



RESOURCES

• Issachar Project •

WHAT HAS HAPPENED TO EUROPE'S POLITICS?

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Autumn 2018

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Across Europe, why are political parties becoming more extreme in their programmes and rhetoric, if they manage to escape being rejected by the electorate altogether? Why are European nations and Europe as a whole so divided?

For many years, communism dominated most of the Centre and East of the continent. This was mainly jettisoned, with nations then aiming to become more like the West, in particular by joining the European Union¹. Meanwhile, the West increasingly based itself on secular liberalism, with globalised capitalism, confident that all would see that this ideology was unquestionably superior and thus would permanently have first place across the continent.

This assumption was wrong

We are witnessing new waves of left and right wing politics which question what has been assumed. They blame “the elite” for all the social and/or economic change that has left people feeling resentful. Both the new political movements and old compete for votes by identifying themselves by being against “the other”. They often foster anger, grievance and fear, and offer simple solutions. People pick their side. Christians do so too.

Should Christians be doing something else?

The European Evangelical Alliance developed the Issachar Project to seek, along with several partners, to understand the times and to know what to do (1 Chronicles 12:32). As part of this, EEA commissioned the papers in this series. The content of each are the author’s perspective on four different ideologies which are splitting Europe, nations, communities and even churches apart – Secularisation, Left-wing Populism, Nationalism and Liberal Values Dogmatism. EEA wishes to thank Rosemary Caudwell, Manuel Suarez and David Landrum for their contributions.

EEA hopes that these papers will enable Christian leaders to reflect on our troubled times and to discern how they can enable others to resist the many temptations of these ideologies, to expose and challenge the idols and dangers, to earnestly intercede for their nation and continent and to be engaged and hope-filled citizens, offering the Good News of Jesus Christ.

There are good things that Christians can support in all four ideologies albeit sometimes more in some than others: passion for freedom and human rights or social justice or love for national culture or preservation and promotion of heterosexual marriage or wanting to protect members of the LGBTI² community from attack.

But the papers show that each of the four ideologies can become an intolerant and dangerous idol. Manuel Suarez mentions examples of left-wing leaders who even come to believe that they are no longer mere human beings. History warns us how too much power and adulation centred on any political leader leads to disaster.

¹ or European Community before December 2009

² Lesbian, Gay, Bi-sexual, Trans or Inter-sex.

How can intolerance and potential political disaster develop in democracies?

David Landrum's paper explains how; we are witnessing a "Cultural Climate Change", a wholesale shift away from Judeo-Christian values." Democracy only works where these values remain central, where we remember that *all* human beings are created in God's image, where forgiveness, mercy, self-sacrifice and truthfulness enable flourishing of all, and where there is self-discipline to temper freedom. Without these, democracy is simply the rule of the majority, and that can become the rule of the mob.

Are these ideologies expressions of populism?

It depends on how you define populism. Rosemary Caudwell quotes the Oxford English Dictionary definition that it "supports the concerns of ordinary people." Their concerns have been ignored, be they austerity or immigration or globalisation or loss of national sovereignty. Manuel Suarez remarks that "populist" is often a label people give to others but rarely choose for themselves. David Landrum gives the liberal media definition: "polite liberal code for xenophobia and bigotry."

Supporters of secular liberalism or abortion or LGBTI rights would not regard themselves as populist. Many populists would call them the elite that needs challenging. And yet secular liberalism and liberal values dogmatism do exhibit some common characteristics of populism which all the papers reveal. These are the tendencies to

- split the world into two camps, "us and them",
- be intolerant towards those who do not conform to their politically-correct language and agenda,
- attempt to suppress dissent,
- manipulate the truth and language for political ends, whether this is what constitutes a man or woman or the actual impact upon a nation of Muslim immigration or Manuel Suarez' story of a left-wing party who convinced itself that it was facilitating, rather than manipulating how older people would vote.

Are the four ideologies always in opposition to each other?

No; there is overlap. Secular liberalism can be found in political parties from across the spectrum, especially in Western Europe. However, the radical left will never agree with its support for technologized capitalism. LGBTI rights are more often supported by secular liberals and the left, but right-wing populists can back them too, for example Geert Wilders in the Netherlands. Protecting the nation is a priority for the right, but Greece's left-wing SYRIZA turned its battle over national debt into one of nation versus the European Union.

The situation is bleak. Is it wishful thinking to believe that Christians can make a difference?

Intercession always has an impact, and before we can intercede, we need to grow our understanding of what is happening by informing ourselves. David Landrum reminds us that politics and democracy have their limits; we should not turn these into idols, expecting them to solve everything. However, he also reminds us of the biblical imperative to engage with the authorities, understanding their role in God's eyes, acting as model citizens, respecting but also challenging because our first loyalty is to the Lord Jesus Christ. David Landrum then goes on to explain the importance of Christians coming up with a positive, hope-filled alternative vision for society. If we are asked to pray and to engage, then surely we can trust that the Lord will act and He will make a difference.

It may be tempting just to read about the ideology you oppose the most. Or maybe you will want to read about the political theory you tend to favour because you are curious to read what criticism it receives. However, reading all the papers reveals how each ideology influences and feeds on another. As David Landrum puts it, "The left needs the right to justify its grievances. The right needs the left to justify its fears. Both are idolatrous." A huge part of how each political movement gains unquestioning followers is how it seeks to manipulate them to believe that the other side is utterly wrong and contemptible. "Post-truth", "fake news" and social media ranting emerge as people's imagination allows them to believe that nothing is too low for the other side to do or say.

What should Christians do?

