



Spirituality and Religion in Europe

For some years, a number of scholars, such as Linda Woodhead and Paul Heelas (2005) and David Tacey (2000), have been arguing that the world, or at least the Western world, is going through a spiritual revolution. People are embracing 'spirituality' rather than 'religion'. Recent research has enabled critical evaluation of this claim.

The Extent and Nature of the Affirmation of Spirituality in Europe

The International Social Survey Program conducted in 44 countries during 2008/2009 included a number of questions on spirituality and religion. In one of these questions people were asked whether they described themselves as religious and spiritual, religious but not spiritual, spiritual but not religious or neither. Table 1 (overleaf) summarises the responses to this question for each of the 24 European countries in the study. It shows that the proportion of people who identify themselves as spiritual but not religious varies from 24 per cent in Slovenia to 6 per cent in Cyprus.

This question about being religious or spiritual has not been asked before in a large survey program such as this. Thus, it is not possible to ascertain the trends by

comparing it with other surveys completed at different periods of time. However, some indication of probable trends can be identified by comparing older and younger people. Assuming that comparatively few people change their sense of being religious or spiritual over time, a comparison of the responses of older people and younger people may give us some idea of how changes in culture are occurring.

A comparison of the responses of under and over 60s shows that in every country in Europe, older people are more likely to describe themselves as religious. In Croatia and Austria, the differences are not significant at 95 per cent level, but in every other country, the differences are significant, indicating a decline in people following a religion.

However, the patterns are quite different in relation to spirituality as shown in the final column of Table 1. In 12 countries, more younger people than older people saw themselves as spiritual. In 11 countries, more older people than younger people saw themselves as spiritual. In one country, Poland, there was no difference between older and younger people. It should be noted that in 14 countries out of the 24, the differences between older and

EDITORIAL

Losing my religion

Hardly a month goes by without some media report about the slow demise of Christianity in Europe. Certainly many sociologists continue to hold to the secularization thesis which predicts the inevitable decline of religion in modern society.

Yet as Goodhew's collection of studies (2012) has shown, the picture (in Britain at least) is at certainly more complex than that. Yes, there are many signs of decline, but also of growth. Secularization and desecularization are occurring simultaneously. This is born out by a recent study on church growth in the Church of England by David Voas: <http://www.churchgrowthresearch.org.uk/report>

Certainly, surveys like the European Values Study show that many (but not all) countries show a decline in organized religion. However, though fewer consider themselves to be 'religious' than previous generations, many more describe themselves as 'spiritual'. So is spirituality replacing religion in Europe?

Our lead article by the Australian sociologist Philip Hughes goes some way to answering that question through analysis of data from the International Social Survey Programme. I follow that up by a detailed analysis of my own research into the spirituality of European students. And Darrell Jackson wrestles with the thorny issue of definitions as well as setting out the breadth of research that is taking place into spirituality in Europe today.

This issue concludes with a case study by Jo Appleton looking at some of the challenges of discipleship in a context where people are attracted by 'spirituality' but have little understanding of following Christ.

We hope you find this latest issue of Vista stimulating.

Jim Memory

younger people were not significant at the 95 per cent confidence level (no asterisk).

It will be noted that there is a tendency for the higher numbers of younger 'spiritual' people to be found in the northern countries of Europe with a Protestant history. The lower numbers of younger spiritual people are found mostly in the Catholic and Orthodox countries of south and eastern Europe.

Further analysis has shown that in most of the countries where spirituality is less

among younger people, it is associated with belief in a personal God. In other words, in these countries, spirituality is understood in terms of personal devotion, or belief in the supernatural powers of God. In those countries where spirituality is found more among younger people, it is usually associated with belief in a higher power or spiritual forces in nature, rather than with a personal God. In other words, 'spirituality' means quite different things in different countries and there is no one 'spiritual revolution' across Europe.

What is evident is that in a number of countries in northern Europe where there is a Protestant heritage and in which the making of meaning is approached more individually, there are more young people than older people embracing spirituality as something individual and associated with higher powers rather than with the God of religious institutions.

