Beyond the Preamble:
Searching for God in a secularising Europe

Author: Rev Darrell Jackson, Conference of European Churches

1. The Challenge of Europe

The absence of any reference to God or the Christian faith in the Preamble of the European Constitution and the manifest failure of the European Churches to change the minds of the politicians highlights the extent to which current European policy making takes place in a secular vacuum. The Constitution guarantees the Christian churches a permanent consultative role within the European institutions but even this fails to assure individual believers that European policy makers take sufficiently seriously the motivating ability of the Christian faith. This is strange given the most recent work of Jürgen Habermas, the German neo-Marxist philosopher who suggests, persuasively, that Europe may be seeing a 'return to the religious', and uses the term 'post-secular' to describe this latest phenomena in the career of religion within European history.

Yet, the fact remains that the complexity within Western Europe is reflected in the equally complex situations found in the post-Soviet societies of Central and Eastern Europe. Reflecting on this, the call for Papers at the 2004 International Society for the Sociology of Religion (ISSR) Conference highlighted the barriers that remain to be bridged in the attempt to understand religion at a pan-European level. The invitation for papers not only made reference to the diversity of religious experience across these countries, but also pointed to the diversity of methodological approach to the study of religion.

Let us take one example. The Slovakian National Census in 2001 revealed a 10% increase since 1991 in the number of people who self-describe as 'Christian' from 76 to 86%. Are we to understand the increase as a reversal of secularisation? To understand such phenomena fully it is necessary to understand something of the immediate post-Soviet historical situation. In Hungary in 1956, with the relaxing of restrictions, many previously underground groups (the Scouts, Christian groups, etc.) emerged to draft letters requesting permission to start up new groups. Their letters are displayed in the House of Terror in Budapest. Many letter writers were rounded up and punished following the collapse of the Hungarian uprising. Asking Slovaks in 1991, only eighteen months to two years after the 'velvet revolution', to indicate religious affiliation was always likely to generate anxiety among a certain percentage of the population. Such stories, and others like it, contribute to the complexity of understanding the situation of religious belief and practice in Central and Eastern Europe after 1989.

There are also significant developments within Western Europe that require careful reflection by those with an interest in the Christian research and study of religion. I mention merely two here. The first is the presence of large numbers of migrant and ethnic minority congregations and significant numbers of those from Muslim backgrounds undergoing Christian baptism. Perhaps more significant is the rising tide of scholarly voices being raised against the classical theory of secularisation. Its power to monopolize the manner in which religious discourse is framed in Western Europe is waning, as the sociological and philosophical consensus begins to break down.

I want to turn to a discussion of these shifting trends at the outset of this paper before I begin to take a more detailed look at the current situation in Europe with regards to the study of Christianity and other religions in Europe.

2. The Ebb and Flow of Secularisation

There can be little doubt that any serious student of contemporary European religiosity has to give an account of secularisation. The debate has raged for nearly fifty years. However, more recent contributors to the debate, including several former secularization theorists who have since recanted, offer evidence that the consensus surrounding classical forms of the secularization theory is beginning to break down. New possibilities and approaches to the questions raised by European religiosity and secularization are being suggested. Sociologists and theologians within Europe[1]and North America are enlivening the debate that has focused on the inevitability of religious decline in modern societies. Sociological mantras learned during the heady days of the sixties and seventies are no longer felt to be adequate in this rapidly moving debate. Church and Christian leaders who wish to engage with contemporary European societies must do so with a greater awareness of the sacred and secular diversity that exists across Europe.

Equally, there can be little doubt that secularism and secularisation continue to provide significant numbers of the citizens of Europe with a framework for shaping ethical decisions, priorities, actions, worldview, 'beliefs', and their attitudes towards other individuals, social groups, and institutions, including the Church. Further, as Raymond Fung reminds us, "In talking about our secular neighbours, we are also talking about ourselves."[2] Within such a framework religion has little or no value in the public realm and is considered to be a purely private matter. As a result, the privatisation of religion has tended to accelerate the degree of nominal religiosity. Consequently church members demonstrate an attendant lack of spirituality accompanied by a widely reported suspicion on the part of the wider population towards the church as an institution. Churches are accused of exercising undue power and influence over individuals and society and promoting mission merely as a means of extending their influence. One thinks of the recent reaction to the statements by the Italian candidate for the European Commission, Rocco Buttiglione, who contends that:

> *I have the right to think that homosexuality is a sin, but this has no effect on politics, because in politics, the principle of non-discrimination prevails, and the state has no right to stick its nose in these situations..*[3]

How one responds to this statement is likely to reveal to what extent one feels Europe is, or should be, a continent of secularizing nations.

To gain a picture across Europe requires an examination of the constituent countries that make up the whole. The European Values Survey (EVS) is probably the most comprehensive grounding for any attempt to begin detailed research at a national level.[4]
The surveys pose questions about church attendance and religious beliefs and deploy a similar methodology to that used by Gordon Heald through the UK-based Opinion Research Business. His work has returned consistent figures (between 70-72%) for people who describe themselves as 'Christian', figures borne out by the UK Census 2001 when a religious question was included for the first time in nearly 150 years.

