

Christianity in Europe: A Future?

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It may not be perfect, but contemporary Europe as a social, cultural, and political reality is an extraordinary achievement.¹ It is not only the envy of many peoples the world over (witness the numbers that wish to come here), but it is a potential model for nations working together in collaboration, while maintaining individual identities at personal and national level. We, as Europeans, enjoy the highest levels of personal and communal freedom of any peoples ever, we enjoy a relatively high level of economic affluence; we enjoy significant political stability with our well-developed democratic structures; and women enjoy an almost equal standing to men in many areas of our culture (I think that it would probably be dangerous for me to suggest that we have achieved an absolute equality!). Europe is, of course, a complex entity that is built on a whole spectrum of archaeological layers that include Greco-Roman culture, Judeo-Christian culture, Arab-Islamic influences, the Renaissance, the Enlightenment, humanism, modernity, post-modernity, and so on. Without overrating the achievement of Europe (as there is much that is still problematic), it is, nonetheless, significant in terms of its possibilities, its freedoms, and its stabilities. I, and I would wager, many Europeans, do not wish to live elsewhere. Writing recently in *La Repubblica*, the Bulgarian-French philosopher and psychoanalyst, Julia Kristeva, speaking of Europe as a 'cultural space (lo spazio culturale),' observes that 'it is perhaps the only one that takes seriously the complexity of the human condition in its togetherness, the lessons of its memory, [and] the risks of its freedom.'²

¹ This paper was given in reaction to a number of young adults speaking about vocation, faith, and religion as part of the Jesuit Province Assembly, held in Milltown Park, 31 May 2014.

² Julia Kristeva, *La bandiera della diversità che ci rende più uniti*, http://www.kristeva.fr/la_repubblica_25_04_2014.html (accessed May 29, 2014).

There is, however, a distinct and, for some, perhaps, surprising disquiet in Europe when it comes to Christian Faith. Despite the enormous contribution of the Christian churches to the shaping of European culture, politics, and identity, young Europeans, and this includes the Irish voices that we heard this morning, by and large, have stepped back from religion in its institutional form and seek otherwise to honour the demands of their spiritual identities. I take no consolation whatsoever from stabilising, or even rising, numbers of vocations to religious life in other parts of the world as being some kind of ratification of the life of faith *against* a European mutiny that has abandoned the bark of Peter and, alone and without guide, taken to the open spiritual seas. What is going on in Europe when it comes to Christian faith and belief? Recognising that they stand on the shoulders of a rich Christian heritage (and in some cases a Jesuit one), what are young Europeans now communicating to us about this heritage? What exactly is being rejected? And the crucial question: *Is the Church in its institutional moments prepared to learn from, and in, Europe?* This is a question that has hardly been asked in a serious way.

The Religious Sentiment – The Desire for the Absolute

The point is now laboured that we are witnessing a so-called ‘return’ of religion as if at some point around midsummer 1965 it were destined, mistakenly, to go away forever! This ‘return,’ if we accept this designation, is not, however, along traditional lines, nor from within a narrow religious self-understanding. It is far less an organised public reality than in earlier dispensations and would appear to be allergic to institutional structures. Against the so-called secularisation thesis, some now even speak of a process of de-secularisation or diagnose a post-secularity.³ Such complementary terms, however,

³ See Peter L. Berger, ed., *The Desecularization of the World: Resurgent Religion and World Politics* (Grand Rapids, MI: William B. Eerdmans, 1999); Hans-Joachim Höhn, *Postsäkular: Gesellschaft im Umbruch—Religion im Wandel* (Paderborn: Schöningh, 2007).

obscure the complexity of the personal and social dynamics that are at the foundation of what we are witnessing in Europe.

