

Wave Formation, Waves and Learning to Surf



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Introduction

TV homebuyer series like, 'A place in the Sun', presented by Jasmine Harman and Jonnie Irwin, show how the home buyer market in the UK compares with the rest of Europe. Choices of home are offered and the buyers are left to choose: Merthyr Tydfil or the Dordogne.

The simple fact is: the UK is no longer isolated from the rest of Europe by La Manche – that's the English Channel to you and me. Trends and patterns cross the Continent – Information, Communication Technology ensure this in our globalised world.

Wave formation: the religious and social-cultural context of Europe

1. Varieties of Christianisation

I suspect that a fair number of us will be reading, or at least claim we are reading, authors such as Stuart Murray Williams (*Church after Christendom, Post-Christendom: Church and Mission in a Strange New World*), David Smith (*Mission After Christendom*), Simon Bartley and Simon Barrow (*Ekklesia*), and Michael Frost (*Exiles: Living Missionally in a Post-Christian Culture*). Even our own Richard Tiplady's book *Post-Mission* touches on these themes.

Taken as a whole, their writing is persuasive and describes accurately what is observed in many instances. Additionally, their assessments seem to be those that many of us may instinctively share. However, the theories offered by prophets of secularisation seemed incontrovertible in the 1960s and onwards. The current consensus is that much of this may have been an attempt to describe the way that the world *ought* to be rather than the way it was. This is the current danger I see in trying to describe religion in Europe as necessarily conforming to a post-Christendom paradigm.

Why is it important to make this point, apart from the fact that it means there is still space for writing more books? If we are going to resist the pressure of the waves that seem to be overwhelming us then we need firstly to understand the nature of the wave. Any competent surfer will tell you that – I'm not a competent surfer.

So what can be said about the complex and confusing religious beliefs of Continental Europe as well as the UK?

2. Some of it is Pre-Secular

The Sami peoples (85,000): some retain their shamanistic religion although most have been Christianised. Four general Gods (including Daughter of God). Shamanism (practised by the Noaidi) is accompanied by drum beating and trance singing.

The Roma peoples (10 million): Nominal Christian affiliation is often supplemented by Roma traditional beliefs: the existence of bibaxt (bad luck) and of muló (supernatural spirits or ghosts), the power of good luck charms, amulets, talismans, curses, fortune telling (but only for non-Roma) and healing rituals. A person can be reincarnated as another human, animal, or muló or "living dead", seeking revenge on anyone who harmed him during his life on earth.

A Roma typically has three names. The first is known only by the mother; it is given at the time of birth. Its purpose is to confuse evil spirits by keeping the real name of the child from them. The second name is conferred at the time of baptism, and is the commonly used name within the tribe. A third, different name may be given when the child is re-baptized in a Christian church. It has little importance, except when dealing with non-Roma.

The indigenous Islamic populations of Europe are frequently syncretistic, with animistic practices accompanying occasional Islamic adherence (totalling just over 6 million). There are also numerous indigenous tribal groups of the Volga, and other remote Russian regions. Not to say that they are typical of European population, nor that they are somehow immune to the impact of the Gospel. In Spain, the majority of Roma are evangelical Christian.

3. You can find many Remnants of Christendom

In July 2001, the former king of Bulgaria, Simeon of Saxony-Cobourg, became the Prime Minister and made a point of taking the oath of office in the presence of Patriarch Maxim. The Bulgarian President, George Parvanov, also took the oath in January in the presence of the Patriarch. Bulgaria is an EU state.

In Greece, an EU state, Orthodoxy is the official state religion.

In Russia, Vladimir Putin's Institute monitoring Human Rights in the west parallels efforts of the ROC to develop a new Charter of Human Rights which are less individualistic, resist western secularisation, and respect 'Christian Values'.

In Denmark, an EU state, the Church and State exist in an incredible alliance, with a Government Minister appointed to the State Church Portfolio and wielding enormous power in the Lutheran Church. Atheists and Muslims must carry a picture of Christ with them whenever they travel abroad.

Romania, an EU state, counts an incalculable number of monasteries and sketes to which monastic vocations once again stream. With the tacit support of many in the Romanian Orthodox Church (ROC) the Romanian royal family is seeking a return to political influence and dominance.

Again, it's important to say that Christendom Europe seems to be fighting a rearguard action that may be more or less effective. It's too early to predict how welcome will be the current attempts by the RC church and the ROC to impact EU and Church of England policy and law making.

4. Some is clearly best described as 'Post-Christendom'

Alan Gilbert's 1980 book *The making of Post-Christian Britain* was followed by Michael Jinkin's *The Church Faces Death* in 1999, closely pursued by Callum Brown's *Death of Christian Britain* (2000). If the titles tell us anything it is that the Future might not have a Church. Countries that most closely reflect this situation include: UK, NL, FR, DE, BE.

