How 'Christian' is Europe Today? Towards a Post-Secular Situation?

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The person on the other end of the line spoke very poor French. From what she said, I gathered that she was trying to find *la Chapelle*. On a shivery winter day in 2004, she had decided to contact a pastor. By some inexplicable means she had obtained a tract of the Baptist congregation of which I was the pastor. Our meeting hall was the basement of an apartment building, located at a corner somewhere in the complicated system of alleys, squares, shop windows and restaurants that make up the commercial centre, *Saint Georges*, in the middle of the historic centre of Toulouse. We called it *la Chapelle.* Apparently, the person had not been able to find it (no wonder!), but fortunately the tract listed a phone number, so she called it and that's how she got me on the line. I guided her by phone through the labyrinth to the front door of our chapel.

She came in and we got talking. I learned that she was a Japanese immigrant, staying with a friend in an apartment not far from the chapel. She was hoping to find a steady job. For the time being, learning French was the main challenge. Then she told me the reason for contacting me. 'I want to become a Christian; could you tell me what I should do?' I must admit that I was rather taken aback, and immediately caught by suspicion. In France, this is not the question people will ask you right away. Was this just a way of getting a residence permit, by becoming member of a church? Was the next question perhaps of a financial nature, or a demand for lodging? Working in downtown Toulouse had made me careful. However, when she told me her story, I heard nothing to raise my suspicion. Her name was Akiko. As she didn't speak English and as her Japanese was all Chinese to me, we had no language alternative but French. She had searched for spiritual truth in her home country, but found no peace in traditional religion. She had travelled and lived in several other countries. She believed that there was a God who cared for us, but she didn't know how to contact him, how to have peace of heart with this God. Which religion can help me, she wondered. After her arrival in Europe she noticed that there were churches everywhere she went. Gradually, she arrived at the conclusion that in Europe, one needs to be a Christian to approach God. As simple as that!

But then, how does a young Japanese woman become a Christian? Good question. She tried to find out in several Catholic churches in the centre of Toulouse, but to no avail. Finally, she decided to try the Protestant way of becoming a Christian. This was the beginning of a whole year of preparation for baptism. My wife and I took all that time to explain the Christian faith, making sure that her motivation was sincere. Akiko faithfully attended all church services, and began to participate in prayers.

Easter Day 2005 arrived, the day of her baptism. When she rose up from the water in the baptistery, she smiled and heaved a deep sigh: 'Finally,' she whispered. 'Now I really am a Christian!' Akiko has continued to follow the Lord, even after she left France. We have occasionally received news from her, confirming that she kept to her faith commitment.

This is certainly a remarkable story! But notice what triggered Akiko's search for faith in the first place: church buildings, cathedrals, chapels. Christian edifices communicated to this Japanese immigrant the message that in our part of the world one should approach God through the Christian faith. In her eyes, Europe, and even France of all places, was Christian.

In the preceding chapter, we have described in what way Europe has become post-Christianised, but this is only one side of the paradox of our continent. The other side is that Christianity still

[1] This chapter is a modified and enlarged version of chapter 17 of my book *Europe and the Gospel. Past Influences, Current Developments and Mission Challenges* (London, De Gruyter/Versita, 2013), entitled 'How Christian is Europe Today?'

occupies a very important place in society. We should therefore ask the question: how 'Christian' is Europe today? A closer look reveals that the presence of the Christian religion is more widespread and our societies are more Christianised than we are often made to think.

1. Christians in a secularised and multi-religious society

Until the 1960s, European societies were largely mono-ethnic, with a European culture and Christianity as the dominant religion. Since then, large scale immigration has changed the traditional white face of Europe into a multicoloured one. Our societies have become multiethnic, multicultural and multi-religious.

Meanwhile, the number of practicing Christians is in constant decline during the last decades. Conversions of Christian or secularised Europeans to other religions are exceptional. Consequently, it would be a simplification to describe European societies either as multi-religious or as secularised. To be precise, we should say that we live in largely secularised societies with various religious minorities: Christians, Muslims, Buddhists, religious Jews, etc.

Special position of Christianity

Europe is becoming increasingly pluralist, yet only partly so, because the traditional culture of the country remains the dominant one. Sociologists call it the *Leitkultur,* to indicate that in a multicultural society there is always one culture that takes the lead. This is invariably a European one. This implies that the religion that was (and still is) part of the *Leitkultur* also maintains a special position. In one country, it is the Lutheran Church, in another one the Anglican Church, or the Reformed or the Roman Catholic or the Orthodox Church, but in all cases it is Christianity that remains the frame of reference. For this reason, Europe is still considered to be Christian, as we saw in a preceding chapter.

Consequently, the position of Christianity remains a special one. The scope of its action extends beyond its constituency of practicing members. The situation is paradoxical. A large majority of Europeans lead a secular life. Yet many of them maintain a certain level of association with Christianity.