The Origins of 'The Spiritual Revolution' in Northern Europe

It is highly likely that the northern European kind of spirituality has its roots in the individualism of post-modernity that has arisen from those types of child-rearing that emphasise meeting the needs and interests of each individual child rather than focussing on the wellbeing of the whole family. This has been shown to be connected to the reduction in family size and changes in technology in the home which allowed greater attention to the needs of individual children in the 1960s and 1970s (Berger et al, 1974). Along with other social processes such as an increase in the pluralism of beliefs and life options that came through migration, world travel and television in the 1960s and 1970s, there was a significant change in the way people sought meaning in life.

Heelas and Woodhead (2005) have argued that, prior to the 1960s, meaning was primarily sought through the fulfilment of those roles which one had inherited through birth or through one's social situation. Married women sought meaning, for example, in fulfilling the duties of being a good wife and a good mother. Men sought meaning in providing economically for their families. Both men and women sought meaning in fulfilling the duties of the religion which they inherited by birth. Such a sense of finding fulfilment by fulfilling one's duties in life is still common in the southern and eastern European countries. Most southern and eastern Europeans have a strong sense that their religious identity is given to them by birth and that being a good person means fulfilling those religious duties.

However, children who grew up after the 1960s when thinking about their own needs and interests looked for fulfilment in what Heelas and Woodhead call their 'subjectivity'. Life consisted in finding what was personally fulfilling, what gave a sense of personal authenticity, rather than the fulfilment of external duties laid upon them by birth or their social situation. It is in this situation that many have turned away from the traditional duties of religion and have sought meaning in the spirituality which they have personally constructed for themselves. In the terms of the social theorist, Anthony Giddens (1991), life came to be lived more reflexively, as a constantly developing biography, rather than as a fulfilment of a specific set of duties and responsibilities.

Table I. Responses to the Question Whether People Follow a Religion or Are Spiritual, Both or Neither, and the Percent of People Under 60 Less the People Over 60 Affirming They are Spiritual by European Country (Percentage in Each Country)

	Religious and spiritual	Religious but not spiritual	Spiritual but not religious	Neither religious or spiritual	Don't know/ no response	* % of people over 60 minus % of people under 60 affirming spirituality
Slovenia	18	26	24	22	11	-5%
Croatia	23	43	24	10	0	-1%
Latvia	15	31	22	25	6	-6%
Netherlands	12	22	22	31	13	9%*
Finland	11	26	19	29	15	3%
Switzerland	18	39	18	20	5	7%*
Austria	15	31	18	22	14	7%
Hungary	15	31	18	29	8	2%
Norway	13	22	17	32	16	-1%
Russia	8	33	16	19	24	3%
France	11	28	16	33	13	1%
United Kingdom	17	27	16	25	15	7%*
Sweden	10	24	15	35	16	11%*
Denmark	16	33	15	25	11	4%
Spain	20	36	15	22	7	-11%*
Belgium	8	30	13	32	17	3%
Ireland	29	41	12	10	8	-14%*
Czech Republic	9	16	11	55	10	-10%*
Ukraine	28	29	10	15	18	-2%
Italy	30	41	10	15	4	-9%*
Germany	8	26	10	41	15	3%
Slovak Republic	31	33	8	19	9	-7%*
Poland	18	58	7	10	7	0%
Portugal	30	52	7	9	2	-17%*
Cyprus	28	51	6	5	10	-15%*

Source: ISSP 2009.

A positive score means more younger than older people affirm they are spiritual. A negative score means more older people than younger people affirm they are spiritual.

* Difference between older and younger people significant at 95% confidence level.

'Spirituality' means a great many things to different people. But common characteristics include the fact that it is seen as developed and owned individually rather than by institutions. It is often developed from a range of sources rather than one particular source. It is found expressed in the recounting of experience rather than in expression of dogma. It tends to focus on this life rather than the next, and is oriented towards human wellbeing rather than towards a transcendent God (Fisk, quoted in Geels 2009).

The Implications of The Spiritual Revolution for Mission

The development of such forms of individualised spirituality in Western Europe has many important implications for how mission is conducted in those places. There are a number of features of contemporary spirituality which many Christians can affirm, and, indeed, in some of those features there may be helpful correctives for some ways in which Christianity is expressed.

