hence, the growing diversity of actors allied to sometimes competing and often irreconcilable visions for the international order makes for a deeply multi-polarising world.

This has impacted on levels of trust between states which makes it that much harder to agree new rules, bargains, and governance arrangements, and that much harder to work together to

address transnational threats, such as climate change, pandemic diseases, financial crises, failed states, genocides and nuclear proliferation.

The greater respect for cultural diversity is welcomed, but it has led to a questioning of universal norms that had previously constrained governments and protected the individual. Some legal scholars warn about an emerging 'authoritarian international law' and an 'age of impunity' in which human rights violations and other crimes too often go unpunished.[10]

Hence, the current crisis facing liberal internationalism is not just about power, it is also about ideas. The end of the Cold War did not result in the end of history or the Western roll-out of Western democracies and the market economy. New entrant countries have become more prosperous, but not necessarily more free and democratic. On joining the World Trade Organisation in 2001, China has gone from being the 6th largest economy to the 2nd (or, arguably, the 1st), but the vast economic gains it has accrued have only, it appears, legitimised the Chinese Communist Party (CCP).

The predominance of liberal ideas has also been challenged by the return of authoritarian great powers. As explored in the previous chapter, over the last 15 years there has been a wave of autocratisation which has put liberal democracy on the defensive, if not in full retreat. It would be an oversimplification to suggest that there is now open competition between democracies and autocracies. But, it does suggest that in ideological terms the future is likely to be considerably messier. It is a future where multiple ideas of order coexist or compete and where consensus around universal rules, principles, values, and patterns of cooperation become thinner.

Even in the traditional heartlands of the liberal international order, liberal democracies are weakening as they struggle to respond to the challenges of rising inequality, poor economic

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[10] Ginsburg, T. (2020) *Authoritarian International Law*? American Journal of International Law. Vol. 114, No. 12.

growth and fiscal crisis - all of which point to the waning fortunes of working and middle-class citizens in Europe and the United States.

To many across the Western liberal democratic world, the central tenets of liberal internationalism have eroded and look more like neo-liberalism – a framework for international capitalist transactions which have benefited the few rather than the many. All of this has contributed to a xenophobic and populist backlash which encourages illiberal politics. Contrary to some assumptions, we are reminded that, in many places, the primary identity markers of geography or politics have given way to a prioritising of language, religious denomination or nationalism.

Without doubt, President Trump's re-election has intensified the crises facing liberal internationalism, but he is not the cause. The abdication of US leadership is felt by all countries, but most keenly by Western powers in general (and Europe in particular) that have depended on the US for its security and protection. But the problems facing the West and Europe are more deeply rooted and longer in gestation than Trump's arrival on the scene.

Sleepwalking into dystopia?

Whether the future of liberal internationalism reverts to looking something similar to what occurred during the Cold War, an alliance involving Western liberal democracies, with or without the US, or evolves to provide a set of minimum global rules and institutions to respond to the dangers and vulnerabilities of twenty-first century modernities, depends in part on those willing to advocate its corner.

Without its advocates, the prospect of countries cooperating for mutual gain and protection within a global space governed by certain agreed rules gives way to more anarchic expressions of international relations where might makes right, where the strong dominate at the expense of the weak, and where life and human dignity hold little value. It is a world in which considerations of justice, morality and international law are irrelevant and the only thing that matters is naked power (sometimes coded as "getting things done").

It is a world which invites fear rather than hope, and one where countries are forced to divert valuable resources away from economic development and welfare programmes and towards rearmament programmes and defence. The resulting arms race is one that makes us all poorer without making anyone feel stronger. As a thousand years of history has shown, it is a toxic environment marred by suspicion, mistrust and strategic miscalculation - often leading to war.

It is a world where common challenges like climate change, health pandemics and the rise of Artificial Intelligence go unaddressed. In the absence of robust international cooperation, the ability to find win-win solutions becomes that much harder as countries adopt a 'beggar thy neighbour' approach, and the future looks somewhat dystopian.

A time for renewal

Despite its faults and missteps, no other system comes close to liberal internationalism in making the case for a decent and cooperative world that encourages the enlightened pursuit of national interests.

The liberal international project has evolved over the centuries and has faced repeated crisis, upheavals and disasters – almost all of them worse than what we are experiencing today. It has experienced world wars, economic depression, trade wars, fascism, totalitarianism and vast social injustices.

Its durability rests in part on the fact that it represents less an ideal world order and more the mechanisms or the machinery with which to deal with the challenges of modernity. All machineries need running repairs and improvements to ensure that they continue to perform their tasks efficiently, safely and effectively. The machinery of liberal internationalism is no different. Urgent investment is needed to respond to the "tidal wave" of changes currently washing over us.

The future of liberal internationalism rests, then, on the ability of countries to both lead and support it. Whether the abdication of US leadership proves temporary or more enduring, other

leading liberal democracies in Europe and further afield must work together to become a shining light on the hill.

Europe has a specific responsibility given that it gave birth to the philosophical traditions that shaped liberal internationalism. Europe also cannot ignore the reality that whatever the current headwinds, it has been one of the main beneficiaries of liberal internationalism since 1945. It has experienced an era of unprecedented peace and prosperity in its history, and, while it hasn't always done so consistently, it has sought to protect liberal values abroad.

Advocating for liberal internationalism today requires states remaining stable, well-functioning and internationalist. They need to win the struggle of ideas and regain their legitimacy as models of advanced societies by finding solutions to the current generation's problems. They need to show their own citizens how an open rules-based international order provides for the mutual flourishing and wellbeing of all. Failure to do so is only likely to nourish those Radical and New Right parties and movements that argue that this order, advocated by a 'global liberal elite' that has become unmoored from their national identities and cultures, works against the interests of traditional national values and local communities[11]

Beyond this domestic agenda, liberal internationalism's future requires liberal democracies working to expand and rebuild a wider coalition of states willing to cooperate within a reformed liberal global order to address common challenges. Europe needs to look beyond the West to court and engage the wider world of developing democracies. There needs to be a rebalancing of rights and responsibilities within existing international institutions to reflect the new diffusion of power. Bodies like the UN and the International Monetary Fund (IMF) need to be reformed if they are to reflect the new reality.

Liberal internationalism's future rests, then, on rediscovering its progressive and radical agenda. If liberal internationalism is once again to become, as John Ikenberry would describe it,

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[11] Arahamsen, R. (ed) (2024) *World of the Right: Radical Conservatism and Global Order. Cambridge University Press*

a sort of 'mutual aid society for the modern age', then it is an endeavour that must extend beyond states, to include civil society, businesses, trade unions, churches and faith communities.[12] To do so, however, all actors need to understand both the challenges and their own specific contribution to the journey ahead.

Liberal internationalism has experienced crises and transformations in the past. It has survived in part because people of good will, whether inspired by faith or not, have risen to the challenge of the age. It requires a similar effort today. Later we will come to the specific challenge to Christians in advocating and working for the building of a more peaceful and prosperous world. Not the nostalgic search for what now seems lost, but a commitment on the basis of unchanged values and principles to the building of a future in a world that has changed.

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[12] Ikenberry, J. (2020) *The Next Liberal Order: The Age of Contagion Demands More Internationalism Not Less.* Foreign Affairs. Vol.99, No. 4

4. Democracy, Freedom and Justice

On an early spring morning in Washington DC, in March 2025, Archbishop Elpidophoros of the Greek Orthodox Archdiocese of America kicked off Greek Independence Day celebrations with a surprising statement. At the White House he told President Trump that the 47th President reminded him of the great Roman Emperor Constantine, who founded and built the magnificent city of Constantinople – the Archbishop's birthplace, known today as Istanbul.

Using Constantine's famous vision of the cross, the Archbishop presented President Trump with a holy cross, calling it a symbol of "divine guidance" for the nation's leader. "Through your leadership, you embody the values of our Christian faith and a love for the Gospel", he added. "With this cross, I pray you bring peace to the world, and make America invincible!"

Responding in typical Trumpian fashion, the President gratefully received the gift as "beautiful" and cited his executive order to end government overreach and hostility toward Christians. "We will not tolerate the targeting or intimidation of people of faith," he said, referencing the language that aims to eliminate "any unlawful anti-Christian policies" from the previous administration.

President Trump is perhaps a strange bedfellow for an Archbishop, given his lack of Christian character, personal amorality and criminal convictions. And yet, the strong backing given to Trump by (primarily) white Christians was the bedrock of his victory in 2024. The relationship between Trump and conservative Christian elements is symbiotic and mutually rewarding. According to the official exit poll, 82% of white evangelicals backed Trump, along with 63% of white Catholics and similar numbers of white non-evangelical Protestants. The US TV evangelist Hank Kunneman described the 2024 Presidential election as "a battle between good

and evil", adding: "There's something on President Trump that the enemy fears: it's called the anointing."[13]

Trump has leaned into this role. Referring to his attempted assassination July 2024, he declared on election night: "Many people have told me that God spared my life for a reason, and that reason was to save our country and to restore America to greatness." President Trump rewarded the Christian vote in his first term by appointing conservative Christians to the Supreme Court, leading to the overturning of Roe v Wade which protected the right to abortion. In this second term he has promised to bring back prayer in schools and create a federal task force to fight anti-Christian bias. He is already making good on his promise to affirm that God made only two genders, male and female.

Enlightened Europeans might roll their eyes and sigh: "only in America", but we are now seeing similar developments across Europe, and indeed in other parts of the world and with other religions. Religious nationalism, whether Hindu nationalism in India or Religious Zionism in Israel or Christian nationalism in Europe, is on the rise and is joining forces with Radical and New Right political forces to reshape the political landscape in many countries.

