

ENQUIRE WITHIN

Question: *Do you agree with the Prime Minister that “Europe is not defined by religion, but by values?”*

Answer: I believe that the Prime Minister was saying the right sort of things in a political sense. The words were spoken on a visit to Turkey. I think it is a good idea for Turkey to feel more and more included in the European mainstream, rather than fall back into a sense of exclusion. He went on to criticise those in Europe who see the world “through the prism of a clash of civilisations”. I agree with the PM’s approach.

Turkey has recently made steps towards being more fair to the Christian minority. A law, promulgated in May 2010, requires land or property expropriated from non-Muslim religious groups to be returned to its original owners. As a result, some churches have already been restored to their original use.

The PM went on to emphasise the importance of Islam to Europe and added “I will always argue that the values of real Islam are not incompatible with the values of Europe; that Europe is defined not by religion, but by values.”

Here we hit deeper waters.

Two things stand out for me. The first is that it is very dubious for someone like Mr Cameron, or anyone who has no intimate experience of Islam today to use the term “real Islam.”

We have to ask the question, “on what basis has he judged the real from the unreal? “ Is this a bit of shallow observation or the result of deep study and reflection?

This idea of there being a “real Islam” which is really compatible with Western ideas, as opposed to another Islam which is not is in serious danger of being a gross over-simplification and as such, capable of being exploited by extremists from the areas of Islam itself, from parts of the Christian church and from atheistic

secularists who are always on the look-out for opportunities to rubbish religions.

The phrase “real Islam” may yet come back to haunt Mr Cameron?

The second issue which stood out for me was the statement that Europe is defined by values rather than religion, by which we must take it that the Christian religion is in the frame.

Here I thought that Mr Cameron had not hit the right note. Western Europe bears the marks of 2000 years of Christianity, and this goes for the good as well as the bad. It seems to me that one cannot separate the “values” of Western Europe from the Christianity which has inspired and informed those values.



The British Prime Minister David Cameron with the Turkish Prime Minister, Recep Tayyip Erdogan, at a press conference in Ankara in August, 2010.

And it would have been helpful if some of the more important values had been spoken about clearly.

Despite the efforts of the secularists and humanists to push Christianity out of sight, it is very much in sight in so many of our best achievements in the culture and life of Western Europe.

It is evident in the liberal democracy which has emerged from the struggles of the past. It is evident in

the freedom of movement, openness and accessibility of our countries. It is evident in the manner in which although deeply based on the Judeo-Christian inheritance, we also welcome people of different viewpoints and enable them to express differences in a calm and peaceful manner. It is evident that there is no political dominance by one religion, even though the official religion remains Church of England, the same as before.

What has been produced in Western Europe is a society which benefits from Christian insights and principles without being dominated by them. It is a good place to be and the invitation to others to join us is not an invitation to change all this but to perpetuate it.