Churches are losing the ability to define the beliefs and influence the behaviour of the vast majority of Europeans. Meanwhile, they continue to have a significant role in the lives of both individuals and communities, most obviously at times of celebration or loss. They are no longer able, however, to exert any form of control. This is a European story, brought about for European reasons, quite different, for example, from the continuing religious vitality of the United States, or indeed the rest of the world.

Even so, despite the pluralist ethos according to which all religions are of equal value, Christianity remains the most attractive one when secularised Europeans are seeking for spiritual meaning.

A solid minority

We have stated that our societies are marked by the abandonment of Christianity. But the loss in numbers is not as complete as it looks. It depends on whom you count as 'Christians.' Numbers of practicing Christians are relatively small. When one takes church attendance on an average Sunday as a criterion, the percentage in most European countries is less than ten percent. Exceptions are staunchly Catholic countries like Italy, Poland and Ireland. Some Orthodox regions in Eastern Europe also show higher percentages. But then, not every committed Christian goes to church every Sunday.

Philip Jenkins speaks of a 'solid minority of committed believing Christians.' Some sixty million to seventy million West European Christians assert that religion plays a very important role in their lives,

and many of those attend church regularly.[2] If he is right, we should put the figure for the whole of Europe at 100 to 120 million, i.e. fifteen to eighteen percent of the population.

The limitations of quantitative approaches

Counting Christians is a complicated matter. Distinguishing 'real' from 'nominal' Christians is even more complicated. Quantitative approaches have serious limitations. Quite often, they only take in account one or two parameters of adherence to Christianity, namely church attendance and/or church registration. You can count the number of people in the pews, you can count the number of names on the church register, but how do you count those who believe in their heart that Jesus died for their sins? Clearly, other criteria are equally valid in determining whether someone is a Christian. For example:

- Belief in basic Christian doctrines
- Individual religious practice (prayer, reading the Bible)
- Lifestyle related to Christian ethical and socio-cultural values
- Demanding Christian ceremonies as rites of passage (birth, confirmation or religious adulthood, wedding, and funeral)

All these criteria are not necessarily linked to church attendance. Church members who hardly ever attend church (the classic sociological definition of a nominal Christian) can:

- Observe Christian traditions such as Christmas and other holidays, religious ceremonies related to national commemorations, etc.
- Insist on a church wedding ceremony, want their children to be baptised (or 'christened' as Anglicans say), and their loved ones given a Christian burial
- Hold to Christian norms and values with respect to marriage, sexuality, family and education, protection of human life, bioethics, and tolerance
- Believe that God exists, that Jesus is the Son of God, that there is a heaven and a hell
- Read the Bible and/or pray in private

These variants show that a more refined approach is needed to get an idea of the scope of Christianity beyond the visible community of believers assembling for worship on any given Sunday.

2. Marginal church membership

To begin with, there is the typical European phenomenon of marginal church membership. It comes in two forms: nominal Christianity and minimal Christian practice.

Nominal Church members

Nominal means that a person is registered as Protestant, Orthodox or Roman Catholic but does not practice this religion. Some nominal Christians come to a point where they demand deregistration, but their percentage is very small indeed. Meanwhile, the nominal ranks are continually swelling. There are two ways of 'becoming' nominal (although it is usually not a decision but rather a quiet process):

– Being baptised as infants because their parents wished to express their adherence to a certain community or follow the tradition of the grandparents do not personally connecting to any form of church life.

[2] Philip Jenkins, *God's continent: Christianity, Islam, and Europe's Religious Crisis.* Oxford, Oxford University Press, 2007, p. 56.

– No longer participating in church when once they did.

Notice, however, that nominal Christians do not sever all links with the institutional church. Although their daily life is largely secularised, and although they may have a secular worldview, they wish to maintain at least an administrative link with organised religion. Reasons may vary:

– 'It is useful to maintain membership to ensure a Christian burial.'
– 'The church does good work for the poor and I want to support that.'
– 'In times of need, I might need the church.'
– 'Maybe God would be offended if I deregister.'
– 'I want to end up in paradise, not somewhere else.'

Minimal church practice

In many countries, there is a notion of minimal church practice. That means that one has to meet a minimum requirement in order to benefit from the services of the Church in times of need, and to be sure that at the end of your earthly existence your family will have a Church funeral. This notion is particularly widespread among Roman Catholic and Eastern Orthodox populations. In the past, the Roman Catholic Church has defined minimum requirements of church attendance: go to confession and mass at least once a year. The typical period of the year varies from country to country: Christmas, or Easter, or Palm Sunday. If not, people run the risk of no longer benefiting from the grace of God as it is mediated by the church. Orthodox churches have similar guidelines.

Many church members opt for the minimum requirement to ensure a good conscience. A few years ago, I talked with Ronaldo Diprose, then academic dean of the Italian Evangelical Bible Institute in Rome, about the place of Roman Catholicism in Italian society. I also asked him about the level of religious practice. Over ninety percent of the Italians are baptised Catholics. He explained that this is even part of the national identity.

