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# Evangelism or the Paradox of Europe and Christianity

*Evert Van de Poll*

## SUMMARY

Mission theologians and practitioners who reflect on evangelism in Europe, or in a particular European country, usually analyse the socio-religious context from one of the following angles: secularisation, postmodernism, or post-Christendom; or a combination of those. The author briefly analyses how each angle leads to identi-

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fyng a particular barrier for the communication of the Gospel, and a particular response to find bridges for the message. He then proposes a fourth approach, not to replace these angles but to place them in a wider perspective, namely the paradox of Europe and Christianity. He then revisits the other angles to show how contradictory phenomena are intertwined.

## ZUSAMMENFASSUNG

Missionstheologen und praktische Theologen, die über das Thema Evangelisation in Europa oder in einem bestimmten europäischen Land nachdenken, analysieren für gewöhnlich den sozial-religiösen Kontext von einem der folgenden Blickwinkel: Säkularisierung, Postmoderne oder nachchristliche Gesellschaft, oder eine Kombination dieser drei. Der Autor untersucht kurz, wie jeder dieser Aspekte eine jeweilige Barriere auf-

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deckt, die sich der Verkündigung des Evangeliums in den Weg stellt, aber auch zu einer jeweiligen Antwort führt, welche jene Barriere zugunsten der Botschaft überwindet. Anschließend stellt er einen vierten Ansatz vor, der diese Gesichtspunkte nicht ersetzt, sondern in einen größeren Zusammenhang stellt, und zwar das Paradoxe, welches Europa und der Christenheit zugrunde liegt. Danach kehrt er zu den vorherigen Aspekten zurück und zeigt auf, wie widersprüchliche Phänomene miteinander verknüpft sind.

## RÉSUMÉ

Les missiologues et les praticiens de la mission qui réfléchissent sur l'évangélisation en Europe, ou dans un pays européen particulier, analysent couramment le contexte socio-religieux sous l'un des angles suivants : celui de la sécularisation, ou de la post-modernité ou de la post-chrétienté ; ou encore selon une combinaison de ceux-ci. L'auteur examine brièvement comment chaque perspective conduit à la mise en lumière d'un obstacle

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particulier à la communication de l'Évangile, et à une approche particulière pour trouver des ponts afin de faire passer le message. Il préconise ensuite une quatrième approche, non pas à la place des précédentes, mais en les replaçant dans une vision plus large, dans la perspective de la relation paradoxale entre l'Europe et le christianisme. Il reconsidère ensuite les autres perspectives en montrant comment des phénomènes contradictoires s'entremêlent.

## 1. Introduction

According to Swiss theologian Christine Lienemann, mission is 'the theory and the practice of the Church meeting strangers', that is, people who are strangers to the Church and the

Christian faith.<sup>1</sup> This simple and modest definition is very appropriate for the mission of the Church in Europe because it makes us aware that a large part of the population in our countries has indeed become alienated from the Christian world view

and religious practice. So much so that one could turn this definition around and say that communities of practising Christians have become minorities, and even strangers, in the modern world. We can simply observe this situation all around us, but the perplexing element of the matter is that this happens in Europe of all places, the most Christianised of all continents where the message of Jesus Christ has been proclaimed for many centuries, in many forms. This makes Europe such a specific context for evangelism.

Our subject is evangelism in Europe as a whole – that is, including the countries outside the European Union. When we look at such a vast field, our approach can only be a generalist one. This is a deliberate choice, for I am persuaded that when we try and see the overall picture of Christianity and religion in Europe, we will gain a better understanding of what happens in each particular country on this continent. Together they constitute a specific context for the communication of the Gospel.

This is a vast and fascinating field of study. Those who reflect on evangelism in Europe have different angles from which they try to understand the characteristics of this context. In this article we shall shortly discuss the three most frequently used ones. We will then propose another approach, one that does not replace the three preceding angles but rather places them in a particular perspective and should be useful to understand our European context.

## 2. Why Europe?

Before we go into the subject, we have to answer the preliminary question: why look at Europe as a whole? What justification is there for taking this frame of reference? I will give three reasons.

First, on a sociocultural level, the peoples and the countries of Europe are very similar. I agree with social scientists like Pamela Sticht, that these peoples constitute a cultural zone, or a family of cultures that have common roots, a common history and to a certain extent common values.<sup>2</sup>

Second, sociologists of religion have characterised Europe as ‘the exceptional continent’. In Europe, the rise of modernity (the dominance of rational science and technology) has been accompanied by secularisation of the public sphere and the decline of religious practice, but this is not a universal phenomenon. In other parts of the world, the development of a society along the lines

of Western technology and rational science does not seem to hamper religious practice, as can be seen in the United States, Canada, Korea, China and Latin America. So the European combination of modernity and secularisation is the exception to the rule.<sup>3</sup>

Third, there is the missionary experience. One cannot just adopt approaches and methods simply because they have proven to be successful in other countries with similar Western cultures. Many who try to do this discover that for some reason or another, things work differently here.

