

Living by European values

Opinion

16 May 2014 | Fr Emmanuel Agius | 4

5 min read



The Berlin Declaration pointed to the need to establish a new dimension to the EU based on shared values. Photo: European Commission

There is a general consensus that Malta's membership of the European Union opened up remarkable opportunities and brought about new challenges for our country. There is a concerted effort towards the laudable goal of transforming Malta, if possible, into the best country in the EU.

Some argue that the cultural changes that this country has gone through over these past few years are the natural outcome of our membership of the EU. Once we have thrown open all the doors and windows, we cannot keep out the winds of change. It is then claimed that living by European values means adopting a liberal mindset. This translates into placing a premium on the individual and interpreting the public or common good

essentially as a set of conditions that would allow the individual to pursue his/her own life in freedom.

The problem with this line of thinking does not lie in the emphasis being placed on the freedom of every individual. Recognition of individual freedoms is a necessary requisite of social life in any democratic country. But is the concept of the public or common good as a belief that goes beyond an individualistic interpretation pertinent to articulate adequately the meaning of our life in society?

One should, I think, acknowledge that the European ethos, which is a common source of inspiration for all EU member states, is facing the challenge of the spilling over of unrestrained economic liberalism and competitiveness into political liberalism with its concomitant emphasis on egotistic individualism. These two forms of liberalism are taking root among us.

“ *The mere sum of individual preferences does not turn preferences into objective values* ”

Within this scenario, custom or tradition have little, if anything at all, to teach us insofar as we are members of society and there is very little space for real civil and public dialogue. Indeed, this appears to allow far less space for the common emergence of humane considerations and joint cooperative activities which are expressions of our human solidarity.

In May 2007, on the occasion of the 50th anniversary of the Treaty of Rome, EU heads of State and of government adopted a political document (the Berlin Declaration) through which the European political project was relaunched.

The declaration adopted an unprecedented approach in defining the EU's policy objectives. Instead of advocating socio-economic goals, the Berlin Declaration pointed to the need for establishing a new dimension to the EU that is based on shared values.

The declaration states that “EU countries are striving for peace and freedom, for democracy and the rule of law, for mutual respect and shared responsibility, for prosperity and security, for tolerance and participation, for justice and solidarity”. These are the normative pillars supporting European policies. The litmus-test of any country is the implementation of all these values in its socio-political and economic spheres.

Both the Charter of European Fundamental Rights and the Lisbon Treaty endorse EU fundamental values that outline the core political design of the EU.

The Charter endorses a set of important values, such as human dignity, freedom, democracy, subsidiarity, protection of human rights, pluralism, non-discrimination, tolerance, justice, and solidarity and gender equality.

The aim of the Lisbon Treaty is to provide the Union with a legal framework and the tools necessary to meet future challenges and to respond to citizens' demands, such as a more democratic and transparent Europe, a more efficient Europe, a Europe of rights and values and Europe as an actor on the global stage.

Europe is not merely a geographical area but a community of values. The founding fathers of the 1950s dreamt of a Europe based on rights and values. Values are present at the core of each country and help to shape its individual culture and its identity.

Values are different from mere preferences. A purely subjective interpretation of European values, the kind of which is currently being pushed in our country, presents us with a number of pitfalls.

The mere sum of individual preferences does not turn preferences into objective values. Values are deeper, richer and presume a sense of memory as well as an intergenerational, interpersonal and social dimension to one's life. While it is commendable that we be forward-looking, belittling the past and uprooting ourselves from core historical values risks creating a vacuum, an identity crisis and a state of confusion.

The EU thrives on respect for plurality and diversity and on non-discrimination. However, we should never understand these principles as code words for value relativism. They have nothing to do with the creation of a society where individuals are merely self-contained entities, operating independently of, if not in competition with, others, particularly vulnerable persons in society.

Acknowledging individual rights does not mean and cannot mean, for example, delegitimising the Christian heritage of Europe and the important values which ensue from it, such as human dignity, justice, the common good, mutuality, altruism, universal brotherhood, protecting marriage and the family, respect for life in general and human life in particular, preferential option for the poor, etc.

In searching for the way forward, our country needs to become more conscious and conscientious of the authentic underlying values that the European project has been safeguarding and promoting in order to address its new and pressing socio-economic, political, environmental and biotechnological issues.

In the wake of the 10th anniversary of Malta's membership of the EU and in view of the upcoming elections for the European Parliament next week, these reflections, which I share with a number of colleagues at the Faculty of Theology, may, hopefully, foster public debate far beyond May 24.

Fr Emmanuel Agius is dean of the Faculty of Theology at the University of Malta.

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