Europe's New Reformation

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CAMBRIDGE, U.K.—It is no secret that the European Union is in severe crisis. Besides the challenge of Brexit, the established order is threatened by a range of other schismatics and heretics to the south, east and indeed within the Franco-German core.

What is less well understood is that in many ways we have been here before—500 years ago, when the Reformation tore Europe apart.

Rome, Constantinople and Moscow

Around 1500, most of our continent was shaped by a single geo-ideological and geopolitical order, or at least a common imaginary. Roman Catholicism reigned supreme from the west coast of Ireland to the eastern borders of Poland and Lithuania, from Norway's North Cape to the heel of the Italian boot.

A wronged wife in Yorkshire could appeal to the papacy for justice if necessary.

You had to go quite far east or southeast to encounter the rival Christian order of Orthodoxy in Muscovy and much of the Balkans.

This was the result of an earlier schism in the church, creating a second Rome in Constantinople, and after the fall of that city a Third Rome in Moscow. Europeans referred to their continent as "Christendom."

Roman crisis

This order was already under some pressure. The Roman Church was generally perceived to be in crisis. Clerical ignorance and corruption, for example the sale of "indulgences," were increasingly regarded as intolerable. Demands for reform were widespread.

In England, one of the great realms of Europe, the common people chafed under clerical abuses, and the monarchy under papal constraints on its authority. Ever since the Middle Ages, the parliamentary statute of "praemunire" had made it illegal to sue for justice in a foreign court, at least with regard to high matters of state.

When all was said and done, though, the sense of inhabiting a political commonwealth was deeply ingrained throughout most of the continent.

Religious wars and political struggles

This unity was shattered by the Reformation crisis, which engulfed Europe from the second decade of the 16th century.

The German friar Martin Luther's concerns were largely doctrinal, not least his insistence on justification by faith alone. The Church cleaned up its act, to a certain extent, with the Counter-Reformation, but it also sought to reassert the true faith and papal authority through force of arms.

Over the next 200 years or so, our continent was roiled by troubles. These were wars of religion, but also political power struggles both between states and within them.

Thirty Years War

Nowhere was this contest as intense as in the Holy Roman Empire (in effect, Germany), the heart of Europe. It was plowed over in the 16th century wars of the Protestant princes against Emperor Charles V, who was loyal to Rome, and then traumatically in the Thirty Years War from 1618 to 1648.

Protestants and Catholics set about each other; external powers such as France, Sweden and Spain intervened at will. Cities such as Magdeburg were sacked amid scenes of extraordinary brutality.

The experience seared itself so deeply into the national consciousness that even in the mid 20th century, shortly after the end of the Second World War, the Thirty Years War was still regarded as its most traumatic period in history.

Henry VIII challenged the church

In England the Reformation was not a doctrinal dispute over theological truth that developed into a political contest. It happened the other way around.

It originated as a challenge by Henry VIII against the authority of the church—to be more specific, his desire to annul his marriage to his wife Katherine, despite the pope's refusal to grant this, and marry another in order to produce a male heir.

This escalated into a broader assertion of English sovereignty, most strikingly expressed in Parliament's Act of Appeals in 1533, which laid down "that this realm of England is an empire."

In other words, England was a legal system unto itself. There could be no appeal to a higher authority.

The doctrine of "praemunire," which had previously applied only to matters of state, now became the law of the land. A wronged woman in Yorkshire could no longer appeal to Rome.

England was increasingly separated from the European legal order. At the same time, Henry VIII relentlessly attacked the institutions of the Church, especially through the dissolution of the monasteries.

Central to Henry's vision was his sense of English greatness. Funded by the sale of church property, he sought to reestablish Henry V's empire in France and to vindicate Christendom in a crusade against the Turks. He even hoped to become Holy Roman Emperor and was a candidate for that crown in the contest in which Charles V emerged victorious.

The implementation of the English Reformation was not a linear process, neither with regard to doctrine nor in respect of authority. Henry oscillated doctrinally, but as far as belief was concerned he effectively died a Catholic.

The most far-reaching liturgical changes—such as the introduction of the Prayer Book in 1549—took place during the reign of his immediate heir Edward VI. This was followed by a reaction under the Catholic Queen Mary, Henry's daughter from his first marriage, which was one of the bloodiest periods of religious persecution in Europe at the time.

