**Christianity in Western Europe (Global Christianity Core Seminar, Week 6)**

Good morning and welcome to the latest, fresh-from-the-studio episode of our Global Christianity Core Seminar. In this class so far we’ve considered sub-Saharan Africa, China, India, Brazil and Russia. Today we turn to Western Europe.

Christianity came to Western Europe within two decades of Christ’s resurrection. By the mid-fifties AD, when Paul wrote his letter to the Christians in Rome, there was an established Christian presence there. And Christianity reached as far as England by the late second or early third Century. So Christianity in Western Europe has a very long history.

It is also a complex history. To simplify some of that complexity, we’re mainly going to look at Christianity in Western Europe from the Reformation, in the early sixteenth century, to the present. And I’m going to focus especially on the current state of evangelical Christianity in Western Europe, and how things got that way.

One reason we’re including Western Europe in this course is because of relationships our church has with pastors and other Christian workers in the region. For instance, Peter and Sharon McMillan are long-term CHBC supported workers in Spain. Former CHBC member and intern Matthias Lohmann is pastoring in Munich, Germany. Former CHBC intern and staff member Jonathan Worsley pastors Kew Baptist church in southwest London. And we as a church have been supporting Johnny Lithell’s work to plant a church in Gothenburg, Sweden.

You’ll see on your handout that we’ll tell three stories, and then we’ll consider common threads in each. While it’s impossible for us to be comprehensive, turn to the back of our handout and you’ll see that these three stories are at least representative, since we’re going to treat one Roman Catholic region, one Lutheran, and one (more or less) Reformed.

**1. First, number one on your handout—France and Spain: Where Reform Never Took Root.**

Despite France and Spain having different languages and cultures, the story of evangelical Christianity in both countries is fairly similar. Let’s start with Spain. At the time of the Reformation, the established religion of Roman Catholicism in Spain had, for centuries, been engaged in both physical and intellectual warfare against the proponents of two other religions: Judaism and Islam.

So what happened in Spain when the Reformation started sweeping through Europe? Here’s how the historian Diarmaid McCullough describes it:

The constant medieval warfare against the rival cultures of Islam and Judaism gave Spanish Catholicism a militant edge not found elsewhere in western Europe. . . . So Latin Christianity, in an especially self-conscious version of its traditional form, became the central symbol of identity for the peninsula’s kingdoms, and from the beginning Protestantism stood little chance of making any headway there against Spain and Portugal’s project of building a monolithic Christian culture.[[1]](#footnote-1)

So the Reformation never took root in Spain. In Spain, for the past five hundred years, evangelical Christians have always been a tiny, marginal, and marginalized minority. Today only 3% of people in Spain claim to be Protestant, but two-thirds of that 3 percent are foreigners.[[2]](#footnote-2) And active evangelical Christians are only a tiny sliver of either number.[[3]](#footnote-3) Today Spain is often called a “missionary graveyard,” not because missionaries die there, but because they see very little fruit, and they give up and leave. In spiritual terms, Spain is a difficult and needy place.

Let’s turn to France. In the early- to mid-sixteenth century, both Lutheran and Reformed convictions flourished in France. By 1572, Huguenots, who were French Reformed Christians, are estimated to have made up roughly 10% of the population. But, in an event known as the St Bartholomew’s Day Massacre, on August 24, 1572, France’s rulers, King Charles IX and Queen Catherine, ordered the assassination of Huguenot leaders in Paris. From there, mob killings of Protestants by Catholics took place throughout the kingdom of France. Around 5,000 French Protestants were killed.

And this massacre took a toll on French Protestantism “well beyond the numbers killed and bereaved.”[[4]](#footnote-4) Ever since, Protestants in France have remained a small, tenuous minority. In 1598, the Edict of Nantes granted Huguenots protection from persecution, but in 1685, Louis XIV revoked this edict. Persecution of Protestants again intensified, with the result that many fled the country.

Another crucial aspect of the story of Protestantism in France is the concept of “laïcité” (la-ee-see-*tay*), or “secularity.” Essentially, France has practiced an even “harder” or more severe version of the separation of church and state than what we are familiar with in the USA. Laïcité has effectively sealed off public affairs from any religious reasoning or commitments. The ground-level effect of this policy has been to further push Christianity, in any form, to the margins of society.

Today, only 3% of France claims to be Protestant, very similar to Spain. Only about 1% of those are evangelical.[[5]](#footnote-5)

In a very real sense, the overall populations of France and Spain have never been evangelized. While Christianity came to both places very early, the last several centuries have been dominated by Roman Catholicism. And in both places, as we will see, secularism is on the rise. You could sum up the spiritual condition of both countries in one word: need. Both countries need bold, fearless evangelical churches that will resolutely preach the gospel and disciple believers against strong cultural and spiritual headwinds.

