

Brexit:

Reflections from a Christian Perspective

Stephen Green believes that the Referendum exposed the deep divisions in our society, and also an unrealistic pride in our history. He sees the new situation as a chance for honest self-analysis, recognition and repentance, leading to better conditions in the areas which voted Leave, and a humbler stance in the world.

I woke up very early that morning. The news was a shock and sleep vanished instantly. And shock was what many others I know felt too. I and they had voted to remain. Over the following days, the mood – in me and around me – was a swirling mix of disbelief, dismay and anger. Even the Leavers amongst my friends and acquaintances were surprised. And it became clear very quickly that few people in either business or government had much idea what Brexit would mean in specifics. For a while, some Remainers – who

seemed to become more passionate in defeat than they had been at any stage in the campaign – pinned their hopes on the petition for a new referendum. Some still hope that it may not in the end come to an actual Brexit: that a new grand bargain which in effect changes the nature of the EU will allow continued British membership on a basis which is more acceptable to the British people. Others – both Leavers who had been nervous about whether they had done the right thing by their children (as one father of a nine-

year-old confessed to me), and Remainers who have been relieved that so far at least the sky has not fallen in – are becoming more relaxed now that the new Government seems to be getting its act together, and more optimistic that Britain will find a reasonable *modus vivendi* with its European neighbours.

We shall see. But whatever happens, there can be no definitive Christian view on the specifics of the case for leaving or remaining in the EU. The case could be and was argued on both sides by committed Christians on



many different bases, on sovereignty, on commercial and on geopolitical grounds. And for many people, underlying all these was a question about identity – do we think of ourselves as Europeans, and if so did this mean that we should see our destiny as bound up with the European Union? Or are we different, special and perfectly capable of finding our own way in the world? With varying degrees of clarity, debates on all these questions dominated the campaign leading up to the vote – and indeed they haven't gone away or been conclusively resolved by the vote. All it did was to close off the *status quo ante*. Now we are in a sort of limbo – a sort of 'phoney war' – which could well last for a few years. But these questions don't have answers which we can reach for in some sort of Christian textbook.

But whatever the eventual outcome, the question we need to ask ourselves – and on this there surely is a Christian perspective – is: what does the vote tell us about what sort of society we are? Why, in fact, was it a shock? For a Remainer like myself it was certainly a disappointment. And I admit that it was also a surprise, because I went to bed the previous day thinking it would probably be all right on the night. But why such a shock? After all, the opinion polls had clearly shown that it was neck and neck. The result was entirely within the range of expectations – within the margin of error of virtually every poll over at least the previous fortnight or so.

It was a shock because we hadn't understood how divided the country was. Old against young, provincial against metropolitan, Scotland and London against much of the rest of England and Wales. The overall result was close; but few of the results by area were close – most were strongly one way or the other. Apart from anything else, this referendum displayed the extent of the distance between the British establishment

on the one hand – in which I include Westminster and Whitehall, the City, big business, academia and the professional middle classes – and the rest of England and Wales (though not Scotland) on the other. And that should surely ring alarm bells. A house divided against itself...It was also a shock – in fact, it was deeply shaming – to see the upsurge in racial abuse and violence which followed the result. And this is not just the exaggeration of the media: I know people personally who have experienced wholly gratuitous abuse – and these are people who have lived in this country for years. And who is my neighbour?...

You learn by reflecting on the past, and recognising individual and collective failures. There is plenty of scope for debate about what exactly those failures are – and they certainly include all the sins of omission and commission which have resulted in a society so unequal in life chances, and in which many feel so resentful of what they see as so alien. The financial and economic crisis of recent years clearly played its part – and bankers, of whom I was one, have much to atone for in that story. But deeper than this lies the whole failure over decades to invest properly in the country's societal future – above all through educational and training systems fit for the purpose of enhancing life chances. Instead, we have filled gaps through immigration. The rich man in his castle, the poor man at his gate...But Jesus reminds us that the poor man was called Lazarus. Have the elite thought enough over the years about the needle's eye?

We should also note the shortsightedness – and the dishonesty – of the British political class (of all colours) ever since the years after the Second World War when the founders of the European

project sought to create a new European order based directly on the principles of Catholic social teaching. How different the EU which so many of us love to hate and to blame for all our ills could have been. How much better it could have been, if only Britain had engaged wholeheartedly from the start and led the shaping of it, at a time when Britain's influence would have been dominant.

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How much better for Europe; how much better the options could have been for the people of this country too. But our forebears were still at that time fixated by empire.

