

Barriers, Bridges, Paradox

Reflections on the communication of the Gospel in a world become 'post...'

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Angles

Those who reflect on evangelism in Europe have different angles from which they try to understand this context and look for bridges to communicate the Gospel.

Three angles or approaches of evangelism

Concentrating on a specific barrier

- Post-religious (secularisation, secularism) – why God?
- Post-modern – why Jesus / the Bible?
- Post-Christendom – why Church?

Fourth approach to refine the others

Paradox of Europe and Christianity

- Look again at the barriers, they might be bridges

1. Post-religious (secularisation/ecularism): Why God?

The first angle is secularisation. Viewed from this angle, the major barrier for evangelism is unbelief in the existence of God. Or, to put it more generally, a worldview and a lifestyle that do not take into account any divine or transcendent reality.

Apologetic approach

Showing the plausibility of believing in God

The usual response of Christians to secularisation is to make a case for believing in God, showing the plausibility of the Christian faith. This is the apologetic attempt to remove the

barrier of a worldview without God by showing the 'plausibility of the Christian worldview', as David Brown puts it.¹

Building bridges

Entering into the world of secular people

However, apologetics is not enough. We should find points of contact and common ground on which we can build bridges of understanding.

As Elaine Storkey puts it: building bridges 'enables us to cross over into a non-Christian cultural context and begin to understand it from within, [to gain] some knowledge of who we are speaking to, and what matters to them'. And they provide ways for non-Christians to 'cross the great cultural chasm between the worldview of Christianity and the worldviews of our contemporary world, so that the Gospel can be heard for what it is'.²

Unquiet frontiers of secularity

The question is how we can build bridges in what Taylor called a secular-3 situation.

This stands for a situation in which there issue cross-pressure, for believers as well as for secularists/agnostics/atheists

Many secular people find the option to believe quite contestable and they strongly contest it. The major problem of our 'secular age', says Taylor, is that our religious beliefs are considered to be unbelievable. Under such conditions it is difficult to believe in God.

Believers are continually challenged by the alternative of not believing. Taylor speaks of an 'exclusive humanism, a radically new option in the marketplace of beliefs, a vision of life in which anything beyond the immanent is eclipsed'.³

Agnostics/atheists experience cross-pressure: Christians contest their presuppositions and challenge them to reconsider the religious worldview and the Christian message

Faced with the pressure of the 'unquiet frontiers of secularity'

Taylor examines what he calls the 'unquiet frontiers' of secular people. He makes every effort to place himself in the position of an exclusive secular humanist. How does it feel to live without God, to have a closed worldview, to live with the idea that death is the total extinction of life?

'Our age is very far from settling into a comfortable unbelief. The secular age is deeply cross-pressured.'⁴ This means that people experience a kind of emptiness that makes everything look useless. They are frequently haunted by the happy memories of religious belief.

In particular, many moderns are uncomfortable with death, 'the giving up of everything'.⁵ Secular belief is a shutting out: 'The door is barred against further discovery.' But 'in the secular waste land ... young people will begin again to explore beyond the boundaries'.⁶ And so there is an explosion of all kinds of spirituality, of quasi-religious experiences.

A telling example is Woody Allan: 'I continue making films in order not to think about death.'

Here we have many starting points to build bridges of understanding. An interesting example is the film *Heureux naufrage* produced by Guillaume Tremblay. Several philosophers, journalists, educators and writers from French-speaking Europe and Canada talk about how they manage in a world after faith in God. As one author put it, 'I do not believe in God but I miss Him.' Others talk about their way to faith, as a post-secular experience. A series of books

¹ David Brown, 'Les difficultés particulières qu'ont nos contemporains français dans la compréhension et l'acceptation de l'Évangile', lecture at the annual meeting of the Evangelical Missiological Network in Frenchspeaking Europe (REMEEF), 23 February 2015.

² Elaine Storkey, 'Bridges to the Gospel', UCCF The Christian Unions, 2015. Published on www.bethinking.org/apologetics/bridges-to-the-gospel [consulted 1 August 2015].

³ Summary of James K.A. Smith, *How (not) to be Secular: Reading Charles Taylor* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2014) 22-23.

⁴ Taylor, *A Secular Age*, 727.

⁵ Taylor, *A Secular Age*, 725.