Christian nationalism in Europe, while differing by country and context, carries several dangers – to democracy and social cohesion as well as to a state's commitment to a rules-based international order. These dangers stem from combining a national identity with a specific religious identity, often at the expense of pluralism, minority rights and democratic norms.

Christian nationalism has bolstered far-right political parties and political leaders with an authoritarian and populist bent. It has also given oxygen to some religious leaders who see it as an opportunity to push back on the excesses of identity-based politics in favour of a return to more fundamental rights.

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[13] Coster, H. (22 March 2024). *Christian evangelicals fire up Trump support with messianic message.* Reuters.

As argued by Gioanthan la Mascal and Kristin Stoeckl in their survey of the Christian right in Europe, what we are increasingly seeing across Europe is the collision of two phenomena: (a) the polarisation of religion, often driven by religious actors, leaders and institutions, and (b) the sacralisation of politics driven by Radical and New Right parties and actors. Left unchecked, this collision and its ability to feed off the grievances that fuel Christian nationalism constitutes a serious threat both to democracies across Europe and the integrity of the Christian faith itself.[14]

If the Church is serious about halting and reversing the democratic backsliding that we are seeing across Europe, and with it a commitment to liberal internationalism, then it needs to better understand the threat that Christian nationalism poses and to more clearly articulate why Chistian nationalism is a distortion of biblical Christian values. It needs to be clear about the strategies for combatting it and the role it can play in articulating a more constructive and progressive nationalism that serves the wider Common Good.

In defence of nationalism

Nationalism is one of those words that is often bandied around casually without any attempt at definition. The resulting ambiguity often causes confusion and fuzziness which leads to suspicion and fear that nationalism is something better rejected in its entirety. So what do we mean by nationalism and how does it differ from patriotism?

The popular distinction between patriotism (understood as a benign affection for one's homeland) and nationalism (understood as a more narrowly defined loyalty and sense of belonging to one's country) echoes the one made by scholars who contrast 'civic' nationalism, according to which all citizens, regardless of their cultural background, count as members of a nation, with ethnic nationalism, in which ancestry and language determine national identity.

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[14]Mascola, G & Stoeckl, K., (2023) *The European Christian Right*. In G Mascola (Eds.), *The Christian Right in Europe: Movements, Networks and Denominations*

In both its inclusive and exclusive forms, nationalism shares common characteristics. First, that members of the nation, understood as a group of equal citizens with a shared history and future political destiny, should rule the state; and, secondly, that they should do so in the interest of the whole nation. Nationalism is thus opposed to foreign rule by other entities and is opposed to those rules which disregard the perspectives of the majority.

The potency of nationalism, both for ill or good, arises when it becomes imbued with or fired by political ideologies that threaten basic political order or human dignity. In the nineteenth century, liberal nationalism spread throughout Europe and Latin America, championing individual freedoms and the rights of nations, particularly the right to self-determination and self-government through constitutionalism and representation. The liberal vision was of a world of independent nation-states engaging in free trade and fostering interdependency in order to reduce conflict.

In the interwar years, fascist nationalisms (though differentiated in nature) triumphed in Italy and Germany where they advocated for the absolute supremacy of the nation, viewing it as a single, organic entity that prioritises the collective will over individual rights and democratic processes. It was characterised by a fervent, often exclusionary, form of nationalism that (a) focused on a single leader (purported to embody the nation), (b) combined with authoritarianism, militarism and economic self-sufficiency, and (c) held to a belief in national decline or threats to the national body that needed to be resisted at all costs. Grievance rooted in victimhood was at its core.

Post-1945, many of the anti-colonial liberation movements that spread across the 'global south' closely intertwined Marxism with nationalism. Many saw a strong correlation between their adopted Marxist-Leninist frameworks, national struggles against imperialism, and the Marxist analysis of class struggle, thus recasting national liberation as a socialist ideal. Elements of this 'Marxist nationalism', are codified in contemporary China with 'Xi Jinping Thought'.

Although nationalism is a relatively recent historical phenomenon, the world today is a world of nation states governed according to nationalist principles. To identify nationalism solely with the political right is to misunderstand the nature of nationalism and to ignore how deeply it has shaped all modern political ideologies, including liberal and progressive ones.[15]

While nationalism in some circles has a bad reputation today, we should treat with caution any sweeping criticisms.[16] In January 2019, in a speech to his diplomatic corps, Frank-Walter Steinmeier, the German President, described nationalism as an ideological poison, while at a mass in June 2025, Pope Leo warned of the "exclusionary mindset that, unfortunately we now see emerging also in political nationalisms."[17]

Whilst responding to contemporary challenges, such critiques ignore the fact that nationalism has provided the ideological foundations for institutions such as democracy, the welfare state and public education, all of which were justified in the name of a unified people with a shared sense of purpose and mutual obligation. Indeed, this was one of the great motivating forces that pushed back the tide of Nazi Germany and imperial Japan. It helped liberate the large majority of humanity from European colonial domination. And, even today, its progressive elements can be seen in the way that the European Union, despite all its weaknesses and tensions, illustrates the liberal nationalist ideal of promoting harmony among nations through economic interdependence, emphasizing reason and discussion over war.

Making the case for nationalism isn't to be purposefully contrarian or to overlook nationalism's dark side. History is scarred with nationalism's excesses, whether that be wars, genocides or ethnic cleansings. Where governments have tried to preserve a single dominant culture, oppression has normally followed.

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[15] Wimmer, A. (2019) *Why Nationalism Works and Why it isn't Going Away*. Foreign Affairs. Vol 98. No2.

[16] Nowrasteh & Somin, I. (2024) *The Case Against Nationalism*. National Affairs, Cato Institute, Winter.

[17] The Guardian. (8 June 2025); *Pope Leo criticises 'exclusionary mindset of nationalist political movements*

Rather, it is to make the case that nationalism, although a relatively recent phenomenon, is here to stay for the foreseeable future. There is no other organising principle upon which to base the international state system. If this is the case then perhaps the Kantian vision of a United Europe of States, that preserves national sovereignty while cooperating to prevent war needs to be revisited. If we are to defend democracy in multi-ethnic societies, then we must stop conflating nationalism with nativism and ethnonationalism. We must look to imbue the flag with a more compelling national-democratic narrative that appeals more widely than the biased tales spun by populist illiberal agitators.

In his famous 1992 book *The End of History and the Last Man*, the American political scientist, Francis Fukuyama, argued that liberal democracy might be the endpoint of political evolution.[18] In 2018, in *Identity: The Demand for Dignity and the Politics of Resentment*, he acknowledged that resurgent nationalism and identity politics challenge that thesis, showing liberal democracy is not inevitable and must be actively defended.[19]

This requires recapturing nationalism's progressive force. Democratic societies need a shared national identity to function effectively - but one that is civic rather than ethnic; one based on shared values, democratic institutions, and the rule of law rather than blood or soil. Without this recovery, democracies risk being overtaken by populist, authoritarian forces that exploit identity-based divisions for their own narrow advantage. The challenge, as one of our interlocutors put it, is: how to make democracy sing (in a world of loud noises)?

Understanding Christian nationalism

The rise of Christian nationalism is a global phenomenon evident in the USA, Latin America and Europe where a cultural — as opposed to creedal — version of Christian nationalism has

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[18] Fukyama, F. (1992). *The End of History and the Last Man*. Free Press

[19] Fukyama, F. (2018). *Identity: The Demand for Dignity and the Politics of Resentment*. Farrar, Straus and Giroux

bolstered far-right political parties and political leaders with an authoritarian and populist bent. At its core it advocates for the fusion of a particular form of Christianity and a country's civic and political life, and for a privileged place for Christianity in the public realm.

Populist parties and politicians across Europe have drawn on Christian language, Christian imagery and – superficially – Christian concerns. The ways in which they use it have differed subtly according to cultural context. Most talk about Europe's 'Christian heritage'. Many talk about their 'Christian roots', their 'Christian values', 'Christian principles', 'Christian people' or 'Christian identity'. This represents what has been called a paradigm-shift from liberal democracy to civilisationism, accompanied by a culturisation of religion and the politicisation of culture. At its heart lies a confusion between 'Christianity' and 'Christendom' (or 'Christianism') – the latter offering what Ralf Dahrendorf once called "a better yesterday", focusing on the past instead of the future, turning inwards rather than opening up to a wider world.[20] Defensiveness is the inevitable outcome.

In Hungary, Prime Minister Victor Orban has increasingly used far-right and anti-migrant rhetoric to cement control of the country in an increasingly authoritarian fashion. He openly describes Hungary as a Christian nation and promotes a vision of "illiberal democracy" rooted in Christian values. Much of this has been written into Hungary's democratic fabric. In 2011, Hungary's constitution was re-written to include references to the Holy Crown of Hungary and Hungary's Christian roots. The constitution was amended again in 2020 to define sex as exclusively male or female, impacting transgender rights, and again in 2025 to enable bans on public LGBTQ+ gatherings.

In Poland, Christian nationalism is a significant and complex phenomenon, blending religious identity with national identity. In Poland's case, it often centres on a conservative Roman Catholicism, which has historically played a major role in shaping the country's cultural, political, and social fabric and which has shaped a narrative of Poland as a Catholic martyr

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[20] Dahrendorf, R. (1980). *Social Policy.* London Review of Books, Vol.2 No.13

nation, constantly under threat from foreign powers or ideologies such as the Nazis, Soviets or, more recently, the EU and secularism.

Similar trends can be seen in Italy and France. In Italy, Giorgia Meloni rose to power in 2023 by stressing the importance of God, fatherland and family – a modern interpretation of 'God and fatherland', the fascist motto used by Benito Mussolini. She has emphasized protecting "our God, our flag, our country" and opposes immigration that might "dilute" Italy's Christian roots.

