

The context of contemporary education in Europe

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Introduction

As we try to be faithful to scripture, and relevant (at the same time), what does 'relevance' mean, in early 21st century Europe?

I feel inadequate: because the changing realities of our very varied continent are hard to capture in a short talk; and because you did such good work in the 'Prague Declaration' ten years ago: and though lots has changed, it is still very helpful. So, I am tempted to list some words that are obvious, and then sit down!

But let me try to say some things that I hope will spark further discussion.

My conviction is that Europe today has some significant similarities with the world in which the early Christians lived and worked: pluralistic, multicultural, hedonistic, highly secularised, and perhaps as open to new ideas as that century.

Christians in the first century did not know what a difference they would make in Europe. They simply knew that Jesus had died for their sins and that He had risen from the dead. They understood that the cross and the resurrection had cosmic consequences: so they went out and, by God's grace, changed the world.

1. The early days of Christianity: the arrival of Christ in Europe....

We know the wonderful story of the book of Acts, and the growth of the Early Church globally: but especially in 'Europe', as we now know this western end of the Eurasian landmass.

But how should Christ's impact on European society be evaluated? Rodney Stark (Professor of Sociology and Comparative Religion, University of Washington) in his book 'The Rise of Christianity' writes:

'Pagan and Christian writers are unanimous not only that Christian Scripture stressed love and charity as the central duties of faith, but that these were sustained in everyday behaviour. I suggest reading the following passage from Matthew (25:35-40) as if for the very first time, in order to gain insight into the power of this new morality, when it was *new*, not centuries later in more cynical and worldly times' He then goes on to quote the whole passage, and comments 'When the New Testament was *new*, these were the norms of the Christian communities' (pages 86-87).

Keith Hopkins (Professor of Ancient History, King's College, Cambridge) in his helpful book "A World full of Gods. Pagans, Jews and Christians in the Roman Empire" is hardly sympathetic in the way he writes about Christians. So I was surprised to read these words:

'For all its idiosyncratic excesses, Christianity also promoted an image of self-sacrificing piety, of virtue, generosity to the poor, and kindness to the sick' (page 137). And again:

'The visual world of Christianity was startlingly different, in image and meaning, from the classical world of paganism. But the greatest achievement of ancient Christianity in this period was, I think, its remoulding of social ethics, its purposeful construction of the virtuous believer" (page 132).

And that remoulding of social ethics shaped every area of life: and led, over the years to an extraordinary growth of educational institutions (among other things) committed to finding out about God's world, and communicating those discoveries to others- all over Europe, and beyond.

And remember: we are talking about the influence of a minority- often a marginalised and even persecuted minority.

2. Twenty centuries later!

It would take too long to mention the dramatic changes that have occurred across Europe and the rest of the world since that first century; from Constantine's conversion and the growth of Constantinean Christendom, via the Enlightenment and the age of discovery to the present post-modern world.

But I think we need reminding of one thing briefly: that despite the great impact of the Good News of Jesus and the resurrection on Europe, it is naïve to think that Biblical faith is the only root of European civilisation- and of our forms of Christianity.

Because the Gospel is **always** contextualised: Jesus was a first century Palestinian carpenter. The early Christians in Palestine were Jewish believers. Then they worked hard to contextualise a Hebrew message to a Gentile setting: and used Greek words and patterns of thought, to do so.

And the Early Church's theologians worked out their theology in a Greek context. We are their children: and we are children of the Enlightenment (with **its** Greco-Roman and Judeo-Christian roots). Our thinking about life and about education is shaped by our Enlightenment context as well: I think it is important to also remember that when we think about 'contemporary education in Europe'.

3. Our immediate context in Europe today

See the Prague Declaration for an excellent series of thoughts about this theme! But I will add one or two things to trigger further thought. In short, our context is complicated: but exciting. It is

Post-everything

We don't need to spend time on this, because you know that we live in an age that rejects authority, and is post-industrial, post-rational, post-Christian, post-communist, and post-modern: post everything!

We sometimes seem to be post-hope and post-caring: at least when it comes to elections, when hardly any of us bother to even vote, because we are so cynical about politicians. Interestingly, a recent survey in the UK, reported in the 'Economist' (05.05.07 Page 31) found that over 75% of people trust school teachers, but less than 30% trust their local politician (the percentages are lower for national politicians). And these levels of trust in politicians (from a 'YouGov' survey for the Daily Telegraph) are matched in recent Eurobarometer and Pew Foundation surveys (in the EU and USA respectively).

