Training people for working in Europe

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Training people for Europe today is a complex business, not least because historically Europe has been a continent in transition. In order to understand European training needs we need to reflect on its history and see the influences which are shaping it.

A truth based on God

For several centuries European culture was characterized by a sense of confidence that we were possessors of truth, and this gave us a sense of certainty about life. The source of this certainty, however, came from different directions at different times. In the middle ages this certainty found expression through societal structures such as the monarchy, the legal system, and in particular the church. It was a sense of certainty built upon a Judeo-Christian worldview[1]. It was the done thing in Europe to go to church and to assent, at least verbally, to a set of beliefs that included recognition of a Creator to whom all men were accountable.

It was also believed that God was the ultimate source of all knowledge and what we know is revealed to us by him. It is for this reason that Europe's ancient universities were church institutions. David Wells comments on the medieval thinkers by stating, 'They were convinced that God's revelation, of which they were custodians, was true. True in an absolute sense. It was not merely true to them; it was not merely true in their time; it was not true approximately. What God had given was true universally, absolutely, enduringly'[2]. This then was the certainty of the Middle Ages - a certainty built upon a firm foundation of theism with the church fulfilling the role as the conveyor of truth.

Medieval Thinking
Truth has been revealed to men and women by God

The deification of the human mind

A huge cultural change known as the Renaissance then swept throughout Europe. At the heart of the Renaissance was Francis Bacon (1561-1626), the first modern scientist[3]. Bacon sought to use experimentation as a method of opening up new discoveries and he felt that the development of science would ultimately lead to a better society committed to human dignity and greatness[4]. In that sense science was not just a tool of education, rather it was the gateway into utopia.

The Renaissance led to the Enlightenment. Arguably the key thinker of this period was Rene Descartes (1596-1650), a mathematician who is commonly regarded as the founder of modern philosophy[5]. As a committed Theist, Descartes was concerned by the fact that some thinkers during the Enlightenment were rejecting the medieval worldview of knowledge through revelation to such an extent that they were becoming skeptical about God himself. He therefore set out to devise a method of discovering truth that could be relied upon. The ultimate aim of this process was that he wanted to convince others of the existence of God through reason. However, things did not turn out the way Descartes intended.

Descartes' formulae (*Cognito ergo sum*, 'I think, therefore I am') was based upon him doubting everything including his own existence. He would then think about his position and conclude that he must actually exist by virtue of the fact that he was thinking. He would then state that his existence was an element of objective truth that he had discovered through human reasoning. This proved that truth could be discovered quite apart from revelation, through rational thinking. The result was that if someone wanted to discover the truth about a particular subject, he did so without any reference to the church and God.

The important thing to note is that through this change of mindset the idea of certainty remained. The thinkers of the enlightenment, like their medieval counterparts, believed that they were possessors of absolute and irrevocable truth, but for them it was not based on theism or the idea that God had revealed truth to them; rather it was based on the powers of human reason.

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1 Europeans at this time were certainly aware of the presence of other world faiths such as Islam, but the Judeo-Christian worldview meant that Muslims would have been considered to be wrong and would have beet treated with a measure of distain (Groothius, Truth Decay, p.33).
2 Wells, No Place for Truth, p.259-260.
3 Grenz, A primer on Post-modernism, p.58.
4 Collinson, Fifty Major Philosophers, p.44.
5 Collinson, Fifty Major Philosophers, p.57.

Eventually the modern world was born replete with its sky scrapers, mass transportation and sophisticated way of life. For many this was the dawn of a new age. European man had matured and believed himself to be the zenith of human civilization.

Medieval Thinking	Enlightenment Thinking
Truth has been revealed to men and women by God	Truth can be discovered by reason and logic

The empire crumbles

In 1844 Friedrich Nietzsche was born into a pious Protestant family[6]. As he developed his philosophy, Nietzsche declared that God was dead, and this meant that human beings must replace him and take control of their world[7]. With God out of the picture, there was no basis for any objective values, meaning or significance in life. Consequently there was no objective basis for declaring that any action was morally right or wrong. Nietzsche did feel that morals were important; it is just that there was no way of having an objective moral system because there was no God who could confirm the rightness of the moral system or uphold it[8].

Nietzsche also denied the idea that objective truth can be found. This did not concern Nietzsche; rather, he stated that it did not matter if a belief was true, as long as it was 'life affirming'. The net result of Nietzsche's work was that a whole generation of thinkers emerged who thought human life was of little intrinsic value and that objective truth could not be found. Thus the certainty which had been so much part of western thinking was beginning to be eroded.

The erosion of confidence in the concept of truth continued for a variety of reasons:

- The development of science had bred a sense of expectation in Europe that mankind was on an upward path towards inevitable progress. This notion was destroyed by the events of World War I and II.

- The arrival of big industry and the multinational conglomerates produced many much-needed jobs in the aftermath of the great wars. But they also turned each worker into a statistic on a payroll rather than an individual, and caused widespread pollution. This was progress, but not uncomplicated progress.