> However, the overwhelming majority hardly ever attend a mass, but that doesn't mean that the church is not important for them. Almost all Italians consider themselves as good Catholics. They honestly believe that if you're baptised in the church, if you have done First Communion, if you're married in church, and if you go to confessional and to mass once a year at Easter, then you're a good Catholic.[3]

Minimal church practice is based on the idea that when you are not interested in church life, you still want to keep on good terms with the church in order to be acceptable to God. Today, this notion is often subconscious. For many people, it has become automatic to do the minimum thing and be comfortable. It almost goes without saying.

A typical European phenomenon

Marginal church membership is widespread in Europe. In some countries, it entails more than half of the population! One might even go as far as to say that this phenomenon is typical of the religious situation in the 'Old Continent.' Nowhere else in the world is there such a large percentage of nominal Christians.

During the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries this phenomenon affected large sections of the working class in the industrialised parts of Europe. After the Second World War, it has become more generalised, especially since the 1960s. It can be observed in all historic churches, Roman Catholic, Orthodox and Protestant. In passing, we notice that a similar process of estrangement from traditional relation can be observed among the Jewish and Muslim communities in Europe.

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[3] This conversation took place during my stay at the Italian Evangelical Bible Institute in Rome, March 22, 2010.

Two examples serve to illustrate the scope of what we are talking about. In France, some sixty-five percent of the population defines itself as Roman Catholic (or Christian, which in this country commonly amounts to the same). An even higher percentage has been baptised in this church. Roughly half of the marriages include a church ceremony. But only seven to nine percent attend mass at least once a month. For the younger generation, the figures are considerably lower.[4]

In the past, the Spanish population was overwhelmingly and staunchly Roman Catholic, but this is rapidly changing. While 82.4 percent of the population still identify as Roman Catholic, only 47.7 percent of them, that is thirty-nine percent of the population, 'practise' Catholicism, according to the same criteria as used in the case of France.

It should be noted that the number of nominal Christians is considerable in countries whose history has been dominated by Roman Catholicism and Orthodoxy (Italy and Greece are the most telling examples). This is less common in countries historically dominated by Protestantism. Historic Protestant churches have lost a considerable proportion of their nominal members.

Interestingly, Evangelicalism is far less affected by nominal membership. The major reason seems to be that it is a conversion movement rather than an historic tradition. However, there are signs that the phenomenon is also beginning to make inroads in these circles.

Different criteria, different variants

Notice that definitions of nominal Christianity vary. It is a confusing term that can mean different things. Historic churches practicing infant baptism consider all baptised members as Christians. Some give them a provisional status, considering them as Christian in view of a confirmation at a later stage in life. The fact that they hardly ever show up in church is not a reason to exclude them. Evangelical churches, however, link Christian identity to a faith decision. People are consciously incorporated into the church through baptism or public confession or both. Viewed from this angle, nominal church members still need to receive salvation, and therefore are not 'real' Christians. Here is, for example, the definition proposed by the influential Lausanne Committee of World Evangelisation.

> A nominal Christian is a person who has not responded in repentance and faith to Jesus Christ as his personal Saviour and Lord. He is a Christian in name only. He may be very religious. He may be a practicing or non-practicing Church member. He may give intellectual assent to basic Christian doctrines and claim to be a Christian. He may be faithful in attending liturgical rites and worship services, and be an active member involved in Church affairs. But in spite of all this, he is still destined for eternal judgment (cf. Matt. 7:21-23, Jas. 2:19) because he has not committed his life to Jesus Christ (Romans 10:9-10).[5]

Obviously, different criteria of determining Christian identity result in different statistics. Evangelical authors put the percentage of Christians at less than one percent in countries with a Roman Catholic or Orthodox tradition, and at an average of four to five percent in countries with a Protestant tradition. On the contrary, government statistics are usually based on church attendance, so they present quite another picture, as do historic churches who present figures of their registers. They mention percentages ranging from fifty to sixty in countries that are most secularised, to more than ninety percent in countries where church membership is still assumed.

Evangelical churches, generally speaking, closely relate Christian identity to active church membership. This explains why nominal membership is not so widespread among them, although it exists.

According to the criteria generally adopted in socio-religious studies, a nominal Christian is someone registered as a church member while not practicing his religion in terms of attending church services, except occasionally.

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[4] See e.g. Frédéric Lenoir, *Le Christ philosophe* (Paris, Plon, 2009), as well as the survey published by *Le Monde des religions*, July 2005.

[5] *Christian Witness to Nominal Christians Among Roman Catholics* (Lausanne Occasional Paper nr. 10). LCWE, 2002, p. 4.

