



CROSS-CURRENTS of RELIGION & SPIRITUALITY in POST-CHRISTIAN EUROPE

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If you were to compare Europe and the United States, which of the two civilizations would you say is...

- ...further along in the process of secularization?
- ...facing the greater pressure of Islamization?
- ...more likely to promote interfaith dialogue for its own survival?
- ...more likely to persecute Bible-believing Christians?
- ...is in greater need of evangelism and church planting?

See if you change your mind on any of your answers by the end of the seminar...

WHAT THE POST-CHRISTIAN LANDSCAPE OF EUROPE LOOKS LIKE

Europe is religiously diverse as perhaps never before. The conflicting currents present a challenge: how can Europe create unity while respecting the huge diversity of ethnic groups and faiths governed by its growing supranational institutions? Two solutions seem most likely: (1) defend diversity while focusing on commonalities and minimizing differences, or (2) impose one religion/ideology by force.

When asked about Europe's religious makeup, many Americans will think of Gothic cathedrals, stained glass, Gregorian chant and grand pipe organs. They are surprised to learn of Europe's rapidly expanding religious diversity in the 21st century, a shift that has brought Europe into a truly post-Christian age. But we must place this transition into a larger framework to understand it. Contemporary commentators on European cultural trends often use the term "post-Christian"—a mood that pushes Christendom's assumptions and traditions to the margins of society in hopes that secularism will reign—to identify the impact of postmodern relativism in the late 20th century. In fact, the fracturing of European Christendom's Atlantic-to-Vistula monolith—viewed by Roman Catholicism as old "Christian Europe"—is hardly new; it has been advancing for the last thousand years.

The Middle Ages edifice of Christendom—a mix of Rome's ecclesiastical hegemony and political influence—began to crack already in 1054 at the Great Schism between the Latin and Greek churches. The fault widened as the Renaissance's interest in "man as the measure of all things" slowly undermined the foundations of the church. The Protestant Reformation in the 16th century threatened the political unity of Rome's continent, notably in Germany, the lowlands, Scandinavia, Switzerland and France. As the scientific revolution built its own cathedral to man's mind in the early 17th century, Catholicism reacted to what it felt were encroachments upon her territory (e.g., by opposing Galileo's scientific discoveries on the structure of the universe). Throughout the 17th and 18th centuries Rationalism, Deism and Scepticism on the continent and in England took a wrecking ball to the authority of both Roman and Protestant churches. The Enlightenment spawned revolution across Europe by the end of the 18th century, ushering the continent into the 19th century's bout with Napoleon. By the time of his exile in 1815, momentum was building for a century of erecting nation states, in which a particular ethnic group claimed the right to govern itself. The involvement of the individual citizen was emphasized more and more. Religion was criticized as the source of conflict, not unity; far better, many wrote, to relegate religion to the periphery of society by limiting its purview to personal experience. The 19th century's Romanticism elevated the artist and the nation to god-status, while at the same time seeking a mystical experience in spiritism and occultism.

After WW II post-Marxist thinkers in France developed a view of reality most have called postmodernity.¹ This

¹ For an introduction to these concepts, see Stanley J. Grenz, *A Primer on Postmodernism* (Grand Rapids: Wm. B. Eerdmans, 1996); Dennis McCallum (ed.), *The Death of Truth: What's Wrong with Multiculturalism, the Rejection of Reason and the New Postmodern Diversity* (Minneapolis: Bethany House, 1996); Millard J. Erickson, *Postmodernizing the Faith: Evangelical Responses to the Challenge of*

outlook opposed the notion of absolute truth and metanarratives, which claimed to provide over-arching explanations of things. As such postmodernity also opposed the hubris of science, which claimed objectivity in research. Across Europe the postmodern mind has bred suspicion of any groups that take their texts seriously (“fundamentalists”). While postmodernity was breeding in the universities, populations outside Europe shifted gears from colonialism to the post-colonial era. Natality rates in Western Europe gradually ebbed to sub-replacement levels, requiring increased immigration to pay for the generous welfare state pension schemes of an aging generation.² Much of this immigration has tended to be from the former European colonies in Africa, Indonesia and the Indian subcontinent. And that, of course, has meant a significant Islamic influx.

