



Source: www.europarl.europa.eu

Faith in European Politics

One hundred and twenty-five million Europeans claim that their religious convictions influence their political choices (if an eight-nation study by the Bertelsmann Foundation in 2008 is representative of the rest of the European Union).

Reporting on the survey, *EUObserver* claimed 'Europeans keep faith out of politics', presumably on the basis that just over 250 million had claimed that religious convictions played only minimal or no influence. But the 125 million who say it is important cannot be ignored and, avoiding the tabloid headlines, the report's authors suggest that 'The role which [religion] plays in tying together the countries of the European Union should not be underestimated.'

One of the founders of the European Union, Robert Schuman, was a man of deep Christian conviction, who in 1958 called for a democratic model of European governance built on post-war national reconciliation which would 'develop into a community of peoples in freedom, equality, solidarity and peace... deeply rooted in Christian values.'

In 2010, according to the *UK Evangelical Alliance*, 98% of UK evangelicals claimed to

have voted in General election. According to a *British Electoral Survey* in 2010, 92.4% of Christians of all denominations voted, compared with 89% of people of no religious affiliation. However, these figures do not readily translate into an obligation for voting in Euro-elections with significantly lower voter turnouts. When Christians read the New Testament with its exhortations to pray for and obey the authorities, they presumably forget that Paul was addressing Christians who were ruled from far-off Rome by an Emperor who had little sympathy for their religious convictions.

The prayers of most Protestants, if offered for their politicians at all, are typically for their national leaders; the Premier, Prime Minister, President or Sovereign. I've yet to hear a protestant pastor pray for any European leader, EU Commissioner, President, or MEP. Is it any wonder that Christians remain remote from decisions made in Brussels and Strasbourg by their elected representatives and yet which potentially impact their daily lives in significant ways? If European politics are increasingly secular, the churches must shoulder more than their fair share of the blame.

EDITORIAL Mixing Faith and Politics

There are many ways in which the history of Christianity can be told and one of them is to tell it from the perspective of the tortuous relationship between faith and politics.

All too often when the church has been in a position of power the result has been a leavened or corrupted Christianity rather than a sanctified society. Perhaps it is not surprising therefore that many Christians, whether by conviction or default, are disengaged from politics.

This edition of *Vista* looks at this issue from different points of view. Darrell Jackson observes the passivity of Christians to engage in European politics and makes an impassioned call to prayer and involvement.

Once again I turn to the European Values Study to see what light it might shed on the issue. We feature interviews with two Christians involved in politics at a European level, Julia Doxat-Pursar, Socio-Political Representative of the European Evangelical Alliance and David Fieldsend of Care for Europe. And the issue concludes with Jo Appleton's evaluation of David Cameron's "Big Society" initiative.

The prayer of Christ in John 17 would suggest that all those who follow Him must wrestle with the challenge of being "in the world" "but not of the world". We simply have no choice about whether we are engaged in the political world or not, only whether we leaven the world or are leavened by it.

We must not let those with a secularist agenda win the argument that faith communities have no place in the European debate of ideas. Counting on our Lord's prayers, with boldness but with wisdom, we must step into the arena and speak. Or can you imagine the apostle Paul sitting by and saying nothing?

JM

Prayer can be a way of engaging in the mission of Christ. It's one way of taking seriously the radical political vision of the New Testament that there is no area of life over which we cannot extend the claim that 'Jesus is Lord!' For Christians, disengagement with European politics is not an option!

In the previously mentioned 2010 EA study, whilst 93% of UK evangelicals claim that it is important for Christians to engage with the Westminster and Scottish Parliaments as well as the Welsh assembly, no information was solicited about engagement with the European Parliament. Does the EA-UK feel that Europe is unimportant or insignificant?

A *Theos* report in 2008 examined the references to faith in the speeches of politicians such as Tony Blair, Gordon Brown and David Cameron. They concluded that 69% of the rhetoric was overwhelmingly positive and only 13% was negative. The director of *Theos*, Paul Woolley, said 'The increase in references to religious faith reflects an increased awareness of, and interest in, religious groups in our society.'

Of course, some European churches have historically been much closer to state power than others. Research conducted by the *Spanish Centre for Sociological Research* (2009) showed that the more right-wing the Spanish voter, the more likely they were to attend mass regularly: 33% of the extreme right, 25% of the mainstream right-wing, 10% of those who are in the political centre, 7% of the Left, and 4% of the extreme Left go to mass regularly.