**2. Number two on your handout—Germany and Scandinavia: Secular Lutheran Lands of the North.**

Yes, I do mean that to be somewhat of a paradox. How can these countries be both Lutheran and secular? That’s what we’re about to find out.

Take a look at the map on the back of your handout. This represents Europe in the sixteenth century, the time of the Reformation. And, in terms of confessional identity, that map has stayed relatively consistent into the present. So look Northeast of France, at what’s there called the Holy Roman Empire. It’s roughly modern-day Germany. It’s shaded pink, for Lutheran, and you’ll see that pink shades up north into Scandinavia, passing through Denmark into Sweden in Norway. First, we’ll briefly discuss Germany, then focus a little more on Scandinavia, especially Sweden.

Germany, of course, is where the Reformation began, with Luther nailing his 95 theses to the door of the church in Wittenberg on October 31, 1517. In the decades following the Reformation, generally speaking, the states of northern Germany became Protestant—mainly Lutheran, but some Reformed—and states in the south remained Roman Catholic.[[6]](#footnote-6) That pattern roughly holds today, with Catholics predominating in the south and west and Lutherans in the north. Though, as with all of Western Europe, church attendance is rapidly declining across the board.

As it did throughout Western Europe, the Reformation in Germany took place in a land with an established religion, and a land where the church and state were thoroughly interconnected. In other words, separation of church and state didn’t exist. Given the practice of infant baptism, to be born in Germany (or any other European nation) was to be born into the church. All citizens of the kingdom were members of the church.

Building on this given, Christendom-type settlement, one way that Germany resolved conflict between Protestants and Catholics in the 16th century was to have the religion of each local state be whatever its ruler held to. That helped to quell fighting between the groups, but it also meant that a given state’s official religion might have little to do with what common people actually believed and practiced.

That gap between the adoption of a particular form of Christianity by a ruler and what most people actually believed and practiced is especially evident in Scandinavia. We’re going to camp out in Scandinavia for a little while. Two reasons for that. First, it’s a little less familiar to most of us. And second, when I was researching for this class, I just found a lot of fascinating stuff.

We’ll consider Scandinavia’s Christian history in three steps: (1) “Christianization” in the middle ages; (2) adoption of Lutheranism in the sixteenth century; and (3) rapid and early secularization.

(1) First, “Christianization” in the middle ages. Basically, from the eighth through the 12th centuries, some form of Christianity took root in the realms of Scandinavia: Denmark, Norway, and Sweden. This happened by various means, but there are some common refrains. One is that, frequently, when a king or tribal ruler converted to Christianity, everyone under his rule also “converted” too. This, by definition, is nominal Christianity: becoming Christian in name only.

Another common theme is that rulers frequently used violent force in order to “convert” people to Christianity or to abolish pagan practices. For instance, the Christian King Harald Greyhide, who ruled Norway in the 10th century, was famous for demolishing pagan temples, but apparently did little to foster evangelism among his subjects.[[7]](#footnote-7)

So, most of what passed as “Christianization” in Scandinavia in the middle-ages was a top-down affair, with a ruler changing religions and the people following suit. But it was nominal from the beginning. Rulers frequently “converted” to Christianity in order to gain or preserve political independence, or to gain access to wealth. Sadly, from the very beginning, Christianity in Scandinavia was a means of worldly gain, not a call to take up the cross.

(2) Second, the adoption of Lutheranism in the sixteenth century. By the late-sixteenth and early-seventeenth centuries, all of these kingdoms adopted Lutheranism as their official state confession. King Christian III ruled over both Denmark and Norway, and established the Lutheran faith in both his kingdoms.[[8]](#footnote-8) Similarly, in Sweden, in 1571, under Johan III, a church order was drafted that committed the Swedish church to an evangelical confession of faith. And after four more decades that resulted in a permanent Lutheran settlement.[[9]](#footnote-9)

But again, in both countries, there’s little evidence that these religious convictions ever came to permeate the population at large. This brings us to our third stage:

(3) Rapid and early secularization. Declining church attendance is currently a major trend throughout Western Europe. But this decline started earlier, and has moved faster, in Scandinavia than elsewhere in Europe. For instance, as early as 1890, in the more urban central region of Sweden only 5% of the population attended church at least once a month.[[10]](#footnote-10) Further, by 1927 in Sweden, it is estimated that only 5.6% of the whole population regularly attended a Lutheran church; by the 1950s this dropped to 3%.[[11]](#footnote-11)

The Lutheran church isn’t the whole story, of course. The first known Baptist church in Sweden was organized on September 21, 1848, in Vallersvik, when five men and women were baptized.[[12]](#footnote-12) At the time, it was a crime to baptize a believer, and the church’s leader, F. O. Nilsson, was eventually deported. It wasn’t until January 1, 1952, that a Swedish Baptist could leave the Lutheran Church without losing civic rights.

