



## ***Beyond Christendom:*** Why the Church in Europe Requires Our Attention

Written by Peter Hanson

We are creatures awash in memories. Humankind marks, memorializes and commemorates the past to evoke what once was and may never be again. Societies pass along memories from one generation to the next; yet collective recollections transmit only a copy of a copy, which may approximate, but never encapsulate, the past itself.

Nostalgia is a condition wherein memories become sentimentalized and idealized. We frequently cloak nostalgia in the euphemisms of an idyllic past, such as the “good old days” or the “golden age”. In essence, we expose our deepest heartfelt longing for peace, rest and happiness through these self-manufactured utopian visions.

The arts hold up a mirror in disruption of our communal rumination on the past. *Midnight in Paris*, a predictable, yet delightful Woody Allen film from 2011, punctures holes in the golden age phenomenon through a mysterious act of magical realism in which the Hollywood screenwriter protagonist, Gil, arrives unexpectedly in Paris of the 1920s: the “Golden Twenties” of émigré writers, intellectuals and artists. In short, Gil has stumbled into the very Parisian era he idolizes enthusiastically. *Midnight in Paris* employs a time-travel plot device to remind the audience that there are no such golden ages; in fact, Gil goes one metaphysical step farther in a paraphrase of William Faulkner’s oft-quoted line: “The past is never dead. It’s not even past.”

Contemporary European society is a timely reflection of another “golden age” in Western Europe from the early twentieth century. The Great War (1914-18)—known in hindsight as the First World War—ruptured a period of relative peace, technological advance and cultural expression, which had spread through much of the European continent since 1871. Nevertheless, romantic depictions of *Le Belle Époque* disguise an undercurrent of rural discontent, large-scale urbanization, vocational upheaval, international migration and political terror-

ism. *Fin de Siècle* Western Europe, although properly distinctive and unique, provides us an unsettling analogy for our present age.

It is an expression of current cultural schizophrenia that the *Collins English Dictionary* recently released the top two words of 2016 in the United Kingdom: Brexit and *Hygge*. Brexit is a portmanteau used to describe the British withdrawal from the European Union. Brexit is the literal divorce of the United Kingdom from a common European identity forged over the twentieth century. *Hygge*, in contrast, is an untranslatable Danish word used to express conviviality, the hearth and coziness, roughly analogous to the German word *Gemütlichkeit*. As these words attest, Western Europe—in addition to much of the Western world—exhibits an existential crisis in regards to identity, heritage and work in the stark fluorescence of globalization.

European identity continues to coalesce between two extremes constructed since the 1960s: globalism (multiculturalism) and nationalism (interculturalism). For globalists, the dream of a united Europe begins with a common economic market and permeable borders maintained through the Schengen Agreement. These policies reflect a profoundly humanist identity that prizes cosmopolitanism—a hospitable, polylingual and multicultural society—paired with a secular ideal of a supportive government in the mold of a social democracy. The European Parliament—known by its metonym of Brussels—stands for the grand European project intended to overcome and reverse centuries of continental religious and political conflict. In this light, Europe, in its collective, unified identity is a beacon of universal human rights to the world.

In opposition, stand European populist leaders—often, but not exclusively, from the political right or far right—who define European identity through the lens of a particular racial, religious and cultural heritage. Political parties such as *Front National* in France, *Lega Nord* in Italy or *Alternative für Deutschland* in Germany support national sovereignty through an emphasis on ethnocentrism and a measured distrust of borderless European elites. In the face of global competition as local as Eastern Europe or as distant as East Asia, combined with an influx of migrants from former colonial possessions, international institutions like the EU or the International Monetary Fund (IMF) appear to stand idly by while European civiliza-

tion declines or disappears. Civilization and (Christian) European identity are thus intertwined in an existential fight against the outsider, notably Islam.

Certainly these are not mutually exclusive worldviews. A spectrum exists within which many Europeans are neither exclusively globalist nor nationalist. A healthy majority of Europeans do not pattern their lives after Christine Lagarde, the globetrotting Managing Director of the IMF, or Victor Orbán, the staunchly traditionalist Hungarian Prime Minister. But we see through these oppositional perspectives that European society seeks obsessively for a simple, utopian answer to the perplexing questions of the twenty-first century.

*Midnight in Paris* once more reminds us how unattainable it is to reconstruct a “golden age” because the past is not fixed and immutable. History and its meaning are open to interpretation and definition. At first glance, this is nonsense; of course there must be a cosmological direction of time forward. But if time has a *telos*, a logical endpoint, then it must equally have a beginning, a foundation. Time as we perceive it is a modern economic (human) creation, but history itself exists through the wisdom of a creator, a God with whom we are intimately acquainted: “In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God” (John 1:1). Our Trinitarian God inaugurated the formation of the cosmos through a speech-act; in the new heavens and the new earth, Christ will consummate all things in the fellowship of the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit.

Christians cast a narrative that turns on the historical fulcrum of Christ Jesus. Our history depends on the Incarnation not on the construction of perfect civil society, whether in the past or in the future. It is easy for the Church to lose itself in nostalgic longing for an ideal age; but the real symbol of Christian hope remains in profound anticipation of Christ’s return. The Church in Western Europe must reform the narrative around Christ not Christendom or the European Union.

