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Understanding Europe: Belief and Unbelief on Our Continent

In this article, based on the text of the annual lecture of the Intercontinental Church Society, delivered at Lambeth Palace in June, 2007, David Smith reflects on the spiritual state of Europe. After a biblical reflection he examines the crisis of Christianity and the reasons for this internal to the expression of Christian faith that require repentance and renewal. He concludes by exploring signs of hope for the future.

At the present time I find myself living in a small town to the north of Glasgow which has a ruined section of the ancient Antonine Wall at its heart. This defensive barrier ran between the Forth and Clyde rivers and represented, for a fairly brief period, the outer limit of the Roman Empire. Where sections of the wall are preserved it is possible to walk along this extraordinary fortification and marvel both at the fortitude of soldiers brought from the lands of the Mediterranean, enduring the rigours of winter in this northerly outpost, and at the extent and glory of the empire they defended. Eventually, as we know, the empire was to collapse, but by the time this happened a new faith, making the incredible claim that an obscure Jewish carpenter, executed as posing a threat to Rome, was in fact worthy of supreme honour and worship, had spread across the continent. This faith, which for three centuries was by turns ignored, derided and violently suppressed, eventually won the allegiance of vast numbers of people and became the official religion of a rejuvenated empire.

It is not possible within the space of this short article to provide even an outline of the subsequent history of Christian Europe. It is a complex, sometimes tragic story, and the very notion of Christendom, or of a Christian civilization, is controversial. However, by the time Columbus set sail on his epic voyage of discovery at the end of the fifteenth century, the evangelization of Europe was complete and it seemed that the once-despised Christ had come to be recognised as Lord throughout this continent. Our concern here is with *what happened next*. How did we get from a situation in which the story of the gospel was of fundamental importance at the very heart of European life and culture, to one in which, to quote Pope John Paul II, Europe has lost its memory and is characterised by a 'practical agnosticism'?¹

The magnitude of the shift that has taken place in Europe is reflected on the skylines of hundreds of cities from East to West. The domes, towers and spires of ancient church buildings testify both to the past vitality of faith in these urban centres and to its accelerating decline in modern times. To take a single example,

¹ Pope John Paul II 2003: 8.

guides at Erfurt Cathedral in eastern Germany are now required to explain the significance of Christian symbols and art to secular people who have no knowledge of them in the very place where there was once standing room only for the worship led by Johann Sebastian Bach.²

Biblical perspectives

Before I attempt to discuss the decline of Christianity in Europe, it may be useful to reflect on a particular characteristic of the biblical narrative that may shed light on the challenges we face. The Bible contains the story of the way in which, across many centuries and in different historical and cultural contexts, God calls and forms a people to worship, love and obey Him. The story begins in the book of Genesis with the call of Father Abram and the promise that through him and his descendents blessing will flow to all the nations on earth. However, the outworking of the promise is never straightforward and the story contains constant twists and setbacks, so much so that at times it appears that all hope of the coming of the promised kingdom of God is lost. The essential point to make here is that the relationship between God and biblical Israel is one that reveals both grace and *judgement*. The prophets are unwavering in their insistence that the covenant which God made with His people is conditional, and when Israel reneges on the promises she made in entering into this relationship she becomes subject to divine judgement. Thus, written into the warp and woof of the biblical story is the possibility of loss, decline and the experience of abandonment. This is most obvious in the period of the exile which produces the heart-rending poetry of the psalms of lament in which devastated people cry out to the God who seems to have abandoned them.

