

# UNITING *for* P E A C E

Edinburgh Inter-Faith Peace Event: April 27 2017:Annandale Street Mosque

"Faith, Peace and Global Politics in the Age of President Trump"

## Populism - And its Moral Challenges

by Rev. Brian Cooper - UfP Churches/Inter-Faith Secretary

### **CONTEXT:**

Just after June 23 2016 Brexit vote, a Pakistani friend asked me, in a tone both sad and definitely rather alarmed: "is this the end of liberal Britain?" She had no doubt *racial and religious intolerance - especially anti-Muslim* - was part of the mix of reasons for Brexit winning. I tried to re-assure her, but soon learned Metropolitan Police recorded 40%+ increase in race hate crime in aftermath of the vote, with most other police forces recording significant rises. It was *NOT that all Brexit voters are racially intolerant & anti-Muslim. Of course many are not.* I don't believe pro-Brexit campaigners like Boris Johnson and Michael Gove were preaching racial and religious intolerance, or UKIP is a racist party [but surely has covert racists and its anti-immigrant and anti-refugee rhetoric has racist tones]. BUT the EU referendum debate became not just about pros & cons of the European Union, but also about wider issues of national identity and history, creating a social and political space in which dark, illiberal, prejudiced, intolerant voices - previously not publicly acceptable - were expressed on doorsteps, in public meetings and at the ballot box. PM May talks of UK now 'embracing the world' - but

much Brexit sentiment was and is about a narrowing of vision, a turning inwards. [Scotland's EU referendum vote seemed to indicate less of that, but social attitudes surveys say Scottish attitudes on such issues are similar to those in England]. There was *subtle and not so subtle appeal to base instincts - fear, intolerance, sense of superiority, racism, xenophobia, etc.* - eg. the notorious UKIP poster of refugees in Balkans clamouring to enter Europe, implying a UK in EU would be engulfed by Middle East refugees - with no hint of humanitarian concern for their plight. This kind of appeal, this style of politics, is the stuff of POPULISM, very evident now across Europe & USA.

### **Populist Politics**

In 2016 US election campaign, Hillary Clinton described Trump's supporters as a 'basket of deplorables' - racist, xenophobic, homophobic, Islamophobic, misogynist/etc. This was a political blunder! An opponent's supporters are not won over by expressing disgust at them. But it was Clinton's gut reaction, albeit misguided, against Trump's blatant populism, his use of outrageous and contrarian statements to ensure people with those kind of views would vote for him. His brand of populism eg. Islamophobic and anti-Mexican rhetoric, had a strong 'anti-foreigner' element, as did his promise of isolationism [seemingly now abandoned]. Calculated divisiveness, setting one community against another, often scapegoating a minority for social ills, are almost universal elements of populism eg. in UK, media attacks on 'benefit scroungers', asylum seekers etc; in Netherlands, Geert Wilders urging extreme anti-Muslim policies such as banning the Koran and closing mosques; in France, Marine Le Pen and Front National in likewise pushing anti-immigrant and anti-Muslim extremism. Similar populist intolerance is now found in movements in most EU countries, especially in Austria, where the neo-Nazi Freedom Party won 45% of the Presidential vote, and in Germany, where Alternativ fur Deutschland and Pegida [People against Islamisation of Europe] have substantial support. While open anti-Semitism has been expunged from some populist credos, it still lurks -

and is potent in some populist movements - eg. Beppe Grillo, Italian ultra-rich comic demagogue who leads the anti-establishment Five Star Movement, is openly anti-Semitic.

**By appealing to the basest instincts - and never talking about human rights, safeguarding minorities, solidarity and internationalism - populist parties present a fundamental moral challenge to long-held social ethics shared by Jews, Christians, Muslims - and Enlightenment humanists. The very notion of compassion, rooted in Europe's Judaeo-Christian heritage, is absent from Populism.** The original founding leaders of the European Union were mostly Catholic, and rooted EU concepts in Catholic notions of solidarity, social caring & reconciliation - all of which populism rejects. It is no surprise populism tends to be anti-EU.

### **Why does Populism Appeal and Advance?**

Yet appealing to base hatreds and visceral intolerances is not enough to explain how these mostly far-right parties have moved from Europe's political fringes to its mainstream - or Trump's victory in USA. Recent events, whether UK Brexit and Trump, or the appeal of Front National in France or 5Star in Italy, clearly show deep forces and frustrations are at work. Anti-immigrant sentiment is both intolerance and lack of human solidarity - but also about issues of national identity and history, and too rapid social change. There is widespread rage against elites, mainstream parties, bankers - against 'the system' failing so many. Above all, *populism offers simplistic answers to problems caused by globalisation, especially the out-sourcing of production to China and elsewhere.* Trump identified this as key source of discontent: neo-liberal global free trade created China's middle class and rising working class at the expense of America's working and lower middle classes [and those of Western Europe, too]. Democrats in USA, and Conservative and Socialist parties in Europe failed to face this. Stopping unhelpful global trade deals like TTIP and Asia free trade agreement is popular, and probably beneficial. "Bringing jobs back to America" was a key element in Trump's appeal; Marine Le Pen appeals likewise to France's own northern 'Rust Belt'; 5Star rejects international trade deals & pitches at Italy's poor. Beppo goes further: he wants to abolish political parties, as a new Mussolini. Within populism

is recognition of the human casualties of globalisation - indeed an embracing of them and their neglect by liberal political establishments - along with dangerously simplistic offers to save them.

