

# God's Continent? The Religious Question in Contemporary Europe

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[ 0 : 00 ] Well, it's always good to be with this group. I know you've got a tremendously warm community.

You don't quite break bread together, but you have breakfast together. And it's a lovely way to start a Sunday. Some years ago, Sandy and I went to see her elderly relative in San Diego.

It was Easter. And we went to church. We went to a very large Presbyterian church, which of course was totally full, enormous congregation.

An orchestra, not a band, but an orchestra. A choir led by a woman who is very well known, a leader in the musical field in San Diego.

And a remarkable sermon. Really quite remarkable. Remarkable. And so it was a great Easter Sunday.

[ 1 : 12 ] Well, curiously, some years after that, I was again in San Diego over Easter. There was a conference that I was attending.

And so on Easter Sunday, I broke away from the conference and went with Sandy's elderly relative to the same church. And there was again the same crowd of people packed out.

The same wonderful orchestra and choir. The same minister. And the same sermon. I was really quite flabbergasted at this.

Well, let me just say, if you were here on the 9th of December, 2007. So, the good thing about academics is that we do usually have a talk that we have given at some point in the past.

The challenge is usually to find it. But because this talk was inside the book upon which the talk is based, I was able to get hold of it speedily.

[ 2 : 45 ] This book, I had just read. In fact, it was just published in 2007. And it really struck me as a tremendous insight to the religious state of Europe.

It's called God's Continent, provocative title, because, of course, we think of godless Europe. His title is God's Continent, Christianity, Islam, and Europe's Religious Crisis.

I'm going to say a little bit about the author in a moment. But let me start off with a vignette to kind of draw more sharply the idea of godless Europe.

Some years ago, I was in Lausanne, where I have a friend who for many years taught at the University of Lausanne. Lausanne, probably in the evangelical world, is best known for the covenant that was agreed upon in 1974 among Christians of 150 nations.

And in fact, that part of Switzerland along Lake Geneva has a very long Protestant history. Calvin's city-state, the Christian city-state that Calvin tried to establish, of course, was in Geneva.

[ 4 : 21 ] And in Lausanne, there is a cathedral on a hill. Lausanne is a city that rises up from the waters of Lake Geneva, slopes up.

And on the crest of the hill is this wonderful Gothic cathedral. It's one of Europe's most beautiful Gothic cathedrals, or at least in terms of those I've seen.

In the 16th century, this cathedral was taken over by the reformers. So the reform movement entered Lausanne and they took over the cathedral.

That was then. Today, the cathedral is the centre of a largely liberal parish.

And within this large building, there are fewer than 50 people who worship on a Sunday. Mainly elderly people.

[ 5 : 29 ] So here is the typical picture of godless Europe. Of a Europe that has secularised and where religion is now an activity in the margins.

How typical is the Lausanne Cathedral of what is going on in Europe? Well, that is the question that Philip Jenkins takes on in this book, *God's Continent*.

This is a morning in which we proclaim the Welsh. Because Jenkins is also from Wales. A prolific Welsh-American historian.

His only mistake is that he was Cambridge-educated. And it's quite remarkable he's had such a prominent future after such a difficult beginning.

But he's teaching, and has been teaching for some years now, at Pennsylvania State University. He also has an appointment at Baylor University.

[ 6 : 43 ] He is a prolific author. However, this book, *Dr. Packer*, is his 21st. How many have you done, Jim?

Seven or eight. Oh, well. He's ahead of you by a multiple, then. I think so. I looked on his website and found that his most recent book, out this year, *The Great and Holy War, How World War I Became a Religious Crusade*.

He's an author who takes on big questions. And has got a wonderful way of communicating in a very accessible manner. But at the same time, it is a well-researched product that we find in his books.

He is what we call a public intellectual. His CV mentions several hundred media interviews, public testimonies to government committees, and hundreds of public lectures.

And by a very close reading of his CV, I discovered the most distinguished thing of all. As a graduate student in 1979, he won the BBC television quiz show *Mastermind*.

