

Europe – the religious context



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Stories

- Gabor Kovacs is a bright, engaging and articulate Hungarian in his mid 30s. He laments the lack of religious education in his youth. He is influenced by the secular atheism of his youth and the secular capitalism of his early career. He feels sure that religious belief and practice will probably help but he is too busy to take it too seriously.
- The National Synod of the Church of Norway's met during November 2005. The main theme of the Synod was 'En misjonerende kirke' (A Missionary Church) and the tension between being an 'open' (or volksskirke) and a 'missionary church' acknowledged for the first time in such a public way.
- The Conference of Protestant Churches in Europe recently finished its report *Evangelising – Protestant perspectives for the Churches in Europe 2004*. Dismissed by some as too pragmatic and practical (= not sufficiently systematic) it is nevertheless an interesting departure for the paedobaptist Churches in membership of CPCE.
- The Czech Republic is statistically the most atheist of all European countries (only 39% believe in God) yet has the second highest rate of belief in telepathy (73%, only surpassed by Lithuania at 79% - 'the Lithuanians are God-believing telepaths')
Source: EVS 2001
- Roman Catholicism in Poland contributes to the highest reported rates of church attendance (78%) and belief in God (97%). In Spain and Italy the situation is not quite the same, due to the perception that the RC. Church has supported too closely successive Right Wing Governments.
- In 'secular' France, a 2003 survey revealed that 32% of people who described themselves as 'Christian' had recently returned to the faith. Ten years previously that figure had been only 13%.¹ Jean-Claud Gillebaud is a leading French intellectual whose critically acclaimed book, *Refounding the World: the western Testament begins with a quotation from the Psalms and has a chapter on the Apostle Paul*. In essence the book is a plea for France to re-examine its Judeo-Christian roots. The French equivalent of Forbes or Fortune magazine published an article in August of 2003 titled, 'God – the stocks are rising' noting the surge of interest in religion and spirituality and its impact on the business and educational worlds as it displaces secularism.
- Historic In October 2005, the head of the Reformed Church of France, the Rev. Marcel Manoel told people gathered in Switzerland for the executive Committee of the World Alliance of Reformed Churches, that the decline in importance of traditional family ties to membership in his Church had been replaced by numbers of disillusioned Catholics and Evangelicals. "Without doubt there are fewer people but they are more active," he

¹ Tennant, A. 'The French reconnection', in *Christianity Today* March 2005, p29

reported. "We are beginning to see a new way of being the Church which is less about organising members and more about helping them to witness in contemporary society."²

- Most Britons describe themselves as Christian despite not attending church regularly, a BBC survey has found. More than two-thirds of the 1,019 respondents said they were Christian, but only 17% regularly went to church. Almost 75% of respondents said the UK should retain Christian values - including 69% of Jews, and nearly 50% of Muslims, Sikhs and Hindus. (Source: BBC IMC Faith Poll 14th November 2005)
- The tragic death of Theo van Gogh is a reminder of the power of religiosity to stimulate both a strong aversion (van Gogh's work) as well as strong sympathies (van Gogh's assailant). I would also draw attention to the launch of the new Dutch version of the Bible. I visited the Netherlands two days after its launch on the 27th October, 2004 but could not obtain a copy in the local bookstore in Amersfoort. They had already sold out.³ As a part of the launch the Queen read Genesis 1:1-10 on prime time national TV, featured in a five hour feature on the Bible. A friend, standing in line to buy his copy, asked other purchasers whether they would be reading it. The most common response was, 'No, I just wanted to own a copy!' A survey conducted at the same time revealed that only 33% of the Dutch population regards itself as Christian.
- I visited a trendy clothes store and on entering were surprised to be greeted by a bleeding heart Jesus, a Madonna and Child, and a Crown of Thorns. Not as religious icons, but as style icons, borne on the sleeves, chests, and quilted padding, of jackets, t-shirts, and other items of clothing.⁴
- Consider French fashion designer MFG who, in March of 2005, displayed the highly provocative advert featuring a female 'Last Supper' on the billboards of Neuilly, near Paris. French Courts considered the advert to have insulted, 'the religious feelings of Roman Catholics' and banned it from public display.
- In the May 2005 edition of *Sourozh*, the quarterly journal of the Russian Orthodox Diocese of Sourozh, Bishop Basil refers to the increase in the numbers of citizens of the Former Soviet Union living in the UK, and the corresponding increase in attendance at Liturgy at the Cathedral in London. The Liturgy is now more likely to be celebrated in Russian than in the English that was commonly used for Russian émigrés until the collapse of the Soviet Empire.
- The Chinese church in Helsinki is a first generation congregation of those who came to faith since arriving in Helsinki. Awareness of the Chinese situation is not particularly relevant for them. Their church reflects the social strata of the Chinese community in Helsinki, particularly the 'waves' of immigrants. Mandarin and Cantonese are used by the PC-USA trained pastor.
- Frej is a French-speaking Algerian academic who has taught with Michel Foucault and others. Since 9/11 he has felt the need to reconnect with Islam as a way of working for moderation and reform. As a 'cradle-Muslim' with only nominal convictions he feels in some small way responsible for the radicalisation of Islam. He connects with colleagues who feel similarly in London, Paris, and elsewhere.
- Iranian refugees are regular worshippers at the Church of Scotland in Budapest. Several of them have been baptised, having gone through the baptismal preparation course. Possessing a baptismal certificate is a useful step along the way to a residency visa but some still attend the weekly Bible Study and free lunch. There is evidence that for some, conversion is genuine.

