

## The European exemplar

Written by The Conversation

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No-one doubts that Europe, or more specifically the European Union, has got more than its fair share of problems. Even before home-grown jihadists inflicted their version of divine retribution on an unambiguously irreverent group of archetypically Parisian artists and intellectuals, the EU was wracked with political, economic and social problems.

Paradoxically enough, though, the spectre of religious intolerance may yet bring out the best in Europe. Recent events may remind Europe's leaders – and the rest of us, for that matter – just what Europe represents and why it remains the greatest experiment in transnational political cooperation the world has ever seen.

For all Europe's problems, if it fails and falls apart, the symbolic consequences may come to outweigh the practical chaos.

No doubt many readers are already rolling their eyes in disbelief. Isn't the EU synonymous with a bloated bureaucracy, unaccountable, overpaid (if not corrupt) officials, and chronic inefficiency? Perhaps so. But the EU is also the most enduring reminder of the possibility of co-operation across borders and of the active creation of an enduring peace where none existed before.

It is worth remembering that Europe has already been responsible for some of the most important turning points in the history of the world. Hyperbole? I think not. Whatever you may think about the system of sovereign states that now dominates the international political system, for example, it had its origins in Western Europe.

If there's one date undergraduate international relations students manage to commit to memory it is 1648, when the Treaty of Westphalia established the principles of sovereign rule and put an end to the interminable blood-letting associated with Europe's religious wars.

Modern Europeans' ancestors could teach the jihadists a thing or two about gratuitous, pointless, cold-blooded murder on an epic scale – all in the name of God, of course – or some theological difference we have thankfully forgotten about or no longer take seriously.

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Political pluralism and tolerance were painfully won, important artifacts of centuries of conflict and slaughter. They remain profoundly important parts of the architecture of European political and social life to this day. It is precisely this unprecedented achievement that is at stake now.

To be sure, having more or less solved the religious problem, Europeans subsequently found other reasons to tear each other apart. The First and Second World Wars had their origins in Europe and remain the gold standard for megalomania, folly and carnage on a truly epic scale. And yet, Europeans also seem to have gone a long way toward solving the hitherto insoluble problem of war, too.

The sight of Angela Merkel and Francois Hollande walking together in solidarity will no doubt be dismissed by some as meaningless political theatrically. I think this would be a mistake. No doubt Hollande will be pleased about the up-tick in his personal approval ratings, but there was still something of great symbolic importance about the leaders of France and Germany expressing common purpose in this way.

I don't think it is too fanciful or hubristic to say that the response of many of Europe's leaders and peoples is an expression of something rather important – even magnificent – about “Western civilization”. Even to invoke this phrase will no doubt invoke howls of protest and derision. And yet if Western civilisation is about anything, it is about a hard fought respect for, and protection of, individual rights, tolerance and pluralism.

Yes, I know what Gandhi said about Western civilisation, and he was right: it does sound like a good idea. The challenge, as ever, has been translating good intentions and noble principles into reality. But it is worth considering the alternative: religious zealots and theocratic states leave little room for the unbelievers and the radicals – to say nothing of gays and women, of course.

I also recognise that imperial Europe pioneered new forms of control over, exploitation of, and violence toward the rest of the world's population. But that was then and this, as they say, is now. We must deal with the world as it is and try to identify forms of political and social organisation that at least hold out the prospect – in principle, anyway – of providing individuals with the chance to live their lives as they wish.

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We should not be squeamish or reluctant to say that some values and principles are more likely to bring this about. Universal suffrage, racial equality, the emancipation of women, religious and ideological tolerance and – yes! – freedom of speech are all good, universally applicable principles and unambiguously better than the alternatives.

At great cost and with immense effort, Western Europe has gone further and played a more prominent role than any other part of the world in developing and implementing such values. Europeans – and the rest of us – need to remember that it this unprecedented, unlikely achievement that is at the heart of all that is best and most important about Europe. Long may it continue. Je suis European.

*Mark Beeson does not work for, consult to, own shares in or receive funding from any company or organisation that would benefit from this article, and has no relevant affiliations.*

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