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## Believing and Belonging: Perspectives on Christian Developments in Europe today

*Keith Clements*

There is an advantage in being given an impossible task, in this case a survey of the contemporary European Christian scene in such short space. It means that no one can object to my being very selective in the themes addressed. In any case, what I have heard of discussions so far in Anglican – Old Catholic dialogue, in particular on the relationship between ecclesiology and mission, encourages me to look at certain issues in overall ecumenical perspective, and in ways which, while not perhaps directly addressing all the specific questions that concern you in Anglican – Old Catholic relationships, will have some bearing on them. We are very much in a situation that requires us to respond to the changing contexts in which Christians find themselves and to face the fact that the changing position of the churches is forcing a reassessment of their status within society.

I take my bearings from two contemporary writers on religion, and on Christianity in particular, in Europe. First, the phrase ‘believing and belonging’, as many of you from the Anglican world will know, echoes the work of the English sociologist of religion Grace Davie, especially her study *Religion in Britain Since 1945: Believing Without Belonging*<sup>1</sup> and her more recent book *Europe: The Exceptional Case*.<sup>2</sup> Davie’s basic thesis about Europe overall is that, while indeed secularisation has proceeded inexorably, with continual decline in active participation in church life, this is not true of the world as a whole. Indeed, in almost every other continent, from North and South America to Africa and Asia, religion flourishes and there are many instances of Christian growth. Europe in this sense is the exceptional case, and the European assumption that where we lead the rest of the world will follow does not in this case hold good. At the same time, Davie argues that the significance of what we might call ‘residual religion’ or ‘nominal Christianity’ or ‘folk religion’, both in Britain and on the Continent, should not be ignored. Secularism does not hold complete sway. Some sort of widespread belief persists even if people do

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<sup>1</sup> GRACE DAVIE, *Religion in Britain Since 1945: Believing Without Belonging* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1994).

<sup>2</sup> GRACE DAVIE, *Europe: The Exceptional Case* (London: DLT, 2002).

not see the need to attend church regularly. That is, many people ‘believe’ in God and some version of ‘the Christian way’ while expressing a minimal, if not zero, ‘belonging’ to the church. I recall a Swedish colleague telling me of a friend who, when asked why as a baptized Lutheran he hardly ever attended church says, ‘Why should I? I believe in the rule of law but that doesn’t mean I go to the courthouse every week to make sure that the law is being enforced!’

The second writer is the American student of global Christianity Philip Jenkins, who in his book *God’s Continent*<sup>3</sup> addresses the frequently asked question of how far Christian Europe is going to succumb to the advance of Islam within its borders. According to Jenkins the lurid scenarios of an Islamic takeover of Europe are based on very doubtful demographic projections, and ignore not only the tendencies towards secularisation amongst westernised Muslims but also the migration into Europe of highly active Christians from the global South – again a feature which I will pick up shortly. But above all, unlike some other voices from across the Atlantic, Jenkins argues that all is not necessarily over with historic European Christianity. Following on from what Davie and other commentators recognise about secularisation in Europe he states:

... [T]his does not mean that Christianity has vanished or is approaching extinction, and there are intriguing signs of growth within that secular framework. The recent experience of Christian Europe might suggest not that the continent is potentially a graveyard for religion but rather that it is a laboratory for new forms of faith, new structures of organization and interaction, which can accommodate to a new secular environment.<sup>4</sup>

‘A laboratory for new forms of faith’. This takes us further than the usual barren argument about whether religion, and Christianity in particular, is in inexorable decline in Europe. Secularist media commentators love to proclaim the long-awaited but imminent and well-deserved death of ‘organised religion’. They exaggerate the decline. Church leaders in response tend to overplay the strength of their denominations and their public significance. The real situation, probably, is neither as terminal as the secularists declare nor as healthy as the church officials claim, but more im-

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<sup>3</sup> PHILIP JENKINS, *God’s Continent. Christianity, Islam, and Europe’s Religious Crisis* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2007). German translation: *Gottes Kontinent? Über die religiöse Krise Europas und die Zukunft von Islam und Christentum* (Freiburg: Herder, 2008).

<sup>4</sup> JENKINS, *God’s Continent*, p. 30.

portantly, it also includes developments that both sides are prone to overlook: namely, as Jenkins points out, the *changing* nature of Christianity in Europe, the experiments and re-inventions that are occurring not least in the relationships of the churches to each other and to their social contexts. This should be no surprise to those who see the Church as a pilgrim people, for whom there must be openness to re-invention, its decisions in history being provisional and requiring constant reassessment in the light of history.

