

Roots, Routes, and Times of Decision: Brexit, Populisms, Colonialism and Imperialism in Global Perspective

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Immediate Context

I am writing this article out of the context of what I appreciate is only one small corner of the world, and where what is happening may or may not seem to others in other parts of the world to be of any particular importance compared with a great many other more global challenges such as poverty, war and climate change; or indeed, to be linked in any significant way with their own historical or contemporary national, political or geographical contexts.

However, in this article I want to argue that there are important connections to be made between what is happening in the biggest social and political crisis of my lifetime in my home country – which is officially known as the United Kingdom of Great Britain and Northern Ireland (UK) – and matters with which friends and colleagues in the Two Thirds World have experience of wrestling with, and which experience might prove to be of assistance to some of us in the UK and in Europe as the UK Government, Parliament and people wrestle with one other over the implications arising from the extremely narrow June 2016 UK Referendum result of 51.89%-48.11% (of those voting) in favour of leaving the European Union (EU), now known as "Brexit".

Within 10 days from the time of the original writing of this article¹, it is possible that the UK could find itself outside of the EU without a legal framework being in place for its withdrawal, with all the negative consequences that is likely to bring for economic and trade relations, and also for the stability of the family lives of over 3.5 million EU27 citizens in the UK, and for the c. 1.5 million UK citizens in EU27 countries living with what is arguably, already, the greatest peacetime trauma that has been known in Europe.

It is also possible, that with only days to go, the UK Parliament may, in the end, vote to accept the Withdrawal Agreement and Political Statement on future relations, as negotiated between the UK Government and the EU. But it is equally possible that the UK may find itself asking the EU for a long extension of the period of notice (known as Article 50) that a member state must give if it intends to leave the EU, during which either a General Election might take place, or another Referendum.

¹ The article was finalised and submitted on 19th March 2019, and 29th March was the originally scheduled date for the United Kingdom to leave the European Union before an extension was sought and agreed until 31st October 2019.

“Roots” of and “routes” through the present crisis

The impact of this situation of uncertainty on the health of the economy, the cohesion of the wider society and of families divided by the issues, as well as the mental health of individuals, has already been substantial. The crisis is of such magnitude that many of the people of the country, however they voted in the 2016 Referendum, are insistently asking about whether or not there might be any “route” or “routes” that could realistically take us safely through the crisis without running a serious risk of even further deepening it.² In relation to this, it is the contention of this paper that both in this particular crisis, as also in others to which it is related in both time and geography, the surest way of finding a “route” or “routes” through – while not without risks - is by proper attention to, and engagement with, the “root” or “roots” of a crisis.

This contention is related to an important dimension that can be found in the Christian tradition’s understanding of time - which is that the course of time is neither one of endless cyclical repetitiveness from which the basic human challenge and opportunity is to escape; but neither is it one of a straight line that is pre-programmed towards uninterrupted historical progress. In fact, in the so-called “koine” (or commonly spoken/written) Greek language of the New Testament scriptures, there are two words used for time. These are “chronos” and “kairos”. And this is not a matter only of narrow linguistic interest. Rather, as one New Testament scholar explains it:

*"The presence of two etymological groups, associated respectively with chronos and kairos for the concept of time, suggests that the Greeks distinguished individual periods of points of time which can be affected by human decision (kairos) from the stream of time, whose progress is independent of any possible human influence (chronos)."*³

Expressed in such a way, however, this distinction might still seem rather abstract. But generally speaking, throughout the world people recognise that, from time to time, as part of our individual, social and historical experience, "special times" occur when the options that can lead to various destinies are heightened. It is in such times that the meaning of "kairos", as further explained by Colin Brown, is pertinent in terms of it being a kind of time that *"characterises a critical situation, one which demands a decision..."* Within this Brown notes of such a time of decision that it can be said that, *"Positively it implies opportunity...or advantage; negatively, danger."*⁴ Within this particular “kairos” of Brexit what, then, is at the “root” or “roots” of it? And how do these “roots” relate to the “roots” of other conflicts in the wider Eurasian geographical context of which the UK is a part, and also to global conflicts, issues and structures beyond that?