The response to the question, 'Do you believe in God?' ran from 97% in Poland to 39% in the Czech Republic. The contrasts within Europe sometimes appear to defy explanation. The former Czechoslovakia not only divided politically during the events of the 'Velvet revolution' but the divide remains in terms of religious belief. The percentage of those who describe themselves as 'Christian' in Slovakia, between 84-86%, is over double that of its close neighbour. A similar contrast in Germany, between former East and West, has also been widely reported. The EVS is most helpful in deploying a common methodology for determining levels of church/mosque/temple attendance, belief in God, religious practice and religious affiliation.

Despite the cautions suggested by the findings of the European Values Survey[5], the trends across Europe should make sobering reading for leaders of the European Churches that are seen to have decreasing relevance to the everyday lives of Europe's citizens. However, as I have travelled I have begun to feel that a more nuanced understanding of secularisation and its impacts may be called for. In their work Religion in Secularizing Europe, summarising the findings of the European Values Surveys of 1980, 1990, and 1998 the report's editors write,

> *Secularization has not proceeded at a similar pace all over Europe.*[6]

For many citizens of Central and Eastern Europe, 'doubly secularised' may be a more appropriate description. For them, soviet atheistic materialism has been followed rapidly by a western, capitalistic form of materialism. The story of Gabor is instructive in this regard:

Gabor Kovacs is a bright, engaging and articulate Hungarian in his mid 30s.

He is English and German-speaking and learnt English in his spare time to enable him to improve his career prospects with the multi-national companies that have been relocating offices to Budapest over the last fifteen years or so. He has worked for various multi-national offices in Budapest over the last seven or eight years and although he recognises the economic advantage of working for the western multi-nationals, he is very aware of the social cost to the individual employees and feels this personally. He speaks of being a 'slave' of western multi-nationals and complains that the higher than average salary brings with it a higher than average set of expectations. He laments that he is unable to give more time to his family commitments. He complains that colleagues in London, Paris, or Frankfurt have highly unrealistic expectations. He suspects that they sometimes tell him that his allotted tasks should only need eight hours in the working day when in fact they know that eleven are needed. His working day is typically eight to eleven hours long, a fact he resents.

He readily suggests that the Soviet education of his youth offered no religious education but reveals that he is very interested in religion as an alternative to capitalism's inhuman processes. He thinks that it might provide a way of achieving inner peace, harmony and a way of dealing with the stresses of modern life. He also wonders whether religion can provide an alternative ideological or value base.

He suggests that Hungary and other EU accession states are likely to pay a high social cost for entry into the EU and believes that many of the accession states are in the pockets of the larger Western nations. Perhaps somewhat ironically therefore, he aspires to be a world citizen, or at least a European one (although he hesitates to tie this too closely to the European Union), and enjoys travelling. He is fearful of nationalisms and is fearful that such factors may be de-stabilising in the enlarged EU. He asks whether the EU knows what it is doing by inviting potentially unstable nations into enlarged membership.

His interest in religion extends particularly to eastern, esoteric, religions, including Buddhism. He readily admits that he has little time for the study and devotion required by most religions. His understanding of religion is fairly individualistic and he rarely talks of religious 'groups', 'communities', or even 'churches'.

My encounter with Gabor reveals, I believe, that there are Europeans who, though carrying the burden of double-secularisation, instinctively believe that religious belief may in some way provide a way towards deeper personal integration and possibly a way to resist the de-humanising tendencies of the western multi-nationals that have recently arrived in Central and Eastern Europe.

Metropolitan Daniel of Iaşi, Romania, argues persuasively that in the face of such a predicament,

> *Secularization obliges the Church to renew its spiritual life, to become more responsible in the world, more sensitive to the presence of Christ in the "signs of the time", in the social struggle for justice, freedom and human dignity; even to experience often the situation of being marginalized, in order to better understand those who are marginalized or forgotten in different societies. Secularization calls paradoxically for more holiness of life, for a deeper spirituality.*[7]

Resisting the de-humanising tendencies of the western institutions and corporations, in some instances, is given institutional expression. In countries such as Russia, for example, the Orthodox Church is widely seen as an important ally in resisting the inroads being made by less desirable elements of western individualism and secularization (although in some versions, this seems to give way to extreme ideological expressions). In such countries, perhaps ironically, where minority churches feel themselves disadvantaged by the dominance of a majority Church, the attraction of a secular State as the only apparent means of securing religious freedoms is difficult to resist.

Grace Davie has put the case well for an understanding of 'European exceptionalism' but she would be the first to admit that her analysis fails to give an adequate account of the complex social and historical realities of Central and Eastern Europe.[8] Further work is needed in these areas to understand more precisely the interaction between Gospel and culture.

The increase in the reporting of forms of contemporary spiritualities in the UK, informed in part by the work of David Hay and Kate Hunt, contributes to the developing sense that all is not well with the classical understanding of secularization. Work currently underway in Britain, Denmark, Norway, and Sweden (and possibly, Ireland) is attempting to understand and learn how best to respond to those people with no formal religious affiliation but who describe themselves as 'spiritual'.