Baptists have had a continuing presence in Sweden to this day, albeit a small one. At their peak, in 1934, Swedish Baptist churches had 68,000 members. As of 2006, that number was down to 17,000.[[13]](#footnote-13)

Back to secularization. What accounts for the early and rapid drop in church attendance in Sweden, as elsewhere in Scandinavia? Probably that church attendance was never that high to begin with. Like other Scandinavian countries, Sweden was more “Christianized” than “evangelized.” Its rulers converted, often for financial and political gain, and a new religion was imposed, top-down. There was never a genuine, widespread conversion of individuals to the Christian faith. And even the Reformation was more of a political regime change than a broad-based change in the worship, theology, and lives of people throughout the country.

The church historian Brian Stanley offers an insightful analysis of this:

The history of Scandinavian Christianity may in fact be a religious exemplification of the brutal dictum of business employment—‘last in, first out.’ In light of the fact that both the initial conversion of Scandinavia from the tenth century and its Lutheran Reformation in the sixteenth century were top-down processes initiated by the monarchy, Zuckerman has even raised the serious possibility that the majority of Dane and Swedes never became Christians at a level more profound than that of formal collective adherence. . . . The narrative of Scandinavian Christianity is as much one of long-term failure in Christianization as one of twentieth-century secularization.[[14]](#footnote-14)

In other words, Scandinavia has never been all that Christian. Despite the veneer of a Lutheran state church, and a small number of evangelical churches, Scandinavia has never really been reached with the gospel.

**Are there any questions?**

**3. Number three on your handout—England: A Partly-Reformed Establishment in Need of Reformation and Revival.**

I’m focusing on England for a number of reasons. For one thing, although for the last three hundred years England has been part of a “United Kingdom” including Scotland, Wales, and Northern Ireland, all of those lands have their own distinct histories of Christianity. It would just be too much to cover. Further, since America is an English-speaking country, and the United States derives politically from English colonies, England’s Christian history sheds much light on our own.

Even so, trying to cover 500 years of English Christian history in just a few minutes is a little ridiculous. So, instead of trying to cram in a lot of dates and names, I’m going to try to quickly sketch the overall story. My goal is to give us a *feel* for the different factors that have helped and hindered the progress of the gospel and the strength of the church in England, and especially what has contributed to the way things are now.

At the time of the Reformation, Christianity had been in England for 1,300 years. Every child born in the land was baptized in the church. Every citizen was a member of the church. Every ruler understood him or herself to be in some sense responsible for the church. There was extensive overlap between the authority of the state and the authority of the church.

When the Reformation happened, how Reformed did England become? Basically, there were always church leaders and church members who wanted to push reform further, and there were always church leaders and church members (and sometimes rulers) who wanted to limit reform. The lasting shape of the Church of England was essentially set by Queen Elizabeth in 1558 and 1559. Under her rule the church adopted a Reformed confession of Faith, the 39 Articles, but required the use of the *Book of Common Prayer*.

Now, the *Book of Common Prayer* is, in many ways, a theologically robust, gospel-saturated liturgy. Our own church’s marriage services, and much of our Lord’s Supper order of service, derive from the *Book of Common Prayer*. But the *Book of Common Prayer* also includes many ceremonies and practices that are not prescribed in Scripture or even mentioned in Scripture. From the late sixteenth through the mid-seventeenth century, a group of pastors and laypeople known as Puritans sought to further reform the church—to conform its worship to Scripture, to purify its discipline, to seek the conversion of more and more of its members. But eventually, Puritans were kicked out of the church. In 1662, on St Bartholomew’s Day—the same day on which so many French Protestants had been massacred—all pastors who refused to conform to the *Book of Common Prayer* were ejected from their churches. Many of the Puritans whom we read and profit from today were kicked out of the Church of England then—including Richard Baxter, John Flavel, Thomas Brooks, and Thomas Watson.

Over the next fifty or so years, the Church of England suffered a serious decline. Unbelief and immorality radically increased, and the church’s influence on society radically decreased. Then, in the 1730s and 1740s, largely through the preaching of George Whitefield and John Wesley, a widespread revival broke out. Huge numbers of people became Christians. Many of these remained in the Church of England, but both Wesley and Whitefield were forced out of the Church of England, and the groups that Wesley founded later became the Methodist church in both England and the US.

