

The “foreigner” in our midst: hopes and fears for Europe

Europe has been profoundly shaped by Christianity. It has also always been home to different faiths and cultures and many of us are now descended from a mix of people groups. In much of Europe, we enjoy the cultural variety and benefit from the skills and labour of those who society regards as “foreigners”¹, including the assistance we have from missionaries coming to partner with us in sharing the Gospel. But, new patterns of migration and global geo-political tensions have also led to increased anti-Semitism, Islamophobia, Christophobia, alienation and suspicion.

Of course, there are no simple solutions, nor is Europe uniform. Paris, Sarajevo, Granada, Riga or rural Poland are all very different from one another. Our diverse personal contexts mean that we have legitimate different perspectives, and we need to be sensitive to those differences. As a European family of Evangelical Christians in the EEA, however, we have the chance to listen to one another, especially to those that live with the reality of inter-cultural hostility, to Christian thinkers and to cross-cultural mission and dialogue experts. Together, we can hope to be more Christ-like in our thinking and less moulded by the world.

Serious tensions: The London & Madrid bombings reveal the intensity of the hatred of a few Muslims and the security challenge we face. Serious inner-city disorder demonstrates high levels of frustration and inter-communal divisions. Other symptoms of the tension include bullying of ethnic minorities in schools, desecration of graves, resistance to the building of mosques, dilemmas over whether to allow or wear a veil / kippa / cross.

A poor welcome: In London, ethnic minorities are twice as likely to be qualified but half as likely to be employed. In recent opinion polls, British people have implied they believe 25-40% of the population are immigrants whereas the true figure is 9%². 20% of Flemish people voted for the Extreme Right party, Vlaams Belang, in October 2006. Stories of threats and conflict attract attention. While a tiny number of so-called “foreigners” have come to cause trouble, e.g. as people or drug traffickers, the vast majority have not. Politicians generally assumed that happy assimilation would just happen naturally but they were over-optimistic. Some “foreigners” were never going to want to integrate. But others have simply found it hard to do so or feel rejected. They have then chosen to enjoy the safety of their own community. Europe could have done a much better job at welcoming those of other races and cultures.

Cultural clashes are real: Few Muslims would ever joke about their faith, while the secular Western press loves to mock all religion. Add the power of the global media to spread and distort stories and situations like the Danish cartoon riots result³. Other huge disagreements include those on Middle East politics, gender issues, how one treats those who change their faith and whether the State’s role is to ensure equality of all before the law and a safe place for people of all faiths. There are marked differences between common understandings of Shari’ah and most European nations’ law, especially in the areas of human rights, family and criminal law.

Multiculturalism or integration? Should so-called “foreigners” be obliged to accept the culture of their chosen home country? Surely, the law and basic freedoms must be accepted by all but how much do the values and cultural practices have to be adhered to? What exactly does it mean to be

¹ One of the problems faced by those of different skin colour, faith etc is that they continue to be regarded as “foreigners” even though they may be national citizens, have been born in the country, indeed their families may have been resident for generations.

² See “Multicultural societies and futures of dialogue”, Ram Gidoomal, Futures 35 (2003) 1055-1066.

³ See EEA’s comment at <http://www.europeanea.org/documents/PublicationofDanishCartoonsFeb2006.doc>

Irish or Greek? A British Muslim said to the BBC, *“What is it to be British? Don’t tell me what it isn’t. What is it? Excessive drinking? Nakedness? What?”*⁴

Christians have particular concerns: Empty churches are being turned into mosques. Some Imams call for our nations to become fully Islamic, living under Shari’ah. But, if Muslims are zealous in their desire to spread their faith, the best response is renewed Christian enthusiasm for evangelism. In Europe, there is a free market for ideas and faiths. Secularism is growing far faster than any faith in Europe. However, the Gospel can stand up to competition.

Exploring answers to the problems: Christians are called to pray for politicians and to seek the peace of the city, Scripture exhorts us repeatedly to care generously for the “foreigner”⁵ who wishes to integrate into society and to treat as a neighbour even those who despise us⁶, and we know that the Gospel is for all peoples. What implications do these truths have for us and our societies?

Christians have much to offer. We share some common ground with followers of other faiths. We know how it feels when our God is insulted or we are ridiculed for sticking to biblical views e.g. on sexuality. We understand that there is absolute truth. We know what it means to live with dual identities, to be both Christian and Portuguese / Swiss / Turkish etc. We are “aliens in the world”⁷ and daily have to work out how to be in the world and yet remain distinctly Christian. We know we are called to be peacemakers. All these factors mean it is easier for Christians to reach out to Muslims and people of other faiths than it is for people with a strongly secular worldview.