In France, a country that's officially secular, Marine Le Pen's National Rally invokes France's 'Christian heritage' to oppose immigration and the threat of multiculturalism. Churches and cathedrals are held up as symbols of 'French identity'. When she defines French identity she points to the church at its core: "The principles we fight for are engraved in our national motto: liberty, equality, fraternity," she declared at a rally in 2017. "That stems from the principles of secularisation resulting from a Christian heritage." The party's mascot, the Catholic saint Joan of Arc, stands in contrast to Marianne, the secular symbol of the French republic who represents liberty and reason.[21]

In Britain, which has historically had a civic national identity, we have seen with Brexit the tilt to a more exclusionary, ethnic nationalism. Although Christianity has not yet been explicitly weaponised to the same degree as in other countries (although Unite the Kingdom events suggest this might change), the subtext of much of the rhetoric around immigration reinforces a nostalgic image of a "pure" British identity — often tied to England, white heritage, and the Empire. The recent proliferation of particular flags as symbols of this might be seen as a case in point – flags as iconic of identity.

One reason why the 'take back control' agenda is so knotty and insatiable is because it is identity rather than policy driven. It is a reaction to a perceived loss of national dignity and

[21] Green, E. (2017) *The Specter of Catholic Identity in Secular France*. The Atlantic

sovereignty. It is fuelled by a sense that 'Britishness' is under threat from immigration, globalisation and that elites no longer have the interests of the 'British people' at heart.

While each country needs to be studied in its own context, there are common themes and traits:

- A country's national identity is usually framed as historically and culturally Christian, and Christianity is often portrayed as under siege from secularism, immigration (usually meaning Islam) and globalisation.

- Nationalist political leaders, who may or may not themselves be Christians, often use Christian imagery such as crosses, cathedrals and saints on political campaigns and attach themselves to dominant strains of Christianity in order to touch a nostalgic nerve and secure political power.

- Once in power, nationalist politicians often pass laws that narrowly define who are the privileged members of the national entity and how that privilege can be maintained by discriminating against those who fall outside its scope.

- The principle of democratic equality is jettisoned in favour of supporting their dominant status both in society and in politics. Political opponents are harassed, free speech is curtailed and voter suppression encouraged, all of which erode important democratic principles.

This commonality illustrates that the upsurge in the variety of national right wing parties or movements isn't a spontaneous response to economic dislocation and inequality but represents something more interconnected and intertwined in terms of its ideologies, worldviews and sensibilities. A recent indication of this is the 2025 US National Security Strategy that talks of the strategic importance to the US of "reversing Europe's civilisational decline" by "cultivating resistance to Europe's current trajectory within European nations".

What this represents is two competing visions of Western civilisation. The vision propounded by the Radical and New Right based on race, Christianity and ethno-nationalism contrasts markedly with what Europe is (or has been) liberal, based on democracy, human rights and the rule of law (including international law).

Responding to Christian nationalism

It might be self-evident but it still needs stating: Christian nationalism is not and should not be seen as synonymous with Christianity. It is clearly divorced from gospel values. It represents an appeal to a nostalgic version of Christendom, not Christianity.

It is a perverse ideology of power domination that needs to be rejected. It turns Jesus from a suffering servant into a political mascot, co-opting his name for political purposes, and inverts his teaching of humility, love and service to justify power, marginalisation and exclusion. It feeds off fear and resentment, and breeds suspicion, intolerance and hatred.

Christian nationalism undermines the universal scope of Christian love and justice by privileging one nation or group over others. This is antithetical to the Gospel's inclusive message of serving all humanity. Human dignity is universal and God-given. Every human being, regardless of nationality, race, religion or gender, is to be respected as being made in the image of God.

It forgets that Jesus was not a European and that the Church is global – it cannot be tied to blood, soil or culture. As Jaques Maritian writes in *Integral Humanism*, "the Gospel has not a national character: it is universal in essence and destiny".[22] When Christ became human he became just that – human. He did not become a Hungarian, English, Polish, Russian or even American nationalist (although, very clearly, was born into a particular ethnicity, place and time – what has been termed 'the scandal of particularity').

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[22] Maritain, J. (1939) *Integral Humanism and the Crisis of Modern Times*. The Review of Politics. Vol1 No1.

The Kingdom of God is not and cannot be tied to any earthly nation. Those who try to do so risk idolatrising an imagined community – treating symbols, history and political leaders with undue religious reverence. Neither Trump, Orban or Farage should be seen as Christ-like figures for our time – saving their embattled countries from the perils of globalisation and immigration by leading their kinfolk to a heavily policed promised land of cultural and religious purity.

At a deeper level, Christian nationalism invites ideological conformity and unquestioning allegiance to exclusionary religious-political narratives. It discourages self-examination and the kind of intellectual spiritual curiosity that strengthens faith within the joyous mystery of Christ's unfathomable love. It certainly does not recognise grace.

Those who advocate this ideology – populist politicians and pseudo-religious leaders alike, and those who take advantage of the grievances that fuel it - need to be named and shamed. Left unchecked, the phenomenon threatens democracy and the integrity of the Christian faith itself.

This is a challenge that should encompass all in society, but Christians have a particular responsibility to promote a counternarrative from within the Christian faith that refutes the truth claims of Christian nationalists. There are signs of this happening in the United States, with, for example, *Christians against Christian Nationalism*, but something similar is needed across Europe.[23]

In doing so, Christians need to work towards a new form of inclusive civic nationalism, rather than rejecting nationalism itself out of hand. Nationalism is not inherently negative. Yes, ethno-religious nationalism is dangerous, often leading to xenophobia, exclusion and authoritarianisms, but a constructive nationalism can help build inclusive civic identities, where people of different ethnic, religious or cultural backgrounds feel that they belong to the same nation or 'polis'. Indeed, without a unifying national identity, it is difficult to see how

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[23] https://www.christiansagainstchristiannationalism.org/

states can over time enforce the rule of law and deliver essential services necessary to nurture human flourishing.

Christians are well placed to contribute to the exercise of constructing inclusive national narratives. The Church is open to anyone and everyone, creating space in which different ethnicities, social identities and statuses can be welcomed and included in a community that is local, national and global. Its commitment to human dignity means that it can offer a moral compass rooted in values like justice, mercy, love, peace, and reconciliation. These values can underpin a national narrative that transcends politics, ethnicity or class and can help shape civic institutions and democratic bodies.

At its heart Christian nationalism - and much of the identity politics that is evident in Europe and North America today - owes itself to the demand for recognition and the human need for dignity and moral worth. Many people feel overlooked and marginalised, and this leads individuals to align to group identities that often eschew universal values and shared narratives. The resulting fragmentation undermines social and democratic cohesion. Narratives of unjust victimhood fuel anger, discrimination and violence.

Through its message of Christ's redeeming love, the Church is well placed to help heal the fear and resentment that feeds these agendas. It can, with all its contradictions and failings, help reconnect our sense of personhood and identity with universal values and a shared sense of belonging. This inevitably goes beyond merely technocratic politics (with which so many people are dissatisfied) and cries out for a re-enchantment of our public and political discourses. As the Old Testament book of Proverbs puts it: "Without a vision the people perish" (29:18).

This takes us now to an exploration of where such a worldview is rooted and how a framing narrative might be constructed.

5. Towards a Framing Narrative: Christian Cosmopolitanism and Personhood

Is 'Europe' a place or an idea? During the Brexit deliberations there was constantly a confusion in the use of terminology and language in references to Europe. To put it simply: Europe is not the European Union; the European Union is not coterminous with Europe; the continent does not comprise only European nations; European institutions can enable nations to cohere in seeking common interests, but institutions cannot solely represent a defined idea; there are nations and ethnicities in 'political' Europe that are not clearly European (being Slavic, Asian, etc.); Europe has, throughout its history, been re-shaped by geography, migration, invasion, conflict, climate-change, culture, economics, political shifts and shifting identities. What, then, is Europe? And what do our assumptions say about reality, complacency and identity?

In his 'Europe Speech' at the Sorbonne in Paris in April 2024, President Macron described Europe as "a particular expression of humankind that places free, rational, enlightened individuals above all else."[24] However, this understanding assumes (what might be called) a philosophical anthropology that is self-evident and neutral. Liberté, Égalité, Fraternité have captured the post-Revolutionary French mind and imagination, but – and setting aside for a moment the irony of that slogan leading to the slaughter of people who didn't agree with assumptions about who should be free, equal and fraternal – the apparent triumph of its post-Enlightenment secular humanism has not gone unquestioned or unchallenged in some parts of the continent.

This is important if we are to think more clearly and realistically about the future of Europe as a continent or peoples, a constantly changing mélange of cultures and languages, of institutions and ideas. The individualism of Macron's definition is now being questioned by people who think the whole Enlightenment project has failed. The human rights agenda seems to some

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[24] https://www.elysee.fr/en/emmanuel-macron/2024/04/24/europe-speech

people to have lost its primacy in collective ethical thinking, clashing against 'rights' of communities who do not see radical individualism as a human good that serves all. The working out of this clash will prove vital for how any peaceful vision of a future Europe might, in fact, develop.

In the last chapter we considered how concepts such as Christian nationalism can offer a very limited and negatively-defined vision for a coherent society in contemporary Europe. But, if the assumptions underlying such nationalism are questionable, then which assumptions might help us construct a viable and generously Christian substructure to any vision?

This is not a merely academic question; nor is it self-evident that human beings have value in and of themselves. What is a human being? If Immanuel Kant was right, then mere existence does not and cannot assume inherent human meaning or value. These assumptions have to be argued for.