But since 1995, when the EU passed the Barcelona accords seeking to engage North Africa’s Muslim nations, religion has come into its own as a potential source of unity and common values for the EU. In an ongoing series of EU-sponsored conferences beginning in the mid-1990s, religious leaders, philosophers and EU-think-tankers have met to mix the diverse religions of the community into an urgently needed glue for Europe’s increasingly heterogeneous society.³ These interfaith dialogues are committed to the radical relativism of the postmodern mind, while at the same time insisting on the binding nature of human rights, rule by law, freedom, social market economies and supranational institutions. Ironically, then, the post-Christian era in Europe melds Christian traditions with those of all other faiths in the interests of creating, not a new Christendom, but a cohesive European super-state which denies the authority of any one religion.

RELIGIOUS CROSS-CURRENTS AND THE UNITY OF EUROPE

In this seminar I will seek to outline some of the competing ideas of major religious movements in the post-Christian scene, as well as their commonalities. I will try to answer the question, how could the cross-currents of religion and spirituality in Europe be used to foster Europe’s unity despite their diverse doctrines and practices?

Can Roman Catholicism bring unity?

The Roman Church, comprising some 284 million communicants across Europe, has felt the pressure of the post-Christian era as much as anyone. Among the world’s top ten Catholic countries, four are still European (Italy, France, Spain and Poland). But Church attendance and belief in God are dropping across Catholic Europe, as a comparison of the maps will reveal. Catholic baptisms declined 34% during the period 1975-1990. In the same period Catholic weddings declined by 41%. In 2004 only fifteen men took the vows of priesthood in the Republic of Ireland.⁴ Sexual abuse scandals among the priesthood in France, England and Ireland have rocked the confidence of Catholics in their leadership. While the estimated projections of the Christian populations of the United States, Brazil, Mexico, the Philippines and China are positive for 2050, Germany’s projection is in the red at -1.7% for the same period.⁵ Rome is in trouble in Europe.

More than any previous pope John Paul II made overtures to Islam, while at the same time promoting radical devotion to Mary and the defense of Catholicism’s traditional stance on birth control and celibacy. But under Benedict

Postmodernism (Grand Rapids: Baker Books, 1998); and D. A. Carson, *The Gagging of God* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1996).

² For population trends for individual European countries, consult http://www.coe.int/t/e/social_cohesion/population/Links/. For a summary of the problem see http://www.mckinsey.com/mgi/publications/demographics/Executive_Summary.asp, which provides close-up reports on German, Italy and the UK.

³ Dr. Sara Silvestri provides a good summary (although now slightly dated) in “EU Relations with Islam in the Context of the EMP’s Cultural Dialogue,” *Mediterranean Politics*, Vol. 10, No. 3, 385-405, November 2005, www.city.ac.uk/intpol/dps/WorkingPapers/Silvestri_MED_POLITICS.pdf. Also see her analysis in “Muslim Institutions and Political Mobilisation” at <http://www.scribd.com/doc/20967216/Muslim-institutions-and-political-mobilization>. For a synopsis of the 1995 conference in Toledo see Marc Luyckx (ed.), *The Mediterranean Society: A Challenge for Islam, Judaism and Christianity* (Forward Studies), Palgrave Macmillan, 1998.

⁴ All statistics come from Philip Jenkins, *God’s Continent: Christianity, Islam and Europe’s Religious Crisis* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2007), 26-36. This is a particularly helpful overview of present religious trends and tensions between Christianity and Islam in contemporary Europe, although Jenkins does not come from an evangelical perspective.

⁵ Philip Jenkins, 90.

XVI's influence Rome seems to be retreating to a more cautious and traditionalist stance on the mass, the church's role in society and dialogue with Islam. I hear more critical comments coming from some practicing Catholics in Luxembourg about the "dangerous compromises" of Vatican II. But Benedict's attempt in Regensburg in September 2006 to argue for the irrationality of Islam, as opposed to the rationality of Christianity, drew perhaps the strongest objection.⁶ He offered an apology to Muslims, indicating he was quoting the opinion of a 14th century Byzantine emperor Manuel II Palaiologos, not giving his own view. It remains to be seen whether or not his papacy will stem the church's hemorrhage on the continent, or send more communicants scurrying for the doors.