Many Muslims genuinely feel that westerners hate them. No wonder that increasingly some choose to live separately from the rest of society. Bert de Ruiter, Operation Mobilisation’s Islam specialist says, *“The key is for every Muslim to have a Christian friend”*. This strategy, of “ordinary” Christians reaching out in relationship to Muslims, would go a long way to ease the alienation, as well as help Muslims understand the Gospel.

Beyond friendship, reaching out could mean social projects, dialogue (formal or informal), practical support (e.g. language lessons, advice for new immigrants, support against discrimination), helping Muslims participate in community life, helping the media understand Muslims and Islam more accurately etc. Christians do not need to become experts before acting, although they may appreciate learning from others. We hope the Resource List will help⁸.

Taking on the big political issues is daunting. One important contribution Evangelical Alliances and other Christian groups could make, however, is to encourage a public debate in our nations on what values we all wish to have. People of different cultures do not know what to integrate into. Franco Frattini, European Commissioner for Justice, Freedom and Security said, *“If we ourselves do not maintain our strong identity, if we are not sure about our principles – how can we manage integrating with others?”*⁹ Many Europeans have already lost an understanding of our roots and a clear set of values for the future and the presence of other cultures is helping to highlight how potentially disastrous this is. Our countries need to consider what principles are core to their well-being, but Christians should not assume that we will like what they conclude. We need to take the initiative to help society see the good sense of biblical values.

There is a diversity of opinion among Christians in Europe about pluralism. Some wish to protect their “Christian nation” and its “Christian values”. Others categorically reject the idea that their nation was

⁴ BBC Radio 4, October 2006

⁵ 1 Timothy 2 v1-4. Jeremiah 29 v7. Leviticus 19 v33-34, Exodus 23 v9, Ezekiel 47 v21-23. Deuteronomy 31 v12.

⁶ Luke 10 25-38.

⁷ 1 Peter 2 v11

⁸ Please see the resource list for literature, training courses, examples of good projects etc. Please also suggest additions to this list.

⁹ See www.euobserver.com 9 October 2006

ever “Christian” and believe the term “Christian values” simply means traditional, not necessarily biblical values. History leads them to understand a “Christian nation” to be where a strong Church and State alliance persecutes everyone else. While this variety of views is likely to remain, can we still point to principles that are foundational for making society harmonious? These principles are, of course, God’s values. We must also act so that the active support of excessively liberal social ideas does not become a non-negotiable duty. Instead, can we convince people of the importance of respect for all, neighbourliness, integrity, commitment in relationships, freedom of belief and expression, care for the vulnerable etc.?

Key questions: What does it mean to be a good citizen? What would encourage society to come together rather than break apart? How do we guarantee freedom of expression yet encourage mutual respect such that an individual or a newspaper chooses not to offend? Is it ever appropriate for a person of strong faith to desist from a particular faith practice for the good of community cohesiveness? How can we ensure that all schools, including faith ones, encourage respect for those who are different? What surveillance methods are appropriate in a free society to stop terrorism? How can politicians, the judiciary and police be seen by all to be absolutely fair to all when both protecting rights and stopping intolerance or lawlessness? Can Christians consider these questions as well as discuss them with those of other faiths and none?

Effective together: Europe is pluralist and, with globalisation, it will become even more so. We do not underestimate the scale of the challenges Europe faces, nor do we naively expect Christians to solve these challenges simply by being friendly to those regarded as “foreigners.” However, we are convinced that Christians are called to pray and to contribute biblical wisdom and to be reconcilers and bearers of Good News. While there are questions that seem too difficult for us, while we will perhaps disagree on some issues, we can all be confident of two underlying, foundational principle that guides our thinking and action: We are to love God and love our neighbour, whoever he/she may be. Thank God for all the Christians who are already building bridges to those of other cultures and who would be delighted to help the rest of us do the same.

In a desire to be brief, this article has simply mentioned issues that deserve far more analysis. We have sought to explore complex ideas in a balanced way but are aware that the compact nature of the document may frustrate. However, our goal is to encourage EEA members to join in a sensitive conversation to learn from one another so that we become more effective in our outreach and in our socio-political activity. We have provided the “Foundations for Action” document as a basis for this discussion. We have also compiled a first edition of a “Resource List” and hope you will suggest additions to it. Please let EEA’s socio-political team know about good practice, your questions and interests.

And please would you join us in praying that we will be more effective together in bringing Christ’s hope to a fearful Europe.

EEA’s Authorisation Team, Spring 2007.