Firstly, contemporary spirituality recognises that there is 'something beyond' this material world. A number of commentators, such as Antoon Geels (2009), have noted that many forms of contemporary spirituality recognise the mystery in human life and in the universe as a whole. It is, in part, a protest against reducing the world to that which is material and mundane. Geels argues that this sense of mystery is very much in line with that described by the mystics of many religions including those in the Christian tradition. The recognition of mystery in contemporary spirituality may be an important antidote to the Protestant tendency to anthropomorphise God, as Karen Armstrong (1993) has argued.

Contemporary spirituality also reminds people of the fragility of the earth and the need for its care. It reminds Christians of the importance of recapturing respect for creation and dedicating themselves to its care. Associated with the sense of the mystery of God is the emphasis on the experience of God. Again, this fits with many Christian traditions, and has been a feature of the Pentecostal and charismatic churches.

Where Christians need to make a stand over against some forms of contemporary spirituality is in arguing that such fulfilment in life is not found primarily by focussing on self-realisation or obeying one's inner impulses, as Heelas and Woodhead seem to suggest, but through one's contribution in relationship with others. In

contemporary society, each individual can develop their own biographies but they will not find those biographies meaningful until they make their own personal contributions to the lives of others and to the wider society. Ultimately we find fulfilment in life when we focus on the wellbeing of others and not just ourselves.

To put it in Jesus' terms: the purpose of Christian mission is to call people to love God and to love their neighbours as themselves. Love of self, love of our neighbour - not only our friends and relatives but also the members of wider society - and love of God is the spirituality to which Jesus calls us.

"Contemporary spirituality can remind us that Jesus' call is to relationship"

Contemporary spirituality can remind us that Jesus' call is to relationship. It is not primarily a call to church attendance, even though that may be a significant basis for relationships with others. We are likely to see increasing numbers of people looking for ways in which they can explore faith or express faith through short-term activities such as involvement in social welfare or social justice activities, through music and drama, through small groups and large festivals, rather than through the weekly congregational worship. We may still want to uphold weekly congregational worship as part of the nature

of the church, but we may need to see it as the end of a path, rather than the start of an exploration for the love for God, for one's neighbour and one's self.



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Jim Memory and Jo Appleton will be taking part in the Symposium on Church Planting in Europe to be held in Leuven, Belgium from 21-25 July 2014 - see you there!

THE SPIRITUALITY OF EUROPE'S STUDENTS

The values and beliefs of European students are often assumed rather than known. As a result the gospel of Jesus Christ is sometimes expressed in terms which make little sense to today's European students. A research project conducted by IFES Europe in association with Redcliffe College has provoked some deep questions about the best way to evangelize this generation of European students.

Methodology

Questionnaire design is an exacting science and, rather than attempt to design our own questionnaire, the decision was taken to take advantage of the questions from the well-trusted European Values Study (EVS) a standardized tool which is used by many of Europe's leading sociologists.

The European Values Study (EVS) is a large-scale, cross-national, and longitudinal survey research program on basic human values. It provides insights into the ideas, beliefs, preferences, attitudes, values and opinions of citizens all over Europe.

All IFES Europe movements were invited but only Albania, Belgium, Croatia, Portugal and Romania decided to engage with the research. Questions were selected from the EVS relating to religion, belief and spirituality. This enabled the IFES student volunteers to conduct the questionnaire in under ten minutes.

Results

A total of 1048 questionnaires were completed, approximately 200 per country. It proved more difficult to balance the number of male and female participants, the result of the greater proportion of females among university students in many European countries.

Table 1: Number of Respondents by Country and Sex

	Male	Female	Total
Albania	51	131	182
Belgium	93	122	215
Croatia	68	147	215
Portugal	91	149	240
Romania	95	101	196
Totals	398	650	1048

The vast majority of the respondents (88% to be precise) were born in the seven years between 1987 and 1993, so at the time of the research were between 18 and 25 years of age, with a median age of 21.

Table 2: The "very important" things in life, ranked by importance and country

Albania	%	Belgium	%	Croatia	%	Portugal	%	Romania	%
Family	91.8	Friends	75.3	Family	85.6	Family	89.6	Family	89.3
Work	68.1	Family	61.4	Friends	62.8	Friends	54.2	Religion	41.8
Friends	19.8	Leisure	45.6	Leisure	42.8	Work	36.7	Friends	36.7
Religion	16.5	Work	41.4	Work	30.7	Leisure	27.9	Work	31.6
Leisure	15.9	Religion	6.5	Religion	18.6	Religion	12.1	Leisure	29.6
Politics	5.5	Politics	4.2	Politics	1.4	Politics	4.6	Politics	1.5

The Important Things in Life

The first question in the survey asked respondents to say how important in their life were work, family, friends and acquaintances, leisure time, politics and religion. Analysis of those who responded that these were "very important" is set out in Table 2.