Stuart Murray Williams suggests seven characteristics of post-Christendom:

Church moves from the centre to the margins

Christians in minority not majority

Christians become sojourners not settlers

Christians experience plurality not privilege

Christians relinquish control and embrace witness

The Church emphasises mission not maintenance.

5. What does this all mean for mission agencies and mission personnel active in Europe?

My caution with regards the post-Christendom analysis is that it tends to do what earlier Church Planting advocates used to do (of which Stuart was one) when they insisted that Church Planting was the, 'single most effective way of doing evangelism on the face of the planet.' Post-Christendom is a helpful way of understanding some of the things happening in the UK and beyond, but it is not the complete picture and mission personnel shaped by these ideas will be less than effective in the parts of Europe that are pre-Christian or still Christendom countries.

If we can accept that 'Postmodern, post-Christendom' ways of thinking operate in a similar way to 'Modern Christian civilisation' ways of thinking, as part of our cultural identity as British Evangelical Christians, we might be more alert to the danger of exporting our cultural baggage to the mission fields on which we are working. Just as earlier generations of missionaries exported the values of civilisation, Christendom and modernity, this generation must avoid simply exporting its own cultural baggage (including our rampant individualism).

If we believe that post-Christendom insights lead us ultimately to a bright and perfect future, even end-point in the purposes of God, then it deserves the service of our lives. If, however, we welcome it as a renewing move of the Spirit for the way we ought to be doing things around here at this particular moment in history, then may avoid the danger of offering it as the only answer to the problem of the Church in Europe. We can avoid the situation where we're not always sure what the questions are, but convinced that the answer to all of them is probably 'Post-Christendom.'

So, part of the challenge when addressing Europe are its pre-Christian, Christian, and post-Christian identities. And what applies for Christian, equally applies to secularisation (pre, secular, and post-secular) as well as modernity (pre-modern, modern, post-modern). European countries and populations might better be understood as simultaneously demonstrating all of these impulses.

Reading the waves: taking up the missional challenges

1. Migration

It's currently estimated that 1.5 million migrant peoples arrives and settles in the EU each year. The same estimates also suggest that seven million migrant peoples within the EU have irregular status with a further half a million of these arriving each year. In total, 4% of the EU population, or 18.5 million people, is made up of non-EU citizens.

A January 2007 report in the EU Observer stated that migration from ex-communist EU states to the UK and Ireland showed no sign of slowing down, with Romanians and Bulgarians testing their new EU travel freedoms. Ninety thousand Poles registered to work in Ireland in 2006 compared with 65,000 in 2005 according to the Irish national insurance office, with over 250,000 new workers settling in Ireland since 2004. Visiting Dublin last week I was impressed by the range of stores with Lithuanian, Ukrainian, and Slovakian names, including the chain of Polish stores. Net migration to the UK hit 400,000 in 2005 - almost double the level in 2004 and 215,000 more than officially stated by the British government. 500,000 arrived in 2006 (though with 200,000 British citizens emigrating in the same year).

This is clearly a challenge for the political leaders of the European Union and the other European Institutions. It would be politically and economically naïve to simply open Europe's

external borders to everybody who comes knocking. Equally, it is historically naïve to believe that Europe is essentially a Christian club (that can exclude Turkey solely on the grounds that its citizens are muslims) and that Europe's historical development has taken place without any reference to, dialogue with, or borrowing from, other non-European cultures.

It is a challenge for the Church and mission leaders of the UK and Europe. The window of opportunity might close. Evidence suggests that some migrants are returning to C&E Europe as wages rise in response to worker shortages. Polish individuals in Gloucester show no inclination to learn English – not really proof of the intention to stay here long term.

2. Islam

The indigenous European Islamic populations number approximately: Bulgaria (0.9 million), Bosnia (1.8 million), Albania (2.7 million), Macedonia (0.7 million), and Romania (45,000).

But statistics are tricky due to who counts as 'Muslim'. In asking whether this is a cultural or religious descriptor we reveal a further misunderstanding of the nature of Islam. Yet, despite this, there are many Muslims in Europe today who might be described as 'non-practising / secular / cultural muslims'. Of course there is always the danger of radicalisation but the presence of missionaries for Islamic radicalisation to work among the Muslim communities of Europe actually highlights the need.

Stories of Islamic Reform. Tariq Ramadan. Frej and his academic colleagues.

Stories of conversion to Christianity: Farsi speaking Iranians and others, OM in Bosnia HGV, Baptist Church in Georgia.

