

EVANGELICAL REVIEW OF THEOLOGY

VOLUME 18

Volume 18 • Number 1 • January 1994

Evangelical Review of Theology

*Articles and book reviews original and selected from
publications worldwide for an international
readership for the purpose of discerning the
obedience of faith*

EDITOR: BRUCE J. NICHOLLS



Published by
PATERNOSTER PERIODICALS

identity of interpretation of the apostolic faith' (Intro 6). We are challenged to explore, both within the WEF constituency and with other conciliar bodies, what precisely is the 'degree of unanimity ... required for the mutual recognition of the apostolic faith' and what is the 'measure of difference in the interpretation of that faith' (Intro 6).

The Theological Commission of the World Evangelical Fellowship adopted the following recommendations:

1. To adopt the response.
2. To request the Commission on Faith and Order of the WCC to react to our response to *Confessing the One Faith*.
3. To convey to the Faith and Order Commission our willingness to participate further in the discussions as opportunity presents itself.
4. To suggest to the Faith and order Commission that it invite the WEF Theological Commission to send a participant to the fifth World Conference on Faith and Order in Spain in August, 1993.
5. To urge WEF member fellowships and their churches to study the Document *Confessing the One faith* and the WEF response to it.

Rene Daidanso
Pietro Bolognesi
Richard Gaffin, Jr.
Jose Martinez
David Parker
Rodrigo Tano
Charles Tipp
George Vandervelde
Miroslav Volf
Paul G. Schrotenboer (Convenor) p. 47

A Credible Response to Secular Europe

Peter Kusmič.

Reprinted with permission from Themelios and Towards Century 21 in Christian Mission, eds. James M. Phillips and Robert T. Coote (Grand Rapids, Win. B. Eerdmans, 1993)

The author gives a disturbing but realistic appraisal of the spiritual crises in both Western and Eastern Europe and the old and new forms of the secular challenge. In the midst of new opportunities for the gospel he warns against the dangerous resurgence of new national-religious totalitarianisms with the shift to 'tribalism'. In the new complexities of Europe he calls the churches to reclaim the reliability, truthfulness and relevance of the gospel, to demonstrate a credible lifestyle and unity and to recover a mission-centred ecclesiology.

Our problem is, therefore, how to get in touch again with the masses of the 'unfaithful faithful'.

The life and death question for Europe is, then, whether it can rediscover its own specific mission.

Dr. W. A. Visser't Hooft

FROM CORPUS CHRISTIANUM TO A NEW EUROPE

There was a time when 'Europe' and 'Christendom' were almost synonymous terms. The symbiosis of the two is summed up in H. Belloc's epigram, 'The faith is Europe, and Europe is the faith' (Will 1981:6). A contemporary of Martin Luther, the geographer Wachelus published in 1537 a woodcut map of Europe called 'The Queen Virgin'. It was to illustrate the unity and integrity of 'Christian Europe' as conceived by medieval Catholic totalitarianism. Wachelus' map shows Spain as the head of the virgin, Italy as the right arm and Denmark the left; Germany, France and Switzerland are the breast; Poland, Hungary, 'Illyricum', P. 48 Albania, Greece, Lithuania, Romania, Bulgaria and others are all identified on the virgin's illustrious gown.

Already at that time, however, the transition from the monolithic, religious 'Christendom' to the secular 'Europe' was in progress. Though the rise of Islam initially strengthened the idea of Christendom, the 15th-century Ottoman Islamic push westward almost broke it when some Christian powers, for selfish reasons, aligned with the enemy against other Christian nations. When Erasmus made his appeal for the crusade against the Turks, he did not appeal to the members of Christendom but, noticeably, to 'the nations of Europe'. The Reformation and the following developments only speeded up the process of transition. In the 17th and 18th centuries, science came into its own and the secular state established itself. In the 19th and 20th centuries, the industrial revolution and the birth of Marxist socialism completed the process of the disintegration of Corpus Christianum. The post-Enlightenment culture became a major European 'missionary problem' (Newbiggin 1986).