What often goes un-noticed, but is crucial to our understanding of the present distress of Christianity in Europe, is that this same principle is present in the New Testament. We are warned, for example, that judgement 'begins with the family of God' (1 Pet. 4:17). The churches addressed in the book of Revelation, facing the challenge of following Christ in the context of the power and dominance of the pagan empire to which we have already referred, are repeatedly told that their very existence depends upon repentance and renewed obedience. Even more significant perhaps are the words of Paul who, in the context of an extended discussion of the sovereign purposes of God, warns Christian believers that they will be 'cut off' from grace in the same manner as Israel unless they 'continue in God's kindness' (Rom. 11:22). Biblical faith is thus related in an organic way to *praxis* and whenever this connection is lost Christianity becomes, in Jesus' own words, good for nothing, except to be 'thrown out and trampled by men' (Matt.5:13).

What is implied in all these passages is that Christianity will not, cannot, spread and grow by a process of simple territorial expansion from a secure and irreversibly Christian base. The possibility of decline and loss are written into the story, so that areas that have once been solidly Christian heartlands may experience a reversal of evangelization as once living churches decay and wither. As Andrew Walls has noted, Christianity does not seem to have the same 'resilience' as other religions in retaining allegiance within evangelized areas because the very freedom of response which is characteristic of it 'leaves it endlessly vulnerable'.³ This crucially important biblical perspective serves to remind us that a Christian analysis

² Martin 2005: 56.

³ Walls 1985: 14.

of the religious condition of Europe cannot depend solely on historical or sociological insights. Valuable as these certainly are, we must always be asking profoundly *theological* questions concerning what God may be doing in our times.

The crisis of Christianity in Europe

I will not attempt in the limited space available here to offer detailed evidence in support of the claim that European Christendom is in crisis. Sociologist Grace Davie, while dissenting from theories of secularization that treat the loss of religious faith as an evolutionary development that is the inevitable outcome of modernization, nonetheless acknowledges that no one today seriously doubts the fact that ‘the authority of both the institutional churches and the creeds that underpin them is systematically decreasing as the decades pass’.⁴ In fact, for at least the past fifty years people gifted with insight and courage have repeatedly warned us of the looming crisis facing the churches and the magnitude of the challenge this presents to faith and discipleship. For example, the Dutch Protestant theologian, J.C. Hoekendijk, once regarded as an unwelcome ‘troubler of Israel’, offered a graphic illustration of the problem in the shape of the testimony of a prisoner of war returning home in the 1940s:

There is a preacher talking from behind a pulpit. We don’t understand him. A glass cover has been put over the pulpit. This smothers all sound. Around the pulpit our contemporaries are standing. They too talk, and they call. But on the inside this is not understood. The glass cover smothers all sound. Thus we still *see* each other talk, but we don’t understand each other anymore.⁵

In other words, *communication* was breaking down. A Christianity which rested upon certain long-held assumptions concerning its relationship with European society, was losing critical contact with a culture in the throes of drastic and rapid change. Hoekendijk concluded that the churches would need to abandon many of the presuppositions upon which their work and witness had depended in the past because within the rising generations little of the Christian story could be ‘called into memory’. Furthermore, what did remain was a kind of ‘residue’, consisting of a distorted image of a ‘caricature Christendom’ that made people ‘immune from the real thing’. In the post-Christian future that lay ahead, the church would need to ‘lose all semblance to a “revival movement”’ and to ‘bear the signature of *mission work*’.⁶ When, twenty years later, Lesslie Newbigin proposed that the Western world, and Europe in particular, constituted ‘the most challenging missionary frontier of our time’, he was in fact echoing and amplifying a call that had been made, and largely ignored, much earlier in the twentieth century.⁷

Clearly, we have come a long way since those early prophetic voices were first raised, summoning us to the challenge of mission across a continent that for centuries had represented the heartlands of the Christian faith. The grave crisis confronting traditional, institutional Christianity, together with the deepening malaise within the secular culture of Europe, are now so widely acknowledged as to be almost taken

4 Davie 2002: 4.

5 Hoekendijk 1967: 50

6 Hoekendijk 1967: 50. The German Lutheran preacher/theologian, Helmut Thielicke possessed similar insights and offered a penetrating critique of Protestant Christianity in Thielicke 1966. From a Roman Catholic

perspective, Johann Baptist Metz referred back to Kierkegaard’s much earlier critique of Christendom and argued that, far from being obsolete, this attack on bourgeois religion was ‘for both Catholics and Protestants – more urgent than ever before’ (Metz 1981).