There are many actual instances, of course, of churches experimenting with new forms of community and church life, worship and evangelism, in specific ways and at local level, and not without some controversy. Anglicans, in my experience, have always come in one set or other of contrasting forms: high church and low church, those in favour of, or opposed to, women priests, and so forth. Now there is another pair of opposites – those who like and those who dislike the report *Mission-Shaped Church* with its encouragement of ‘fresh expressions’ of church.<sup>5</sup> This is part of a much wider scene of experimental forms of church, some well outside the aegis of official church structures, under the general umbrella of ‘emerging church’. What I wish to look at, however, is not these multiple experiments but rather certain broader trends and shifts of understanding by which churches and Christians are having to engage with the forces of change in Europe. I will deal, albeit too briefly, with four issues that are requiring or witnessing to a reorientation in the European churches’ understanding of who they are and of their role in Europe. These are: the challenge to identity brought by migration; secularisation as potential as well as threat; the move from inherited Christendom to conscious-choice Christianity; and the emergence of vicarious Christianity.

## **1. Migration**

The twenty-first century is seeing a massive new consciousness being forced upon Europe, and for good reasons upon its churches above all. It is not just that ‘immigration’ is an issue for Europe. Far more profoundly it is that Europe is part of what is now a migratory world, in which ‘Migration is a key factor in the development of modern societies in the age of

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<sup>5</sup> The Archbishops’ Council, *Mission-Shaped Church: church planting and fresh expressions of church in a changing context* (London: CHP, 2004).



globalization.’<sup>6</sup> More people are on the move today than at any previous point in human history. Estimates vary, but one recently quoted figure is that one in 35 people in the world is a migrant in some form or other: economic migrant, refugee, internally displaced person or asylum seeker. In 15 European countries (Switzerland, Latvia, Estonia, Austria, Croatia, Ukraine, Cyprus, Ireland, Moldova, Germany, Sweden, Belarus, Spain, France and Italy) between 10 and 25 % of the population is made up of immigrants. The reasons why the churches are having to come to terms with this phenomenon are first, of course, that just and compassionate treatment of the ‘stranger within thy gates’ (Deuteronomy 24:14, etc.) is a prime Christian duty; but, secondly, it is because so many migrants into Europe from the global south are themselves Christians. It is thought that ‘among the estimated 24 million migrants that were in the EU at the end of 2003, around 48.5 % belonged to Christian Churches. A further 30.95 % were Muslims, and about 20.5 % belonged to other religions.’<sup>7</sup> That means over 11.6 million Christians of non-European origin. Among these are communities of vibrant faith and evangelistic zeal from Africa, Latin America and Asia. A global reversal of the missionary movement is under way. This rings a particularly personal note for me. I am literally a child of the twentieth-century western missionary enterprise, for my parents were missionaries in China, where I was born. The Baptist church of which I am a member in Bristol, England, is filled to capacity every Sunday afternoon by the congregation of the West of England Chinese Church. How striking it is that there are now far more Chinese Protestant Christians living in Europe than ever Western missionaries went to China! African and Asian churches seem to be mushrooming in our European cities. In London, one of Britain’s largest and fastest-growing congregations is African in origin and led by a Nigerian pastor. The Dutch writer on migrants and migrant churches Wout van Laar describes how it is estimated that some 800,000 migrant Christians are living in the Netherlands, and that Rotterdam alone now numbers about 95 migrant churches, six of

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<sup>6</sup> DIETRICH WERNER, ‘Theological education with migrant Christians in the changing landscape of World Christianity – Crucial issues from WCC/ETE perspective’. World Council of Churches. Document dated 01.12.2010. Available on <http://www.oikumene.org/en/resources/documents/wcc-programmes/education-and-ecumenical-formation>.

<sup>7</sup> WERNER, ‘Theological education’.

them in one square kilometre of the supposedly 'secularised' city centre. He comments more generally:

The old European churches are confronted with new faces of Christianity alongside their church buildings and in their parishes. They are being challenged by hitherto unknown expressions of Christian faith, brought from all over the world. Unfamiliar African, Korean, Brazilian and Chinese shapes of Christianity give rainbow-colour to multi-ethnic cities like Rotterdam, Madrid and London. On an average Sunday in these cities one meets more non-Western migrant Christians on their way to places of worship than Christians of 'white' established denominations going to their church buildings.<sup>8</sup>

The picture is varied of course, embracing a wide range of evangelical, holiness and Pentecostal groups. Some are decidedly fundamentalist and highly conservative on ethical matters and regard the historic European churches as barely Christian. Others however are seeking genuine relationships with 'indigenous' European Christianity and, in some cases, with our ecumenical organisations. In a number of countries, joint programmes of theological education, encouraged by the WCC, are being planned. In many cases too, for example in the Waldensian churches of Italy, immigrant African Christians are not always seeking to set up their own congregations, but instead wanting to participate fully in those they find here. That is not without its tensions, as can well be imagined. Even in sunny Italy, traditional Protestant sobriety and African expressiveness do not always make for an easy marriage.