Anthropological assumptions

In his book *Dominion* the historian Tom Holland has described the impact that Christianity has made to the world, and particularly to Europe and Great Britain in the last 2000 years.[25] His basic premise is that many of the assumptions and institutions that we take for granted now did not simply drop from the sky or emerge from some neutral 'humanist' inevitability. They derived from a Christian humanist worldview that sees human value rooted in a particular theological anthropology: each individual is made in the image of God and, therefore, has infinite value. However, this Judeo-Christian anthropology of the individual is accompanied by and conditional on how the individual exercises responsibility within the wider community of humanity.

Again, this is important. If Europe's polity and collective value system is derived from or based upon Greek, Judeo-Christian and other foundations, then it is incumbent on European societies

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[25] Holland, T. (2019) *Dominion: The Making of the Western Mind.* Little, Brown Book Group

to take responsibility (to different degrees) for the wellbeing of 'neighbours' whether they be proximate or distant. It also follows that any claim to Christian identity by European individuals or nations cannot simply shrug off or ignore this fundamental human interdependency. Campaigning with a cross or a slogan cannot substitute nostalgia for an imagined Christendom with the Christian faith itself.

This relationship of mutual belonging and responsibility is made concrete in the rule of law. The only caveat to this statement is that law has to be good law. A corrupt or dictatorial regime that changes law in order to justify how it wants to behave (or wield power) cannot legitimately claim adherence to the rule of law when it does not treat its subjects impartially. Good law provides a mechanism by which all people can be assured of impartial and equal treatment by the authorities. Laws designed to promote or protect primarily the powers of the powerful are necessarily exposed as corrupt.

However, this all assumes that there is common agreement with the concept and definition of law, justice, freedom (which is always limited by law) and equity. And, if these are to be honoured, then those who wish to promote and defend the rule of law (for the common good) must also explain on what anthropological ground they hold these truths to be unquestionable. For it is clearly the case that in 2025 these truths are being questioned – not philosophically, but by a creeping sidelining of inconvenience and the protectionist ranking of hierarchies of obligation.

A Christian understanding of personhood sees that human beings are created and redeemed to fulfil their personhood within and through a just and generous common life. Hence, any positive narrative for a European identity with a good foundation (and superstructure of humanist values) must recognise both our rootedness in particular communities and our concern and responsibility for others. A look at the market-driven narrative of the USA alongside the statist approach of China raises questions about fundamental human value in the first place: in the former the individual is a cog in an economic wheel, in the latter the individual can be sacrificed on the altar of conformity to state power. Where should Europe, with its (historic) pretensions to 'better' human values, sit in this context?

It could be argued that the contemporary struggles and divisions in Europe emerge from this friction. Can we cut loose our frameworks of justice, obligations and rights from the tree that gave them life and growth? And if we are to decide to establish a new framework for justice, values and mutuality, then what should it look like, who should decide, and on what rational or philosophical basis should it be underpinned?

This is an oversimplification, but, during the Brexit debates in the UK it became evident that European countries (and especially the European Union) largely saw the development of the post-Second World War settlement as a project to secure peace, democracy, human rights and the rule of law within a framework of treaties and international agreements that – enabled by the mutuality of pooled sovereignty – would secure the most equitable conditions for economic and social growth. It seems that the UK saw such developments from an island perspective as providing an economic opportunity. Hence the bewilderment – anger, even – of some continental Europeans when this project was dismissed by a slim majority of the British electorate in the Brexit referendum of 2016.

If Europeans still value democracy as hitherto experienced on the continent, then some urgent work is going to have to be done to demonstrate theoretically and pragmatically why liberal (as opposed to illiberal) democracy is the best option for political governance available to us. If justice is thought to be worth institutionalising, then this has to be argued for, defended and justified in the public arena. If sovereignty is to mean anything, then the question of how pooled sovereignty increases benefits must be addressed honestly (unlike in the referendum discourse in 2016.) Worryingly, some polls in recent years indicate that many people – especially young people – would sacrifice these if a 'strong leader' would cut through the friction and make everything great again. Functionalism trumps principle and ethics.

In the context of this discussion, then, it is appropriate to urge a renewed energy for challenging the complacent assumptions about liberal values that have hitherto been regarded as invincible and self-evidently right. These values are under serious attack and cannot simply be assumed to be 'normal' or inevitable. As power is increasingly centralised under authoritarian leaders who use democratic means to gain a position where they can then change the rules for

the benefit of their own interests, it becomes all the more important to articulate why democracy matters.

We have looked briefly at Christian nationalism earlier, but for now it is necessary only to identify in this chapter the challenge to European democratic values and urge that attention be paid to them - and how, if so desired, they might be promoted and protected for the common good. Identifying the power of Christian thinking on Europe is not to demote the impact of Islam, Judaism or any other form of political ideology. To note the impact of Christianity on the Christendom of Europe is not to endorse or assent to Viktor Orban's appropriation of Christianity as a weapon in his illiberal democratic manifesto. It is simply to recognise a historic reality and ask questions about alternatives as history moves on and norms get challenged.

Any consideration of a future vision for Europe cannot be simply a pragmatic exercise, entire of itself. If the cosmopolitanism that shaped the Christian development and complexion of Europe has validity for any future narrative for Europe – one that addresses the continent, the EU institutions, etc. – it must be re-learned, reappropriated and re-argued for. If it is true that, as one of our interlocutors asserted, "what we have in common is our individual uniqueness", then this common humanity must underpin our understanding and assumptions about where we go from here and what sort of continent we want to live on.

Given our analysis so far in this report, why should Christians or the Church worry about democratic backsliding? Why should Christians advocate for democracy over and above other political systems?

Put simply, Christian humanism and forms of democracy that emerge from it share a fundamental belief in the inherent dignity and worth of every individual, advocating for participation in public life and social justice as necessary and inherent obligations of all citizens. Christian humanism emphasises the role of individual agency and responsibility in shaping a just and flourishing society, while democracy provides the political framework for such participation and rights.

The Roman Catholic theologian Jacques Maritain, writing in the dark days of the Second World War, made the case in his short book, *Christianity and Democracy* (1943), that Christianity and democracy are not just compatible, but that Christianity has in many ways been the "leaven in the bosom of human history" that has given inspiration for some of the main ideas in democratic thinking.[26] In this sense Christianity can be seen as a source for a set of convictions about human dignity, equality and freedom, out of which has (very slowly) developed a belief in the possibility of democracy.

A Christian idealised understanding of community (*koinonia*) is informed by concepts such as fellowship, love of neighbour, joint participation, partnership, sharing, the peaceful resolution of disputes, and communion. In turn, as political theologian Luke Bretherton suggests, these have further informed an understanding of organising and political action in ways that enable shared worlds of meaning and action to be created and sustained.[27] This stands in contrast to systems that seek to concentrate power in the hands of the few rather than the many, or where the ability to come together in association with others is impeded, or where coercion is used to resolve shared problems. Reinhold Niebuhr, the post-1945 American Protestant theologian, put his finger on the point here when he noted that "man's capacity for justice makes democracy possible, but man's inclination to injustice makes democracy necessary."[28]

This is not to say that Christian faith should be made subservient to democracy or, indeed, to any form of political life. Nor is it to imply that Christian faith compels believers to be democrats; it surely doesn't. But, it is to argue that the democratic impulse has arisen in human history in part as a temporal manifestation of the inspiration of the Gospel. Again, this isn't to assert that Christianity has a proprietary claim on democracy; democracy, understood as a set

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[26] Maritain, J. (1943) *Christianity and Democracy: The Rights of Man and the Natural Law*. Ignatius Press.

[27] Bretherton, L. (2015) R*esurrecting Democracy: Faith, Citizenship and the Politics of a Common Life*. Cambridge University Press. Bretherton, L. (2019) *Christ and the Common Life: Political Theology and the Case for Democracy*. Eerdmans.

[28] Niebuhr, R. (1944) The *Children of Light and The Children of Darkness : A Vindication of Democracy and a Critique of its Traditional Defence*. Charles Scribners Sons

of social practices for collective self-government, finds justification in numerous religious and philosophical frameworks, too.

A manifesto for democratic renewal

Setting out a Christian defence of democracy is a necessary first step for Christians and the wider Church in responding to the current crisis of democracy. Unless we understand why democracy matters, our defence is likely to be shallow and incoherent, relying more on emotion than clarity of argument. Unless arguments are properly grounded, we are unlikely to be able to resist the inevitable pushback from those who either question why Christians are concerning themselves with such matters at all or those who favour alternative forms of government.

Christians should take heart and encouragement from various moments of political crisis when theologians and philosophers provided alternative visions for ordering human relations. In the 1940s, Jacques Maritain, Reinhold Niebuhr, Karl Barth and Archbishop William Temple wrote in defence of democracy in response to the rise of fascist and communist totalitarianism in the 1940s and 1950s. Similarly, in the 1960s the likes of Dorothy Cotton, Fannie Lou Hamer, Bayard Rustin and Martin Luther King provided an alternative to white supremacy and the Jim Crow laws that segregated America, while Latin American Liberation theologians like Gustavo Gutierrez and Oscar Romero spoke out against dictatorship and exploitative forms of political economy in the 1970s.

More recently, Archbishop Desmond Tutu's account of *ubuntu*, which emphasized the radical interconnectedness of humanity and the importance of community, provided an understanding of democratic political order in the context of apartheid and post-apartheid South Africa in the 1980s and 1990s. Speaking into the current context, the late Pope Francis often spoke of the critical role that Christians can play in political life in order to combat the global decline of democracy, urging active participation, social solidarity and the rejection of indifference and exclusion.