[ 8 : 25 ] Another of his books, *The New Faces of Christianity, Believing the Bible in the Global South*, won Christianity Today's Annual Award for the Best Book on Missions and Global Affairs.

So, Jim, I don't know why he's never been a Lang lecturer at Regent. I'm not saying that in any kind of critical way of you personally, but it seems he would just be a wonderful person to speak at Regent.

We must work on that. Oh, yes. Yes. If I was a member of the board, I would make the...

LAUGHTER Now, do I let him have the last word?

LAUGHTER I'm afraid that John was quite accurate in his analysis of the goings-on behind these walls.

Faulty towers indeed. LAUGHTER So, *God's continent* raises, amongst other things, not only the decline of Christianity, but also the growth of Islam.

[ 9 : 43 ] To what extent is there a second Islamic invasion of Europe? It's a very, very big question in Europe. So, this book has been widely acclaimed and translated into a number of other European languages.

And what I'm going to say today is really very largely based on this book, with a few remarks of my own around the edges.

Well, Europe has been described as the most secular continent. Books have been written with titles like one written ten years ago by Callum Brown, *The Death of Christian Britain*.

It's a remarkable state of affairs. For, of course, Europe was the heart of Christianity for a thousand years. In addition to secularisation, there is something which Jenkins is making more and more of in his more recent writing.

And that is the relationship between a lifestyle change that includes a low birth rate.

[ 11 : 04 ] He, in fact, has argued that the best correlate of the level of secularisation in a country is its fertility rate. It is a tremendous predictor of the level of church adherence.

So, let me start off with a few comments on that. In parts of Germany, the birth rate today is now lower than it was during the Second World War.

During the Second World War. 40% of women college graduates in Germany will be childless through their lifetime.

In 1982, the author Gunther Grass published a novel, *Headbirths, The Germans Are Dying Out*.

And that reminded me, I've not read that book, but I have read a book some of you may have heard of by P.D. James, famous Anglican novelist in the UK, *Children of Men*.

[ 12 : 14 ] A book that is set in the childless Britain of 2027. Why these rates of childbirth, the fertility rate, is so low is a subject of much discussion.

And one thesis, and this is the thesis that Grass follows through his novel, is that couples are now just too worldly and career-oriented to put up with the inconvenience of having children.

No doubt, the full story is much more complicated than that. But going forward, we might expect to see a growing contrast between a Christian and a secular world in terms of family formation.

For the role of children and families plays a large role in orthodox Christian tradition. In fact, there's a political scientist, a Canadian who is now working in London, who has written a book in which he more or less says, the conservatives will inherit the earth.

And his argument here is that people who are conservative, and especially religious people who are conservative, have more children than people who are liberal in their politics and in their theology.

[ 13 : 49 ] And thus, if you follow reproduction forward, assuming that their children also take on those characteristics, which we cannot assume, of course, the conservative voice is going to prevail.

It's a very big issue in Israel, where the orthodox Jews have such an enormously high birth rate, and the secular Jews have a birth rate below the replacement level.

So you can see every year the percentage of orthodox Jews is increasing in Israel. Anyway, there is then a population gap in Europe.

The population is not replacing itself, and whenever you have that situation, that opens the door to immigration as a necessity. And that is what's happened in Europe.

Among these immigrants are Muslims from North Africa, the Middle East, and South Asia. Turks moved to Germany to work in the car factories.

[ 15 : 09 ] North Africans moved to France, and Pakistanis moved to the UK. Moroccans moved to the Netherlands. There's a lot of Iraqi and Iranian refugees in Sweden.

Every country in Europe has got its own distinctive mix, but there is a significant minority. In Europe today, there are about 15 million Muslims.

A third of them are in France. So, asks Jenkins, and this is really, his book rotates around this question, is Europe a graveyard for Christianity?

Is Europe a graveyard for Christianity? Or, he asks, is it a laboratory for new forms of faith in a dominantly secular environment?

And it is, in fact, that second option that he seems to adopt in his book, that Europe has become a laboratory for new forms of faith in a dominantly secular environment.

