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The race for endorsements in the EU referendum reached new levels of absurdity last week when one minister claimed that farm animals would, given the chance, choose to line up alongside Boris Johnson and Nigel Farage in the Leave camp. It was the latest dubious entry in an increasingly odd competition; both sides in the debate have already attempted to co-opt Margaret Thatcher to their cause, Winston Churchill is reportedly in two minds on the subject, and even the fictional House of Cards president Frank Underwood has written a column in The Times explaining why he's backing Brexit.

So it was inevitable that sooner or later somebody would speculate on the voting preference of the Almighty. A new group called Christians for Britain, launching this month, has come close to doing just that, claiming theological justification for a Europe of free nations under God – and comparing leaving the EU to the Reformation. They've dubbed themselves the 'BeLeavers'.

On the other side of the divide, both the Church of Scotland and the Vatican have made clear their opposition to the idea of a Brexit, with the latter warning it was "something that is not going to make a stronger Europe".

But the Archbishop of Canterbury, Justin Welby, takes a characteristically more measured approach. "You can't say 'God says you must vote this way or that way,'" he immediately makes clear when we meet in the House of Lords. "I don't think there is one correct Christian view, one way or the other."

Welby is all too aware that entering into such a "sensitive" political debate, with plenty of potential to offend, is risky, and admits to "hesitating" before commenting. He avoids coming down clearly on one side or the other, but says it is entirely reasonable to feel "fear" about the outcome of the vote. "It should be about what we fear," he says. "Fear is a valid emotion. Fear of what happens if we leave, fear of what happens if we stay. You can understand why that really matters. Fear is legitimate."

But he adds that he is concerned with the nature of the debate, which he feels is not yet addressing the big, "visionary" questions about Britain's role in the world.

"My hope and prayer is that we have a really visionary debate about what our country looks like. From those who want to leave; what would it look like? What would Britain look like, having left? What would be its attitude internationally? What would be its values? What are the points of excitement, of contributing to human flourishing? How does that liberate the best that is within us?

"And from those who want to stay, how would we change the European Union? How would we make it more effective if we remained in it? What's our vision?"

Welby says Britain has a long history as a global leader on everything from trade to humanitarian relief. And with the EU facing up to, amongst other things, a refugee crisis which represents "such an enormous challenge it can only be handled at a European level", he urges both campaigns to recognise that the debate over Brexit "mustn't all be about us".

"It's got to be about us, but about what we do in the world. This country has this extraordinary history, going back hundreds of years, of outward-looking, confident, often wonderful work around the world.

"At the moment we're one of the most effective people on international development, we're one of the most effective people on international trade, we lead the world on tackling modern slavery, and we have huge skills and gifts to bring.

"I suppose I'd love to hear, from both sides, how those are deployed if we leave, or if we stay."

Welby has been a consistent critic of the Government's approach to the refugee crisis over the past six months, welcoming the UK's "absolutely superb" humanitarian work in the camps surrounding Syria and Iraq, but labelling the offer to resettle 20,000 refugees here by 2020 as "very slim", particularly in comparison to Germany's "extraordinary" efforts.

He says as the situation in southern Europe approaches a "crunch point" the lack of a continent-wide solution is now "deepening the crisis very, very significantly". "A problem of this scale can only be dealt with by a response on an equally grand scale right across Europe, and we have to play our part," he adds.

Just days before our interview Welby visited Germany to witness first-hand the response of the German church to the crisis, and take lessons from their “very effective” collaboration with the government. “I was in Berlin, and the churches there are doing the most extraordinary things, as are the German people,” he says. “They took 1.1m last year. And it does make 20,000 over several years sound really very thin.”

Britain is “leading the world,” he says, when it comes to offering humanitarian support in the region. “But it’s got to be both, not either/or. What the government is doing in the refugee camps and at the origin of the issue is really excellent. We’re taking an extraordinary lead there. It shows what we can do. Can we not show the same capacity and strength here, as we do there?”

He adds: “We have to be careful. I’m aware of the complexity. The Government is rightly concerned about effectively subsidising people smuggling. That is quite proper, that could make everything worse.

“But we can’t pretend we’re not part of this issue. We’ve got to find ways of taking our share of the load.”

Welby accepts that, politically, the debate around refugees and migrants is deeply divisive, and says concerns about the pressure new arrivals could place on communities and services are entirely legitimate.

“There is a tendency to say ‘those people are racist’, which is just outrageous, absolutely outrageous,” he says. “Fear is a valid emotion at a time of such colossal crisis. This is one of the greatest movements of people in human history. Just enormous. And to be anxious about that is very reasonable.

“In fragile communities particularly – and I’ve worked in many areas with very fragile communities over my time as a clergyman – there is a genuine fear: what happens about housing? What happens about jobs? What happens about access to health services? There is a genuine fear. And it is really important that that fear is listened to and addressed. There have to be resources put in place that address those fears.”