3. Believing and/or behaving without belonging

When we look at forms of 'Christianity' outside the circle of practicing believers, we notice more than only nominal Christians. In order to bring this out, it is useful to use more variables than church attendance or official membership.

Believing without belonging

To begin with, we should distinguish 'belonging' and 'believing.' These technical terms have been introduced by Grace Davie in 1994, and adopted by most sociologists of religion in western Europe, as they analyzed the outcomes of the European Value Studies (EVS).

- Belonging stands for church attendance.
- Believing stands for holding Christian beliefs in God, life after death, heaven, hell, sin, etc.

The European Values Studies (EVS) are a series of surveys conducted by a number of universities in several European countries at regular intervals (1981, 1990, 1999). The latest survey dates from 2008. What makes the EVS interesting is that they use more criteria to assess the religious situation of modern Europe: denominational allegiance, reported church attendance, attitudes towards the church, indicators of religious belief and subjective religious dispositions. From the data emerges a widespread phenomenon known as 'believing without belonging,' the name given to it by Grace Davie.[6] There are two types of variables to measure religious practice, she says: on the one hand those concerned with feelings, experience and the more numinous religious beliefs, on the other hand those which measure religious orthodoxy, ritual participation and institutional attachment.

> It is only the latter (i.e. the more orthodox indicators of religious attachment) which display an undeniable degree of secularisation throughout Western Europe. In contrast, the former (the less institutional indicators) demonstrate considerable persistent religious adherence. With this in mind, I am hesitant about the unqualified use of the term secularisation even in the European context. Indeed, it seems to me considerably more accurate to suggest that West Europeans remain, by and large, unchurched populations rather than simply secular. For a marked falling-off in religious attendance (especially in the Protestant North) has not resulted, yet, in a parallel abdication of religious belief – in a broad definition of the term. In short, many Europeans have ceased to connect with their religious institutions in any active sense, but they have not abandoned, so far, either their deep-seated religious aspirations or (in many cases) a latent sense of belonging.[7]

On the basis of the most recent EVS data, Grace Davie even comes to an opposite conclusion. 'Religious belief is *inversely* rather than *directly* related to belonging.' In other words, as the institutional disciplines decline, belief not only persists, but becomes increasingly personal, detached and heterogeneous and particularly among young people.

Believing without belonging has quickly become a catch phrase that rings a bell with most people who study the religious situation in their country. It describes the phenomenon that Christian beliefs are widespread beyond church institutions. It is found among nominal church members, and even among those who are no longer registered as such. Many Europeans seem to be secularised at face value, but retain a 'latent sense of belonging' because they share a number of beliefs inherited from the Christian past.

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[6] Grace Davie, *Religion in Britain since 1945: Believing Without Belonging.* Oxford, Blackwell, 1994.
[7] Grace Davie, *Europe, The Exceptional Case: Parameters of Faith in the Modern World*. London, Darton, Longman & Todd, 2007, p. 7f.

Behaving without belonging – cultural Christians

However, this distinction does not suffice to discern the spread of 'Christianity' outside the visible church community. We should enlarge the two variables (belonging-believing) to a triangle: belonging-believing-behaving. This helps us to see more clearly yet another category of persons. We owe this insight to Allan Billings. Together with some colleagues, this British Anglican priest analyzed the religious situation in his region. According to the 2001 census in the UK, over seventy-six percent of people identified themselves with 'a faith tradition' (answering this question was not compulsory!). These faith traditions comprise not only Christianity but also other religions, as well as vague notions of 'spirituality.' Unsatisfied with the secularisation theories, they used the idea of believing without belonging as a tool to better understand these people in their cities, towns and villages. But this didn't give much more clarity. Most people who were not churchgoers appeared to be quite eclectic in what they believed. 'They thought of Christianity more in terms of praxis, a way of living, than a set of beliefs.' Billings describes them further:

> They live Christian lives; they are Christians because their lives reflect the life and values of Jesus Christ. Like him they acknowledge that we live in a creation; that God cares for us, that we should care for one another, and so on. It is the religion of the golden rule: do unto others as you would have them do to you. Sometimes they feel the need to attend a Church on such occasions as a Christmas Carol Service or Midnight Mass. They want family weddings and funerals to be held at a Church. They watch and feel uplifted by *Songs of Praise* on Sunday-night television. Sometimes they might want to hear inspiring music at a cathedral Matins or Evensong. They see the Church, in other words, as a spiritual resource. But they do not want to belong. [8]

We could call this 'behaving without belonging.' Granted, this is a diluted form of practising Christianity. It only touches the social behaviour side of it, omitting the belief side and the worship side almost entirely. Allan Billings calls such people 'cultural Christians.' He distinguishes them from 'church Christians' (who go to church and adhere to its basic beliefs). This term should not be confused with the *Kulturchristentum* in nineteenth-century German, although there are similarities. As I talk with people in my French surroundings and look at their attitude to Christianity, I recognize this description. In this country, I meet many cultural Roman Catholics, as Billings meets many cultural Anglicans in Britain. I suspect that the reader could meet them in any European country.

