

Reaching Secular Europe

Stefan Gustavsson

stefan.gustavsson@credo.nu

Not many weeks ago it was 1 of April; the day when you – at least in Europe – have official permission to fool people. This year's best prank came from an online gaming store called GameStation. In the site's terms and conditions – which you have to confirm that you have read and understood before placing the order – they had buried an "immortal soul clause":

"By placing an order via this Web site on the first day of the fourth month of the year 2010 Anno Domini, you agree to grant us a non transferable option to claim, for now and forever more, your immortal soul. Should we wish to exercise this option, you agree to surrender your immortal soul, and any claim you may have on it, within 5 (five) working days of receiving written notification from gamestation.co.uk or one of its duly authorized minions."

GameStation even included a hyper-linked option, which said "Click here to nullify your soul transfer" and rewarded astute shoppers with a coupon worth 5 GBP! But only 12 percent of purchasers noticed the ruse; 88 percent of the day's transactions included human souls; altogether 7 500 souls!

We Europeans, it seems to me, has in a similar careless way sold our souls and dispersed our rich inheritance. Europe has become the prodigal son.

1. Europe – the Prodigal Son

During the first century the gospel spread like a fire brand around the Mediterranean. But like earlier in Asia Minor and North Africa – once parts of the world with thriving churches – Europe today has denied the gospel and replaced it with other convictions.

Look at the different continents in the world. The Evangelical church worldwide has seen enormous growth in the last 100 years. During the 20th century:

The Latin American Evangelical church increased by over 5000 percent.

The African Evangelical church increased by over 4000 percent.

The Asian Evangelical church increased by over 2000 percent.

On the other hand, the situation in Europe is very different. To quote World Christian Encyclopedia:

No one in 1900 expected the massive defections from Christianity that subsequently took place in Western Europe due to secularism, (and) in Russia and later Eastern Europe due to Communism.

Now, people are coming to faith in Christ in Europe. There are, thank God, thriving churches. But the general trend is different: the Christian church in Europe is rapidly diminishing. Of course there are all kinds of variations, between the Roman Catholic south, the Orthodox east and the Protestant west, as there are differences generally between countries who suffered under communist terror and countries with a longer history of freedom. But there are also common trends.

Take my country Sweden as an example (since we unfortunately sometimes lead the way here). We have witnessed dramatic changes for the church during the last 100 years.

At the year 1900 Sweden had a strong Christian identity. Huge parts of the population were shaped in their thinking by a Christian world view, there had been strong revivals during the second half of the 19th century that effected 100 000 of people, Swedish missionaries were sent out to many places around the world... and so on.

100 years later the situation has dramatically changed. We are the world's most secularized country. The churches are diminishing. The statistics, to give some examples, looks like this:

- **Lutheran Church: Attendance Sunday service**
1990 – 2000: minus 30 %
2000 – 2008: minus 17 %
- **Membership Free churches 1975 – 2000**
Salvation Army: minus 44%
Baptist Church: minus 33%
Covenant Church minus 21 %
- **Membership Free Churches 1990 -2005**
Salvation Army: minus 50 %
Covenant Church: minus 19 %
Pentecostal Church: minus 11%

The sad fact is that churches do not only fail to win the non-Christians; they fail to keep their own members.

A few days ago this was on the news in Sweden: "Elderly people are more active today in all respects – including getting married at old age – and in all form of activities, with the exception of going to church."

The negative trend within the churches is a mirror of the general trend in the European culture. A new global inquiry, showing peoples beliefs and values was recently published. Question 42 was: How important is religion?¹

¹ Pew Global Attitudes Project

Religion is very important in my life:

Senegal 98 %
Indonesia 95 %
Brazil 78 %
India 74 %
USA 57 %

Polen 33 %
Germany 25 %
Britain 19 %
Hungary 15 %
Sverige 8 %

So it is a time of dramatic changes for Europe. The statistics may vary in their details between countries, but the general trend is clear. In Europe the gospel is not viewed as good *news* – many think it's been tried and found false.

The story behind this is of course extremely complex and I can only highlight a few elements.