[ 16 : 26 ] Okay, so first of all, a bit more on godless Europe leading to secularization. Here surveys underline what everybody knows.

Church attendance has dropped like a stone in Europe. In 2002, only about 20% of Europeans agreed with the statement, quote, religion plays a very important role in my life.

Typically, the lowest rates are in Scandinavia and Eastern Europe, though interestingly not in Poland. I'll say more about Poland later.

In the UK, in 2004, only 44% of the population believed in God, and only 5% are regular churchgoers.

But, 72% say they are Christians. 44% only believe in God, but 72% are Christians.

[ 17 : 46 ] Well, there is what a psychologist would call some cognitive dissonance there. But I, what I want to kind of draw out of that is that, is in these European countries a kind of a Christian memory?

In some instances, even a Christian nostalgia. culture. And, it seems to me, we see it popping up unexpectedly. For example, at a popular level, there has been a considerable backlash in the UK against Richard Dawkins and the new atheists.

They are really regarded as out there, on a fringe, not representative of the population at large. and you see people who don't go to church being kind of quite defensive of, 72% say they're Christians. So, so there is this kind of residual presence. And it seems to me that, and this is a point that Jenkins makes, that there is tremendous opportunity here for the church to connect with this residual memory.

and the fact that people actually do say, many of them, that they are believers. I was reminded of Paul speaking in Athens.

[ 19 : 17 ] And as he speaks, he talks about, he talks to, he talks through the issue of the unknown God. And identifies the unknown God, of course, as Christ.

Christ. And it seems to me that we too need to talk through whatever residual understanding there remains and use that as a starting point to, for a much fuller discussion of the gospel.

over time, the Protestant states showed the most rapid decline, but now the Catholic countries are following the same path.

Indeed, despite the official view on contraception amongst Catholics, the lowest birth rates in Europe are in strongly Catholic countries.

Spain and Italy have the lowest birth rates in Europe. Catholic demise is quite recent, from the 1990s.

[ 20 : 31 ] And this is true even in Ireland, which, with Poland, have been the most faithful Catholic nations in Europe. Some years ago, I was at a university in Ireland, and on the edge of its campus, Maynooth, not far outside Dublin, is a great seminary, a great Catholic seminary in Maynooth.

The vast corridors, I went around this seminary, and the vast corridors were almost empty. You just didn't bump into people, and if you did, they were from the Philippines or Vietnam.

Maynooth used to house 500 seminarians. That's what it was built for. In 2004, in the whole of Ireland, only 15 priests were ordained.

The whole of Ireland, 15 priests. I talked to the people I was with about this. They weren't Christians, but they certainly had some views, and what they said to me is that one cause of avoidance of the priesthood and the church in Ireland has been sexual scandal.

That there's now almost a suspicion that you're a pedophile if you're a priest. In fact, in 2006, 250 priests in Ireland were under investigation for child abuse.

[ 22 : 18 ] It's astonishing. We only see the tip of the iceberg here. The outcome of changes like this are quite literally a new religious landscape as churches are closed and transformed to other uses.

It's been reported that in the first ten years of this century, 500 churches of all denominations in London were converted to other uses.

500 in one decade converted to other uses. We are moving clearly into a post-Christian age. A poll in Britain stated that 40% of Britons did not know what event was commemorated at Easter.

40%. Why? Well, the answer that one's commonly given is secularization.

Secularization, part of modernization, the decline of the spiritual, the rise of the rational, and the material. Think about Quebec's quiet revolution in the 1960s, transformation that occurred in Quebec, where there was a rapid modernization process that occurred in a 10-year period.

[ 23 : 54 ] The expansion of education, lots of new universities were opened, the rise of the welfare state, the decline in the authority of the church, and an astonishing decline in the birth rate.

the birth rate fell by half in 10 years. From four children, the typical in 1960, the typical Quebec family, four children were born, 1970, two children, and it's gone down since then.

So what you see then is this conjunction of events that together we call modernization, that include the rise of the state and the state taking over some of the welfare activities that had been carried out by the church, including education and other services, and a decline in the influence of the church.

church. In Ireland, the decline of the Catholic church coincided with rapid economic growth in the 1990s.