Often crude in its political discourse and often rejecting moral norms, populism harnesses intense even virulent nationalism - hence its opposition to international institutions such as EU and UN. Furthermore, populism makes highly emotional appeals, rejecting reason, negotiation and compromise. eg. Michael Gove in EU debate: "We don't need experts!"

**Populism is flourishing now because:**

- world changed 2008-9 with financial crash
- austerity is really hurting millions [25% youth unemployment in France and Italy] -- so many established certainties have been swept away, causing a sense of dislocation
- millions feel disoriented, anxious, fearful about the future
- Islamist jihadist terrorism heightens anxiety and insecurity
- globalisation and inter-dependence require a human leap-forward to a global citizenship as well as EU/national/local citizenship, but people find that hard to accept. [PM May: "If you are a citizen of the world, you are a citizen of nowhere" - she can't grasp multi-identity]. Theologically, this is the moral and spiritual calling to global awareness and community set forth by Catholic theologian Teilhard de Chardin.

In Eastern Europe, populist authoritarianism has come to power in Hungary under Viktor Orbán and in Poland under Jarosław Kaczyński. They proclaim their purpose is to build "illiberal democracy", with closeness of party and state, party control of state apparatus, judicial system, media, culture etc. *They have gone much further than anything proposed by Western Europe's populists, because democracy is still very weak in post-Communist Eastern Europe.*

Populism represents the dark tradition in modern Europe. The post-Cold War assumption eg Francis Fukuyama 'End of History', the future was inevitably democracy, global free markets, human rights and liberal advance, was severely under question before current populism - eg rise of militant Islam, Western

**interventionism in Middle East.** Pankaj Mishra in *Age of Anger* - History of the Present, shows the falsity of the idea of inevitable liberal progress in an arc from 18th-century Enlightenment to recent liberal interventionism, and of the notion that the violent periods of the modern era - Two World Wars, etc - were 'aberrations' from an ongoing march of liberalism, freedom and reason. Imperialism, racist exploitation of subject peoples, Fascism, and huge conflicts, were all part of Europe's actions, causing global reactions.

**Populism is a resurgence of Europe's darker side, which brought such death, destruction and misery in mid-20th-century. The self-destructive urge manifest then is evident in some ways now.** Mishra quotes the 'Futurist Manifesto' [1909] of Italian poet and precursor of Fascism, Filippo Marinetti: "*We want to glorify war....and contempt for women. We want to destroy museums, libraries and academies of all kinds.*" If not militaristic, European populism certainly has many aspects of the irrational and destructive.

**We have certainly plunged into another Age of Unreason.** George Osborne, controversial Conservative politician who was Chancellor of the Exchequer during Cameron's premiership and now edits London's *Evening Standard*, is writing a book called *The Age of Unreason*. A recent lecture on its issues included: "*Financial crisis, communities left behind by globalisation, rapid cultural change and the blistering pace of technological advance have led many to conclude that it's time to stop trying to fix the world's problems and instead focus on putting our own houses in order. It's an alluring message made more potent by the echo chamber of social media. Erecting trade barriers with our neighbours, making an enemy of our open societies, demonising those seeking a better life, turning away refugees, unravelling the institutions that sustain the West, are not the answer. If the Statue of Liberty turns its back on the world, if Britain retreats behind its island shores, then it is not just others who depend on us who will pay the price - the heavy cost will fall on our own citizens too.*"

### **Summing-Up: The Moral Challenges of Populism**

Populism poses fundamental challenges to the moral, ethical and spiritual teachings and traditions of Christianity, Islam, the other faiths, and to

Enlightenment humanism:

**:: It preaches fear - and opposes hope. *We must re-affirm hope.***

**:: It creates division. *We must re-affirm community and solidarity.***

**:: It preaches hate. *We must re-affirm harmony and fellowship.***

Faith communities, especially Muslims, are under threat from Populism. ***We must re-assert civilisational values, especially:***

**Tolerance; respect for and between communities; healing in society; compassion for the needy in UK and internationally; respect for minorities; internationalism and global awareness; global and social inter-dependence; use of God-given Reason, not emotionalism.**

**Populism is a present danger: even if its leaders don't win, they are shifting public discourse in a meaner, more intolerant, and more inward-looking direction.**

Rev. Brian Cooper - April 27 2017

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