But he says local communities have “demonstrated an enormous capacity” to deal with the refugee crisis at a “micro” level. “It is simply a question of the scale on which we are prepared to act, in a way that spreads the load so it can be managed.”

Dozens of civil society groups, churches, NGOs and local authorities are already doing a “brilliant” job and deserve credit, he says, highlighting the work done in Romney Marsh, “one of the poorest parts” of his own diocese. “In that area they’ve taken significant numbers of unaccompanied children. I was down there recently at one of the schools, the Marsh Academy, and it was hugely moving to see the way that a scattered community in a rural area, with many issues of their own, had been able to welcome people. These kids, their sense of being cared for and loved was extraordinary.

“That demonstrates what we’re able to do. Fear is justified, I wouldn’t want to criticise that for a moment, but so is hope wholly justified, because we have the capacity. We’re those kind of people, we always have been. But it needs the organisation, it needs the macro and it needs to happen at a European level.”

Ending the crisis in the long-term, though, will require both a political solution to the conflict in Syria, and the defeat of the religiously-justified violence of Islamic State.

Welby backed the Government's decision last December to join the US, France and others in a military campaign against IS in Syria, arguing that the action satisfied the historical test for a "just war".

But he warns that if military action is the primary tool, the campaign is bound to fail. The religious extremism which has given rise to IS and other terror groups must also be countered, he says, with a robust ideological and theological response.

Seeking resolutions to long-standing conflict is nothing new for the 105th Archbishop of Canterbury; before his appointment, he spent several years as a canon based at Coventry Cathedral focusing on negotiation and reconciliation between warring parties, and visiting some of the most dangerous territories in the world, from Nigeria to Iraq to the Democratic Republic of Congo, to broker peace deals.

But this conflict, he warns, is like no other. "For the first time in centuries in this country – certainly going back to the 18th Century, arguably going back to the Glorious Revolution, 1688 – we find ourselves involved in conflict which has very, very significant theological aspects.

"Not only in the Middle East but around the world, in all kinds of places, you're seeing the outworking of that. You're seeing it in Libya, in Nigeria, Somalia, Yemen, right across the Levant and Mesopotamia. And you're seeing it with other faith traditions in other places, in the world, including Christians attacking minority faith groups, for instance in the Central African Republic.

"And therefore an intelligent response to this must include theological and religious literacy, and an understanding of what drives people when they are caught up in religious ideas."

Internationally, that means confronting those states, in particular Saudi Arabia, that have aided the development of extremism and violence. "The key thing is, if we are going to deal with extremism, mainstream religious leaders – which within many parts of the Islamic world includes governments – must be very, very clear about taking responsibility for the violence within their own traditions – as we must be as Christian leaders – and tackling that effectively," he says.

"That will mean places like Saudi Arabia tackling extremist thinking within their own tradition. Much support has come from within those countries, and they need to be challenged on that. They need to stamp out the support for the extremist views from within their own societies. That's really important."

But in order to be fully successful, he says, the struggle against religious violence and extremism must involve a domestic component too. He offers a staunch defence of the UK's own "Judeo-Christian tradition", and warns against attempts to dilute those values out of a misplaced fear of causing offence.

"I think you've got to be very clear about rights and wrongs," he says. "You can't turn a blind eye, in any way at all."

This is where secularism, Welby says, too often goes wrong: a successful multi-faith society, he believes, should not view faith as a threat to be pushed to the margins, nor identity as a zero-sum game of exchange, where different groups deny their values to avoid alienating others. Instead he says society must make room for people of different faiths to take pride in their traditions, and regard diversity as a blessing and an opportunity for hospitality.

“We need to be confident about our own heritage, our Judeo-Christian heritage, whether we’re believers or not,” he says. “That is what has shaped our own values, and we need to be confident in that.

“But within that confidence there needs to be a hospitality, a clear sense of what we believe to be right or wrong, not based on temporary values of one kind or another that come and go, but on the eternal values that spring from the very roots of our culture.”

Welby adds that he was “baffled” by the decision of cinema bosses late last year to refuse to screen an advert by the Church that featured the Lord’s Prayer, citing fears that the video could cause offence. “I couldn’t understand what on earth they were worried about,” he says.

“I think the idea that you can separate secular life from religious life like separating from potatoes from peas on your plate, is just cloud cuckoo land. It’s not how human beings work. It denies the genuine inner sense of what a human being is.

“If someone is genuinely committed to a faith tradition, whether you agree with it or not, that faith will guide and inspire everything they do. Everything. You can’t separate it. It doesn’t make any sense at all.

“We’ve seen that in parts of Europe where they’ve tried to introduce very clear secularism, and it really doesn’t work. It hasn’t worked there, it won’t work here.

“We’ve got a society with many faiths in it. It doesn’t work by some sort of extraordinary mush that stands for nothing at all. It never has. That’s why I say we must be confident in our own tradition. And with that confidence be deeply hospitable of the other traditions we find living with us. Listen, share, engage, enjoy the fact that we are a diverse society.”

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