The birth rate fell and there was also a fall in religious conviction. religion. Now, whenever this thesis is trotted out, there's a big anomaly, and the anomaly is the U.S.

[ 25 : 34 ] I think most of us would agree that the U.S. is a modernized society, but clearly it is a society where there is still a strong faith component in the culture.

And yet, if you look in detail within the U.S., you see that the birth rate is actually sustained by immigrants, especially immigrants from Latin America.

And the state that has the greatest fertility of all is guess which? Texas.

Texas. So that's a good guess, but it's not right. That's where all the old people live. Is there something you know I don't know?

Utah. So, here then is the thesis of godless Europe, the rise of secularization.

[ 26 : 49 ] But then Jenkins starts to push back to look for counter-tendencies, and I think this is where there is much more hope in his thesis. He begins by noting that we typically get our information from the media, and the media are far from a neutral source when it comes to reporting religious matters.

people have heard of people. Has anybody noticed that? They have their favorite topics, and typically they are topics that are insidiously unfriendly to religious faith.

Jenkins reminds us that there are still 60 to 70 million people in Europe that state that religion plays a large role in their lives.

That's more than a remnant. Poland is, in a sense, the United States of Europe, a fascinating anomaly, with a vigorous Catholic Church and young men lining up to enter the seminaries. The Polish diaspora in Europe, since Poland entered the EU, has been reviving the Catholic Church in other countries.

[ 28 : 21 ] For example, in the first 10 years of this century, 600 to 700,000 young Poles moved to the United Kingdom.

And in fact, there are now more Poles in the UK than there are people whose source country is Pakistan.

In areas where the Polish population is concentrated, some Roman Catholic churches have had to double the number of masses on the Sunday because of these young Poles who are coming to mass.

So, there are, if we had a different way of looking at the data, there are some positive stories to tell, but there's a lot more than that.

Then there is the issue of latent faith, which I've already discussed, but Jenkins also alludes to, residual forms for adherence that could be rekindled, where there are nominal, nominal claims to belief, where there are state churches, such as in the UK and Germany, where there are religious schools.

[ 29 : 45 ] All of these provide a kind of a residual presence, at least, into which the church can speak.

Then, there are the renewal movements. Now, the media don't tell us much about this, but the number of evangelicals, charismatics, and Pentecostals in Europe doubled from 1970 to 2000. there is actual growth occurring when we look at these groups within which, of course, we would number ourselves.

When my friend was taking me through the Lausanne Cathedral, I asked him, is there no religious vitality in Lausanne anymore?

He said, oh, well, there's some Pentecostals meet, but people don't know much about them. He was a liberal Protestant.

[ 30 : 54 ] There are also great religious events. For example, in the UK, each spring, an event called Spring Harvest, which is an event festival, a Christian festival, that has now grown so large at 100,000 people that it meets in several separate locations.

We would need a most renewal movement to think about the Alpha series, originating in London, Holy Trinity Brompton, an Anglican church in the museum district of Kensington, down the street from Harrods, I'm told, but I wouldn't know that.

The large churches today in Britain are primarily evangelical or charismatic, and all charismatic. And Holy Trinity Brompton, with two and a half thousand worshippers, is amongst the largest of them, and has planted a number of daughter churches churches around London.

In fact, I attended a daughter church when I was living in London for five weeks last year. The Alpha course emerged, as most of you know, at Holy Trinity Brompton in the early 1980s as a ministry to exactly this group with a kind of residual, distant memory of Christianity, but without any sense of what it really means in everyday life.

And it has been astonishingly successful. Within the UK, two and a half million people have attended an Alpha course, and globally 15 million.

[ 32 : 58 ] So it has been a tremendous vehicle for outreach. St. Peter's Fireside, I think, has an Alpha course going on at present.

The Roman Catholic Archbishop of Paris has described Alpha as one of Protestantism's two biggest gifts to the Catholic Church.