Despite this revival, evangelical believers remained a minority in the Church of England, and that’s been the case up to the present day. Today, the Church of England remains the established church of the land, but its influence is constantly waning. It’s tough to give exact numbers, but if you count up pastors, conservative evangelicals are a definite minority within the Church of England. A large number of priests and bishops in the Church of England are theological liberals, denying the exclusivity of Christ, the penal substitutionary nature of the atonement, and sometimes even the resurrection. And a large number of priests and bishops are what is called “Anglo-Catholic”—their understanding of worship, ministry, and theology has more in common with the Roman Catholic Church than with Reformed theology. And despite its status as the established church, the Church of England sees only 1.4% of the population attending its churches on any given Sunday.

What about outside the Church of England? After the Great Ejection of 1662, the roots of three modern denominations began to form more distinctly: Congregationalists, Presbyterians, and Baptists. Congregationalists eventually succumbed to theological liberalism and merged with other denominations. Since the seventeenth century, Presbyterians have always been a tiny minority in England. Though in many ways, compared with the bishop-governed, state-church structure of the church of England, Presbyterian churches in England have much more in common with Baptists than might appear at first glance.

What about Baptists? Baptists in England have a long and rich history, reaching back to the early 17th Century. Unfortunately we don’t have much time for the history today! Instead, I’m going to try to briefly describe the “state of play” of Baptist churches in England, in comparison with the Church of England and other evangelical churches.

Today, the Church of England remains the established church. This means that many people are still “baptized” as infants into the Church of England. Many people get married and buried in church. And when people think “church” they think of the Church of England—often an old, stone building in the center of town. The Church of England still has lots of property. If you want to be a pastor in the Church of England, they’ll pay your way through seminary and, more or less, guarantee you a pastorate upon graduation.

What does this mean for independent evangelicals, those who aren’t part of the state church? It means that, socially speaking, you’re a minority of a minority. Only a small minority of English people attend church, and if you’re not part of the established church, you’re viewed as suspect. If you’re a Baptist church, that means you don’t baptize infants. If you’re a consistent Baptist church, you don’t accept those baptized as infants into membership. This is one reason why a huge majority of “independent evangelicals” practice what’s called open membership. In other words, most evangelical churches that are not part of the Church of England practice and teach believer baptism: they understand, as we do, that Scripture teaches that baptism is a public profession of faith. But, the vast majority of independent evangelical churches admit those baptized as infants into membership.

From a pragmatic, political perspective, it’s easy to understand why churches do this. But it means that in England today, consistent, convictional Baptists are a tiny minority.

So what’s the state of the church in England today? The Church of England is a deeply compromised, mixed bag, with a vibrant evangelical minority. Only a tiny fraction of the population attends church. There’s a general, and seemingly growing, spiritual indifference among the population.

Anecdotally, during the three years that I lived in England, I often heard pastors say something like this: “We see so few conversions among native English people. But praise God, it seems that people from Pakistan and Iran are coming to faith in large numbers.” The progress of the gospel may be slow today among the English, but we can praise God that he is bringing people from many nations to England, and many English Christians are faithfully answering the call to evangelize.

**4. Number four on the handout—Common Threads.**

What do the spiritual situations of those churches have in common? As we wrap up the class, I want to highlight three common threads running throughout Christianity in Western Europe. I think these three threads go a long way toward explaining the challenges these churches face.

**1. First, the fallout of the Enlightenment**. The Enlightenment is an intellectual movement that swept Western Europe in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries that effectively made human reason the final measure of truth. As the philosopher Immanuel Kant put it, “What is Enlightenment? Enlightenment is mankind’s exit from self-incurred immaturity.”[[15]](#footnote-15) The Enlightenment increasingly dominated Europe’s universities, and infiltrated Europe’s churches. Theological liberalism is basically Christianity cut down to a size set by human reason operating with naturalistic, materialistic convictions. And theological liberalism at least gained the upper hand, if not outright dominance, in every Protestant state church throughout Western Europe. It is a legacy of the Enlightenment that the average Western European thinks that religion is unnecessary because science explains all we need to know about life, human origins, and morality.