This cultural Christianity is the effect of more than a thousand years of Christianity that has left behind a legacy of stories, words, images, and rites, through which Christian beliefs are transmitted. Think of the popular idea of Saint Peter at the gate of heaven, of the deceased floating on a cloud to heaven, of a horned devil that tempts people to commit a deadly or 'capital' sin. It has above all left us with values and a morality, notices Allan Billings: 'The way we treat one another – especially the sick, the aged, the poor, the stranger in our midst – owes a great deal to the Biblical notion that all people are created in God's image and deserving of care. We are a people who have been shaped and continue to live by Christian values.'[9]

He goes on to say that many people want to abide with social values that have a Biblical origin, and which they do not hesitate to call Christian values.

> They feel that they are doing what can be expected of any Christian. And God, if he exists, will certainly approve. He will accept them. It is lived Christianity. It is hardly a matter of 'believing without belonging,' since most people are not much interested in beliefs; the attachment is more emotional and practical than intellectual. [10]

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[8] Alan Billings, *Secular Lives Sacred Hearts: the role of the Church in a time of no religion.* London, SPCK, 2004., p. 11.
[9] *Idem,* p. 15f.
[10] *Idem,* p. 18.

Belonging without believing/behaving

Pastors who 'know their flock' will add to this that the inverse phenomenon also exists. They are usually saddened to observe that people belong to the church without believing and/or without behaving as Christians should. But that is an alternative way of defining the phenomenon of nominal Christianity described in the preceding paragraph.

4. Vicarious and default religion

We cannot limit the scope of Christianity to the number of practicing Christians only, nor even to the percentages of marginal Church members and un-churched people holding to Christian beliefs. There is yet another way in which Europe is more Christian than one would have thought when looking at the ongoing secularisation of society. While the vast majority of the people live indeed a secular life, they do not disregard Christianity altogether. In the pluralist society of today, all religions are tolerated and treated as equal before the law. According to the postmodern worldview no religion can claim absolute authority in matters of social ethics. Even so, Christianity is not reduced to just one of the many religious options. Even in the multicultural society where secular humanism dominates the public sphere, many un-churched people maintain an indirect, often unconscious link with Christianity. Two phenomena confirm this.

Vicarious religion

The first phenomenon is called 'vicarious religion.' The term was introduced by Grace Davie and Danièle Hervieu-Léger, a British and a French sociologist of religion. They noticed that the church embodies the collective religious memory of the whole nation, including people who do not practice the Christian religion. In this respect, the church has a function for the society at large. People appreciate that there are churches, they find them useful. Moreover, they see them in relation with the history of their nation. The church is part of the national cultural heritage, so the church should go on, even when they do not participate themselves. Grace Davie has this to say:

> For particular historical reasons (notably the historic connections between Church and State), significant numbers of Europeans are content to let both churches and churchgoers enact a memory on their behalf (the essential meaning of vicarious), more than half aware that they might need to draw on the capital at crucial times in their individual or collective lives. The almost universal take up of religious ceremonies at the time of a death is the most obvious expression of this tendency; so, too, the prominence of the historic Churches in particular at times of national crisis or, more positively, of national celebrations.[11]

This is a typical European phenomenon, sociologists notice. Everybody in Europe seems to be able to easily understand it, but in other parts of the world people find it difficult to grasp, as if it is something outside their experience.

Default religion?

Related to this is a second idea in which Christianity is the default religion of Europeans. If you are not religious yourself, but want something religious, this is the religion you turn to, as long as you do not have a particular preference for another one. Secularised people who wish a religious funeral for their deceased loved ones are unlikely to approach a rabbi or an imam. Either they ask a professional undertaker to organize an eclectic mix of texts and traditions with a more or less spiritual connotation, or they request the services of a clergyman.

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[11] Grace Davie, *Europe, The Exceptional Case*, p. 19.

What is the default setting to which Europeans return when they are thinking about spiritual matters, about God, prayer, afterlife, sin, the origin of man? Two options seem to be prevalent. Either an esoteric New Age kind of spirituality made up of elements of Asiatic religious traditions and/or of elements from pre-Christian pagan religions in Europe. For this option, one needs to have a more than average acquaintance with such traditions. One needs to be a deliberate seeker of spiritual meaning in order to follow this track. In computer terms, this is not a default setting, but a customisation, based on personal configurations.

The other option is taking up Christian traditions that linger in the collective subconscious of European people. For this option, one doesn't have to make much effort. It is there, disseminated in our culture, to be found in any church around the corner. If you're looking for spiritual meaning and you don't customize, this is what you get: a Christian image of God, a Christian image of man, a Christian idea of prayer, and so on.