⁶ Taylor, *A Secular Age*, 769, 770.

and audio-visual materials have been produced to use the film for discussions and group study.⁷

Existential experiences – when secular explanations do not satisfy

Others follow the same pattern and find that secularised people have the same existential experiences as religious people. It is one thing to make a case for the Christian answer, in an apologetic way. But don't give the answers before you have listened, why are non-religious people not satisfied by answers and explanations based on secularism and scientific rationalism?

- a) Finitude (death) – What is the sense of our existence if one day everything will be all over?
- b) Failure – Where does our sense of shame and/or guilt come from? What about our (bad) conscience?
- c) Good things in human existence – How to explain beauty, happiness, force, resilience, peace, love, progress, community, freedom, liberation, justice?
- d) Insight in reality, human wisdom – While this takes the effort of study and reflection, this is often experienced as being 'given'
- e) Evil and suffering – Why can't we accept suffering from fellow-humans and from natural disasters if life is just a struggle for survival?

H.M. Vroom, *Religies en de waarheid* (Kampen, 1988, 247). G. Noort et al., *Een kerk kan opnieuw beginnen* (Zoetermeer, 2008, 216)

2. Postmodernism: Why Jesus Christ?

Others look at the European population mainly from the angle of post-modernity. Viewed from this angle, the main obstacle for evangelism is unbelief in absolute truth. This includes the message that Jesus 'is the truth'. As a human being, Jesus is highly esteemed, but the postmodern outlook finds it difficult to admit that he could be the Christ, the unique Saviour of mankind.

Apologetic approach

Showing the plausibility of Jesus' claims to truth

One way to respond is apologetic, by showing the plausibility of Jesus' claims to truth. Others criticize the presuppositions of postmodernity and in so doing they try and make a case for the truth of the Christian faith.

Leslie Newbigin comes to mind. He did not use the term postmodern, but what he described is indeed a major element of post-modernity. In a pluralist world, religion is a matter of values and personal experience, while no one can pretend that his or her religion is superior to that of another. This is the major challenge for evangelism in Europe, says Newbigin.⁸ He counters this by arguing that scientific truth is as much based on presuppositions as religious truth is based on faith. So, we should not accept the pluralist idea that scientific reason stands above all religious affirmations, as their ultimate arbiter. On the other hand, we cannot convince others by our rational arguments either. We can and must speak the truth only in the humble confidence that only the Spirit convinces the heart of the hearer.⁹

Building bridges

Sharing your faith in the form of dialogue, respect and acts of charity

Others insist that the postmodern outlook of our fellow-citizens calls for a new kind of evangelism, in the form of dialogue, based on respect for the opinions and lifestyles of others.

⁷ Cf. the Website of the project. <http://www.heureuxnaufage.com/>

⁸ Leslie Newbigin, *The Gospel in a Pluralist Society* (London: SPCK, 1989).

⁹ See Leslie Newbigin, *Proper Confidence. Faith, Doubt and Certainty in Christian Discipleship* (London: SPCK, 1995).

The issue of absolute truth cannot be avoided, but we should make it known in ways that allow others the freedom to respond.

At this point I also want to mention Marie-Hélène Robert, and her analysis of the documents of the Roman Catholic Church on 'new evangelism'.¹⁰ She emphasizes the need for dialogue, and she puts forward another important element of our witness: acts of charity, as concrete signs of God's love. This should be combined that with the notion of respect, which she defines as granting other the liberty to respond as they desire. She writes:

Postmodern cultures adapt easily to charity and liberty, but they do not consider the truth as Christianity presents it, neither the objective truth (its divine origin and universality), nor the subjective truth (its human reception and translation). Evangelism is the proclamation of a real liberty: man is free to respond in love to the offer of love ..."

3. Post-Christendom: Why Church?

The third angle from which mission theologians look at the Europe context is that of Post-Christendom. Viewed from this angle, the major barrier is the Church and the way it has done mission and evangelism. People have been given a distorted picture of the Christian faith community. They confuse it with an established religion. And mission/evangelism is wrongly seen as a way to impose a religion.

Apologetic approach

Correct distorted images of the Church and evangelisation

A defense of the positive side of its history (several RC authors)

Show the plausibility of the Church as it was 'originally' meant (Evangelical approach, free Church model)

Building bridges:

A Church that meets people's needs and serves society

One way of building bridges is to make the church relevant for society (Johannes Reimer).

