

GORDON-CONWELL THEOLOGICAL SEMINARY  
MISSIONS AND CROSS CULTURAL STUDIES

MISSION TO POST-CHRISTENDOM EUROPE:  
AFFIRMING PAN-EUROPEAN EVANGELICAL IDENTITY, UNITY, AND ACTION  
A POST RESIDENCY PROJECT SUBMITTED TO DR TIMOTHY TENNENT  
IN CANDIDACY FOR THE DEGREE OF DOCTOR OF MINISTRY

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It seems apparent that the way forward for the gospel in post-Christendom Europe is for kingdom-minded evangelical leaders to build on and to promote the growing consensus among evangelical churches, parachurch organizations and national and pan-European alliances with regard to their common identity and shared mission. Rather than seeking to revitalize historic Christendom and its established (state) churches, which, in general, have been in steep decline since World War II, the fledgling evangelical movements in Europe are re-planting the church. Demonstrating missionary fervor through contextualized evangelism and creatively re-conceptualizing the forms and structures of the church, they are building a truly biblical evangelical ecumenism across national, linguistic, ethnic and ecclesiastical boundaries.

Although the 1974 International Congress on World Evangelization in Lausanne, Switzerland and its daughters have had a strategic role in bringing evangelicals together for common action in Europe, much if not most of what has been happening on the ground in the last sixty years has been humanly un-orchestrated and the fruit of largely uncoordinated local initiatives and missionary activity. Until recent years, trans-lingual and trans-national gatherings of evangelicals rarely occurred outside of denominational contexts. Historically, Europe's evangelical minorities have been disparate and insular, oftentimes tragically competitive and confused. Things are changing in the new Europe.

Could the twenty-first century be the "century of the evangelical" in Europe? Might the death of institutional Christendom allow for the re-evangelization of Europe and the flourishing of believers churches, churches unfettered by the burdens and dues of state sponsorship?

In this paper, I would like explore the possibility that, in spite of its small numbers and systematic shunning and maligning on the part of the European press and the historic Christian confessions, evangelical Christianity is poised for significant, if not spectacular, growth in the first half of the 21<sup>st</sup> century. If indeed there are signs of a groundswell of growth and unity among Europe's evangelicals, what then are the implications for mission to Europe?

### **The Death of Christendom**

It is general knowledge that European Christianity has been in decline since the nineteenth century. According to Patrick Johnstone, the annual growth rate of Christianity in Europe is minus 0.44%. Atheistic, eastern religious and occult affiliation is growing at annual rates of 0.88% to 5.12%, depending on the group. Johnstone states, "The rate of decline of Christians is accelerating. Christian profession is likely to decline dramatically over the coming two decades."<sup>1</sup> Andrew Walls also

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<sup>1</sup> Patrick Johnstone and Jason Mandryk, *Operation World*, 21<sup>st</sup> Century Edition (Waynesboro, GA: Paternoster USA, 2001), p. 51.

observes: “the recession of Christianity among the European peoples appears to be continuing.”<sup>2</sup> A massive culture shift has taken place in Europe as postmodernism has replaced Christianity as the predominant worldview, exercising control over the media and the major social institutions. Younger Europeans have moved en masse to New Age thinking, and the occult, with the resultant relativistic moral values. The process of secularization seems to be irreversible.

Post-world-war western Europeans have largely abandoned the church. Mainline Protestant acquiescence to National Socialism in Germany and Roman Catholic collaboration with fascist régimes such as that of Generalissimo Francisco Franco in Spain contributed to the massive disaffection with organized Christianity and the end of Western Christendom as a social model.

A simple examination of the statistics of world Christianity show that, in France, there are more spiritist healers than doctors, lawyers and priests combined; that there are more believers in China than Germans in Germany; that one denomination in Brazil alone has more members than all the evangelicals in Europe; that one church in Korea has as many members as the population of Amsterdam. Membership in the Church of Scotland plunged 22 percent between 1994 and 2002.<sup>3</sup> According to the *Operation World* prayer guide, since the Welsh Revival of 1904-1905, the region of 2.9 million people has experienced the highest rate of church closings and the largest decline of church attendance in the United Kingdom.<sup>4</sup>

Stuart Murray Williams, in a talk entitled “The End of Christendom,” which he presented in May 2004 at *Global Connections Interface Consultation* in the U.K., presents statistics whose trajectories predict the collapse of many denominations in the U.K. in the next 30 years. Williams presents a strong case, for anyone who yet doubts, that the U.K. and Europe have entered the death throes of Christendom, and that the process will be complete by the mid 21<sup>st</sup> century:

Christendom took centuries to develop and will not collapse overnight. In this interim period, some still know the story and memories of faith may still draw some into the churches, but this era is fading . . . Post-Christendom is coming . . . Christendom is dying.<sup>5</sup>

The waning of historic Christendom in Europe raises many questions. As Europe continues to secularize, undoing more than a millennium of church dominated states, universities and cultures, does “post-Christendom” necessarily mean “post-Christian?” What is the probable future of European Christianity, which decreasingly benefits from a privileged relationship to state and society? Has the gospel, culturally, politically, and spiritually, been held captive by Western Christendom? The Word of God “is not bound”<sup>6</sup> and cannot, indeed should not be held captive by any human culture or

<sup>2</sup> Andrew Walls, *The Missionary Movement in Christian History: Studies in the Transmission of Faith* (Maryknoll, New York: Orbis Press, 1996), p. 22.

<sup>3</sup> Ted Olsen, “The Church in Absentia: Membership in the Church of Scotland has dropped 22 percent—is that enough?,” *Christianity Today Online* 22 January 2004 [magazine on-line]; available from <http://www.christianitytoday.com/ct/2004/001/37.19.html> ; Internet.