One must not forget that even if the cathedrals are emptier in many countries than they've been in a long while, Rome still seeks to wield influence in Brussels via the *Commission des Evêques de la Communauté Européenne* and through its business holdings. The founders of the EU in the 1950s were all staunch Catholics and many key leaders on the contemporary European stage are loyal Roman Catholics (Silvio Berlusconi, Tony Blair, Jean-Claude Juncker, Herman van Rompuy, Nicolas Sarkozy, etc.). But the Church's inability to leverage mention of Christianity's contribution to the European project in the failed constitution, as well as the dominant secularism of the EU and COE bureaucracy, suggest Rome's influence is either waning or well hidden.⁷ Given these trends and barring radical changes, it is hard to imagine that Roman Catholicism acting alone will be able to create the unity it seeks.

Can secularism do what Catholicism cannot?

If Catholicism continues to recede, what will fill the void? Secularism is certainly one of the main contenders. At a popular level secularism has built a social order on the foundations of atheism (much of it militant à la Richard Dawkins, Christopher Hitchens et al.), technology and economic *savoir faire*. Deteriorating social mores reflect atheism's foundation. Young people are consumed with pop music, entertainment and escapism. Meanwhile both parents (if they are not divorced) work full time and place the children in nursery care to pay the taxes and buy a house. Political correctness and tolerance are *de rigueur*.

How can this kind of secularism hold together a diverse society? It seems unthinkable that the present secular system, expunged of any religious influence, could bring Europe through another hundred years of peace. Europe's diverse peoples will get religion, it seems, whether they like it or not! The reason: EU institutions are increasingly hopeful that religious dialogue between the civilizations north and south of the Mediterranean will bring new cohesion to Europe.

Marc Luyckx Ghisi (b. 1942), a Belgian advisor to EU Commission presidents Jacques Delors and Jacques Santer and Director of the EU's Forward Studies Unit, spoke in the early 1990s at a conference of evangelicals tracking developments in the EU. He insisted that the traditional view of truth (what's "in the box") and error (what's "outside the box") must be discarded in favor of a new approach. Each religious tradition was situated on the periphery of a circle, much like the crust of a pizza. No single religious or ideological tradition can demonstrate a monopoly on truth; instead, as religious people meditate on their core moral values, they tend to converge toward the principles espoused by all other religions. A common ethic is at the center of all religions, and these universal values must be championed, while each religion continues to hold to its own tradition or expression of faith.⁸

Dr. Luyckx had recently been appointed as Dean of the CBA Business School in Zagreb when in 2006 he lectured on transmodernity and the new business paradigm.⁹ He argued for allowing the "center of the pizza" to remain empty as religions reflect on truth. The post-secular world must become "re-enchanted" with a new sense of collective responsibility, consciousness, radical tolerance, and value-rich economic activity. Violence between states must be replaced with negotiation (the EU is a great success in this regard, he contends). Socialism must capitalize

⁶ Pope Benedict XVI, "Faith, Reason and the University", 12 September 2006, University of Regensburg, <http://www.zenit.org/article-16955?l=english>

⁷ For commentary see Tony Bennett's summary of Mark Stout's *E.U.: Papacy Revisited?* (Maastricht: Metajuridical Books, 2005)

⁸ "Europa 1992," 27-28 February 1992, Brussels, personal conversation with the speaker.

⁹ Marc Luyckx, "Why is Business Changing?" 23 May 2006, "Febelux," www.exhibitions.be/content.../f/Presentation_Marc%20Luyckx.ppt

on diversity and ensure the survival of both nature and people according to globally accepted ethical principles. Ironically, it appears that Luyckx has not at all jettisoned boxes in favor of pizzas. He has packaged transmodernity in a neat box, neatly encased in its own doctrines and ideology, while rejecting both the pre-modern and modern economic and social systems. Nonetheless, his thinking seems increasingly mainstream in intellectual circles, as we shall see in our glance at interfaith dialogue.

And what about Islam?