² Following the extension of the UK’s Article 50 notification of leaving the EU beyond March 29th 2019, in May 2019 the British Prime Minister, Theresa May, announced her intended resignation as leader of the governing Conservative and Unionist Party and, at the time of writing, a contest for leadership of the Party and the office of Prime Minister is currently ongoing among members of the Parliamentary party and of the local Conservative Associations.

³ Colin Brown, ed. (1978), *New International Dictionary of New Testament Theology*, Volume III, Pri-Z, 3 vols.; Exeter: Paternoster Press, p. 834.

⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 833.

During the 2016 EU Referendum debates, the theme of "take back control" was deployed as a very powerfully seductive slogan suggestive of an apparently simple problem and solution, designed to appeal to two main public discontents. First it sought to connect with, and provide an explanation for, the sense found among the socially and economically "left behind", that since the financial crash of 2007-08, they had been the victims of powerful global forces that their government, far from protecting them against, had exacerbated through its deliberately chosen policies of economic austerity. Second, it was deployed in relation to the migration of people, particularly from the new (2004) EU accession states of Poland and Romania, which had resulted in rapid and extensive changes to aspects of the previously more familiar social and cultural fabric of, especially, many of the local communities that had previously been impacted by economic austerity.

In such a context key political figures campaigning for "Leave" including, in particular, the then leader of the UK Independence Party (UKIP) and Member of the European Parliament, Nigel Farage,⁵ played on these anxieties. Indeed, they stoked them further by evoking a spectre of millions of Turks about to come to the UK from what was said to be Turkey's likely imminent accession to the EU. This was also against the background of the constant media coverage of what, at the time, were feared to be potentially uncontrollable numbers of asylum-seekers (especially from Syria, Iraq and Afghanistan) and others (including especially from African countries) attempting to cross the Mediterranean sea to reach Europe, and by those taking the overland route through the Balkan countries. Given the instrumentalisation of these issues in the Referendum campaign, it is perhaps not surprising that in the wake of the result, racist and xenophobic sentiments and behaviours that had been insufficiently challenged during the Leave campaign were, in effect, "given permission" to be expressed in public. This resulted, among other things, in verbal and physical attacks on, especially, people of Polish migrant backgrounds, but also spilling over into a newly empowered Islamophobia directed towards Muslims but also including those ignorantly thought to be Muslims (such as turban wearing Sikhs).

Seen in terms of domestic politics, "Brexit" came about through a Referendum that was called by the former Conservative Party Prime Minister, David Cameron that was designed (unsuccessfully) to try and outflank the, at the time, growing electoral threat of UKIP. But it is a central argument of this paper that a more serious understanding of the "roots" of the crisis of "Brexit" requires an analytical engagement with the cross-currents that swirl between aspects of the global imperial and colonial inheritance of an Empire that, by 1920 (even after the loss of the former colonies in what became the independent United States of America) covered 24% of the world's landmass, and some of the key trends and issues arising from the highly varied, ambiguous, but also irresistible contemporary forces of globalisation resulting from what the British historian Arnold Toynbee used to refer to as "the annihilation of distance". In this context, it is the argument of this paper that, while this barely recognised in current public and political debate within the UK, and only to some extent in the wider Europe, "Brexit" has uncovered what have been unresolved contradictions that lie at the "root" of the contemporary UK's very emergence as a state in terms of its present political configuration.

⁵ Nigel Farage is now the leader of the Brexit Party.

Uncovering the disintegrating UK

Alongside the profoundly destabilising effect of having conducted a binary Referendum question on a matter of enormous and complex constitutional significance that resulted in a 52%-48% outcome and which would, in any social and political context be challenging to manage, this particular Referendum and its aftermath has laid open the historic wounds and divisions within these islands off the western shores of continental Europe. "Brexit" has, in fact, shaken up political configurations and complacency about what English politicians for too long – and even after the warning of the 2014 Referendum on Scottish independence (with 44.7% of those voting for independence, and 55.3% voting against) – have tended to refer to in an unconsciously culturally and politically assimilationist way as "the nation" when, as a matter of both historical fact and contemporary reality, the present UK state is a specific configuration of nations within a single state.

