

Christian Faith and the Making of Europe

Yesterday and Today

Evert Van de Poll

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Introduction

The Paradox of Europe

The common thread running through the essays on the following pages is the interaction between Europe and the Christian faith, viewed from a culture-historical perspective. Our purpose is to bring to light how Christianity has played, and still plays a crucial role in the making of Europe, yesterday and today.

Nowadays, there is a strong tendency to downplay, or even ignore the role of Christianity in the making of European values such as democracy, equality, freedom of conscience, human dignity, social justice, and so on. We are constantly hearing another story, telling us that these are the fruits of secular Enlightenment philosophy in the eighteenth century. We are being told that we owe democracy and rational science to the ancient Greeks, and to their enlightened disciples in modern Europe. Secular humanism is presented as a secular alternative to the intolerance, the persecutions, and the religious wars that Christianity has brought in the past.

This story, for all its popularity, especially in the western part of Europe, is a myth. While it contains many elements of truth, it overlooks or reinterprets other elements. In so doing, it constructs a storyline that simply does not stand up to the facts. As Christians we should do justice to the past by setting the record straight. The following chapters are intended as a contribution to this task.

When we look to the making of Europe in the past without prejudice, we see the far-reaching impact of the Bible and the Christian faith on the culture, the worldview and the identity of its inhabitants. They shaped every sphere of society. Without this influence, Europe as we know it today would never have existed. This is true for the emergence of modern science and technology, the separation of church and state, human rights, the project of European integration and the EU, and the downfall of Communism only three decades ago. But what about the flipside? The European church is often blamed for having oppressed freedom of conscience, caused capitalism, supported authoritarian regimes, allowed slavery, waged war against Muslims, persecuted Jews. Even the current ecological crisis, critics say; is due to the Christian idea that man is called to dominate the earth. While it cannot be denied that churches played a negative role in all these areas, it is

also true that individual Christians were the most outspoken critics of these errors, even when they were at times a small minority. These Christians have played a decisive role in the struggle for freedom of conscience, the recognition of the intrinsic value and dignity of each individual human being. They have initiated social reforms, experimented and developed democracy, and combatted antisemitism. The past record of Christianity is a mixture of shame and honour.

In a time in which the Christian roots of our cultures are downplayed or even ignored, and in which the social, moral and spiritual heritage of European Christianity is presented as outdated, or even as a hindrance to progress, we need to be reminded of the Europe's indebtedness to the Christian faith.

Paradox of Europe and Christianity

In terms of religion and society, Europe presents us with a paradox, a love-hate relationship if you like, a kind of 'living apart together.' On the one hand, this *the most christianised of all continents*. No other region in the world has been exposed to the Biblical message and the influence of the church for such a prolonged and intensive way as Europe. Ever since the Gospel became known to scattered Jews and their neighbours in Philippi, Corinth, Rome and other places on the northern shores of the Mediterranean, it has deeply influenced the history of the peoples in territories that become the continent of Europe. So much so that without the spread of the Gospel, the impact of the Bible and the influence of institutional churches, Europe as we know it today would never have come into existence. A sweeping statement indeed! But a justified one, given the role of Christianity in the making of Europe. The message that originated in Galilee and Jerusalem has created a cultural, religious and social framework for the peoples living in the continent. Christianity has become the major factor in their political and cultural development. Nowhere else is there such a rich Christian heritage, not even in the United States where Christianity is 'just' five centuries old.

At the same time, Europe is *marked by the abandonment of the Christian faith, more than any other part of the world*. This process has been going on much longer and is more widespread than in any other part of the world. Europe was christianised but also gave birth to secular worldviews, atheism, secular lifestyles and political ideologies, so much so that it is called 'post-Christian.' Ours is not only the continent of beautiful cathedrals but also the continent of deserted monasteries and church buildings turned into cultural centres, shops or apartments, or converted into mosques. Once Europe was

the heartland of worldwide Christian mission, now it has become a major mission field. Once our societies were christianised, now they have become multi-religious and largely non-religious. Our continent is the most secularised of all.

This paradox is a key to understand the cultural and socioreligious context in which we live. The two sides of the reality must be taken together to get the whole picture. More than three quarters of the Europeans identify as Christian, but practicing or committed Christians have become a minority, albeit a substantial and influential one, among the various religious and non-religious categories of the population. European cultures are rooted in Biblical values and a Christian worldview, but also profoundly influenced by modes of thought and movements that deliberately distance themselves from the Christian faith. European societies are still deeply marked by many centuries of Christian influence, but also by the secularisation of science, the state and the public spheres, and since the 1960s by a clear move away from traditional Christian norms and values.