3. Neo-paganism (Incl. Buddhism?)

Estonian pyramid dwellers.

Jeff Fountain's attentiveness to Neo-Pagan spirituality.

John Drane (and the latest Sensing Faith).

Nick Spencer's research-led, Beyond the Fringe: Researching a Spiritual Age.

Paul Heelas and Linda Woodhead's research-led, The Spiritual Revolution: Why Religion is Giving Way to Spirituality

4. Ecological concerns

How is the Church to respond to the current ecological challenge? Is it enough for the Bishop of London to make a pledge to use public transport for a year?

Chris Wright, in positioning the next Lausanne Consultation for World Evangelisation, to be held in South Africa in 2010, argues for a theology of mission,

"The God who commands us to disciple all nations also commands us to do justice, love mercy and walk humbly with our God. We still struggle to 'relate' these things to one another when we ought never to have split them apart in the first place. But sadly we did. We have been guilty of putting asunder what God has joined together. Lausanne, in its commitment to holistic mission, believes in the integration of all these things because anything less is untrue to the Bible."

It has to be said that the earlier biblical notion of 'Walking humbly' gives a certain poignancy to the notion of a, 'carbon footprint'.

A'Rocha has a European presence. The ecumenical Church groups of Europe are addressing the issue. Possibly the EEA is unable to do anything due to lack of resource (or, more likely, a lack of impetus from the national Alliances). Where is this on the agenda of mission agencies active in Europe? CMS & BMS have entered agreements/understandings with A'Rocha. That is welcome but what about others? Will Chris Wright's words come back to haunt agencies that turn up in Cape Town in three years' time with little to report on our mission to the whole of Creation?

5. Religious myopia/amnesia

Christianity in the public marketplace of Brussels, etc. Absence of historical accuracy in drafting of the (former) Constitutional Treaty and its replacement.

CEC's contribution to European values debate on interculturalism was invited on the basis that it would conform to the parameters of a secular framework.

Do we welcome the openness on the part of the European Commission, appearing in the new Treaty amendments, to engaging with Churches? Is it enough to leave this to Church leaders who lack a missional vision and might they merely perpetuate a Christendom mindset?

Learning to surf: Back to basics

Wilbert Shenk proposes a three-fold response: World – Word – Church

1. How do we understand and engage with the world?

Pluralistic. Multi-religious. Secular.

2. How do we read the Scriptures, particularly in public, with humility and confidence?

The Messiah is coming (Martin Kettle – Guardian)

Most of the time, our music writers spend their time discussing what they see and hear in our concert halls and opera houses and listening to what emerges from the recording studio. There's nothing wrong with that, and no picture of our musical life would be complete without proper attention to these places.

But the picture thus painted is not the full one. In fact, it is in some ways extremely misleading, because most of these music writers pay almost no attention to performances in the arenas in which arguably the majority of our national musical life takes place. I refer, of course, to our churches.

This critical neglect is at its most brazen and indefensible in the month of December, as this is when the centrality of the church to modern British musical life impinges most obviously. A religious point could be made about this—but I am seeking to make only a musical one. (Prospect November 2007)

In the political arena (Tony Blair's comments).

Tony Blair acknowledged that his belief in God played a "hugely important" role during his 10 years as prime minister, in a BBC television documentary "The Blair Years" broadcast on 25 November. "If I am honest about it, yes of course it was hugely important. You know you can't have a religious faith and it be an insignificant aspect because it's, it's profound about you and about you as a human being". I don't actually think there is anything wrong in having religious conviction - on the contrary I think it is a strength for people. If you are in the American political system or others then you can talk about religious faith and people say yes that's fair enough and it is something they respond to quite naturally. You talk about it in our system and frankly people do think you're a nutter."

"This is a man who takes a Bible with him wherever he goes and last thing at night he will read from the Bible," Peter Mandelson told the BBC programme. Alastair Campbell warned Blair against going public on his beliefs. Both men feared the public would be wary. (Ecumenical News International 27th November 2007)

3. How do we re-imagine the Church?

Against the backdrop of numerical decline, scandal, abuses of power, and widespread indifference.

New and emerging or ancient and faithful? Davie concludes that there are two religious economies in Europe: religion as a marketplace and religion as a public utility. She astutely observes that each fills the space that the other leaves. These competing economies are in tension and it is in this tension that Europe's religious complexities will continue to emerge. (*The Bible in Transmission*, Winter 2007, p.15)

Postscript

John 1:6-9. Do we believe that the light of Christ still shines upon Europe, upon the UK? If so, then our task here as sojourners and exiles is not to reinvent light but to simply let the light of Christ shine through our witness as *martyrs* to the truth.

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