



## Europe – the cultural context

Greater Europe Mission

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### Media

Looking at some ads, in a German magazine you have Santa Claus saying, "Buy more presents this Christmas; you're patriotic aren't you?" Economic growth figures are waning. A good holiday spending spree would financially benefit the nation. However, the use of familiar icons from one sphere of life to influence another sphere – a common practice in advertising – is pushing the limit even further in another recent ad: an image that was banned by the Catholic Church in France.

#### Girbaud's 'Last Supper' Ad

We are unable to reproduce Girbaud's 'Last Supper' Ad here, as we do not hold the copyright or reproduction rights to this image.

However, we have included the following link to the internet which clearly displays the image (you will need to click the 'back button' on your browser to return to Encounters Mission Ezine):

<http://tinyurl.com/lme8d> (Epica Awards)

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Here in Girbaud's 'Last Supper' ad, in which eleven women and one man are placed as figures on two sides of a central female figure, all gathered on the far side of a long table. This is an ad for women's clothing. Interestingly enough, the male figure is the most scantily clad with his bare back exposed, turned away from the camera. He also is sitting in the position given to Mary Magdalene in Dan Brown's controversial book, *The Da Vinci Code*.

Drawing from "residual Christian memory" in our culture, the designers of this ad have created an interesting juxtaposition between religious and fashion images. This is common practice in media today. Borderless images are mixed and matched, a bit like the "a la carte" way people are choosing to amalgamate religious choices to form their own brand of what they believe.

Art, fashion and advertising are often on the outer limits of communication in a society, breaking through taboo and tradition. As watchers of culture, we can be alerted to trends and bold statements by staying in touch with these voices. Even though it may be an uncomfortable place to be positioned, as followers of Christ curious about our world and with the sons of Issacar, challenged to "understand the times", we must expose ourselves to some of what the world is telling us through these media, watching and discerning, dissecting and putting together pieces of the puzzle.

A familiar word has come to encompass what we understand of the “spirit of the age” since the final decades of the 20<sup>th</sup> century: postmodernism. As a defining term used to describe our age, it should be made moribund. It is “post” modern, which makes it “pre” the next wave. It continues to be defined by what it is not. Generalisations are inadequate to explain the variances found in the “movement”. The term “pomo” defines nothing since current expressions of reason and/or non-reason, truth and relativism are indefinable in any common form. Worship services, emerging churches and books designed for postmoderns are targeting people for whom the label smacks of pigeonholing by non-postmoderns.

Jean-Claude Guillebaud, in *Re-Founding the World*, quotes the dissident theologian Maurice Bellet: “Don’t our societies,” he asks, “only hold together because of the *values* (civic responsibility, a minimal professional conscience, a respect for the founding proscriptions, etc.) that have themselves survived because they activate some residual, or debased, notion of what is *sacred*? It seems as if we are merely grafted onto shards of a lost humanity, as if our collective existences only rested on some spiritual *residue*, some mother-lode now almost mined out, and which, in any case, there is no longer anything to replenish.” (Guillebaud, 2001 p11)

Guillebaud writes that, though Europe and the Western world is founded on the Greco and Judeo-Christian moorings of reason, justice, right of the individual, equality, time and progress, “nowadays, no one is prepared to risk facing the essential questions head on. It almost seems to have become a question of good manners.” Therefore, he says, the media chatters, leaving us in the fog of soliloquy, as if they are talking to themselves, mixing metaphors and dodging the real issues, telling half-truths, feeding on the ratings awarded by the reporting of chaos.

The fragmentation of knowledge is dehumanising, says Guillebaud. “We have entered an age of atomised and labyrinthine knowledge. We can only lay claim to competence in partial, local, limited domains. We feel our way forward, towards a horizon of multiple affiliations, plural identities, modest reason, fractal logic, and complex networks.” (ibid p18) There is just too much to know. We react by pulling back into our own fields of study, or one slice of a field of study, trying in vain to grasp the breadth of an ever-expanding database. There are always too many books that need to be read to keep up with the latest developments, to ride the crest of the wave, never mind getting ahead.

We are overwhelmed and tend to reject the possibility of synthesis between discoveries made in a range of fields. This tends to push us toward the conception that everything is relative; “it just depends”. Your conclusion depends on how much you know...and we can never know all there is to know. We start to feel that the truth – the ultimate truth – cannot be known. Moreover, if we can’t unquestionably know something as true, we assume others are caught in the same trap. Therefore, we allow that “it’s true if it’s true for you”.