As a state, it is also important analytically to understand that what is today the UK, was created as part of what was an overall trajectory of a colonial and imperial enterprise that was then rolled out into the wider world by the "Great Britain" that was created (following the 1284 conquest and annexation of Wales by the English Crown) from the 1706-7 union of the previously separate Kingdoms of England and Scotland, and then the later (1800) union of "Great Britain" and "Ireland" into what eventually became the "Kingdom of Great Britain and Ireland" at the heart of the British Empire. What is not often enough identified or reflected upon (especially in England) is that the colonial and imperial enterprise of the British Empire was one that was projected as much "internally" across these islands, as externally into the wider world. If this analysis is accepted, then it is perhaps not surprising that issues relating both to Scotland and to Northern Ireland have been playing a very big role in the present Brexit crisis.

In relation to Scotland, in the EU Referendum, 62% of those voting voted to remain in the EU and only 38% to leave. Ironically, in the 2014 Scottish independence Referendum, it had previously been argued by the UK Government that leaving the UK would put Scotland's EU membership at risk. And, prior to the EU Referendum, the First Minister of Scotland had argued that any EU Referendum results should only be implemented if there were majorities one way or another in all four countries of the UK, where in the end the results included 52.5% to leave and 47.5% to remain of those voting in Wales; 53.4% to leave and 46.6% to remain of those voting in England; and 55.8% to remain and 44.2% to leave of those voting in Northern Ireland.

In the negotiations between the UK Government and the EU, and in the UK Parliamentary debates concerning Brexit, the implications of Brexit for the future relations between especially the Republic of Ireland, Northern Ireland and the rest of the UK have been very prominent. This has been especially so since, following the loss of its absolute majority in the snap General Election called by the Prime Minister in 2017, the current UK Government of the Conservative and Unionist Party has been dependent on the Democratic Unionist Party's (DUP) votes to carry its policies through the UK Parliament. However, it has withheld that support in relation to the UK Government's proposed Withdrawal Agreement from the EU on the basis of a

concern that certain reserve provisions (known colloquially as the "Irish backstop") in that draft agreement could, if agreements on alternatives were not later reached, end up driving a wedge between the Northern Ireland and the rest of the UK, and potentially leading to developments towards Irish Unification which, as a unionist party, the DUP exists to resist. And this has been in an overall context where the majority of people in Northern Ireland voted to remain within the EU, but also one in which the leading Republican and Nationalist party in Northern Ireland, Sinn Féin, does not take up any seats to which its members are elected in the Westminster Parliament on the basis that it sees the UK as a foreign power in the North of Ireland.

The "roots" of the ongoing conflicts around Ireland go back to an English Crown and (later) Parliament, and still later British and imperial state, that could never fully conquer Irish resistance despite brutal military subjugation; a process of "internal" colonisation; an external "settlement" (including of Scots) into Ireland; and, finally, the impact of the Government of Great Britain and Ireland's economic policies in the wake of a potato blight and that issued into the Great Famine of 1845-1849, during which around a million people died and a further million emigrated, resulting in a catastrophic population fall of between 20-25%. Irish resistance stemming from this, coupled with growing Irish aspirations for independence, eventually led to the partition of the island of Ireland between the 1922 foundation of what was the Irish Free State (and is now the fully independent Republic of Ireland) based on 26 of Ireland's original 32 counties, and the province of Northern Ireland which was formed out of 6 of the original counties and which, until now, has remained a part of what, in 1927, with the loss of around 22% of its previous landmass, was renamed as the United Kingdom of Great Britain and Northern Ireland – and which newly created and shrunken state therefore may or may not yet survive a full century of existence.

The partition of Ireland initially gave birth to a civil war in the south over whether or not to accept the partition of the island, and also to a broader ongoing tension between the (Irish) Nationalist and (UK) Unionist interests and aspirations, which from time to time has flared up through paramilitary activities undertaken by the Irish Republic Army (IRA) and other armed Republican groups such as the Irish National Liberation Army (INLA). Following the violent suppression of the Civil Rights movement in Northern Ireland during the late 1960s and early 1970s, and especially after the events the so-called "Bloody Sunday", when in 1972, British paratroopers shot 28 unarmed civilians (out of which 14 died) during a protest march against internment without trial, the so-called "low intensity" state of war that ensued embroiled not only Northern Ireland itself, but also the rest of the UK and the Republic of Ireland. Indeed during a period of about three decades, around 3,500 people were killed, of whom 52% were civilians; 32% were members of the British security forces; and 16% were members of paramilitary groups, which armed conflict continued until the current peace brought about by the 1998 *Good Friday* or (more formally) *Belfast Agreement*. Contained within this an international agreement between the UK and Republic of Ireland governments, the militarised infrastructures that had developed on the border between Northern Ireland and the Republic during the period popularly known as "The Troubles" were dismantled, and the free movement of trade and of people between the Republic and Northern Ireland was facilitated in the context of shared membership of the Single Market of the EU, to which both the UK and the Republic of Ireland belonged.