It is immediately apparent that in almost all the countries the family is considered to be the most important thing for students. In only one country (Belgium) does it not occupy the top position and in every other case over 85% of students say that family is very important to them. The second most important thing to students are their friends with this item appearing in the top three of every country but in most cases at a significantly lower level than the family.

Student Happiness

Perhaps the most striking finding of all came from the results of the question which asked about life satisfaction. Students were asked to rate on a ten-point scale: *All things considered, how satisfied are you with your life as a whole these days?* As can be clearly seen from Figure 3 European students are on the whole very satisfied with their lives. The median score across the whole dataset is an 8 with 86% of students scoring between a 6 and a 10.

Believing without Belonging

The inclusion of a number of questions from the EVS on belief and religious participation enabled us to consider to what degree European students were "believing without belonging" as Grace Davie famously put it. One question asked: *Apart from weddings,*

Figure 3: Percentage - How satisfied are you with your life as a whole?

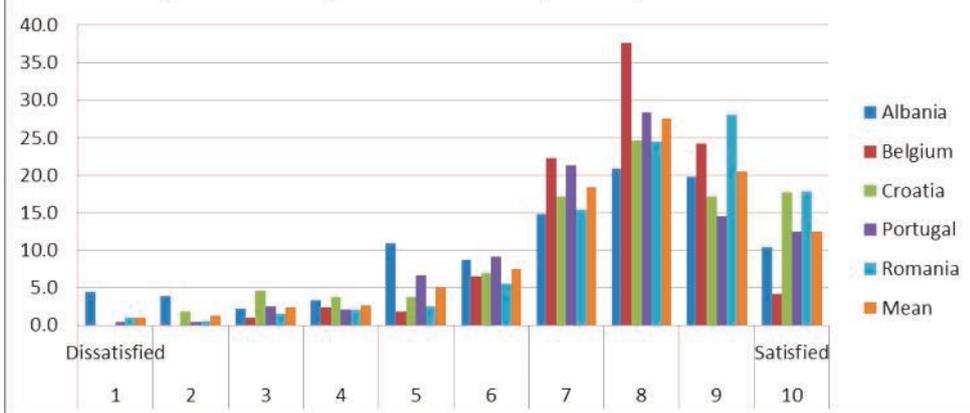
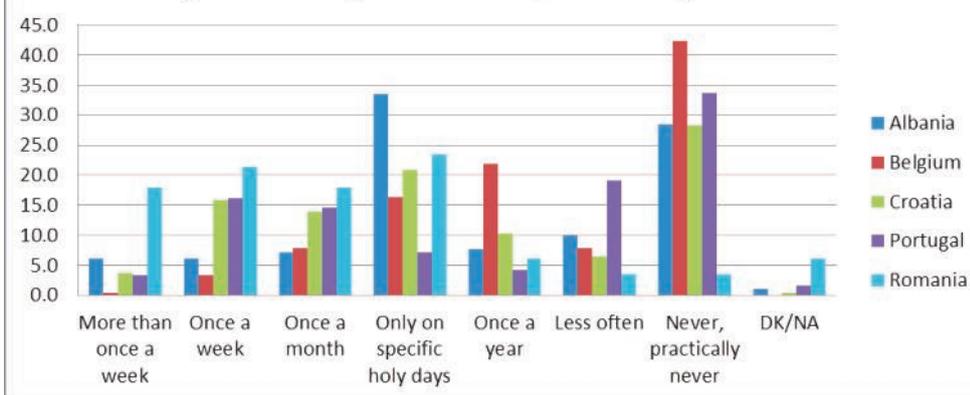


Figure 4 - Percentage - How often do you attend religious services?



funerals and christenings, about how often do you attend a religious service these days? The possible responses ranged from more than once a week to never or practically never and the results are displayed in Figure 4.

We also asked: how often do you pray outside of religious services? The possible responses ranged from every day to never. We found that, despite a lack of regular attendance at religious services many European students continue to pray (Figure 5).

