Is Europe a vainglorious Tower of Babel or a creative outpouring of Pentecost? That is our question.

I want to begin tonight with a theological history of Europe, before moving on to what I see as three rival but overlapping ways of understanding European identity. Let’s start with the history.

Jesus was not a European. Jesus was not a Westerner. But Europe begins at about the time of Jesus. The Roman Empire, which occupied Palestine during Jesus’ lifetime, occupied the south-eastern half of Europe during the first centuries after Christ. For the early church it was the new Babylon, the beast of the book of Revelation, the force that those filled with the Holy Spirit had to reckon with. But once Constantine became a Christian in the early fourth century, the rise of Rome looked like a providential trail blazed on the church’s behalf. Almost overnight the church’s sense that it was called to embody the crucified Lord changed into an understanding that it was called to imitate Jesus reigning at the Father’s right hand. The idea of a vast unified Christian empire only lasted a century and a half, but it was long enough for the notion of the inextricable link between Christian faith and classical civilisation to take hold. Ever since, Christians in Europe have had a twin assumption – that they had an entitlement to direct European affairs, and that Europe would fall apart to the degree they weren’t in charge.

In the era of migrations, formerly known as the Dark Ages, it was indeed Christians, mostly within monasteries, that preserved this classical heritage until its reflowering in the early Middle Ages. With the split between Catholic West and Orthodox East from the eleventh century, and with the rise of Islam across the southern border of the former Roman Empire, Europe started to become synonymous with Catholic Christianity – the two almost coterminous and, for all the tussles between kings and barons and even Popes, converging in one coherent linguistic and ecclesial unit. But then Europe embarked on a 100-year civil war, known as the Wars of Religion, in which this largely harmonious and homogeneous whole disintegrated into warring parts. Catholicism, so tied to the sense of being for everyone, was dealt a blow from which it has never psychologically recovered. Protestantism, born of conflict, continued to depend on a state of crisis and the vilification of Rome to justify its separate existence. The nation state arose as a rival to Christendom, inviting loyalty to ruler and people in place of devotion to faith. Once the intricate balance of power in the Holy Roman Empire had been dismantled by Napoleon, a vacuum arose in central Europe that would soon enough be filled by a new phenomenon, Germany, with its unique combination of cultural vibrancy, technical mastery, and memories of pan-European supremacy.

Meanwhile, from the sixteenth century, Europe and its capital, commerce, and civilisation had been making forays across the world, to the Americas, to Africa, and to Asia. The church sent missionaries to the ends of the earth, sometimes ahead of and sometimes behind the entrepreneurs that shared their ambition but directed it to different ends. For the colonisers, Europe was the centre of the universe, and success was in making the rest of the world more like the land from which they’d come. They forgot that Jesus was not a European. In some parts of the New World, notably America, energy and resources would one day exceed those of Europe. And eventually Russia would decide it did want to be part of Europe after all.
The combination of these diverse factors – the divisions among peoples, the rise of the nation state, the emergence of the wider world, and the industrialisation of culture and war, led to the combustion of Europe in the repeated civil war of 1914 and 1939, and its moral nadir in the Holocaust. In the rubble of the 1950s European leaders woke up to a new reality in which they were no longer the economic centre of the world, religion was no longer a pervasive influence uniting culture, colonialism was having as much of an effect on the western powers as on the peoples they’d subjugated, and unless they put a stop to civil war they would beat each other to a physical, emotional, moral and economic pulp. The result of that realisation was, over the next two generations, the emergence of the European Union, given extra energy by the fall of Communism and the expansion of liberal democracy eastwards.

While the necessity of the European Union was political, the possibility of Europe, as a power to rival America, Japan and emerging markets, and as a zone in which to move freely, was economic. But this brought with it two quandaries that remain problematic and unresolved. Can there be economic union without political union, with Europe becoming more or less one country, borderless and limitless, like in medieval times? And how can economic unity be sustained when different countries have such contrasting degrees of wealth, stability, and public policy? These are the issues that are troubling all of Europe today.

After that brief historical survey, let me turn to what I take to be the three rival but overlapping visions that characterise the European sense of itself. Each has a particular way of telling Europe’s story, and each has a particular perspective on Christianity. The first I’m going to call the pragmatic view. The pragmatic view sees the priority as the flourishing of individuals and peoples in democratic conditions of sustainable affluence, such that justice reigns and diversity is upheld and damaging economic peril, cultural tension, or worst of all violent conflict, are avoided. It’s a limited aspiration, but in the light of the last hundred years, a worthy one. Such a view concentrates on getting the relationship between France and Germany right, since that interface has proved so explosive in recent times. It sees economic union as a practical way to ensure the flexibility and competitiveness of Europe in a global market. And it sees religion as an administrative problem. It recalls the Thirty Years’ War of the seventeenth century, and regards that bloodbath, with its 8 million deaths, as the definitive statement that religious division causes terrible violence. With the rise of Islamist terrorism in the last 15 years, this fear of religion is renewed, and the church is often seen as a mild version of what is inherently an anti-liberal aspect of society that can be tolerated but must be closely monitored.

This pragmatic approach is the dominant view among European elites today. It’s a technocratic policy that recognises the powerful economic interests of Germany, France, Britain, and sometimes Italy, but seeks to balance those interests with the long-term stability of the whole continent. It’s not clear whether it will have the force of character to address climate change, the imagination to set a better culture towards external and internal migration, or the clout and patience to overcome the euro crisis and the challenges of austerity. This is the Europe Pope Francis described as weary and aging, elderly and haggard, losing its fertility and vibrancy. It has a compelling social logic, but lacks a vision of transcendent good in which the claims of Christianity, of repentance and mercy, of abundant and eternal life can find a hearing.