The European map today is in a state of political and economic, as well as cultural and religious, flux. This chapter is written at a time of rapid changes and an intensive search for a 'new Europe'. Presently, Europe lives in the intensive period 'between 1989 and 1992', the year 1989 marking the beginning of the wholesale collapse of Communism and 1992 the beginning of a 'United States of Europe', initially a West European economic and political integration. The European Community's (EC) move toward a closer union has been accelerated recently in response to dramatic events in Eastern Europe. The demand for change in the East European countries has been promoted and strengthened by the political freedoms and economic success of Western Europe, which have acted as a magnet drawing the East toward the West.

Today, Europe seems to be fully alive and bursting with visions, programmes and activities which make it again 'the most important theatre of contemporary world events' (Burstein 1991:11). Western Europe is in the process of dismantling its frontiers and gearing itself for new economic growth, energetically engaged in overcoming the two interrelated diseases of the early 1980s—'Eurosclerosis' and 'Europessimism'. For a while, these often-lamented twin ills threatened to make Europe a largely unimportant, uninteresting and conceivably even an irrelevant continent. Europe was for a while playing only a minor and increasingly diminishing role in the global geopolitical game. The constant complaints that Europe is an 'economic giant and political pygmy' and 'merely the chessboard over which American and Soviet masters made their strategic moves' (Burstein 1991:37) became somewhat obsolete when the oil-shocked 1970s and the alarming growth of unemployment resulted in economic collapse along with political impotence.

Where did the new vision and will come from? Are there analogies to be drawn and lessons to be learned p. 49 due to a somewhat similarly discouraging religious situation in Europe? Many diagnose the European churches as suffering from similar conditions of 'sclerosis' (stagnation) and 'pessimism' (loss of will and power to stem the tide of decline).

The turning point in the transition from the 'old' to the 'new' Europe was an almost 'spiritual' event. Jacques Delors, the incoming president of the European Community's executive commission, acted as a visionary prophet when in December 1984 he summoned other commissioners to Royaumont Abbey (outside Paris) for a crucial contemplative retreat. Delors analyzed the crisis of Europe and the failed dream of a new, united Europe with analytic precision, brutal frankness and prophetic vision. He warned his fellow commissioners that if Europe did not recognize its *kairos*-time (this author's expression) and failed to seize the historic moment, it could anticipate a 21st century in which it would be little more than a 'museum to be visited by American and Japanese tourists who like our cuisine and culture'.

'Europe's choice is between survival and decline' was the challenge of Delors as he called the EC to undertake a 'solemn commitment' to a strategic plan for recovery (Burstein 1991:36). The facts of a structural crisis had to be faced squarely and basic structures remade so as to become an efficient servant of the new Europe. Lessons were to be learned from others—even from ideological opponents!—especially in the area of removing government barriers for free trade. There was also to be a willingness to forget and forgive the animosities of the past (see the amazing 'metanoia' from Franco-German enmity to Franco-German amity!) in order to pave the way for a more viable future.

Does this brief survey contain any lessons and discernible seeds for change in the European spiritual climate? While relying on centuries of Christian history and benefiting from inherited traditions and institutions, the future of the European church should not become a hostage of its glorious past. Neither should the present lack of spiritual vitality, denominational divisions, religious indifference and other 'Christian ills' allow the church to reconcile itself to a *status quo* position and thus incapacitate itself for its God-given mission in and on behalf of the new spiritually revitalized Europe.

THE SPIRITUAL CRISIS OF EUROPE

In his introduction to a popular and largely pessimistic assessment of Europe's Christianity, a North American evangelical missiologist writes: 'Europe appears to be a continent on the verge of moral collapse. Decades of anaemic Christianity and humanistic philosophies have eaten the spiritual interior of this continent and Europe now stands at crossroads. Can it be saved?' (Henley 1978:9). This sounds very similar to the question, 'Can the West be converted?', asked by Lesslie Newbigin (1987:2), an author known for his perceptive analysis of post-Enlightenment Western culture as a P. 50 specific missionary challenge. A European missiologist begins his survey 'The Church in Europe' with the sentence: 'There is a general agreement that the Church in Europe is in a poor state of health'. He corroborates this diagnosis with, among other things, the statistical statement that 'some 1.8 million people in Europe leave the Church each year' (Cotterell 1989:37). The late Bishop Stephen Neill, writing at the time when he was a professor of ecumenics and missions at the University of Hamburg, was equally pessimistic: 'Church attendance in Europe is everywhere declining; the lack of ordained ministers is grave in every country, whether Roman Catholic or Protestant. The secularization of life proceeds apace. We seem to be watching a steady diminution of the spiritual capital of Europe, the disappearance of the old synthesis of religion and culture, and a desiccation of the human