Students were also asked about their belief in God: which of these statements comes closest to your beliefs: there is a personal God; there is some sort of spirit or life force; I don't really know what to think; I don't really think there is any sort of spirit, God or life force (Figure 6). Whilst belief in the divine is widespread, belief in a personal God is considerably lower. Nearly four times as many Belgian students believe in some sort of spirit or life force as in a personal God.

Religious or spiritual?

Another question asked: independently of whether you go to church or not, would you say you are: a religious person; not a religious person; a convinced atheist? As Figure 7 makes clear an extraordinarily high percentage of the students describe themselves as religious. Most strikingly over a third of Belgian students describe themselves as religious even though only 4% attend church on a weekly basis (Figure 4). The very low level of convinced atheists among students is also noteworthy, even in the most secularized of the countries in the analysis: Belgium.

The final question delved deeper into the issue of spirituality showing that European students are interested in spirituality (Fig. 8).

Figure 5 – Frequency of private prayer by country (%)

	Every day	More than once a	Once a week	At least once a	Several times a year	Less Often	Never	Don't Know/ No
Albania	52.7	17.6	4.4	5.5	7.1	7.7	3.3	1.6
Belgium	6.0	2.8	4.7	7.0	11.6	14.4	50.2	3.3
Croatia	28.8	14.4	8.4	9.3	8.8	8.4	17.2	4.7
Portugal	15.1	9.2	6.3	6.3	9.2	16.3	32.6	5.0
Romania	54.6	13.3	4.1	4.6	1.0	11.7	5.1	5.6

Only a tiny minority have no interest, and most are somewhat or very interested. Even in Belgium half of the students had some interest in the sacred or supernatural.

Conclusions

Whilst differences were apparent between the countries some common patterns emerged. This led us to make three significant observations that were true for all:

1. The students in this study were largely satisfied with their lives.
2. The students in this study consider family and friends to be the most important things in their lives.
3. The students in this study were not always interested in religion but were interested in spirituality and the supernatural.

What follows is an attempt to reflect missiologically and theologically on the observations of this research.

Proposition 1: European students are largely satisfied with lives

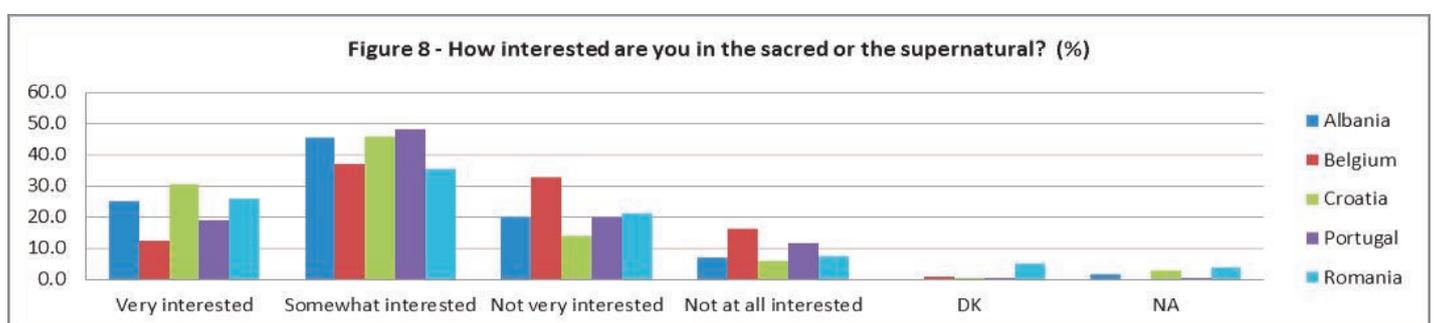
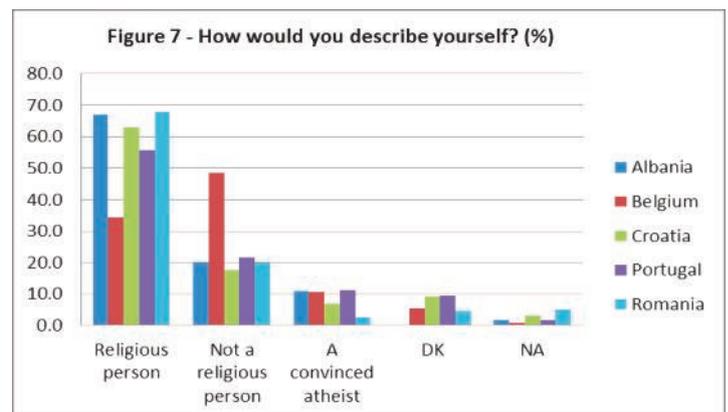
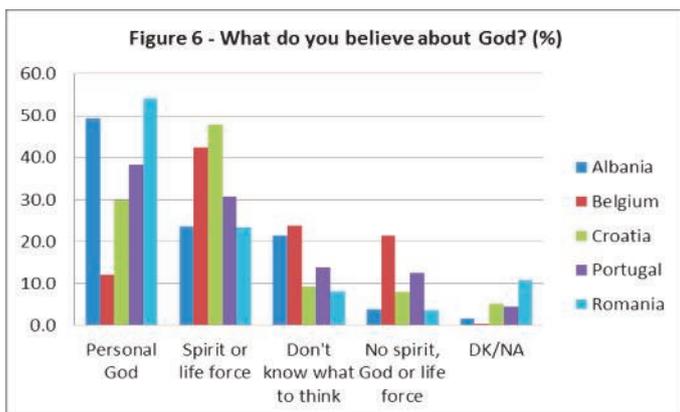
This study found that European students are generally satisfied with their lives. This corroborates other studies such as that by