Swiss theologian Karl Barth frequently used the phrase *Ecclesia semper reformanda est* (“the church is always to be reformed”) to express the need for consistent reexamination within Christian faith. The Church maintains the integrity of doctrine and witness, passed on through centuries of faithful practice, but we must be wary of historical chauvinism, wherein we believe our generation has perceived the fullness of God’s activity and fulfilled the purpose of the Church to

the world. Rather than cast about for new methods or mission fields, the Church renews itself through a return to a simple formulation professed in Colossians 1:17-18: “And [the Son] is before all things, and in him all things hold together. And he is the head of the body, the church. He is the beginning, the firstborn from the dead, that in everything he might be preeminent.” The Church, led by the Spirit, participates as a community in the proclamation of God’s kingdom, anchored in the wisdom and patience that Christ alone reconciles all things unto himself.

We have yet another reason to reexamine contemporary Europe society with the continent on the eve of the First World War. Over a century ago, roughly thirteen hundred representatives of Protestant denominations and mission societies convened in the Assembly Hall of the United Free Church of Scotland for the 1910 Edinburgh Missionary Conference. Participants recognized the widespread success of Christian missions over the nineteenth century; yet, in hindsight, we notice the virtually complete absence of non-Western delegates and the omission of Roman Catholic or Eastern Orthodox representation. Moreover, in less than four years, Europe would pass into the great conflagration of war; Protestant dreams of worldwide Christianization dissipated in the fog of the ensuing thirty years of conflict.

Western European Christianity, deeply affected by the dismantling of global order throughout the twentieth century, has wrestled with the tension between the Church as a marginal community and the cultural remnants of Christendom. The Church collectively is non-Western: the global distribution of vibrant Christian communities, whether in Latin America, Africa or Asia has reconfigured practical and demographic power dynamics between former missionaries and “mission fields”. Despite these developments, European Christian communities—and Western Christianity in general—maintain an influential position with regard to resources, intellectual leadership and social capital, especially in the realm of mission movements. Consequently, how might former mission fields send missionaries to a place like Western Europe characterized by its Christian history? How might the Church of the majority world contribute effectively alongside the Church in Europe?

Perhaps these concerns create a false dichotomy of God’s mission? Perhaps

the Enlightenment pursuit of progress, whether through human achievement or Christian civilization, is an artificial measure of whether the Church remains steadfast in expectation and proclamation of Christ and his kingdom? American theologian Daniel Migliore proposes instead: “If we seek an analogy of the new community in Christ empowered and guided by his Spirit, our reference must be the triune life of God.” The Church is in mission, everywhere, and at all times, because our redemptive, compassionate and merciful God draws us into Trinitarian fellowship and sends us forth, out of his abundant love, into all creation.

In Christ, God provided a substitute and perfect sacrifice for our sin; Christ is our mediator who brings us back into renewed relationship with God. Hence when the apostle Paul writes in 2 Corinthians 5:18 of the “ministry of reconciliation” given to the Church, he expresses the mission of the Church as participation in the mission of Christ. In simple terms, the Church lives out the threefold office of Christ as priest, prophet and king.

Christ is the “great high priest” through whom we have forgiveness, redemption and new life before God the Father (Hebrews 4:14-16). The Church actively proclaims salvation and renewal to the world through Christ alone. Jesus Christ, the definitive prophet, calls us to reject injustice and idolatry, and to walk humbly in the perfect will of God. Likewise, Christians exhibit and teach God’s kingdom of righteousness and mercy, faithfully listening to the Spirit, and speaking forth against that which rejects God’s character. Finally, Christ is the Lord and king who has made us “a people for his own possession” in his kingdom (1 Peter 2:9-10); he is our advocate and defender against all principalities. The Church, in obedience, responds to and declares Christ’s authority, and speaks out against all tyrannies of sin and oppression.

Missionaries, then, have a particular vocation to participate in the renewal and reexamination of the Church in Europe. Decades of economic progress and supportive government social improvements have concealed the current European identity crisis. In much the same way idyllic memories of *Le Belle Époque* moderated the radical transition to the industrial age, the postwar *Pax Americana* deferred the roiling tensions underneath the surface of the transfer to a globalized digital age. The Church in Europe must challenge the temptation of

insularity and inflexibility that occurs alongside cultural upheaval, while simultaneously remaining resolute to the radiance of Christ to a broken creation. The Church in other parts of the world has an invaluable opportunity to contribute as part of one body together through the extension of missionaries to Europe. For as Paul writes in 1 Corinthians 12:18-20:

“But as it is, God arranged the members of the body, each one of them, as he chose. If all were a single member, where would the body be? As it is, there are many parts, yet one body.”

Missionaries draw together the disparate parts of the Church in a tangible representation of the unity Christ prayed for those who believe in him (John 17:20-23). Missionaries in Europe work amidst fellow Christians as co-laborers in the reconciliatory activity of God.

It is emblematic of the human condition when we assert our personal experiences as normative. Lest we lapse into myopic cultural perceptions of Christ and his mission, fellow members of the global Church remind us of the threefold office Christ has presented to his people. European Christian communities are not a relic of the past; rather, they are reshaped and reformed—as Christians everywhere must be—when an encounter with Christ radically interrupts the comfortable status quo and challenges idolatrous expectations. Let our prayer be one of hope that God continues to draw the Church to work together for his glory and fame across Europe and in all creation.



Peter Hanson lives in Chicago, but is at home in any global, cosmopolitan urban center. One of his life goals is to have an intelligent and informed conversation on most any topic imaginable, preferably over a cup of coffee.