

Christianity in post-Christian Europe

In the West, until recent decades, Christians have been used to dominating the discourse in society. The Church has held a privileged position in relation to European / Western life, though and society. But things have changed. Secularisation has grown and spread since 1960s, removing Christianity to margins of public life in the West - a big change after 1700 years of Christendom.

Recent examples of marginalisation in Europe:

- Debates over mention of Christianity in EU constitution
- Furore over appointment of EU Equality Commissioner Rocco Buttiglione
- Jerry Springer : The Opera

We live in a consumerist society where people buy experiences, lifestyles and identities like they buy cat food and coffee. People are free to choose what they believe. This has created some fear in the churches, but it is actually liberating. Christian commitment is about freedom to choose to follow Christ, not a social obligation. The choice to follow Christ is more clearly a life-changing personal decision, so people are choosing more radical / stricter / more conservative forms of Christian life and belief that actually mean something.

Increase in Christian sense of marginalisation has led to a stronger emphasis on being 'salt and light' in society:

- Increased interest in Community Regeneration Mission (The Message 2000; Soul in the City) and "social networking evangelism", e.g. Urban Expression
- Marketplace / workplace theology
- More proactive Christian lobbying (e.g. Religious Discrimination Bill; Jerry Springer – the Opera)

While this is understandable and even commendable, let's consider what the Bible has to say about living on the margins rather than at the centre of society. To do so, I will draw on the Old Testament experience of Israel, specifically the period of exile during the 6th century BC, when Israel experienced a catastrophic loss of security and status.

Jeremiah 29:4-9

The first group from Judah was exiled to Babylon in 597BC (the destruction of Jerusalem Temple – symbol of God's presence – and the second, bigger, exile happened in 587BC). Jeremiah is writing in this interim period to the first group, now exiled in Babylon.

(False) prophets were saying that this would only be for a short time, and that the exiles would return (e.g Hananiah, cf Jer 28:2-4, 15-17). Yahweh would not abandon his people, they said, for he had promised them a land of their own. In Jer 29:8-9, Jeremiah advised the exiles not to listen to this.

There is some fear and pessimism about the survival of the church, and the crisis of faith in northern Europe. Maybe we tend to get similar messages of (false?) hope, due the impending experience of exile:

- I have heard many quotes of "I will build my church, and the gates of Hades will not prevail", i.e. God won't let the church disappear in Europe. But Islam obliterated the church in Turkey and North Africa, so there are no guarantees. On this, compare Andrew Walls' view on the "serial centres" of Christianity (was Europe, now Africa / Latin America).

- We saw a similar phenomenon of prayer for revival, especially during the 1990s. I had reservations about this at the time (revival seemed to mean “more people like us”). If “revival” (as defined in fairly limited terms) were to happen, then we don’t have to face up to changed reality. We can keep doing what we have already done

Jeremiah’s message to exile in Babylon is equally relevant to us today – stop looking back at the (mythical) lost past, accept the new reality, settle in it and serve God there.

So what might this mean. After all, there were major changes in (post)exilic Jewish religion compared to pre-exilic Israel:

- before – centred on the Jerusalem Temple, regular sacrifice, and festivals at which people gathered (Tabernacles, harvest, etc)
- after – centred on synagogue, Sabbath, and Torah (the Deuteronomistic History was compiled to explain why the exile happened)

We face similar major readjustments on how we live as Christians and do church in the 21st century. So how should we live? Should we imitate the Jewish ideas of synagogue and Sabbath (both of which are about separatism and maintaining of identity)? We should note that neither were Old Testament-endorsed strategies, but they were realities in first-century Palestine.

The Key Principle : take the new context seriously

Across Europe we find a massive interest in spirituality. In a continent that is generally prosperous, and where even its poor can generally not be said to be starving, there is a desire for something beyond material possessions. People are searching for meaning, for transcendence (something beyond themselves), for identity. But they are generally not looking at churches for this. It is not uncommon to hear people say of themselves that they are “spiritual but not religious”, with the church being included in the latter category. All too often, we have created communities where spiritual experience is tied to meetings and membership, as well as participation in a whole host of other institutional activities. The spiritual seeker looks at the social price tag, and looks elsewhere.

And this is not an issue that is reflected only in those outside the church; it can be found in Christians too, and even in missionaries:

“Problems arise when younger missionaries are expected to plant churches according to a model that they themselves find boring and irrelevant. It is not uncommon to find young missionaries whose only motive for attending church is a latent sense of Christian duty, and who come away each week wondering why they bothered to go. Such a situation cause problems at three levels : the personal spirituality of the younger missionary who faith is weakened, not strengthened, by church attendance; the ineffectiveness of the missionary as evangelist and church-planter (after all, why draw people into a church where you rarely meet God?); and tension and division in the missionary team itself” (Peter Stephenson, *I still haven’t found what I’m looking for*, in *Postmission*).