Now here's a movement that could bring unity from diversity if it gets the chance! Fifty years ago few would have predicted that by the middle of the 21st century a fifth of Europe's population could be Islamic. But a variety of factors have combined to make this a distinct possibility: Europe's low fertility rate; massive immigration from North Africa, Pakistan and Indonesia; Islamic immigrants' higher natality rate; and Europe's determined defense of freedom of religious expression. Rather than ban extremist rhetoric, the EU member states have chosen for the moment to allow it in hopes that keeping jihadist rantings in full view of the public will accomplish more than pushing Islamism underground.¹⁰

Islam's presence is felt by Europeans in many ways: the establishment of mosques in all large cities; the building of minarets (or the banning of them as in Switzerland following a referendum on 29 November 2009); the debate over the wearing of veils at school or at work; the employment of Islamic people at the cost of granting special privileges for the fast of Ramadan and setting aside designated rooms for daily hours of prayer; halal issues in school canteens; etc. Islamic fundamentalists seek to return secularized Muslim immigrants back to the cultural signs of Islamic identity (wearing the *hijab*, celebrating Ramadan, etc.), then establish Islamic institutions. These approach the state with demands that the Islamic population in the territory receive privileges consonant with their religion. If these are not granted, the institutions decline any responsibility for terrorist attacks launched by disgruntled young men¹¹.

Of the 27 EU members states, France, the Netherlands and Germany have the highest percentage of Muslims living in their borders. If Europe continues to expand eastward, the Islamic population will increase dramatically, given Turkey's huge Muslim population.¹² At this writing Turkey seems quite disenchanted with Europe's overtures and appears to be looking eastward for closer ties with Syria, Iran and Russia.

What is the attraction of Islam? Why should Muslims now increase in a region where blood has been spilt to keep the Ottoman Empire out? One reason is demographics. For the moment Muslim families have a higher natality rate than national Europeans. It remains to be seen if this will continue into the next generation, since secularization (it is suggested by some) may tend to lower the number of children per Muslim family. But we require other reasons to explain conversion to Islam by national Europeans. Islam condemns Europe's decadence (and rightly so). Here is a religion that seems to have a history of culture (e.g. Al Andalus), the power of conviction, and a clear set of rules that govern every aspect of life. Islam is a works religion not unlike Roman Catholicism, and appealing for total and unquestioning submission to Allah. And jihadist groups menace unbelievers with death or the head tax. Intimidation seems to elicit appeasement in Europe, reinforcing the perception of Western *dhimmitude*.¹³ If Islam does indeed increase as expected, this religious community will become a major power broker. If so-called moderates prevail in arguing for Islam's adoption of democratic principles and integration into their host countries, evangelical Christians may retain a degree of liberty of worship. But if fundamentalist Islam gains the upper hand, one should expect much

¹⁰ Philip Jenkins, 228-232.

¹¹ For a thorough treatment of the history and tactics of *jihad*, see Patrick Sookhdeo, *Global Jihad: The Future in the Face of Militant Islam* (McLean VA: Isaac Publishing, 2008).

¹² Statistics in the Power Point presentation taken from www.cia.gov/cia/publications/factbook/index.html

¹³ See Bat Ye'or, *The Dhimmi: Jews and Christians Under Islam* (Rutherford, NJ: Fairleigh Dickinson University Press, 1985) for a brilliantly researched treatment of the relationship between Muslims Jews and Christians throughout Islamic history. Her more pessimistic book *Eurabia: The Euro-Arab Axis* (Madison: Fairleigh Dickinson University Press, 2005) traces the virtually unknown Euro-Arab Dialogue, which she contends has irreversibly transformed Europe into "a symbiotic Euro-Arab partnership, preparing a Kafkaesque cultural and political totalitarianism, wherein Islamist jihadist values subvert the whole European conception of knowledge, human rights, and fundamental individual liberties" (269).

harder times.¹⁴

Could Buddhism be more influential than anyone expects?

One does not quickly link Buddhism to the European religious scene. Nonetheless statistics show this religion has great appeal in post-Christian Europe, with over 3% of the population claiming adherence.¹⁵ Western Europe boasts the highest number of Buddhists on the continent with 20.7 million adherents, or about 5% of the population. Whence this influx? Eastern thought has flooded into Europe through the New Age movement, the influence of the Dalai Lama (popular since winning the Nobel Peace Prize in 1989), and increasing interest in mysticism and silent contemplation.