Now it may well be argued that immigrant Christianity from the global south is always going to be a minority feature in Europe, largely concentrated in certain urban centres, and that over vast tracts of Europe it will hardly be noticed. But its very presence poses a searching ecumenical question to the European churches: to whom do you relate as members of the Body of Christ? And how does that affect your sense of identity, both as churches and Europeans? Do you feel that you belong with such communities in Christ? It is one thing to say that we now have a worldwide church, to say that we are all 'one in Christ' around the globe ('Elect from every nation/Yet one o'er all the earth', to quote one of the finest Anglican hymns). But it is perhaps easier to have a sense of oneness with African Christians so long as they remain in Africa, and with Korean and Chinese

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<sup>8</sup> WOUT VAN LAAR, 'The South Moving North: The Need of a New Paradigm of Mission' (Utrecht/London, 2008). Available on [www.edinburgh2010.org/fileadmin/files/edinburgh2010](http://www.edinburgh2010.org/fileadmin/files/edinburgh2010).

Christians so long as they are confined to the inscrutable Far East, but once they come to live over here and bring something of their African or Asian life and culture with them – what then? With whom do we now identify: with these as brothers and sisters in Christ, or primarily with our largely secularised European society and culture? To whom or to what do we really belong? This is a question with which the churches all across Europe are having to wrestle.

## 2. Secularisation

I have just referred, almost as a matter of course, to ‘our largely secularised European society and culture’, and am aware that this is to provoke a host of critical questions, especially from the sociologists, as to whether I am making too many assumptions. Despite steep numerical decline in active church life, it is argued by some, it is misleading to talk of Europe as a secularised continent, quite apart from the fact that the situation varies enormously from country to country. Much depends, of course, on what we mean by ‘secularisation’ – and on that the sociologists themselves are not agreed. My own broad understanding of secularisation is three-fold: (1) a decline in active religious observance by members of the population; (2) the removal of the authority of religious organisations over social and political life, often because the welfare role of the church has been replaced by secular authorities – creating a context in which it can now be said ‘the state is my shepherd’;<sup>9</sup> (3) consequently the development of a discourse in public affairs which does not invoke or refer to explicitly religious values. With regard to the decline in religious observance, I accept much of what such researchers as Grace Davie have to say about the persistence of residual belief among non-church-attached people, a ‘believing without belonging’. But I note that Davie at one point uses the term a ‘latent sense of *belonging*’<sup>10</sup> to describe the deep-seated religious aspirations of those who have ‘ceased to connect with their religious institutions’, and I take this to be an admission that the distinction between ‘believing’ and ‘belonging’ cannot be made too rigid. This is important, for it is pretty certain that if there is a ‘believing without belonging’, there is also a ‘belonging without believing’. That is, there are those who remain faithful attenders and participants in traditional churches while affecting a deep

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<sup>9</sup> JENKINS, *God's Continent*, p. 43.

<sup>10</sup> DAVIE, *Europe: The Exceptional Case*, p. 8.

personal agnosticism about much, if not most of their official doctrines and credal formulations. For all their lack of ‘belief’, they have not given up on the church because they nevertheless feel it is somehow a force for good in society; they cherish its cultural heritage (especially of architecture and music) and it provides them with human relationships and community. They are, one might say, unsecularised unbelievers. In the British context, I often hear Anglicans saying that it is part of the role of the Church of England to continue to provide a home for such people.<sup>11</sup> I would simply say that the same is no less true of the less conservative Free Churches and probably parts of the Roman Catholic Church as well.

Where the churches are really having to face the fact of secularisation is in the area of public affairs. What is interesting is the way in which, despite vocal opposition from secularists and misgivings from within their own ranks, they are seeking how to translate their social and ethical concerns, which are theologically based, into the secular language of European politics and social policy where theological language is not understood. I recognise that there are some who say this cannot be done without betraying the gospel into the hands of the ungodly, on the grounds that secular political and social discourse is inherently atheistic in its presuppositions.<sup>12</sup> But the alternative is for the church simply to talk to itself in its own religious language all the time. I instance the challenge and opportunity which has arisen especially with the development of the European Union. We recall the debates that accompanied the formulation of the Preamble to the European Constitution, and how much religious content there should be in it. The European churches held widely differing views on this, some (especially Roman Catholic and Orthodox) wanting a specific reference to God as supreme authority, others being more content with a recognition of Christianity as the prime historic source of European identity and values, but all having finally to accept a somewhat nebulous paragraph acknowledging the diverse spiritual and cultural roots of Europe. The EU is, therefore, evidently an avowedly secular body. But if it is non-religious, is it thereby *anti*-religious? What has generally been overlooked, is that in the actual substance of the Treaty itself there is set

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<sup>11</sup> For example, the noted historian Hugh Trevor-Roper (Lord Dacre) (1914–2003) ‘claimed to be an Anglican, not a Christian’. See ADAM SISMAN, *Hugh Trevor-Roper. The Biography* (London: Weidenfeld and Nicholson, 2010), p. 124.