What about other religions? As far as we can observe and generally speaking, neither Islam nor Hinduism are attractive options for Europeans in search of spirituality, inner peace or whatever term we could use for a renewed religious interest. Certainly, Muslims are actively engaging in missionary activities, but apparently, these are aimed mainly at the second and third generation of Muslim migrants who are drifting away from the religion of their parents. Islam is still very much a communitarian religion. 'Old stock' Europeans who convert to Islam almost always do this in the context of a mixed marriage. More research is needed to learn about conversions for other reasons. From the available publications on the spread of Islam in Europe, we get the impression that the number of converts from a European cultural background to Islam is limited.

Many Europeans have a benevolent attitude towards Judaism. Christians in particular are interested in its traditions, but in the eyes of both insiders and outsiders, this remains a religion of and for Jewish people. This feeling is enhanced by the fact that Judaism is not at all a missionary religion. Rabbis do not encourage non-Jews to become Jews. Very few take this step. In fact, this happens mainly in the context of mixed marriage.

Buddhism and other Asiatic spiritualities seem to be attractive to European society in search of a non-religious spirituality, in harmony with nature. This is often in connected with in interest in esoteric sources. Usually denoted as New Age or as New Religious Movements, these movements remain typically European. Instead of fully converting to the original Asiatic religion, its adherents usually take over its ethical elements, without its religious practices.

Many non-religious people in Europe have the idea that the appropriate religious practice in Europe, for those who wish 'to have one', is Christianity. While they have no problem with churches continuing to function, considering that 'they have always done so,' they are often apprehensive about the presence of mosques. They tolerate them, as they think modern citizens should, but nevertheless, they often feel that Islam is foreign to 'our country,' 'our way of life.' In the eyes of a considerable percentage of the population, a mosque is considered to be a kind of edifice that is not 'home' to Europe, representative of a way of life they would rather not like their children to adopt.

A typical example

A few years ago, Catherine, a middle-aged business woman lady joined our congregation. Having studied psychology, she took a keen interest in matters of well-being and 'spirituality'. This is how her pilgrimage led her to our small Protestant Church in a largely secularised small town:

> Born in a Roman Catholic family, I abandoned religion as a teenager. Later in life I began searching for more spirituality in my life, but I didn't want to learn Tibetan words and become Buddhist, like my son. I tried, but that made me feel far away from home, so I went to a church because that is much closer to my culture. At first I went to a Roman Catholic parish church, but felt not really welcomed. A few months later, I discovered a small Protestant church building just down the road, where Bible study discussions were held every Wednesday. I asked whether I, as a Catholic, could attend, and the group welcomed me without asking

> questions. Gradually I have drawn closer to experiencing a relationship with God. This was like returning to my lost spiritual roots.

What made this woman decide to come back to a church? It was her awareness that Buddhism was 'far from home,' while a church is 'much closer to my culture.' In the eyes of many, Christianity is the most appropriate religion of Europe.

5. Europe still considered a 'Christian' part of the world

Despite massive secularisation and the development of a multi-religious society, Europe is still considered to be Christian.

In a cultural sense

Christianity has left Europe with a rich cultural heritage of values, ideas and images, artistic expressions, traditions, festivals, wedding and funeral rituals, local social customs, symbols, etc. This heritage can be found everywhere. It gives a Christian ring to our national and regional cultures. We also noted the existence, all over Europe, of a plethora of Christian schools, hospitals, social institutions, welfare programs, rehabilitation centres, television and radio networks, publishers, newspapers, humanitarian and development agencies, and so on. They constitute a 'presence' of Christianity that goes far beyond the Christian community or even the marginal Church members. The same can be said of confessional political parties, trade unions and influence organisations (so-called 'lobbies'). Not to mention individual politicians in other parties who take Biblical values and Christian beliefs as their frame of reference.

All of this makes Europe still look Christian, particularly to outside observers When tourists come to get an idea of Europe, they come and visit the outstanding works of art that are part of our Christian heritage. Among Europeans as well there is a widespread popular feeling that 'we are a Christian country' – that is, in a cultural sense.

One thinks of the recent row over the Swiss referendum resulting in a vote against the construction of minarets (2013). One thinks of the popular outcry in Italy when action groups wanted to have crucifixes removed from public schools (2012). One also thinks of the political parties who attract voters with the message that the Muslim presence becomes a threat to our cultural heritage, saying that after all, 'we' are a Christian country.

Other faith communities do not fit easily into our societies which regard the privatisation of religion as normal practice. Muslims in particular, find it normal to practice religious customs both privately and publicly. This has led to heated controversies about wearing head veils in public schools, medical treatment by doctors from the opposite sex, subsidising the construction of non-Christian religious buildings, etc.

But public signs of Christian faith do not arouse the same level of protest. Instead, they are taken for granted as part of the landscape. One will find that secularised people actively oppose the destruction of a chapel because they consider it a beautiful element of the cultural heritage of the village. Al these examples illustrates that Christianity is seen as a normal part of the cultural landscape of Europe.

