

IN SEARCH OF OUR IDENTITY

Discovering our European DNA

Distinguished guests, ladies and gentlemen, thank you for this invitation to be with you today.

Many people these days are searching for their personal roots, inspired by popular tv-programmes like ‘Who do you think you are?’ and DNA agencies offering to trace your geneology.

Someone in my extended family recently discovered that we have some Indian ancestry. We learnt that my great-great-grandfather died in a debtor’s prison in Calcutta - not such an esteemed heritage!

We want to know about our heritage because we want to know our identity. We need to answer the questions, ‘*Who am I?*’ and ‘*Where have I come from?*’ in order to answer the questions ‘*Where am I going?*’ and ‘*How shall I now live?*’

The rise of populism across Europe and the western world is an expression of this search for identity. We hear a lot these days about ‘identity politics’, where people form exclusive political alliances around racial, religious, ethnic, sexual or cultural identity, instead of engaging in traditional broad-based party politics.

Why is this happening, and why is this happening now?

Can the cause be that we have lost the big picture? History is simply the product of power politics, we’ve been told. So we don’t learn history anymore. Not only is history a neglected subject today. The history of Europe is even more neglected. And the history of Europe’s Christian origins is studiously ignored.

Yet the well-known British atheist Richard Dawkins says we cannot understand Europe without understanding Christianity and the Bible. That may be surprising to hear from an atheist. Dawkins implies that we cannot understand our European identity without reference to Christianity and the Bible.

Almost every summer since 2005, my wife and I have led Heritage Tours across Europe. We encounter Martin of Tours, Celtic monks, Charlemagne, Benedict, Boniface, Cyril and Methodius, Hildegard, Francis, Hus, Erasmus, Luther, Bach and many other fathers and mothers of our European culture.

This is a story, in my experience, largely unknown to Europeans. It’s a story that explains much about the wellsprings, the soul of European life: her art and music, architecture and design, business

and economics, cities and guilds, compassion and development, dignity and rights, education and scholarship, ethics and morality, family and marriage, healthcare and hospitality, language and literature, politics and democracy, science and technology, time and history... even wine and beer!

Sure, the dark chapters in the story of those calling themselves Christians have prompted many to reject it. Blaming the Crusades, the Inquisitions and the religious wars, they search for alternative narratives. So we find ourselves today confronted with a paradoxical Europe: the continent most shaped by the story of Jesus and by the rejection of that story.

The French Enlightenment promised an alternative in the humanistic values of Freedom, Equality and Brotherhood. Yet we all know how quickly these values were lost in the bloodbath of the godless French Revolution. For can we have Brotherhood without starting with Fatherhood? Can a process that guarantees the survival of the fittest lead to Equality?

The 20th century has been a century of disillusion. French writer Jean-Claude Guillebaud says: Marxism, socialism, hedonism, consumerism, humanism, scientism and militarism have all failed us.

And so we search for smaller, local, specialised identities - like fanatical local football club fans - to build our lives around. We find ourselves in a Europe breaking up into a fragmented, polarised, small-minded populism.

Perhaps it is time to research our European DNA again, and ask, is there a broader, more inclusive identity that we share?

Like the watermark on a banknote, there is an indelible imprint on European culture that is visible when held to the light.

Think for a moment about the symbol of a cross. It is so prevalent in the western world, we cannot escape it. We see it on hospitals, pharmacies, cemeteries, flags, jewelry and ornaments, leather jackets, crowns, ambulances, Red Cross vehicles, First Aid stations, (and in this country) military vehicles and aircraft – not to mention churches, cathedrals, monasteries, Bibles and religious art.

Yet how did the cross, a cruel, Roman instrument of torturous death become a symbol of hope and healing? The simple answer is: the death and resurrection of Jesus, 2000 years ago.

This is the event without which Europe as we know it would never have emerged.

For, while our European story has roots in ancient Athens and Rome, the classical legacy alone was not sufficient for the emergence of Europe. The Hebrew revelation of a God who created humans in his own image, *imago dei*, laid the foundations of the European concept of humanity, with dignity, rights, compassion and sanctity of life.

Secondly, the Christian concept of moral equality profoundly shaped European law and government. The essential European ideas of the individual and of equality were not discoveries of the Enlightenment, as Oxford professor Sir Larry Siedentop argues, but rather the fruit of Christianity. Paul's words, that in Christ there is neither Jew nor gentile, slave nor freeman, male nor female, made him the greatest revolutionary in history, says Siedentop.