This is the paradox of Europe: its societies are marked as much by the Christian faith as by its abandonment and rejection. Failing to consider the two sides of the coin in an equal measure leads to misrepresentations. Either we only look at the place of Christians and Christian institutions, or only at the absence of Christian faith. That will lead us to drawing completely different pictures. The paradox of Europe is that both kinds of pictures are true at the same time.

European Christianity, for the better and the worse

We should hasten to add that we do not speak about with Christianity as a whole, but about European Christianity. We are not talking about ‘the Christian faith’ in an abstract, generalised way, but about European Christians, yesterday and today, about real men and women, belonging to real churches and Christian movements, who have influenced the development of Europe. European Christianity consists of a great variety of churches, institutions and movements and individuals, representing a wide range of doctrines, liturgies, and lifestyles. For all their diversity, they have this in common that they belong to the history and the making of Europe.

One does not have to be an expert in church history to realise that Europe has become acquainted with the Christian faith for the better and the worse. Much good things have been accomplished in the name of Christ, but in the same name many evil things have been perpetrated as well. Our history is marked by the exploits of saintly monks and ruthless warriors, of preachers

and crusaders, of devout reformers and scandalous prelates, all in the name of the same Lord. On European soil, cruel wars have been fought in the name of religion, but this was also the sending base of missionaries who brought the Christian message to the far corners of the earth, not counting the costs, and at the price of immense sacrifice. Within the same European churches, we find people who have defended the system of slavery and who were involved in transporting and trading slaves from Africa to the Americas, and those who have campaigned for the abolition of these practices. The Bible has been used as a warrant for war and for peacekeeping, for violence and non-violence, for intolerance and universal civil rights. Contradictions like this abound in the history of Europe and the Christian faith.

Keeping this in mind, we should be cautious to always specify what kind of Christianity was involved in the development we are talking about. In some respects, we can speak about European Christianity as a whole, for example, when it comes to the spread of the Biblical or Christian worldview. European Christianity, however, is very diverse, so in many cases we shall have to specify which form of Christianity or which church we are talking about: Orthodox or Catholic or Protestant, Anglican or Lutheran or Reformed, Evangelical or Pentecostal. In some respects, we should make a distinction between the historical ‘established’ churches that were in a dominant position for a long time, and the counter movements within and outside these churches, non-conformists of all sorts, as well as non-established ‘free’ churches, who took a very different stance, not only in matters of doctrine and liturgy, but also with respect to the relation between church and state, freedom of conscience, and moral conduct. All these churches and movements and have woven their threads and integrated their colours in the tapestry of European history.

Sociological use of the term ‘Christian’

As stated in the preface, our position is Evangelical Protestant. Evangelicals have a certain theological view of what it means to be a Christian and to be a church community in this world, of salvation in Jesus Christ, of the authority of the Bible, of the future of the world, and so on. Given our Evangelical Christian identity, we are bound to find ourselves in disagreement with certain views and practices of other Christians. But this book is not the place to discuss the question which expressions of the Christian faith are authentic or not. In Evangelical circles, it is commonplace to distinguish between real Christians, those who have chosen to be Christ-followers, and others, called traditional Christians, or nominal Christians (‘in name only’), or cultural Christians. Such distinctions are based on normative,

theological criteria, on a certain understanding of the message of the Gospel. This is an important subject, and a matter of ongoing reflexion in the Evangelical movement worldwide. Nonetheless, we shall leave aside this subject, except in the last chapters in which we look at the widespread phenomenon of people claiming Christian identity without practicing the faith. Our use of the word 'Christian' is not normative but descriptive, not theological but sociological, based on self-identification. Viewed from that angle, 'Christians are all who call themselves followers of Christ, in public or in private or who regard themselves... as part of the Christian community or who claim to be such.'¹

Topics studied

In the following essays we shall look at several ways in which Christianity has marked Europe. The first part describes how today's world is rooted in what happened yesterday. The history of the name 'Europe' is a story in itself, and today the name has many other meanings and connotations (chapter 1). The spread of Christianity has even shaped the geographical and cultural map of Europe (chapter 2).

Europe is a mixture of ethnic backgrounds, languages, forms of Christianity, large and small nations, yet there has always been the idea of belonging to a whole called 'Europe'. As we shall see, this idea is bound up with the Christian religion, and it has changed over the centuries. Today it is still operative, as a foundation of the construction of Europe and the EU (chapter 3 and 4).

European cultures have different roots, but they are all linked to the Christian faith. We shall discover that it is precisely the subject of the Christian roots of Europe that causes controversy and even political division today (chapter 5).

The following chapter 6 deals with the enormously rich spiritual, social and cultural heritage of European Christianity. It would take countless books to describe this in detail. We shall just summarise the main elements, including the Bible, the book that has made our world. Honesty demands that we also look at the shadow-side of its shameful implications in oppression, violence, slavery, colonial imperialism and antisemitism, to name some of the things that churches are accused of. But we shall point out that in every case, other Christians were the severest critics and initiators of reform (chapter 7).