In a civilisational sense

The French political scientist Jean-François Susbeille has recently published a study on the decline of 'the European Empire.' His scenario of future doom is debatable. What makes his argument interesting for our subject is his repeated claim that 'in this twenty-first century, the European Union remains the cradle of the Christian West, a community of countries who share common values (…)

Christianity is indeed one of the foundations of Europe.'[12] Statements to the effect that Europe is part of western Christian civilisation can be found in many other essays on global issues and geopolitical developments.

6. Moving to Post-Secular situations?

There is a widespread assumption that secularisation is definitive, a no-return phase in the cultural of human development. Entering the secularised phase means the end of all religion. Only people with a residual religious worldview might link up with the church again, but people with no notion of divine reality whatsoever, are unlikely to change. Such is the assumption. Secularist philosophers give ample food to this idea. They argue that religion is a temporary phase in the development of humanity. Once this phase is past, there is no turning back. Massive decline in church membership in the post-war decades seems to substantiate this scenario. But is it realistic? Several indicators seem to point to the contrary.

The past century has been marked by secularisation, but this does not mean that the present century will just follow the same path. We cannot draw a straight line from yesterday to tomorrow. This is what the old secularisation theory did, according to which Europe will inexorably become less religious. But there are several signs that the future might well be different, less secularised.

Return of religion in the public sphere

Notice the 'return of religion' in the public sphere, in the arts, in popular music, in philosophical debates. There is a growing interest in spiritual matters among a wide range of people raised in a secular environment. So much is happening in the area of religion and society. Look at the new religiosity that has spread among Europeans who have not been brought up in a religious context. Often labelled as New Age or New Religious Movements, this can take the form of Eastern meditation, esoteric speculation, an interest in heretical movements of the past (Catharism for example), neo-paganism (Celtic cults revisited), or an ethical form of Buddhism combined with a bit of 'spirituality': seeking transcendental truth in the inner self.

There is also a new interest in Christianity. The number of adult baptisms in Roman Catholic churches, the popularity of Gospel music, the number of people taking part in spiritual retreats in a monastery, the ongoing success of Taizé, the charismatic movements in historic churches, the young people with no Christian background whatsoever who are attracted to Evangelical musical events, and so on. Although the people concerned often are nominal church members, we also find among them people who come out of a completely secularised environment.

Several social scientists see signs that the decline of Christianity is about to come to a standstill. American investigative journalists, John Micklethwait and Adrian Woolbridge, were so intrigued by the ongoing news of religious communities and by people in their highly secularised environment who appeared to have linked up with the Christian faith again, that they decided to concentrate their research on this subject; not only in the US but also in Europe. The result is a most challenging book called *God is Back.* Quoting research in the area of religion, collecting data about religious practice, reading publications and talking to opinion leaders in society, they arrived at the conclusion that 'a global revival of faith is changing the world.' Not only Christianity but also Islam, Hinduism and other religions are progressing in highly modernised societies, including Europe.

Leaving journalistic hyperbole aside, the facts they collected are telling us that a new kind of religious adherence is winning ground all over Europe. While fewer people are inclined to remain faithful to the tradition of former generations, hence the decline of historic churches, a growing number of people is receptive to the Christian faith through a process of personal enquiry, leading to a

[12] Jean-François Susbeille, *Le déclin de l'empire européen: qui domine l'Europe ?* Paris, First Editions, 2009, p. 187, 192.

spiritual experience and to some kind of conversion. This corresponds with the observations of sociologists like Danièle Hervieu-Léger that the typical twenty-first-century believer is a 'pilgrim' and a 'convert.'[13] For this reason, Evangelical, Pentecostal and Charismatic faith expressions are finding increasing response, as Micklethwait and Woolbridge point out.[14] According to the *World Christian Encyclopaedia*, these churches and movements accounted for 8.2 percent of Europe's population in 2000, nearly double to that in 1970.[15] Pentecostalism is France's fastest-growing religious movement.

Meanwhile, migrant churches are thriving in all the larger cities in western Europe, thus changing the perceptions of Christianity among the general population.

On the one hand, Europe is becoming markedly more secular. Traditional Christian values are set aside; legislation follows majority opinions that run counter to what the church has always taught. On the other hand, there is an upsurge in religious practice, even in the urban areas. This comes as a surprise to the largely secularised world of social sciences. Moreover, the place of religious communities and their customs in society is a regular issue in political discussions.