We begin by seeking to understand and to pray. And then we must start with ourselves, honestly examining our assumptions, attitudes and priorities, including how we regard those with whom we disagree. Rosemary Caudwell reminds us that, just as many Europeans are engaging in identity politics, so Christians need to be different, understanding that our identity is in Christ.

Having examined ourselves, we should then consider those in whom we place our political trust through a biblical lens.

Do Christians have to abandon most political parties?

Salt and light are needed in parties and movements, to preserve against what is wrong, to show the way when darkness confuses. It is vital that Christians play this role. As Manuel Suarez explains, no political party can ever be perfect from a Christian perspective. How could it be for it is made up of fallible human beings? But there is also a danger of being seduced by the rhetoric, of our faith being co-opted into a cause that is not biblical or of allowing ourselves to be complicit in what is profoundly unbiblical. There comes a time that we must be alert to, to know when we must walk away, no longer supporting or remaining in membership.

Rosemary Caudwell lists some helpful questions to consider. These are repeated here, but with some additions and adaptations inspired by the other papers.

1. As our starting point, do we have a proper understanding of our identity in Christ; that this is our primary loyalty, and that it is on that basis that we approach our culture, our nation and our political “tribe”?
2. Are we certain that the movement or party we support does not call for absolute loyalty? Is the party's ideology compatible with our primary loyalty to Christ?
3. If a political movement has arisen in response to a sense of injustice or oppression, does it accurately identify the issues? Does it propose a solution that is achievable and that would contribute to the wellbeing of the whole community? Or does it stir up a sense of victimhood, grievance, and blame against other groups in society or against certain institutions or nations?
4. How does the party regard truth? Does it consistently work to avoid falsehood or exaggeration?
5. Will it contribute to human flourishing, a respect for culture and a sense of identity and belonging for all in our plural societies?
6. Does it respect democracy, independence of the media, the rights of representation and access to justice for all³, including those of whom we may disapprove or fear?
7. Is the leadership of the party or movement becoming too admired or too powerful, to the extent that it is increasingly hard to challenge them?
8. Does it understand the importance of freedom of religion or belief for all, including private, public, and individual and community expression of this foundational human right?
9. Does it respect the rights and needs of minorities, and enable them to participate in society?
10. Does it advocate sustainable economic development, and protection for the vulnerable and poor? Is it neglecting certain people or regions?
11. Does it respect the rights and dignity of both indigenous and migrant communities, or does it seek to exploit differences and tensions between them?
12. Will it respect the rights of asylum seekers and encourage integration of immigrants?
13. Does it intend to build good relationships with neighbouring countries, and respect for other cultures?
14. Can dissent be expressed? How central to the party's ideology are the policies that seem problematic from a Christian perspective?

³ The rule of law, applying equally to all, is an important aspect of democracy. It is protected by an independent judiciary to which all citizens should have access.

What answers does Christianity have?

Criticism and possible withholding of political support will change nothing on their own. Europe is hurting and confused, searching for identity, stability, solid values and meaning. The Gospel provides powerful answers. Here are just some of the ideas from the papers.

Manuel Suarez boldly says that Evangelicals are the “stone in the shoe” of populism. Since we are heirs of the Reformation and believe in the priesthood of all believers, we know the importance of free enquiry of the truth, of the separation of Church and State and of resisting too much power centred on individuals. We understand the importance of accountability and courageously speaking truth to power.

We also remember that all are made in God’s image, with infinite value. But also all sin. Salvation is only because of grace and faith. Therefore, we can stand against the idea of “them and us” and act as bridge builders and reconcilers. We can seek to take the bitterness out of public debate. We have a ministry to help individuals and communities address their fears and hurts in healthy ways. And we are called to defend and care for the most vulnerable, even those that society despises.

What vision can Christians offer?

David Landrum answers this question; Europe needs a biblical, hope-filled vision for how things can be better. There are and will be other contributions that Evangelicals can make; for example, Manuel Suarez reminds us of the importance of basing society on a developed civil society, rather than on bureaucracy. David Landrum writes about a civil public square, a vision that the European Evangelical Alliance has been advocating for several years. It is where rights, responsibilities and respect enable people to live together with their deepest differences. It is where “there is maximal freedom for the Gospel to be proclaimed and lived out, and in which there is maximal respect for all who accept or reject the claims of the Cross.” In a civil public square, people are free to be themselves but understand the need to be good neighbours with those that live or believe differently to them. Our nations and continent are pulling themselves apart because we do not know how to reconcile the differences that there are and will be in the future. A civil public square is essential if our societies are to hold together.

How the vision would work is explained in the [Global Charter of Conscience](#), written by Evangelical sociologist Os Guinness, with input from others, including EEA and Heiner Bielefeldt, former UN Special Rapporteur on Freedom of Religion. It is not about compromising each other’s distinctiveness. As Article 14 states, “...*there is always a responsibility to find common ground across the differences without compromising the differences that matter.*” Instead, it injects Judeo-Christian values back into society, expecting us all to respect others and be guardians of their rights, as well as our own.

David Landrum’s final challenge to us is that Evangelicals prioritise public leadership that is inspiring, equipping and nurturing Evangelicals into leadership roles in every sphere, where they can serve but can also challenge and speak hope.

Depression or Hope?

This set of papers will inform but they could leave us depressed if we do not remember who is Lord of history. Our God laughs at those who conspire against Him (Psalm 2:4) and brings rulers to nothing (Isaiah 40:23). Nothing can stop His Kingdom growing until it is fully fulfilled at the end of time. He calls His Church to play its part in demonstrating signs of this Kingdom, to intercede and to be hope-filled Good News People. EEA trusts that these papers will point us towards hope.

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