¹ C.K. BARRET (ed.), *World Christian Encyclopaedia*, edition 1982, p. 68.

Europeans are very much attached to human rights, but very few are aware of their real origins. We shall describe the general background and focus on the Baptists pioneers of liberty of conscience and universal rights in the 16th century. At a later stage, Enlightenment thinkers will pick up these ideas and integrate them in their political philosophy (chapter 8).

Europe is marked by a long history of intricate connexions between church and state, beginning with the alliance between throne and altar in the days of Roman emperor Constantine. The first ones to call for the separation of church and state and to put in practice were the same radical Protestants who gave birth to human rights. We shall discover how again the Enlightenment has taken over this idea, and how it was gradually introduced in Europe. Even so, the separation has hardly ever been complete. Today, multiple connexions between church and state exist in every country on the continent (chapter 9).

Europe has made modern science and technology and these in turn have made Europe. Why did the scientific revolution of the 16th and 17th century that birthed Western science and technology originate in Europe of all places, and not in another civilisation that was perhaps more advanced at the time? The answer is: the Christian faith. The decisive factor was the Biblical worldview of medieval and early modern natural philosophers who shook off the preconceived ideas of ancient Greeks that had dominated Christian thinking, and developed the empirical scientific method based on observation and experiment. Their objective was to glorify God and to put in practice the dominion mandate to ‘till and cultivate the earth.’ We will also show how science became secularised and how the idea of ‘conflict between religion and science’ arose. This idea is based on quite unscientific presuppositions and does not reflect the historical facts. Christian religion and science are not at all mutually exclusive (chapter 10).

In the second part we look at two major transformations in our time in which Christianity played a key role. I would like to call them ‘moments of grace’. Why? When we believe that our God is the Lord of history, then He also rules over European history. We are not always able to discern his hand in the affairs of individuals, let alone in those of nations. His providence operates in a mysterious way. But sometimes one can clearly discern a moment of grace that is in a certain sense ‘given’ to man: a new opportunity of liberty, for instance, or the surprise of peace. After all, when God’s people pray continuously for a turn of events, could we not expect that from time to time, that the Lord will intervene?

Personally, I am convinced that there have been such moments of grace in recent European history. First the construction of a united Europe after World War Two. As we tell this story, we shall point out how the founding fathers were Christian democrats motivated by their Christian faith to work for reconciliation between former enemies, and for a collaboration based on Christian values such as solidarity, subsidiarity and public justice (chapter 11). The revolutions that toppled the Communist regimes in Central and Eastern Europe between 1989 and 1991, are a second moment of grace. They would probably not have taken place, were it not for the influence of churches and church leaders, such as Pope John Paul II and Romanian pastor Laslo Tökes. In chapter 12 we tell the story of these extraordinary events, and the peaceful transition to a post-Communist era.

In the third part, we take a socioreligious look at Europe. Has it really become 'post-Christian' as is often said? Has the emergence of a secular Europe relegated Christian Europe to the past? Closer scrutiny brings to light that European societies are rather post-christianised, due to several processes of secularisation. Since the 1960s the decline of Christian religious practice has accelerated. We shall summarise the story how of the various processes of secularisation in the course of the last centuries and ask the question how they are related to Christianity (chapter 13). Instead of the secular city that sociologists predicted, we live in an SMR society, secularising and multireligious at the same time. This is a new situation. We shall mention some trends, including the demographic development and how they relate to the secular/religious future of Europe (chapter 14).

Our interest in this book is not religion in general, but the state of Christianity today. What do surveys and statistics say? They tell us about the differences between East and West. And that committed Christians are a solid minority, even the most important one in the East (chapter 15). Over half of the population is affiliated to a church or claims Christian identity in surveys but seldomly attends a church service. This is called nominal Christianity, which takes several forms. As we review these, we shall discuss the parameters of being Christian and becoming Christian and correct some misunderstandings of social scientists. Christianity is also important for people outside the church, although it becomes 'fuzzy' for some and a cultural identity marker for others. Even so, Christianity serves as the vicarious religion in modern society, and it might even be the default religion for secularised Europeans (chapter 16).

We conclude our series of essays with the witness of the Christian faith in today's society. We shall look at typical 'European' barriers and bridges for the Gospel (chapter 17).

Throughout history, there have been so many ways in which Christians have communicated the message, developed churches, spread the Bible, worked for the welfare of people, developed science, created works of music and literature, initiated social reforms, established schools and hospitals. Europeans today benefit from their enormously rich heritage. The Christian values that were articulated in the past, are still relevant for our modern societies. The story of 'the cross and the continent' that began long ago is far from being ended! The presence and influence of Christians in the past is a source of encouragement and inspiration for our generation, as it seeks to live out the same message in a changing context.

Preface