<sup>4</sup> Johnstone, p. 656.

<sup>5</sup> Stuart Murray Williams, “The End of Christendom.” Presented at *Global Connections Interface Consultation*, Swanwick, Derbyshire, May 2004 [article on-line]; available from [http://www.globalconnections.co.uk/pdfs/\\_endchrissmw.pdf](http://www.globalconnections.co.uk/pdfs/_endchrissmw.pdf) ; Internet.

<sup>6</sup> 2 Timothy 2:9

language, no matter how monolithic its history and influence. Karl Barth's inclusion of Christendom under God's judgment of all religion as unbelief is a good starting point for European Christians as they consider how they might evangelize their contemporaries.<sup>7</sup> A humble and healthy recognition of the failure of Christian churches to live consistently with the teaching and example of Christ should help believers, in their sharing of Christ, to emphasize the universal *message* rather than its temporal and human *ecclesiastical vehicles*. Unbelievers, sensing that believers do not defend but rather condemn the atrocities committed in the name of Christendom, may perhaps be more open to listening to the message of Christ.

Will the progressive disentanglement of church and state in Europe finally liberate the church to be the Church? Are there possible advantages for the gospel to be thus disentangled? Stuart Williams thinks so, seeing significant potential for the gospel during the dying process and after the end of Christendom:

The perspective from which this article is written is different. It 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 freely 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>8</sup>

However, the true Church must assess the new situation and make significant adjustments if she is to weather the storm and come out of it rejuvenated and growing. Williams speaks prophetically:

We must prepare for change. New expressions of church and mission will be needed, new ways of thinking on ethics, politics and evangelism . . . But perhaps – if we have the courage to face into this future rather than hankering after a fading past, if we resist short-term strategies and pre-packaged answers, if we learn to be cross-cultural missionaries in our own society, and if we can negotiate the next forty years – whatever culture emerges from the ruins of Christendom might offer tremendous opportunities for telling and living out the Christian story in a society where this is largely unknown. Post-Christendom is coming. Whether this is post Christian will depend on whether we can re-imagine Christianity in a world we no longer control. Christendom is dying, but a new and dynamic Christianity could arise from its ashes.<sup>9</sup>

### **Civilizational Malaise in Europe**

The waning of Christendom over the last two centuries has been paralleled and promoted by aggressive secularization. This relentless process, accompanied by two world wars, forty years of cold war, and the subsequent collapse of ideology, has generated a civilizational crisis for Europe and an identity crisis for Europeans. Ongoing religious nationalism and interethnic and inter-religious conflict and

<sup>7</sup> Paul F. Knitter, *No Other Name? A Critical Survey of Christian Attitudes Toward the World Religions*. (New York: Orbis Books, 1985), p. 82-87.

<sup>8</sup> Williams.

<sup>9</sup> Williams.

bloodshed in the Balkans have demonstrated the powerlessness of religious as well as political leaders in Europe to avert the bloodshed, ethnic cleansing and genocide on European soil.

In the vocabulary of Jean-François Lyotard's 1979 seminal article defining the phenomenon of post-modernism, Europeans have lost the idea and hope of a meta-narrative, a *weltanschauung* into which all of the facts fit, are explained, and find their meaning. When there was still the assumption of absolute, discoverable universal truth, the primary question was *what is truth?* But in Europe today, the issue is not a *truth* one, but an *identity* one: "*Who am I?*" "*Who are we?*"<sup>10</sup>

Timothy Tennent has remarked, however, that post-modernism "has a 'shelf life;' it cannot endure. Post-moderns must create their own meta-narratives in order to give their lives meaning."<sup>11</sup> In an article entitled "Contemporary Promises and Challenges in Global Christianity," he describes the present malaise associated with the major historical and cultural shift taking place in the West:

Our very language tells us that we are in a new era and we are grasping for an adequate vocabulary. Take, for example, the frequent use of the words "former" and "post" in our discussions. We speak of the **former** Soviet-Union, the **former** Yugoslavia and so forth. Likewise, the word "post" says volumes about the "seam of history" (if I might borrow a phrase from Samuel Huntington) upon which we stride. We now live in a *post*-Western, *post*-denominational, *post*-Christendom, *post*-colonial era in the missionary movement. New questions are being raised . . . new challenges are being posed . . . new leaders are now on the global stage.<sup>12</sup>

The use of the prefix "post" by Europeans to describe their current situation is indeed evidence of the present civilizational transmutation: *post-christian*, having rejected a Christian worldview and values; *post-communist*, having rejected the Marxist worldview and values; *post-ideological*, having rejected all ideology and any associated set of values; *post-modern*, having rejected the scientific, rationalistic worldview and values as universal. But "post" is temporary; what will the post-"post" be? Who will define the values of the new Europe, which describes itself as a "union" and a "community?"

George Weigel, Senior Fellow of the Ethics and Public Policy Center in Washington, D.C. and an astute Christian observer of European culture and history, in an article entitled "Europe's Problem – and Ours," develops a brilliant analysis of Europe's present "crisis of civilizational morale." He makes no apologies for his Christian approach to interpreting history: "Europe's crisis of civilizational morale teaches us that, while there are many lenses through which history can be read, theological lenses help us to see deeper, farther, and more truly."<sup>13</sup> According to Weigel, the unprecedented human slaughter in Europe by Europeans during the twentieth century was no accident of history, but rather the fruit of the Enlightenment, which is still pursuing its agenda today in the guise of the so-called "secular state:"

The roots of the "European problem" that thoughtful Europeans and many Americans experience today go back to the nineteenth century, to the drama of atheistic humanism and the related

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<sup>10</sup> Jean-François Lyotard, "La Condition postmoderne : rapport sur le savoir." Collection "Critique." (Paris: Minuit, 1979); available in English translation from: [http://www.eng.fju.edu.tw/Literary\\_Criticism/postmodernism/lyotard\\_text .Htm](http://www.eng.fju.edu.tw/Literary_Criticism/postmodernism/lyotard_text .Htm) ; Internet.