Savage et al (2006), who found that British young people live by what they call a “happy mid-narrative”: their lives revolve around their friends being happy together in the here and now and overcoming problems through those friendships toward that end.

We might ask what the students who responded to our survey understand by “satisfied” but it seems to be very much focussed on enjoying life in the present.

Clearly this observation has huge missiological consequences:

- If European students are basically satisfied with their lives then many forms of evangelism which presuppose dissatisfaction with life will make little sense. This goes much further than a rethink of evangelistic materials or even of evangelism training but points to a need for a new theology of evangelism. This would involve effectively a change of missiological paradigm for many churches.
- Whilst today's young people are just as much in need of redemption as those of every other generation, our “missiological starting points” must posit answers to their spiritual questions not ours.



dementia spirituality, typically understanding themselves in relationship to a 'higher' something or someone. This is something that Professor Arndt Büssing (*Centre for Integrative Medicine, University of Witten/Herdecke*) suggests is a form of 'meaning-focused coping'. Others have highlighted the value of 'hope', rooted in spirituality, as among the more significant resources relied upon by patients facing an uncertain future.

The European Research Institute for Spirituality and Health (www.rish.ch) has organised four European Conferences and published a quarterly newsletter since 2006. One of its goals is to identify ways that healthcare agencies can promote spiritual competence among employees.

Spirituality and Education

In the area of Higher Education in Europe, the *European Research Area (ERA)* is an emerging political reality. There is always the danger that shared European convictions about any EU-wide activity become a value-free zone. Working to avoid this are individuals like Dr Diana Beech of Cambridge University's *Faraday Institute for Science and Religion*. She chairs the *European Spirituality in Higher Education (SHE)* which lobbies for the EU to recognise the impact of spiritual values upon contemporary postgraduate research. The vitality of this area of research can be seen in the fact that Watson & de Souza's 2014 book *Global Perspectives on Spirituality and Education*, features seven European contributors from countries including Belgium, Malta, the UK, and Finland.

Teachers at secondary school level across Europe continually face the question, 'What are Religious and Spiritual Education Good for?' The *European Association for Research on Learning and Instruction* has a special interest group called 'Religious and Spiritual Education' which advocates for research into cognitive, social and emotional components of the educational process. This is another area where there has been a growing concentration upon 'hope' as a personal reservoir for professional teaching practice.

Spirituality, Economics and Society

The *European Spirituality in Economics and Society Forum (SPES)* explores the interface between spirituality, economics and culture in the EU. It takes a cue from research commissioned by the European Commission in 2005, *The Spiritual and Cultural Dimension of Europe*. Their work has suggested that links can be made between the current crisis of European identity and increasing levels of spiritual illiteracy and poverty. Diana Beech's research has also addressed the disconnect

between the spiritually defined political vision of EU figures such as Robert Schuman and Jacques Delors and the current sole focus on economic survivalism. Dr Beech has the distinct advantage of a platform from which to address European policy makers.

