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Is the Gospel Thriving in Postmodern Europe?

Abstract

"My personal impression is that as Europeans are rejecting the Gospel of Jesus Christ, God is using the lowly—the refugees—to shame them by saving many of them."

Posting about the health of the Christian church in Europe from *In All Things* - an online journal for critical reflection on faith, culture, art, and every ordinary-yet-graced square inch of God's creation.

<https://inallthings.org/is-the-gospel-thriving-in-postmodern-europe/>

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in things

June 25, 2019

Is the Gospel Thriving in Postmodern Europe?

Sacha Walicord

As a Christian professor and pastor who now works in the US after many years in Austria, I sometimes find myself in conversations with Americans who are interested to know about the health of the Christian church in Europe. The question posed to me as I was invited to write this article is a version of a question that I am asked more often: “Is the Gospel thriving in postmodern Europe?” To respond well to this query, I need first to draw attention to three possible assumptions that may be beneath the question.

The first possible assumption is that the term “Europe” refers to some spiritually or culturally homogeneous geographical area for which there exists an equally homogenous answer. However, this is not the case. According to the Eurobarometer Survey of 2012, 59% of people in the Czech Republic claim to be either atheists or agnostics. Decades of Socialist tyranny with its suppression of Biblical Christianity have left their mark on the souls of people. Formerly communist Russia paints a similar grim picture, with only about 1% of the population seeing themselves as Evangelicals. On the other hand, there are areas like Northern Ireland, a semi-autonomous province of the United Kingdom with a historically strong Protestant witness. Protestants represent the majority religion in the region with almost 50% of inhabitants defining themselves as such. It is, of course, a completely different question how many of these self-declared Protestants are actually true born-again Christians. Only God Himself, as the searcher of hearts, knows the answer to this question.

The second possible assumption seems to be that Europe is also homogeneously postmodern in philosophy. Unlike the US, Europe contains many different countries with their particular cultures. Yes, the senseless, irrational, and self-contradictory pluralism of postmodernism has permeated most of Western culture to a certain

degree, but there are also other philosophies that have equally affected European hearts and minds. Neo-Marxism, social Darwinism, and secular materialism with their inherent hostility toward Biblical Christianity have equally harmed the Christian witness in Europe, especially through liberal theologians who have undermined churches, seminaries, and whole denominations. Globalist multiculturalism, in a geo-political attempt to eradicate the “Christian West,” has flooded Europe with millions of Muslims who now demand their worldview to be applied to all areas of life. Not only that, all those who object to it, including the Christians, are immediately labeled as bigots or racists and are pushed to the fringes of society. There seems to be plenty of tolerance for just about everybody—except for Christians or those who hold to a similar value system. Nothing less than unconditional surrender will be accepted by the Muslim community and their multiculturalist advocates outside (and inside!) of Christian churches. What unites all these unlikely allies is their unwavering contempt for every remnant of Biblical Christianity in Europe, because “the enemy of my enemy is my friend.” Therefore, to characterize Europe as simply postmodern seems far too simplistic and misses the complexity of reality.

The third possible assumption is that there is consensus as to what the term “Gospel” actually means. Scripture is very clear and straightforward about the Gospel of Jesus Christ as being “the power of God to salvation for everyone who believes, for the Jew first and also for the Greek,” as we read in the first chapter of Paul’s letter to the Romans. ((Romans 1:16 ESV)). And yet, as I have indicated above, there are those who seek to redefine the Gospel from its “vertical power” to some form of “horizontal Humanism”—a different Gospel packaged in somewhat Biblical terms of “Liberation theology” or “Social Justice” in order to deceive Christians away from Christ’s atonement into a utopian, this-worldly social movement, stripped of the Biblical Christ and His atonement for sinners. This movement will not suffer any opposition as it comes with an unprecedented dogmatism while harshly criticizing the dogmatism of those who seek to believe and live according to the Word of God. I dare say that this radical movement with its “unholy trinity” of race, class, and gender has harmed Christianity in Europe at least as much as it is currently harming Christians in the US. When I speak of the “Gospel” I refer to the Biblical Gospel of Jesus Christ and not to any Humanist “knock-off-version.”

Following these assumptions, here is my personal assessment of the situation in Europe. As an Austrian, currently living in the United States and having also lived in the United Kingdom and ministered in Germany, I can best speak for these areas; however, I have been following the events in other European countries as well.

The overall percentage of evangelicals in Europe stands at a bleak 2 to 2.5% in average with vast differences depending on the region. The situation looks even bleaker when it

comes to churches of the confessionally Reformed persuasion. There is, for example, only one small, somewhat Reformed congregation in the whole country of Iceland. But, there is a light at the end of the tunnel. While mainline denominations are shrinking dramatically, Biblically conservative evangelicalism is actually growing, even in traditionally secular places like France, where evangelicals have grown eight-fold in the last five decades from 50,000 to 400,000. The younger generation seems to be especially open to the Gospel and searching for real answers.

There is something else that is extremely encouraging about the spiritual situation in Europe. I currently travel to Europe about two to three times per year to speak at conferences or teach seminars. Being an ordained minister, I open myself up for preaching requests while there. Over the last few years I have observed an interesting trend: while preaching in German-speaking churches, I saw a massive increase in refugees, especially Iranian, in these congregations. Some congregations have even doubled in size for this reason. Alongside this development, I was increasingly invited to preach in refugee congregations in Austria. I am half-Iranian and having been raised bilingual (German and Farsi), I was considered an ideal pulpit-fill for such congregations. I have enjoyed wonderful fellowship with these brothers and sisters in Christ.

That's not all—for some reason I also received multiple invitations to Romanian, Arabic, Armenian, and other refugee churches. Last month when I visited Austria, I didn't preach even once in a German-speaking church. Where am I going with this? I will tell you. As I have indicated above, Europe has been massively challenged by waves of predominantly Muslim refugees over the past few years. This has been without doubt a severe challenge. Exploding crime rates and cultural conflicts are now a reality in most European countries. However, too often we forget that ultimately it is God Who sits on the throne and Who has all things working out for His glory and for the good of His people. From what I hear, masses of former Muslims are now born-again believers, filled with a new hope for this life and for the life to come.

There are two ways to look at this new situation: one can keep lamenting and ranting about it and do nothing, or one can see God's hand bringing the mission field to Europe and get to work. I am not denying that this is a serious challenge for Europe, created by ruthless people who are using precious human beings as geo-political weapons, but I am saying that whatever it might be, the **Great Commission** still applies, and we should get as many evangelicals as possible working to seize this opportunity in Europe. One is reminded of Joseph's words in Genesis chapter 50 to his treacherous brothers who had sold him into Egyptian slavery: "But as for you, you meant evil against me; but God meant it for good, in order to bring it about as it is this day, to save many people alive."((Genesis 50:20 ESV))

My personal impression is that as Europeans are rejecting the Gospel of Jesus Christ, God is using the lowly—the refugees—to shame them by saving many of them. That works for me, as long as the Name of Christ is being preached!