<sup>11</sup> Timothy Tennent, in a class lecture given to a D. Min. class (Osijek, Croatia, January 2005).

<sup>12</sup> Timothy Tennent, "Contemporary Promises and Challenges in Global Christianity," unpublished paper.

<sup>13</sup> George Weigel, "Europe's Problem – and Ours," *First Things*, February 2004 [journal on-line]; available from <http://www.firstthings.com/ftissues/ft0402/articles/weigel.html> ; Internet.

triumph of secularization in Western Europe. For that process of secularization had profound public consequences: it meant the collapse of a transcendent horizon of moral judgment in European public life . . . European man has convinced himself that in order to be modern and free, he must be radically secular. That conviction has had crucial, indeed lethal, consequences for European public life and European culture; indeed, that conviction and its public consequences are at the root of Europe's contemporary crisis of civilizational morale. That crisis of civilizational morale, in turn, helps explain why European man is deliberately forgetting his history. That crisis of civilizational morale helps us understand why European man is abandoning the hard work and high adventure of democratic politics, seeming to prefer the false domestic security of bureaucracy and the false international security of the UN system. That crisis of civilizational morale is why European man is failing to create the human future of Europe.<sup>14</sup>

Weigel's thesis is that modern Europe, with its façade of democratic institutions and the defense of human freedom and human rights, is actually in an advanced state of moral decadence and contains within itself the seeds of self-destruction. He queries:

Why have many of Europe's political leaders insisted that the new Constitution for Europe include a deliberate act of historical amnesia, in which a millennium and a half of Christianity's contributions to the European understanding of human rights and democracy are airbrushed from the continent's political memory? Why are so many European public intellectuals "Christophobic," as international legal scholar J. H. H. Weiler (himself an observant Jew) puts it? . . . To deny that Christianity had anything to do with the evolution of free, law-governed, and prosperous European societies is more than a question of falsifying the past; it is also a matter of creating a future in which moral truth has no role in governance, in the determination of public policy, in understandings of justice, and in the definition of that freedom which democracy is intended to embody.<sup>15</sup>

Stan Guthrie echoes Weigel in his assessment of European angst:

That Europe should be experiencing "continental drift" into angst seems curious when one considers that the Soviet menace has disappeared and the region is emerging from a long and painful recession. But Europeans, who have suffered through two world wars this century, face more uncertainty than ever in today's "post-modern" age, which some say started following the collapse of the Berlin Wall in 1989. Today, when they might be basking in their victory over communism, instead nearly every Western European government faces widespread public skepticism, contempt, or hostility. The nearby genocide in the former Yugoslavia has made Europe's elected leaders appear feckless, craven, and divided. "There is no Kissinger, Brzezinski, or Bismark on the horizon," a senior Croatian diplomat has said. "There's a lack . . . of long-term concepts or strategies. The idea is to survive until next Monday or the next election."<sup>16</sup>

Jean-Arnold de Clermont, president of the *Fédération Protestante de France*, attributes the rise of anti-religious sentiment, rhetoric and acts in France, as well as the growing presence of religious sects in recent years, to a century of absence of religious education in the traditionally anticlerical public school system. Although generally well educated, French citizens today display a striking ignorance with regard to the historic religions of France and Europe.

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<sup>14</sup> Ibid.

<sup>15</sup> Ibid.

<sup>16</sup> Stan Guthrie, "Global Report: Evangelicals in Europe Dropping Anchor of Hope," *Evangelical Missions Quarterly*, 31:3 (1 July 1995), p. 330-335.

In the autumn of 2004, a Swedish court sentenced a Pentecostal pastor to one month in prison after finding him guilty of offending homosexuals in a sermon, a recent *Christianity Today* news item reported. "The case was the first trial test of the national law against incitement as applied to speech about homosexuals."<sup>17</sup> In this case the age-old human rights of freedom of speech and of religion here come into conflict with the recently acquired right of homosexuals as a recognized societal sub-class to be protected against discrimination

Reference has already been made to the record number of church closings in Wales, the scene of the great Revival of 1904-1905. It is interesting to note the irony in the cancellation, by the Cardiff City Council as recently as December 2004, of a civic reception for internationally renowned evangelist Luis Palau, who was in Cardiff for the Welsh Revival Centenary Celebrations, because of his "extreme evangelical beliefs." *Christianity Today* reported the following:

The cancellation was prompted by Welsh Assembly Government Member Lorraine Barrett's attack on Palau for his stance on homosexuality and other religions. "To fund such an event for a figure who holds extreme views on sensitive social issues is, in my opinion, a terrible way of spending public money," Barrett said. "I am very concerned at some of the views espoused by Mr. Palau, which are very narrow and critical of anyone who does not follow his evangelical beliefs. I think he is a right-wing reactionary individual. I also think it is dodgy mixing religion and politics in this way. I think he and people like Billy Graham exploit vulnerable people."<sup>18</sup>

Palau described the decision as "anti-Christian fundamentalism."<sup>19</sup>

The systematic de-Christianization of Europe is leaving an enormous spiritual and moral vacuum among Europeans that is especially evident among youth. What kinds of religious ideas and spiritualities are filling the unoccupied space in European culture?

### **The Search for New Meta-Narratives and Spiritualities**

So what happens when Europe rejects the Book, forgets the Story, and loses Biblical hope?