## 3. The angle of secularisation

The first angle from which we can look at Europe as a context for evangelism is secularisation.

### 3.1 Secular, secularisation

The terms secular and secularisation can have several meanings. Here I will use them in the sociological sense: the decline of the social and political influence of the Church and Christian institutions and the public sphere becoming secular, i.e. neutral, a-religious. Since the twentieth century, ‘secular’ refers to people who have no religious affiliation and hold no ‘religious’ beliefs. So secularisation is the decline of Church membership. All of this has given rise to a secular worldview, which often becomes an ideology called secularism. According to this view a universal, neutral rationality is normative in politics, science, economics and society.

Only a minority of secular people are convinced atheists, most of them are agnostics who just don’t know, or who suppose that there is something like a divine being or force, but generally speaking they are not interested in relating to that ‘something’. But practically speaking they live ‘as if there is no God’. They manage their life without religious practice related to a transcendent Being.

### 3.2 Major barrier: worldview without God

When secularisation is seen as the main characteristic of European societies, in terms of culture and religion, then the major barrier for evangelism is unbelief in the existence of God. Or, to put it more generally, a worldview and a lifestyle that do not take into account any divine or transcendent reality.

The secularisation of Europe partly explains why some evangelism models that have worked well in Latin America or in Africa do not yield

much fruit in Europe. In those parts of the world, the Gospel is communicated among people with some kind of religion: Roman Catholic, animistic or others. They already believe in God, or at least in a divine reality. No need for them to change this religious worldview in order to accept the Gospel and become a Christian. What changes for them is their image of God, their doctrinal convictions, religious practices and spiritual experience. Perhaps they only change denominational attachment.

For secularised Europeans, the situation is completely different. Before they can even consider the invitation of the Gospel, they should become religious, have their secular worldview transformed into a religious one. The question is not, which God, which religion? But, why God, why religion in the first place? Does God exist? What does the word 'God' mean, and to whom or what does it refer? Are you talking about a force, a person, an idea, a projection of a human father figure? Can we experience this God? And if so, why is this important? What is the relevance of religion anyway? When I'm not poor, depressed, lonely, ill or jobless, what would I need a religion for? What does this 'God' add to my life?

Moreover, many secularist intellectuals maintain that religion is a past stage in the development of humanity. Viewed from such a perspective, secularisation is a stage that comes after Christianity. What is the next step? There is no next step, at least not a religious one, because secular humanism considers itself to have advanced beyond all religions. As Marcel Gauchet put it: 'Christianity is (or was) the religion of the end of all religion.'<sup>4</sup>

This view is based on the evolutionary development of cultures, already put forward by Herbert Spencer, Lewis Morgan, Edward Tylor and others towards the end of the nineteenth century. While this is an old theory that is now disputed by scholars, it is still widely held and propagated, for instance by the French philosopher and former cabinet minister of education, Luc Ferry. He argues that the God of the Bible is a human creation. 'In the past, people needed this imagined divine being, but we have to do without, and we can do without.'<sup>5</sup> For a secularised European to become Christian really amounts to a conversion in the truest sense of the word; a complete turnaround in direction, which goes against the thrust of history, against the whole cultural and intellectual development of our world! Embracing a religion, even Christianity, is seen as a step backward.

### 3.3 Secular-3 and the challenge of exclusive humanism (Charles Taylor)

Sociology, theology and missiology have been discussing secularisation for several decades now. Charles Taylor has taken this reflection a step further because in his *A Secular Age* (2007) he analyses at length and in great detail how secularisation has come about in history.<sup>6</sup> Although Taylor is a Canadian, his analysis is particularly relevant for the European situation, because secularisation is a European 'invention', a phenomenon that has arisen on our continent. In fact, Taylor pretty much writes and argues like a European, for Europeans.

Taylor makes an important distinction. What people have been discussing so far, he says, is the worldview and lifestyle of nonreligious or unchurched people, as well as the idea of a secular science or secular politics, in the sense of a-religious, neutral, unbiased, 'objective'. He calls this secular-2. Then he introduces another sense of the term, secular-3. This stands for a society in which religious belief or belief in God is understood to be one option among others. Moreover, many secular people find the option to believe quite contestable and they strongly contest it. The major problem of our 'secular age', says Taylor, is that our religious beliefs are considered to be unbelievable. Under such conditions it is difficult to believe in God.

Believers are continually challenged by the alternative of not believing. Taylor speaks of an 'exclusive humanism, a radically new option in the marketplace of beliefs, a vision of life in which anything beyond the immanent is eclipsed'.<sup>7</sup> In other words, our neighbours and colleagues are coping with the difficulties of life without looking to God for help. They find our convictions simply unbelievable. Taylor describes several 'conversion experiences' of people who have abandoned religious beliefs and turned to atheism. Many of them say that this felt like 'becoming an adult, coming of age, getting rid of childish Sunday school images'. Such stories make Christians look like naïve people who 'still' believe in some sort of fairy tale.