Urbanization is one key factor. The majority of people globally have traditionally lived in the country side. The statistics for planet earth looks like this:

People living in "urban areas": 1800; 3 %, 1900; 14 %, 2000; 50 %, 2050; 80 %

Cities with more than 1 million inhabitants: Rome 5 b. c.; London 1811; it is estimated that 4,68 different cities had more than one million inhabitants 2007!

The church in Europe has not responded well to this change; there is therefore an enormous need for church planting in the big cities; churches that meet the real needs of today's city people; socially, existentially, culturally, intellectually and spiritually.

But urbanization is not at the bottom of Europe's problem; secularization is.

2. Historical Background for Secularization: Two Root Systems in Europe

In order to understand modern Europe we need to understand some of its historical background. Things hang together. There are cause and effect. **The secularization of Europe has not come just out of the blue.** Simplifying to the extreme, there are two root systems in Europe, which both goes back to Antiquity: Humanism, with its roots in Athens and Christianity with its roots in Jerusalem. Let's begin with Christianity

a. Christianity

Christianity – where God is at the centre and is glorious revealed in the person of Jesus

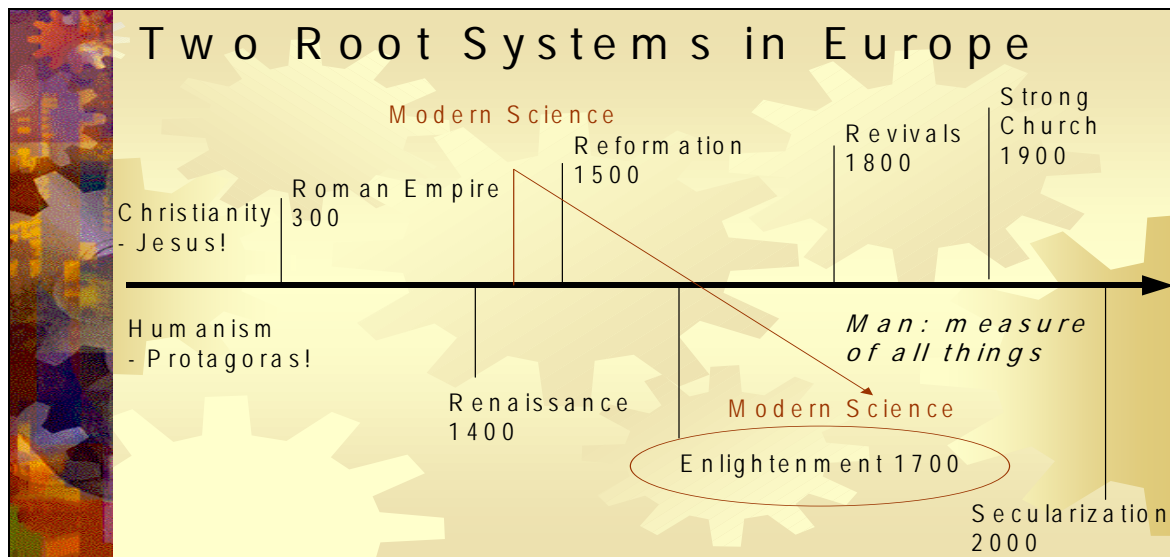
Christ – spread throughout the Roman Empire and become the dominating faith from the fourth century and onwards. Then the gospel was gradually lost – or deeply confused with other ideas – and then rediscovered at the reformation in the 16th century. There were strong revivals during the 18th and 19th century and at the year 1900 the Christian church stood seemingly strong in Europe. And yet the Christian faith has lost at the beginning of a new millennium. Why? The answer is to a large degree to be found in the other root system of Europe.

b. Humanism

Humanism – putting man at the centre of everything and so making man the measure of all things – was promoted by Protagoras and other Greek philosophers. It was rediscovered at the Renaissance during the 15th century and it became the central idea at the Enlightenment during the 18th century and onwards! The Enlightenment was, at the start, mainly a perspective accepted by the philosophers and artists – the intellectual elite of Europe. It affected science and Academia, which in turn affected just a small portion of the people. But gradually the Enlightenment perspective has taken over much of our culture and today both science and Academia affects everyone.