<sup>12</sup> I am thinking here of some representatives of the contemporary ‘Radical Orthodoxy’ Anglican theological movement.

the clause which commits the European Commission to ‘maintain an open, transparent and regular dialogue’ with the churches.<sup>13</sup> The insertion of this clause was due to the joint collaboration and advocacy in Brussels of the Conference of European Churches’ Church and Society Commission and the Commission of Catholic Bishops Conferences in the EU (COMECE). The EU has created space for dialogue with policy-makers and it is up to the churches to make use of the opportunities. What is notable is that, as well as the CEC Church and Society Commission, which represents the 125+ member churches of CEC at the European Institutions, and COMECE for the Roman Catholics, a number of churches have also established their own offices in Brussels, and these include Orthodox as well as Protestant and Anglican. It may be complained that such church presences are simply there to seek protection of their interests back home, against unwelcome aspects of EU legislation. But there is more taking place than that. The churches from across Europe are learning, by experience and from each other, about how they can contribute to the welfare of Europe as a whole and the interests of all its peoples.<sup>14</sup> This requires that, certainly on the basis of their faith, but without in the first instance demanding that that faith be accepted by all, they can meaningfully address concrete human issues. A neat if small-scale example is the recently founded ‘European Sunday Alliance’ in which a number of churches are joining forces with labour organisations to protect Sunday as a day of rest – not citing the Decalogue directly, but reflecting nonetheless the biblical principle of the need for rest from work, and the protection of health, safety, family life and the dignity of everyone.<sup>15</sup>

In our time, however, in the eyes of many the most avowedly secular concept is that of ‘human rights’, which as such is defended by secularists and attacked by some religious. For us in the West human rights are almost too easily assumed to be consonant with Christian belief and ethics, and indeed western Christianity has been formative in making human rights a central pillar of public discourse from the time of the Second World War. In the East, and for Eastern Orthodoxy in particular, this has not been so

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<sup>13</sup> See Article I–52 in draft *Treaty Establishing a Constitution for Europe* (European Commission, 2003).

<sup>14</sup> Cf. Jeremiah’s letter to the exiles in Babylon: ‘But seek the welfare of the city where I have sent you into exile ...’ (Jer. 29:7).

<sup>15</sup> See also other studies and statements by the CEC Church and Society Commission on poverty, rural life, the environment, etc. Visit [www.ceceurope.org/](http://www.ceceurope.org/).



because of a different perception of the place of the individual in relation to society. This has led to some unfortunate mutual caricaturing of Western and Eastern European Christians, with westerners being labelled by Orthodox as purely individualist, and Orthodox being accused by westerners of implicit totalitarianism by placing the needs of the state or national community or church over the freedom of the individual. There are still real issues here, which lie at the basis of the debates about religious freedom and what is seen in the east as proselytism by both Protestants and Roman Catholics. But we should note carefully that there is a developing understanding within Orthodoxy on human rights and their theological basis. Yes, there is criticism of human rights if they are conceptually based on anthropocentric and individualistic presuppositions. But also among such writers as Vladimir Lossky and the present Patriarch of Romania, His Beatitude Daniel, there is strong affirmation that human rights is a proper concept if it is placed in the context of human mutual relationships in which true freedom is the freedom of loving God and one's neighbour. Patriarch Daniel even states: 'Paradoxically secularisation makes a claim on holiness! The presence of others makes a claim on our prayer! The life of others makes a claim on our love! The freedom of others makes a claim on our responsibility! The rights of others make a claim on our duty! The humanity of others reminds us of our divine vocation, our likeness to the living God!'<sup>16</sup> In not dissimilar vein, Archbishop Jeremiasz of the Polish Autocephalous Orthodox Church, recently argued that secularisation, with its emphasis on the autonomy of the human person, provides an opportunity for the deepening of Christian faith and that 'secularisation can be a necessary correction and an opportunity for renewal of the churches'.<sup>17</sup> What is evident, therefore, is that churches across the confessional spectrum are seeing that secularisation cannot be judged positively or negatively in itself. It is a medium plastic to treatment by faith.

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<sup>16</sup> Metropolitan [now His Beatitude] Daniel, 'The Orthodox Church and Human Rights: a Pastoral response to a Pressing Issue', in JAMES BARNETT (ed.), *A Theology for Europe. The Churches and the European Institutions* (Bern: Peter Lang, 2005), p. 217.

<sup>17</sup> Address to the meeting of European National Councils of Churches, 4–7 April 2011, in Warsaw. Cited in CEC Press Release 11/07, 8 April 2011.