7 Newbigin 1987: 7.

for granted across the entire range of Christian traditions. Thus, the Catholic theologian Hervé Carrier recognises that ‘the spread of Gospel values into the social fabric’ is today blocked by the chasm that has opened up between the Christian faith and the contemporary world.⁸ More recently, the present Pope has described state churches throughout the world as ‘marked by fatigue’ and, in remarkably restrained language which avoids any mention of ‘re-evangelization’, has wondered ‘whether it is within our power to reintroduce the religious dimension through a synthesis of what remains of Christianity and the religious heritage of humankind’.⁹

Unfaith seeking understanding

In seeking the causes of the religious and cultural changes that have occurred in Europe in modern times, I want to focus attention on factors that are *internal* within the Christian movement, rather than pointing to developments beyond the churches that inhibit and undermine faith. Of course, it is not to be denied that there are such external forces, nor do I minimize the importance of seeking to understand them. Lesslie Newbigin, to whom reference has already been made, provided us with a detailed and stimulating description of modern, Western culture and rightly claimed: ‘Our culture has been confident, during the past two centuries, that it could change the world. Perhaps we may now have to insist that the point is to understand it’.¹⁰

However, the biblical texts mentioned earlier suggest that our first priority must involve a critical self-examination and a willingness to recognise that the hostility or indifference that Christianity encounters within contemporary Europe is related, at least in part, to moral and ethical failures within the churches. The French Reformed scholar, Jacques Ellul, notes that the modern critical assault on religion has almost always been focused upon ‘our disastrous practice’. The tragic use of coercion in compelling whole peoples to accept the Christian religion, the role of Christianity in the economic and political expansion of Europe around the globe, and the complicity of Christians in what has been called the growth of consumer-militarism, all of this has given substance to the secular assault on religion and, in Ellul’s words, illustrates ‘the terrible distance that Christian practice has created from revelation’.¹¹ Ellul argues powerfully that the truth-claims of the Gospel are either validated or fatally undermined by the practice of Christians and he insists that the mutual love of those who bear the name of Jesus ‘is where the approach to the Revealed God begins’.¹²

This makes us see that in not being what Christ demands we render *all* revelation false, illusory, ideological, imaginary, non-salvific. We are thus forced to *be* Christians or to recognize the falsity of what we believe. This is the undeniable proof of the need for correct practice.¹³

8 Carrier 1993: 1.

9 Pope Benedict XVI 2006.

10 Newbigin 1983: 18. Paul Weston has collected a judicious selection from Newbigin’s work in Newbigin and Weston 2006. In his final public message at the World Conference on Mission and Evangelism held in Brazil in December, 1996, Newbigin identified the gospel, the free market and Islam as the three forces that would compete for human allegiance in the

twenty-first century and he said that the crucial question would be whether ‘the Christian church can recover its confidence in the gospel in order to be able to challenge with confidence the enormous power’ of the ideology of the free market ‘that now rules us’. See Newbigin and Wainwright 2003: 119.

11 Ellul 1986: 6.

12 Ellul 1986: 6.

13 Ellul 1986: 7.

We may turn these statements the other way round and say, in the words of Dutch missionary theologian, J.H. Bavinck, that success in the work of Christian mission depends above all else on 'the ability to arouse *envy*'. This claim, which echoes the longing of the Apostle Paul that his life and work might arouse a jealousy among his own people that would lead them to Christ, has been recognised as fundamentally important in cross-cultural missionary work overseas. However, since we now find ourselves in a classical missionary situation within Europe it comes as a challenge to us, as does the same writer's insistence that all attempts at Christian witness that are 'not rooted in a church that has found the secret of mutual love' will ultimately be shown to be powerless.¹⁴

