A COMMON HOME— A SINGLE SOUL?

By JAN KERKHOFS

Christianity or Christendom?

CENTURIES AGO CHRISTIANITY slowly became rooted not in one single, already existing European culture, but in a great variety of human traditions: elaborate ones such as those of Greece and Rome; more primitive ones such as those of Northern and Eastern Europe. What we now call 'Europe' came into being in the course of the early Middle Ages. Unconsciously, merchants, soldiers and churchmen built the common home, and succeeded in imposing upon it the Judeo-Christian moral code and an all-embracing, common belief in the God of Jesus Christ. C. Dawson rightly states that the final stages of *The making of Europe* (1934) took place around the end of the first millennium, when the Nordic region and parts of Western Russia officially became baptized. Even today we still find the symbols of this baptism: from the mosque-church of Cordoba, to the cathedral of Uppsala; from the abbeys of the British Isles and Ireland, to the golden towers of the Kremlin and the holy city of Zagorsk.

The European Value Systems Study (1981, repeated in 1990)[1] shows that at the end of the second millennium the vast majority of Europeans still adhere to the Ten Commandments, and that more than two-thirds believe in God. According to a survey carried out in the U.S.S.R. in 1990, 40% of Russians say that they trust the Church. No other institution has achieved such a score since *glasnost* and *perestroika*. If the present trend towards religious freedom is maintained, we may justifiably say that never in its previous history has Europe, from the Atlantic to the Urals, been more united than on the threshold of the magical year 2,000. Most Europeans share the values of freedom and equality, of peace and human rights, of authentic love and care for the cosmic dimensions of life. Tolerance is the common platform for relations between nations, between social groups and between individuals. The obsession with revenge

which was so widespread in the past has now almost totally disappeared.

Never before has the prospect of growing welfare, based upon mutual solidarity, technology and the social market economy, been so real. Never before has there been such an emphasis on the equality of women—even if it is still not fully accepted in practice; and never before has there been such investment in the upbringing and training of the (ever fewer) children and young people. For the first time in history the masses can visit the whole of Europe at reasonable cost and in security. While many institutions still need to be adapted, the Common Home is being built daily by the efforts and the convictions of the common people. According to the *Eurobarometer*, the periodical public opinion poll by the Commission of the European Communities, in 1990 seven out of ten Europeans agreed on the need to speed up the economic, monetary and political unification of Europe. And most countries in Eastern Europe are prepared to join the Community as soon as possible. Indeed, never before has there been such a strong European collective conscience. On the human level, the existence of a single European soul is a reality.

A closer look, however, shows that this single soul has many unshared dimensions. Sharp divides still exist underneath. While we may be able to discover material for a common spirituality, deep differences divide the Europeans.

First of all, many 'Christians' are only marginal believers or even agnostics in practice. The Churches appear less and less the laboratories of the spirituality of the future. The gap between them and the younger generation is widening. Christianity, as a community of believers, and Christendom, as the historic expression of Christian values in culture and in institutions, are becoming increasingly alienated from one another. Whereas 95% of the Swedes call themselves 'Christian', only 28% believe in an afterlife, and about 10% are not even baptized. Of the French, 80% of whom claim to be 'Catholic', only 27% believe in heaven. In none of the major cities of Northern and Western Europe are half of all new-born children baptized. And the future is even bleaker. The following tables with regard to belief and practice provide an eloquent example.

TABLE 1: *People with 'no-religion' according to country (in %)*

	FR	NL	B	SP	UK	FRG	IT	DK	IR
Age group									
18–24	38	47	24	15	14	9	9	6	2
25–34	45	45	16	19	10	15	12	9	2
55–64	16	26	13	5	4	8	4	4	1

(FR = France; NL = Netherlands; B = Belgium; SP = Spain; UK = United Kingdom; FRG = Federal Republic of Germany; It = Italy; DK = Denmark; IR = Ireland)

Source: EVSSG, 1981

TABLE 2: *'I never attend a religious service' (in %)*

	FR	NL	B	SP	UK	FRG	IT	DK	IR
Age group									
18–24	63	44	41	39	59	31	26	52	8
25–34	72	52	38	39	54	28	31	52	5
55–64	50	30	34	16	36	22	19	36	2

With the exception of Poland, the situation in Eastern Europe gives equal grounds for concern. In the Eastern part of Germany (the former GDR) while 37% of people say that they are Christians (30% Protestants and 7% Catholics), only 5% allow their children to be baptized. Bohemia, Moravia and Hungary are almost as secularized as Scandinavia, and the number of priestless parishes is very high. According to serious estimates, the vast majority of people in the European part of the Soviet Union belong to no religion. Even in the Ukraine, the area from which 70% of the priests and more than 50% of the bishops of the Russian Orthodox Church are drawn, there are only about five million Orthodox Christians and four million Catholic Uniates out of a total population of 52 million. It is clear that the new spiritual impulse expected from the 'Eastern lung', by which Pope John Paul II sets such store, will have to come from the minority.