So what are the roots of this change, and what should we be thinking and doing about it?

Part of the reason for this is that our understanding of community is changing.

Community and church in pre-modern, modern and post-modern societies

In pre-modern societies, communities were based around land and a sense of place. The parish system served well across Europe as a way for the church to reach all those, rich and poor alike, who owned, lived or worked on the land in a given place.

The modern era was characterised by a significant change, which affected the way that churches were organised. Emigration, urbanisation and industrialization meant that the land and the parish became less important. Community was reconstituted in the expanding industrial cities on the basis of shared culture and shared experience. Class, not place, became the most important signifier of identity. Churches emerged with an emphasis on congregation and club, where people gathered to worship with those who were like them, rather than those who lived in the same village. Working-class and middle-class denominations arose.

The postmodern era changes our ideas of identity and community again. Identity is not based on a common sense of place, since we are all more able to be highly mobile now. Nor is identity based on common experience or social class. In his book, "Bowling Alone", Harvard professor Robert Putnam shows that across all types of social association, such as religious affiliation (church attendance), union membership, participation in parent-teacher associations and the number of volunteers for civic organizations such as the Boy Scouts and the Red Cross, involvement has declined in the last fifty years. The title of his article came from his discovery that, while more Americans go tenpin bowling than ever, participation in organized bowling leagues fell 40 per cent between 1980 and 1993. This is not a trend that affects America alone. Putnam shows that a decline in the level of social engagement is also evident in Europe. People are meeting together less frequently in organised groups.

The very concept of personal identity is more fluid and changeable in a postmodern context. Our identities are more complex, more changeable and less certain. The postmodern world creates new forms of fragmentation and dispersal. In modernity, human identities were kept securely in place by clearly-defined class and gender roles. Now we have the freedom to choose our identity, to change it, to succeed or fail alone.

Sociologist Zygmunt Bauman comments:

"What emerges from our fading social norms is naked, frightened, aggressive ego in search of love and help. In the search for itself and an affectionate sociality, it easily gets lost in the jungle of the self. Someone who is poking around in the fog of his or her own self is no longer capable of noticing that this isolation, this solitary confinement of the ego is a "mass sentence" to which we have each been individually condemned".

In such a context, many churches base their outreach strategies on the offering of community and identity to those adrift in an uncaring world. These strategies usually take one of the following two forms:

1. church as heritage site

In the premodern era, the worship of the church was part of a commonly-owned culture. In the modern era, the church was closely related to the aspirations and experiences of different social and ethnic groups (or 'people groups', as we now call them). As living expressions of a past era, church has

for some taken on a historical character. This is not a turn-off for some – the weekly visit to church becomes attractive precisely because of its historical flavour. The church is valuable because it preserves the traditions of the past and makes them accessible to new generation. Its music, architecture and literature are prized for being artistically significant. In effect, the church becomes part of the heritage industry (like the National Trust), and the emphasis lies in preserving for future generations that with which we have been entrusted.

2. church as refuge

The fluid, ever-changing environment of postmodernity offers little support or shelter in the face of overwhelming change and almost unlimited choice. In these circumstances, people look for safe and welcoming places where they can find a sense of togetherness and safety. When a wider sense of community has all but eroded, churches develop into places of refuge where we can retreat for a while. In home groups, Sunday school, youth ministries and social activities we can meet people who share our values.

The bigger the shelter, the more comfortable it becomes, and more people it can accommodate. Some churches have turned from being a refuge into being a resort; no longer a place for emergency help, it becomes an attractive place for a vacation, or even to live in all year round (Christian schools, Christian business directories, etc). And so people retreat from the wider world and wonder why they have no appreciable impact upon it whatsoever.

The problem for each of these models is that while they have responded to some small degree to the postmodern society around us, they do not take it seriously, nor do they consider how they can express the gospel fully within that culture. They are throwbacks to an earlier age, and look like ill-fitting imports from another place. They degrade the full implications of the gospel, which is that every culture, including postmodernity, can be inhabited and transformed by Jesus Christ, and they confuse the practice holding on to past structures and practices with faithfulness to the living God. The possibility of engaging effectively in mission with our surrounding culture is reduced, because by becoming a heritage site or a refuge, they have become (and are perceived) to be separated from ordinary life.