Protestantism and parliamentary supremacy

Only in the early 18th century, with the bedding down of the Hanoverian succession, did Protestantism and parliamentary supremacy become firmly established in this country.

Three things were central to this process of emancipation from the continent.

■ First, the creation of a pro-Reformation constituency.

This was partly acquisitive—the emergence of a whole new class that benefited from the distribution of spoils from the secularised monasteries. But it was also affective—the widespread sense that loyalty to an independent English church represented a fundamental part of what it meant to be English, and that the Old Church, the Church of Rome, was the faith of foreigners and traitors. Catholic holdouts, or "recusants," came to be seen as a fifth column.

■ Secondly, the new regime established an ascendancy not merely over England, but over the entire British Isles.

■ Thirdly, England was able to see off various outside attempts at interference and to intervene itself decisively on the European mainland.

Justly or unjustly, the Catholic or crypto-Catholic English monarchs acquired a reputation for strategic incompetence or, worse still, collusion with foreign powers. Mary's standing never recovered from the loss of Calais in 1558, nor that of Charles II from the Treaty of Dover in 1670, by which he effectively sold the country to France in return for Louis XIV's support for the restoration of Catholicism and monarchical authority in England.

A new European order

When the great schism came to an end in the early 18th century, a very different European order took shape. In England, Anglicanism emerged dominant and in the British Isles so did Protestantism more generally.

The four nations were progressively welded into a single geopolitical unit. These were designed to prevent Scotland and Ireland from serving, as they so often had, as "the back door" to England.

The new system also delivered on Henry's main ambition, which was to make England—or the United Kingdom as the expanded state was now called—the principal ordering power in Europe.

From the early 18th century to the present day, London has been at the heart of almost every major European settlement.

■ This began with the Treaty of Utrecht in 1713, which enshrined the principle of the "balance of power."

■ This was followed by the Treaty of Vienna in 1815, in which the British foreign secretary Lord Castlereagh was centrally involved in the reconstruction of Europe following the Revolutionary and Napoleonic Wars.

■ Lloyd George was similarly involved in the Versailles Settlement that established a new order after the First World War.

■ Churchill and his successors were among the "big three" at the Yalta and Potsdam settlements that ended the Second World War.

Britain was less central during the Cold War, but was still the most important western European actor. The great exception was the European integration project, which Britain joined belatedly and, as we all know, awkwardly.

Role of France

In France, the boot was on the other foot. Protestantism had been completely defeated; royal power triumphed over representative assemblies.

The French church was very much under the control of the crown, a phenomenon known as "Gallicanism," while the more aesthetic and purified form of Catholicism practised there was called "Jansenism."

France too became an ordering power in Europe, though a less effective and long-lasting one than the United Kingdom.

Role of Germany

In Germany, the great schism resulted in a very different settlement, both religiously and politically.

The Treaties of Westphalia, which ended the Thirty Years War in 1648, enshrined a system of power-sharing between Catholics, Lutherans and Calvinists. This was guaranteed by external powers, in the first instance France and Sweden.

Contrary to myth, Westphalia did not mark the emergence of the modern "sovereign nation state." On the contrary, sovereignty was diffused, partly because it was feared that German princes would abuse it and plunge central Europe back into war, and partly because outside actors feared that their rivals might use the unified powers of the Holy Roman Empire to achieve hegemony in Europe.

Eastern Europe

A different sort of compromise was reached in parts of eastern Europe, which had been contested by Catholicism and Orthodoxy. The Uniate Church effectively split the difference. It acknowledged papal authority, but followed a Byzantine liturgy—the opposite of the late Henrician Reformation in England.

This order lasted about another 200 years and survived serious challenges, the most severe being that of revolutionary and Napoleonic France around 1800.

Second Thirty Years War

From the early 20th century however, between 1914 and 1945, Europe was once again convulsed by a period in which ideologies, states and nations faced off, in what both Charles de Gaulle and Winston Churchill called, with good reason, "The Second Thirty Years War."

Like its predecessor, it was a savage ideological conflict, this time a three-sided contest between Nazism, communism and western democracy. Like the Thirty Years War, its main focus had been Germany.

In some respects, the order that emerged after the Second World War bore a remarkable resemblance to what had followed the great 17th century conflagrations. At first, Germany was neutralised, becoming an object rather than a subject of the European system.