### 3.4 Response: show the 'plausibility' of believing in God

The usual response of Christians to secularisation is to make a case for believing in God, showing the plausibility of the Christian faith. This is the apologetic attempt to remove the barrier of a worldview without God by showing the 'plausibil-

ity of the Christian worldview', as David Brown puts it.<sup>8</sup> A recent example of this approach in the Netherlands is a book by Stefan Paas and Rik Peels entitled *Proving God*.<sup>9</sup> Apologetic arguments may not convince others, but they certainly have an important function to reassure believers that what they believe is not irrational or childish.

### 3.5 Where can we start to build bridges?

However, apologetics is not enough. We should find points of contact and common ground on which we can build bridges of understanding. As Elaine Storkey puts it: building bridges 'enables us to cross over into a non-Christian cultural context and begin to understand it from within, [to gain] some knowledge of who we are speaking to, and what matters to them'. And they provide ways for non-Christians to 'cross the great cultural chasm between the worldview of Christianity and the worldviews of our contemporary world, so that the Gospel can be heard for what it is'.<sup>10</sup>

The question is how we can build bridges in what Taylor called a secular-3 situation. What starting points do we find there? Taylor himself shows us the way. He makes every effort to place himself in the position of an exclusive secular humanist. How does it feel to live without God, to have a closed worldview, to live with the idea that death is the total extinction of life? In anthropology, this would be could an emic approach.

Taylor examines what he calls the 'unquiet frontiers' of secular people. 'Our age is very far from settling into a comfortable unbelief. The secular age is deeply cross-pressured.'<sup>11</sup> This means that people experience a kind of emptiness that makes everything look useless. They are frequently haunted by the happy memories of religious belief. In particular, many moderns are uncomfortable with death, 'the giving up of everything'.<sup>12</sup> Secular belief is a shutting out: 'The door is barred against further discovery.' But 'in the secular waste land ... young people will begin again to explore beyond the boundaries'.<sup>13</sup> And so there is an explosion of all kinds of spirituality, of quasi-religious experiences.

Here we have many starting points to build bridges of understanding. An interesting example of such a bridge is the television documentary *Heureux naufrage* ('Happy shipwreck'), produced by a team of French-speaking Canadians and Europeans. Several philosophers, journalists, educators and writers talk about how they manage in a world after faith in God. As one author put it, 'I

do not believe in God but I miss Him.' Others talk about their way to faith, as a post-secular experience.

## 4. The angle of post-modernity

The second angle from which we can look at Europe as a context for evangelism is post-modernity.

### 4.1 Postmodernism, philosophical and popular

Numerous descriptions and definitions of Postmodernism are given and there is considerable debate on which one is right. Let me just give some key elements. Postmodern means that you are critical towards the pretention of rational science that it knows the truth about reality itself. This truth is hidden from us; we can only see parts of it. Postmoderns mistrust any religion or political ideology that presents something like the final truth for everybody. Such 'metanarratives' are used as a mask for a power play.<sup>14</sup>

Besides this philosophical stream there is a more widespread postmodernism on a popular level. People with postmodern mind-set or outlook are 'sceptic about technology, objectivity, absolutes, and total explanations'. At the same time, they highly value 'image and appearance, personal interpretation, pleasure, and the exploration of every spiritual and material perspective'.<sup>15</sup>

### 4.2 Major barrier: unbelief in absolute truth

Some consider post-modernism as the main characteristic of our societies. Of course, this is not to say that everybody in Europe has a postmodern outlook. But when you see postmodernism as the major cultural characteristic of European societies, the main obstacle for evangelism is unbelief in absolute truth. This includes the message that Jesus 'is the truth'. As a human being, Jesus is highly esteemed, but the postmodern outlook finds it difficult to admit that he could be the Christ, the unique Saviour of mankind.

### 4.3 Response, dialogue and respect for others

Lesslie Newbigin comes to mind. In his writings he has dealt with the pluralist society, in which religious truth is separated from the truth claims of rational science. In a pluralist world, religion is a matter of values and personal experience, and no one can pretend that their religion is superior to that of another. This is the major challenge

for evangelism in Europe, says Newbigin.<sup>16</sup> He counters this by arguing that scientific truth is as much based on presuppositions as religious truth is based on faith. So we should not accept the pluralist idea that scientific reason stands above all religious affirmations, as their ultimate arbiter. On the other hand, we cannot convince others by our rational arguments either. We can and must speak the truth only in the humble confidence that the Spirit convinces the heart of the hearer.<sup>17</sup>

In his writings, Newbigin did not use the term postmodern, but what he described is indeed a major element of post-modernity. Many churches, mission organisations and theologians see post-modernity as the key characteristic of Europe today. For instance, in 2008 the German *Arbeitsgemeinschaft für evangelische Missiologie* organised a colloquium on mission in Europe, at which the main angle of approach was post-modernism.<sup>18</sup> Similarly, the international mission conference in Edinburgh 2010, which marked the centenary of the historic world mission conference of Edinburgh 1910, placed post-modernity in the centre of its theological deliberations. At this point I also want to mention Marie-Hélène Robert. In her recent book on the theology of evangelism she analyses the documents of the Roman Catholic Church on ‘new evangelism’, as well as the European context in which this takes place. In line with these texts, she too defines this context in terms of post-modernity.<sup>19</sup>