Humanism, in my view, is the base for both modern and postmodern man. In both systems man is at the centre: either his thinking or his feeling. But it is still man as the main point of reference; God and the supernatural is out of the picture.

One interesting factor here is science. Of course, science in one sense has its roots amongst Greek philosophers. But *modern* science, with its empirical investigation into the actual state of affairs, has mainly Christian roots. When modern science grew during the 15th century and onwards, it had basically a Christian motivation: We are called to understand God's world! But as time went by and more and more of nature were understood – which of course was not a problem for Christianity – science was kidnapped and turned against it's own mother. And today science is viewed by many to have undermined the Christian faith and instead established the Enlightenment perspective.



3. Two inadequate responses from the church

How could this happen? How could Enlightenment thinking take over? I think that at least part of the answer is to be found in the faulty responses given by the church!

a. **Compromise**

Many Christian theologians and leaders felt compelled to adjust their theology to the Enlightenment philosophy. They seemed to think that the scientific revolution demanded them to accept the Enlightenment – as if the scientific findings meant that God was out of the picture! So in order to be seen as intellectually honest they started to deny miracles, revelation and the supernatural. This is the **liberal theology** that has intoxicated the European churches so deeply. Prominent church leaders and theologians argue against the virgin birth, miracles and the resurrection of Christ as historical facts and view them only as theological statements. The Bible is no longer a source of joy and a natural authority for the Christian, but under attack and often rejected.

This is the background for the many “religious atheists” of Europe; theologians and church leaders who deny the supernatural, but hold on to religious language.

By becoming infected with Enlightenment thinking, the church is now her own gravedigger.

Listen to what the German theologian Wolfhart Pannenberg has to say:

“Secularism's greatest success, however, is in the wide-spread demoralization in the ranks of the clergy and theologians who are supposed to proclaim and interpret the truth of the Gospel but delude themselves that they are achieving that purpose by adapting Christian faith and life to the demands of secularism. What the situation requires, I am convinced, is precisely the opposite of such uncritical adaptations. The farther secularism advances the more urgent it is that Christian faith and life be seen in sharp contrast to the secularist culture. What is needed is a strong reaffirmation of the central articles of Christian faith against the spirit of secularism, and it is quite possible that in the early part of the 3rd millennium, only the Roman Catholic and Orthodox Churches, on the one hand, and Evangelical Protestantism, on the other, will survive as ecclesial communions. What used to be called the Protestant Mainline Churches are in acute danger of disappearing. I expect they will disappear if they continue neither to resist the spirit of a progressively secularist culture nor to try to transform it.”

Much of the church today is sadly high-jacked by secular philosophies and liberal theology.

b. **Withdrawal**

The other response came from more bible-believing people, who did not want to accept the Enlightenment challenge. They wanted to hold on to the whole Gospel. But they tried to do it mostly by a withdrawal from the culture, from Academia and from science. This is the more **Pietistic and later Charismatic theology** that has deeply influenced many churches. Now, there are many, many good sides in these movements. But there has been a

dangerous weakness in their isolation from culture and in their neglect of the intellectual challenges.

There has been too little teaching on the world-view level of Christianity. Often there has instead been a separation between mind and heart and between the mind and the Spirit.

The result: The church has left walk over in the intellectual field.

The effects of this was not so strongly seen during the 1900 century, but became dramatic during the 20th. Today we see the university, the popular culture, the media, science ... totally dominated by secular people with secular thinking.

In sum: Europe has a long history based on the Christian faith. But, claiming it is not possible to believe that Christianity is true, Europe has turned away. Europe was first lost for the gospel in the areas of ideas. If Europe is going to be won for the gospel once again, it must be won also in the area of ideas – the point of its departure.

Here are important lessons to be learned for the global church. Do not repeat the European mistake of compromise or withdrawal!

The resulting situation at the beginning of the 21th century is that Europe is a cut flower, who has lost its roots in the truth. Europe today is a deeply secular culture, where God is absent in the public domains and where the underlying worldview is **naturalistic humanism**.