This call to repentance and renewal within European Christianity is given added urgency by the fact that the culture that emerged in the wake of the secular challenge to Christendom, appears to be itself now confronting a growing crisis at the level of human meaning and purpose. This situation has been movingly described by the philosopher Leszek Kolakowski,

After centuries of the growth of the Enlightenment, we suddenly woke up in a mental and cultural disarray; we are more and more frightened in the face of a world that is losing its religious legacy, and our fear is well justified. The lost myths seem to be replaced less by enlightened rationality and more by terrifying secular caricatures and substitutes.¹⁵

I recently attended a conference on urban ministry in the city of Glasgow, a metropolis in which the influence of the Protestant Reformation was once reflected in a motto which took the form of a prayer: 'Let Glasgow flourish by the preaching of God's word and the praising of His name'. At the conference a minister who has spent more than thirty years working in a deprived parish in the city observed that the economy and culture of Glasgow now seemed to be based on the twin objectives of enabling people to 'shop all day, and party all night'.

Our culture has elevated economic progress to the position of ultimate importance. It treats the growth of markets as the primary indicator of social health and elevates people who acquire enormous wealth to celebrity status as models of success. It does so while also loosening, if not actually removing, all restraints on the means by which such acquisition becomes possible. Such a culture produces a way of life that is ultimately destructive of the well-being of human persons and societies. As Pope Benedict has observed, what has been called the culture of economism is creating a situation in which, at the point at which Europe appears to have achieved success, it has also become hollow, 'as if it were internally paralyzed by a failure of its circulatory system that is endangering its life'. At the same time, this continent seems to be 'infected by a strange lack of desire for the future' as children come to be perceived 'as though they were taking something away from our lives'.¹⁶

Signs of hope and convergence

But all is not dark on this continent. Let me turn to some signs of hope. The very crisis to which reference has been made creates an extraordinary opportunity for a chastened, humbled and re-formed Christianity to recover the credibility and vitality

¹⁴ Bavinck 1960: 47.

¹⁵ Kolakowski 1990: 107.

¹⁶ Pope Benedict XVI 2006.

of its witness to Jesus Christ. This is not, let it be clearly understood, an opportunity to regain lost ground, to go back to the old arrangements of the Christendom era and so to recover lost social dominance. The opportunity is rather to move *forward*, to discover a new, surprising and demanding future as the God who brings life out of death calls us to receive the newness he creates and gifts to us.

The signs of this emerging future are to be seen, I suggest, in the manner in which we can detect various lines of *convergence* in our postmodern situation. There is a growing convergence between Christians and ethical humanists. The collapse of Christendom is bringing believers to engage in the kind of critical reflection on the past that I have referred to above, while the ending of the Enlightenment dream, of a world transformed by human reason alone, leads thoughtful humanists to re-assess their dismissal of the sacred and the spiritual. One may see this radical shift of perception in the discourse of sociology where, for example, a scholar like Peter Berger, who has spent a lifetime arguing that modernity spells the end of socially significant religion, now confesses his previous assumptions were false because, 'the world today... is as furiously religious as it ever was, and in some places more so than ever'.¹⁷ Christians and ethical humanists of various kinds have an unprecedented opportunity today to engage in genuine dialogue concerning matters of fundamental importance related to human well-being and the future of the beautiful, but terribly fragile, planet we inhabit together. What is more, this opportunity for dialogue is paralleled by growing evidence of spiritual hunger and the quest for alternative approaches to life at popular levels within our culture.