Attendances at the film 'Passion of Christ' suggest a significant level of popular interest in the person and story of Christ. I do not want to offer a theological or artistic evaluation of this film(!) but simply to draw attention to the appeal of the Gospel narrative and the corresponding failure on the part of the churches of Europe to engage its peoples with it. The churches continue to empty at an alarming rate across Europe and their attempts to mediate the Gospel narratives seem less convincing, less appealing, and more institutionally demanding than handing over eight euros for a night at the movies. However, eight euros is obviously considered good value for the many within Europe who are constructing individualized ways of making sense of religious narrative, symbolism, and ritual.

In the Netherlands, 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 also note 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.[9] As a part of the launch the Queen read Genesis 1:1-10 on prime time national TV, featured in a five hour programme 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.

How the famously tolerant Dutch will handle questions of integration in their multi-religious society will doubtless continue to interest the rest of the Europe. In France, the banning of religious symbols in public schools is a timely reminder that secular public policy is not exercised consistently within Europe. In a perverse contrast with the French experience, Muslims who wish to own a passport in equally irreligious Denmark[10] are required, as loyal Danes, to carry an image of the crucified Christ on the inside front cover.

Moving on from the Dutch bookshop we 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. These were not seen as religious icons, but as style icons, borne on the sleeves, chests, and quilted padding, of jackets, t-shirts, and other items of clothing.[11] Religion may have lost its institutional power base but, in this instance, it has not disappeared, just been captured and subverted by the fashion houses, including G-SUS Industries. Are we to understand by this that the secular is being sacralised or can we interpret it as evidence of the unstoppable appetite of the secular spirit: a mutant form of secularization that is unafraid to invade the private sacred space, previously negotiated over several hundred years of Enlightenment history. The private domain of religion is, it seems, no longer territory respected by advocates of secularization. In essence, we can see this response to Christianity paralleled by the work of van Gogh and his response to Islam.

Finally, it might be suggested that a further complicating factor is likely to be the presence of increasing numbers of migrant and ethnic minority churches across Europe. Their forms of Christian faith are vibrant and vital, often charismatic, and require high levels of personal commitment from their members.[12] The interaction of such congregations with traditional forms of the western church, as well as civic authorities, political leaders, and local communities, will remain an area of relevance to the discussion of secularization over the coming years.

Conclusion

In short, we can say that a more careful understanding and account of secularization will need to take account of these European realities, before we too readily conclude that Europe's peoples are on an unstoppable journey towards religious anomie.

Halman and Riis again:

> *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*[13]

So, the challenge for our churches remains: to engage with both the sacred space and the secular space. How may we make sense of both the marketplace and the cathedral precinct? How may we speak the name of Jesus in both places, in worship and in witness, with equal relevance and conviction?

Notes

1 For an accessible treatment, see Paul Avis, A Church Drawing Near: Spirituality and Mission in a Post-Christian Culture (London: Continuum, 2003). For American sociologists, the context of a highly modern and highly religious society has provided a sharp contrast to their observations of European societies; similarly modern but secularised. The most recent assaults on secularization theories have come from the 'rational choice' school of sociologists of religions. See, for example, Stark and Finke Acts of Faith; explaining the Human Side of Religion (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2000)

2 R Fung 'Evangelising a Secular Society' in Proclaiming Christ in Christ's Way Samuel, V. (Oxford: Regnum 1989) p146

3 Frances D'Emilio, 'Italian Minister Withdraws as Candidate for E.U. Commission' in The Washington Post Sunday 30th October 2004 pA30

4 The datasets for the 1981-1984, 1990-1993, 1999-2001 surveys are available via national social science data archives (the latter dataset is also available for purchase on CD ROM). To analyse changes in political and economic orientations, family values and religious norms, their impact on economic growth, political party strategies and the prospect for democratic institutions, the first comparative value surveys were started in 1981under the leadership of Jan Kerkhofs and Ruud de Moor. They collected data on ten West European societies. These surveys earned so much attention that they were soon replicated in fourteen additional countries with Gordon Heald coordinating the fieldwork outside Europe. To facilitate cross-national research, the data for the World Values Surveys were integrated and documented by Ronald Inglehart. See www.europeanvalues.nl for further information.

5 Religiosity in Iceland is surprisingly higher than in all Northern European Countries, Poland and Ireland are far less affected by secularization and individualism than other countries. In Spain, levels of trust in the Church are increasing and in Italy, religiosity is increasing (though not institutional religious activity).

6 Halman, L. & Riis, O., Religion in Secularizing Society (Brill: Leiden, 2003), p9

7 Metropolitan Daniel Ciobotea Confessing the Truth in Love: Orthodox perceptions of life, mission and unity (Iasi: Trinitas, 2001)

8 Davie, G Europe the Exceptional Case (London: Darton, Longman & Todd, 2002), xi

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

10 Halman, L. & Riis, O, Ibid 'in both 1981 and 1990, the French and the Danish are the least religious people.' p11

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

12 Members of London congregations have been told that they are being sent to plant congregation in another country.

13 Halman, L. & Riis, O., Religion in Secularizing Society, Brill: Leiden, 2003 p11

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