

Working with Western Europeans

Background and world view

What is Europe? Is it the EU or the continent, and does it include Britain and Northern Ireland?

The fact is the UK is part of Europe! There are not eight continents and we have shared cultural roots with the rest of Europe. It is easy to see Europe as one block. There is however, a huge variety across Europe: especially language, cultural, political, religious and economic differences.

Europe is a group of interdependent countries. We live in a highly globalised world and in Europe that interconnectedness operates on different levels and in many areas is a given. We live very close to one another in Europe.

[The founders of the EU had deep Christian convictions about the need for reconciliation. In a context where the French and the Germans had 3 major wars within 100 years, they were determined that would never happen again in their lifetime. They decided to build economic links so that it would be very difficult to go to war. These roots are still there and the vision has been realised: Europe is more and more closely linked and it is hard to imagine France and Germany going to war now.]

A brief history of Christianity in Europe

Early days: Christ comes to Europe. The story of the book of Acts is the story of the historical development of the gospel from Chapter 2 when Jesus came to the Jewish community to Chapter 8 where Jesus came to the Samaritans and finally to Chapter 10 when Jesus came to the gentiles. When did Jesus come to Europe? Maybe it is Acts 16:6-10 in the “Man of Macedonia” or Acts 13 when the gospel reaches Cyprus? No – it is in chapter 2 when those present at Pentecost took the gospel to Rome. Christianity went on to have a massive impact on Europe in the 1st century.

Christendom comes to Europe: In 300AD Constantine Christianised the Roman Empire. Christianity became Institutional and territorial. Not all was positive about this, but Christian values influenced European thought and lifestyle in many positive ways and with largely biblical values. E.g. It is a given that when an ambulance puts its siren on, everyone clears out of the way. Why? Because human life is valued. A lot of our values are due to the impact of the Judaeo-Christian worldview. But Christendom was a strange animal and the political and economic power it welded was far removed from the power of the gospel and the Spirit and the Word. But the good news is life has moved on from Christendom. Christ (as opposed to Christendom) comes from the Middle East, has more followers in the southern hemisphere than in Europe and is on the move in other parts of the world.

Post Christendom reality in Europe today: Western Europe is highly secular and desperately needy spiritually. It is a post Christian environment. Christendom is no more.

Europe is:

- A highly **secularised** part of the world. The secular /religious divide dominates the media and politics. Religion and faith are kept out of public life.
- Generally a **multicultural society**. There is a lot of debate on how to deal with the resultant religious pluralism. As Christians we need to remember that the truth has nothing to fear from this.

Europe has been and will continue to be influenced by **postmodern thinking**. This is shown in a growing lack of shared theistic assumptions in society, a decline in biblical literacy, and erosion of common cultural

memories, and absence of common concepts of morality, and an increasing pessimism about whether truth and knowledge are ever attainable, even in principle.

The **Evangelical protestant church is small** and pockets of growth tend to be in black majority church or ethnic minority churches (e.g. Gypsy churches). Church growth is very minimal and the evangelical church is often seen as a cult e.g. in Greece with its orthodox background or in Spain with its Roman Catholic background. In general, religion and religious people are seen as the minority and prone to be considered outside of the mainstream of society.

This is an age when Europeans are generally **open to spiritual ideas** of one type or another. Younger people have rejected Christendom, e.g. if you meet a German student he will most likely tell you why the Bible isn't true. He would have been told that by Religious Education teachers in school. Most have thrown out Christianity as they perceive it as irrelevant and discredited. But there is some openness to spiritual realities. This is reflected in film and music which are both windows into contemporary culture. They also reflect the culture as much as they shape it and films and music have a huge impact on the thinking of European students. Both of these reflect an interest in spiritual issues.

In Europe the realities are shifting very fast. We are now post everything! Post-communist, Post-Christian and Post-modern. This leaves a gap and as in the 1st century, we are pluralistic, multicultural and highly secular. Europe is open to new ideas. The 1st century disciples did not know the impact of their actions. They 'just' knew that Jesus had died for their sins and had risen from the dead. They knew that the cross and resurrection had cosmic implications and consequences and so they lived and died in the light of this truth and the continent was shaped by that living and dying. Why should it not happen again?! Christendom has come and gone, but Christ has not!