Many Catholics and Protestants see no conflict between their Christian tradition and Buddhist practices. Dr. Luyckx's transmodern paradigm of the convergence of all religions toward a common ethic, despite their divergent dogmas, is not essentially different from Buddhism, which pursues discipline of the body, non-violence and union with ultimate consciousness. Even if Buddhism does not become an official unifying factor at the level of organizational religion, the attitudes and pluralism of Buddhism are likely to feed European multi-culturalism in the next generation.

Why esoteric spirituality is nothing new

Today's esoteric spirituality is hardly new to Europe, given that it reflects the continent's ancient pagan roots. Already 150 years ago continental artists returned to nature worship and spiritualism during the Romantic period. Wicca, Neo-Druidism, New Age syncretism, nature worship, occultism, and the revival of ancient ethnic pagan forms—at one time on the fringe of European thought and practice—have become acceptable. The mood of neo-paganism strongly undergirds Europe's passion for ecology and goddess spirituality. As such, esotericism, like Buddhism, has potential to promote unity among diverse European religions.

The minimal influence of pseudo-Christian cults

Jehovah's Witnesses are still very active across Europe with some 2.3 million communicants. Mormonism seems to have difficulty recruiting; conversion rates are declining, requiring the consolidation of Europe's regions under one department. Seventh Day Adventism cuts more of a Protestant figure in recent years. The group was invited along with other French Protestant denominations to participate in celebration of Calvin's 500 birthday this fall in Strasbourg at the French Protestant Festival. The numbers represented by these groups are relatively inconsequential in the larger scheme of things. Unless they are willing to shed their distinctives for political reasons, it is hard to see how these groups would promote unity in a diverse society.

The huge momentum of the Interfaith movement

In the last few decades interfaith dialogue and action has built momentum at all levels of society. Groups supporting joint action and inter-religious dialogue have multiplied, all chanting essentially the same theme of unity around the altar of "multi-culti" diversity. All of this nicely dovetails with postmodernity's neo-Kantian "categorical imperative" of respect for everyone who happens to differ with you on details about the noumenal world of religion.

Examples are all too easy to find. **Tony Blair**, former UK Prime Minister and recent convert to Roman Catholicism, has launched the Tony Blair Faith Foundation to promote interfaith social action.¹⁶ His emphasis skirts doctrinal differences between religions while seeking to funnel the energies of diverse people into social projects such

¹⁴ For varying secular insights on the status of Islam in Europe, see: Melanie Phillips, *Londonistan* (New York: Encounter Books, 2006); David Cook, *Contemporary Muslim Apocalyptic Literature* (Syracuse, NY: Syracuse University Press, 2005); Ed Husain, *The Islamist: Why I Joined Radical Islam in Britain, What I Saw Inside and Why I Left* (London, Penguin Books, 2007); and Bassam Tibi, *Political Islam, World Politics and Europe: Democratic Peace and Euro-Islam versus Global Jihad* (London: Routledge, 2008).

¹⁵ http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Buddhism_by_country

¹⁶ <http://tonyblairfaithfoundation.org/pages/our-aims>

as combating malaria. At the 2008 Davos summit in Switzerland, Blair moderated a panel of over a half dozen representatives of world religious leaders, including Rick Warren, who strongly promoted using religious meeting places as distribution points for government and private sector projects, and underscored his conviction that interfaith dialogue must give way to interfaith projects.¹⁷ Much of this rhetoric mirrors the late 19th century social gospel.