Prêt a Manger's nutritional information booklet has the following quotation from Rabbi Dr Jonathan Sacks at the centre:

"The idols of today are unmistakeable - self-esteem without effort, fame without achievement, sex without consequences, wealth without responsibility, pleasure without struggle and experience without commitment."

This is clearly a very helpful analysis; I am equally interested that Prêt a Manger feels it is commercially positive to quote it!

Highly secularised

Struggles within the European Parliament, for example, are often between the secular (often militantly: a form of secular fundamentalism) and people of faith (of varying flavours).

I don't need to tell you that we need to work hard to be taken seriously in the public square. Evangelicals have tended to do one of two things. Either to retreat into private piety, suggesting that Christianity is about personal faith alone.

It is, of course, about personal faith: but it is also about public justice and righteousness. It is about relationships between the rich and the poor. It is about ethics in business. It is about abortion and euthanasia. It is about medicine; and it is about education.

It is about making a difference in this life and the next! And we have as much right as everybody else to have our input into the debate about the future of our schools and universities, our cities, countries, continent and world.

Or, the other mistake that we have made (coming from our Christendom model) is thinking that we should automatically be understood to have **more** rights than others to influence and shape our countries (because they are "Christian" in some way, so Church people have more rights than others).

The reality is that our countries are now very pluralistic, as well as highly secularised.

We do not have more rights than others: but we should not have fewer rights, either. We have as much right as the Muslim minority and the secular majority, to engage in public debate about every aspect of life in our country!

So we need to work hard, to translate the things that Scripture says into language that can be understood in our secular context, so that the whole of society can once more benefit from the wisdom of Scripture.

Globalised

There are millions of signs of that. The multi-racial nature of our societies is one sign: with massive implications for education in our cities.

Pockets are not multi-racial and lots of places are still very racist: it is very uncomfortable being an African student in Russia, or even in Belgium, and the Far Right wins a frightening percentage of the vote at election time in a lot of places. But as a general observation: Europe is an international, multi-cultural continent these days...and all the richer for that, in my view.

But the impact of globalisation goes way beyond this obvious area.

The contents pages of 'Global Transformations' make interesting reading (as does the book as a whole), even though it is dated now. For a book of stories about some aspects of economic globalisation, I recommend Thomas Friedman's 'The world is flat': it is free-market biased, but interesting and easy to read.

Part of our reality at this stage of our globalised history is that youth in Moscow probably have more in common with their contemporaries in Mexico or Manila than they do with their parents.

Isn't it odd how anti-globalisation protesters organise their demonstrations on the internet (which is a product and driving force of globalisation)!

Very open to spiritual ideas

Younger people especially have obviously rejected Christendom. But there is more openness to spiritual reality than there has been for a long time in Europe. See, for example:

- The fascination with the Para-normal and the After Life in films
- The seriousness of some of the lyrics in some pop and rock music: of course not all, but there are some serious questions about life in some music (e.g. current Bloc Party album).
- The questions that we are asked by some students and young people
- The sociological analysis of people like Grace Davie (see, for example, her book 'Europe the exceptional case')
- Some believe that growing interest in pre-Christian religions and paganism is a major trend (see Jeff Fountain's book 'Living as People of Hope'). Certainly there is a fascination with the occult and with esoteric questions (e.g. see popularity of the large esoteric fair in Basel every September)
- More likely in my view is that the dominant 'spirituality' will continue to be secular materialism
- **But** many creative types and younger people are aware that there is more to life than that!
- **And** there are indications that this dissatisfaction could become a wider trend. Secular materialism has failed, by any measure...surveys about happiness show that after a certain level of affluence, people are **less** happy: because the false appetite for more things (created by aggressive advertising) can never be fully satisfied. And there is a growing awareness of the huge damage that we are doing to the planet: raising questions about the validity of secular materialism as a foundation for the future.
- The fascination that there is with the place of Islam in Europe. There are various obvious reasons for that, but is not at least part of the reason awareness that secular materialism has no answer to the 'problem'?
- A recent TEAR Fund survey (03.04.07) found an unexpected openness to invitations to church
- Evangelical Church growth across Europe has mostly not been dramatic (except in Ukraine, and in ethnic minority Churches), but there are several indicators that show **steady** growth in evangelicalism in the last 20 years.
- Atheism is becoming more aggressive and seeking to proselytise: I suspect that this is a sign of desperation, in the light of fresh openness to spiritual issues!

