

Martin Luther and the Reformation

I have worked on cultural issues throughout my political career, first as an assistant in the German Bundestag and more recently for the town hall of Lutherstadt Wittenberg where I live, and where Martin Luther's home has now been converted into a Reformation museum.

Ten years ago, Germany launched an ambitious decade-long programme about the Reformation that culminates and ends in 2017 with the jubilee event Luther 2017, 500 Years of Reformation, half a millennium after Luther so spectacularly nailed his 95 theses to the door of Wittenberg's church. The programme's focus on our Enlightenment years aims to show how the Reformation influenced our society and culture today, not just from a religious viewpoint but also in music, art, language and culture.

Right from the start, the programme involved a EU-wide network spanning Denmark, Norway, Sweden, Hungary, Netherlands, Finland and Switzerland, where the Reformation produced such towering figures as Jean Calvin, Erasmus, Mikael Agricola and Huldrych Zwingli.

The national event Luther 2017 has been organised, among others, by the Evangelical Church in Germany (EKD), the national and regional govern-

ments and a number of associations. Among these, the Reformation Jubilee association is organising a route that links European cities (Europäischer Stationenweg) to show the extent to which the Reformation connects us all, and to offer the occasion to think about its value today.

I also belong to a group of MEPS who are promoting a European Heritage Label to be awarded to especially symbolic sites – more than 100 so far – that embody our cultural and spiritual history. The reason these EU-wide projects are so important is because we Europeans need to build bridges between our national cultures so as to emphasise what we have in common.

The EP's Committee on Culture and Education, along with the intergroup on European Tourism Development and Cultural Heritage, and the non-profit "A Soul for Europe", aimed at bringing an ethical, spiritual dimension to the EU, are pushing for 2018 to be designated as the European Year of Cultural Heritage.

I myself used to work in education before moving into politics in 2007, so I know how much has to be explained and taught if we are going to build a European identity. Travel and school exchanges are crucial to the discovery of other places and mindsets.

It comes as a relief that culture is not affected by the TTIP negotiations: there are so many worthwhile ways of spending public money on culture.

In Germany, the Länder (regions) and cities dispense their cultural budgets on a voluntary basis, but I believe that spending on culture should be compulsory and that investing in culture should be an EU responsibility, comparable to investment in the overall European project. If we want to build a European identity, a “Soul for Europe”, then we must better understand all the complexities of our diversity. A good example is the UK’s project called Fred@School that is doing a good job of educating young film-goers by screening the European Parliament’s LUX film prize in schools and then encouraging online discussions among students.

We must of course always defend art and freedom of expression, so I am deeply concerned by recent developments in Poland. Public funding of the arts and culture must come with some responsibilities because we also have a duty to reach new audiences, and to build up the cultural experience and expertise of future generations. We in Germany now routinely introduce opera and classical plays with the back story to help new audiences and young people develop their own knowledge and appreciation. We also promote accessibility by bringing performances to city centres, staging events outdoors and supporting innovative cultural projects.

We need to learn from other countries to see how they approach the challenge of bringing people to culture, and culture to people. It’s a long-term

goal that's not easy to achieve quickly. Comparative studies examine things like chewing gum and washing machines, so why not do the same for culture to determine the best ways to make it easily accessible and inexpensive? In Germany, major exhibitions are subsidised by both private and public funding, but for the funding to be made available, a proportion of that has to be devoted to developing educational tools. We all need to share best practices like these, while keeping in mind that one size doesn't fit all.

I have an older sister who has set up an interesting network for artists in Germany as part of a project called art-to-live-from-the-art. Basically, it is all about creating a community for artists to help them make a living, and it's particularly useful for artists who work in isolation, including the countryside. Ideas like helping artists to network and promoting exchanges for artists just as Erasmus does for students, are all steps in the right direction.

In EU terms, culture is a national competence where decisions are at Member State and local levels. How best then could we create a dialogue that would commit countries to devoting a minimal proportion of their national budgets to culture? Conditional co-financing by the European Commission might be one way of encouraging this, and if the Commission does not want to spend the money, an alternative would be to see what different EU countries are doing. In Scandinavia, for example,

what proportion of the national budget is spent on culture, and why?

If the European Year of Cultural Heritage becomes reality in 2018, it would be the perfect framework for carrying out a comparative study of national cultural investments, and the European Parliament's research services could be asked to do the work. We would then have the material we need to push matters forward on the cultural front. The future of European society will largely depend also on making culture one of our prime concerns.

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