***"For Christians,
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The correlation between religious and national/political identity is frequently close in other countries. On the 2nd February 2011, the Russian Orthodox Church ruled that clergy and leaders were eligible to run for public office (though not to join political parties) where it was necessary to combat blasphemy, slander of the Church, moral relativism, family values, and destruction of historical monuments and the environment. Potential opponents might include

'schismatics and other religions', frequently code for minority Christian groups. Europe's political liberals frequently make equally heavy weather of responding to God's appearances. In many of the debates about head coverings or the wearing of crucifixes there are liberal answers on both sides. How liberal is it to ban a BA check-in attendant from wearing a cross? Whose rights are infringed when a woman freely chooses to wear a veil? I'm not suggesting that the answers are at all obvious or easy but, as Rowan Williams suggested in a 2005 speech in Brussels, 'Unless the liberal state is engaged in a continuing dialogue with the religious community, it loses its essential liberalism. It becomes simply dogmatically secular, insisting that religious faith be publicly invisible.'

The space created within the Lisbon Treaty for transparent and regular consultation with Europe's religious communities is there for a purpose. Europe's churches must learn to use it or lose it and risk the lurch of the European project further into ideological secularism.

DJ

Are these people in your prayers? The EU Parliament in Strasbourg Source: www.europarl.europa.eu



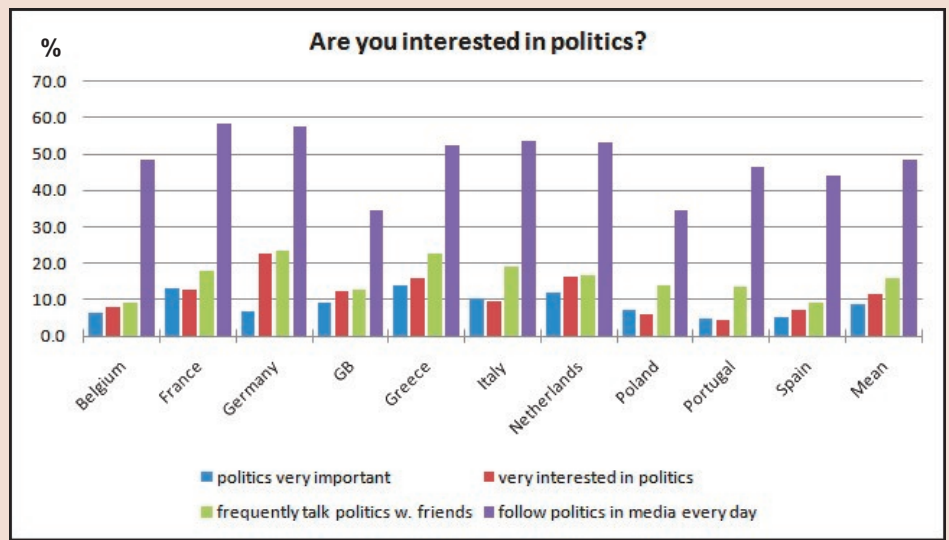
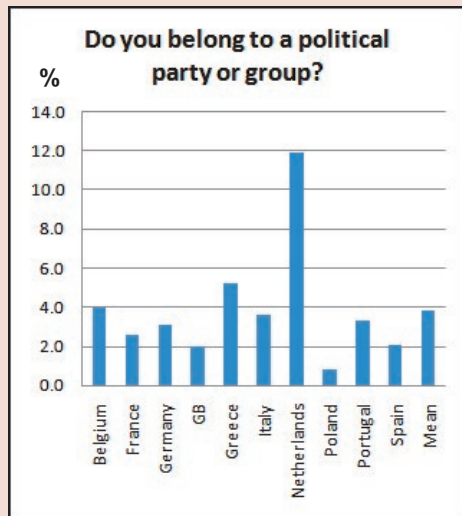
ARE EUROPEANS REALLY INTERESTED IN POLITICS?

The European Values Study suggests that Europeans are disengaged from political participation but remain avid consumers of political ideas.

If you ask an average European* whether politics is important in their lives more than half of them will say that it is not. However a closer look at the European Values Study data suggests a more complex picture. We have focussed in on three aspects, the importance of politics to today's Europeans, active involvement in political parties and their confidence in political institutions.