One live option for Europe is to attempt to return to her pre-Christian, pagan, eastern roots. Uwe Siemon-Netto, United Press International Religious Affairs Editor, in a recent article in the Washington Times describing the decline of atheism in the West, quotes the Rev. Paul M. Zulehner, dean of Vienna University's divinity school and one of the world's most distinguished sociologists of religion:

Atheists in Europe have become "an infinitesimally small group." "There are not enough of them to be used for sociological research," he said. Mr. Zulehner cautioned, however, that the decline of atheism in Europe does not mean that re-Christianization is taking place. "What we are observing instead is a re-paganization," he said.<sup>20</sup>

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<sup>17</sup> Lars Grip. "Free Speech in Preaching: Swedish pastor sentenced to jail for blasting homosexuality," *Christianity Today Online* 8 September 2004 [magazine on-line]; available from: <http://www.christianitytoday.com/ct/2004/132/12.0.html> ; Internet.

<sup>18</sup> Rob James, "'Extreme' Orthodoxy: Luis Palau dropped from Welsh revival celebration for his evangelical beliefs." *Christianity Today Online*, 13 December 2004 [magazine on-line]; available from: <http://www.christianitytoday.com/ct/2005/001/7.22.html> ; Internet.

<sup>19</sup> Ibid.

<sup>20</sup> Uwe Siemon-Netto, "Analysis: Atheism worldwide in decline." *United Press International*, 1 March 2005 [magazine on-line]; available from: <http://www.washtimes.com/upi-breaking/20050301-123015-2069r.htm> ; Internet.

Marc Spindler, in his article “Europe’s Neo-Paganism: A Perverse Inculturation,” demonstrates that France is leading the way for a popular revival movement of European paganism, or at least a modern reconstruction and adaptation of pre-Christian paganism. European neo-pagans see themselves championing a sort of revival of European authenticity, and have co-opted their own prophets, such as Germans Nietzsche and Hesse; Englishmen Julien and Aldous Huxley, and D. H. Lawrence; Frenchmen André Gide, Jean Cau, Alain de Benoist, and Louis Pauwels. In Spindler’s words, “Neo-paganism is presented as a recovery of authentic European heritage.”<sup>21</sup>

With regard to European Christianity, Lesslie Newbigin quotes nineteenth century British politician and Christian statesman W.E. Gladstone: “Should the Christian faith ever become but one among many co-equal pensioners of a government . . . this will prove that we are once more in a transition-state -- that we are traveling back again from the region to which the gospel brought us, towards that in which it found us.”<sup>22</sup> Newbigin then draws conclusions for Europe at the threshold of the 21<sup>st</sup> century:

What Gladstone foretold is essentially what has been happening during the 140 years since he wrote those words. The result is not, as we once imagined, a secular society. It is a pagan society, and its paganism, having been born out of the rejection of Christianity, is far more resistant to the gospel than the pre-Christian paganism with which cross-cultural missions have been familiar. Here, surely, is the most challenging missionary frontier of our time.<sup>23</sup>

Peter Kuzmic assesses what he describes as “the spiritual crisis” of Western Europe, underscoring the association of the twin phenomena of secularization and paganization:

Any discussion of the future of the Christian mission in Europe must take into account a growing indifference to anything religious such as is found in no other continent in the world. Bishop Hanns Lilje . . . in his *Christianity in a Divided Europe* distinguishes between three types of atheism: . . . militant atheism . . . philosophical atheism . . . and *atheismus practicus* (practical atheism) . . . “an excellent description of the most difficult, spiritual phenomenon in the Western world today. For it suggests what it says: not an explicit antitheistic theory but the actual and practiced disregard of God. Here is not apostasy but weakness, not an open revolt but the silent paganization.” This is a biblical picture of the modern Europe that sees no need for God or any theistic concepts. The West European churches need to take a hard look at themselves and face the realities of their spiritual crisis in order to realize that they themselves have become a mission field.<sup>24</sup>

W. A. Visser ’t Hooft, when addressing the West European Consultation on Evangelism in 1977, pointed out that “European culture has become a debate between three forces: Christianity, scientific rationalism and neo-pagan vitalism.”<sup>25</sup> Kuzmic comments that the decades following Visser ’t Hooft’s statement:

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<sup>21</sup> Marc Spindler, “Europe’s Neo-Paganism: A Perverse Inculturation” *International Bulletin of Missionary Research*. January 1987.

<sup>22</sup> Lesslie Newbigin, *Foolishness to the Greeks: The Gospel and Western Culture* (Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1986), p. 20.

<sup>23</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>24</sup> Peter Kuzmic, “Europe” in *Toward the 21st Century in Christian Mission*, eds. Philips, James M. and Robert T. Coote (Grand Rapids: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1993), p. 151-154.

<sup>25</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 152.

. . . have changed the picture and given rise to a growth of a new rationalism, Europe's neo-paganism. Visser 't Hooft seems to agree with Carl Gustav Jung, who claimed that the Christian message has neither reached nor transformed the soul of the European person and that Christianity in Europe is like a cathedral built on the foundation of a pagan temple. His conclusion: "Now there is surely need for evangelism, revival and renewal. There are millions of lapsed Christians who need to hear anew what the Gospel has to offer them. But there are today in Europe even more millions who are not adequately described as lapsed Christians, because they have in fact turned to another religion."<sup>26</sup>

According to Spindler, French neo-paganism, very much unlike pre-Christian paganism, is decidedly anti-Christian, describing Christianity as "life-denying faith, repressing the natural instincts of human beings, spoiling the joy of life of humankind. Paganism is healthy, Christianity is producing sickness and neurosis."<sup>27</sup> Neo-paganism opposes the Judeo-Christian view of history, which gives history meaning and direction; neo-paganism actually denies history, emphasizing the eternal present, and offers no hope for the future. In another place, Spindler remarks: "Christianity has destroyed the right to be different and therefore must be combated."<sup>28</sup>

In A.D. 732, the French turned back Muslim armies at Poitiers; in 1492, after seven centuries of Muslim occupation, the Spanish pushed the Moors off the Iberian Peninsula back into North Africa; in 1683, the Ottoman advance through Eastern Europe was decisively halted at the gates of Vienna. But Islam is making new inroads into European society, filling some of the spiritual vacuum created by secularization and de-Christianization.