Secular and religious trends

What is the overriding trend in Europe? Is it secular or religious? 'Predicting the future about religion in Europe is tricky as more than one thing is happening at once,' says Grace Davie, whose analyses we have found useful to get a picture of the place of Christianity in today's society. A few years ago, a journalist of *The Guardian* put this question to her, 'Is Europe's future Christian?' Her answer was:

> The historic Churches of Europe are losing the ability to discipline both the beliefs and behaviour of the vast majority of Europeans. The process is unlikely to be reversed and will lead, other things being equal, to an increase in secularisation in most parts of the continent. Other things, however, are not equal, given that the rest of the world is arriving in Europe – pretty fast. New communities have arrived, which understand their religious lives very differently from their European hosts. Among them are forms of Christianity which challenge the historic Churches of Europe – in terms of fervour as well as belief; they are markedly more conservative. Among them also are other-faith communities, some of which do not fit easily into our societies which regard the privatisation of religion as 'normal.' Hence the series of heated controversies about the wearing of the veil in public school, for instance.[16]

In our time, religion is becoming increasingly important in society. Traditional religious practices are not disappearing as secularist intellectuals have thought they would, but remain important for a considerable part of the population. This creates problems (should ritual slaughter by Jews and Muslims be allowed; should the state help migrant communities to build better places of worship; what kind of religious education should be taught in public schools?), but politicians are often ill equipped to take decisions. Here we notice the effects of secularisation, one of which is the systematic loss of religious knowledge. It follows that necessarily sensitive debates are very often engaged by people who, literally, do not know what they are talking about – with respect to their own faith, never mind anyone else's. 'It is little wonder that things get out of hand,' notes Grace Davie, who emphasizes that 'little will be gained, conversely, by denying the realities of the past, by contempt for the seriously religious, and by the (sometimes deliberate) cultivation of ignorance about faiths of any kind.'

She adds that Europeans should be better informed about their religious heritage, and build on its positive dimensions – those of generosity and welcome. Europeans, moreover, should ensure that there

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[13] The title of one of the main publications of Danièle Hervieu-Léger: *Le pèlerin et le converti: la religion en mouvement*. Paris, Flammarion, 1999..

[14] John Micklethwait and Adrian Woolbridge, *God is back: how the global revival of faith is changing the world.* New York, Penguin Press, 2009, p. 356ff.

[15] Quoted by John Micklethwait and Adrian Woolbridge, *God is back,* p. 136.

[16] Grace Davie, 'Is Europe's Future Christian?' interview in *The Guardian,* 1 June 2009.

is a place in their societies for those who take faith seriously, whatever that faith might be. 'The largest proportion of these people will still be Christian, but in ways rather different from their forebears.'[17]

Is Europe becoming post-secular? While the process of secularisation is still going on, we are witnessing new forms of church life (all kinds of missionary and 'emerging' churches, religious communities) and a host of revitalised existing churches. Micklethwait and Woolbridge conclude their research by saying:

> Give people the freedom to control their lives and, for better or worse, they frequently choose to give religion more power. Give religious people modern technology and they frequently use it to communicate God's Word to an ever-growing band of the faithful....
> Religion is proving perfectly compatible with modernity in all its forms, high and low. It is moving back toward the centre of intellectual life. But it is also a vital part of popular culture, with Christian barbershops and tattoo artists, skateboarders and stand-up comedians. Christian rock-music is ubiquitous.[18]

In his book on the future of religion in Europe, Philip Jenkins has devoted a whole chapter to these phenomena, aptly called 'Faith among the ruins.'[19] They may be portending days in which the Gospel will gain a larger hearing still

Hope

At the end of our investigation we want to quote once more Lesslie Newbigin. We don't need promises of coming revival or statistics of church growth, he says, to have confidence for the future. Instead, we must accept the facts. We are a minority, but that should not worry us, because our hope is not based on figures but on the faithfulness of God.

> In a pluralist society, there is always a temptation to judge the importance of any statement of the truth by the number of people who believe it. Truth, for practical purposes, is what most people believe. Christians can fall into this trap. It may well be that for some decades, while Churches grow rapidly in other parts of the world, Christians in Europe may continue to be a small and even shrinking minority. If this should be so, it must be as an example of that pruning which is promised to the Church in order that it may bear more fruit (John 15). When that happens, it is painful. But Jesus assures us, 'My Father is the gardener.' It is a summons to self-searching, to repentance, and to fresh commitment. It is not an occasion for anxiety. God is faithful, and he will complete what he has begun.[20]

The last phrase reminds us of the words of the Psalmist as they are echoed in the traditional greeting pronounced at the beginning of Protestant church services: 'Our help is in the name of the Lord, who is faithful in eternity, who never abandons the work that his hand began.'

If we can say that he began a work through the apostles who set foot on the shores of Macedonia at the beginning of the Christian era, and that he has continued the work during many ages in what has come to be called Europe, then we may have confidence that he will not abandon it, but bring it to completion, according to his good purposes.

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[17] *Idem.*
[18] John Micklethwait and Adrian Woolbridge, *God is back,* p. 355.
[19] Philip Jenkins, *God's Continent*, chapter 3.
[20] Lesslie Newbigin, *The Gospel in a Pluralist Society.* London, SPCK, 1989, p. 244.