Karen Armstrong, the British author and conference speaker (formerly a nun who left the order to study English at Oxford) has promoted the "Charter of Compassion," a document framed to appeal for all religions to follow the Golden Rule. The virtue of compassion, not a particular understanding of God, must be at the heart of morality and religion.¹⁸

The Swiss Catholic theologian **Hans Küng**, President of *Stiftung Weltethos*, has founded the Global Ethic Foundation. Although Küng encountered Rome's opposition when he refused to acknowledge the infallibility of the pope, he was allowed to continue to teach in Tübingen. In his later years he has been increasingly influential in framing documents that express ethical principles common to all religions. He is known for his dictum, "There will be no peace among the nations without peace among the religions. There will be no peace among the religions without dialogue among the religions."¹⁹

Even conservative Roman Catholics have felt pressured to participate in interfaith dialogue. Debate emerged at the Fatima shrine in Portugal in 2003 after the **Fatima Interfaith Congress** brought together the leader of the shrine, a Hindu, a Buddhist and a Muslim. Given that all these religions prized the ideal of virginity and female purity (or even female deity!), interfaith celebration was only fitting.²⁰

Fethullah Gülen, a Turkish Sunni Muslim, repeats the same shiboleths through the Institute of Interfaith Dialogue. The IID explains that "the vision of the Institute of Interfaith Dialogue is to help unite communities in order that the spirituality of all individuals be heard in a space that is free of dogmatism, criticism, oppression, and fear."²¹ Gülen and other "moderate Muslims" do indeed seem to promote democratic values along with conservative Islamic teaching. Their participation in the interfaith project gives an aura of credibility to the movement.

One will even hear Jewish voices pleading for the same interfaith doctrine. **Rabbi Dr. Alon Goshen-Gottstein** of the Elijah Interfaith Institute expresses the sentiments of interfaith dialogue succinctly on the EII website trailer:

"We all have our tradition, we all have our wisdom. We all have that which nourishes our tradition, and yet there is always the wisdom of the other, of the other religious tradition, the wisdom that has been inspiring the world religions for thousands of years. We are not asking who is right. We are asking, 'What can you teach me?' We are turning to the person next to us and saying, 'I know I have something to learn from everyone; what can I learn from you?' I know I may have something to share with everyone, what do you think I could share with you?' So many people walk around the world thinking only they have the truth, and that truth leads to violence, leads to blindness, leads to egotism. For that which we consider truth to bear fruit we also have to have the humility of spirit and the openness to the other that says, 'I am ready to listen and I am ready to share.' And listening to the other doesn't make our own commitment any weaker, it makes it stronger. And this experience has continued as Elijah's work has gone from working with seminarians to some of the world's premier religious leaders, to some of the world's top scholars. It is a recognition that there is a new way of being in the world nowadays. This is a contemplative process for us to understand each other and how we honestly reflect the

¹⁷ World Economic Forum, Davos, Switzerland, <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=rGyTW4yh0C8>, 0:48:00.

¹⁸ <http://www.good.is/post/compassion-karen-armstrong-on-interfaith-dialogue/>

¹⁹ <http://www.weltethos.org/dat-english/index.htm>

²⁰ A Catholic critique of the congress "'The Present of Man – the Future of God: The Place of Sanctuaries in the Relation to the Sacred," may be examined at "Fatima to Become Interfaith Shrine?" <http://www.fatima.org/news/newsviews/sprep111303.asp>. The Vatican denied that the Fatima site would be turned into an interfaith shrine. <http://www.catholicnewsagency.com/new.php?n=239>.

²¹ The Institute of Interfaith Dialog, <http://www.interfaithdialog.org/about-iid.html>

diversity of our religious traditions. Our reality is like a mushroom. On the outside we see only the individual mushrooms, the individualities and they are different. It is beautiful and it is fine. But everybody who knows what a mushroom is, knows that under the surface the mushroom is one. It is the old way, a way of love, love translated into today's world, and that translation means opening up in understanding, in listening, in the openness and receptivity to share wisdom. We invite you to be part of our process of sharing wisdom, to become our partners in fostering peace."²²

This message is well reflected in mainstream Hindu thought. **Michael S. Karlen**, Secretary General of Comprehensive Dialogue Among Civilizations, stated that universalism is at the heart of Hinduism:

"Practices such as silence, prayer, meditation and contemplation allow us to feel the fundamental unity of all religions and the oneness of humankind. A good example of this is the annual interfaith prayer day in Assisi. This was initiated by Pope John Paul II in 1986 when he brought together an unprecedented number of religious leaders from diverse faiths for a day of prayer and peace. Interfaith dialogue strengthens each individual religion as it focuses individuals on the essence of religion.