- Buildings began to be designed along rational lines to maximize the space, but these new housing developments were soulless and soon became crime ridden.

- Furthermore, as people from Europe traveled to other parts of the world and saw different cultural values apparently working well within their respective societies.

All these events together conspired to begin a change in the way European people viewed life.

The contemporary European mindset

In general contemporary European culture denies that truth is absolute[9]. The expression 'you have your truth and I have mine' would have made no sense to people a couple of centuries ago. But for people in today's world it makes perfect sense.

Medieval Thinking	Enlightenment Thinking	Contemporary European Thinking
Truth has been revealed to men and women by God	Truth can be discovered by reason and logic	Truth does not exist in any objective way. It is a product of a person's culture and environment.

This, of course is not universally true. There are still vestiges of enlightenment and even medieval thinking around. The enlightenment thinking is expressed primarily through the scientific community and medieval thinking is expressed through the infrastructure of the traditional church (whether Protestant or Catholic). The result of this is that there are three major

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6 Russell, A History of Western Philosophy, p.728.

7 Friedrich Nietzsche, The Portable Nietzsche, p.95.

8 Reaper-Smith, A Brief Guide to Ideas, p.168. Nietzsche felt that morals could not just be discovered, rather humans had to create them.

9 Peter Hicks stresses that this rejection of truth and the acceptance of relativism are basic to postmodernism and this results both in the lack of certainty, subjectivism and the denial of any overarching explanatory system or 'metanarrative' (Evangelicals and Truth, p.35).

strands of European thought or worldview:

1. There are the Enlightenment thinkers. That is, those people whose belief system is based on science and believe that science explains the origin of life not God.
2. Then there are the Medieval Europeans. That is, those who still hold to a medieval Catholicism or Orthodoxy which borders on the superstitious. These are mainly older people.
3. Finally there are the post-modern Europeans. That is, those who relativize truth, ethics and religion. They do not believe in absolutes either religiously or morally. These tend to be younger people. As a proportion of society this group is increasing all the time.
4. In addition we can add to this what I call the 'New Europeans'. These are people who have come into Europe as a result of immigration. Their numbers will increase greatly in the next 50 years to counteract the imbalance caused by a low European birth rate. Many of these immigrants are from non-Christians backgrounds, in particular Islamic. Many are concerned about being adversely influenced by the immorality of European life. Linked with this, many are becoming radicalized.

Of course these categories are not hard and fast, and the overlap is considerable. But they do sum up something of the philosophical challenge of Europe.

Due to its prominence we will focus more attention on the post-modern Europeans. Their denial of absolutes affects their worldview in a variety of ways:

Downgrading of deity
For post-modern Europeans God is not opposed, he is merely downgraded to a position of anonymity. God is seen as a private choice, a bit like a hobby. Most of these Europeans do not reject 'spirituality', indeed, many would use tarot cards and crystals and read their star signs in magazines and daily newspapers. But these forms of spirituality are not sustained by any concept of objective truth.

Relativized morality
The questioning of absolutes has also led to a moral framework that has been relativized to the point where it has become meaningless. No longer can a thing be considered to be right or wrong in a moral sense. Rather, the talk is of lifestyle choices. In this way post-modern European society has essentially abolished sin.

Pluralism
What is true for morals is also true when it comes to religion. If there are no absolutes then no one faith can claim to be true in an absolute sense. At best a particular faith can be no more than true for the individual. The broad European consensus is that all religions are equal, and equally true. In such a world the Bible carries no authority.

Experience
There is also an obsession with experience. Facts have been replaced by feelings and truth by experience. Our actions should not be judged by any moral yardstick, but by whether we enjoy the experience of living.

The Church in European society
Having considered the changes that have shaped European society, I want to look at the role which the church has played in all of this. The last one hundred years have been very exciting as far as the worldwide Christian church is concerned. The scene in Europe, however, has been somewhat different. Though the Roman Catholic Church is still a potent force across much of Europe, many Roman Catholics are increasingly nominal and apathetic[10]. Furthermore, the percentage of evangelicals in most European countries is very low (often below 1%).

The United Kingdom, traditionally a strong centre of evangelicalism, is typical. Statistics show that in the 1930's there were more than ten million church members (all denominations), but today the figure has fallen to below six million[11] . The trend is still downward and affects most mainline denominations with the possible exception of the New and Pentecostal churches[12]. One example of this can be seen in the fall of Sunday school attendees. In 1900 6,796,000 children attended Sunday school, which was about 55% of the child population. By the year 2000 this number had fallen to 530,000 or 4% of the child population[13].

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10 March, Europe Reborn, p.22.
11 Religious Trends 2000/2001, No.2, 2:12
12 Religious Trends 2000/2001, No.2, 2:11
13 Religious Trends 2000/2001, No.2, 2:15

All churchgoers of whatever persuasion together only 7.7% of the population of this country attend church on a regular basis and the number is still falling [7]. Even at Christmas time when church attendance climbs for the festive season, only 32% of the British population can be bothered to drag themselves out to a church [8]. The British are now believed to be among the most religiously cynical in Europe.