The essential point to be recognized is that the religious sentiment, the drive to seek and engage with the absolute, is, and remains, an indestructible foundation of the human person.⁴ It cannot be definitively quenched, excised, or sublimated. Certainly, it may, for a time, be masked by other satisfactions, but these will always emerge eventually as surrogate, relatively empty, and ultimately unsatisfying. Its originality cannot be replaced by other phenomena, be they sport, entertainment, music, the arts, Gurus, psychotherapy, the determinations of the social sciences, hyper-connectivity and social media, advancing technology, etc. This is so even for the highly educated European mind and heart! As we advance through life in exploring the landscape of our interiority, this desire will imperiously assert itself beyond and above all other needs. The task of responding to it may be delayed—as it often is because of the multiple stimulations of contemporary culture and the onerous responsibilities of daily living—but it cannot be definitively suspended. It is this that explains the so-called ‘return’ of religion. It is not really a ‘return’ at all; it is a re-realization of the infinite complexity of human interiority. We cannot do without God: it is the universal truth of the *inquietum est cor nostrum* of St. Augustine. This is true not only for each person, but it is also true for every culture. If I may quote Karl Rahner SJ:

There will always be a mysticism and mystagogy of the inexpressible nearness of God, who created another being in order to give himself in love as the gift of eternal life. Men [and women] can always be taught to demolish the finite images of idols which obstruct their paths or to pass them by calmly; can be taught not to make anything absolute; to become ‘equable’ and ‘calm’ in the face of all sorts of

⁴ For a philosophical discussion and justification of this observation, see Maurice Blondel, *Action: Essay on a Critique of life and a Science of Practice*, trans. Olivia Blanchette (Notre Dame: Notre Dame Press, 1984); see, more specifically, Maurice Blondel, ‘M. Maurice Blondel, Professeur de philosophie à l’Université d’Aix,’ in *La Question Religieuse: Enquête Internationale*, ed. Frédéric Charpin (Paris: Société du Mercure de France, 1908), 242-45.

powers and forces, ideologies, goals and futures. In this way they learn what God is and that their freedom is not as empty as it seems.⁵

But we can say more. It is evident in Europe that the so-called ‘return’ or better ‘new visibility’ of religion is not being expressed in the frameworks of traditional Christianity. You will recall one young woman pointing out that she ‘was spiritual,’ but not ‘religious.’ Such an observation, which is typical in our culture, raises some very important questions about these very frameworks, which it could be argued, in their present form, at least in Europe, are no longer, as the saying goes, ‘fit for purpose.’ I would contend that this distancing from the frameworks of the institutional Church and the apparent indifference to the formal structures of religious practice can themselves be read as a preparation for a renaissance of Gospel truth and life (which respond precisely to the indestructible human desire for the absolute).

The crisis that we are experiencing on the surface of the European mind and heart when it comes to faith is not a ‘dissolution’ of the spirit of faith nor even an evolution because the spirit of faith does not change. Rather it is a purification of the religious sense and a preparation for a deeper integration of catholic truth.⁶ It is purification because the so-called collapse in our present time is simply of realities that are already moribund and are no longer capable of supporting in its present form the life of faith. Of course, one can try to maintain as sacrosanct institutional forms and practices from an earlier constellation by claiming that they are somehow intrinsic to Christian reality, but the truth is that in multiple unknown and unacknowledged ways—through the development of more equitable societal forms, through the unexpected events of history, through the

⁵ Karl Rahner and Paul Imhof, *Ignatius of Loyola*, trans. Rosaleen Ockenden (London: Collins, 1979), 38.

⁶ See Blondel, ‘M. Maurice Blondel,’ 243.

interior lives and actions of individual persons, through struggles for equality, through upright minds that are searching and seeking, and even through those who may be hostile to religion—the liberating vision of the Gospel is realized in our time. We have no monopoly on the ways of God or on the drama of personal faith.

It is an utter illusion to set up a polarity or a polemic for and against faith. Those who try, for example, to suppress the religious sentiment only strengthen and extend it. Richard Dawkins has done more for religion in the popular mind than I will ever do!⁷ And in any case, you only fight with something (or better someone) that is important for you. Likewise, those who would defend a particular *Gestalt* of the life of faith at a cost to newer manifestations only enclose themselves in the prison of resistances and speed up the emergence of new and alternate expansions. Through their intransigence, those who dwell in the past hope, perhaps, that without changing the self, they will succeed in changing the other. In a contemporary Europe that values personal freedom, this simply will not happen. You will only move the mind and heart of the other in changing the self, and this occurs only when the self, as self, is recalled to the radical conditions of the Gospel. In this way what appears as loss leads in reality to a richer integration of the religious life and thought, which is elaborated in Christianity and through Christianity.

