

Jogging our memories

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Now and then we need our memories jogged as to how our western society was formed.

- Where did our norms and values actually come from?
- Why we do things the way we do?
- Why do we have seven days in the week?
- Why do we keep one day as a day of rest and relaxation?
- Why do we talk about the sanctity and dignity of human life?
- On what do we base the concept of human rights?
- Why do we think in terms of past, present and future?
- What inspired the emergence of many of the institutions of our western way of life, including hospitals and universities, trade unions and women's emancipation, the abolition of slavery and movements like the Red Cross, Amnesty International or Alcoholic Anonymous?
- Why do we look to the future with hope for a better tomorrow?
- What has shaped so much of our western art and music, language and literature, law and government, science and education, and even our agriculture and architecture?

We tend to be creatures of short memories. We often assume concepts to be 'self-evident', unaware of what we have inherited from some dim, distant past. For example, the framers of the American Constitution, all of European ethnicity, declared that 'we hold these truths to be self-evident, that all men are created equal.'

Oh really? That's not so self-evident to millions in India. Neither does it square with Darwin's understanding of the evolution of species based on the survival of the fittest.

So when and how did such ideas creep into our collective unconsciousness in Europe?

The answer takes us back to the first millennium after Christ. Pagan peoples began migrating in droves from the east towards the western peninsular of Eurasia, to what we now strangely call the 'continent' of Europe. Strangely, because Europe is the one 'continent' that is not a continent! It's merely a peninsular. But somehow, and at some time, Europe's culture became so distinctly different from its oriental origins that it earned the reputation of being THE Continent!

These people groups—ancestors to most Europeans today—worshipped gods and goddesses, and appeased the powers of fate and stars. Yet at some stage, all that changed. Travellers came into their communities, telling stories of a man who had lived and died centuries earlier in Palestine. He had claimed to be the son of the one, true God, a God of love, forgiveness, compassion, holiness, justice and mercy—unlike any other gods they knew. This God was the Father of all, the Creator, who, so the story went, had created humans in some sense in his own image.

Ahh! So here is where the Founding Fathers picked up this idea of 'men being created equal'! And many more ideas! For the story these travellers were telling had long roots. They reached back into the history of the Hebrew peoples, back to Moses and further to Abraham. And it was Abraham who had broken from the ancient view that life was an endless cycle of the same old thing, fated to meaningless repetition. His God had spoken to him about new things, a new land, a new future, a new destiny. Here was one of the greatest shifts in human sensibility in history! History had direction. History was going somewhere.

Later Moses had passed on to Abraham's children simple commandments to obey in order to enjoy harmony in society: don't kill; don't steal; don't covet; don't lie... Ten of them, one for each finger to remember. Commandments implied everyone could choose, and was therefore responsible for one's own life before one's Creator.

The story climaxed with the coming of Jesus of Nazareth, who brilliantly summed up the commandments in two simple imperatives: love God and your neighbour. These were radical ideas! They brought fundamental changes. The story of Jesus and a God of love spread into Europe—among the Greeks, the Romans, the Gauls, the Goths, the Helvetians, the Celts, the Scots and Picts, the Angles and Saxons, the Franks and the Friesians, the Allemani, the Suevi, the Slavs, the Magyars, the Rus... and eventually among the Vikings. Life styles and cultures changed. Kings and warlords were tamed. Communities and families were transformed. A common foundation for the European way of life was being laid, albeit with regional distinctions.

Sometimes the story was passed on in the conversation of daily life – by soldiers stationed far from home or by anonymous traders and travellers. But often the story was spread systematically and intentionally by travelling bands who sometimes faced fierce opposition and unknown dangers. Boniface had a dagger thrust through his skull near Dokkum in northern Holland. Gellert was rolled down the mountain into the Danube where Budapest now stands, inside a barrel studded with nails! Theirs was indeed a dangerous profession.

What motivated St Maurice and the Theban legion to lay down their own lives rather than kill Christian Helvetians? or Columbanus, Gallus and Beatus to leave their beloved Emerald Isle to bring this story to Switzerland? or Nicolas of Flue, Felix Manz, John Calvin, Henri Dunant and countless others in Swiss history who have chosen radical obedience and possible danger over mediocre comfort and material security?

Call them radicals and fundamentalists if you will. Pure Christianity has always demanded fundamental change. For it addresses the heart of the human problem, the problem of the human heart. True Christianity was radical then, and is radical now.

Such men and women passionately believed in their mission and bequeathed to us a legacy from which those aspects of western life mentioned in the opening paragraph have sprung. They understood the transforming power of their message and were compelled to share that message of love and forgiveness, mercy and justice, with those who had not yet heard. They knew that ideas had consequences. They believed that the story they were entrusted to pass on would undermine the old worldviews based on fear of capricious gods and spirits.

Yes, missions transformed Europe and Switzerland through the ages. Indeed, the story of Jesus was the single greatest influence in shaping Europe's, and Switzerland's, past. Why should it not also be the single greatest influence in shaping Switzerland's, and Europe's, future?

Each year my wife and I take a group of people on a Heritage Tour, on a search for the soul of Europe. We start in Holland, travel through Germany, as far east as to Prague, and then back across to Switzerland; St Galen, Zurich, Bern, Lausanne, Geneva and Basel.

We are searching for the people, places and movements that made Europe. We are asking what breathed life into the European community of peoples? What gave them a common identity? From what source did they receive their inspiration for living? What was their map of reality? their moral compass? their point of orientation? their guide for daily living? their common reference point? Despite the great diversity of European cultures, even after the Great Schism of east and west in the 11th century, and north and south in the 16th, there was clearly one common source: the Bible.

