

Europe: A Unique and Unified Voice in Global Mission?

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A well respected mission leader from an international, conservative mission agency was speaking to a group of international non-American students preparing for mission. He spoke for an hour on the challenges of mission at the start of the 21st century covering many of the far-reaching and important issues but he chose to finish with a comment that surprised all those present.

I want to encourage all of you to study hard, to continue reflecting and become missiologists regardless of your role, because one of the greatest challenges and opportunities offered today is that British missiology needs to become strong enough to tame American missiology.

At the start of the year a newspaper column brought me back to considering his words anew: "The forum was therefore a long barrage of American-led interventions, whose participants ... were unable to hear a different, European, perspective ..."¹ These words were spoken about the Davos Economic Forum but could it equally be said of missiological gatherings today? Jonathan Ingleby suggests that historically at least it was often the case (see Europe, Britain and America: extracting a European voice from the historical debate about mission).

When we started Encounters it was with an explicit aim of giving space for UK-based reflection on missiological issues. The growth in readership and response to Encounters has been remarkable and many colleagues on mainland Europe have expressed appreciation for and interest in Encounters. Some have asked the valid question "Is it really needed?" Our usual reply is "If you have a serious, reflective article on mission and want to publish it in the UK and do not want to publish it in an American Journal, where would you go?" People go to reply, pause, scratch their heads and then often say "Oh, I see what you mean."

By contrast others have recently said 'Why can't Encounters be a European space for missiological reflection?' In this issue we have decided to ask just that question: can Encounters provide a place to publish papers on issues that people are wrestling with in the different parts of Europe, a place to cast them out into the 'European Space' and see where common ground is found, where shared interest lies and where possibly a unified voice might be discovered. This would be a voice that, collectively, can speak loud enough to bring out the often unheard voices and different perspectives that the continent of Europe has on the issues we face in the global mission movement.

What Might This Achieve?

Whether we generally feel that American missiology needs taming or not there does seem to be an important need to avoid Europe being sidelined in global mission. Some say with justification that this has already happened: that Europe is a 'has-been' as far as God is concerned. Indeed some writers question whether it can truly be re-evangelised let alone

¹ Stéphane Marchand - Le Figaro, January 27

be a meaningful player in world mission again. Certainly since the rise of American missions Europe's role has been played down and often Britain has been caught in between – accused of been part of a militant managerial approach to mission seen as Anglo-American by Europeans and yet suspicious of the gung-ho, 'can do in our generation' style of the Americans. Whatever the case Europe is increasingly at the heart of global mission, albeit as a receiving continent: the prodigal son, once in the Father's house but now long since left home. (See Darrell Jackson's article *Beyond the Preamble: searching for God in a secularising Europe* for a discussion on whether Europe is really a secular continent.) This change of fortunes brings with it just as many challenges as the historic role of being God's missionary continent tasked to evangelise the rest of the world. We need to talk about these things, wrestle with them and make sense of them missiologically.

Likewise Europe still has at least one specialist task in mission that no one else can perform, or at least no one is nearly as well qualified: that is to wrestle with post colonialism and its effect on mission from the position of the historic colonisers. Recently during the VE Day (end of World War II) celebrations I heard a Polish immigrant explain his amazement when he came to Britain. He could not believe how small the country was and yet what a huge force it had exerted over such a large part of the world. That is not unique to Britain; it could be said of Holland, Germany, France, Spain, Portugal and others. The legacy of postcolonialism is far reaching and very relevant to mission. As the colonisers we need to understand these issues better than most: how they affect our mission efforts to others and how they affect people's desire and willingness to come and do mission 'to us'. We need to understand how colonialism helped and hindered and be able to speak into the modern-day equivalents to avoid the devastating consequences of our own experience. An example of this was cited recently by Vinoth Ramachandra in the CMS Annual Sermon 2003.

The silence of many American evangelical leaders in the face of the unilateralism of the US Government threatens to undermine the credibility of American evangelical missions in the early 21st century, just as the involvement of 19th-century British evangelicalism in the imperialist project has had dire consequences for the credibility of the Gospel among sensitive non-Christians both in Britain and the post-colonial world.

We Europeans, have experience to share, not least from our mistakes, but here too we do not do this on our own. In the same way that we spoke about Encounters being a 'UK space for missiological reflection' and invited those outside to speak to the issues and subjects we were wrestling with, so with a European focus we would need others from outside Europe to speak into 'our space'.

What Might This Involve?

What would we need to do to make such an idea work? How could Encounters become European? Here are some ideas and questions that we have thought of:

- How can Encounters gather voices from those that matter: opinion formers, on the ground practitioners and others?
- What issues are particular to Europe?
- How do we attract non-European voices to challenge us?

There are some more specifically practical questions:

- Would it involve translating the key documents published on Encounters into another or several European languages?
- Or perhaps does it mean that we need summaries in these languages?
- Do the discussion boards need to be available in several languages or is English sufficient?

If you would like to respond to this article, please use the 'Voice your comments' form on the Encounters website (www.redcliffe.org/mission). Alternatively, you may prefer to email your response to mission@redcliffe.org, in which case please remember to include your full name, your organisation/role and whether you would like your comments posted on the Encounters discussion board.