The End of Empire and the 'Time of the Other'

In European thought there has been since the mid twentieth century a concern with thinking the 'other' over against the 'self.' This concern is a reaction to the self-centered philosophies that could be (and were) exploited to bolster the dynamics of totalitarian regimes that survived by exploiting an insidious power-over-the-other. It was a failure in

⁷ Indeed, Aristotle has already pointed out that oppositions are contraries of the same order.

the broadest sense of ethical and religious resistance, and as such, it was the manifestation of evil. The dynamics of power-over, encapsulated in the idea of 'totality,' in its very essence sacrifices the individual and the personal for the sake of the communal, the group, the institution, the nation, and so on. This powerful reaction to the self-centering self of modernity through an ethical de-centering of the self in post-modernity is still being played out in European thought and culture.⁸

My concern in terms of our work of reflection here today is that this contrast between what I will call the 'centering of the self,' which makes little allowance for the other *in their otherness*, and the recognition of the 'singularity of the other,' which prioritizes a concern for the other in an ethical or even religious gesture, touches on something that is essential for Christianity as the possibility of being a life-giving source and force in Europe.

Ever since the fortuitous marriage of empire and gospel in the early fourth century, Christianity has learned to play the forces of power-over-the-other to the advantage of the self.⁹ And this has been the case at every level and in every manifestation of Christian life. At various times and in various places throughout Europe, it has meant, for example, a power alliance with political and juridical structures, the murder of those who did not conform to the dominant understanding of Christianity, the oppression and silencing of the other's discourse when it did not match that of hierarchical leadership, and so on. Such dark memories do not, and will not ever, sit well with the European mind. And in our present context lead to a deep distrust of any alliance between power-over and gospel. A credible ministry in the European context cannot any longer play the forces of

⁸ In politics, for example, we see this in the recent European elections, where, to the surprise of many, more right wing parties did extremely well. It is, if you like, a re-assertion of the self over the other, and, in some cases, explicitly so when the other is taken to be a so-called 'non-national' or a 'foreigner'.

⁹ As a symbolic date that would mark this conjunction, one could take the battle at the Milvian Bridge on October 28, 312, when Constantine defeated Maxentius and was proclaimed emperor, declaring himself to be Christian shortly afterwards (although he was not baptised until on his deathbed).

power-over-the-other to its own advantage. Interestingly, in *Evangelii Gaudium*, Pope Francis complains of a

self-absorbed promethean neo-pelagianism of those who ultimately trust only in their own powers and feel superior to others because they observe certain rules or remain intransigently faithful to a particular Catholic style from the past. A supposed soundness of doctrine or discipline leads instead to a narcissistic and authoritarian elitism, whereby instead of evangelizing, one analyzes and classifies others, and instead of opening the door to grace, one exhausts his or her energies in inspecting and verifying. In neither case is one really concerned about Jesus Christ or others. These are manifestations of an anthropocentric immanentism. It is impossible to think that a genuine evangelizing thrust could emerge from these adulterated forms of Christianity.¹⁰

Regretfully, power-over structures are now so closely associated with the ‘institutionality’ of the Church, that the majority of European young adults would prefer to describe themselves as ‘spiritual’ but not ‘religious.’¹¹ This is understood to be the only manner of safeguarding their intimate, personal sphere from the prying eyes and manipulating minds of would be co-religionists, teachers, or leaders. It reflects an utter lack of trust in the institution, as institution.

The Singularity of the Other

A major achievement of the European mind since the Enlightenment is the recognition and, where feasible, the protection of individual freedom and the concomitant recognition of the absolute dignity of each human being. This explains ultimately why for Europeans the death penalty is barbaric. The remote origin of this achievement is to be found, no doubt, in the Judeo-Christian recognition of each person being created in the image and likeness of God. In the twentieth century this would lead, particularly in the

¹⁰ *Evangelii Gaudium*, no. 94.