Being aware of the connection between Christianity and democracy also helps to shape a more critical appraisal of the health of democracy in any given country and whether it provides the necessary framework for a just and flourishing society. All too often, current discussions about democracy across Europe and North America end up problematising populism rather than seeing populism as an expression of underlying deficiencies in current representative systems of government.

Speaking at a conference, *The Heart of Democracy*, in July 2024, Pope Francis noted that Christians can't be content with a "marginal or private faith" but that they should bring their faith into the public sphere "not so much to be heard, but to have the courage to make proposals for justice and peace in the public debate." Christians, he said, "have something to say, but not to defend privileges. No. We must be a voice, a condemning and proposing voice in a society that is often mute and where too many have no voice."[29]

This means being a voice of hope and looking to the future rather than the present. It requires Christians to speak up against indifference and a culture that makes government structures incapable of listening to and serving people, especially the poor, the frail, the sick, children, women, the young and the old. It means recognising that our institutions and structures have sometimes failed people, not the other way around.

Any framing narrative for renewing or re-creating a vision for the future of Europe must take seriously the histories that have led to now, the current realities that confirm or confound the original driving visions, and the values that, most commonly owned, might help us to shape a future which is coloured by freedom, justice, love and mercy. This is no simple task. But, churches have always had a global horizon whilst being rooted in place.

Given this perspective, this report can now take a closer look at how such a framing narrative might help us to navigate the challenges that Europe, as a particular expression of humankind,

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[29] https://www.vatican.va/content/francesco/en/speeches/2024/july/documents/20240707-trieste.html

currently faces from a revisionist Russia and an aggressively domineering America. Both seem aligned in their questioning of the norms that have shaped our rules-based international order. So, how might a Christian cosmopolitanism and understanding of personhood which prioritises the unique dignity of each individual rooted in community, help us think through in today's uncertain world our responses in a way that recognises the responsibilities that arise from our human interdependence?

6. A European Future

On an unusually cold winter's day in Oslo, Norway, in December 2012, with temperatures dropping to -9 degrees Celsius, the three presidents of the European Union collected the Nobel Peace Prize in recognition of six decades of work promoting "peace and reconciliation, democracy and human rights". At the ceremony in Oslo City Hall, attendees heard the Nobel Committee President, Thorbjoern Jagland, praise the EU in helping to transform Europe from a 'continent of war' into a 'continent of peace'. Jagland recounted how the same prize had been awarded in 1926 to the foreign ministers of France and Germany for their efforts at post-war reconciliation. Those efforts ended in failure as the continent reverted to conflict in the1930s. But, he said, now was the time to celebrate a prolonged peace in Europe.

Not surprisingly, the award was scoffed at by some. Six EU leaders, including David Cameron, the then PM of Britain, sidestepped the ceremony, while the Eurosceptic, Nigel Farage, the then leader of the UK Independence Party, lamented that the ongoing Eurozone sovereign debt crisis threatened "engendering violence, poverty and despair across Europe". Others, like the academic Hans Kundnani, have questioned whether this 'peace project' represented more a 'white peace', pointing out that even when the former French Minister Robert Schuman made his famous declaration in 1950, France was fighting a brutal colonial war in Indochina. Since then, EU member states haven't necessarily shied away from using force against those who aren't its members.[30] Peace project or power project?

But in accepting the prize, the then European Commission President, José Manuel Barroso, said: "This is an award for the European project – for the people and the institutions – that day after day, for the last 60 years, have built a new Europe. We will honour this prize and we will preserve what has been achieved. It is in the common interest of our citizens."

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[30] Kundnani, H. (March 2025). *The EU is becoming an Engine of War*. The New Statesman

Looking to the future, Barroso went on to say "And it will allow Europe to contribute in shaping that 'better organised world' in line with the values of freedom, democracy, human rights and rule of law that we cherish and believe in. The last 60 years have shown that Europe can unite in peace. Over the next 60 years, Europe must lead the global quest for peace."[31]

The idea that the European project was not just born out of the ashes of the Second World War, but has somehow transcended war itself, has shaped Europe's self-image as a civilian actor and even a civilising power. It has bound former enemies like France and Germany together as states united in a common purpose (*foedus pacificum*) and, through the process of enlargement and various trade association agreements had a normative - even pacifying - effect on its neighbourhood and its relations with other countries. Key to the motivations behind this construct was the notion not that war could realistically be eliminated for ever, but, rather, that it might be diminished as a feature of a common future.

Writing in the 1970s, François Duchêne, the British born journalist of Swiss-French origin, who was a close advisor to Jean Monnet, urged the then European Community to be an "exemplar of a new stage in political civilisation and to demonstrate the influence which can be wielded by a large political cooperative formed to exert essentially civilian power".[32] Duchêne advised that Europe could only hope to domesticate international affairs "if it remains true to its inner characteristics." He listed these as "civilian ends and means, and a built-in sense of collective action, which in turn expresses, however imperfectly, the social values of equality, justice and tolerance."

Even if this image of Europe as a civilian power has been overplayed at times, it points to a wider understanding of Europe as a soft power which would leave others, most notably the USA, to do the heavy military lifting if or when Europe's peace was imperilled. Such is the

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[31] https://www.theguardian.com/world/2012/dec/10/eu-receives-nobel-peace-prize

[32] Duchêne, F. (1973) *The European Communty and th Uncertainties of Interdependence*. In Max Kohnstamm and Wolfgang Hager (eds.), *A Nation Writ Large? Foreign Policy Problems Before the European Community*. Macmillan.

distinctiveness of roles that some political commentators, like Robert Kagan, have claimed that Europeans are from Venus and Americans from Mars.[33]

Europe's 'zeitenwende'

Putin's full-scale invasion of Ukraine and Trump's second election have had a transformative effect on European relations as well as Europe's self-understanding of itself as a peace project.

Putin's annexation of Crimea in 2014 and his full invasion of Ukraine in 2022 shattered the assumption that large scale war between states was no longer a feature of European politics. (Boris Johnson, appearing before the Liaison Committee in Parliament just a month or two beforehand, breezily dismissed the notion that tanks would roll across the fields of Europe again. The Guardian's Rafael Behr observed in May 2024: "Brexit was a huge bet against the idea that geography mattered to economic and security policy in the twenty-first century. Geography won.") Russia's total disregard for key tenets of the UN Charter, the Helsinki Final Act and the Budapest Memorandum pose a direct threat to the rules-based order that European peace and security has relied upon since 1945.

It has also raised concerns that Europe faces a direct military confrontation with Russia in the foreseeable future and the allied fear that this could involve tactical nuclear weapons. The UK's Strategic Defence Review of June 2025, for instance, portrays Russia as an immediate and pressing threat, while Mark Rutte, NATO's Secretary General has warned that "Russia could be ready to use military force against NATO within five years." [34]

Despite the early warning signs during Trump's first Presidency, the United States, under President Biden, stood shoulder-to-shoulder with Europe in outrage at Putin's illegal war. Through both words and actions, it was possible to still discern a 'united West' determined to safeguard European security by challenging and reversing Russian aggression. This all changed

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[33] Kagan, R. (2003) *Of Paradise and Power: America and Europe in the New World Order.* Alfred A. Knopf

[34] The UK Strategic Defence Review (June 2025) *Making Britain Safer: Secure at Home, Strong Abroad.*

in November 2024 when Trump made clear that the US would no longer be the primary guarantor of European security and that European nations should take responsibility for their own security.

Whether the threat of disengagement from Europe is a strategic or ideological objective, or merely represents a high-risk bargaining chip to get Europe to spend more on defence, remains unclear. Either way, the prospect of US abandonment of Europe while war rages on its border poses a vital challenge to Europe's security and raises concerns about the reliability of the US as an ally.

Following Chancellor Scholz's 2022 speech in which he first used the word 'Zeitenwende' (turning point), European leaders have been forced to re-evaluate their priorities given the risks posed by Russia and are taking steps to defend themselves with less American support. The US is now seen increasingly as less an ally and more a necessary, if not always reliable, partner with whom Europe must strategically cooperate and compromise. This has become a more pragmatic and less sentimental relationship. Talk of 'special relationships' sounds increasingly like a nostalgic reflex at odds with reality.

Speaking in February 2025 in the wake of several elections, the new German Chancellor, Friedrich Merz, said: "My absolute priority ... is to strengthen Europe as quickly as possible so that step-by-step, we actually achieve independence from the US". He went on to describe the current situation as a 'five minutes to midnight' moment for Europe, given that remarks by Trump made clear that "America is largely indifferent to the fate of Europe." [35] It could be argued that the 2025 US National Security Strategy reflects more hostility than indifference, especially given Trump's territorial ambition in Greenland.

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[35] https://www.politico.eu/article/friedrich-merz-germany-election-united-states-donald-trump-nato/

European governments have realised that they now need to be ready both to ensure Ukraine's survival without US support, and also to provide for their wider defence should the 'grey zone' between war and peace in Europe turn into something else.

As the security and economic environment becomes more challenging, the case for deeper European defence cooperation both within the EU and between the EU and other European countries becomes stronger. Previous red lines are being redrawn or recast as Europe looks to secure strategic autonomy.

The actual effects and consequences of Brexit – both in the UK and the EU – shine a new light on what the future might look like. The EU-UK summit in May 2025, the first such summit since Brexit, provided a clear framework for a deepening relationship, not least through a Security and Defence Partnership that paves the way for British participation in European defence programmes.

In July 2025, President Macron and British Prime Minister Keir Starmer took a bold first step toward establishing an independent nuclear deterrent with the Northwood Declaration in which they agreed that "there is no extreme threat to Europe that would not prompt a response by our two nations."