"Quarrels over religion lose sight of the common spirit and essence that unites all belief systems. At the heart, all religions share common principles such as love, compassion, forgiveness and integrity as well as a common set of moral guidelines.

"For Sri Ramakrishna (1836-1886) all religions are the revelation of God in His diverse aspects to satisfy the manifold demands of human minds. Like different photographs of a building taken from different angles, different religions give us the pictures of one truth from different standpoints. They are not contradictory but complementary. Sri Ramakrishna faithfully practiced the spiritual disciplines of different religions and came to the realization that all of them lead to the same goal. Thus he declared, 'As many faiths, so many paths.' The paths vary, but the goal remains the same. Harmony of religions is not uniformity; it is unity in diversity. It is not a fusion of religions, but a fellowship of religions based on their common goal -- communion with God. ...

"This harmony is to be realized by deepening our individual God-consciousness. In the present-day world, threatened by nuclear war and torn by religious intolerance, Sri Ramakrishna's message of harmony can give us hope and show the way."²³

When considering the interfaith movement, one must not forget that it is usually the most radical wing of any religious movement that will commit to the project. Furthermore, sometimes participants have a hidden agenda—they wish to pull the dialogue in their own direction; at other times they are simply naive free thinkers. And the ostensible unity reported in the press is not always the reality on the ground.

"As I sat alone at dinner after the opening session [of the 1993 Parliament of the World's Religions], the enthusiastic conversation on both sides of me centered on what was most striking about the event: all the speakers were saying the same thing. Whether Catholic, Buddhist, Native American, or Baha'i, all upheld such themes as the fatherhood of God and the brotherhood of man. All speakers seemed to be reaching out in affirmation to the members of other faiths. Love and tolerance were triumphing over distrust and conflict. But on further observation this celebrated unity often proved to be chimeral.

Part of the illusion could be attributed to a general ignorance of what the various religions really believe. Many of the speakers *sounded* as though they accepted the religions of everyone else while in fact they were preaching their own distinctive doctrines and making the most of an evangelistic opportunity. . . .

Given their commission to unite the world through Baha'ullah's teaching, the Parliament provided a missionary bonanza for the Baha'is. They could sound ecumenical in ascribing value to all the world's religions. In actuality they were only affirming those religions' *past* value, while pointing to their own faith as the *present* fulfillment and replacement of all previous religions.²⁴

²² Elijah Interfaith Institute, <http://www.elijah-interfaith.org/press/videos/elijah-trailer>. Emphasis in the original.

²³ The Need for a New Spirit and Culture in Interfaith Dialogue," http://comprehensivedialogue.org/cdac/index.php?option=com_content&task=view&id=109&Itemid=100.

²⁴ Elliot Miller, "The 1993 Parliament of the World's Religions, Part Two: The Fundamentalism of Tolerance," *Christian Research Journal* (Winter 1994), 32. Emphasis in the original. Miller's whole exposé as an observer is insightful and well worth the read.

Like all the distortions of God's truth in world religions, interfaith, too, will finally wilt and wither in the heat of Judgment Day. In fact, given the jealousies and rivalries inherent to different religions, interfaith may well collapse *before* the Judgment Day! It is simply not possible to divorce the nature of the God we worship from the ethical system we defend. Therefore a shift to ethics as the commonality of all religions cannot hold the world together.

Why the EU is sponsoring interfaith dialogue

Realizing that immigration from North Africa, Turkey and Asia was creating its own new social inequalities, EU leaders pushed for social solidarity through a dialogue of civilizations. The project took form in 1995 through the Barcelona accords, the Euro-Mediterranean Partnership, which sought to establish closer ties between the EU and its North African and Middle Eastern neighbors. Part of the mission included a series of EU-sponsored interfaith conferences gathering representatives of all religions active in the region, as well as secularists and philosophers making no claim to any religious conviction. Toledo (Spain) launched the series in 1995, followed by Coimbra (Portugal) in 1996. The follow-up meetings have become a regular event. The EU Ministers of the Interior recognized officially at their Council meeting in Rome in 2003 that interfaith dialogue was a factor of social cohesion in Europe and a peace instrument for the Mediterranean area. True to EU bureaucratic tradition, they framed the European Charter of Interfaith Dialogue in December 2003.²⁵

The bottom line seems clear: although religion has been seen in the past as a divisive force in European history, it is now being harnessed as a conciliatory force—assuming, of course, that religious leaders are willing to acknowledge that their convictions are fundamentally the same as all others, and that they can continue to practice their own faith unhindered. And there is the rub for Bible-believing Christians.