The main thrust of all these conferences and publications is a call for a new kind of evangelism, in the form of dialogue, based on respect for the opinions and lifestyles of others. The issue of absolute truth cannot be avoided, but we should make it known in ways that allow others the freedom to respond. Another important element of our witness are acts of charity, as concrete signs of God’s love. Marie-Hélène Robert combines that with the notion of respect, which she defines as granting other the liberty to respond as they desire. She writes:

Postmodern cultures adapt easily to charity and liberty, but they do not consider the truth as Christianity presents it, neither the objective truth (its divine origin and universality), nor the subjective truth (its human reception and translation). Evangelism is the proclamation of a real liberty: man is free to respond in love to the offer of love ...<sup>20</sup>

On the basis of charity (practical love) and grant-

ing others this liberty we can speak the truth of salvation, says Robert.

#### 4.4 Where can we build bridges?

What points of contact do we find in the postmodern world to build bridges for communicating the Gospel? Elaine Storkey identifies the following ones:

- A new involvement in spirituality
- Fascination with the narrative
- Cultural openness to worldview questions – film, novel, music
- Shared issues of justice, meaning, compassion and suffering<sup>21</sup>

Postmodernism is not a reaction to any religious experience and practice. It is not against religion, nor does it present itself as an alternative religion. People with a postmodern outlook are not closed off to religious belief and spiritual experience, quite the contrary. One can be postmodern and practise a religion – as long as one remains tolerant of other forms of ‘truth’. Tolerance is the key post-modern value, including tolerance of Christian religious experience. So this openness provides many points of contact.

#### 5. The angle of post-Christendom

The third angle from which theologians, and mis-siologists in particular, look at the Europe context is that of Post-Christendom. This term needs some clarification. Christendom is not the same as Christianity (the religion, the faith) but denotes the Christianised society in which the state church is closely connected with the political powers. Another term for this is Constantinianism, because it was the Roman emperor Constantine who, in the fourth century, introduced the alliance between the political powers and the established Christian Church. In *Evangelism after Christendom* Bryan Stone gives the following description:

In the Constantinian state of affairs, which is also called Christendom, church and state are fused together for the sake of governance in such a way that Christianity becomes a project of the state, or an appendage to the state, subject to its violent ends.<sup>22</sup>

This situation has come to an end with the separation of church and state, although there are many vestiges of the old system in every European country. We are now in a post-Christendom, post-Constantinian situation as Christianity is no longer

the dominant religion, practising Christians have become a minority and the churches are pushed to the margins. The problem is that many forms of church life from the old situation are retained.

Stuart Murray is a typical example of those who look at Europe from the post-Christendom angle. He describes this situation as follows:

Post-Christendom is the culture that emerges as the Christian faith loses coherence within a society that has been definitively shaped by the Christian story, and as the institutions that have been developed to express Christian convictions decline in influence.<sup>23</sup>

In short, post-Christendom means that Christians are moved from the centre to the margins. From a majority they have become a minority. They have lost privileges and have become a community among others, in a plural society. The shift from Christianity to another religion is not new in history. It has happened in several regions of the world, such as North Africa, but in Europe this shift was different. Stuart Murray explains:

Here the Christian story has not been replaced by another [religious] story but [by] the scepticism about all explanatory and culture-shaping stories. In this sense, post-Christendom in Western Europe is different from earlier versions: we really have not been here before.<sup>24</sup>

### 5.1 Major barrier: the Church

When we look at Europe through this angle, post-Christendom is considered to be the main characteristic of our societies, in terms of culture and religion. Viewed from this angle, the major problem, or barrier, is the Church. People have been given a wrong picture of the Christian faith. It really is quite different from the Christendom kind of religion.

### 5.2 Response: another kind of church, new forms of evangelism

The response, then, is to do something about the Church. The emphasis should change from maintenance, keeping what you have, to mission; from being an institutional church to being a movement of followers of Christ. Stuart Murray is an example of this approach because he analyses the current situation and proposes new ways of communicating the Gospel, as well as new forms of church life. His work has inspired a whole network of so-called 'new expressions'. Murray agrees with those who find that post-Christendom is not an easy envi-

ronment for discipleship, mission or church. He notices that Post-Christendom can easily be perceived as a threat and associated with failure and decline, but he himself takes a different perspective:

[This response] celebrates the end of Christendom and the distorting influence of power, wealth and status on the Christian story. It grieves the violence, corruption, folly and arrogance of Christendom. It rejoices that all who choose to become followers of Jesus today do so feely without pressure or inducements. It revels in a context where the Christian story is becoming unknown and can be rediscovered by Christians and others. It welcomes the freedom to look afresh at many issues seen for so long only through the lens of Christendom. It anticipates new and liberating discoveries as Christians explore what it means to be a church on the margins that operates as a movement rather than an institution. And it trusts that history will turn out how God intends with or without Christians attempting to control it.<sup>25</sup>