The Federal Republic slowly regained its right to participate in European politics on the understanding that it remained embedded in the wider structures of European integration.

European Economic Community

The United Kingdom joined the European Economic Community in 1973. Thereafter, London did much of its "ordering" in Europe through the EEC and later the European Union.

The EU resembled both a church and an empire. Its hold over the imaginations and emotions of many Europeans was something like a religious faith. They might be diverse and fractious, but they were all part of a single whole.

A new order was born, one in which the divisions originating in the Reformation and deepened by centuries of conflict were slowly healed.

The EU was often likened to the Old Holy Roman Empire with its emphasis on rules and the "juridification" of political conflict. It was a geo-economic order centred on the customs union, the single market and free movement.

Above all, the EU was a geo-legal order, in which Union law prevailed over national law. A wronged woman in Yorkshire could now appeal to a higher court—the Court of Justice of the EU—than those of the land. There was a general sense that there could be no prosperity, no security, no law and even no salvation outside the EU.

Another age of schism

Over the past eight years, however, Europe has been so violently convulsed by crises that we can speak of another age of schism.

- First to emerge was the North-South divide.

The eurozone bubble burst in the Mediterranean, creating unsustainable banking and sovereign debt crises in countries such as Greece, Spain and Portugal. There is now a fundamental divide between "northern Europe" and the "south"—which is groaning under the impact of austerity.

- Europe was also rent by the eastern schism.

Member states such as Poland, Hungary, Slovakia and Bulgaria increasingly felt culturally alienated from the central and western European liberal mainstream. This division became manifest when some of these countries refused to take even a token number of refugees from the brutal Syrian war.

There was also a big question mark over the reach of the EU's legal order, as governments ignored rulings on the independence of the judiciary and of the press.

Eastern Europe began to become a fundamentally different place, with a distinct and more reactionary political culture, closer to Putin's "Third Rome" than Brussels.

Million new migrants

All this was aggravated by a schism not merely between the member states but within them.

These had long existed, but the economic crisis, and especially the appearance of around a million new migrants from Syria and other parts of the Middle East and Africa in late 2015 led to a surge in right- and left-wing populism, even in the Franco-German core.

In the 2017 presidential elections in France, the National Front secured a third of the votes in the second round.

In the German federal elections the same year, the far-right Alternative für Deutschland more than doubled its vote share to 12.6 percent and is now the official opposition in the Bundestag.

Brexit vote and Britain sovereignty

But, of course, the greatest breach in the European order was the Brexit vote of June 2016.

There were many issues at stake in the referendum, but the fundamental (if not always clearly articulated) question was whether Britain should accept serious constraints on its sovereignty in order to remain part of a larger com-

monwealth, or whether it would reassert the primacy of laws made by West-minster and arbitrated by U.K. courts alone.

The Brexit project was thus "Empire 2.0," not so much in the global 19th century sense, but in the sense of making the U.K., to use the language of the 1533 Parliamentary Act of Appeals, once more "an empire" unto itself; that is a sovereign legal and political space.

This was primarily an assertion of authority, rather than the articulation of doctrinal difference. It was, so to speak, a Henry VIII moment.

Catholic Europe and Reformation

The response of the EU to this challenge in some respects resembled that of the Old Church and Catholic Europe to the Reformation.

This sentiment was manifest in the response of Jean-Claude Juncker, president of the European Commission, to Theresa May's hope that they could make a "success of Brexit." Brexit, he said, "cannot" be a success.

There could be no salvation outside the Union, just as there was no salvation outside the Catholic Church.

Brexit was an offence not merely to the European order, but to the European imaginary.

Viewed as U.K. defecting

When the EU began the Brexit talks, it did so not with the understanding that the European system was co-owned by the United Kingdom and the European Union, but rather that the U.K. was defecting from the only legitimate geo-legal order. This was reflected in its "demands" at the start of the negotiation.

■ First, the U.K. would have to settle its divorce "bill" and EU citizens' rights.

■ Then it would have to provide guarantees on the Irish border, making clear that the only assurances the EU would accept involved a "backstop" that would, if necessary, extrude Northern Ireland from the economic and legal order of the United Kingdom. (May is now frantically seeking to amend this to provide an exit mechanism for the U.K..)