In all but a few cases, defence spending across the EU has been swiftly rising over the 2% of GDP level. In 2024, NATO members' spending was 50% higher than it was in 2014. At the NATO Summit in the Hague in June 2025, NATO members agreed a new commitment to reach a combined target of 5% of GDP by 2035. However, the sustainability of this surge of new commitments remains questionable amid wider fiscal pressures. The UK government, for instance, now spends more on debt-servicing than on anything other than health: over £100bn a year. Its debt-to-GDP is close to 100%. For the eurozone the percentage is 87%, which is not much better.

The only realistic way to find extra defence money quickly will be more borrowing. Indeed, the European Commission has already recognised this in its *Rearm Europe*, relaxing its fiscal rules

to permit more borrowing for defence, while the German Chancellor, Friedrich Merz, has removed the limits on national borrowing when it is used to fund defence spending. This represents a powerful change in policy for a German government.

Beyond these fiscal concerns, governments are also looking to engage their publics. Although there remains a general wariness about military service, several European countries like Latvia, Lithuania and Sweden have recently reintroduced compulsory military service. In the case of Sweden, the government is re-establishing its Cold-War era whole-of-society strategy known as 'total defence' which entails the mobilisation of the entire population and legally mandates citizens' participation in the defence of the country. [36]Other countries such as Germany, Poland, France and Italy are looking either to bring forward proposals or initiate a wider public debate on the matter.

Where then does this Zeitenewende, or turning point, leave the idea of Europe as a civilian actor and as the epitome of 'postwar'?

It is probably too strong to say that the European peace project has given way to a war project; but, what is new is (a) the weaponisation of Europe's economy against Russia, (b) the willingness to invest in the capabilities to defend itself against threats, and (c) being able to pursue its collective interests on the world stage.[37] Europe's decision to rearm itself does not necessarily mean abandoning the idea of being a civilian power. After all, there is nothing which prevents civilian powers from using military power for purposes of self and collective self-defence or collective security.

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[36] Ljungkvist, K. (2025) *Participatory War and Its Challenges for Total Defence*. Carnegie Endowment for International Peace.

[37] Leonard, M. (2024) *The European Union as a War Project: Five Pathways Towards a Geopolitical Europe.* In Hal Brands (ed.). *War in Ukraine: Conflict, Strategy and the Return of a Fractured World*. John Hopkins University Press.

In fact, it could be argued that Europe must have the military means in order to be a civilian power, because it is only by wielding military power that civilian ends – peace, justice, equality, order and democracy - can be pursued and protected. Indeed, in today's threatening world an armed civilian power might just have a greater chance of survival.

For the last 70 years, the driving force in European politics has been the elusive quest for peace. That peace has all too often been underpinned by US security guarantees. Confronted with a revisionist Russia and a disengaging US, Europe has little option but to invest in a mix of soft and hard power to protect and defend its own values and interests in a transactional world. So long as Europe remains true to its inner characteristics, then its aspirations to be a civilian power will continue to have weight.

What role for the Church?

Europe's remilitarisation isn't just a political, logistical and budgetary challenge, it is also a deeply moral and ethical one, posing searching questions of and challenges to Christian thought and ethics with regard to the appropriate recourse to military force.

Could we have done more?

Hindsight is a wonderful gift, but decisions are made in real time. That said, looking at consequences of decisions made and priorities assumed should not be seen as a useless exercise in self-justification. To recognise a failure is not the same as damning those who, exercising their best judgment at the time, committed it.

War in all its forms is contrary to the mind and spirit of Christ as we discern it in the Scriptures. It is a great evil that we should strain every sinew to avoid. Even when we have no option but to take up arms, either in self-defence or to correct a grave injustice, it remains a sin. It signals a brokenness in human relations and demonstrates that we have failed in our God-given mandate to be peacemakers – reconciling relationships and working to resolve conflicts.

That Europe is experiencing conflict on its landmass – especially given its post-war emphasis on 'never again' - is lamentable. Its horror is before us day and night in the reports and pictures

from Ukraine. These pictures force us to ask ourselves: how have we arrived at such a point? Did we do all in our power to promote peace and to work with Russia in addressing perceived grievances that fuelled its invasion? Could we have offered Ukraine further security guarantees that could have deterred Russian aggression?

This is not to invite appeasement, rather to encourage a self-critical assessment of our own actions and possible culpability. Similarly, this is not to give succour to the baseless accusations that Russia articulated on the eve of its invasion, but rather to ask whether our broader actions following the end of the Cold War contributed to the current breakdown in relations. To say that there was nothing we could have done to have prevented Russia's invasion might absolve us of blame, but it is disingenuous - and demonstrates an unwillingness or inability to exercise the sort of self-criticism that is essential for dealing with historical reality.

We can point to Putin's Tsarist ambitions to reconstitute the Russian Empire (the Holy Rus) and its prior aggression in Georgia. But even if the beam is in Russia's eye and only the mote in ours, we can't deny that the mote is at least there. Did the EU's civilising mission through enlargement into former territories of the USSR and expansion of NATO eastwards fuel the grievances that led to Russian aggression? Did the paucity of Europe's response to Russia's invasion of Georgia encourage Putin's endeavours? Did the West's scrambled withdrawal from Afghanistan signal US military and societal fatigue with foreign wars?

We must recognise that, even if we are secure in the justness of our cause and a judgment that the actions of Russia lie beyond the pale, there will also be millions of Russians, many of them Christians, who will hold diametrically opposed views. The Europe within which Russia's aggression occurred and this war persists is a Europe that we have all created and for which we must all take responsibility.

Again, to avoid any wilful misreading of this argument: to ask these questions, and even to point to some small modicum of culpability, is not in any way to excuse Russian aggression or to suggest that countries should not come to Ukraine's aid and support. Russia's invasion and its subsequent war of aggression is a very real evil that needs to be resisted. It was right for the UK

and other countries to have responded in the way that they did. They had no other option but to respond, and they have no option but to see this through to its end; but we must do so in penitence at failing to prevent this war from occurring in the first place.

The age of 'unpeace' and the shadow of total war

Although Britain and its allies are not at war with Russia (yet), it can hardly be said that we are at peace. Our countries are proxies to the war in Ukraine, both by supplying military and financial aid, and by the coercive sanctioning of the Russian economy, key officials and businessmen. These sanctions have caused significant damage to the Russian economy and to Russian livelihoods, but they have not so far changed the behaviour of the regime.

In fact, Russia's economy is revitalising and geared now to a war economy footing. Many countries, such as India continue to buy cheap Russian hydrocarbon products, while China is underwriting Russian economic risk. At the same time, Russia is conducting an escalating and violent campaign of sabotage and subversion against European targets. This includes espionage, disruption attacks on critical infrastructure, disinformation campaigns to influence public opinion and elections, and supply chain attacks.

In today's age of 'unpeace' the risk of escalation, whether by accident or design, is very real. Poland's downing on 9 September 2025 of several Russian drones that had entered its territory in the eastern part of the country near its border with Ukraine and Belarus, and its decision to activate Article 4 of the North Atlantic Treaty, illustrates how perilous the situation is. These probing incursions are now a daily reality.

The death and destruction witnessed in Ukraine is heartbreaking and underlines why we should strain every sinew to secure a just peace and avoid a wider confrontation with Russia. That starts by challenging the narrative prevalent in some quarters that an all-out armed conflict between Russia and Europe is inevitable. It means investing in the appropriate resources to prevent this scenario by addressing and resolving the underlying drivers of this confrontation, not simply reacting to them.

NATO governments are rightly looking to the state of their countries' military preparedness, but they need to calibrate their Strategic Defence Reviews against their lack of capability and capacity in peacebuilding. This is the vital component missing in the UK Government's recent security planning, planning which seems to lock us into an inevitable military confrontation.

A Strategic Peacebuilding Review could remedy this failure, by identifying and plugging the gaps when it comes to conflict management, diplomacy and reconciliation. A government's recourse to armed force should always be the last resort; but if all a government has to fall back on is military means then 'last resort' can all too quickly become the 'only resort'.

Investment in Europe's armed forces needs to go hand in hand with a commensurate investment in Europe's peace-making capacity. The two need to be seen as two sides of the same coin. In light of the dual threat posed by an expansionist Russia and an isolationist US, it would be folly for European governments not to take steps to fill the vacuum and provide for their own defence. Much as we might wish it otherwise, we cannot just rely on civilian means, but, similarly, nor should we over-estimate the utility of military force.

Again, if we find ourselves in five or ten years' time on the brink of direct military confrontation with Russia, with no honourable way of escape, we must be able to look back faithfully and say that we did everything we possibly could to avert war by investing in and then deploying the necessary tools to de-escalate tensions and to resolve perceived grievances. There is obviously no guarantee that such tools will work, but we must give ourselves that chance.

Labouring under the constant demands of love

Understanding Christian ethics as a study in empathy helps to maintain our humanity in the midst of conflict.

There can be little doubt that Russian soldiers are guilty of atrocities in Ukraine but for Christians that can never be the basis for reprisals. The problem with reciprocal violence ("an eye for an eye") is that everyone ends up blind to the atrocities that are committed in their

cause. For Christians, even in this age of unpeace, our enemies remain children of God. God has his own purpose for them as he does for us, and he has the same love for them as for us. They each possess God-given human dignity that needs to be respected and valued.

This means that as Christians we should labour under the constant demands of love. The Christian duty of love and forgiveness are as binding in war as they are in peace. We should avoid dehumanising language and pray for Russia, its people, its soldiers and its leaders. This should not be mistaken as praying that Russian arms prevail, but rather the seriousness of accusations levelled against them signals the greater need that we pray for them.