Post-Christendom also implies that Christians have to evangelise in a new way, not through control as in the old days, but through the witness of our lifestyle, through personal testimony and through the communal witness of churches that are signs of the new society that only God can build. In the words of Bryan Stone, another author who has reflected on evangelism in the post-Christendom situation,

The most evangelistic thing the Church can do today is to be the church, to be formed by the Holy Spirit through core practices such as worship, forgiveness, hospitality and economic sharing into a distinctive people in the world, a new social option, the body of Christ. This is... the witness to God's reign in the world. [Mission] is neither the individual, private, or interior salvation of individuals nor the Christianisation of entire cultures, but the creation of a people... The church does not really need an evangelistic strategy, the Church *is* the evangelistic strategy.<sup>26</sup>

## 6. The paradox of Europe and Christianity

As far as we can see, there is not one angle that suffices to get an overall picture of religion and society in Europe; the three angles discussed so far are complementary. So I propose to place them, and

other possible angles, in a wider framework, which I call the paradox of Europe and Christianity. One could also say: the love-hate relationship between these two.

Clearly, Europe is the most Christianised continent; no other part of the world has been exposed to the message of the Bible for such a prolonged period of time and in such a consistent way as this continent. Nowhere else is there such a rich Christian heritage. Its cultures are still rooted in Christian values and symbols, and Christian institutions were at the basis of the current social benefit systems. Without the spread of the Gospel, the impact of the Bible, and the influence of institutional churches, Europe as we know it today might never have come about. A sweeping statement indeed! But a justified one, given the crucial role of Christianity in the political and cultural development of Europe as a whole, and of each European country in particular. Several historians and political scientists bring this out.<sup>27</sup>

At the same time, Europe is now marked by the abandonment of Christianity, more than any other part of the world. Nowhere is the desertion of the Christian faith and the retreat from institutional churches as wide-spread as in Europe, and nowhere else has this been going on for such a prolonged period of time. It is here that a secularised worldview, atheism, secular lifestyles, and secular political ideologies have emerged – so much so that Europe is now called ‘post-Christian’, although it is much more precise to say ‘post-Christianised’.

This is the paradox of Europe; its societies are marked as much by the Christian faith as by its abandonment and rejection; by an enormous variety of expressions of Christian faith and a rich heritage of historical European Christianity – and by a variety of alternative, secular worldviews and ideologies, a secularised public sphere and the spread of secular lifestyles. Failing to take into account both sides of the coin leads to misrepresentations: either we draw a picture that is too optimistic with respect to the influence of the Church or we depict an image that is too much the opposite.

From whatever angle we look at Europe as a context for the mission of the Church, we should take into account this paradox, namely that our societies are at the same time marked by Christianity and by the abandonment of Christianity. This approach does not replace the angles mentioned above. It should rather refine our perception, as we realise that there is always the other side of the coin. The contradicting aspects of the same reality

fall into place.

When studying the context in which we as a Church are called to bear witness to our faith, I find this paradox of Europe and the Gospel a helpful tool to come to grips with the different characteristics and apparent contradictions of our societies, in relation to Christianity and the Gospel. So let us take a second look at the other angles.

### 6.1 Much Christianity in secularisation

First, there is so much Christianity in secularisation. This is not only a barrier for the Gospel. Secularisation has not just replaced the religious practice of Christianity, but it is at the same time very ‘Christian’ because it is permeated by originally Christian ideas and values. Secularisation, to be precise, is the secularisation of Christianity. Some Christian elements are retained, such as the idea of the intrinsic value of humans, ideas of individual responsibility, freedom, and social and cultural values. Secularisation is ‘post-Christian’ but only in a partial manner. People take the humanist values of Christianity out of their original religious ‘envelope’.

This means that secular humanism is not only a barrier but also provides common ground to build bridges of understanding. Take for instance the issue of which values are to be considered foundational to create cohesion in our multicultural societies. This is a matter of ongoing debate, and the interesting thing is that the values in question are to a large extent secularised biblical and Christian values.<sup>28</sup> What will become of them in the long run if they are cut off from their original religious foundation? Here is where Christians come in and take part in the debate.

Look for instance what happened to Jean-Claude Guillebaud, a leading left-wing intellectual in France. He set out to define the basic values that are needed to restructure our multicultural societies. Listening to a host of secular philosophers and social scientists he came up with a list of six values, which he described in a lengthy book – *La refondation du monde*.<sup>29</sup> Towards the end he came to the surprising conclusion that five of the six foundation values had biblical, Christian roots. This was the beginning of an intellectual pilgrimage that led him a few years ago to publicly embrace the Christian faith.

Another example is Luc Ferry who was mentioned above (3.2). In his recent book, *The Revolution of Love*, Ferry develops what he calls a ‘secular spirituality’ based on the biblical con-



cept of love. He thinks highly of Jesus, qualifying him as ‘the supreme example of an altruistic lifestyle’. He takes the teachings of the church seriously when it comes to the practical application of the commandment to love your neighbour, and summarises it in the principles of solidarity, the primacy of the common interest, and the value of selfless service.<sup>30</sup> What he says about love would largely fit in a manual on practical Christian discipleship. However, contrary to Guillebaud, he did not turn to the Christian faith. So here we have the paradox again.