Church in the C21

1. Communication, not congregation

If congregation was the normative model for the church in a modern era, then communication will be the dominant theme for the church in postmodernity. The growth in fragmentation and individualism leads some to conclude that community is dead. But I think that this is wrong. It is not dead – it is just different. People still want to be with each other, to find significance in relationships, and to make a difference in other people's lives. But in our postmodern context this is not expressed so much in organised meetings; it is expressed through constant communication. Cell phones, email, instant messaging, photo and video messaging – millions of European young people have developed new forms of connectivity. It is community based on communication rather than meeting. But it is more than a virtual community, since these young people also meet face-to-face regularly. A postmodern church needs to take this form of communication seriously. For example, an ECM church-planter uses MS SmartMeeting software to conduct weekly bible studies and discipleship with a scattered group of young French Christian professional whose working lives are too busy to enable them to meet regularly face-to-face.

2. Leadership by example

Modern churches ordain those who are safe and steady, and who will lead from the front (of the meeting). Postmodern church will not be able to rely on meeting, on visibility of attendance, and on authority. People are free to shop, and will gravitate towards those who they perceive as enlightened, who have something special that is worth hearing or learning from – these people will be the real leaders, regardless of their position. Leadership will be by influence rather than control. Those who are perceived to have met with God, and who have been changed by him, will be the guides, the teachers who lead into holy and passionate living for Jesus Christ. Already we see congregational leaders being supplanted in influence by spiritual directors, those who will guide into a spirituality that goes beyond the safe confines of the congregation.

3. Integrated or separate?

This is an interesting question (hence the question mark). In “Mission Implausible”, Duncan McLaren suggests that it is the more sectarian forms of religious belief that are thriving in Europe at the moment. Yet a different approach is endorsed by a recent letter-writer in ‘Christianity’ magazine (February 2005). Writing about football chaplaincy, Steve Goddard writes, “I would like to see informal fans chaplains appointed (wearing “Revaldo” on the back of the team shirt?) who travel with the faithful to away matches and become a seamless part of what are vibrant, caring communities”. A similar ‘integrated’ approach to Christian life can be found at The Crowded House churchplant in Sheffield (as shown in the following extract from www.thecrowdedhouse.org):

At university someone had tried to get Patrick along to church. What a joke! But was he at church now? He wasn't sure. It had started when a colleague asked him round for a meal. He was impressed by how Simon and the other people in his house all got on with one another. They'd got talking about life and stuff and they'd invited him to come round again on Sunday. Simon had suggested he come round in time to watch the football. When others arrived later in the afternoon they had all eaten together. They were a real hotch-potch of people, but Patrick enjoyed the banter. After the meal they had read from the Bible and discussed what it meant. No-one seemed to mind his questions. Now some were playing a board game. A family with young children had just left. A couple seemed to be praying in the kitchen. Maybe this was church. Maybe it wasn't. Whatever it was, Patrick felt strangely at home.

4. Experimental diversity

The “one size fits all culture” is dead. We expect tailor-made products and services in many parts of our lives today, and this corresponds to the postmodern celebration of diversity. It took 800 years to evangelise Europe the first time round; we won't do it for the second time in our lifetimes. And we don't really know which approaches to church-planting will work best. Michael Moynagh, co-director of the Tomorrow Project, writes “churches in the New Testament seem to have been diverse. Indeed, diversity is one of the hallmarks of the Holy Spirit”. He quotes retired Archbishop of Canterbury George Carey, “the Spirit never leaves identical finger prints”, and adds “God has built experimentation into the fabric of creation. It is part of being human. It will be part of successful church-plants as well”.

Not models to follow but a mindset to develop – experimental, fragile, tentative (making it up as you go along) – a missionary mindset, not assuming you know what to do and how to do it

Personal example : Sunday a.m. football coaching

Such missional discipleship can often be misunderstood (lack of local church support – pastors want people present to listen to them). But we need to think radically – “it is impossible to get out of a problem using the same kind of thinking that got you into the problem” (attributed to that famous theologian (?) Albert Einstein).

The situation faced by the church in Western Europe could be seen as a cause for pessimism. Christian values appear to be less widely held, although sometimes these values have just be middle-class / white-collar and baptised with the name Christian. Christians feel increasingly marginalised and excluded in much of Western society.

- Our reaction - welcome to the normal state of affairs for many Xns worldwide and also for the earliest Xns
- In both OT and NT, many examples of God’s people living as outsiders – Jesus himself was treated as such and why should those who follow him expect anything different?
- Not to despair – an opportunity to try new things – might not look like anything we are familiar with.