

## Editorial

### Mark Elliott

What does it mean to be European? Is it about Europeans defining themselves against other continents and cultures? Is Turkey's likely eventual admission to the EU a sign of the contribution Islam has made to European civilisation? Is Israel's otherwise somewhat anomalous participation in the Eurovision Song Contest a reminder of the Jewish part in shaping European arts and sciences? Is it aware that a union makes strong and that the purpose of strength, pace Nietzsche, is so that one can help the weak? Need one be aware of secularisation in Britain being a totally different thing from that in Germany or that in France (where *laïcité* has been a 'given' for two hundred years, or uncontested for one hundred: we 'celebrate' this year the centenary of the Church and State separation legislation of 1904, which was also, coincidentally the year of *Entente Cordiale* with Britain!) What would a Christian culture look like? Surely not more rock bands playing hymns, theatre companies doing lots of Calderon and TS Eliot, art getting all representational but not conceptual. It might mean closed shops on Sundays, more religious services on television at Christmas and Easter, less abortion on demand. But since it is the gospel of Christ for which evangelicals stand, need there not be something said about grace, forgiveness, repentance, prayer?

The new European Union Constitution's preamble may not give much appreciation of Europe's 'Christian past'. The content may seem to rest on a theory of rights which may owe *something* to Christianity, but it in turn has been slow to recognise or show appreciation of its parent. Even the British Premier's Catholic wife, the lawyer Cherie Blair in a recent article congratulated the Catholic Church for catching up with the Universal Declaration of 1948 during Vatican II, as if Jacques Maritain *et al* had contributed nothing to that document!

'Believing without belonging' often has very little to do with Jesus and what we would call 'saving faith'. It is the kind of unthinking and thus inactive faith which gets a bad name from James

(and Thomas Aquinas). James 2:19 is written with reference to the *Shema* of Deut 6:4, but it could be the kind of spirituality that has room for 'God 77.4% heaven 46.3% hell 33.9% sin 62.1%' [European Values Study]). But one thing that such studies do show us is that the battle for the soul of Europe is by no means lost.

We might not find the gospel but at least some clear reflection of it in recent writings by Žižek, Vattimo, Derrida and the late Lyotard. Vattimo argues for a 'weak metaphysics' where according to the incarnation and such principles as 'the immanent Trinity is the economic Trinity' we have a God who is much more at home in the world and less likely to be idolised through 'natural holiness'. In other words, Heidegger without the Nazism. A God whom Jesus tells us is a friend and not to be feared, a Christianity which stands against racism and promotes charity. (*Credere di credere*: Milano: Garzanti, 1996). Is this a secularised, de-mythologised Christianity, or is that an unduly negative judgement? In Derrida's case it is more Judaism, but the Catholic pull is strong even for lapsed sons and daughters of the church.

There seems to be less infiltration in Protestant America by theology into the philosophers and cultural commentators, when one thinks of the interests of Rorty, Searle, Putnam or Gore Vidal and Judith Butler. Does Catholicism then provide a cradle which is more like a spider's web to escape from? Is this a good thing and what does it make evangelicals think about our contribution to the consciousness of the 'thinking person'?

What then is the place of theology? N.T. Wright thinks secularism is on the wane, as interest in spirituality increases. This need not be a positive or negative thing. 'But would you rather be taught music theory by someone who was tone deaf and therefore "neutral", or by someone who was an active, if controversial, composer or conductor? Doesn't it mean that the research will be done more carefully...the Christian theologian hopes to allow the church to think and speak coherently and



truly about God, the world, what it means to be human and what can be said about evil...' (Times Higher Educational Supplement, 18/4/2003)

While appreciating this, one can also sense a need to be a little more aggressive. The theologian is called to discern between what in culture and society serves holiness (and *was Christum treibt*)

and what would not. The theologian is called to phrase the gospel in ways that grapple with the buzz-words and the Leitmotive of contemporary trends of thinking, and to lead the way in preaching the gospel unashamedly, although without trying to be something (s)he is not.

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