spirit, as a result of which men not merely are not religious, but can see no reason why they should concern themselves beyond the world of the senses.' In 1970 (2 April), *TIME* magazine wrote of the progressive paralysis of European religious life and of 'a secular-minded culture that suggests eclipse rather than the presence of God' (cf. Detzler 1979). Addressing the West European Consultation on Evangelism in 1977, Dr Visser't Hooft pointed out, 'European culture has become a debate between three forces; Christianity, scientific rationalism and neo-pagan vitalism (1977:355). For a long time, the impression was created that scientific rationalism was victorious. Recent decades with the negative results of the technocratic civilization, nuclear threat, and ecological devastation have, however, changed the picture and given rise to a growth of a new irrationalism, Europe's neopaganism. Visser't Hooft seems to agree with Gustav C. Jung, who claimed that the Christian message has neither reached nor transformed the soul of the European man and that Christianity in Europe is like a cathedral built on the foundation of a pagan temple. His conclusion: 'Now there is surely need for evangelism, revival and renewal. There are millions of lapsed Christians who need to hear anew what the Gospel has to offer them. But there are today in Europe even more millions who are not adequately described as lapsed Christians, because they have in fact turned to another religion' (1977:350).

The real status and strength of the Christian faith in Europe today cannot be ascertained by review of its historical role nor by present-day statistics of church membership. Europe is far less 'Christian' than its history, religious institutions and statistical figures seem to indicate. There is now a growing realization among churches in Western Europe that a baptized person or a person who pays church taxes is not necessarily a Christian. Nominal Christians among the Protestants in central and northern Europe, the Catholics in France and southern Europe, as well as among the orthodox in southeastern Europe and the USSR, are increasingly seen, not only by evangelical mission activists from North America, but in many cases by their [p.51](#) own concerned bishops, as 'unreached people groups' in need of evangelism. In that very context, the questions about the role of baptism in the appropriation of salvation and about the assurance of salvation are increasingly pushing themselves onto the agenda of theological debates and ecclesiastical practices.

Any discussion of the future of Christian mission in Europe must take into account a growing indifference to anything religious such as is found in no other continent in the world. Bishop Harms Lilje (at the time the presiding bishop of Germany's Lutherans and president of the European Council of Churches), in his *Christianity in a Divided Europe*, distinguishes between three types of atheism: *atheismus militans* (militant atheism, especially of the communist type associated with Eastern Europe), *atheismus subtilis sive philosophicus* (subtle or philosophical atheism of rationalistic intellectuals), and *atheismus practicus* (practical atheism). The last term is borrowed from the well-known biblical scholar, Johann Albrecht Bengel, who in his famous commentary, *Gnomon Novi Testamenti*, points out that the rich man in the Lord's parable ([Lk. 16:19-31](#)) was not condemned for wrong belief or heresy but because he lived by a certain *atheismus practicus*, ignoring God and eternity. Lilje is convinced that though this formula is more than 200 years old, it is 'an excellent description of the most difficult, spiritual phenomenon in the Western world today. For it suggests what it says: not an explicit antitheistic theory but the actual and practised disregard of God. Here is not apostasy but weakness, not an open revolt but the silent paganization' (1965:32-33). This is a biblical picture of modern Europe which seems to see no need for God or any theistic concepts. This widespread phenomenon echoes the attitude expressed in Jean Paul Sartre's philosophy: 'What man needs is to find himself again and to understand that nothing can save him from himself, not even a valid proof of the existence of God' (1956:311). Whether

god exists or not does not matter any longer, for it seems to make no difference to the average European, who may be a culturally conditioned 'nominal Christian' but is actually a 'practising atheist'. By this European majority, God is completely disregarded and the Christian church largely ignored.