IMPORTANCE

Only 9% of Europeans say that politics is very important in their lives with 60% saying that politics is not, or not at all important to them. The most politically disengaged are the Portuguese and the Spanish with only 4.7% and 5.2% saying that politics is important, whereas 14% of Greeks say so. Further questions asking how interested they are in politics and how often they discuss political matters with their friends suggest similar levels of disinterest.



However, when asked how often they followed politics on TV, radio or in the papers a surprising contrast emerged. In every one of the countries the level of political engagement through the media was significantly higher with almost 50% following political matters on a daily basis.

BELONGING

Given that so few say that politics is important to them, it is perhaps no surprise that the percentage of those who say they belong to a political party is also very low. Overall just under 4% of Europeans belong to a political party or group but in some countries the percentage is much lower than that, only 2% in GB and Spain and 1% in Poland. Only in the Netherlands is there a notably higher level of political engagement by belonging with nearly 12% saying that they belong to a political party.

CONFIDENCE

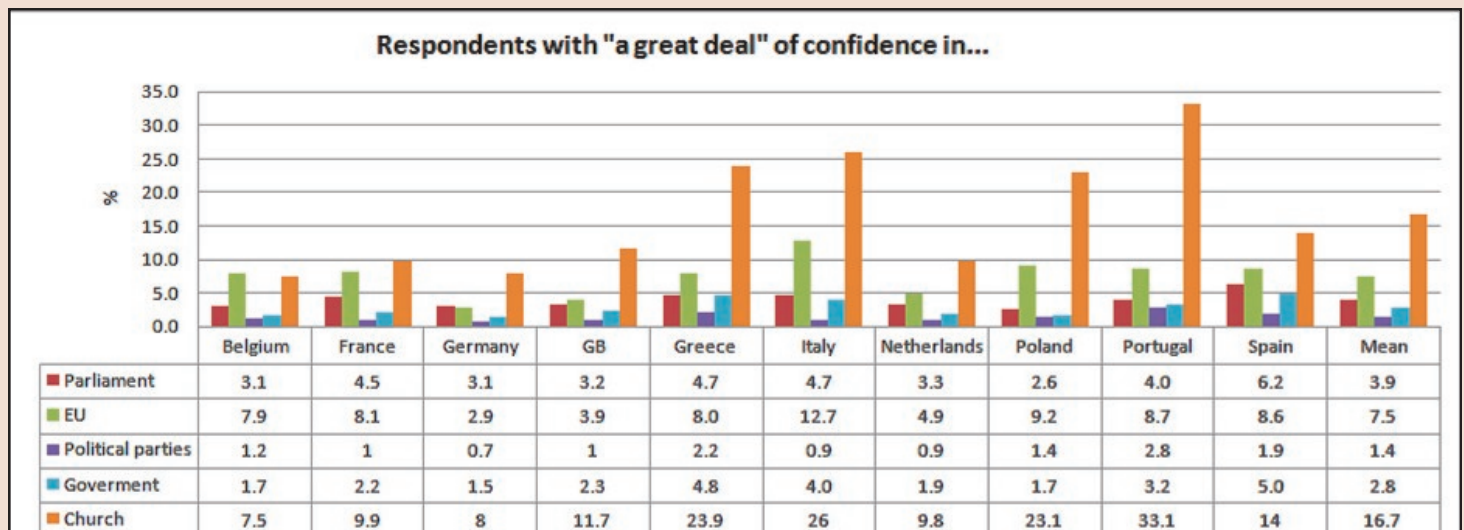
The third measure of political engagement we considered relates to the confidence in political institutions, namely the parliament, government, and political parties in the countries in question, and the EU. Overall the political institution that enjoys the greatest confidence of Europeans is the EU

with 7.5% of Europeans saying they are very confident about it. This is followed by their own Parliament (3.9%), their government (2.8%) and finally the political parties themselves (1.4%). As Figure 3 clearly shows however, there are significant national variations with Germany, GB and the Netherlands being much more eurosceptic, and Spain, Portugal, Poland and Italy ranking the EU as much more trustworthy than their national parliaments. Tellingly in no country does confidence in political parties rise above 3%.