### 3. From Christendom to a consciously chosen Christianity

Whatever else, we are at a most interesting time in European Christianity, of former sharp distinctions becoming relativized and blurred and new possible identities and self-understandings emerging, with big ecumenical implications. Sigmund Freud coined the term ‘the narcissism of minor differences’ to describe how both individuals and groups may exaggerate what they believe to be unique about themselves as a way of hiding or compensating for internal tensions and conflicts in themselves, or anxieties about their status in relation to others.<sup>18</sup> If in the past the churches have exhibited such narcissism, today they are being encouraged to escape from it.

In 2011 it is exactly one hundred years ago that there appeared in German the monumental work of Ernst Troeltsch *The Social Teaching of the Christian Churches*.<sup>19</sup> Troeltsch set out his famous distinction between the ‘church type’ and ‘sect type’ of Christianity. The former is the inclusive concept of church, seen most evidently in the *Volkskirche* or ‘national’ church; it embraces all in society who have not consciously opted out of it. The latter, the ‘sect type’, is seen in the exclusive ‘gathered congregation’ of the faithful who have consciously chosen to be members, often in conscious rejection of the society around them. Of course not all churches neatly and entirely fit into one or other of these categories – no doubt the Old Catholics have debated this long and hard over the years!

But a mere 16 years after Troeltsch’s work appeared, the young Dietrich Bonhoeffer was challenging the church/sect distinction on theological grounds. Defining the church as the community which hears the Word of God, Bonhoeffer strongly relativizes the concept of ‘church type’ and ‘sect type’ Christianity, and also sees a necessary complementarity between the ‘national’ church (*Volkskirche*) and ‘gathered’ church, in the interests of always keeping open the possibility of a ‘confessing’ church. Remarkably, this was in his doctoral dissertation *Sanctorum Communio*, written six years before the advent of Hitler to power and the onset of the

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<sup>18</sup> I owe this reference to Freud to PETER BALDWIN, *The Narcissism of Minor Differences. How America and Europe are Alike* (Oxford: OUP, 2009).

<sup>19</sup> ERNST TROELTSCH, *The Social Teaching of the Christian Churches*, trans. Olive Wyon, 2 vols (London: George Allen and Unwin, 1931; original German edition 1911).



German Church Struggle.<sup>20</sup> The lessons from that chapter in European church history are still echoing today whenever the issues are raised about where the ultimate loyalty of any church lies amid the competing claims of race, nation, state and the universality of the *Una Sancta*. The problem has been that however sociologically neutral the term 'sect' may be, it still carries a pejorative association. One hears arguments from some Anglican traditionalists for example that if the Church of England were to be 'disestablished' then it would ipso facto be reduced to being a 'sect'. This does not help ecumenical relations. But today the distinction is becoming relativized. Even Pope Benedict XVI has referred to Christianity having to become a 'creative minority' in modern European society, and Archbishop Rowan Williams has been heard to remark that a church always needs to keep in mind the possible necessity of becoming a sect if it is not to become simply assimilated into secular society.

Meanwhile a number of observers detect a slow but significant 'sea change' in the nature of European Christianity, from what was largely an inherited Christendom towards a consciously chosen, more voluntary allegiance. Notions like 'Christendom' or 'Christian Europe' are of course laden with a romantic aura, of a golden age when Pope and Emperor, or Prince and Bishop, Church and State went hand in hand, and faith and culture, nationality and religion, made a single, seamless robe: the 'medieval synthesis', for example. The more historians probe, however, the more they suggest that there is more romance than fact in this picture. One Anglican theologian, Timothy Gorringer, argues that the nearest Europe got to embodying this dream was not in the Catholic Middle Ages but in the 'Protestant Erastianism' of the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries.<sup>21</sup> Be that as it may, it is surely largely true that until well into the twentieth century, in Europe Christianity was a belief and a way of life into which one was born, and into which one was nurtured as part of one's education, socialisation and formation of identity. But increasingly since the Enlightenment, it was equally a belief from which one might consciously withdraw. But belief was the default position from which everyone started. This was not simply a matter of the dominance of the national church or

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<sup>20</sup> DIETRICH BONHOEFFER, *Sanctorum Communio. A Theological Study of the Sociology of the Church; Works*, English Edition, Vol. 1 (Minneapolis MN: Fortress Press, 1998), pp. 221, 269–71.

<sup>21</sup> TIMOTHY GORRINGER, *Furthering Humanity. A Theology of Culture* (Aldershot: Ashgate, 2004), p. 23.