In search of identity

- The big questions on the agenda are identity questions: who are we? What do we want to become?

- The EU Constitutional Treaty debate revolves around that. The question of Turkey's EU membership revolves around that
- Some people think that there can never be a spiritual 'vacuum'. I don't know whether that is true or not. What is certainly true is that democratic societies cannot exist without agreed values and some shared identity.
- And what is also certain is that, despite the rampant individualism of our age, people want to belong: to be identified as part of identifiable social networks

There are lots more things that we could discuss: many of them are listed in the Prague Declaration! If we had time, we could discuss the strange tension between modernity and post-modernity, in our day, or whether post-modernity is late-modernity, or what we think will come next (because all commentators agree that however we describe it, this phase is not sustainable). But I must finish, so:

Three short concluding thoughts

1. A lesson from the media at a time of massive cultural shift. The 'blog' culture shapes the content of the news as well as the way it is received and presented. The Time magazine 'Person of the Year' 2006 was 'You'. Increasingly the news is being driven by 'amateurs', who are empowered by the internet (for all its faults, to which I am not blind). **Ordinary people shape things these days!** And don't educators aim to shape people: who will shape others?
2. Very few people turn out for elections: but huge numbers **discuss** in chat rooms. People do care about their futures (about climate change, for example). And it is possible that the low turnout for elections is because we care: cynicism about politicians may be a sign of that, in a strange way (if we didn't care, we would not be cynical) But our **energies and interests need to be harnessed**: and isn't that what educators do?
3. In our early 21st century globalised world, people are **as hungry as ever for relationships**.even if they are at a distance, over the internet. The Triune God has designed us, in His image, for relationships. And aren't good educators committed to being positive role models: and to building relationships?

So, my encouragement to you, in your deeply strategic roles is in the form of a question: could this be our time again, as Christian educators?

Time magazine on May 14 2007 listed their choice of 'the 100 most influential people'. I am not completely convinced by all their choices. But this I know: you are among the most influential people on the planet: because you influence the next generation.

Children are being wooed by advertisers; life is often meaningless and disadvantaged at home. But Christ cares! And so do you: and you can make **the** difference in the lives of ordinary people who will shape the future of Europe.

Please God that the energy of those you influence may be channelled constructively; and that this generation of young people might shape a healthy 21st century Europe and world.

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Appendix from EurECA 'Prague Declaration'

B2. The contexts of contemporary education in Europe

There are three significant contexts which we are taking into account in proposing the Christian educational principles that follow.

B2.1 The social, economic and political context

- Changes in family patterns and breakdown in relationships generally.
- Searches for new identities for historical people-groups who look nostalgically to their more distant pasts. At the same time and in tension with this, there is a search for a new European identity which can appear quite parochial from a global perspective.
- Greater mobility across more open national frontiers leading to tensions between resurgent racisms and concerns to create more multi-cultural societies.
- Following the collapse of communism, a pervasiveness of the free market philosophy, in which the individualism of consumer autonomy is paramount.
- Disillusionment, scepticism and a lack of trust in political systems following the failure of both communism and capitalism resulting in a prevailing pragmatism, particularly in Eastern Europe.

B2.2 The spiritual and intellectual context

- A search for a new spirituality following the decline of Enlightenment modernism and loss of faith in a universal belief system.
- Abiding Christian influences in national cultural heritages across the continent (including the former communist lands) and attempts on the part of the established Christian denominations to reclaim lost ground.
- The rise of a form of pluralism which insists that all world-and-life-views are equally true and that tolerance is the greatest virtue.

B2.3 The educational context

- Variety of formal and informal contexts such as educational institutions, churches, homes, and voluntary groups.
- Unprecedented access to information.
- Ascendancy of auditory and visual media.
- Widespread concern about moral values and educational standards.
- An unprecedented rate of change.