Arguments about God and the preamble to the European constitution

TWENTY-FIVE European foreign ministers sat around the table in Naples last weekend. But an unseen presence hovered in the room: God. A spot of divine inspiration is always handy when ministers start arguing about the draft constitution for the European Union, but this time it was God Himself who was the topic of debate. For one of the most controversial issues is whether to include an explicit reference to Christianity in the statement of values that serves as a preamble to the constitution.

The Poles are leading the God squad, with some support from other Catholic countries such as Italy, Spain and Ireland, as well as from several Christian Democratic parties across the continent. The French, for whom secularism is an article of faith, are adamantly opposed, with strong support from the Danes and other northern Europeans, as well as from Socialist and Liberal politicians. Several countries are not bothered either way. For the protagonists, however, the argument goes to the heart of their sense of nationhood.

The Catholic church provided spiritual comfort and inspiration for Poles during the years of Godless communism. They consider the idea of a statement of European values that has no mention of Christianity to be abhorrent. Polish politicians also say that they could lose a referendum (if they have one) should the Holy Father let it be known that he does not approve of the constitution. On the other side, the French maintain that a rigid separation between religion and politics is an essential part of their national identity, reflecting their revolutionary inheritance and republican ideals.

The French are happier than the Poles with the text as it now stands. That is hardly surprising, since the preamble was written by Valéry Giscard d'Estaing, a former French president who chaired the Convention on the Future of Europe that wrote the draft constitution. His draft attempts a brief summary of the common history and values that form the basis of the “great venture which makes of it [Europe] a special area of human hope.” But, even though he was personally lobbied by the pope on the point, Mr Giscard d'Estaing grants God only the briefest acknowledgment, making reference to “the cultural, religious and humanist inheritance of Europe.”

For the Poles and their allies, such scanty treatment misrepresents history. They argue that the first stirrings of European civilisation were intimately linked to notions of Christendom. For Gianfranco Fini, Italy's deputy prime minister, Christianity continues to be a defining feature of Europe. “If you go from
one end of the continent to the other, what is it that says you are in Europe?”, he asks rhetorically. “The presence of the church.” But such arguments trouble secularists. Early ideas of Europe may have been partly forged by crusades against Muslims and other infidels. But the modern EU has millions of Muslim, Hindu and Jewish citizens. Moreover, it has accepted that Turkey, a big Muslim country, can be a long-term candidate to join. An explicit reference to Christianity in the constitutional preamble might suggest that the EU sees itself as a “Christian club”—precisely the wrong message to send to the Turks and others at a time when the western world is striving to avoid a clash of civilisations.

Arguments about religion and fundamental values do not sound like the sort of thing that can be settled by clever legal drafting. But—this is the EU—a compromise is already in the works. The Italians, who are chairing the constitutional negotiations, suggest that the final text might refer both to Christianity and to the secular nature of the modern European state.

How neat. And how uninspiring. For beyond the argument about Christianity, European leaders should really be debating whether their constitution needs a preamble at all. Mr Giscard d'Estaing's original plan was to come up with something as inspiring and memorable as the preamble of the American constitution, which reads: “We the people of the United States, in order to form a more perfect Union, establish Justice, insure domestic Tranquility, provide for the common defence, promote the general welfare and secure the Blessings of Liberty to ourselves and our Posterity, do ordain and establish this Constitution for the United States of America.”

In search of Philadelphia

Unfortunately, where the Founding Fathers came up with a single, stirring sentence, the Giscard preamble rambles on for six paragraphs. Like an over-ambitious student essay it starts with a quotation from Thucydides (in the original Greek): “Our constitution...is called a democracy because power is in the hands not of a minority, but of the greatest number.” The preamble continues with some utterly forgettable sentiments about civilisation, culture, prosperity and other excellent ideas, and ends with a vote of thanks to none other than Mr Giscard d'Estaing and his colleagues. That the EU emerged above all as a reaction to two world wars is only tacitly acknowledged in a sideways reference to the determination of Europeans to “transcend their ancient divisions”.

A British diplomat struggling to summarise the significance of the preamble writes that it is “pompous and pretentious, but at first view not actively dangerous.” Few other readers seem able to muster more enthusiasm. Mr Giscard d'Estaing has suggested hopefully that future generations of European schoolchildren might learn the preamble by heart. But this would seem to be in contradiction of Article II-4 of the constitution's Charter of Fundamental Rights, which states clearly that “no one shall be subjected to torture or to inhuman or degrading treatment or punishment.”

The best suggestion in Naples came from the Finnish delegation. They proposed putting the entire preamble in the bin. Come to think of it, haven't a few atavistic curmudgeons suggested doing just that with the whole constitution?

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