

# Christianity, the EU and Brexit

This is the article I published on Conservative Home:

It was a revelation to read a tweet from the Archbishop of Canterbury that was critical of recent words and attempted deeds of the EU. The Church he leads has often been identified with the various Lib Dem and Labour Remain campaigns which he and other Bishops have supported in the Lords. These campaigns have always worked from the basis that the EU can do no wrong and the UK can do little right.

His tweet is worth examining, because it explains why he and others like him have been so pro EU before. It turns out to be grounded on some basic misunderstandings of both the nature of the EU and the evolving constitution and nature of the English/UK state.

“The EU was originally inspired by Christian social teaching at the heart of which is solidarity. Seeking to control the export of vaccines undercuts the EU’s basic ethics. They need to work together with others” he wrote.

Not exactly, Archbishop.

The EU began life as the EEC, a development of the German Zollverein or customs union. It was neither free trade oriented nor open to the rest of the world, based on protectionist thinking. The early EEC/EU was strictly secular. The first reference to religions in the Treaties was introduced at Lisbon and remains today as Article 17 of the Treaty of the functioning of the EU. That states that the Union respects different religions and different philosophical and non confessional organisations recognised in individual member states. It does not accord any priority to Christianity or any other religion, and merely says the EU will have a dialogue with all these bodies. There is no official Church of the EU. The preamble to the Treaty of Union shows how eclectic the sources of EU thought are by saying “drawing inspiration from the cultural, religious and humanist inheritance of Europe”. France, a fiercely secular state fought successfully to avoid any reference to the Christian religion in the EU Treaty or constitution. The EU has sought to define inalienable human rights that come from no particular faith or philosophy.

In contrast there are several states in Europe that do afford a special place or mention to a Christian Church and Christian values in their constitutions. Denmark, England, Greece, Hungary, Malta and Norway for example all have state Churches that are identified and given various special privileges or mentions. England is one of the most generous to its established Church, the Church of England which the Archbishop leads.

I do not hear him talking much about the special status the Church enjoys in English and wider UK life. The Church owns substantial legacy property and investment wealth courtesy of the UK state and Parliament. MPs do not question this. Parliament moreover allows the Church to collect all rents

and dividends free of income tax, take all capital gains free of Gains Tax, and buy assets free of Stamp Duty, to give it maximum scope to build its wealth and grow its income. It would be good to hear more debate on how that is being used. It has its own Parliament, rule making and disciplinary bodies, though they are answerable to the UK Parliament and ultimately governed by UK law. The Archbishops and senior Bishops have seats , votes and voices in the UK legislature. Though they are there as part of the wider governing establishment they are under no duty to support the government, and often during a Conservative government vote and speak in opposition. They also vote on Northern Irish and Scottish matters outside the area of their clerical authority. The Archbishop himself has been a critic of various Brexit measures including the recent Trade Bill and Internal market Bill.

The Church of England benefits from its status as the established Church, gaining a near monopoly over all the main UK national and English civic events from royal weddings and funerals through Remembrance Day services, national anniversaries, civic services for Councils and Mayors, daily prayers in Parliament, to a network of Church schools receiving taxpayer finance. These swell otherwise dwindling congregations. I will explore the nature of solidarity and where that stands in modern politics in a later post. I look forward to the evolution of the Archbishop's thinking on EU matters as he studies more how the EU seeks advantage and augments its power in ways that do not offer friendly co-operation with the rest of the world.

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