*Volkskirche*. Those who rejected the national or established church, like the English Dissenters, still assumed there to be a national Christian culture albeit in need of purification. Today, it may be said that the general default position is non-belief or non-belonging, but also that those who do believe and belong do so with a different motivation than earlier generations. Grace Davie asks

... whether a significant and this time authentically European mutation might be taking place, both inside and outside the historic churches. The mutation in question takes the form of a gradual shift away from an understanding of religion as an obligation and towards an increasing emphasis on consumption. In other words, what until moderately recently was simply imposed ... or inherited ... becomes instead a matter of personal choice. I go to church (or to another religious organisation) because I want to, maybe for a shorter period or maybe for longer, to fulfil a particular rather than a general need in my life and where I will continue my attachment so long as it provides what I want, but I have no *obligation* either to attend in the first place or to continue if I don't want to.<sup>22</sup>

No doubt this sets alarm-bells ringing and public address systems declaring 'Danger! The market-place of religion! Spiritual consumerism! The downgrading of faith to an item for self-indulgence!' But I do not see how anyone with contemporary pastoral experience can fail to recognise that something like this is indeed going on, and must be expected to be going on in a society where secularisation has relativised and reduced the claim of traditional religious authorities and where the autonomy of the human person is recognised. Democracy is indivisible. The question is not whether personal choice as such is harmful, but whether what is on offer for personal choice is good. In Christian terms, do the various options, whatever their immediate appeal, offer ways into the catholicity of the faith?

There is however another factor which I do not think Davie fully addresses, in setting 'obligation' and 'personal choice' in sharp contrast to each other. In contemporary Christianity, many people would say that they have *both* chosen a particular community of faith *and* have a sense of duty to persist with it. Between 'choice' and 'obligation' stands 'loyalty'. 'Belonging' may have depths beyond what is outwardly observable in terms of attendance and 'membership'. Just what people feel they are belonging to when they say 'I'm Anglican', 'I'm a Baptist' or 'I'm a Roman Catholic' is not always so simple. I have already referred to people who

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<sup>22</sup> DAVIE, *Europe: The Exceptional Case*, p. 148.

‘belong without believing’ but, quite apart from such cases, we cannot presume upon what it is that people who *are* ‘committed believers’ really value and identify with in that tradition. At the 2009 American Academy of Religion, Professor John Apczynski, a Roman Catholic of St Bonaventure University, gave a fascinating paper provocatively titled ‘Is the Pope Catholic?’<sup>23</sup> It comprises reflections on identity, continuity and authority. In short, Apczynski addresses a question that must have interested many of us: how is it that many Roman Catholics, some of whom we know personally very well, highly intelligent and humane people, remain in a church which to us appears so hierarchical and authoritarian, and increasingly so in recent years? How do they square their common-sense, relatively liberal views on sexual ethics with the Papal prohibitions on contraception for example? Apczynski, however, argues that being Catholic has always meant an identity ‘shaped primarily by processes of worship, prayer, and practice informed by the meanings embedded in the communal tradition’, a formation of identity that ‘occurs gradually and almost unobtrusively by remains of their incorporation into the practices and lore of the Catholic tradition from infancy’. In summary, this transformative influence of the Catholic communal tradition is what appeals. Up until around the mid-twentieth century it was protected and controlled by the hierarchy. But then a major and dramatic shift came about:

... Catholics had increasingly come under the sway of post-modern sensibilities: their more educated status made them aware of the plural forms of flourishing available in a democratic, open society. As they interacted with fellow citizens in a variety of neighbourhood, educational and workplace environments they became more conscious of their own abilities to act responsibly in the quest for some ultimate significance to their lives ... [T]hey had come to acknowledge the general authority of the Pope (along with the hierarchy), but because of their personal experience and reflection they no longer regarded the Vatican’s promulgations of concrete norms to have the same authoritative force. Indeed, this ‘sense of the faithful’ [*sensus fidelium*] was explicitly recognized during the Second Vatican Council to be a means contributing to the understanding of revelation and should be valued as such by the Catholic tradition.<sup>24</sup>

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<sup>23</sup> JOHN V. APCZYNSKI, ‘Is the Pope Catholic? Reflections on Identity, Continuity, and Authority’. Presented at meeting of Polanyi Society, American Academy of Religion, Montreal, Quebec, November 2009. Unpublished to date.

<sup>24</sup> APCZYNSKI, p. 13.

How and why people identify with a particular church today may therefore be rather different from the official leadership story. This particular instance, I suspect, applies not only to Roman Catholics in America, and not only to Roman Catholics in Europe, but in some shape or form can have parallels with most of our traditions in Europe today. And of course it has large implications for ecumenical dialogue.

#### 4. The vicarious church and mission

To link ecclesiology and mission together is quite a bold enterprise, since there can be no assumed agreement on either ecclesiology or mission and so one can end up with a mushrooming diversity of disagreements! I will be very interested to see how the CEC Churches in Dialogue Commission handles this one, committed as it is to a programme of study on the self-same linkage over the next few years. I recall that about ten years ago when we first discussed in CEC Central Committee the setting up of the CEC consultancy on mission in Europe, the church representatives who took the most convincing were not the Anglicans, nor the Orthodox, nor our Roman Catholic partners, but the historic *Volkskirche* of the Reformation. If a church understands itself to be a church *of* the people it may find some embarrassment in being asked to consider a mission *to* the people. In this respect Grace Davie is interesting in her suggestion that whilst European Christianity in terms of active belonging is clearly in a minority, it does have a *vicarious* significance for the wider penumbra of those with residual belief. She writes:

Could it be that Europeans are not so much less religious than populations in other parts of the world, but – quite simply – differently so? For particular historical reasons ... significant numbers of Europeans are content to let both churches and churchgoers enact a memory on their behalf (the essential meaning of vicarious), more than half aware that they might need to draw on the capital at crucial times in their individual or collective lives.<sup>25</sup>

Davie cites examples of occasions of national tragedy and grief when people turn to the churches for public ritualising and pastoral care: most recently, of course, the Norwegian massacre of 22 August 2011 will come to our minds. I find this notion of vicarious Christianity highly suggestive but would like to push it much further beyond its being a social phenom-

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<sup>25</sup> DAVIE, *Europe: The Exceptional Case*, p. 19.

enon acting by default, as it were, and much more as a conscious commitment by the churches as to how they identify themselves and their responsibility to everyone in their society, whether they are believers in any sense or not. In fact, one of the heartening features of European church life, certainly at the ecumenical level, is a new preparedness to take on issues which vitally affect the lives of all in society, whether related to the church or not. As an example take the report of the CEC Church and Society Commission in Brussels and Strasbourg, *Rural Life in Europe*. Naturally so much of our attention in Europe goes on our big cities where social problems are most visible and, as happened in our English cities recently, can explode into violence. Yet huge swathes of Europe are rural. The level of rural population in the ten countries from the east which joined the EU in 2004 is well above the European average, and these rural societies have been especially vulnerable to the Common Agricultural Policy. Mark Lenders, who was then the Church and society staff person responsible for this area, writes:

... [T]he churches have been alerted to the conditions in which many simple country people have to live. The fact that there is an abnormally high number of suicides in this portion of the population, the fact that there are many emergency telephone lines to support families in distress, a rural society that is crumbling in many places, the fact that professional organisations and the unions did not seem to care about remedying the situation at that time drove the churches to fulfil their vicarious task of political *diakonia* in this respect. They fulfilled it with the means available to them. They developed personal contact with those who were directly involved in developing networks that enabled people to feel less isolated; politically they intervened directly in Brussels with those who devised the policies.<sup>26</sup>

Such vicarious representative work, being fully ecumenical, is not the special prerogative of any one kind of church, *Volkskirche* or gathered church. Whether or not historically the churches of Europe have considered themselves to be *of* the people or of only certain believing people from the population, there is now in train a learning process of how to be church *for* the people, which churches of all types are having to discover. Moreover, if it can no longer be assumed that the historic attitudes, assumptions and certainties that once ensured that the churches fulfilled a significant social role will enable them to sustain even their recent level of

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<sup>26</sup> MARC LENDERS, 'The Future of Rural Life in Europe: the Minutes of an Experiment', in Barnett (ed.), *A Theology for Europe*, p. 166.



resources and activities, that surely makes the ecumenical enterprise even more important.

But mission as normally understood also includes evangelism, the communication of the gospel and the invitation to faith and discipleship. My final observation concerns those levels and types of belief among those who do not 'belong' to any church. A recent survey across sixteen European countries, east and west, by the Nova Research Centre on Mission in Europe concludes that European *young* people do have a more secular world view than previous generations, even in some traditionally Catholic countries.<sup>27</sup> However, even among young people, belief in God continues to hold up despite very low church attendance. Only in France, Germany and the Czech Republic does belief in God fall below 40%. 'Half of all Europeans and 41 % of young people continue to believe that religion is 'very or quite important in their lives.' One striking fact to emerge is that it is the country which under Communism was the most rigorously atheist of all, namely Albania, where more than 80 % of adults and more than 75 % of 20–29 year-olds say they are 'religious', and where one is least likely to find self-declared atheists. This would seem to support Davie's thesis. But what I find striking is how the sociologists and not a few theologians habitually describe the beliefs of non-church-attenders as 'residual' or at best 'persistent' belief. The assumption is that it is the dying ember of the old fire and will eventually go out completely. But the fact remains that there is a significant level of belief among *young* people throughout Europe, not all of whom will have simply caught it from the parents or grandparents. Why do we not call this *incipient* belief rather than 'residual'? Is it some kind of self-induced pessimism, a perverse determination to be negative, that makes us view such belief or interest in spirituality as an ending rather than a potential new beginning, a withering leaf rather than a seed of new life? Or is God already prompting the *missio Dei* beyond the bounds of the present church? Do we not condemn ourselves too quickly as missionary failures in secularised Europe? And might not such sense of failure be the reverse side of a kind of pride, an ambition to be in charge of God's mission on God's behalf?

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<sup>27</sup> 'Understanding the "spirituality" FAQs of contemporary European young people', *Vista* (quarterly bulletin of research-based information on mission in Europe, Nova Research Centre, Redcliffe College, Gloucester, UK), issue 4 (January 2011).