Which leads me to an even deeper question that we must ask ourselves in a spirit of Christian

introspection. For if we just focus on the policies and practices of the British establishment over the last few decades – important though it undoubtedly is to do so – then we will miss some of the most uncomfortable truths about ourselves.

For I believe that we British have not been living wholly honestly with our past. Whether we feel we are members of the establishment or whether we feel alienated from it and mistrustful of it – in either case, too many of us have lived for too long with a general sense that we can be proud of our history and of the role Britain has played in European and in global history.

And indeed, there is much to be proud of: yes, we did stand alone against the evil of the Third Reich in May 1940. Yes, we did bring a halt to Napoleon's vaulting ambition at Waterloo (albeit with the crucial help of the Prussians). Yes, it was Britons who led the campaign to abolish the slave trade. Yes, we have had a continuously adjusting constitution ever since the signing of the Magna Carta which has given us the mother of parliaments. Yes, our common law, evolved over the centuries and

upheld by an independent judiciary is – in the words of W.S. Gilbert – the true embodiment of everything that’s excellent. Yes, we are the heirs of Shakespeare and our language has become the *lingua franca* of the planet.

But Christian scripture and tradition tell us to be wary of the sin of pride (‘He has scattered the proud...’). And the fact is that there are other things in the scales too. For this was also the country whose foreign policy in the nineteenth century was conducted with what can only now – from our present vantage point – be described as breathtaking arrogance and selfishness. What do we make, from a Christian perspective, of the famous dictum of Lord Palmerston that Britain has no permanent allies, only permanent interests? Not only was this wrong even in its own terms (he clearly defined the British presence in India as a permanent interest): but more generally, it reduces all international relationships to pure contracts. How much wiser (and indeed, ironically appropriate in this context) were the words of John Donne in his famous Meditation XVII: ‘no man is an island entire of itself, but every man a piece of the continent’. He meant this in the context of individual human relationships; he meant that we are not just autonomous individuals, but that we are connected deeply, that we are ‘involved in mankind’. But as individuals we are members of communities, of societies, and – as matters stand, at least – members of nations. What he said applies not only to individuals but also to societies, to nations – as plenty of teachings in the Jewish law and in the New Testament remind us.

And still more basically: where does the notion of Britain itself come from? Answer: it was the creation of an eighteenth century establishment – both English and Scottish – which led to over- centralisation of national life in London. No one thought of themselves as British before that time. It was, to be sure, the beginning of a vibrant period – a time of industrial inventiveness, scientific progress, enlightenment philosophy, missionary zeal and trade. British energy brought success, and success brought pride in a navy which could reach anywhere to further and protect its interests.

But it is also true that the concept of Britannia became the icon of a nineteenth-century imperialism whose record is a good deal more mixed than many of us are comfortable in recognising – as any Indian or Chinese, for example, can remind those who choose to forget some of its darker episodes. And if that isn’t enough, we need to remember – as we fret about the fragility of the United Kingdom and about a possible breakaway by the Scots – that the United Kingdom has broken up before. Ireland was in effect Britain’s longest running and worst colonial experience. No one can read about the greed, insensitivity and often outright brutality in the behaviour of both English and Scottish interests in Ireland over the four hundred years leading up to the First World War without a sense of shame and of tragedy. This was the time of what became known as the Protestant

Ascendancy. How does that feel, from a Christian perspective? It’s shocking how little attention was given during the referendum debates to the effect of it all on the island of Ireland.


Much has changed, of course, over the last hundred years. In particular, the EU has given Ireland a new place in the world and a new self-esteem. Yet somehow, the British go on treating it as an afterthought.

All of this may seem a long way from the Brexit question. But it’s not. We live with the consequences still: the concentrated establishment in

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London, and the assumption that we have a special role in the world, given to us by a history which the world ought to admire. Just as we live with what the vote told us about our own society. At home we have walked by too often on the other side: on the

world stage we have been blind to the beam in our own eye.

This may seem harsh. But in our individual Christian lives we don’t hesitate to acknowledge that spiritual maturity comes through honest self-analysis, recognition and repentance. I think that is true of nations too. Other European nations, of course, have reason enough to acknowledge this truth. But we do too. Brexit is one of those history making crossroads which – whatever else it means – gives us occasion for a reflection which, if honest, cannot help involving repentance. And, therefore, the possibility of renewal too. For that too is an implication of the Christian gospel. 



Stephen Green was Chairman of HSBC until 2010, before becoming Minister for Trade and Investment in the Coalition Government until 2013. He now chairs the Natural History Museum. He is an ordained priest of the Church of England. He is the author of several books, including *Reluctant Meister* – How Germany’s Past is Shaping its European Future, and *The European Identity* – Historical and Cultural Realities We Cannot Deny.