Niall Ferguson, Research Fellow at Oxford and Stanford Universities and Professor of Financial History at New York University, in an article published in the *New York Times*, "Eurabia?," gives credence to recent prophets of doom who foresee the possibility of "the rise of a new 'Eurabia' that is hostile in equal measure to the United States and Israel."<sup>29</sup> Ferguson refers to Pat Buchanan's book titled *The Death of the West* in which he prophesies: "declining European fertility and immigration from Muslim countries could turn 'the cradle of Western civilization' into 'its grave.'"<sup>30</sup> Ferguson adds: "A youthful Muslim society to the south and east of the Mediterranean is poised to colonize – the term is not too strong – a senescent Europe . . . This prospect is all the more significant when considered alongside the decline of European Christianity."<sup>31</sup> Ferguson concludes:

What the consequences of these changes will be is very difficult to say. A creeping Islamicization of a decadent Christendom is one conceivable result: while the old Europeans get even older and their religious faith weaker, the Muslim colonies within their cities get larger and more overt in their religious observance. A backlash against immigration by the economically Neanderthal right is another: aging electorates turn to demagogues who offer sealed borders without explaining who

<sup>26</sup> Ibid.

<sup>27</sup> Spindler.

<sup>28</sup> Ibid.

<sup>29</sup> Niall Ferguson, "Eurabia." *New York Times*, 4 April 2004 [magazine on-line]; available from: <http://www.nytimes.com> ; Internet.

<sup>30</sup> Ibid.

<sup>31</sup> Ibid.

exactly is going to pay for the pensions and health care. Nor can we rule out the possibility of a happy fusion between rapidly secularized second-generation Muslims and their post-Christian neighbors. Indeed, we may conceivably end up with all three: Situation 1 in France, Situation 2 in Austria and Situation 3 in Britain.<sup>32</sup>

Philip Jenkins evokes the impact of the growing presence of Islam in Europe, with emphasis on a possible complicating factor for the evangelization of Muslims, which is the conflict between Muslims and secular governments as well as with traditional churches:

Just how inevitable Muslim-Christian conflict is becoming is now, for the first time, a serious question in much of Europe, and not only in the Balkans. Religious rivalries have for some time played at least a marginal role in social conflicts in several Western European nations. In France Muslim North Africans make up a large proportion of the underclass youth which have so often clashed with police in urban rioting since the 1980s . . . With these precedents in mind, it is quite conceivable that inter-religious violence could erupt in Europe itself: we might even imagine Muslim para-military groups waging religious war on French or German soil . . . France's Muslim minority could be approaching 10 percent of the population . . . Interfaith controversies have subtly changed the shape of European debates over immigration, which traditionally were presented in simple racial terms. Now, though, religion is entering the picture.<sup>33</sup>

Weigel appeals to historian Christopher Dawson who, with regards to the European problem, wrote: "the modern dilemma is essentially a spiritual one, and every one of its main aspects, moral, political, and scientific, brings us back to the need of a spiritual solution."<sup>34</sup> Weigel adds:

The long-term answer to the demise of Europe will only be found in a revitalization of Europe's Christian roots and the rebirth of Christian conviction in Christianity's historic heartland. Europe, in other words, needs something like a Great Awakening—by which I mean, not necessarily a fourth wave of the Wesleyan revolution, but a rebirth of life-transforming and culture-forming Christian conviction.<sup>35</sup>

European neo-paganism as well as the prospect of creeping Islamicization represent new and growing challenges to the "re-evangelization" of Europe. The question must be raised as to whether the historic and traditional Christian churches in Europe have retained sufficient viability to be susceptible to revitalization, or if the peoples of Europe, through new mission, must be entirely re-evangelized and the church re-planted. Newbiggin's thesis is that re-evangelizing the peoples of de-Christianized, re-paganized, post-Christendom Europe, will require a much more dynamic missiological model than evangelizing an un-Christianized people.

### **Signs of Evangelical Growth in Europe**

The evangelical presence in Europe remains small at 2.8%. Twenty-four European nations are less than 1% evangelical. Of these, 11 are less than 0.2% evangelical. However, although the growth is not exponential or spectacular, evangelical Christianity is the only sector of Christianity that is growing in Europe.

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<sup>32</sup> Ibid.

<sup>33</sup> Philip Jenkins, *The Next Christendom: The Coming of Global Christianity* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2002), p. 179-80.

<sup>34</sup> Weigel.

<sup>35</sup> Ibid.