## 5. Conclusion

Taking the risk of making my conclusion the subject for another paper, I suggest that we look for insight to the context from which many of the new European churches have come from the global South. The Gambian mis-siologist Lammin Sanneh points out that while the missionary movement brought the gospel to the South in the colonial era, the most dramatic growth of Christianity there has occurred *after* the colonial period and the western-led missionary enterprise.<sup>28</sup> He persuasively argues that the main agency in the spread of the gospel across new cultural frontiers is not primarily the missionary or the missionary church, but the indigenous recipients. I simply ask the question: what parallel might Europe offer to this process in the future? Might our historically established churches somehow have to *allow* certain things to happen, instead of too anxiously trying to *do* them on behalf of God, or ‘the re-evangelisation of Europe’, to quote Pope Benedict? Might our calling have to be to give space and opportunity to those who are seeking after spiritual truth in semi-secular Europe rather than devising means of foisting it upon them? If so, I would hope that both the Anglican and Old Catholic communities, with their ethos of hospitable openness to people at all stages of their spiritual journeying, could play an important role here.

To summarise all the points that I have sought to make, now is an exciting as well as critical time for Christianity in Europe, a time of far-reaching and long-term changes that are at work. There are invigorating arrivals from outside Europe. Churches are engaging creatively with secularity, not just in retreat from it. A new kind of Christian belonging and identity is being shaped, even as the old Christendom erodes, a Christianity of conscious commitment rather than an assumed inheritance or obligation, one that sees its calling to vicarious ministry on behalf of all people. If it is truly humble and hopeful, it can be Christianity at the start of a new phase of God’s mission in Europe as in the rest of the world. Lammin Sanneh, to whom I have just referred, describes what he sees as a prevailing mood of pessimism among Europe’s churches: ‘solemn vespers without the Gloria’, he says.<sup>29</sup> There is no reason why, even before daybreak, we might in the lifetime of many of us start singing the office of Mattins.

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<sup>28</sup> LAMIN SANNEH, *Whose Religion is Christianity? The Gospel beyond the West* (Grand Rapids MI: Eerdmans, 2003).

<sup>29</sup> SANNEH, *Whose Religion is Christianity?*, p. 30.



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### *Deutsche Zusammenfassung*

Das europäische Christentum erfährt – allgemein gesprochen – derzeit eine signifikante Langzeitentwicklung. Die Soziologin Grace Davie hat über «Glauben ohne dazuzugehören» (believing without belonging) als Kennzeichen eines «übrig gebliebenen» Christentums in Europa geschrieben, während Philip Jenkins das «christliche Europa» als «Laboratorium für neue Weisen zu glauben» bezeichnet hat. Vier hauptsächliche Veränderungen finden – stichwortartig aufgezählt – statt:

*Migration nach Europa*, vor allem von Christinnen und Christen aus dem Süden. Dies wird bisweilen als «umgekehrte Mission» bezeichnet. Aber zugleich fordert dies europäische Kirchen und Christen heraus, sich der ökumenischen Frage nach ihrer eigenen Identität und Zugehörigkeit in einer sich globalisierenden Welt zu stellen.

*Säkularisierung*, ein komplexer Prozess sowohl in seinen Wirkungen als auch hinsichtlich der Reaktionen, die er vonseiten der Kirchen hervorruft (genauso wie es «Glauben ohne Zugehörigkeit» gibt, gibt es «Zugehörigkeit ohne Glauben»). Die Kirchen stehen heute nicht mehr abseits, sondern engagieren sich in positiver Weise.

*Vom Christentum zu einer bewussten Entscheidungschristenheit*. Frühere klare Unterscheidungen werden weniger scharf. Im heutigen Europa ist es schwierig geworden, an Troeltschs Unterscheidung zwischen Kirche und Sekte innerhalb des Christentums festzuhalten. Quer durch alle Konfessionen, auch in den Volkskirchen, ist Christsein nicht mehr einfach etwas, was als vorgegeben übernommen wird, sondern eine willentliche Selbstverpflichtung.

*Auf dem Weg zu einer «stellvertretenden» Kirche und Mission*. Stellvertretung kann als eine Art und Weise verstanden werden, wie Kirchen aller Art ganz bewusst ihr Zeugnis als «im Namen von» allen Menschen und Lebensbereichen verstehen. Im Hinblick auf die Weitergabe des Glaubens muss der «übrig gebliebene» Glaube, der sogar unter jungen Menschen auf einem erstaunlich hohen

Niveau vorhanden bleibt, neu bestimmt werden: Es ist nämlich vielmehr ein «beginnender» Glaube.

Fazit: Die europäische Christenheit befindet sich in einer anregenden und zugleich kritischen Periode des Wandels und der Neuerfindung.

*Key words:* believing – migration – secularisation.