Here is a framework for a more inclusive identity, a place of welcome for all; a universal framework, understanding that God is the creator of all humans, whatever ethnicity, religion or gender. This is the space theologians call 'common grace'. The new identity created for followers of Jesus does not negate the broader identity of the human race created in God's image, however fallen that image may be.

Here is a basis for Brotherhood, for Equality, and the Freedom to become who God created us to be; a basis for *unity with diversity*, the motto of the European Union, for a truly rainbow community of peoples.

This was the starting point for the Fathers of Europe, Robert Schuman, Konrad Adenauer and Alcide de Gasperi, as they began to rebuild Europe after World War II. Schuman understood Europe had emerged over time as a society of peoples with a common worldview, shared in varying degrees of understanding from Armenia to Iceland.

French foreign minister Schuman believed the roots of true democracy were Christ's teachings—the principle of equality, the practice of brotherly love, individual freedom, respect for the rights of the individual. 'Democracy will either be Christian or it will not be,' he wrote. 'An anti-Christian democracy will be a parody which will sink into tyranny or into anarchy.'

'Loving your neighbour as yourself' was a democratic principle. It meant being prepared to serve and love neighbouring peoples. Forgiveness and reconciliation were Christian imperatives—even with those presently seen as the enemy.

The European story, he believed, was deeply rooted in the Christian story. Without those roots, Europe would lose the foundations for equality, human dignity, tolerance and compassion.

These thoughts inspired Schuman to propose – on May 9, 1950 – the European Coal and Steel Community, a truly radical plan that caught the world by surprise. Never before in history had the defeated party in a war been treated on equal terms. In a speech of a mere three minutes, Schuman laid the foundations for the European house in which today 500 million Europeans, from 28 nations

(still), live together in peace. This speech is recognised as the birth of the process that has led to the European Union.

Both Schuman and Adenauer were strongly influenced by a Lutheran evangelist named Frank Buchman, and his movement called Moral Rearmament. They had opened a Centre for the Reconciliation of the Nations in Caux, above Montreux in Switzerland. Thousands of representatives of industry, labour, government, media and church from different nations – former enemies – came together there after the war in a spirit of reconciliation and forgiveness.

On his first visit to Caux, Konrad Adenauer heard the moving story of a French socialist woman active in the resistance named Irene Laure. Mme Laure confessed she hated the Germans and wanted to see Germany wiped off the map. She was invited to Caux, but once there, she heard Germans were coming so she went to pack her bags. Frank Buchman happened to meet her in the corridor and asked: “Do you think we can rebuild Europe without the Germans?”

Mme Laure reluctantly agreed to have lunch with the widow of Adam Von Trott, hung for his role in the assassination attempt on Hitler’s life, along with Dietrich Bonhoeffer. After talking with Frau von Trott, Mme Laure asked to address the whole conference. Adenauer was in the audience when, to the surprise of all who knew her reputation, Mme Laure confessed her hatred of the Germans and asked their forgiveness. A German woman stepped forward and offered Mme Laure her hand. Immediately the tense atmosphere relaxed into one of acceptance and reconciliation.

Adenauer later invited Mme Laure to address various Lander parliaments in West Germany. This began a remarkable chapter in the story of post-war Germany, a story told in the film *‘For the love of tomorrow’*.

Influenced by Caux, Schuman and Adenauer reached out in trust to each other, a relationship that led directly to the Schuman Declaration of May 9, 1950. For Schuman, peace and reconciliation were central to the rebuilding of Europe. If peace reigned in Europe, Europe could make a major contribution to world peace.

Yet Schuman warned from the start that the European project needed a soul; it was not just an economic and technological project. He spoke of the ‘spirit of Europe’, meaning the recognition of the common spiritual heritage and thus a commitment to the common good.

We do well to remember and celebrate May 9 as Europe Day. Not as a top-down political imperative from Brussels, but as a bottom-up, peoples’ movement, a cultural expression of gratitude for how enriched we are by belonging to a bigger family.

Think of Italian pizzas, Belgian beers, German cars, British detectives, Finnish saunas, Norwegian fjords, Dutch cheeses, French cuisine, Spanish wines, Irish rock bands, etc, etc - all of which have enriched our European lifestyle. We have become interdependent, irreversibly connected.

Nations, like individuals, need both a strong sense of autonomy and connectedness. We can celebrate our national distinctives – as the Dutch did last Saturday on Kingsday – yet let's also celebrate our belonging to a bigger European family of peoples.

The way forward for Europe is to recover this broader, more inclusive identity, rooted in the Story that gives us answers to the questions '*Who are we?*', '*Where have we come from?*', '*Where are we going?*' and '*How shall we now live?*'.

Vielen dank!