According to Peter Brierley, Senior Lausanne Associate for Research, the percentage of evangelicals (including Pentecostals and Charismatics) among Christian people in the world will have increased, between 1970 and 2050, from 21 to 46%. During the same period, this percentage in Europe will have increased from 26 to 43%. Part of this significant growth is due to the depopulation of the historic churches, part to the actual growth of the evangelical movement. The number of evangelicals in Europe will have grown from 129 million in 1970 to 226 million in 2050.<sup>36</sup>

Several examples, one in Eastern Europe and two in Western Europe, are illustrative of evangelical growth in Europe:

- Evangelicals represent only 2.7% of the population of Hungary. The mainline Protestant and Catholic churches which account for over 80% of the population, have been experiencing negative annual growth, while evangelicals have seen 6% annual growth.<sup>37</sup>
- The 25 years of religious freedom in Portugal have resulted in the steady and increased growth of evangelicals from 55,000 in 1975 to over 307,000 in 2000. Evangelicals now number 3.1% of the Portuguese population.<sup>38</sup>
- The number of evangelical churches in France more than doubled between 1970 and 2004, from 769 to 1852.<sup>39</sup> As Agnieszka Tennant reported in a recent edition of *Christianity Today Online*:  
The accelerated growth of Islam in France, to nearly 5 million adherents now, has rightly received much attention from the American media. But few people realize that French evangelicals have experienced healthy—sevenfold!—growth since 1950, and that evangelistic influences such as the Alpha course are revitalizing faith in the nominally Catholic and practically secular nation.<sup>40</sup>
- A recent census of evangelical churches in France has shown a 10% growth over the past fifteen years, with evangelical Baptist, Pentecostal and many independent denominations seeing considerable increases.<sup>41</sup>

Patrick Johnstone cites a number of encouraging spiritual trends, including people movements to Christ among:

- Europe's seven million Roma;
- The Bulgarian Muslim Millet and Roma;
- The Albanians, both in Albania and Kosovo.<sup>42</sup>

<sup>36</sup> Dr. Peter Brierley, "Evangelicals in the world of the 21st century", paper for the *Forum on World Evangelisation Programme*, October 2004; available from: <http://www.gospelcom.net/lcwe/2004/reports/LCWEvangelicals.pdf> ; Internet.

<sup>37</sup> The *Free Methodist Global Cities* website, available from: <http://www.fmglobalcities.org/Budapest.htm> ; Internet.

<sup>38</sup> *Ibid.*, <http://www.fmglobalcities.org/Lisbon.htm>

<sup>39</sup> Daniel Liechti, "Taux de Pénétration en 2004 et 1970", website of the *Fédération Evangélique de France*; available from [http://www.fef.asso.fr/Impl\\_Egli/stat2004/nombreegliseslocale.htm](http://www.fef.asso.fr/Impl_Egli/stat2004/nombreegliseslocale.htm) ; Internet.

<sup>40</sup> Agnieszka Tennant, "The French Reconnection: Europe's most secular country rediscovers its Christian roots," *Christianity Today Online*, March 2005 [magazine on-line]; available from: <http://christianitytoday.com/ct/2005/003/20.28.html> ; Internet.

<sup>41</sup> "Administrative Barriers Obstruct Evangelical Growth in France" *Christianity Today Online*, 16 February 2005 [magazine on-line]; available from: <http://www.christiantoday.com/news/eur/447.htm> ; Internet.

Another sign of evangelical growth is the emergence and growth of pan-European visions and organizations. Present structures which are directly involved in evangelical consensus building in Europe are, for example, the *European Evangelical Alliance* and its related national alliances, the *Hope for Europe* network, *DAWN Europe*, the *Alliance for Saturation Church Planting*, the *European Leadership Forum*, and pan-European youth missions movements such as *Youth With A Mission* and *Operation Mobilisation*. Other evangelical movements which although unstructured are having an impact across Europe and beginning to create ad hoc networks are the “house church” movement, *Alpha International*, the “New Generation” youth culture church plants, and the mass conversions among the Roma populations from Spain to the Ukraine.

Increasing intolerance of and opposition to evangelicals in Europe is perhaps one of the prices to pay for growth and visibility. Patrick Johnstone evokes the steady erosion of religious freedom all over Europe, which he attributes to secular society in which “Bible-believing Christians are ridiculed, marginalized, and even legislated against through the insistence of secularists,” governments, “who have over-reacted to extreme acts of small sectarian groups and arbitrarily black-listed a wide range of innocent religious groups,” and the Orthodox Church, “which, in many countries of central and eastern Europe, has reacted vigorously to minority religious groups through pressing for discriminatory legislation, harassment and misleading propaganda.”<sup>43</sup>

A recent *Christianity Today Online* report on evangelicals in France stated that churches across France have reported that they have been encountering growing administrative problems, “which have arisen as the country continues to re-assess its secularist society.”<sup>44</sup> European *fonctionnaires* (government employees) oftentimes have difficulty in recognizing the legitimacy of any religious body that does not fit the historic, state-related, hierarchical Christendom paradigm. The report continues:

Many official actions undertaken by authoritative bodies have had to be frequently protested against by the French Protestant Federation, as the decisions tend to attack the religious freedoms of Christians . . . Last year a French magazine released an article which stated that all evangelical churches were sects, and criticised them as simply being a political tool of the US. French Federation President Jean-Arnold de Clermont, however has rejected many claims that religious freedom was under attack in France. He said, “Liberty of religion is intact but it is true that the ignorance of some public officials has often placed us in difficult situations. Freedom of religion is fundamental to French law. Administrative zeal or administrative rules should not bring into question this freedom of religion.”<sup>45</sup>

### **Why Evangelical Unity in Europe?**

Stuart Murray Williams envisions the possibilities for the gospel in post-Christendom Europe, and there will surely be many, but perhaps more attention should be paid to the prospects of a post-Christian Europe where evangelicals remain on the periphery, insular, disorganized and divided; where other spiritualities flourish, a contextualized Islam makes inroads, and evangelicals are not only marginalized, but harassed and even persecuted. If evangelicals fail to seize the day and unite around common mission and cause, the consequences could be catastrophic in nature: an unprecedented opportunity for the gospel may be lost; the possibility of a new thrust for world mission from Europe

<sup>42</sup> Johnstone, p. 52.

<sup>43</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 53-54.

<sup>44</sup> *Christianity Today Online*, 6 February 2005.