If the UK cannot find a way to remain in the EU, it seems clear that Scotland will very soon again seek to achieve a way out of any post-Brexit UK and into an independent membership of the EU. And if the UK leaves the EU without that being in the context of a formal Treaty with the EU which makes the return of a hard border to the island of Ireland impossible,⁶ the peace achieved on the island of Ireland could well be imperilled. And any departure of that kind, or indeed possibly at all, is likely to add impetus to the demographic trends that, even on their own, will in the short to medium term in all probability lead to the calling of a plebiscite on a united Ireland. A common belonging within the supranational structure of the EU having, in many ways, brought about the relativisation of the previous national tensions and conflicts in these islands, any exit of the UK from the EU is sadly likely to reactivate and further inflame those tensions and conflicts. Thus one of the things that is clearly emerging from the Brexit "kairos" is that the current forms of the interrelationships between the component parts of the UK are no longer fit for purpose. And if the UK is in some form to continue at all - whether on its own outside the EU; in some form of association with the EU; or even if ultimately by one means or another, not outside of the EU, then a reconfiguration of the current UK state into new kinds of interconnections that are more properly reflective of these nations' and islands' shared (if sometimes conflictual) histories, identities, cultures and economies is likely, if it can be charted, to offer one of the few possible "routes" forward for the UK.

Eurasian and global developments

However, if these are some of the "roots" of, and potential "routes" through, Brexit when considering the UK on its own, then in relation to this "kairos" time more broadly, it is also important to take into account that this little group of (often called British) islands are situated to the west off the coastline of what, might most appropriately be understood as "Cap Asia" of the Eurasian landmass, but which has for a number of centuries been known as "Europe". Especially since the adoption in 2007 of the *Treaty of Lisbon* and its coming into force with the 2009 creation of the European Union, this geographical region has, on the one hand, been the context for a project of increasing economic, monetary, legal, political and social integration. On the other hand, and especially during the increasing substantial flows, in 2014-16, of refugees and migrants from both Syria and Africa trying to reach Europe (and within that, especially, Germany), this Europe has also been the context for a growth in political movements that are seeking both to prevent and roll back what, over recent decades, has been the continent's increasing ethnic, cultural and religious pluralism. In this context, the Mediterranean sea has, tragically, become a graveyard for many people seeking to reach Europe (with the United Nations High Commission for Refugees estimating 2,275 deaths in 2018, which is 1 death for every 51 arrivals), such that the "civility" of the EU project is very much at stake.

⁶ The current draft Withdrawal Agreement (and which has not so far achieved the support of the Westminster Parliament of the UK) contains the so-called Irish "backstop" which is intended to be a kind of "insurance policy" that, should the UK and EU not reach formal agreements on future relations following any UK withdrawal from the EU, then the Irish border would remain open and the UK would remain very closely aligned to EU customs rules, with some regulatory differences between Northern Ireland and the rest of the UK. To many Brexiteers this is tantamount to potentially keeping the UK in the EU, even though both the EU and UK government that negotiated this have both stated that they don't wish rely on the "backstop", but instead to negotiate future mutually acceptable arrangements.

The migration crisis in the wider EU is also a reminder that, although the present author is strongly committed to the EU, and to the UK's continued participation in it as a full member of what has been a unique social, economic and peace project at the heart of an otherwise internally (and, through that, also externally) destructive European history, the EU is a far from perfect political formation when considered in terms of its relations with the world beyond Europe. Indeed, in recent years within the EU, not only have those seeking to become new arrival asylum seekers and refugees often been dealt with in ways contrary to the articulated values of the EU, but within many EU countries, existing minorities of all kinds come increasing pressures oriented towards the social, political and civil exclusion of those defined as "others" relative to the various definitions of national belonging articulated by (what are predominantly right wing) national populist movements.