NB. Secularization in Europe is not the scepticism of a few individuals, challenging the norm, but secularization has become the norm. It is viewed as a positive liberation from superstition and from religious power play, which held people in bondage for centuries.

Most important, secularization is not seen as a world-view in it self – on the same level as Christianity and therefore a competitor to Christianity – but as the natural, neutral starting point which should be shared by all reasonably persons. And then, if you want, you are free to subjectively add a personal faith in Jesus or in Buddha on top of that, as long as it is not challenging secularism. This is what philosopher Charles Taylor has called “exclusive secularism”— a secularism determined to exclude all transcendent reference points from cultural, social, and political life.

4. What about Postmodern Europe?

Haven't we passed the modern, Enlightenment era, and moved beyond it to the postmodern era, where people don't believe in truth any longer and where a very different stage is set. Jean-François Lyotard defines postmodern “as incredulity toward meta narratives.” Postmodern philosopher Michel Foucault encourages us to reject “all theory and all forms of general discourse. This need for theory is still part of the system we reject”. So instead of offering a new truth, it is *the concept of truth* that is denied.

Many European Christians think that this change from modern to postmodern thinking will somehow solve our problem and open the door for the gospel again. And they think that Christian apologetics has now been made obsolete, since people do not care about truth. I think both points are wrong.

First, even though postmodern thinking is influential in some areas, western culture generally is far from postmodern. Take **science** as an example; it operates on the assumption that there is an external reality that we can have knowledge about. And that reality is the same for everybody on the whole globe. The debate about global warming, to take just one recent example, presupposes from all sides in the debate that there are universal truths. Or take **ethics**. The new view on homosexuality, that it should be affirmed and embraced, which is now the dominant view in Sweden, is not seen as relative or context dependent. It is seen as the right and true view and therefore something that we should convince other cultures about. It is seen as a global truth! Or take the recent discussion about **religion**, launched by the so-called new atheists. The whole discussion is built on the concept of truth; the accusation being that all claims about a metaphysical reality are false.

These examples show that the concept of universal truth is still very much with us, in scientific, ethical and religious discussions. The Enlightenment challenge is not yet over.

Secondly, postmodern philosophy is not so much a philosophy in its own right, as it is a critic of other perspectives. This means that when everything has been deconstructed, there is not much on offer for the questioning mind. But anyone concerned with life cannot, in the long run only deconstruct. Inevitable, we as human beings must also give answers to the big questions in life. And so far in Europe, the answer given is humanistic naturalism.

Notice also that the postmodern denial of truth is theoretically incoherent. The denial itself becomes a new universal truth. It is impossible to deny truth, since every denial will be a new claim to truth. Why put ones hope into an incoherent idea that contradict basic Christian assumptions? Instead, we should criticize the postmodern denial of truth.

The advent of postmodern thinking has not diminished the need for apologetics; it has doubled it. Now the Christian church has two major challenges to deal with. The concept of truth (that there is such a thing as attainable truth) and the content of truth (that it is the Christian message, not naturalism, which is the truth).

Along the same lines much of the postmodern spirituality in Europe is, in my view, misinterpreted. The postmodern is born out of the modern, which is naturalistic. And that naturalism has never been challenged! In postmodern spirituality, therefore, there is no transcendence; only immanence, pantheism, mysticism ... There is no real God outside the human experience.

Former Swedish archbishop K G Hammar can exemplify this:

God sent his Son to the world to save it, John 3:17. Mission therefore is a central theme in Christian faith and vocabulary. When the formulation was first made,

mission was imagined as something concrete and literal. God was in heaven; heaven was in an upper story above the earth. When our thoughts today search for support ... most people imagine that God is approaching human beings from the inside, from the cosmic depths that every human being is a carrier of.

Words like God or mission is still used, but now within a different worldview, without real transcendence.

5. Jesus, Paul and the Need for Apologetics in Europe

We have many, many different needs in Europe. When I am now going to highlight one of them – the need for apologetics – **it is not at the exclusion of other needs**. It is one crucial, but often neglected, need. Interestingly, the New Testament has a lot to say about apologetics.