For most West European Christians, faith does not make much difference in life. Sunday is not a day of worship (as it still seems to be in North America) but only a welcome break between two working weeks. The process of secularization was the breeding ground of Christian nominalism, which was in turn followed by a marked shift from nominal Christianity to varying degrees of pragmatic atheism throughout Europe. As a result, the church is now largely disregarded and seems to have no significant influence on individuals, families and public life. 'Despite the various degrees of influence presiding in different countries, at no point can it be said that Christian conviction—divorced from political pretension—is giving decisive direction to the trends of events in p.52 Europe' (Herman 1953:198). There is a general lack of clarity about what Christianity stands for, and widespread ignorance of the most basic facts and values of Christian faith.

The workshop on 'Nominalism Today' at the Lausanne Congress on World Evangelization in Manila estimated that 75–80 per cent of professing Christians—at least 1 billion—are nominal. The conclusion was that this is 'the largest religious group in need of evangelization today' (Douglas 1990:446). The workshop divided nominal Christians into four categories: 'ethnic-religious identity' nominal, second-generation nominal, ritualistic nominal, and syncretistic nominal. The Catholic, Protestant and Orthodox churches in Europe are in themselves a complex mission field in which all four types of nominals exist and should become priority concern for intentional and comprehensive programmes of evangelization. Awakening the religiously indifferent and those who have found false security in a superficially sacramentalistic, cultural and/or nationalistic and yet only nominal Christianity is a very complex challenge. Evangelism in Europe must also take into account large numbers of those who have been 'disappointed by Christianity or have remained at a level of a merely psychological piety or legal morality' (Weber 1979:78).

In 1978, the Lutheran World Federation sponsored a Regional Consultation (for North America, the Nordic countries of Europe and Germany) on Mission and Evangelism. The consultation was a significant step beyond the traditional understanding that mission is something the churches and missionary organizations in Europe and North America, which are relatively rich in qualified personnel and financial resources, do in the poorer countries of the southern hemisphere in the Third World, considering them as their sole mission fields. It concluded, as did other recent gatherings, that 'mission is indivisible', and began grappling seriously with the thesis that 'mission begins on our doorstep. And for the superficially large churches it is precisely here that there is a vital need for mission' (Lutheran World Federation 1979:vi). The West European churches need to take a hard look at themselves and face the realities of their spiritual crisis in order to realize that they themselves have become a mission field. 'Folk and state churches are conscious of the paradox of their empty churches on the one hand, and their solid church institutions on the other; the evidence of secularization; religious frustration; materialism with all its ramifications in western societies; the invasion of new religions and pseudo-religions; ...' (*ibid.*). These realities are descriptive not only of the more secularized protestant West European countries but also of their Catholic counterparts, as evident from the recent Vatican encyclicals and repeated calls of Pope John II for 're-evangelization' of Europe.

THE CHALLENGES OF A NEW EASTERN EUROPE

Whatever is written about the future of Eastern Europe at this time must be written in pencil. All across P. 53 Eastern Europe, and in the Soviet Union, monumental changes are taking place at a breath-taking speed and in most dramatic and unpredictable ways. The impact of *glasnost* and *perestroika* has put into reverse process the revolutionary events of 1917 and post-World War II European developments. The massive collapse of communism in Eastern Europe at the end of 1989 and in the Soviet Union in August 1991 have removed from the European scene the most impressive competitor to Christian faith and its most powerful opponent.

It is a well-known fact that wherever Communists came to power, their long-term goal was not only a classless, but also a religionless, society. Christian faith was viewed as a superstitious, obscurantist, obsolete, pre-scientific and thus totally irrelevant way of thinking. Christian institutions were treated as a reactionary remnant of the old order and a hindrance to the progress of the new society and full human liberation of their citizens. Since Communists had monopoly on both power (which they abused) and truth (which they distorted), they developed comprehensive strategies and powerful instruments for the eventual elimination of religion. This included restrictive legislation, total atheization of educational institutions and media, control of selection and activity of church leaderships, etc. Policies and methods have differed from country to country and in different periods even within the same countries, depending on what was politically expedient during various historical periods and in different regions. Generalizations are impossible, for Eastern Europe has never been totally monolithic in the treatment of religion due to the complexity of its national, cultural and religious history of different nations and depending on international relationships and considerations. At best, however, Christian faith was barely tolerated and Christians marginalized and discriminated against as 'second-class citizens', and at worst, they were brutally persecuted. In Albania, for example, all visible expressions of religion were totally eradicated from 1967 onwards as that small country prided itself on becoming the 'first atheistic state in the world'. The story of Christian persecution under Stalin in the Soviet Union and during the Khrushchev era is well known (Hill 1991:69ff.) and does not need to be retold.