The gap between 'Christianity' and 'Christendom' is increasing.[2] Nevertheless, Europe claims to be a 'religious' continent. According to the EVSSG-survey, 63% of Europeans state that they are 'religious'. In the Republic of Ireland, 64% say that they are 'religious', compared with 61% in Denmark, yet in these countries regular, weekly Sunday church attendance is 82% and less than 3% respectively. Although not all 'Christians' are 'religious' people, most of the 'religious' are Christians. There is still no

major 'religious' alternative in terms of numbers. But not all Christians are believers . . .

From a transcendent towards an immanent God?

Secularization is not the end of religion. According to the latest *Eurobarometer* poll on the subject (Autumn 1989), 65% of Europeans consider themselves religious (in comparison with 4% who claim to be agnostics, and 6% who say they are convinced atheists). Many people in West and East, however, interpret the religious dimension of their lives in new ways. The younger generations look for immediate personal religious experiences through music, the arts, affection in small groups, and through care for the environment. There is emphasis on the 'cosmic'. A small, though still numerically impressive, minority does this within the framework of the institutional Churches through membership of the '*movimenti*' ('Focolare', 'Comunione e Liberazione', the charismatics). They like large gatherings such as Compostela, the German *Katholiekentage*, Taizé. They enjoy pilgrimages as an opportunity to meet the like-minded. Another minority, finding the institution not only too rigid and too self-centred but also over-concerned with ethical issues, is examining its own psyche to discover the 'inner god', as does the gnosis of the 'New Age'. Here we encounter the religious expression of the narcissistic individualism which is characteristic of the post-modern European.

People begin a personal quest for a new wholeness, in which God as the transcendent Other is generally absent. It is certainly a reaction to the over-rational and abstract God of the past. It also reveals the absence of a reinterpretation of the classic Christian eschatology. Whereas in the past minds were orientated by the imagery of heaven, hell, purgatory, angels and devils, many people now no longer consider the gentle or terrible encounter with the living God as the goal of life. A growing number of people consider reincarnation as a more meaningful perspective, less burdened by guilt and fear than traditional Christian eschatology. It is striking to note that 21% of Europeans believe in reincarnation. There are no differences between Scandinavia (20%), Latin Europe (22%), and North-Western Europe (21%). In any case, when we see that even some one-third of regularly practising Catholics and Protestants profess belief in reincarnation, Europe's spirituality cannot be anything other than pluralistic.

This phenomenon of new forms of religiosity is underpinned by a profound change in the interpretation of the traditional God of Christianity. Indeed, the God in which Europeans believe is ever less the personal God of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob, whose reality was so profoundly experienced by Blaise Pascal. Only 32% of Europeans believe in a personal God, whereas 36% believe in 'some sort of spirit or life force' and 29% do not know, or do not believe, that there is a personal God or a life force. It is the younger people and the most 'modern' regions of Europe which believe least in a personal God.

The following table shows a very impressive correlation between belief in a personal God, the importance of God according to a 10-point scale, and regular Sunday church attendance. We know from detailed research in Germany and Belgium that there is, at the same time, a steady decrease in prayer (personal and at home).

TABLE 3: *Beliefs of Christians according to church attendance (in %)*

	Go to church at least once a week		Go to church less than once a year	
	Catholics (N:2569)	Protestants (N:271)	Catholics (N:493)	Protestants (N:548)
Believe in God	98	97	74	76
—in after-life	77	77	34	29
—heaven	72	77	28	37
—a personal God	60	73	27	18
—hell	52	44	15	10
—sin	86	85	44	56
—reincarnation	31	37	18	17
Importance of God (19 point scale)	8.74	8.39	5.45	5.25
Voluntary work (for all European respondents 19%)	28	58	12	10

It is possible that the Orthodox tradition from Russia may help the Western part of Europe to integrate immanence and transcendence better. Olivier Clément, the French Orthodox priest, has a real influence upon the spirituality of his Catholic countrymen; and Russian 'communist' philosophers in Moscow are rediscovering in Teilhard de Chardin's *The phenomenon of man* parallels with thinkers such as V. Soloviev and N. Berdyaev. But

it is equally possible that the 'Mother Earth' cult celebrated by many environmentalists will lead towards new forms of pantheism, and thus provide a link with another traditional aspect of Russian anarchical spirituality characteristic of the many sects to be found in the Russian past.