Witnessing to Europeans

The two major issues that you need to have a basic understanding of are an overview of **postmodernism** and the **distinction between Christianity and institutionalised religion**. The first is perhaps obvious, the second because we need to be able to explain clearly and persuasively that Christianity is distinct to anything they have probably seen or rejected. Try to communicate a sense of vital relationship with Jesus. Get them into the gospels – Jesus is often perceived as unapproachable so we need to show them the Christ of the Bible.

Relationships are key and postmodernism has brought with it a renewed emphasis on this. This is completely in line with the fact that we are created and made for community. Remember the gospel brings with it restored relationships. Start by building bridges. Look for shared geographical connections. We have a lot of common history and much common contemporary culture. A teenager in Hungary will often have more in common with a Scottish teenager than with his Uncle. However, do not feel daunted if you do not feel an expert in contemporary culture! Aim for authenticity, openness to others and a willingness to "share your life" (1 Thes 2:8)

"The greatest apologetic for Christianity is not a well-reasoned argument but a wildly loving community. Our Lord did not say they will know us by our truths, as important as that is; truth is very important, but they will know us by our love."

A loving Christian community is the beginning context of effective ministry in a post-modern culture. This can be frustrating however, as the majority of students come over via the ERASMUS program. This means they are here for a frustratingly short period of time and it is even more vital to immediately look to form community, planning from before students arrive, since we only have 3-6 months.

Our message also needs to be one that emphasises **hope**. People are searching for hope and cannot find it. They are sceptical that it even exists *"there is no Mommy and Daddy, no great Saviour coming down to walk us through the millennium. There is no saviour."*

Postmodernism has been described as nihilism with a smile. People believe there is no hope, but they say it with a smile. Arthur Levine used the *Titanic* as an example – our culture feels it knows the ending, but they want to go first class on the journey. But we need to be people who radiate **hope**. We know the “ending” and we need to speak about Revelation 21 and 22: we need to give a sense of what God is doing and will do. We need to speak hope in a context of pain and suffering.

Stories are also a powerful means for communicating the gospel. We place *our* story in the context of *God's* story. We need to be people who will listen and allow people to share their stories. Then we need to help them place their story into the larger context of God's story. We need to live the truth out in our own lives, our own story. As we live out the gospel, people start seeing we are different. Our lives and our story intrigue them. They become more open to sharing their story with us. Then we have the right to share God's story with them. We **MUST** talk about truth. We **MUST** proclaim the gospel. But we don't always *start* there.

Most people need to start being discontent with their life. Look at current videos and listen to the songs. Most people are already there. They long for relationships because God created them that way. So often with Europeans, the conversion process will begin as they enter our community and we enter theirs. However, if we are not careful, that is where it will end. When they move, they will find another community and be “converted” to that.

We must make sure they are converted not just to the *community* but to the *King of the community*, Jesus Christ. That is where Biblical revelation needs to be coming through all of the time. In a preaching context, 1-1 or small group bible study context, it doesn't matter which – it just needs to be done. Then they will grow in commitment to Christ. We are called to “go and make disciples” Matthew 28:18.

“Many Christians see this post-modern generation as a hopeless cause. But I think that the opportunity for revival is greater today than it has been in the last 40 years...this post-modern generation is struggling to survive the confusing changes that surround them. They feel hopeless. Are we ready to offer them God's hope? ... God is calling us to be a people of hope who offer this gospel of hope to a generation without hope.”

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See also the articles "Roman Catholicism" and "Post-modernism" on the Friends International website.

Resources

Grace Davie. *Parameters of Faith in the Modern World'*
Published by Darton, Longman and Todd.
ISBN: 0232524254

Philip Jenkins. *The Next Christendom: The Coming of Global Christianity*
Publisher: Oxford University Press Inc, USA
ISBN: 0195146166

Telling the Truth: Evangelizing Postmoderns D.A. Carson (Editor)
Publisher: Zondervan
ISBN: 0310243343

James W. Sire. *The Universe Next Door: A Basic Worldview Catalog*
Publisher: Inter Varsity Press
ISBN: 0830827803