And what of Protestantism?

Protestantism, like Catholicism in many parts of Europe, is in marked decline. Historical criticism, skepticism and the postmodern hermeneutic have effectively emptied Protestantism of any solid Christian theological base. The official Protestant churches in Luxembourg where I live promote eastern mysticism, ecological concerns, anti-capitalist economics, and the ethics of tolerance. All are actively involved in inter-confessional associations that mirror the emphases of the World Council of Churches. There may be small groups within European state-church Protestantism which are seeking to distance themselves from these emphases, but I am not aware of them at this date.

The root of the problem

Why all this confusion? God's arch enemy, the god of this world, blinds the minds of the unbelieving (2 Cor. 4:4). One of his methods is the fostering of competing and contradictory lies about ultimate questions. Experience shows us that liars are imaginative and inconsistent, but they must mix in enough truth to be convincing. If Europe really wants unity in its diversity, it would seem she needs an imposed religion—Islam, secularism, or a fundamentalism of tolerance—rather than the free-floating diversity that now tosses her ship. The book of Revelation suggests that this is indeed what will happen before Christ returns in power and glory to establish His kingdom. Until then, the only way to steer people out of the chaos of satanic lies is to let the truth of God's unique inscripturated revelation shine like a beacon, through faithful proclamation and consistent practice.

The status of sound churches in all this confusion

Bible-teaching churches in Europe—especially those firmly committed to biblical inerrancy, the deity of Christ, the fallenness of all men, the substitutionary atonement, salvation by grace through faith alone, the eternal security of the believer, believer's baptism, the concept of the free church, premillennialism, judgment and a literal

²⁵ Dr. Silvestri commented, "It is likely that on many occasions before, EU governments' representatives have discussed the issue of religious identities and religious conflicts when addressing the problems of the Middle East, for instance, or perhaps when evaluating the case for Turkey's accession to the EU, but *this was the first time that interfaith dialogue was officially invoked by civil authorities as the possible instrument to overcome social and political problems across the two shores of the Mediterranean*. The EU ministers in charge of Home affairs that attended that meeting in Rome even promoted a European Charter of Interfaith Dialogue, which was officially presented at a Council meeting the following December (Council, 2003)." Sara Silvestri, "EU Relations with Islam," op cit., 392. Emphasis is mine.

heaven/hell—are usually small and considered in Catholic Europe to be sectarian. Many desperately need more trained leaders. It is not unusual that people in these fellowships feel uneasy about the encroachments of Islam and increasing EU regulation. Given the trend of immigration across the continent and in the British Isles, international churches are growing significantly; all healthy churches must deal with the clumsy realities of multi-lingualism and multi-culturalism. They experience the pressure of charismatic teaching, pragmatic methodology and a natural hunger for respectability. Long served by American church planters who have often had a difficult time moving on to new church plants, European churches must urgently take responsibility for evangelism and church planting in the new generation.

Healthy local churches offer the best solution to Europe’s challenge of creating unity in diversity! Only the power of the Holy Spirit, mediated through the faithful proclamation of His Word through dedicated believers, can bridge the cultural and linguistic divides of Europe’s heterogeneous ethnic groups. This unity will not be at the expense of truth, but will be fueled by the One who *is* the way, the Truth and the life. To reduce the Lord Jesus Christ to a moral principle (the Golden Rule) would be to espouse a form of godliness while denying its power (2 Timothy 3.1-5).

Today’s European local churches must be lighthouses projecting a piercing beam of truth—by life and lip—so that European neighbors who watch and listen will know that universalism and works-based religion are not the answer to man’s need, no matter how seductive the packaging. May God raise up many European young adults to meet this challenge! Why not put this need on your prayer list?

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