New religious nationalisms?

In Western Europe national belonging and religious identity are on the decrease. Catholics and Protestants follow the same trend: they are all becoming increasingly 'secularized' (in the many meanings of this term). At the grassroot level mixed marriages and intercommunion are broadly accepted, as distinct from the long period of *ejus regio illius et religio*. In Eastern Europe, however, the combination of national identity with religious identity would appear to be on the increase. Yugoslavia is still deeply divided along denominational lines (e.g. Orthodox Serbia and Catholic Slovenia). The martyr Church of Czechoslovakia is already facing serious internal tensions. In the Czech part of the federation, which is more secularized and in which are to be found more Churches of the Reformation, many non-Catholics fear the reappearance of earlier clericalism and a certain triumphalism which may hinder the much needed tolerance among the various religious denominations. On the other hand, a growing number of Catholics are in favour of a revocation of the fifteenth-century condemnation of Huss. In Slovakia nationalism and Catholicism go hand in hand, sometimes dangerously. There is even a certain popular religiosity which fosters the canonization of Mgr Tiso, the national leader of Slovakia under the Nazi regime. In highly secularized Hungary many basic communities have become alienated from the hierarchy which, in their view, was too accommodating with regard to the former communist government. A long history of distrust among religious and among secular leaders, and particularly within the families themselves, calls for a process of reconciliation—a process which will probably demand a careful and delicate pastoral strategy stretching over the coming decades.

While the Church in Poland has valiantly defended the nation against the communist state, its new freedom has revealed the presence of a pluralism within the collective conscience which has for long been hidden. From the ethical point of view, many Poles are secularized (e.g. with regard to divorce and abortion) and tensions between laity and hierarchy are growing. In many respects,

traditional Poland has yet to integrate the renewals of Vatican II as expressed in *Lumen gentium* and *Gaudium et spes*.

The situation in the Soviet Union is chaotic. It is estimated that out of a total population of 287 million people the U.S.S.R. has some 45 million Orthodox Christians and 11 million Catholics, mainly concentrated in Lithuania and the Ukraine. Increasingly the State is supporting the Russian Orthodox Church, in the hope of obtaining solid backing for its policies (through an improvement in morals, greater commitment in the areas of health care and social work, a rediscovery of cultural roots, being primarily religious). Recently, however, many Ukrainian Orthodox in favour of the strong movement towards Ukrainian independence have split from the Moscow Patriarchate to form their own autocephalous Church. This could have dramatic consequences for the Russian Orthodox Church. In the meantime, Catholic Uniates have made a speedy recovery from their repression by Stalin. They are trying to recover many of those church buildings which were handed over to the Orthodox. The Russian Orthodox Church (and the state) is counting on the Vatican and its option for ecumenism to halt the Uniates. A growing number of the latter accuse the Vatican of an excessively ambiguous attitude and are turning to the Ukrainian Orthodox Church. In the meantime, theological and spiritual training within both the Orthodox and the Roman Catholic Churches is of very low quality. For example, where a growing number of Russians request baptism into one of these two denominations, they are received without any catechesis. Spirituality is therefore reduced to liturgy (and generally a pre-Conciliar liturgy for the Catholics). For many lay people, the state church still lacks credibility. Baptists attract believers by stressing the bible and by offering genuine communities. Intellectuals are discovering the sources of Russian spirituality (V. Soloviev, N. Berdyaev and, in particular, F. M. Dostoyevsky) independently. In addition, the low birthrate in the Western part of the U.S.S.R. has led to increasing fear of the fast-growing numbers of Muslims in the Islamic republics in the South-East. A solid and well-balanced Catholic presence in the Russian republic is greatly needed, but the number of well-trained Russian Catholic priests and theologians is far too small to have any real influence in the foreseeable future. (Moscow, with ten million inhabitants, has about 3,000 Catholics, most of them Poles and Lithuanians.)

As for the Greek Orthodox Church, its links with the state are still too strong for it to engage in a creative dialogue with an increasingly secularized environment. Moreover, with rare exceptions, ecumenism is non-existent.[3]

Eurocentric-nationalism

In some Catholic circles the idea of a 'Common European House' is an expression of the utopia of the new form of 'Christendom', the dream of Charlemagne, of mediaeval popes and of the Hapsburgs. It is a dangerous dream. It could narrow Christianity down to Europe, and to its expression within European culture, thus neglecting the world-wide vocation of the followers of Christ. Some people see Islam as the major threat to Europe's future. They see a common Christian ideology as the backbone of the defence of European values against the aggressive politico-religious convictions of Muslims. Non-believing, socio-cultural Christians are keen to support this political conception of Christianity. They find ready support among Christian fundamentalists who are sceptical of the dialogue which Vatican II encouraged believers to open with other faiths, particularly with Jews and Muslims. Some of them even make an open plea for the merger of NATO with what remains of the Warsaw Pact to defend the Christian West against the Muslim invaders. Indeed, in this context even devotion to Our Lady is sometimes abused, just as some Frenchmen make use of Joan of Arc as a standard for their chauvinism. Certainly, Europe may well have its own patrons in Benedict, Bernard, Cyril and Methodius (why no woman?), but the only saint of all Christians is and remains Jesus Christ.

