

## TREASURES FROM THE PAST

# A soul for Europe?

**Mike Robinson** shares his 'treasure from the past' with an article published in New City in July 2005.

My 'treasure from the past' is an article by Frank Johnson which appeared in New City in April 2005. It is a long article and there is only space here for extracts.

The reason why I have chosen this article is because in the discussion of Brexit by both the 'remainers' and 'leavers' there has been very little mention about the 'soul of Europe'. Much of the discussion has centred round the economic benefits or seeing the migrant as a threat and not as a neighbour to be loved.

Regardless of whether you are a 'remainder' or a 'leaver' it is possible to share the vision of the founding fathers of Europe who wanted to make sure that Europe would never fall into war again, and that friendship rather than enmity should prevail. Hopefully something of this vision will remain post-Brexit.



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**To most people in Britain the spiritual origins of the European Union remain a closely guarded secret. Frank Johnson investigates.**

Extracts taken from *New City* (July 2005 pages 4-6)

The ‘problem’ of Europe just refuses to go away. The United Kingdom has been a member of the European Community for three decades, and yet there is probably more Euro scepticism now, than there was when we first voted to join our European neighbours. Extremists there will always be, but it is clear that many of those who express doubts about further integration with Europe are not extremists. The majority are moderates on most other major political issues.

The fact that the Catholic Church, of which I am a member, and Chiara Lubich, president of the Movement to which I belong, are strongly in favour of European unity, forced me into looking more deeply at the issues involved. In theory I can see why it would be better if Europe were to be more united. The economic argument seems fairly strong, although there are some well-respected economists who are opposed to further integration of the UK in Europe. But I have always felt uncomfortable with loss of sovereignty, with the many ‘silly’ regulations regarding food labelling and the like, as well as with a European Commission which seems to have no direct accountability to the electorate...

### Higher principles

One thing that has never emerged in all the debate that has taken place in Britain is the idea of ‘a soul for Europe’. Things are always presented in terms of what economic advantages are to be had. The reality is that no ‘higher’ principles are ever put forward. Whether this is because our politicians are not aware that such principles exist, or because they are aware, but consider them to be vote losers, is unclear.

### What is a nation?

I came across an interesting definition of a nation by French philosopher Ernest Renan: ‘A nation is a group of people united by a mistaken view of the past and a hatred of their neighbours.’ That may seem a very cynical view and obviously there are many more positive definitions, but it is in some ways quite descriptive of reality. It struck me immediately that, as

a Christian the one thing I cannot do, is to hate my neighbour, whether it be the person next to me at the bus stop, the one across the border in Scotland or across the channel in France. I cannot hate them. So, the starting point, as far as I am concerned, is my duty as a Christian to love my neighbour. In fact, from the Christian point of view, we are all brothers and sisters and therefore are all children of the one heavenly Father. Seen from this perspective, the concept of nationhood seems very secondary...

### The founding fathers of Europe

The impact of the Second World War was immense. There was a determination at all levels of society and throughout the continent, that war should never again blight the people of Europe. In particular there were some very committed Christian politicians who were determined to do something about it; they were: two Frenchmen, Robert Schumann and Jean Monet; a German, Conrad Adenauer; and an Italian Alcide de Gasperi. They wanted to find some way of making sure that Europe would never fall into war again, and that friendship rather than enmity should prevail...

However, somewhere along the way, the original plot was lost and the whole thing became a huge economic enterprise with the idea that if we join this it will be a great advantage to us as a nation, to our nation and our people. So the arguing started.

### A genuine community of nations

The founding fathers were all committed Christians and politicians who were able to look beyond their own national boundaries in pursuit of a greater good. Their successors, perhaps in an attempt to make the idea more acceptable, concentrated on the economic advantages. It didn’t take long before the original vision faded to be substituted by the economic one. There must be very few people in Britain who have any idea of what the original idea behind the European Economic Community was...

The debate will continue. The current European Union is not congruent with the Christian concept of a united Europe, but it is at least moving in the direction of unity and community. Perhaps the least we can do is try to make sure that the original vision of Europe, as a real brotherhood of nations, and not a bunch of selfish squabblers, is brought back on to the agenda. ■