What is currently significant about these movement – which have never completely disappeared since their last rise in the 1930s – is that they are no longer to be found "only" as movements of social and political protest, as has at least so far been the case on a national level over many decades in the case of, for example, the Front Nationale in France (since 1988 renamed as Rassemblement National, or National Rally). Rather, movements of these kinds have more recently begun to move into political and state power, as in the case of Victor Orbán's Fidesz party, which has now been embedded in power in Hungary for nearly a decade, and the Law and Justice Party in Poland, which came to power in 2015, and has recently ordered all new passports to include the words "God, Honour, Motherland".

There is also the relatively new arrival into Italian coalition government (with the itself difficult to define in traditional terms, but also in many ways populist, Five Star Movement) of Matteo Salvini's La Lega Nord (formally, Lega Nord per l'Indipendenza della Padania). And there has been evidence that, in the run up to and following the May 2019 European Parliament elections, Salvini, Orbán and others have been seeking to form a new coalition of forces within the EU in defence of what they see as "Christian civilisation" against an invasion of alien values, cultures, and people - most particularly in relation to Islam and Muslims.

Moving beyond Europe, there has been the recent Presidential election win of Jair Messias Bolsonaro in Brazil. There is also the longer-standing paradigmatic example of Donald Trump and "Trumpism" in the USA, with its projects to exclude travellers from a range of countries having predominantly Muslim populations, as well as by the building of a wall along the country's southern border with Mexico to deter migrants and asylum-seekers from Central and Latin America.

And from within the majority Muslim world there has been the transmutation of the longstanding populist rule of Recep Tayyip Erdoğan's Justice and Development party in Turkey into an increasingly authoritarian form of rule in which thousands of ordinary religious believers, civil servants, and journalists have been imprisoned and/or condemned to a kind of "social cleansing" and, which, with justification, might be seen as an ongoing coup against civil society.

The challenge for those with “eyes to see and ears to hear”

Therefore, that in the UK; in the EU; and in the wider world beyond, we are living in a “kairos” time cannot be in too much doubt for those who have “eyes to see and ears to hear”. But especially for Christians and other people of faith, as well as for all those of goodwill, a troubling question comes into focus which is that, in this period of “kairos”, where are the religious and/or political leaders (the Martin Luther Kings, or the Mahatma Gandhis) who have the intellectual clarity, the political incisiveness and the practical wisdom to rise to the challenges of identifying the “roots” of this “kairos” and who, without prematurely being seduced into calls for “peace, peace, where there is no peace”, might help us to chart some possible ways through this “kairos”?

Whatever else it has or has not done, the UK’s Referendum on membership of the EU has shaken up a culture of political complacency and many existing political configurations. Taken in the round, that has probably been overdue in the context of what has all too often become a tired and disconnected form of representative democracy that has imposed an economic “austerity” that was always a political rather than an economic choice alone, while offering far too little in the way of hope for political and economic transformation into a more human form of society.

Therefore in and through this turbulent “kairos” time period symbolised by Brexit and expressed more broadly in Europe by nationally, ethnically and religiously exclusionary populisms, the question comes into focus of whether, in and through the current deep fractures revealed in UK, the EU and global body politic, a realisation of the impossibility of political “business as usual” could yet be combined with the emergence of a new vision, courage and practical wisdom in which this “kairos” of real and present danger could yet become an opportunity to seize the possibility of creating something better than what has so far been?

Given the continued historical and contemporary blindness among many of the world’s “powers that be”, as the historic and continuing significance and effects of the phenomena of colonialism and imperialism finally come home to roost in the fragmented, embattled and embittered fabric of what is left of the now deeply (dis) “United” Kingdom, it is likely that those of us who live and work there and in the wider Europe and who do have “eyes to see and ears to hear”, will need to call in aid against our temptation to despair, the analytical, spiritual and practical resources that sisters and brothers from the Two Thirds world have developed over several centuries of understanding the “roots” of these destructive phenomena and of identifying some possible “routes” out of them. And among our best hopes for the future might be that individuals and groups from within the previous and present “United” Kingdom and beyond it, and who have previously experienced such phenomena, could be best placed to help the rest of us in our own search for justice and peace within the common fragile and interdependent world in which we all live.

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