<sup>45</sup> *Ibid.*

could be compromised; the sons and daughters of evangelicals may find themselves in a Europe where religious liberties are increasingly bartered away, and evangelicals despised. Without a revival of Christianity (but this time a Christianity freed from the fetters of state sponsorship), Europe could once again descend into its historical suicidal behavior, giving in to its demons of nationalism, inter-ethnic hatred and inter-religious warfare.

The times seem ripe for evangelicals in Europe to unite in common mission and for building the pan-denominational structures for evangelical growth and representation that have been lacking. Europeans need to see a Christianity that is not nationalistic, but multiethnic, multiracial, and global. Europe needs to see the Asian, African, and Latin American faces of evangelical Christianity, in addition to its own.

A united pan-European evangelical movement, in the midst of the spiritual wasteland of secularism, could promote a clear testimony of the power of Jesus Christ to transform individuals and families; to reconcile estranged peoples; to bring hope for the future of human society. United evangelicalism in Europe would provide great opportunities for the Church to prayerfully pursue a Kingdom agenda within Europe's borders, seeking justice for the disenfranchised and powerless; reconciliation following ethnic and religious conflict; provision for Europe's chronically indigent and despised; promotion of biblical values in society. A united evangelicalism could allow for the rebirth of a European missions-sending movement; a unified front against the principalities and powers operating just under the surface of the so-called secular European state; and a unified front against administrative harassment, religious discrimination, and societal ignorance.

Ease of travel, wealth, and advanced communications technologies in today's Europe make it possible for evangelicals to become united in Christ and in his mission, rather than remain insular, divided, and vulnerable.

Recent strides in the merging theological vision of dispensational and covenant theologies in North America could provide a concrete basis and a stirring call for a unified evangelical social engagement in Europe. Russell D. Moore in his seminal study *The Kingdom of Christ: The New Evangelical Perspective* convincingly demonstrates how, as both dispensational and covenant theologies come to a consensus concerning the relationship of the inaugurated Kingdom and the Church, a common basis for evangelical engagement is emerging. Moore quotes Carl F. H. Henry in this regard:

When Christianity discusses the new society it speaks not of some intangible future reality whose specific features it cannot as yet identify, but of the regenerate church called to live by the standards of the coming King and which in some respects already approximates the Kingdom of God in present history.<sup>46</sup>

### **Implications for Mission to Europe**

We have seen that the disestablishment of institutionalized Christianity in Europe is in an irreversible trajectory, and should be complete in the next 40 years. Although Orthodoxy and Roman Catholicism in the former communist block countries are in the ascendancy, it is unlikely that these countries will escape irrepressible European secularization, especially those who have become, or will become, members of the European Union. Europe is in a mega-transition from a Christendom past to a post-Christendom future. There is a vast ideological and spiritual vacuum in Europe, opening the door to new spiritualities. We have seen that *post-Christendom* does not necessarily mean *post-Christian*,

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<sup>46</sup> Russell D. Moore, *The Kingdom of Christ: The New Evangelical Perspective* (Wheaton, Illinois: Crossway Publishers, 2004), p. 139.

although short of a revival of Christianity, and probably of the evangelical sort, this destiny seems inevitable. Neo-paganism, Islam, and “soft” Buddhism are two contenders for European spirituality; there are others. It is likely that multiple religious options will develop in the present context.

We have seen that evangelical Christianity is poised for what could be a major advance in Europe. Present disinformation and prejudice are obstacles, but not insurmountable. Evangelical Christianity presents several features which, if known, could counter some of the prejudice and favor its growth among Europeans: its continuity with historic, biblical Christian faith; its discontinuity with institutionalized, politicized Christendom (i.e., its Anabaptist, free church heritage); its local engagement with social problems; its vibrant individual and corporate spirituality; its emphasis on community; its multi-ethnic, multi-cultural, and global character.

How does all this impact North American mission to Europe? The theme of this paper is “Mission to Post-Christendom Europe: Affirming Pan-European Evangelical Identity, Unity, and Action.” North American mission to Europe should focus its work primarily in four areas:

1. Identifying and targeting the least-reached and the unreached peoples and neighborhoods in Europe’s major metropolitan areas for pioneer evangelism, compassion ministry, and church planting.
2. Planting churches that become missional communities, that is launching stations for new mission, locally, cross-culturally, and internationally. Peter Kuzmic has written that “one of the central and most urgent tasks for both Western and Eastern European churches is to *recover a practical missionary ecclesiology, the missionary character of the believing community.*” He continues: “The recognition that the congregation is the proper agent for missionary and evangelistic activities and that the task should not be relegated to outside agencies, specialized ministries and zealous, evangelistically minded individuals is an imperative.”<sup>47</sup> Kingdom-centered mission to Europe must seek to train and inspire kingdom-conscious churches and believers. As “kingdom communities,” local churches should be planted, nurtured, and structured as seedbeds for world mission. A seedbed is a plot of soil that has been prepared in such a way that it is conducive to the growth of living plants from tiny seeds. As the seedbeds for world mission, local churches in Europe must be environments propitious to “growing” believers into knowledgeable, experienced, and responsible missional Christians. Missional Christians are disciples for whom the *missio dei* has become the integrating, overriding priority for their lives. Ideally, local churches, which are the foundation for world mission, should develop the resources needed for effective missions education.
3. Promoting citywide evangelical ecumenism, and cross-denominational and church-mission-parachurch partnerships, for the advancement of contextualized evangelism, cross-cultural ministry, and international mission.
4. Assisting in the development of pan-European structures and initiatives which defend and promote the evangelical movement, advance evangelical identity, engage European society with biblical ethics and values, compassion and justice, and ensure “connected-ness” with global evangelicalism.

There are many possible avenues of missionary investment in Europe, which could make a significant contribution to the development of European evangelicalism. Following are some ideas for further investigation:

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<sup>47</sup> Kuzmic, p. 159.