Human rights are another example. They are key values in European societies, but it is not without coincidence that they have emerged in the history of European Christianity, not elsewhere. How many secular people (and Christians for that matter) realise that Baptist and other non-conformist leaders were the first to define the universal right of religious freedom and freedom of conscience? This was the starting point of a process that led to the declaration of universal human rights. Some atheist philosophers admit this. Michel Onfray says: ‘their language is rational, but their quintessence is Judeo-Christian ethics’.<sup>31</sup> John Gray calls them ‘a hangover of Christianity’.<sup>32</sup> This again provides an interesting point of contact for introducing the biblical message.

## 6.2 Postmodern critique and Christian experience

Secondly, our paradox shows another side of the postmodern outlook. The Christian community, particularly in evangelical circles, often takes a suspicious, negative stance towards this mode of thought, because of its critical attitude towards the message that Jesus is ‘the’ truth and ‘the’ way to fullness of life. Yet at the same time, Christians can join postmodernism in its critique of totalitarian regimes such as Nazism. Reacting against social structures and ideologies that claim to represent absolute truth, postmodern thinkers argue that such claims for absolute loyalty really were (and are) instruments of power. Following the line taken by Jacques Derrida, Jean-François Lyotard and others, they set out to deconstruct these systems in order to bring to light the political and economic interests behind them. By excluding all rivals, these ‘great stories about reality’ lead to suppression of individual freedom. This critique of the terrors of atheistic, totalitarian regimes such as Nazism and Soviet Communism reminds us of the biblical critique of any Tower of Babylon kind of

system based on human pride.

Postmodernism is not only suspicious of religious claims to knowing ‘the only way’ to salvation and happiness, but in a similar vein it also criticises the dogmatic attitude of secular rationalism. It deconstructs the idea, based on the Enlightenment, that modern science leads humanity on a triumphant march towards a brave new world. In fact, what are the grounds of this ‘belief’ in progress? What kind of knowledge do scientists have of reality? Are there no other things to know than phenomena that meet the rational eye? And are there no other ways of obtaining knowledge than rational enquiry? Human beings are fundamentally a mystery even to themselves, so instead of relying on the limited power of reason, this mystery can often be better explored by means of music, aesthetics, intuition, religion and other rich worlds of experience.

We can take up these ‘postmodern’ questions and bring to light the pretensions of secular scientific rationalism as it tries to impose its worldview. This creates an opening for Christians to come up with plausible answers to the questions people are posing today. A religious answer is not by definition less valid than a secular one. On what grounds can secular rationalists ‘absolutely’ exclude the existence of God, the validity of religious experiences, and the biblical story of the origin of humankind?

Moreover, postmodernism is not in opposition to religious experience and practice. The postmodern outlook is not an alternative to religion as such, but a reaction to the dominance of truth systems. People with a postmodern outlook are not closed off to religious belief and spiritual experience, quite the contrary. One can be postmodern and practise a religion – as long as one remains tolerant of other forms of ‘truth’. From the Christian standpoint, the great problem of postmodernism is its pluralism, which leads to relativism.

## 6.3 Heritage of European Christianity

Thirdly, let us look at the legacy of European Christianity. Surely, established churches have a very dubious historical record because of their implication in power politics, wars, oppression and so on. Moreover, they suffer from a negative image among a considerable part of the population. At the same time, they enable us to build bridges for making known the Gospel today. For a start, the message of the Bible has permeated every sector of our society. As Indian author Vishal Mangalwadi puts it in his masterly study, ‘this is the book

that shaped European culture, indeed the soul of the whole Western civilisation'.<sup>33</sup> Mind you, this came to pass not only through Christian counter-movements and apostolic preachers, but to a much larger extent through established churches and their social institutions.

Moreover, European Christendom has left us with an enormously rich heritage: art, music, paintings, cathedrals, monasteries, universities, social customs, festivals, names, symbols. This heritage abounds in all European countries; it is there for everybody to see and hear, read about, touch and visit. The question is: who will be a guide? Many people visit cathedrals without understanding their symbolism. They enjoy sacred music and admire famous paintings of biblical figures without understanding the real meaning. They use the benefits of hospitals and schools that were once Christian institutions but they have no idea why and how they came about. They give their children names of Christian saints while ignoring their history.

Finally, there is a growing interest in the roots of our culture. As Christians, we represent the major religious root of Europe and this provides us with countless occasions to build bridges for the message. We only have to explain general culture, quite simply. Because we are familiar with the Bible, we have the key to unlock the meaning of this rich cultural heritage to our contemporaries. As Christians, we are ideally equipped to explain European culture to our contemporaries who are ignorant of its background.