CONCLUSIONS

It is clear that Europeans are largely disengaged from politics when it comes to active participation in political parties or even political debate over coffee with their friends. Nevertheless, they are avid consumers of political matters in the media which may evidence a keen self-interest if nothing else.

The crisis of confidence that political institutions are suffering is perhaps most clearly illustrated by comparison with levels of confidence in the church, another widely questioned institution. In every country but Belgium the church enjoys much more confidence than political institutions. Europeans appear to have more faith in faith than in politics. JM



* The ten countries included in this analysis (Belgium, France, Germany, GB, Greece, Italy, Netherlands, Poland, Portugal and Spain) represent 404 million people or 80% of the total population of the EU. Source: European Values Study 2008 www.europeanvaluesstudy.eu

CHRISTIANS ENGAGING IN POLITICS

The European Evangelical Alliance and CARE are just two of several Christian organisations engaging with the European Parliament on issues as diverse as religious freedom, climate change and trafficking. We asked Julia Doxat-Pursar (EEA's Socio-Political Representative) and David Fieldsend and Anca Bulica (CARE for Europe) for their perspectives on 'faith in politics'.

VISTA: In your opinion, what are the biggest issues for Christians to engage with in European politics today?

J.D-P: Loving the "other", be that Muslims, refugees, Roma or whoever. There is so much fear. There are big political challenges. But Christians have a vital role to play to stand against intolerance and to reach out in love.

Offering a fresh and broad vision of Kingdom values, in contrast to those who champion Christian values and Europe's "Christian heritage" but who generally have a very restricted agenda.

And religious freedom, both the "traditional" issues and also the new problems arising from a redefinition of human rights. Freedom of religion is being restricted to freedom of worship, and freedom of expression is restricted by a new right not to be offended.

DF & AB: North-South relations: the EU is the world's largest donor of overseas aid and has bilateral multi-lateral trade and aid agreements throughout Latin America, Africa and Asia. Christians need to engage with the degree to which these agreements put the interests of the poor and disadvantaged in the southern hemisphere first, or prefer the vested interests of people back home in Europe or the ruling elites elsewhere.

We also need to consider the degree to which the human rights clauses included in these agreements are taken seriously, and whether there is a form of cultural imperialism being pursued which seeks to promote Western individualism and sexual libertarianism at the expense of traditional family and community values.

Religious Freedom: the promotion of a new secular morality and a view of church/state separation which goes beyond neutrality to trying to create religion-free public sphere is leading to some areas of European legislation to potentially diminish the freedom of individual Christians and churches to follow their consciences and have freedom of expression for their faith-based views. In most cases this is only following where UK legislation has already led, but we are concerned that other countries should not be forced to follow our bad examples.



Source: www.europeanea.org

Julia Doxat-Pursar

Organised Crime & Modern Day Slavery: these issues have to be tackled on a continent-wide basis as mobsters do not recognise international borders. However, the advance of EU legislation to strengthen the prevention of these crimes, punish offenders and afford greater protection to the victims of human trafficking is being hampered by the unwillingness of some states to give enough priority to this.

"I'd love to see Christians making a difference on issues such as promoting integrity in public life and business"
Julia Doxat-Pursar

Vista: What do you see as developing issues in the medium to long term?

DF & AB: I fear the same issues will be with us for some time! There will probably also be new bioethics challenges as medical technology makes possible enhancement of human faculties, not just healing of diseases and defects.

J. D-P: The impact of climate change, especially climate refugees. I fear that increasing nationalism and intolerance could lead to real problems. I'd also love to see Christians making a difference on issues such as promoting integrity in public life and business, plus fair trade.



Source: www.careforeurope.org

David Fieldsend

Vista: How can we pray for the politics in Europe?

J.D-P: My priority prayer topics would be those outlined above. People wanting to keep up to date with the issues can subscribe to EEA's Impact newsletter, to Facebook and Twitter updates and a socio-political blog on tumblr by contacting office@europeanea.org

DF & AB: Our first focus should be on people. European politicians are humans with needs and pressures like anyone else. Get to know who your local MEPs are and pray for them by name. CARE also produces a prayer guide which gives you a name or two to pray for daily over the course of a month of the top leaders of the EU institutions (from kate.berbaut@care.org.uk).

There is also a regular digest of issues produced by EU Review and a call to prayer which can be found at <http://euprayer.com/>

JA

THE BIG SOCIETY—A BIG OPPORTUNITY?