1. Organize and sponsor research on the various Roma people movements in Europe, including the older movements in Spain and France as well as the younger movements in Central and Eastern Europe, the Ukraine and Russia, with the goal of cross-fertilization, inter-Roma evangelism, mission, and leadership training, as well as representation in the European and national evangelical alliances. This could become a project of the *European Evangelical Missionary Alliance*.
2. Organize and sponsor research on the various Muslim people movements in Europe and contiguous areas, including the Kabyl Berbers in Algeria and France, the Bulgarian Millets, and the movements in Bosnia, Kosovo and Albania. Once again, the goal would be cross-fertilization, inter-Muslim background people evangelism, mission, and leadership training, as well as representation in the European and national evangelical alliances. This could also become a project of the *European Evangelical Missionary Alliance*.
3. Deliberately discover, recruit and embrace non-European ethnic churches in regional and pan-European evangelical entities. This could also include the identification and intentional targeting of the poor and the disenfranchised for compassion and justice ministries, evangelism, church-planting, and leadership training.
4. Promote as broadly as possible through the evangelical networks in Europe cross-denominational tools for evangelism, such as the *Alpha Course*, which is having great success in bringing independent, Protestant, and Roman Catholic “evangelicals” together for evangelism.
5. Assist the re-organization and re-conception of TEMA, The European Missionary Association, whose last Urbana-like youth missions conference was forced to declare bankruptcy. The larger picture is the need to inspire and train evangelical students for missions, as well as for municipal, national, and Europe-wide public service.
6. Create dynamic and organic links between evangelical theological and missionary training institutions globally through student and professor exchange, as well as providing professors of mission for European institutions.
7. Sponsor the development of a *Perspectives in World Mission*-like course for missions and cross-cultural awareness for local churches in Europe, with the goal of helping believers and churches engage culture, rather than withdraw from it, fear it, or misjudge it. Lesslie Newbigin, who spent over 30 years working in a Hindu culture that presented numerous obstacles to the Gospel, to conversion and to the growth of the church, affirms and commends, even to the Church in the post-Christian West, this process and dynamic tension between the Church and its surrounding culture when he writes:
 

. . . (the church) must therefore live always in dialogue with the world, bearing its witness to Christ but always in such a way that it is open to receive the riches of God that belong properly to Christ but have to be brought to him. This dialogue, this life of continuous exchange with the world, means that the church itself is changing . . . It will continue to change as it meets ever new cultures and lives in faithful dialogue with them.<sup>48</sup>

Peter Kuzmic warns against “theological and communicative rigidity and over-pious ‘other-worldliness’ in the name of historical faithfulness (the temptation of the Eastern Orthodox and evangelical fundamentalists) is not the way ahead for Christian mission.” This would constitute betrayal of the gospel, rendering it meaningless “in its refusal to enter into dialogue with the

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<sup>48</sup> Lesslie Newbigin. *The Open Secret: An Introduction to the Theology of Mission*. Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1995), p. 180.

world and its inability to translate contextually the message of salvation to its secularized contemporaries.”<sup>49</sup>

In conclusion, North American mission to Europe must seek to reverse the effects some of its past “sins”, for example its importation of theologically and ecclesiological sectarian thinking and action; its denominationalism; its failure to create autonomous missional communities with missionary vision; its failure to train its converts to engage European culture. Mission to Europe must promote broad evangelical unity and dialogue. Peter Kuzmic affirms and warns:

*The quest for Christian unity remains an imperative* in the light of both biblical and contemporary missionary requirements . . . The uncoordinated and, at times, culturally and religiously ill-prepared and insensitive missionary activities from North America will create confusion, unnecessary duplication and growth of new denominations and independent groups with various theological emphases, ecclesiological models and missionary practices . . . If the questions of biblical unity, cooperation, mutual trust and integrity—all under the biblical umbrella of the Lordship of Jesus Christ—are not properly addresses, this process will become counter-productive and result in discrediting the message and the mission of the church at the time of its greatest opportunity and need.<sup>50</sup>

Andrew Walls summarizes what he predicts will be the issues of the 21<sup>st</sup> century for Christianity:

The great issues of twenty-first-century Christianity are likely to be ecumenical. The most urgent issues of ecumenism no longer relate to confessional and denominational issues . . . The great ecumenical issues will be about how African and Indian and Chinese and Korean and Hispanic and North American and European Christians can together make real the life of the body of Christ.<sup>51</sup>

This is the challenge before the church in Europe, and therefore before those involved in mission to Europe: how may evangelicals make real the life of the body of Christ in post-Christendom Europe? Despite the dubious prognosis for the future of European Christianity, there is room for optimism and hope.

The *Hope for Europe* movement, sponsored by the European Evangelical Alliance, describes the mission of evangelicals in Europe in terms of hope:

Millions of our fellow Europeans face an uncertain and sombre future, despite the overthrow of dictators and the passing of the Cold War. Christians have a word of hope for modern Europeans that no-one else can speak. The credibility of this message of hope, however, has been impaired through disunity, unbiblical pessimism and withdrawal from being salt and light in society. We have thus often implied to our fellow Europeans that there is little hope for Europe's future. Yet it is our responsibility as Christians to pray and work for God's kingdom to come, for His will to be done among the European peoples, as it is in heaven. We accept that the people of God are his primary agent of transformation (Eph. 3:10), and are thus called to be the people of hope.<sup>52</sup>

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<sup>49</sup> Kuzmic, p. 161.

<sup>50</sup> Ibid.

<sup>51</sup> Walls, p. 69.

<sup>52</sup> *Hope for Europe* website; available from: <http://www.hfe.org> ; Internet.

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