This can take several forms, but the central idea is always meeting their needs of people around us, serving the city, serving the neighbourhood through social and cultural activities, helping the poor, etc.

A key concept is 'missionary church'.

New ways of being Church (Murray, Fresh Expressions, Emerging Churches...)

Others go further than that. The response, then, is to change the way of being Church. The emphasis should change from maintenance, keeping what you have, to mission; from being an institutional church to being a movement of followers of Christ. Stuart Murray is an example of this approach because he analyses the current situation and proposes new ways of communicating the Gospel, as well as new forms of church life. His work has inspired a whole network of so-called 'fresh or new expressions'. Murray describes this situation as follows:

Post-Christendom is the culture that emerges as the Christian faith loses coherence within a society that has been definitively shaped by the Christian story, and as the institutions that have been developed to express Christian convictions decline in influence.¹²

Post-Christendom also implies that Christians have to evangelise in a new way, not through control as in the old days, but through the witness of our lifestyle, through personal testimony and through the communal witness of churches that are signs of the new society that only God

¹⁰ Marie-Hélène Robert, *Pour que le monde croie : approches théologiques de l'évangélisation* (Lyon : Profac, 2014).

¹¹ Robert, *Pour que le monde croie*, 297, 300.

¹² Stuart Murray, *Post-Christendom: Church and mission in a strange new world* (Milton Keynes: Paternoster, 2004) 19.

can build. Reflecting on evangelism in the post-Christendom situation, Bryan Stone has this to say:

The most evangelistic thing the Church can do today is to be the church, to be formed by the Holy Spirit through core practices such as worship, forgiveness, hospitality and economic sharing into a distinctive people in the world, a new social option, the body of Christ. This is... the witness to God's reign in the world. [Mission] is neither the individual, private, or interior salvation of individuals nor the Christianisation of entire cultures, but the creation of a people... The church does not really need an evangelistic strategy; the Church is the evangelistic strategy.¹³

Paradox

Societies and cultures

...have been exposed to and marked by Christianity

longer and more intensively than anywhere else in the world

...are marked by the abandonment of Christianity

longer and more intensively than anywhere else in the world

Europe is marked simultaneously by:

- a) An enormous variety of expressions of Christian faith and a rich cultural, liturgical and spiritual heritage of European Christianity
- b) A variety of alternative, secular worldviews and ideologies, a secularised public sphere and the spread of secular lifestyles

The two go together, are intertwined. Barriers are at the same time bridges

1. Paradox applied – Christianity in Secularism

There is so much Christianity in secular worldviews and humanism!

Let's talk about the origin of values and ideas that are dear to secular Europeans!

Debate on foundational values for cohesion in multicultural society

Jean-Claude Guillebaud (*La refondation du monde*, 1999): where do our 'humanist' values come from?

Luc Ferry (*La révolution de l'amour*): secular spirituality based on Christian idea of 'love' (agape)

For example, human rights, a secular value today but basically a Christian idea

Importance of human rights in a state of law, Europeans are very much attached to it. This issue a foundational reference for legislation and for international relations

A Christian heritage developed by Enlightenment in a secularised form

A 'hangover of Christianity'? (John Gray)

The question of religious or secular foundations

2. Paradox applied – Postmodernists as allies

Postmodernism also contains some Christian and Biblical notions

As Christians we share their critique on the way ideologies and religions are used to subdue people and exert power

I have no time to develop this

3. Paradox applied – Heritage of European Christianity

¹³ Stone, *Evangelism after Christendom*, 15 – author's italics.

Christianity still represents 'the major moral and intellectual roots of Europe' (Jürgen Habermas)

Vishal Mangalwadi, *The Book that Made Your World – How the Bible Shaped Every Aspect of Western Society*

This transformation has taken place in the time of Christendom, through established and non established churches, through Christian political rulers and counter movements.

Churches in Europe have left us with a rich heritage

The Gospel is everywhere around us, we only have to 'uncover' it

- Arts, culture, social customs
- Names, infrastructure...
- Historical figures, founders of institutions

Many people are ignorant and illiterate – who will be their guides, if not Christians who share the faith of the originators of that heritage?

Efforts to create new kind of Churches should not hinder us from valuing the traditions, the forms and the 'treasure of ages' of Churches in Europe, because they offer bridges for secularised people to connect with Christian faith