Look at Jesus: His public ministry took place in a Jewish context, where the majority shared a number of beliefs. Still it was not a monolithic culture. Jesus was constantly in conversations with people who begged to differ. We read of his dialogues and debates with Pharisees and Sadducees, with Samaritans, Greek pilgrims and Roman authorities. And he argued for his message. People noticed that Jesus gave “a good answer”² and that he “silenced the Sadducees”³. According to Luke his critics “were unable to trap him in what he had said there in public. And astonished by his answer, they became silent.”⁴ Jesus used apologetics; he argued his case and he defended it.

Look at Paul: What did he do when Pre-Christian Europe was so pagan, relativistic and pluralistic? He preached and defended the Gospel of Christ among his contemporaries. He went first into synagogues to persuade his fellow Jews that Christianity is true, proving and arguing from Old Testament Scriptures that Jesus was the Christ. Paul also went to pagan Greeks. Starting with their literature and cultural artefacts, Paul demonstrated that the “unknown God” has been revealed and proclaimed in Jesus Christ.

A careful reading of Acts reveals Paul’s extraordinary ability as a communicator. He was at home in any venue, could meaningfully convey truth to those of any world-view, and was not afraid to engage in vigorous debate. While he made full use of his opportunities in the synagogue, he was equally comfortable out of the pulpit, whether it was in the marketplace,⁵ lecture theatre,⁶ civic centre,⁷ or private home.⁸

² Mark 12:28

³ Matt 22:34

⁴ Luke 22:26

⁵ Acts 17:17

⁶ Acts 19:9

⁷ Acts 17:22

⁸ Acts 28:23

Following Paul to different cities around the Mediterranean Luke says this about Paul's ministry.

- Paul the apologist:
 - In Damascus: "proving that Jesus is the Christ"⁹
 - In Jerusalem: "talked and debated"¹⁰
 - In Thessalonica: "reasoned with them... explaining and proving"¹¹
 - In Corinth: "reasoned in the synagogue, trying to persuade"¹²
 - In Ephesus: "reasoned... arguing persuasively..."¹³
 - In Rome: "explained ... declared to them ... and tried to convince"¹⁴

We need to see a generation of Christians in Europe who do not compromise with the gospel and who do not withdraw from the culture, but who are Christians with an understanding of the biblical world view, who have a Christian mind and who engage and challenge the surrounding secular culture.

Avery Dulles writes this in his article *The Rebirth of Apologetics*:

All over the United States there are signs of a revival [of apologetics]. Evangelical Protestants are taking the lead. Apologists of the stature of Norman L. Geisler, William Lane Craig, and J. P. Moreland are publishing scholarly works on natural theology and Christian evidences. Unlike the liberal Protestants of an earlier vintage, these Evangelicals insist on orthodoxy; they uncompromisingly maintain the fundamental Christian doctrines of the Trinity, the Incarnation, the Atonement, and the bodily resurrection of Jesus. And their method succeeds. The churches that combine a concern for orthodoxy with vigorous apologetics are growing. Their seminaries attract large numbers of enthusiastic students. A similar revival is occurring, albeit more slowly, in Catholic circles.¹⁵

That is a revival we need to see in many more places, including Europe.

Conclusion

As a European I have often been encouraged by Acts 16. It tells the amazing story of how the gospel first came to Europe. Paul and his companions were planning to go east, but three times the Holy Spirit redirects them more north and more west, until they reach Philippi. There they can preach the gospel and the first European – a woman called Lydia – becomes a Christian. It shows me that God has a heart for Europe and I continue to pray that the Holy Spirit will redirect people and resources to Europe, so that Europeans once again will receive the gospel of Christ.

⁹ Acts 9:22

¹⁰ Acts 9:29

¹¹ Acts 17:2-4

¹² Acts 18:4

¹³ Acts 19:8-9

¹⁴ Acts 28:23-24

¹⁵ First Things 143 (May 2004): 18-23