With the collapse of communism, a new spirit of hope has filled the widened horizons of new freedom. Today we are witnesses of the historical fact of the title of the latest book by Michael Bourdeaux—*The Gospel's Triumph Over Communism* (1991). Though the dramatic changes contain many elements of unpredictability, followers of Christ all across Eastern Europe are aware that this is the work of the Lord of history who has seen their suffering and longing for freedom, answered their prayers and provided them with a special *kairos* period to call their nations back to God and to the spiritual foundation for a free and truly 'new society'.

The general euphoria of East Europeans with a newly found freedom p. 54 is, however, very quickly giving place to a sober encounter with the grim realities that threaten the prospects of a free, peaceful and prosperous future society. Eastern Europe is presently going through a very difficult political transition, moving away from one-party totalitarian regimes toward some kind of multi-party parliamentary democracy. Mistakes are being made as the ABCs of democracy first have to be learned, and new institutions and traditions of democracy have yet to be established. The transition is equally painful economically as Eastern Europe moves away from the centrally planned 'command' economy toward some kind of a viable free-market economy. Economic recovery will be slow as the huge bureaucratic apparatuses have to be dismantled, many statesubsidized factories closed (causing potentially massive social unrests and thus bringing instability to the society) and the mindset of the people changed. Re-education for formerly stifled

creativity and initiative, so important for the free-market economy, may take considerable time. Social unrest, disillusionment of the impoverished masses and the general mentality of dependence may create environments conducive to new dictatorships, or at least tempt politicians to control the economy in similar ways to those of the Communist period.

The major problem for the Christian church and its mission may be the temptation to return to a quasi-Constantinian model of churchstate co-operation. In the process of replacement of Communist ideology by nationalistic ideologies there is an intense and valid rediscovery of national-religious identity. The churches are given the rightful recognition for having historically preserved the sense of nationhood, language and culture, especially in the Balkans under the centuries of the Islamic Ottoman-Turkish imposition. They are also rightfully credited for their opposition to the Communist system and for keeping alive certain endangered national and spiritual values. On the negative side, however, the discernible shifts 'from totalitarianism to tribalism' (issuing in inter-ethnic conflicts and wars) and 'from rights to roots' threaten the democratic processes in most of the East European countries. They also present a dangerous resurgence of new national-religious totalitarianisms. National churches (especially Orthodox in several republics of the Soviet Union, Romania, Bulgaria and Serbia, and Catholic in Poland, Hungary and Croatia) reassert their claims of monopoly on religious life and activity in their nations. In these countries, belonging to the national church is becoming less a question of theological persuasion and allegiance to Christ and more a question of patriotism and bona fide citizenship.

Protestantism in general is looked upon with great suspicion as that radical movement which in the past has divided Christendom and as a modernized, Western faith and thus a foreign intrusion which in the present in its various fragmented forms threatens the national and religious identity and unity of the people. Democratically and ecumenically p. 55 illiterate clergy, and militant fanatics among laity, are frequently opposed to protestant evangelicals as disruptive sectarians involved in dangerous proselytizing and unpatriotic activities. It is not inconceivable that some evangelical and other leaders of religious minorities could become the new 'dissidents' of the post-Communist era in Eastern Europe.

THE NEW EUROPE: WHAT IS TO BE DONE?

The religious situation in Europe is a peculiarly complex one and generalizations are hardly possible since situations and status of the church(es) differ from country to country and there are significant variations between different parts of the same countries. Christian institutions play a prominent part in some countries, while in others they are virtually ignored. The following proposals are in no way exhaustive and need to be both expanded and further elaborated if the gospel is to make a significant impact in post-Christian Western and post-Communist Eastern Europe.