Spirituality and ecology

Some researchers are enthusiastically exploring the connections between ecology and spirituality. The *European Centre for Psychotherapeutic Studies (Normandy)* promotes a form of eco-spirituality that values the interconnections of the earth and human beings. This might not be such a surprise from an organisation that tends to be pantheistic (seeing 'god' in everything) but a 2011 European research programme researching the cultural and spiritual values associated with woodland sites is perhaps more surprising. The Forestry Commission (UK) took part in this programme, along with other national forestry agencies within the EU. The results were published as 'The State of Europe's Forests'.

Contemporary spirituality: what are we talking about?

A fifth of the UK population now describes itself as 'spiritual', according to Prof Michael King of University College, London. A BBC report in 2013 of Prof King's work described these as a wide range of people including pagans, devotees of crystals, and people who feel there must be 'something else' to life. The practices that accompany these expressions of spirituality are equally diverse: meditation, attending a summer solstice, silence, healing, prayer, channelling energies. This tendency has given rise to the description 'spiritual not religious', a term that some sociologists believe says little about a person's beliefs or principles.

A fifth of the UK population now describes itself as 'spiritual'.

Given this diversity of expression, and the failure to provide a widely-accepted definition, should Christians conclude that 'spirituality' is a totally unhelpful term?

Woodhead and Heelas (2005) work has convincingly demonstrated the shift from religiosity towards spirituality. They argue that this represents a 'turn to the self'. In other words, this is a spirituality that is focused on 'me' rather than on anything transcendent. Breen & Reynolds (2011) claim to see evidence of this in increasingly secular Ireland and describe a 'transference of allegiance from institutions to self'. Büssing (2010) is one among others who argue that religion is institutional and cultural whilst spirituality is individual and open.

Intriguingly, the Finnish researcher, Kirsi Tirri (2008), welcomes the opportunities this

presents for the greater participation of young people in 'communicative action concerning religion'. However, there are more cautious assessments of what *may* be a growing phenomenon: 'International demographics of spirituality and religiosity among youth and young adults suggest that spirituality varies widely in this age group around the world and that variation may be linked to historic, cultural and economic differences' (Lippman, 2010). Showing a similar sensitivity to Europe's cultural and social history, researchers at the Max Planck Institute (2012) suggest that spirituality and secularity are in fact both distinctive responses of European modernity to institutional religion.

How should the churches and mission agencies respond?

If contemporary forms of spirituality are a response to institutional forms of religion; if they are a coping mechanism in the face of change or trauma; if they provide a vocabulary for young people to discuss religious realities; then how do we respond to spirituality rather than merely defining it?

Frustratingly, two counter-cultural elements are required in any response. Firstly, the 'self' at the centre of Heelas and Woodhead's 'turn to the self' is a self that requires sacrifice as much as it needs to be fulfilled. It's a 'self' that needs to be put to death as much as it needs to be 'actualised'. Secondly, the vision to achieve this is nurtured and sustained communally.

There is certainly a case to be made for forms of Christian faith and practice that generate open spaces for engagement without pre-condition and yet which don't confuse active engagement with membership in the body of Christ. The former may become the latter in due course but this always involves a putting to death of the self. To turn from a spirituality of the self to a more adequately Christian spirituality will always involve a conversion.

Darrell Jackson

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The missional conversation in Europe is slowly gathering pace. Over New Year, I attended the Mission-Net congress in Offenberg, Germany. More than 2800 young people from many countries across Europe, including Belarus, Estonia, Albania and Turkey were encouraged to ‘transform their world’ in many creative ways.

For Christians who want to adopt a missional mindset, Frost (2011, p28) poses the following important question:

what does the reign of God through Christ look like in my neighbourhood? If the kingdom of God has come and is overlapping with the broken world in which I live, how can I alert people to it? ... this is a far more legitimate and creative question to ask than the usual questions about how we can attract people to our church programs.