¹¹ For a discussion of ‘institutionality,’ see Michael A. Conway, ‘Ministry in Transition,’ *The Furrow* 65(2014): 131-149, at 140-41.

work of French phenomenologists, to the radical recognition of the dignity of the other. It is leading slowly but surely to the intellectual, practical, and political valuation and appreciation of every individual in any community, in any particular state, in Europe. Julia Kristeva observes that this is among the most surprising acquisitions of European culture:

This singularity of each man, of each woman of that which in him or her is incommensurable, irreducible to community, and in this sense 'genial'; this singularity whose emergence and respect are among the most surprising acquisitions of European culture, and that thus constitute the foundation and the face of human rights. It is indeed the concern with the singular subject that permits the extension and the adaptation of political rights themselves to the poor, to people with disability, to aged persons, but also to respect sexual and ethnic differences in their specific intimacy.¹²

Recognizing and respecting the singularity of the other in community is to my mind the only viable possibility for a re-awakening of an active and visible Christian life in a European context. Without this, Christianity will, and can, have little purchase. It involves valuing the person in his or her integral integrity and this includes, crucially, respecting without reservation personal freedom as an inviolable norm. Crucially, this respect for individual freedom is freedom as understood and defined in the time of the other and not that of the self. There is an enormous journey to be made by some instances of the institutional Church if it is to realize this normativity at the heart of its structures and of its thinking. The institutional self must not play off the other, in its singularity, against the institution, as was, and still is, too often the case. And community cannot have uniformity, even of mind, as its ideal.

¹² Julia Kristeva, 'Conférence Introductive,' *Cercle Richelieu Senghor de Paris*, http://www.cercle-richelieu-senghor.org/index.php?option=com_content&view=article&id=42 (accessed May 29, 2014).

This de-centering of the self in the Christian narrative of identity means significantly the end of all Christian ideology that not only is bolstered by the dynamics of power-over-others (and, this, not only along institutional lines), but that survives through an uncreative rehearsing of the past, which feeds on platitudes, clichés, facile re-appropriation of earlier modes, and a significant ignorance of the dynamics of contemporary life (beyond one's immediate purview). In its place, that is, in the place of Christian ideology, I would suggest that what is now required is a Christian discourse-in-community that re-appropriates the past in order to enrich each person in their singularity in the present and so prepare for a future that is always to some degree both known and unknown. It will not only be prepared to listen, learn, and integrate when appropriate, but it will also always be attentive and respectful of the other in their otherness. It is daring vision for a renaissance of Christianity in Europe, and, ironically, the unmasking of power-over dynamics in the scandals of recent times is but one step in this changing reality of Church.

The Kenotic Time of Charity

Because it is rooted in the incarnation, Christian life is not outside of time, and the Christian community, which is intimately connected with all of humanity, belongs in time and it belongs in culture. As such, at its best, it is a powerless vehicle of redemption from within. This life is never an imposition; it is a gift. The gifting itself of this gift—that is always a matter of grace—obeys the time of the other. It cannot be otherwise. The time of ministry is not the time of the self, but rather the time of the other. And it is a servant to the rule and rhythm of the other. In Europe the dynamic of ministry and evangelisation has no future as time of the self, but must learn to obey this time of the other. It is that humbling of the self that is central to the life of Jesus of Nazareth. Ministry, understood in

the widest sense of the term, transpires to be a withdrawal of the self so as to facilitate this time of the other, which has its own rhythm, its own questions, and its own needs. Rather than being structured primarily as an efferent evangelization (or even re-evangelization), it is an afferent hospitality that is Gospel inspired. It is the opening of one's heart and mind to welcome the other so as to proffer a personal space that facilitates the work of God. Given the achievement of freedom that is Europe, this is the only possibility for the European self to discover her God, her Church, her community, and her truth as being the image and likeness of the creator. The time of invasion—the legacy of empire—must give way to the kenotic time of charity, the time of self to the time of the other.¹³

In an imaginary conversation, whereby Ignatius of Loyola speaks to a modern Jesuit, Karl Rahner SJ, writing on 'Service and Power,' observes: '[Jesus] alone can preserve you from the fascination with power which exists in a thousand forms in the Church ... ; he alone can rescue you from the only too plausible thought that basically you can only serve humankind by having power; he alone can make the Holy Cross of his powerlessness understandable and acceptable.'¹⁴

¹³ The desire and drive to vanquish the other, which, to date, has accompanied the Church in its European journey is written deep into the fabric of lived Christianity and expressed most clearly in dysfunctional dynamics of control and an inordinate preoccupation with governance. In the Western European context there is now a unique opportunity to challenge this as utterly inappropriate in terms of the Gospel as a feature of the Christian economy of redemption.

¹⁴ Karl Rahner and Paul Imhof, *Ignatius of Loyola*, trans. Rosaleen Ockenden (London: Collins, 1979), 24, translation modified.