² ENI-05-0791 'French religion faces new future 100 years' Ecumenical News International email News service, 18th October 2005

³ ENI reported that 200,000 copies were sold in four days. *ENI* 10th November 2004

⁴ See the fashion website www.g-sus.com

- Evangelical optimism. An evangelical congregation has been established in France every eleven days for the last thirty-five years.⁵ Peter Brierley suggests that the evangelical churches are those that are more likely to be growing in the UK.
- For the last two or three years the European Missionary Councils & European Missionary Alliances have met together as a gesture of solidarity and a desire to seek deeper co-operation. An EMC member is helping fund an EMA programme. The Conference for World Mission and Evangelism invited the full participation of Evangelical and Pentecostal mission leaders in 2005.
- Religious Trends⁵ shows that France overtook Kenya last year as the leading destination for British mission agencies. Operation World estimates some 3,690 cross-cultural missionaries working in Europe. 69.4% of US & Canadian funded mission personnel working in Europe are either North American citizens or non-nationals in the country of operation. This leaves 30.6% who are indigenous mission workers.
- Religious Trends notes the increasing numbers of denominations in the UK since 1977. There were 97 in 1977, by 2005 there were 270. In 26 European Countries there are a total of 81 different Reformed Church Denominations, the UK and the Netherlands manage 31 between them.
- Europe's churches are networked in multiple ways. The EEA, CEC, CPCE, CCEE, are just a few of the acronymic organisations that networks churches within Europe.
- The Alpha phenomenon is Europe-wide. By 2005, 6,336 courses had been run in 41 European countries with a further 7,234 in the UK. Some European evangelicals remain wary of charismatic elements, and some may incorrectly perceive it as Roman Catholic, for example in Croatia.
- The Czech Republic is one of the most atheist European countries whilst Slovakia is one of the more religious.
- Following the arrival of missionaries from a major US mission agency, to work in the established Baptist congregation of Skopje, Macedonia, the missionaries felt the Macedonian leadership was not adequately stressing doctrinal Calvinism. The controversy provoked a split and the Mission Agency notched up its first church plant; Skopje now has two Baptist churches!
- In Moscow 2004 I visited the Director of *Going Together*, a youth organisation that some have described as Putin's *Komsomol*. The Orthodox Patriarchate co-operates with the organisation because it stresses the importance of culture for the proper education of young (elite) citizens of Russia. Its three catchphrases are, "Professionalism", "Morality", and "Patriotism". Culture in Russia (Dostoyevsky, Pushkin, etc.) is influenced by Orthodox Christianity and young people are taught to respect Orthodoxy. The programme has a secular basis and it appears that the main agenda is the political education of young people.

⁵ Ditto, p30

Analysis

- There is widespread evidence of decline in Church attendance
- There is widespread evidence of decline in patterns of 'orthodox' Christian belief
- European religious identity appears to demonstrate the greatest resilience when it is understood as a component of cultural identity.
- There are a number of crises within the historic Protestant 'volkeskirke' within Europe, with decreasing revenues from Church tax, decreasing numbers of people willing to pay voluntary Church tax, and a reassessment of historic Church-State relationships. Within these churches, the Church of England's 'Mission-shaped Church' report is being reasonably widely read and appreciated. In some quarters there exists a refusal to face facts and the declining revenues is leading to financially-driven mission audits.
- Within the nations of Europe, the complexity of multi-culturalism is matched by the complexity of multiple variations on a sacred-secular spectrum. Simultaneously, as a continent, Europe can be described as pre-secular, secular, post-secular. Some countries are experiencing 'La revanche de Dieu' in rather obvious ways.
- Christians committed to inter-faith dialogue need to recognise that contemporary Europe may demand a dialogue that is inter-ideological (for example, between faith and secularism) rather than inter-faith.
- There are a myriad of Churches of the diaspora (from all continents) that suggest the need for Christians with a deep appreciation and understanding of working across cultural boundaries, to engage with diaspora churches in behalf of national churches. This has an obvious relationship to the presence of non-European missionaries working in Europe
- There are significant populations of 4th world European peoples (Sami, Roma, Ingrians) often not widely known outside of their national context.
- There are signs that Eastern Orthodox Christians are able to appreciate the spirituality and missionary zeal of Western Christian missionaries (and vice versa) but this requires a deep commitment to humble and mutual learning. This is an important pre-requisite for more effective evangelisation/christianisation of parts of Central and Eastern Europe.
- There are signs that a renewal of Ecclesiopraxis is being led by the need to engage more effectively in mission in the complexity of contemporary Europe.
- There are increasing number of religious freedoms being won in former communist countries although this will continue to require monitoring carefully for some time to come.
- The implication of determining 'Spiritual security' to be synonymous with 'National security' in Russia is likely have considerable bearing upon the impact of Christian mission.

Halman and Riis of the EVS,

"All age groups show increasing levels of general religiosity when they get older, but as soon as institutional aspects are evaluated, all age groups show declining levels of religiosity. There is indeed an institutional crisis, but not necessarily a religious crisis"⁶

⁶ Halman, L. & Riis, O., *Religion in Secularising Society*, Brill: Leiden, 2003 p11

Whether Europe really is the prodigal continent depends upon an assessment that it was at one point a part of the Father's household. It is difficult to see how it can be so considered at this point in its history, if Halman and Riis are indeed correct. To what extent it was ever a part of the Father's household is a discussion for another place.

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