All of this, however, presupposes that the churches of Europe are able to meet the challenge of radical change and to become intentionally missionary in their very nature and expression. Yet here again there are, I suggest, signs of convergence as churches representing different traditions find themselves confronted by a common agenda shaped by the crisis that threatens all inherited ecclesiologies. Nicholas Boyle, in a significant study of European identity, predicts that the century ahead is likely to witness 'a great reconciliation' between Catholicism and Protestantism which will, in part, result from an ongoing work of 'Reformation without schism' within the Catholic Church: 'We may expect many more idols to fall, many more absolutes to pass away, as the Church takes on its global responsibilities and the accretions of the last 500 years are weighed and sifted'.¹⁸

In order to illustrate the kind of transformation to which Boyle is referring, let me quote Peter Hunnermann, emeritus Professor of Dogmatic Theology at the University of Tübingen and President of the European Society of Catholic Theology. In an article with the subtitle 'Observations on a Church in Peril' he writes:

As long as the older European social concepts predominated, there was but one public sphere. It was constituted by the respective rule or ruling group or caste. In that situation Christian faith had the character of a Christian culture and society. To be baptized was a social "must". The handing on of faith to the next generation was not distinguished from the educational process of the appropriation of one's culture. This situation of identity between faith and society, between faith and culture, has vanished.

¹⁷ Berger 1999: 2.

¹⁸ Boyle 1998: 93.

A new approach to mission, witness to the gospel, and conversion need to be given priority in the modern European church... The basic fact is that people find a new identity within the process of conversion.¹⁹

If the language used here sounds remarkably 'protestant', Hunnermann's further observation that the future of European Christianity requires the formation of communities in which the memory of Christ's death and resurrection will be celebrated as they are 'renewed by his word, by common prayer and praise' appears even more so. Perhaps it is in such a context as this that we begin to discern the outlines of the newness that God creates as those who name Jesus as Lord in Europe rediscover their true identity in fellowship together and recover the 'secret of mutual love' which we have seen to be the pre-requisite for effective mission.

There is, finally, another sign of convergence that offers hope for the future. While European Christianity fell into decline, the Christian faith was experiencing explosive growth almost everywhere else in the world. This has resulted in a situation in which, as we know, the phenomenon of 'World Christianity' has emerged. Across the Southern hemisphere, and especially on the continent of Africa, Christianity has become a major force and is increasingly contextualized in relation to the cultures of those regions. There is not space here to discuss this extraordinary movement. What we must notice however is that, through the enormous migratory movements from South to North, these new forms of Christianity are increasingly present within European cities. They add colour and vitality to jaded urban centres and bring fresh spiritual and theological perspectives to bear on European Christianity. In Hamburg, a city deeply influenced by Lutheranism, it is reported that there are now more than fifty African churches operating while a traditionally Catholic city like Dublin is host to an enormous influx of Nigerian Christians. Such patterns are repeated across the continent.²⁰ It should not be assumed that an influx of Christians from the South provides some automatic route to renewed spiritual vitality, or that it can offer a short cut to fruitful missionary engagement with the inhabitants of Europe. However, what this does highlight is the fact that Christianity is now a genuinely global faith. As the concerns of believers in the northern hemisphere related to post-modernity begin to overlap with those from the southern hemisphere regarding post-colonialism, there is the potential for yet another form of convergence to occur. This opens up the prospect that Christians from widely diverse cultural backgrounds may be able to articulate a credible witness to the truth and values of the kingdom of God at a time when a materialist culture threatens to engulf and destroy the planet.

Pope Benedict, at the end of the address to which reference has already been made, confesses that it is impossible at present to know what the future of Europe will be but he cites a statement of Arnold Toynbee to the effect that the fate of a society depends on its 'creative minorities'. Perhaps it is a further indication of the convergence to which I have referred that as a Protestant Evangelical Christian I am glad to close this paper with the Pope's words:

Christian believers should look upon themselves as just such a creative minority, helping Europe to reclaim what is best in its heritage and thereby to place itself at the service of all humankind.²¹

¹⁹ Hunnermann 2001: 76.

²⁰ See Bremer 2004: 95. On African Christians in Europe see ter Haar 1998.

²¹ Pope Benedict XVI 2006.

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