**2. Second, secularism accelerating in the wake of the sexual revolution**. The philosopher Charles Taylor argues that the secular worldview that dominates Western Europe is not what is simply left over when you take away Christianity, but that it is a complex and tenuous achievement.[[16]](#footnote-16) It depends on a whole host of shared cultural, political, and technological factors. It expresses a wide range of common convictions that are not in any way derived from scientific fact. In any case, this secular framework dominates politics, schools, the media, and Western European cultures at large. In many ways, secularism has a stronger hold on Western Europe than it does on America. (For a great response to the spiritual challenges of secularism, check out Jonathan Worsley’s message from the First Five Years conference in 2017, called “Pastoring in the Dark? Engaging a Secular Generation.”)[[17]](#footnote-17)

Further, secularism seems to have accelerated in the wake of the “sexual revolution” that came to a head in the 1960s. As the historian Brian Stanley points out, “. . . the crucial decade for the collapse of regular Christian practice in a number of different countries—France, Spain, the Netherlands, Canada, Australia, and Britain among them—was the 1960s.”[[18]](#footnote-18) In other words, the sexual revolution caused secularization to speed up. The creed of unfettered sexual “freedom” is perhaps the greatest currentr challenge to the Christian confession that Christ is Lord.

**3. A third common thread is the largely counter-productive presence of state churches.** While the details have changed over time, all three countries I mentioned a moment ago—Germany, Sweden, and England—have some form of established church. While there are exceptions, including many faithful evangelical congregations in the Church of England today, these state churches are largely a hindrance to the gospel. They multiply nominal Christianity—people thinking they’re Christians because of the country they’re born in. They historically create legal restrictions on, and foster social opposition to, Baptist convictions and practice. They create a mere veneer of Christianity. Sadly, state churches often act as an inoculation against the gospel—just enough Christianity to keep the real thing out.

Now, this whole picture may seem pretty bleak. And we should be patient with gospel work in Western Europe. By all accounts, evangelism and church planting is hard and slow work there. It calls for long-term support, both financial and relational. But I hope that one encouraging take-away from our class today is that, in many respects, Western Europe is as much of a mission field as anywhere else in the world. That should strike us not as a discouragement but as an invitation. What can we as Christians do, what can we as a church do, to help send the gospel back to a place that was once one of the global centers of Christianity?

**Are there any questions?**

[Close in prayer.]

1. Diarmaid MacCullogh, *The Reformation* (London: Penguin, 2003), 58, 60. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. Based on the number 1.5 million Protestants in Spain given at <https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Protestantism_in_Spain>. For the figure of 1% of native Spaniards processing to be Protestants, see <https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Religion_in_Spain>. [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. For one recent estimate see <http://www.missionaryjournalist.net/images/Spain-_Spains_Awakening.pdf>. [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. MacCullogh, *The Reformation*, 339. [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
5. Based on the figure of 650,000 evangelical Christians in France today, given in: <https://www.france24.com/en/20180319-france-evangelical-churches-christians-popularity-expansion-technology-religion>. [↑](#footnote-ref-5)
6. See <https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Religion_in_Germany>. [↑](#footnote-ref-6)
7. <https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Christianization_of_Scandinavia>. [↑](#footnote-ref-7)
8. MacCullogh, *The Reformation*, 335. [↑](#footnote-ref-8)
9. MacCullogh, 336. [↑](#footnote-ref-9)
10. Brian Stanley, *Christianity in the Twentieth Century: A World History*, The Princeton History of Christianity (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2018), 110. Stanley’s statistic is based on attendance at “communion”; my presentation of this statistic above assumes that each weekly Luthern service would’ve included communion. [↑](#footnote-ref-10)
11. Ibid. [↑](#footnote-ref-11)
12. For this and other details of Baptist history in Sweden, see Nils Sundholm, “Baptists in Sweden,” *Baptist Quarterly* 15 (1953):183–87. [↑](#footnote-ref-12)
13. <https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Baptist_Union_of_Sweden>. This is the number of members of churches belonging to the Baptist Union. I’m not aware of a substantial number of Baptist churches that do not belong to the Baptist Union, but I may be mistaken. [↑](#footnote-ref-13)
14. Stanley, *Christianity in the Twentieth Century*, 111, 114. [↑](#footnote-ref-14)
15. Wording lightly adapted; cited in Diarmaid MacCullogh, *Christianity: The First Three Thousand Years* (New York: Viking, 2010), 803. [↑](#footnote-ref-15)
16. Charles Taylor, *A Secular Age* (Cambridge, MA: Belknap, 2007). [↑](#footnote-ref-16)
17. Available at <https://www.9marks.org/message/pastoring-in-the-dark-engaging-a-secular-generation/>. [↑](#footnote-ref-17)
18. Stanley, *Christianity in the Twentieth Century*, 109. [↑](#footnote-ref-18)