Now this brings me to something that has puzzled me for some time. Europe is a continent full of museums. All sorts of museums! Yet I have not been able to find one museum dedicated to the legacy and influence of the Bible on our culture. I know of three Bible museums: in Amsterdam; in Budapest; and one near Lake Constance...

The Bible far outstrips all other books in its influence on Europe's languages and literature, law and government, healthcare and hospitality, family and marriage, business and banking, architecture and agriculture, arts and music, education and science, human rights and environmental concern.

You don't need to be a believer to recognise this. Even Richard Dawkins says you cannot understand European history without understanding Christianity and the Bible.

Why then do we not teach our children about the influence of this book? Where is there curriculum for primary and secondary schools about this, the most influential book in the world?

The recovery of Biblical literacy is of importance for all Europeans, believers or doubters. Last week I read a column in the secular NRC Handelsblad in Holland. The writer was taking a TV interviewer to task for saying something like: "The Bible means nothing to me." Oh, the writer asked, then you shouldn't be in journalism, because our Dutch language, and culture, is soaked in biblical concepts.

Let's correct this situation! Last year was Calvin's year - the 500th anniversary of the Reformer's birth. Next year will be the 400th anniversary of the KJV which has a huge influence on the English language, people and culture. In 2016 we can celebrate the 500th anniversary of Erasmus' Greek translation, which paved the way for Luther's Reformation in 2017. We have a series of opportunities therefore to focus public attention on this remarkable book.

We need writers and publishers to produce, for example, illustrated coffee table books telling this story, or a series of academically-sound books covering each of the fields I've mentioned - the Bible's influence on the arts; on architecture; on law; on language, and human rights, etc. We need educators to develop curriculum for schools of all levels.

This is not in the first place a task for politicians. But if the general public were to recover an awareness, an appreciation, even a love for this truly exceptional book, the political landscape would also be changed. No book has been translated, distributed, quoted, hated, loved, read or vilified as the Bible. It is the most unique book in human history.

There is one other story I want to recall, in which this book played a central role. Switzerland today is an island surrounded by the European Union. It is the elephant in your backyard. You can't ignore it. Neither are you ready to become part of it.

And yet Switzerland and Swiss people played a very key role in the birth of what has become the EU. Soon after the Second World War, Swiss families pooled their money to buy a large abandoned hotel above Montreux, in Caux. This hotel became a centre for the reconciliation of the nations, as many of you will know. It was and is still a centre of the Moral Rearmament Movement, now known as Initiative for Change.

The Biblical message shared in word and deed at this centre had a very significant influence in creating a climate of forgiveness and reconciliation, particularly between French and German leaders, including Konrad Adenauer, who became the West German Chancellor, and Robert Schuman, the French Foreign Minister. Frank Buchman, the leader of MRA, became a personal friend and confidant of both men and helped them overcome their mistrust of each other.

Both Schuman and Adenauer were devout believers. Both were convinced that post-war Europe had to be rebuilt on Christian foundations. Schuman wrote later that he believed democracy had to be Christian or it would become the tyranny of the majority. Schuman's personal vision for Europe was of a community of peoples deeply rooted in Christian basic values. The European story was one deeply rooted in the Christian story. Cut off from those roots, Europe would lose the foundations for equality, human dignity, tolerance and compassion.

Schuman believed the way forward for Europe was to build political and economic structures at all levels—local, national and European—on the democratic principle of 'loving your neighbour' applied to states and peoples. Human rights needed to be guaranteed by international law, rooted in the biblical teaching of Imago Dei—that each person was made in God's image. Such rights included the right to those things without which humans cannot adequately function: food, shelter, clothing, education and relationships. The imperative to guarantee human rights was rooted in the

command to love one's neighbour. Schuman was one of the initiators of the European Convention on Human Rights, which is soaked in biblical concepts.

Few remember this man. More often than not his name is confused with that of the German composer, Robert Schumann with two 'n's. Yet in three momentous minutes on May 9, 1950 – the time it takes to boil an egg – Robert Schuman laid the foundations for the European house in which today half a billion Europeans from 27 nations live together in peace!

Today however, many believe the Bible is an outdated, irrelevant book; that Christianity is a spent force and has no message for tomorrow's Europe. G.K.Chesterton, the English apologist from early last century observed however that on five occasions over the past 2000 years, the church had appeared to have 'gone to the dogs' – meaning, had been proven outdated and obsolete. Each time, however, he continued, the dog had died!

Christianity is all about death – and resurrection. No matter how dark the days seem, there is always hope. The Holy Spirit has always moved in fresh renewal at the most depressed phases of church history, bringing new life and vigour, often from the fringes, the unexpected sectors, not usually the established centres of power.

In his excellent book on Europe, God's Continent, historian Philip Jenkins includes the following quote:

If you are the kind of person who likes to buy stocks and bonds, I'd buy Christianity. The price is down, it has to go up!

end.

"Egalitarian universalism, (from which sprang the ideas of freedom and social solidarity, of an autonomous conduct of life and emancipation, of the individual morality of conscience, human rights and democracy), is the direct heir of the Judaic ethic of justice and the Christian ethic of love. This legacy, substantially unchanged, has been the object of continual critical appropriation and reinterpretation. To this day, there is no alternative to it. And in light of the current challenges of a post national constellation, we continue to draw on the substance of this heritage. Everything else is just idle postmodern talk." Habermas