But changing church culture from ‘maintenance’ to ‘missional’ comes with a health warning! As has been highlighted before in Vista (for example *Missional in Berlin, Jan 2013*), missional church aims to truly reach those outside of the church, rather than solely serve the needs of those who already attend. The practices may look very different from what we expect from Sunday services (and may not even be on a Sunday!). Discipleship becomes messy, because church is often centred around community and belonging, before people are expected to believe or behave.

The following case study highlights some of these issues. It features the Gospel Fellowship, a church birthed within Copenhagen’s Gospel singing community, and is based on interviews conducted in 2010 and 2013 with Peter Dhyr, pastor of the Gospel Fellowship. While many churches in Denmark, and indeed Scandinavia and beyond, have a Gospel choir, often the strategy has been to start a Gospel choir in order to get the people into church and convert them so they become part of the church. The Gospel Fellowship has a different vision. While initially it was the umbrella of a local Lutheran Church, Kobenhavns Frimenighed, it began not as church having gospel choir but rather as gospel choirs becoming church in their own right.

Peter and the choir leaders Hans Christian Jochimsen and Claes Wegener, sensed that God was already at work in the Gospel Choir community. People were being touched by the Holy Spirit through the

power of the music and words, but they would not then automatically go to ‘church’ because they viewed it negatively as an institution.

‘There isn’t that much residual memory of faith in Danish culture,’ says Peter. ‘Not many of the people who attend the Gospel choir were confirmed or baptised. If they went through confirmation, they hated it. Maybe they have come to a Sunday service and found it boring and didn’t connect with it – but this is where the Gospel music is so powerful – it is not charismatic, but it is highly inspirational and connects highly with their feelings.’

‘In these choirs people are coming to faith without knowing it, who can’t go anywhere with their faith because there hasn’t been any system of discipleship or a path where people can walk to develop their faith. So we decided we would love to do a church that somehow could take these people to the place where they want to go.’

Over the last four years, the team have developed a structure of big celebrations, mid-size clusters and now small groups within the Gospel Fellowship, in order to create this ‘path’. They have two Sunday services each month – one is a ‘big choir’ celebration and the other is a billed as a ‘meditation’. They have Gospel music as their worship style with everyone taking part, and the liturgy is adapted to suit the target audience. On another Sunday the smaller cluster meets, with a brunch, singing and group discussion. Newcomers are invited to hear more about the church: *‘They have to be part of the fellowship to see what it is. They will have been to a celebration and experienced a cluster, then we will tell them what it means.’*

The Fellowship also organises four practical courses for people who want to be more intentional about their faith: subjects include leading yourself, growing in spirituality, discovering your spiritual gifts and a second level of leadership training.

Small groups are just beginning. *‘Some people will have already experienced a Church small group already, but it may have been a negative experience for them,’* explains Peter. *‘Ours will be about teaching discipleship and values. Discipleship happens through conversation and experience. We need to be living examples that people copy and try to do themselves.’*

The path of discipleship displayed in the Gospel Fellowship is very much ‘belong, believe, behave’ rather than the process of believe, behave, belong that is expected by some churches. Belonging takes place as people feel they belong to the choir. As they attend, they are touched by the Holy

Spirit, but are also given a language to explain what is happening: *‘it is not just ‘healing and good thoughts but we need to say ‘this is the Holy Spirit you are experiencing – this is the love of God’,* says Peter. They start to open their hearts and become believers – like the atheist who is now saying *‘I am an atheist, but I am starting to believe in God. I can see there is something going on in me, even though I don’t think God exists.’*

This is where it gets messy. Because people already have a strong sense of belonging, and are on a journey to belief, many people who are part of the church who do not yet ‘behave’. *‘We want them to behave not because of rules but because their hearts have been transformed by God,’* says Peter. *‘But negatively, we could be too accepting. It could be we have no ambition for people to be transformed.’*

‘How much noise can we live with and how much do we expect people to have the same values?’ Do we accept the mess and try to play the right melody and hope that people pick up the tune as we go along?’

As we wrestle with these issues, we turn to the example of Jesus. The story of the woman caught in adultery gives a biblical example of how he dealt with this tension. If he did not condemn, then we certainly cannot, as we recognise we are all on the same journey of receiving forgiveness. But just as Christ always called those he encountered to a different way, a higher ideal and a new kind of living, so we too need to balance love, acceptance and non-condemnation with the call to ‘go now and leave your life of sin’ (John 8:11).

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Reference

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