The second perspective I’m calling the romantic view. This believes there really is something special about Europe – something tied to classical civilisation and to Christianity and the interplay of the two, something that the Renaissance highlighted and the best kind of humanism fostered. It’s a view that takes pride in the legacy of Charlemagne, Luther, Calvin, even Napoleon, of great figures with expansive visions and high ideals. It has a lot of time for national cultures, and folk tales, and swathes of forests, glorious mountains and beautiful cities, local languages and classical music, literature and philosophy. At the same time it understands the fear of the stranger and it laments the bureaucratisation brought about by regulatory regimes. It’s not inherently tied up with a
particular economic package or an inevitable slide toward political unification. It’s rooted in a
desire to translate what it sees as the cultural aspirations of Christianity – to ennoble the people,
enrich their common life, and enhance their mutual flourishing. If the pragmatic approach has a lot
of the solidity, earnestness and attention to detail of north-European Protestantism, this romantic
view has rather more of the artistic, idealistic character of southern-European Catholicism.

The problem with this more aspirational view of Europe is what it ignores and what it excludes. The
idea of a pure Europe that embodied the classical and Christian heritage of antiquity sounds
marvellous. But it hides an exclusionary culture that ostracised Jews and eventually murdered six
million of them, on spurious theological and biological grounds that they didn’t belong. The
language of Christianity has been employed to suggest there’s no place for Turkey, because Turkey
supposedly lacks that Christian character, and to argue that Islam is somehow inherently inimical to
Europe, again because this is in some way Christian territory. It’s the same logic that led Christian
Europeans to suppose an innate superiority to other cultures and embark on the whole colonial
project. There’s so much ugliness in European history that it’s surprising people still hold out for
the romantic view rather than slink away to an embarrassed corner.

What we need is a third vision, one that accepts the realities of the pragmatic view about global
economics and avoiding war, while recovering some of the joy and aspiration of the romantic view,
about beauty and culture and truth. At the same time that vision needs to free itself of the
cumbersome lead weight of the pragmatic approach and the myopic nostalgia of the romantic
perspective. Two things are equally clear: the idea that a nation such as ours can simply withdraw
from the European project and take its ball home is a fantasy. But at the same time the European
dream of a realm of freedom and flourishing springing out of a diverse people rooted in shared
values has undeniably lost its sparkle. What might a renewed and realistic vision look like?

The story of Pentecost tells of the Holy Spirit coming in wind and flame. The apostles were given
energy and dynamism and people from north, south, east and west found they could each hear the
gospel in their own language. It’s not that there was just one language, and everyone had to speak
it; it’s that there were a myriad of languages but the barriers those different languages were taken
away. This offers a vision for Europe: not one megastate; not one system for everything; not the
eliding of healthy difference. Instead, a model of diversity as peace, the harnessing of divergent
cultures for enrichment, the challenge and engagement of many systems for the benefit of all. It’s
an old favourite that in hell the Italians run the trains, the English are the lovers, and the Swiss tell
the jokes, while in heaven the Italians are the lovers, the English tell the jokes and the Swiss run the
trains. Like many old favourites, there’s a lot of truth in it.

A renewed and realistic Europe can’t have sharp boundaries. It’s not for one kind of people and it’s
absurd to say Muslims don’t belong. It can’t be about keeping certain people out; it has to be about
widening the tent and extending the notion of flourishing in new contexts. If it’s worried about
mass inward migration it must invest in the countries from which immigrants are coming and
eradicate their reasons for fleeing their homes.

The Christianity that I believe has a place in a renewed Europe can’t be claiming Constantinian
domiance or cultural superiority or historical entitlement. It must prove itself by acts of mercy,
peace, and grace, by evident wisdom, understanding, and love, by facilitating education,
reconciliation and healing. The European Union is founded on two principles – solidarity and
subsidiarity. Both come from Catholic social teaching. Solidarity is the desire to support one
another in good times and bad. Subsidiarity is the commitment to deal with problems at the most
local level suitable to address them. There’s not much wrong with Europe that a return to these
core principles wouldn’t improve.
But a renewed Europe must have a heart. For me, there’s only one place that has a claim to be the heart of the new Europe: and that’s Auschwitz. Auschwitz is the place that teaches humility to all European pretensions, honesty to all memories, warning to all language of purity and power. A Europe centred on Auschwitz won’t give in to nostalgia or content itself with pragmatics. It will be alert to the outsider and wise to malign ideology. Its Christianity will never forget it comes from the Jews, and its rhetoric will never forget that becoming Babel is no idle fear.

And a renewed Europe must be something it’s never really been before. There’s one country in Europe that’s never let go of its eighteenth- and nineteenth-century colonies, and where the church has never renounced its Constantinian pretensions. And that’s Russia. As long as Russia remains outside the EU the EU will seem like a bulwark against it. But a fully-engaged Russia would reunite the Orthodox and Catholic halves of Europe and finally put the Communist ghost to bed.

The debate about Europe consistently misses the point because those who care passionately for or against the EU do so for romantic reasons of culture and identity that are ultimately blind to the circumstantial details. But the public debate concentrates almost entirely on pragmatic claims that assume Europe was an economic calculation from the beginning and largely miss the historical and religious context. Vainglorious Tower of Babel or Creative Outpouring of Pentecost? Europe has almost always been a mixture of the two. It still is. It’s not necessarily better together. But it’s almost certainly absurd apart.