Guillebaud says “we are, it seems, condemned to either idiotic chatter or microscopic knowledge. Between these two extremes, there seems to be little firm ground. But isn’t it precisely this in-between region that we live in...?” (ibid p19)

## **Immigration and Identity**

The Muslim issue: the French case, anger burning...the condition of disaffected European-born children and grandchildren of immigrants is not unique to France’s major cities. Paola Subacchi, of Britain’s Royal Institute of International Affairs says, “the situation is broadly the same across Europe.” We ignore these simmering communities of underprivileged youth at the peril of social functioning.

Linked to this roiling, unsolved presence of blatant discrimination and the “failure” of the multi-cultural model in France and elsewhere; is a major issue, which is at stake for most peoples of Europe, and indeed for Europe itself: namely, one of identity. Europeans tend to either deny their roots or cling tightly to a definition of their uniqueness. The peoples of Europe are wrestling with who they are as more and more from non-European roots pour onto the continent. Not only are new arrivals asking what it means to be Kurdish-European, Algerian-French, Indonesian-Dutch, Turkish-German, Pakistani-British or Sudanese-Swedish; long-time European family landowners are asking, “What does it mean to be French, Dutch, Spanish or Italian?” In an attempt to preserve ancient traditions and a certain national pride, these European-rooted families and people groups often reject new elements as threats to their way of life.

In the midst of this movement of peoples and lack of clarity on identity, both personal and that of the “group” to which each belongs, we find some general trends in common across the continent. The ubiquitous presence of cell phones, cutting across socio-economic lines, has changed the way people meet, the way they talk, the way they move from place to place in our world. Music, fashion, information, and the outsourcing of manufacturing and services have become globalised.

However, these generalisations alone are not locally helpful as we attempt to find better ways to prepare missionaries for communicating Christ cross-culturally. Each country, and at times even specific people groups or regions within countries, has its own set of characteristics which define it: its own way of thinking, its own language and traditions, its own keys to unlock a unique set of cultural images and ideals.

East and West will continue on different growth trajectories. Latvia is becoming a small creative force in the New Europe while Germany’s sluggish economy holds Old Europe’s giant captive. The East is significantly more supportive of the American military presence in Iraq and more open to new American bases in their countries than is Western Europe.

As each nation struggles with the convergence of their own past history and their own future hopes, in their own very real and unique present; they deal with forms of government, with economic decisions, dominations and invasions, both past and present, which are influencing them today.

## **Cultural Preparation**

The best way to prepare followers of Christ to communicate the hope of the Gospel in Europe is to help them to learn the tools to exegete the culture. It is not enough to know that, in general, Europeans do “such and such”. It is intrinsic to the clear communication of the Gospel message that the messenger should be able to listen, watch, analyse and try to understand the mindset and culture of the people he or she is trying to reach. Learning how to read the signs of the times and be in step with current thought in the host country of a worker is invaluable in being able to connect with the people living there.

As part of the process of getting to know about a host culture, the study of dominant religions is helpful but not sufficient. We must look at the broader picture: that of history, religious affiliations, wars, power, and immigrant movements. Though crucial to our understanding of culture, religion does not often translate as “faith”. The study of religion is not often the study of the “religiousness” of a country. Religion is more often than not a political issue, part of a power struggle, a side to take against a group which is not “us” but is “them”.

When we look at religious activity as Christian students of culture, we should look through eyes, which do not spiritualise its role in society. Explicit followers of Christ (certainly in Europe) only ever make up a small percentage within the larger societal grouping and therefore cannot be regarded as representative of the wider population. If we can hold the analysis of the role of religion loosely, without getting hung up on the hook of spiritual judgment, we will more clearly be able to analyse this role as one element which shapes society, albeit a defining role that affects the receptivity of the Gospel in that culture today.

In the interest of clarity, as a Christian student of culture moves cross-culturally, entering an unfamiliar social space, we need to make sure what “culturally-loaded”, excess issues we bring with us, extraneous to the core, immutable tenants of the Gospel and Scripture. This analysis may also include the labels we bring with us into the new setting. In Ireland, a new church plant may not want to link itself with the word “Protestant”, though in the sending country from which the new workers are coming they most certainly would have identified themselves as such. There are situations today in Europe in which it would not be wise to be connected with the label “Evangelical”. This term has become politicised over the last four years through events outside of Europe, specifically those involving 9-11, the American President and the war in Iraq.

As we attempt to leave behind old labels (or at least keep only those which make sense in the new cultural setting) and seek to learn about how to be good communicators of the Gospel as we cross cultural boundaries, we must first be well anchored and rooted in our own sense of who we are in Christ: of our identity as redeemed and forgiven, imperfect and needy followers of Christ who is love itself to us and to all peoples. As bearers of this love, our sensitive entry into an unknown culture as students and learners rather than conquerors, will be the best start to building transformational relationships.

Guillebaud, J. (2001) *Re-Founding the World: A Western Testament*, translated by Wilson, WD. New York, Algora Publishing

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