As Christians, we should not be looking for the crushing or humiliation of Russia, but rather keep forefront in our mind the search for a settlement that restores peace and justice in Ukraine and that arrives at a wider settlement that provides for the flourishing of all nations in Europe. Sadly, despite diplomatic efforts we are very far from such a point, which underscores why we need to invest further in conflict resolution mechanisms.

Rejecting the weaponisation of religion in war

As part of efforts to resolve the current impasse in Ukraine and to help forestall a wider conflict, churches should look to use their ecumenical relations to provide solidarity with those who are suffering aggression and to challenge those who are providing religious justification for this war.

During the Cold War, ecumenical bodies like the Conference of European Churches (CEC) tried to foster dialogue between churches in Western and Eastern Europe. In 1964 amidst growing restrictions on travel, church leaders from Eastern and Western Europe met in neutral waters on a ferry boat off the coast of Nyborg, Denmark, creating a rare space for dialogue, prayer, and cooperation.

Although CEC might not have done as much as it could have to support Christian dissidents and human rights activists behind the Iron Curtain, its emphasis on Christian unity over and

above political division, encouraged churches to focus on shared values like peace, justice and human rights.

The current challenges facing Europe today require the Church to be equally imaginative and bold in its commitment to peace building. The Church can be a quiet but influential player in rkeeping Europe connected through faith, dialogue and diplomacy – helping prepare the ground for peaceful change and challenging those who might use religious language and imagery to justify war or idolatrise political leaders who advocate nihilistic policies.

Just as Christians should challenge those on the right in the US who see President Trump as being 'anointed', so too do they need to challenge Patriarch Kirill, the Head of the Russian Orthodox Church, for his portrayal of President Putin as a 'miracle of God'. Such idolatry leads to condoning actions that directly transgress Christian values.

Taken to the extreme, as in the case of Patriarch Kirill, this leads to being more than just immovably silent in the face of an ever-growing list of war crimes, but being willing to overlook or even pardon such crimes when they are seen as having been committed as part of a wider metaphysical struggle in defence of Orthodox Russia. This is shockingly blasphemous in the way that it normalises, even sanctifies, sinful behaviour and needs to be challenged.

Protecting human rights

Churches in Europe must also be alert to the risks that their own government's response to Russia's aggression might impact negatively on human rights and human dignity. As Churches we must stand up for human dignity at all times – even in an age of unpeace.

In Ukraine, the government has signed a law, Law 3894, that bans any religious organisation that has affiliations or links to the Russian Orthodox Church, even though such a law violates international treaties and conventions regarding freedom of religion or belief. A similar law was passed by the Estonian parliament, but the president has refused on two occasions to sign it.

As governments promote civic engagement in defence, churches must also be alert to and push back against the possible deterioration of civil liberties, human rights and democratic principles. A move to a whole-of-society strategy to defence risks the militarisation of society and with it the erosion of the distinction between combatants and non-combatants.

How do we ensure that the right to conscientious objection is upheld and protected in the move to national service? How do we ensure that steps taken to combat Russia's influence don't feed an ethno-religious nationalism, as is possibly happening in Ukraine, that discriminates against loyal citizens?

Similarly, if in today's hybrid environment, every citizen is a so called 'smartphone soldier', do civilians lose their protected status under international humanitarian law and become legitimate targets during war? How do we ensure that the costs of re-armament are born fairly across society rather than encouraging an austerity that sows divisions and threatens social cohesion?

These are critical but often neglected issues that need addressing. All too often, however, the space for critical ethical debate on such issues gets overlooked or kicked down the road till a later date; and, yet, as societies and economies become militarised, so the space for critical debate and engagement shrinks.

Final reflections

Europe faces a historic moment. The lamps have not gone out across Europe, but they are certainly dimming where once they burned bright. Putin's aggression and Trump's isolationism cast long shadows across Europe, calling into question its ability to see itself as a continuing peace project.

The Russian invasion of Ukraine has brought war to European soil. Europe, therefore, cannot be said to be at peace. How Europe responds in this moment will determine not just the peace of

Europe, but its place in a newly emerging world order and its ability to shape this order in a way that upholds human dignity, democracy, and the rule of law.

Standing in solidarity with Ukraine and providing for Europe's common defence and security – both against any future Russian or even US aggression - involves measures that will prove costly to European economies and societies. But, if Europe is willing to accept these costs for the sake of a positive vision of human interdependence, peace and justice, then we shall have a more compelling narrative when necessarily countering the dramatic, even apocalyptic, myths arising elsewhere in the world.

The questions raised here pertain to citizens, political leaders, economic drivers and social shapers. But, they demand a debate that goes deeper than mere pragmatic reactions to destabilising stimuli. They demand an open, serious consideration not only of ethics, but of what theological or philosophical assumptions underlie those ethical frameworks. And this is where Christian churches must regain their confidence in thinking through, defending, arguing for and striving for a more hopeful future than that being offered by many – and, in so doing, ensure that the current twilight becomes a new dawn.

This requires of us to continue to be peacemakers and to invest in the tools that can safeguard our common futures. The possibility that, through our neglect, this age of unpeace might see the return of total war is one that should stir us all into action.

To return to one of the questions that spurred this inquiry, any such endeavour demands that serious attention is paid to the engagement of younger generations in shaping the future. Inheriting the securities of the past generations is not enough. The language of politicians who maintain that "we need to deliver for the next generation" is misguided and complacent. 'For' needs to become 'with'. And that task is urgent: in schools, religious and social communities, universities, the military and the media.

7. Conclusions

This report does not pretend to be any sort of last word. It is written because there needs to be a supply of first words which identify the challenge, open up the opportunity, and try to articulate some of the questions that must be addressed if the future of the European continent is to be bright and not destructive. Solutions will have to be enacted in the micro and local contexts in which ordinary people live out their lives. But, they must also be found at the macro level where policies are formed, laws drafted, debates held, commentary made, and resources focused. And, to emphasise the point, attention must be paid by all interlocuters to the essential roots of cosmopolitanism: that is, why we think any idea of common life actually matters in the first place.

The report must speak for itself. However, some provisional conclusions can be drawn, briefly, here:

1. The priority of constitutional integrity and the rule of law cannot be overstated. Democracy and the rule of (good) law must be argued for afresh, defended at every level, and promoted as a necessary good. The corruption of such democratic frameworks and conventions must be resisted through political renaissance and democratic innovation. However, a reassertion of these 'goods' requires a positive and constructive framing – one based on creative responsibility and not merely prevention of something worse.

2. This priority must be derived from an intelligent (and ongoing) debate in public and through media about which values underpin any vision for Europe. This means encouraging a serious debate at every level about where such values come from and who should decide which values prevail. Assumptions about liberal democracy or the rule of law can no longer be regarded as self-evident. This has implications for education in schools and universities. To return to my encounter in Brussels, concepts such as 'solidarity' must be argued for and not simply assumed or ?prayed in aid.

3. The political language of "delivering to or for" the younger generation is no longer adequate. Younger people must be engaged in and not done to. The need for the next generation to shape Europe's future is vital, but this assumes some grappling with the previous two conclusions. It further demands a compelling critique of the values behind some current power-political behaviours (including language, discourse, truth-telling and truth-hearing).

4. The current appeal of Christian Nationalism and the appropriation of Christian symbols to feed grievances must be resisted and a better alternative commended. A nostalgic appeal to Christendom (power and purity) that shows no connection to the content of Christianity itself is dangerous. The churches need to provide clear and courageous engagement with this and name the contradictions.

5. Churches must take a confident lead in fearlessly addressing the need for clarity of theological thinking, engagement with social need (for the common good), and humbly commending a positive vision for how society can be when, rooted in the Christian values that shaped Europe in the past, it confidently embraces change and frames a different future. This is a vision that entails not merely eliminating existing problems, but building or achieving something tangible. Such a vision is necessarily open, generous and loving.

APPENDIX 1

The briefing paper sent to potential interviewees

The Church and the Future of Europe - an Inquiry by the Bishop of Leeds

Outline

Over the next year, the Bishop of Leeds is chairing an Inquiry into the Church and the Future of Europe. Through a series of debates and discussions, Christians and others in the UK and beyond will share their thoughts to help shape future Church thinking. The output of this process will be a Report with recommendations to aid the Church's engagement with Europe.

Rationale

Britain has left the EU but its future relationship with the EU has yet to be written. A re-visioning of Britain's relationship with the EU can't be divorced from a wider re-visioning of Britain's relationship with a changing Europe. Making Europe synonymous with the EU, rather than seeing the EU as one piece in a larger jigsaw, invites strategic incoherence and irrelevance. It reduces the space for political imagination by projecting domestic debates about the EU onto Europe. And yet, a re-imagining of Britain's relationship with Europe and the challenges it faces could help inform how the UK engages with a range of pan-European bodies, the EU included. Any such process needs to be open and deliberative; informed and shaped by the broadest array of actors, whether that be trade unions, business and trade associations, social movements and charitable organisations. Churches and faith communities also have a role to play - ensuring that any vision reflects values as well as interests, and works for the well-being of the many not just the few. Without creative and dedicated work, such a role will remain unexplored and the Church's potential contribution unrealised.

Background

Britain remains geographically part of Europe and a member of various pan-European bodies

such as the Council of Europe and the Organisation for Security and Cooperation in Europe that enables the UK to relate on common issues to other European countries, some of whom are also members of the EU. The European Political Community (established in 2021 by President Macron to structure the EU's relationship with its immediate neighbourhood) is the latest addition to this landscape and points to an ever-growing variable geometry of overlapping institutional bodies across Europe as countries look to cooperate on issues affecting the continent as a whole (Russia's invasion of Ukraine, energy security, etc).