First, the church must *reclaim the historical reliability and truthfulness of the Christian gospel*. The spiritual crisis of Europe is also an intellectual crisis, a crisis of truth which is in the very centre of the 'modern eclipse of God'. In our age of relativity, atheism, agnosticism and denial of all absolutes, when the very truth of any truth is under suspicion, the validity of the gospel truth is either outrightly denied or largely ignored. All across Europe, the proclamation of the gospel has to become once again communication of knowledge of the foundational facts of Christian faith as revealed in the Holy Scriptures and centred in the life, teaching, death and resurrection of Jesus Christ: 'By this gospel you are saved, that Christ died for our sins, according to the Scriptures, that he was buried,

that he was raised on the third day according to the Scriptures, and that he appeared' ([1 Cor. 15:2-5](#)). The faithful, brave and creative proclamation of the gospel must be grounded in these foundational facts of the universally valid truth, for truth is foundational for trust. Or, as Stephen Neill puts it in his *Call to Mission*, 'The only reason for being a Christian is the overpowering conviction that the Christian faith is true' (1970:10). Whether it is in the context of a Western relativity of all religions or in the encounter with the Marxist-type 'scientific atheism', it is necessary to remember William Temple's dictum; 'The Gospel is true for all, if it is true at all' (1937:82). This gospel must be unashamedly proclaimed all across the lands of Europe as not only the truth about God and our own lost condition apart from Christ but also as 'the power of God for salvation for everyone who believes' ([Rom. 1:16](#)).

Secondly, we must *renew the credibility of the Christian witness*. Missions and evangelism are not primarily a question of methodology, money, management and numbers, but rather a question of authenticity, credibility and spiritual power. For a significant impact of the Christian gospel in Europe, both West and East, the question of world [p. 56](#) evangelization, 'How shall they hear?', can be rightly answered only after we have answered, 'What shall they see?'. The biblical logic demands for *being* to precede *doing*. Newbigin is right when he concludes his *Foolishness to the Greeks* with the chapter 'The Call to the Church' focused on the question, 'What must we be?' (1986:124ff.). In Eastern Europe we have learned that Marxist criticism of religion is not always wrong, for the Christian religion has a long and heavy historical ballast that presents a serious hindrance to the re-evangelization of our continent. The rise and spread of both Western and Marxist atheism seems to be proportionally related to the shrinking credibility of the Christian church. In going out to evangelize in Yugoslavia, I frequently tell our seminary students that our main task may be simply to 'wash the face of Jesus', for it has been dirtied and distorted by both the compromises of institutional Christianity through the centuries and the antagonistic propaganda of atheistic communism in recent decades. The mission and the message of the Christian church have no credibility apart from their visibility as expressed in the quality of new life, mature and responsible relationships in the believing community and a loving concern and sacrificial service on behalf of the needy in society. The renewal of the credibility of the Christian witness goes hand in hand with the recovery of the whole gospel, which implies a joyful celebration of God's gift of salvation and continuous openness to the Holy Spirit to authenticate the Word of God. As I have stated elsewhere, 'The whole Gospel covers proclamation of truth and exhibition of love, manifestation of power and integrity of life. In the task of world evangelization, it will also require less competition and more cooperation, less self-sufficiency and more self-denial, less ambition to lead and more willingness to serve, less of a drive to dominate and more of the desire to develop' (Kuzmič 1990:201).

Thirdly, one of the central and most urgent tasks for both Western and Eastern European churches is to *recover a practical missionary ecclesiology, the missionary character of the believing community* (Newbigin 1989). European churches have to recognize that faith is not automatically inherited from generation to generation and that the main task of the church is not its institutional and mechanistically sacramental self-perpetuation. The church's mission in the world should not be reduced to isolated political statements and good deeds, as if the church were just a religio-social agency. Neither should the ministry of the clergy be reduced to the serving of baptisms, weddings and funerals. The churches need to be internally renewed by the Holy Spirit in order to become recognizable as 'the spontaneous overflow of a community of praise ... the radiance of a supernatural reality ... a place of joy, of praise, of surprises, and of laughter—a place where there is a foretaste of the endless surprises of heaven' (Newbigin

1986:149). This will also require, as Newbigin puts it, 'the energetic fostering of a declericalised lay theology' (1986:142), the rediscovery [p. 57](#) of the priesthood of all believers along with the discovery of the gifts of the Holy Spirit and the related idea of Christian stewardship. The recognition that the congregation is the proper agent for missionary and evangelistic activities and that the task should not be relegated to outside agencies, specialized ministries and zealous, evangelistically minded individuals is an imperative. The post-Reformation institutional divorce between church and mission which made the voluntary groups rather than the churches responsible for mission has to be overcome by new theological and structural developments. In conjunction with this, one of the crucial questions to be studied is, 'Are parish and congregational structures in Europe sufficiently flexible to be missionary congregations?' (Senft 1978:96).

