

IS THE VATICAN THE CAUSE OF BRITAIN'S EUROPEAN SCHISM?

VIEWED from Brussels, the death of Pope John Paul II underlines some differences between the UK and its neighbours. Those differences have had a lasting effect on Britain's place in the European Union.

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The Pope's funeral might have the power to shift the date of the (secular) wedding of the heir to the British throne, but the UK can never properly belong to any family of Catholic nations.

Roman Catholicism shaped the present-day politics of several of the UK's EU partners, in a way that is not true of Britain. Whereas Catholicism was a dominant political force during the 19th and 20th centuries in continental Europe, it was largely excised from English politics by the end of the 17th century. The work begun by Henry VIII during the 16th century and fought over for the subsequent 150 years, was settled, as it turned out, when a Catholic monarch was replaced by the Protestant William of Orange, a Dutch import. The Catholic faith certainly remained an influence on politics in Ireland and Scotland but in England at least, Catholicism was a minority pursuit (and at various times that minority was persecuted).

What is now the EU was the creation of Roman Catholics: Robert Schuman, Konrad Adenauer, Jean Monnet, Alcide de Gasperi and Walter Hallstein. Roman Catholicism was in at the birth of the EU. Britain was not.

Ernest Bevin, the British foreign secretary at the time of the Schuman Plan, harboured suspicions that the Coal and Steel Community was a Catholic conspiracy. Roy Jenkins, later president of the European Commission, recounts how in 1962 he organised a meeting between Jean Monnet and the then Labour leader, Hugh Gaitskell, in the hope that Monnet would bring Gaitskell round to view the European Economic Community more favourably. "Gaitskell was uncomprehending of Monnet's faith," Jenkins wrote later.

The inability to comprehend Catholicism is part of what has made Britain's dialogue with the EU difficult. (Perhaps to make up for this gap in understanding, a disproportionately high number of diplomats charged with representing Her Majesty's government in Brussels have been Roman Catholics: Sir Michael Palliser, Sir John Kerr and Sir Stephen Wall.)

Elsewhere in Europe, engaging with Catholicism was a routine part of a political education, even for those fiercely opposed to the Vatican. The influence of Catholicism was not confined to Christian Democracy of the centre-right. Jacques Delors, the French minister who became a dominant Commission president, came out of the Catholic Left: the Jeunesse Ouvrière Chrétien and the Catholic trade union movement in France. But the Left also developed a tradition of anti-

clericalism, which was, for instance, a defining feature of the socialist party of Paul-Henri Spaak, the Belgian prime minister, another of the EU's founding fathers.

British socialism, by contrast, has no strong anti-clerical tradition. Nor does British liberalism. Nor is there a counterpart to the tradition of left-wing Catholicism.

The identities of Britain's political parties are different from those of their counterparts from various EU states. Most obviously, the British Conservative Party sits uncomfortably apart from the European People's Party (EPP).

Not that the Christian Democracy of today's EPP is the same as that of Adenauer's day. A secular managerialism, with a dash of nationalism, characterises nearly all modern politics, left or right. The German Christian Democrats are forsaking their Catholic roots. In Belgium, the francophone Christian Democrats have rebranded themselves as the Centre Démocrate Humaniste. Christian Democracy has fissured repeatedly in Italy. France has always been a bit different because of the obsession with separating church from state but Napoleon did not succeed in extirpating the church and had to settle with Pope Pius VII. Catholicism was the religion of the people, if not of the state. The Roman Catholic Church remains a strong, if divisive, influence in France. In Ireland, the Catholic church is not the force it once was, though the foreign minister, Dermot Ahern, is perceived as being strongly pro-Vatican. In Austria, Spain and Portugal, the Catholic influence on the centre-right is still powerful.

The Vatican's influence on European politics may now be weaker, but still the imprint is there. There are mainstream newspapers in the likes of Spain and Belgium that are still distinctively Catholic.

All of this matters to Britain and its relations with the EU. The UK talks a different language. It does not share the same assumptions. The UK, for instance, does not suffer the same agonies as some EU states over admitting Turkey to the EU, because it has never accepted the EU as a Catholic construct. It may have signed up to the Treaty of Rome, but it didn't sign up to Rome.

This non-Catholicism of the UK sets it apart from other pre-2004 members of the EU, save Finland, Sweden and Denmark, and, for other reasons, Greece. (Of the 2004 intake, the most Catholic are perhaps Poland, Slovenia and Malta.)

None of this is to cast judgement on Catholicism as a benign or malign influence. It is merely to observe, with the assistance of events in Rome, that that is the way things are, and that they have made a difference.