Christian heritage centres have been developed in several locations, and they organise lectures and heritage tours. This is not a difficult endeavour, and every church can try to see what Christian heritage there is in their city and in the region and make efforts to study it. Before long, they can offer city walks, guided tours and heritage talks. Throughout Europe, people are generally fond of discovering culture, ranging from local music to local cuisine and local customs, and also natural sites with history, architecture and so on. In most cases, there is a link with the history of the church. Find out about it and transmit it to others. One just has to explain the meaning of this painting, that building, a popular custom, or tell the story of a famous person in the past, and there is a natural occasion to explain the Bible.

#### 6.4 Two sides of the coin: attachment, indifference and incomprehension

Are we not drawing a much too optimistic picture of the socio-religious context of Europe with respect to the communication of the Gospel? This would indeed be the case if we would forget the paradox. The long history of Christianity in Europe, and all the efforts of evangelisation that have been going for ages, have led to a paradoxical situation that I would summarise in three words: attachment, indifference and ignorance.

The Bible and its moral values and its picture of God, the Gospel stories of Jesus and the cross, the names of the apostles, and countless traditions of the Church have become part and parcel of European cultures. While many people feel attached to this heritage, they are often indifferent and ignorant with respect to what it means to be a Christian. We observe this in particular among the electorate of patriotic political parties that are on the rise all over Europe (also called far right or populist). High on their agenda is the defence of the 'European' identity, that is, the culture of the autochthone people against multiculturalism and immigration. It is commonplace that these movements appeal to the Christian or Judeo-Christian roots of our societies, but, as political scientist Pascal Perrineau points out, 'they attract more non-religious voters than practicing Catholics'.<sup>34</sup> What Perrineau, a noted observer of the phenomenon of right-wing populism, writes about the *Front National* in France can also be said of similar movements in other countries:

The Front National (FN)... penetrates all categories of society, but practising Catholics are less touched than others. The strongest penetration of the FN is among non-practising Catholics, and among the non-religious category that has been a key left-wing electorate for a long time.<sup>35</sup>

This ambivalence can be observed at a wider scale in the whole society. Benedict Schubert, inner city pastor (Reformed) and lecturer at the Theologisches Alumneum in Basel, summarises it as follows:

In our country, there is an extraordinary inhibition to speak of faith in public. This leads, in fact, to a particular ambivalence. To begin with, this reluctance does not mean that people want to do away the visible signs of Christian presence that are everywhere around us: the crosses on the mountain tops, chapels beside the trail and churches in the village centre. On the con-

trary, people seem to be attached to them. In the debates on migration, there is much emphasis on the fact that we are a ‘Christian country’. However, and this is the other side of this ambivalence, this does imply an openness to publicly discuss the meaning and the scope of such a statement. Asking someone what faith and religion mean to him, usually causes discomfort.<sup>36</sup>

Readers all over Europe will recognise this combination of cultural attachment to the heritage of Christianity and indifference to the message of this religion for today. The two phenomena are intertwined. Since churches have been around for ages, how can their message still surprise? How can it be heard as good news? People certainly need to hear it as something ‘new’ in order to be willing to change their minds, but precisely because of our ‘Christian’ history it is not easy to present the Gospel as good news. When people hear about it, their first and automatic reaction is, ‘We know all that.’ The problem is that they think they do, while in fact false presuppositions, preconceived ideas and traditional misrepresentations abound. They are much harder to correct than ignorance.

Most people are superficially familiar with the person of Jesus. From what they know, they will generally have a positive impression of his ethical conduct, and as such Jesus enjoys a certain popularity, but being a disciple of Jesus is quickly associated with not so attractive images of the institutional church. Some associate Jesus with outdated songs, long sermons, prescribed rituals and a whole list of forbidden pleasures; others with a child in the arms of Mary and a dying man on a crucifix. This also pertains to the influence of historical Christianity, with its paradoxical mix of Bible truth and human traditions.

We can take our paradox even further. Precisely in Europe with its rich history of Christian practice, where Christian symbols still abound, more and more people no longer understand religious language for what it really means. Everyday language owes much to the Bible and Christian tradition, but today, the language in which Christians express their faith often meets with incomprehension. Generally speaking, people are indifferent to what is abracadabra to them. Benedict Schubert hits the nail on its head when he says that in Europe of all places (!) we are faced with the tremendous challenge to make new translation efforts:

Find phrases, metaphors, illustrations, lines of

argument that allow us to express our faith, to talk about our experiences with God in a way that is meaningful for our secularised contemporaries. This begins with listening to them, their songs, their books, their films. In what context and with what connotations did you recently come across the word ‘sin’ for example?<sup>37</sup>

For those who are involved in evangelism, this other side of the coin is all too familiar. However, if we only look at that, we can draw a very pessimistic picture of the religious state of Europeans, to the detriment of the other side of the reality, i.e. the far-reaching influence that this same message has exerted and still exerts on the cultures and social institutions of our continent. These two sides of reality should not be treated as mutually exclusive.

## 7. Closing remark

Everywhere in Europe we see signs of the impact of the Bible and the Gospel – even in the ways in which it has been rejected and abandoned. May churches, organisations and individual believers today find ways to add new chapters to this ongoing story!