Fourthly, the recovery of historical reliability and truthfulness has to be accompanied by an effort to *renew the intelligibility and relevance of the Christian faith* for contemporary secularized and religiously indifferent Europeans. The gospel of Jesus Christ 'is not something that man made up', for it was received by 'revelation from Jesus Christ' ([Gal. 1:11-12](#)). This is why the NT never uses the word 'gospel' in the plural. It is important to recognize, however, that Jesus and other NT evangelists portray considerable flexibility and creative freedom in adapting, translating and variously communicating the gospel in different political and cultural settings. While the basic content of the message is always recognizable and unchanging, the presentations are never the same. There are no pre-packaged, universally applicable formulations of the gospel given for either indoctrination or as if there was some magic power in the language itself. The missionary vocation of the church is to build bridges across the wide gap between the ancient world of the true and powerful biblical story and the modern secularized, technological age which is biblically illiterate. Helmut Thielicke, that rare example of a German theologian who was also an effective preacher and creative communicator, reminds us that 'the Gospel must be preached afresh and told in new ways to every generation, since every generation has its own unique questions. This is why the Gospel must be constantly forwarded to a new address, because the recipient is repeatedly changing his place of residence' (1970:10). The potential recipients of the gospel in Europe, both East and West, have been 'changing their address' ideologically, philosophically and culturally in this century more frequently and drastically than in any other area of the world. The radical, ideologically inspired secularization of Eastern Europe and the similar cultural developments in the pluralist and materialistic West European countries have produced new generations of biblically illiterate Europeans. The message of the cross and salvation have very little meaning for the relativistic and pluralist, consumer-orientated Western societies and even less meaningful significance for those who grew up in a system which denied that Jesus ever existed and 'scientifically' argued that any belief in God and spiritual realities is [p. 58](#) superstition. The Soviet government, for example, claimed only a few years ago that one of the successes of its educational system and atheistic propaganda was evident in the fact that around 90 per cent of their young people aged 16-19 adhered to atheism as their world-view. Though these figures need to be relativized and conclusions qualified, they remain indicative of a major missionary challenge in the new Europe.

Missionary outreach to these spiritually impoverished and disorientated generations will require an ability to understand their beliefs and prejudices and to translate the gospel in to their thought categories with intelligence, clarity and relevance. In this process of incarnating the gospel in the new European culture, the pitfalls of some of the Western Protestant 'apostles of modernity' must be avoided, for in their almost neurotic anxiety about the relevance of Christianity they have frequently amputated, rather than

adapted, the biblical message and thus rendered it powerless. Transcendenceless 'this-worldliness', with a concern for relevance and modernity (a liberal Protestant and, to a lesser extent, a modern Catholic temptation), must be avoided. Equally, totally theological and communicative rigidity and over-pious 'other worldliness' in the name of historical faithfulness (the temptation of the Eastern Orthodox and evangelical fundamentalists) is not the way ahead for Christian mission in contemporary Europe. Both betray the gospel of Jesus Christ: the first, in its attempt to make it more attractive and palatable to secularized minds, renders it powerless, and the second renders it meaningless in its refusal to enter into dialogue with the world and its inability to translate contextually the message of salvation to its secularized contemporaries.

Fifthly, in spite of relative failures of the 20th-century ecumenical dreams and efforts, *the quest for Christian unity remains an imperative* in the light of both biblical and contemporary missionary requirements. Churches need to continue to ask themselves the painful question: 'How can a sinful and divided church announce to the world the gospel of salvation and reconciliation?' The mainstream Christian churches in Western Europe, but especially in Eastern Europe with the recent political openness and the 'attractiveness' of that 'mission field', will increasingly face competition from new groups and denominations, both the indigenous and the imported kind. The unco-ordinated and, at times, culturally and religiously ill-prepared and insensitive missionary activities from North America will create confusion, unnecessary duplication and growth of new denominations and independent groups with various theological emphases, ecclesiological models and missionary practices. Sects and cults will also flourish, taking full advantage of the spiritual void, political freedom and the abysmal ignorance of the basic tenets of the Christian faith by so many Europeans. In light of the cultural and ecclesiastical history of East European nations, the creation of a competitive, free religious market p. 59 will not be without pain and conflict. If the questions of biblical unity, cooperation, mutual trust and integrity—all under the biblical umbrella of the Lordship of Jesus Christ—are not properly addressed, this process can become counter-productive and result in discrediting the message and the mission of the church at the time of their greatest opportunity and need.