A spirituality which seeks to promote Eurocentrism is also a utopian one. As the sociological data cited here show, Europe is not really Christian. Catholic historians such as G. Le Bras and J. Delumeau constantly stress that it has never been Christian. As in the past—even in those periods when State and Church provided mutual support—Europe is and will remain pluralist, at least as long as freedom of conscience is accepted as a basic value. Any spirituality which forgets the gospel parables of the 'narrow path' and the 'little flock' gives in to naive triumphalism. Increasingly faith, in order to be credible, will require to be free. And real faith has always been concerned about the poor and the weak. In our world, with its fast communications, the huts of the poor are close by. A rich 'fortress Europe' confronting the terrible reality of the

southern hemisphere is a betrayal of the gospel. A European spirituality, if it is to be Christian, must be deeply aware of its responsibility 'to preach deliverance to captives' (Luke 4,18), to those in poverty, the victims of injustice, war, racism, disease and oppressive forms of religiosity. Quite rightly, Mgr G. Thils, professor emeritus of the University of Louvain and a Vatican II expert, has warned the European Churches against the dangers of European nationalism.[4] He criticizes many of the statements by bishops and theologians, and even of popes, when they place too great an emphasis on Europe as the heartland of Christianity now and forever. European history is, indeed, a mixture of grace and sin, of holiness and of immorality—as is the history of every culture. A true European spirituality is called to play a role of criticism and discernment. Saint Francis and Saint Clare, with their openness to the cosmic dimensions of the faith, their unprejudiced dialogue with other religions, their care for the poor and the oppressed, their deep love of Jesus, the saving Brother of all humankind, remain the great guides. It is the spirituality of the ecumenical Conciliar Process of Basel (May 1989). If the interreligious dialogue, i.e. the dialogue with all the other great religions and with the new forms of authentic religiosity, is indeed most probably the major challenge facing every local Church, a European Christian spirituality will have to discover that new blend of identity and openness which was characteristic of the great Fathers of the Church in the East and in the West.

The Episcopal Synod for Europe, announced by Pope John Paul II during his brief visit to Czechoslovakia (April 1990), will not only have to deal with new forms of cooperation between the local Catholic Churches of West and East, with the dramatic challenge of the many thousands of priestless parishes, but also with the growing need to accelerate open cooperation with Protestant and Orthodox Christians who are also facing the consequences of secularization. East and West both need a 'new evangelization'. Common concern for basic human values could serve as the bridge between Christianity and a secular Europe. Christians and non-Christians share a common set of values. They may find their common meeting ground in this 'common religion'. Christians will gain credibility to the extent that they honestly promote authentic human values. Thus they will offer a form of pre-catechumenate. Even if this does not result in an explicit Christian faith, it may encourage a true spiritual life in which the Lord can reveal

himself in his own way. J. Delors, the President of the European Commission, in his address to the Plenary Assembly of the French Bishops' Conference, sees in this a task for the Church: 'After a Europe of traders comes a Europe of values. With good reason, the Church questions Europe. Europe may not just be materialistic. You should awaken it!'

This awakening, however, can only be successful if, at the grassroot level, networks of committed men and women prepare the way for a practical spirituality for our post-industrial and post-modern culture.

NOTES

[1] The International Foundation European Value Systems Study Groups (EVSSG) is registered in Amsterdam. Its secretariat is located at the University of Tilburg in The Netherlands. The Foundation has supported surveys on values in Eastern and Western Europe, the Americas, Australia, South Africa, etc. An analysis of ten European countries has been written by Stephen Harding, David Phillips and Michael Fogarty: *Contrasting values in Western Europe: unity, diversity, change* (London, Macmillan, 1986).

[2] Kerkhofs, J.: 'Between Christendom and Christianity', in *Journal of empirical theology (JET)*, 1 (1988), pp 88–101.

[3] 'The Church in Greece', *Pro mundi vita dossiers*, Europe—North America, No 1, (1976).

[4] Thils, G.: '*Foi Chrétienne*' *et* '*Unité de l'Europe*' (Louvain, 1989).