Unfortunately, Jenkins didn't tell us what the other one was. So there is then Alpha, Holy Trinity, Brompton.

Now you go to the other side of Hyde Park and off Oxford Street in London, and you come, of course, to All Souls Langham Place, another major evangelical presence in central London for decades.

And the pulpit occupied for so long by John Stott. Our church has had quite a close relationship with All Souls over the years. In fact, I know two people here who met each other at All Souls.

[ 34 : 06 ] There's an attractively wide network of ministries associated with these churches. These churches have learned how to reach out to their parishes, to their publics, in a post-Christian age.

All Souls, for example, uses its buildings as a community centre for the neighbourhood round about. It has an orchestra, that has a travelling programme that is called Prom Praise.

Its venues have included the Royal Albert Hall, where the real proms occur. All Souls has a primary school that serves over 200 children in central London.

It has an Aslan programme that works with the homeless. And so on. We see the way in which it has reached out into the community.

It doesn't have Alpha, but it does have Christianity Explored, a seeker series that we have used at St. John's.

[ 35 : 17 ] So there are all of these signs and many others then of bright points, of renewal in Europe. Then I want to go on and talk about something that has actually interested me professionally, and that is the role of immigrants and religious renewal.

I think I've given a talk on that topic to this group some time in the past. Immigrant religion is another important topic as we look for positive signs in Europe, but also in other secularizing countries like Canada.

In Europe, the arrival of Africans, Latin Americans, people from the Caribbean, and Christian minorities from the Middle East and other parts of Asia have led to significant church growth.

And some remarkable, remarkable stories here, including some of the African churches have got very special names.

One that Jenkins mentions is, this is the title of the church, the Embassy of the Blessed Kingdom of God for All Nations. This church was founded by a Nigerian student in Kiev, capital of the Ukraine, in 1994, with seven members.

[ 36 : 59 ] Before long, it claimed 30,000 adherents in the Ukraine, including the mayor of Kiev. It has 50 daughter churches in the Kiev region, and another 100 elsewhere in Kiev, and it is now church planting in Russia.

Remarkable story that I've never read in the Guardian newspaper. Another Nigerian established the Kingsway International Christian Center in London in the 1990s.

Its building is called the Miracle Center and accommodates 5,000 worshippers. Its animated website, which I looked at, reads, Who told you that church was boring?

So, clearly, if you go to the Kingsway International Christian Center, you will have anything other than a boring morning or evening. morning. Now, not altogether different to that is John Stott's statement on the website of All Souls.

One of the major, and I'm quoting from John Stott, one of the major reasons why people reject the gospel today is not because they see it to be false, but because they see it to be trivial.

[ 38 : 27 ] Trivial. Four of the ten largest churches in Britain are now pastored by Africans, typically with a charismatic or Pentecostal style of worship.

There was a census carried out in 2005 of religious adherence in the UK, and it was revealed that in London, 60% of people who go to church are not white.

They are immigrants or the children of immigrants. And in fact, Africa is now sending missionaries to Britain.

It's estimated, in fact, there are 1,500 African missionaries at work in Britain. And one of the nicest stories here is two missionaries from northeastern India who have traveled to Wales, the land of a strict Welsh Presbyterian stock, I think this is the group that Olaf came from, who sent this group, sent their own missionaries to northeast India in the 19th century and established the church there. Now the descendants of those churches are coming back to godless Wales as missionaries themselves. Lovely circle there.

[ 40 : 01 ] It's the same elsewhere in Europe. It is immigrants who are providing one of the major sources of renewal to the Christian church.

Paris has now 250 Protestant churches, most of them black African. Rome has a large population of Filipinos and Latin Americans who have brought new life to Catholic congregations.

The energy and vision of these assemblies is often breathtaking. In Hamburg, in Germany, it's another of the stories that Jenkins tells, a Ghanaian founded a church in the 1990s that now has a dozen congregations in Germany and 60 back in Ghana.

You see this kind of momentum. Of course, we are well aware at St. John's of the importance of the global South as our brothers and sisters in belief.