Does the Church of England have a vision for Europe that might frame its response to developments in Europe? If not, should it have one? If it does, how might it articulate a vision that is authentically Christian (informed by scripture, tradition and reason) and which recognises the changed and changing nature of Britain and Europe over the last 10 years. How might social teaching precepts like the common good, solidarity, the well-being of our descendants, speak into the current context in which the UK and Europe finds itself?

How might the Church of England's own complex history and set of relations with Europe help inform any such thinking? The Church of England is established by law in England and yet its largest diocese, the Diocese in Europe, spans the continent of Europe. Allied to the myriad of diocesan companion links with church partners across Europe, there are also the more formal ecumenical agreements like Porvoo, Meissen and Reuilly, to say nothing of the Church's membership of the Conference of European Churches. At the same time, the Church of England is but one expression of Anglicanism in the UK. Another expression, the Church of Ireland, spans the whole island of Ireland.

Given that the EU is the dominant political and economic actor in Europe, how might any vision for Europe inform how the Church understands the EU and the UK's future relationship with it? This is not about reopening the old ideological cleavages that marked the Brexit debates, but it is to acknowledge that Brexit has left unanswered the broader question of how the UK relates to Europe. Efforts to address these questions (such as with the Integrated Review of 2021, with its emphasis on the Indo-Pacific tilt, and the refreshed Review of 2023), often run up against the Brexit buffers such that debate becomes prejudiced and questions unresolved.

Timing

The Inquiry into The Church and the Future of Europe will run from 30 March 2024 to 30 March 2025.

Chair

The Inquiry is led by the Bishop of Leeds, the Rt Revd Nick Baines, in his capacity as the Church of England's Lead Bishop on Foreign Policy. The Bishop of Leeds played the lead role in the House of Lords on behalf of the Lords Spiritual scrutinising Brexit legislation. He is also a former Co-Chair of the Meissen Commission and a former member of the Governing Board of the Conference of European Churches. In his first career, he was a professional linguist for the Government.

Aims

i. To articulate a Christian vision of Europe that might inform the UK's relationship with Europe, the EU and other European bodies

ii. To offer practical and deliverable ideas on how this vision might shape the Church's future relationship with Europe and partners in Europe

iii. To make proposals to shape the trajectory of public and political debates on Britain's future relationship with the Europe

iv. To propose areas for further action and study by the Church of England, other churches and faith groups, on ways to maximise their contribution to this area.

APPENDIX 2

List of interviewees

This inquiry was organised and facilitated by Dr Charles Reed and Alison Bogle. They handled all administration, offered advice and observations, and made the process possible. I am very grateful to both of them for the time, expertise and commitment they gave to it.

I am indebted to the following people who gave me time for an interview and generously shared their wisdom, experience and perspectives. There was a broad range of people and views. The content of the report is the result of my thinking in the light of these conversations, but not directly attributable to any individual or group.

1. Katya Adler, Europe Editor, BBC
2. Baroness Anelay of St Johns, Conservative Peer
3. Baroness Ashton of Upholland, Labour Peer
4. Evie Aspinall, Director, British Foreign Policy Group
5. Miguel Berger, German Ambassador to the UK, 2022-25
6. Dr Nicola Brady, General Secretary of Churches Together in Britain and Ireland (CTBI)
7. Dr Ilma Bogdan, climate consultant
8. Dr Luke Bretherton, Regius Professor of Moral and Pastoral Theology at Christ Church, Oxford
9. Professor Malcolm Chalmers, former Deputy-Director General of RUSI, Strategic Adviser to the Defence Secretary
10. Baron Frans van Daele, EU Special Envoy for Freedom of Religion or Belief
11. Dr Vincent Depaigne, European Commissioner, Article 17 dialogue
12. Dr Toby Dodge, Professor of International Relations, London School of Economics
13. Frank-Dieter Fischbach, General Secretary, Conference of European Churches
14. Dr Mario Fischer, General Secretary of the Communion of Protestant Churches in Europe (CPCE)
15. Timothy Garton Ash, Professor of European Studies emeritus at the University of Oxford
16. Isabelle Gerber, Pastor, Chair of the CCR (Conference of churches along the Rhine)

17. Dr Simon Glendinning, Head of the European Institute & Professor in European Philosophy, London School of Economics

18. Misha Glenny, Journalist, broadcaster, Rector at the Institute for Human Sciences, (Institut für die Wissenschaften vom Menschen) in Vienna since 2022

19. Dr Nigel Gould-Davies, Senior Fellow for Russia and Eurasia, International Institute for Strategic Studies

20. Charles Grant, Director, the Centre for European Reform

21. Dr Katrin Hatzinger, Director, EKD mission to the EU

22. Dr Katy Hayward, Professor of Political Sociology in the School of Social Sciences, Education and Social Work at Queen's University Belfast

23. Nicholas Hudson, Roman Catholic Bishop of Plymouth and member of COMECE

24. Robert Innes, (Anglican) Bishop of the Diocese in Europe

25. Andrew Khoo, Chancellor (legal advisor), Diocese of West Malaysia

26. Dr Petr Kratochvil, Professor of International Relations, Prague, and former Governing Board member of the Conference of European Churches

27. Hans Kundnani, Visiting fellow at the Remarque Institute, New York University

28. Esther Lenz, Pastor, Church Inspector at UEPA

29. Dr Lucian Leustean, Reader in Politics and International Relations, Aston University, Birmingham

30. London School of Economics Masters and PhD students

31. John McDowell, Archbishop of Armagh and Primate of Church of Ireland

32. Nick Mabey, Research Fellow at the Centre for Economic Forecasting, London Business School

33. Dr Jack Macdonald, Chair in history at the Protestant Faculty in Brussels and chaplain-president of the Anglican Central Committee in Belgium, Honorary Canon

34. Phillip McDonagh, Director of the Centre for Religion, Human Values, and International Relations at Dublin City University

35. Ralf Meister, Landesbischof of the Evangelical-Lutheran Church of Hannover

36. Dr Anand Menon, Professor of European Politics and Foreign Affairs, King's College London & Director of UK in a Changing Europe

37. Lord Richard Newby, Liberal Democrat Peer

38. Sir Robin Niblett, Distinguished Fellow, Europe Programme, Chatham House

39. Metropolitan Athenagoras (Peckstadt) of Belgium, President, Inter-ecclesiastical Orthodox Committee of Brussels

40. Dr Maria Power, Senior Research Fellow in Human Dignity at the Las Casas Institute for Social Justice.

41. Dr Jerry Pillay, General Secretary, World Council of Churches

42. Dr Matti Repo, Bishop of Tampere, Finland

43. Gethin Rhys, Retired Minister of Religion and Policy Officer, Church in Wales

44. Lord Peter Ricketts, Former Ambassador, Crossbench Peer

45. Dr Sarah Rowland-Jones, Dean, St David's Cathedral, Church in Wales

46. Philippe Sands KC, Professor of Laws & Director of the Centre on International Courts & Tribunals at the Faculty of Laws, University College London

47. Pedro Serrano, European Union Ambassador to the UK

48. School students from two schools in Leeds

49. Dr Nick Spencer, Senior Fellow, Theos Think Tank

50. Mark Strange, Bishop of Moray, Ross & Caithness and Primus of Episcopal Church of Scotland

51. Dr Heinrich Bedford Strohm, Moderator of the Central Committee, World Council of Churches, and former Ratsvorsitzender der Evangelische Kirche in Deutschland

52. Dr Hannah Strømmen, Centre for Theology and Biblical Studies, Lund University

53. Anthony Teasdale, Visiting Professor in Practice at the European Institute of the London School of Economics

54. Dr Marietta Van der Tol, Assistant Research Professor, Landecker Lecturer at the Faculty of Divinity, University of Cambridge

55. Dr Armida van Rij, Senior Research Fellow, Europe Programme, Chatham House

56. Dr Helene von Bismarck, Hamburg-based historian specialising in UK-German relations

57. Lord William Wallace of Saltaire, Liberal Democrat Peer

58. Carol Wardman, Bishops' Advisor for Church and Society, Church in Wales

59. Dr Rowan Williams, former Archbishop of Canterbury, Crossbench Peer

60. Dr Dagmar Winter, Bishop of Huntingdon and Vice President of Council of European Churches

61. Nick Witney, Senior Policy Fellow, European Council on Foreign Relations

About the author

Nick Baines became the first Bishop of Leeds in June 2014. He was previously Bishop of Bradford (2011-14), and before that was Area Bishop of Croydon in the Diocese of Southwark. He read German and French at Bradford University and, before ordination, worked for four years as a Russian linguist at GCHQ. Nick stepped down from being the Bishop of Leeds in September 2025, and formally retired in December 2025.

He has a particular expertise in communication, having for many years written a blog (Musings of a Restless Bishop) which, at its peak, was getting between 500-2000 views each day. He is known for his engagement with the media. He is frequently asked to comment nationally on topical issues and is regularly heard on BBC Radio 4's 'Thought for the Day' and Radio 2's 'Pause for Thought'. His writing includes comment pieces for broadsheet newspapers, popular books on Christian faith (he has written eight) and contributions to academic journals. For nine years he chaired the Sandford St Martin Trust which promotes and advocates for excellence in religious broadcasting through the presentation of annual awards.

He became a member of the House of Lords in 2014, leading on foreign affairs and media. He has represented the Archbishop of Canterbury at international faith conferences and served for 11 years as the English Co-chair of the Meissen Commission (which develops relationships between the Church of England and the Protestant Church in Germany). He has received three honorary doctorates, one from the Friedrich-Schiller-Universität in Jena, Germany.