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## Endnotes

- 1 Quoted by Benedict Schubert, ‘Témoigner : responsabilité personnelle, communautaire, ecclésiale’, Public conference, *Association Francophone Œcuménique de Missiologie* (AFOM), Paris, 21 June 2014.
- 2 Pamela Sticht, *Culture européenne ou Europe des cultures ? Les enjeux actuels de la politique culturelle en Europe* (Paris: L’Harmattan, 2000).
- 3 Grace Davie, *Europe: The Exceptional Case. Parameters of Faith in the Modern World* (London: Darton, Longman & Todd, 2007) 137, 145.
- 4 Marcel Gauchet first presented this argument in *Le désenchantement du monde* (Paris : Gallimard, 1985) and repeated it in several subsequent pub-

- lications, lastly in *Le religieux et le politique. Douze réponses de Marcel Gauchet* (Paris : Desclée de Brouwer, collection Religion & Politique, 2010).
- 5 Luc Ferry, *La révolution de l'amour* (Paris : Plon, 2010) 7.
  - 6 Charles Taylor, *A Secular Age* (New York: Harvard University Press, 2007) 2-3.
  - 7 Summary of James K.A. Smith, *How (not) to be Secular: Reading Charles Taylor* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2014) 22-23.
  - 8 David Brown, 'Les difficultés particulières qu'ont nos contemporains français dans la compréhension et l'acceptation de l'Évangile', lecture at the annual meeting of the Evangelical Missiological Network in Frenchspeaking Europe (REMEF), 23 February 2015.
  - 9 Stefan Paas en Rik Peels, *God bewijzen. Argumenten voor en tegen geloven* (Amsterdam: Balans, 2013).
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  - 12 Taylor, *A Secular Age*, 725.
  - 13 Taylor, *A Secular Age*, 769, 770.
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  - 15 James W. Sire, *The Universe Next Door. A Basic Worldview Catalogue* (3rd edition; Downers Grove/Leicester: IVP, 1997).
  - 16 Leslie Newbigin, *The Gospel in a Pluralist Society* (London: SPCK, 1989).
  - 17 See Leslie Newbigin, *Proper Confidence. Faith, Doubt and Certainty in Christian Discipleship* (London: SPCK, 1995).
  - 18 See the publication based on this colloquium: Klaus Müller (Hrsg), *Mission im postmodernen Europa: Referate der Jahrestagung 2008 des Arbeitskreises für evangelikale Missiologie*, Mission Reports 16 (Gießen: Edition Afem, 2008).
  - 19 Marie-Hélène Robert, *Pour que le monde croie : approches théologiques de l'évangélisation* (Lyon : Profac, 2014).
  - 20 Robert, *Pour que le monde croie*, 297, 300.
  - 21 Storkey, 'Bridges'.
  - 22 Bryan Stone, *Evangelism after Christendom. The theology and practice of Christian witness* (Grand Rapids: Brazos, 2007) 118.
  - 23 Stuart Murray, *Post-Christendom. Church and mission in a strange new world* (Milton Keynes: Paternoster, 2004) 19.
  - 24 Murray, *Post-Christendom*, 19-20.
  - 25 Murray, *Post-Christendom*, 21.
  - 26 Stone, *Evangelism after Christendom*, 15 – author's italics.
  - 27 Several historians and political scientists take this view, e.g. Philip Jenkins, *God's Continent. Christianity, Islam, and Europe's Religious Crisis* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2007); Norman Davies, *Europe. A History* (Oxford University Press, 1996); Urs Altermatt, Mariano Delgado, Guide Vergauwen (Hrsg.), *Europa. Ein christliches Projekt? Beiträge zum Verhältnis von Religion und europäischer Identität* (Stuttgart: Kohlhammer, 2008).
  - 28 Here I follow the lead of several historians, such as the contributors to Francis Jacques (dir.), *Les racines culturelles et spirituelles de l'Europe. Trois questions sur la place de la source chrétienne* (Paris : Parole et Silence, 2008).
  - 29 Jean-Claude Guillebaud, *La refondation du monde* (Paris : Seuil, 1999).
  - 30 Ferry, *La révolution de l'amour*, 7.
  - 31 Quoted by Frédéric Lenoir, *Le Christ philosophe* (Paris : Plon, 2007) 262.
  - 32 John Gray, *Straw Dogs. Thoughts on Humans and Other Animals* (London: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2007).
  - 33 Vishal Mangalwadi, *The Book that Made your World. How the Bible created the Soul of Western civilization* (New York: Thomas Nelson, 2011).
  - 34 Pascal Perrineau, 'Le FN est désormais présent dans toutes les categories', interview in *La Croix*, 11 December 2015, 5. This phenomenon is further developed in his book on right-wing populist movements, *La France au Front: Essai sur l'avenir du FN* (Paris : Fayard, 2014).
  - 35 Perrineau, *La France au Front*.
  - 36 Schubert, 'Témoigner'.
  - 37 Schubert, 'Témoigner'.