And so this, I think, is encouraging for us to hear about. There are some common features of these rapidly growing immigrant congregations.

[ 41 : 26 ] They are almost always charismatic, Pentecostal, or evangelical. They are very contemporary in their worship styles.

They are not limited by borders. The church planting goes back to their home country as well as remaining in the country, the European country, in which a new church was started.

They are typically independent. And herein lies often some problems, such as the cult of personality, where a dominant, charismatic leader assumes too much power, and also tremendous temptations.

And indeed, one of the major churches in London, its leader currently has some challenges from the UK government's income tax department.

Fourth point here is that there are sometimes unusual, even bizarre fringe groups around these churches, and it's these groups that the media assume an interest in.

[ 42 : 48 ] They provide rich fodder for the sensational media, these fringe groups, not the large congregations. But these churches, whether they be orthodox, evangelical, like Holy Trinity, Brompton, or Langham Place, all souls, have three key realizations.

First, they know they are a minority group in a secular and indifferent society. Secondly, they have big visions.

And thirdly, they have creative ministry models. Well, the last point I want to look at here is Jenkins' discussion about the growth of Islam in Europe.

So he does, as you can see, identify places of hope in terms of Christianity. Now, what does he have to say about the growth of Islam?

First of all, he reminds us that this is not the first advance of Islam into Europe. In 732, Arab armies entered France from Spain, which they controlled, and were eventually turned back at the Battle of Poitiers, not many days' march from Paris.

[ 44 : 22 ] Almost a thousand years later, Turkish armies of the Ottoman Empire spread through southeastern Europe and once again into Spain. their greatest advance of this wave was to the gates of Vienna.

So, their influence reached that far into Central Europe, to Vienna, where they were defeated by the King of Poland in 1683.

And here's an interesting little historical snippet. It said that in celebration of this victory, over the Turkish army, the Viennese bakers made a new pastry shaped like the Islamic crescent and baked it.

And that, my friends, is the origin of the croissant. There's your takeaway for the morning. The origin of the croissant.

of course, it is entirely through peaceful means that Islam has re-entered Europe.

[ 45 : 42 ] Indeed, Muslims are there because they've been invited to go there, to work in the countries where very low population rates are not able to replace the labour force.

one scenario, and of course, population forecasting is a very, very inexact science, but one scenario is that Muslims will comprise 20% of France and Germany by 2050.

And the question that Jenkins raises is, does that matter? Even if it were true, we don't know whether it will be true. Because, again, he says, the media only give us a single take of Muslims, and that is the perception that they are a threat, that there is a threat to public order.

But, in fact, it is a tiny minority that does not represent the larger population. I mean, think about Muslims in Vancouver.

The largest groups here are Iranians and Ismailis from East Africa. Both are very western in their orientation, very moderate in their politics and religion.

[ 47 : 14 ] And this is true of the large majority of Islamic groups. for example, I found this quite, this broke my stereotype.

In France, guess what the percentage of Muslims who go to worship regularly is. Guess what the percentage is.

5%. You saw my notes, Brian. You saw my notes. Well, you're clearly much more informed than me.

Oh, you remember it from the last time I gave the talk. Is that what you're saying? Isn't that fascinating? That the level of really active belief is as small as that.

there is evidence of all manner of assimilation of these Islamic immigrants into European society. [ 48 : 18 ] Their birth rates, for example, are dropping rapidly. Westernization is occurring and European forms of Islam and Islamic understanding are emerging which are much more moderate. than the extreme forms that have come out of Saudi Arabia. Indeed, even in their home countries, birth rates have dropped significantly.

Turkey now has a birth rate below the replacement level. In other words, Turkey's population is now not high, its fertility rate is not high enough for the population to be replaced. birth rates are also dropping rapidly. But, of course, we cannot overlook this extreme ideology that is attractive to a few disappointed young men who are from the Islamic tradition, typically second generation, rarely first generation.

generation. And the other issue that I find very surprising is conversions to Islam amongst Europeans, or indeed amongst Canadians and Americans.

[ 49 : 43 ] there are a lot of these relatively similar things.