■ Only then would the EU discuss the future relationship, including the all-important question of trade.

It treated the United Kingdom, in effect, as a schismatic rather than an equal partner. Strikingly, the U.K. government and its negotiators not only accepted the EU's framework but also seem to have internalised the thinking behind it. This is not surprising, as the policy was formulated by a Remain prime minister and conducted by civil service mandarins whose entire professional and cultural formation had taken place within the EU.

This is not to suggest any bad faith on their part, merely to note that their thinking still runs within a groove that Brexit was designed to escape.

It was rather like entrusting the English Reformation to the English bishops loyal to Rome. Even Brexiteers such as David Davis followed suit, at least initially.

Break from the EU

The resulting "deal" agreed by the Prime Minister with the EU in November 2018 reflects this. It is the opposite of the Henrician Reformation.

It offers a clear doctrinal break with the EU, for example through a proposed end to "free movement," but will most likely leave the U.K. under the authority of a foreign politico-legal order.

During the transition period, the U.K. will remain part of the customs union ultimately arbitrated by the European Court of Justice. Ireland, in other words, has once again served as the "back door" to England, or if you prefer as the "back door" back into Europe for Remainers and British business.

Yet under some rules

In the meantime, the entire U.K. will be subject to EU rules on trade, current and future environmental legislation, labour and social laws, and state aid, without having a voice in making them.

It is therefore not surprising to find a leading Brexiteer, Boris Johnson, arguing that the Prime Minister's plan to remain under some EU laws was in violation of the (long-repealed) Statute of Praemunire.

The deal agreed between May and the EU also differs from the Henrician Reformation, and the subsequent history of this country, in another fundamental respect.

Excluded itself

For hundreds of years, the U.K. has been not merely self-governing but an ordering power in Europe. The deal on offer, by contrast, excludes Britain from the general ordering system of the continent. If one prefers, one can say that the U.K. has excluded itself, but the point remains.

Some of the contours of the new post-schism European order are already clear.

■ It seems likely that the Old Church and empire, otherwise known as the European Union, will continue to hold sway over much of central and western Europe.

■ It has acquired a doughty if embattled champion in France's President Macron, whose reform policies are very much in the Jansenist tradition, and whose insistence on French national interests within a larger "European sovereignty" can only be described as "Gallican."

■ The east is increasingly Uniate: politically tied to the European Union, but culturally more and more Byzantine.

Uncertain future

For now, we cannot be sure how Britain will fit in. A "people's vote," or some other change of heart, could return her to the Old Church, the EU.

Britain could, as per the Prime Minister's deal, follow the Uniate model of remaining under aspects of EU authority but cultivate liturgical difference in areas such as immigration.

Or the U.K. could go for fully fledged political Anglicanism—complete separation from the continent. Nobody can be sure how this will end.

The Old Church remains strong in many parts of the United Kingdom, especially Scotland and Northern Ireland, but also in the big cities, the universities and the professions.

Because of demographic shifts, peak Remain will be in about 20 years' time.

■ For this reason, all else being equal, Brexit will only be irreversible with the passing of the first generation of those who have only known life outside the EU.

■ If Brexit persists beyond this point, the Remainers will indeed become recusants, still prominent perhaps in the seats of learning, but no longer a force to be reckoned with.

In European geopolitics, of course, things are never equal.

■ Like the Reformation, the future of Brexit will also be determined by outside powers. The EU could, for instance, so marginalise the U.K. that "return" becomes the only remedy to penury and irrelevance.

Alternatively, the EU might provoke a hostile reaction and deepen Brexit.

Just as the reign of Mary Tudor led to a fatal association between Catholicism, foreign domination and strategic incompetence, so the cause of Remain or "return" could be tarred with the same brush.

Lingering questions

So we are left with more questions than answers.

■ Will Brexit be reversed by a Marian reaction, or will the original clash of authority be followed by a further deepening of the U.K.'s political divide with the continent?

■ Will England, Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland be ordered by the United Kingdom, or by the European Union?

■ Even if Westminster manages to assert its authority over the British Isles, how will the United Kingdom discharge its ordering functions on the continent of Europe once outside the EU?

■ Will the Europeans recognise the "exceptionality" of the United Kingdom, and accept the co-management of our continent, or are Britain and the rest of Europe condemned to another destructive clash of ordering claims?