REFERENCES

- Bourdeaux, Michael, 1991: *The Gospel's Triumph Over Communism* (Minneapolis: Bethany House Publishers).
- Burstein, David, 1991: *Euroquake: Europe's Explosive Economic Challenge. Will the World Change?* (New York: Simon and Schuster).
- Cotterell, Peter, 1989: 'The Church in Europe', *Evangelical Review of Theology* 13(1):37–47.
- Detzler, Wayne A., 1979: *The Changing Church in Europe* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan Publishing House).
- Douglas, J. D. (ed.), 1990: *Proclaim Christ Until He Comes* (Minneapolis: World Wide Publications).
- Herman, Stewart Winfield, 1953: *Report from Christian Europe* (New York: Friendship Press).
- Henley, Wallace, 1978: *Europe at the Crossroads: A Reporter Looks at Europe's Spiritual Crisis* (Westchester, IL: Good News Publishers).
- Hill, Kent R., 1991: *The Soviet Union on the Brink: An Inside Look at Christianity and Glasnost* (Portland: Multnomah Press).

- Hill, Kent R., 1991: *Turbulent Times for the Soviet Church: The Inside Story* (Portland: Multnomah Press).
- Kuzmic, Peter, 1980: 'Evangelical Witness in Eastern Europe', in *Serving Our Generations: Evangelical Strategies for the Eighties* (Waldron Scott, ed.; Colorado Springs: World Evangelical Fellowship, pp. 77–85).
- Kuzmič, Peter, 1990: 'How to Teach the Truth of the Gospel', in *Proclaim Christ Until He Comes* (J. D. Douglas, op. cit., pp. 197–208).
- Lilje, Harms, 1965: *Christianity in a Divided Europe* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press).
- Lutheran World Federation, 1979: 'Forward', in *Mission and Evangelism, Report of a Regional Consultation, Loccum, 1978* 4:vi.
- Neill, Stephen Charles, 1970: *Call to Mission* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press).
- Newbigin, Lesslie, 1986: *Foolishness to the Greeks* (Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Co).
- Newbigin, Lesslie, 1987: 'Can the West Be Converted?', in *International Bulletin of Missionary Research* 11(1):2–7.
- Newbigin, Lesslie, 1989: *The Gospel in a Pluralist Society* (Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Co).
- Sarte, Jean-Paul, 1956: 'Existentialism', in *Existentialism from Dostoyevsky to Sartre* (Walter Kaufmann, ed.; New York: Meridian Books, p. 311).
- Senft, Kenneth C. (Chairman) and Bauerochse, Ernst (Secretary), 1979: 'Working Group IB: Frontiers of Mission', in *Mission and Evangelism, Report of a Regional Consultation, Loccum, 1978* 4:96.
- Temple, William, 1937: *Basic Convictions* (London: Hamish Hamilton).
- Thielicke, Helmut, 1970: *How Modern Should Theology Be?* (London: Fontana).
- Visser't Hooft, W.A., 1977: 'Evangelism Among Europe's Neopagan's', *International Review of Mission*, LXVI (264):349–357.
- Weber, Gerhard, 1979: 'Home Mission: Where Do We Stand? Where Do We Go?', in *Mission and Evangelism, Report of a Regional Consultation, Loccum, 1978* 4:72–88.

Dr. Peter Kusmič is Principal of the Biblijsko Teoloski Institut in Croatia, and also Chairman of the W.E.F. Theological Commission. p. 60

AIDS and the Heretical Imperative: The Outbreak of Truth

Valson Thampu

Printed with permission from AIDS: Heresy and Prophecy (New Delhi, TRACI, 1993)

Ethics are inseparable from a theology of religions. In this chapter of his book the author seeks to address the root causes and not merely the symptoms of this dreaded global scourge. What appears to be heretic is in truth prophetic.

Editor