These worrying statistics beg the question, why?

Slow to wake up
This question is a very difficult one to answer as it is so broad, but there are certainly some important reasons for the decline of the church.

- Culture moves on at an increasingly fast pace, but churches can often become calcified and tradition-bound, struggling to cope with the new world that confronts them.

- The rise of biblical criticism within the theological faculties of our universities has made its impact on the church. Many of the assumptions that had long been accepted in the church, like the inerrancy of scripture, were beginning to be questioned.

- The church has become isolated from the community. There was a time when everyone got married in church and wished to be buried from there. The church was the guardian of the nation's morality, and when church leaders spoke they were listened to by the community at large. Not so now! The church, more often than not, is seen as an out of touch and out-of-date institution that commands little respect.

- The church has become impure with Compromise a norm. Many people who might call themselves Christians do not live a Christ honouring life, and do not possess any distinctly Christian convictions.

How can we train for Europe
All the above means that any workers who go to Europe will find a situation that is complex and difficult. Any training to work in this tough environment will have to involve the following:

1. Strong spiritual affirmation
European secularism has had a spiritually dampening effect on people. Missionaries and Christian workers can be affected by this. It is very stressful to work in an environment where profound spiritual apathy exists. It is discouraging inviting people to church repeatedly and them never turning up. A vibrant spiritual life is required and therefore spiritual enrichment must be an implicit part of training.

2. Instilling patience
Working in Europe involves a long term commitment. Some European mission agencies estimate that a church planting project could take 18 years to accomplish. Anyone wishing to work in Europe must be patient and this issue should be reflected in their training.

3. A strong grasp of apologetics
Europeans do not lack educational opportunities and so we enjoy a high level of functional literacy as well as a very good university system. Added to this is skepticism (perhaps even cynicism) with regard to Christianity. It is not uncommon in evangelism to find people who are able to argue persuasively against Christian belief. It is therefore important to be equipped to answer questions on issues such as: evolution vs. creation, religious pluralism, ethics, life after death experiences, the historical reliability of the bible, God as wish fulfillment, suffering, the divinity of Christ, the reality of sin and salvation, universalism and the purpose of life. All of these issues must be dealt with in training.

4. A deep biblical and theological knowledge
Given the religious history of Europe and the many theological debates that have occurred, it is vital that workers who come here have a good understanding of scripture. They could be asked to explain why they are not committed to Mariolatry, why evangelicals do not go to confession, or even why we do not recognize the authority of the pope. These questions are not unexpected, but will require an adequate understanding of biblical texts and theology to answer.

5. A general political and social awareness

Like many parts of the world, Europe has a rich and varied history. Many national traits in the component countries are explicable on the basis of history. Europeans are also proud of their history and expect residents both to know and respect that history. Generally Europeans also have an interest in what goes on in the world and pride themselves in their internationalism. It would be practically difficult to educate students as to this varied field, but it would be possible and advisable to encourage students who are going to European countries to read widely in the fields of history and current affairs.

6. An ability to work across the generation gap

One of the very pronounced features of modern European life is the widening of the generation gap. In many European countries youth culture is a distinctive entity and young people form a sub-culture. Many churches find it difficult to bridge this gap and appeal to all age groups at the same time. Missionaries working in the situation would need to have an awareness of this issue and be able to relate to different age groups. Training could reflect this cultural phenomenon and identify youth cultural values such as dress, recreation and music.

7. Friendship evangelism

One of the most obvious things to say about Europe is that the younger generation doesn't go to church. This inevitably means that the key to working in most European countries is friendship evangelism. If students are not taught creative ways of reaching people through friendship they will struggle to make any impact. This must therefore be an important component in any training.

8. Different models of church life

Life in Europe is very diverse, from the large sprawling cities to the peaceful countryside. There are also numerous sub cultures which operate within European society. Such diversity requires a varied approach to church life. This inevitable means some focus on different church models and how to relate church life to different social contexts. These need to be covered in any training.

9. Comparative religion

Due to the increasing religious diversity within Europe (due to immigration), it is almost impossible to live in Europe without coming into significant contact with people from other faith systems. For all European workers a basic understanding of the world's major faith systems is important. A deeper understanding will be necessary if the worker is involved in an ethnic community.

10. Hermeneutics

Though last on the list, Hermeneutics is arguably the most important subject that can be taught to students hoping to work in Europe. Given the sophisticated nature of European life, and given that much of the Bible emerged in a non-European context, it is vital that workers in Europe have an understanding of how to contextualize and apply scripture into living situations.

I hope this paper demonstrates that Europe is a difficult place to work and that training people for European mission is a challenging and important task. It is significant, however, that Europe is the only continent in the world where the church is shrinking rather than growing. Europe today is post Christian and this needs to be understood by anyone hoping to minister there. I would also like to emphasize, however, that there are signs of life and some remarkable things happening. We need to rise to the challenge of Europe and train a new generation of missionaries who will increase the life that is there.

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