Is David Cameron's "big idea" an opportunity for the churches to engage in new and creative forms of engagement in their communities? Jo Appleton investigates.

In 2010, UK Prime Minister David Cameron formally launched the *Big Society*, aimed at 'creating a nation of empowered citizens and communities'.

A key part of the idea is encouraging social action by communities and groups, as well as the distribution of power from central government to 'communities, neighbourhoods and groups.' Christian organisations such as the UK Evangelical Alliance and Faithworks have been 'largely supportive', seeing opportunities for faith groups to make a difference in their local communities.

Others however are less positive and question the ideology behind the *Big Society*. For example, Simon Barrow of the think tank *Ekklesia* comments that, "it is ... important that churches and church-related agencies do not find themselves sucked into plugging unsustainable welfare gaps without asking tougher questions about the ideology and priorities shaping the government's agenda," alluding to the cuts to the budgets of many government welfare services.

Volunteerism is already part of UK society, with a 2007 government survey finding that nearly three-quarters of adults (73%) had spent some time volunteering in the previous

year, with just under half (48%) doing so at least once a month. The actual amount of time spent was not calculated, and it included informal opportunities such as 'giving advice or looking after a property or pet'. 44% of adults took part in more formal volunteering such as helping in groups, clubs or organisations that 'benefit other people or the environment.

85%
**of evangelical Christians say
that their church is engaged
with the local community**
Source: EA UK

Three recent surveys by Christian organisations show the potential impact of churches in the community. Research carried out by *Christian Research* among 284 churches found that they had delivered on average 1,925 hours of voluntary service per year, per church, or 37 hours per week. Ministries listed included youth work, mothers and toddlers, caring for the elderly, community improvement, debt counselling, parenting courses, helping homeless or addicts and street patrols.

While this research may be biased towards larger churches, the UK Evangelical Alliance's *21st Century Evangelical* survey of over 17,000 Christians across the UK found that 9 out of 10 respondents believe 'it is a Christian's duty to be involved in activities that benefit the local community.'

The initial report states that a staggering 99% do some type of volunteering each year and 85% say their church already engages with the local community. Just under half of those surveyed 'volunteer for their church in an activity that serves the local community at least once a fortnight'. Interestingly, those who consider faith as 'the most important thing in their life' spend more time volunteering than those who do not.

And while the majority believe that evangelism and social action are 'equally important and compatible', 35% feel that there may be too much emphasis on social action by many churches and organisations.

These findings are similar to a 2008 survey carried out by *Gweini: The Council of the Christian Voluntary Sector in Wales*, in partnership with *Wales Council for Voluntary Action (WCVA)*. This survey covered all

CONTINUED



faith communities in Wales, of which 98% were identified as Christian. Over two thirds of faith communities were involved in serving their local community in some way, and those that did engaged in an average of five different activities, including children's and youth work, counselling, support for the elderly/single parents, crime prevention and literacy classes.

As the political emphasis, in the UK at least, shifts towards encouraging local people to be involved in providing some of the services which make communities better places to live in, Christians may have the opportunity to highlight what they are already doing and to engage in new and creative ways. The challenge is to live 'not as unwise but as wise, making the most of every opportunity... understanding what the Lord's will is' (Ephesians 5:15-17).

Over to you:

- In what ways are Christians involved in social engagement in your context?
- What difference do they make?
- Are there opportunities for your church or organisation to be involved in local issues? What are they, and what could your next steps be to make it happen?



Source: www.voluntaryworker.co.uk

This article focuses on the UK context – we'd love to hear your comments about the European context. You can get in touch with us via our blog:

europeanmission.redcliffe.org

Sources and Resources

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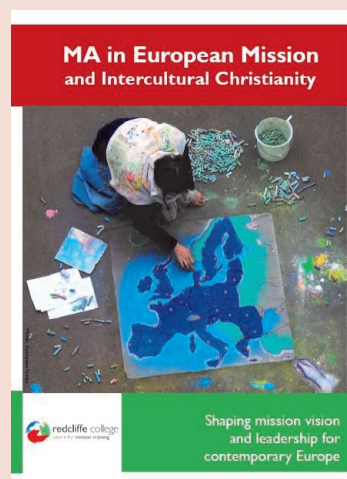
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