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Restoration Churches and Movements in Europe: Great Challenges and New Opportunities

YANN OPSITCH

The Stone-Campbell Movement, sometimes known as the “Restoration Movement,” is only one expression of an ideal going back to the early years of Christianity.¹ In North America the Christian Church (Disciples of Christ), the Independent Christian Churches, and Churches of Christ trace their historic beginnings to this nineteenth century movement.

Today in Europe a number of churches and institutions have brotherly connections with Restoration churches and institutions rooted in the American movement. In this article we present significant challenges faced by these churches, and some of the responses to those challenges. We also reflect on some of the attitudes within the movement towards the ecumenical imperative, felt by so many throughout the twentieth century to the present time. The question of women’s role in the church is also part of this discussion. But first, we want to look into some of the historical roots of both European and American churches claiming a Restoration heritage.

HISTORICAL BACKGROUND

The sixteenth-century Reformed tradition of John Calvin and Ulrich Zwingli strongly encouraged a return to a church modeled after the New Testament and is also known as “primitivism.” This tradition “became the vehicle by which ecclesiastical primitivism made its way to England, Scotland and America.”² Independent church movements flourished in the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries in England, Ireland and Scotland.³ However, ecclesiastical primitivism has in some cases given way to a church organization removed from the concept of local church autonomy while attempting to maintain other dimensions of the restoration ideals. Thus in Great Britain a number of independent Churches of Christ formed an Association of Churches of Christ, which in 1980 became part of the United Reformed Church.⁴ On the Continent independent church movements such as those found in the British Isles were even more ancient and were found among the heirs of the Anabaptist movement. The Anabaptists rediscovered the importance and place of the local congregation since “they regarded state regulations of the church as tantamount to corruption of

1. Richard T. Hughes, “Historical Models of Restoration,” in *Encyclopedia of the Stone-Campbell Movement*, ed. Douglas A. Foster (Grand Rapids: W. E. Eerdmans, 2004), 635.

2. *Ibid.*, 635–38.

3. The Scotch Baptists, Sandemanians, Glasites, Seceders and Auld Lights held to common basic principles found in the New Testament, in particular the autonomy of local congregations, elders overseeing each local congregation and the baptism of believing adults. See A.C. Watters, *History of the British Churches of Christ* (Indianapolis: Butler University, 1948), xi, 132.

4. Graham Fisher, in *Christian Worker*, October 2007.

the church.”⁵ Menno Simons (1496–1561) sought to pacify and re-center the Anabaptists around the gospel message and to this day the Mennonite churches are flourishing in Europe.⁶

Since the end of World War II, missionary efforts connected to the American Stone-Campbell Movement have more recently been flourishing on the European continent. The presence of Churches of Christ has grown slowly but steadily; we estimate the actual total membership between ten and twelve thousand. It is possible to get an idea of this presence through the different websites, which give an indication of the presence of local churches in each country.⁷ The Christian Church (Disciples of Christ) is also present on Continental Europe but the Disciples usually work through existing European Protestant churches. Thus missionary Tim Rose works with the Reformed Church of France among “migrants and refugees without status, language, or opportunities.”⁸ In Germany the Disciples partner with the Union of Evangelical Churches (UEK), a united church joining Reformed and Lutheran traditions.⁹ The Disciples also focus their efforts on scholarship, in particular through the Institute for the Study of Christian Origins with ties to the University of Tübingen.¹⁰ Through Christian Missionary Fellowship (CMF), the Independent Christian Churches are working in several European cities, often with a focus on university campuses.¹¹ Efforts have been undertaken by Churches of Christ to offer biblical and theological training within the context of European Institutions. British Bible School in Corby England has been offering systematic training on the biblical text for over thirty years.¹² Otis Gatewood founded European Christian College in Vienna, now called International Christian University.¹³ In Saint Petersburg, Christians can receive training through the Institute for Theology and Christian Ministry.¹⁴ The Churches of Christ in Croatia also offer biblical and theological training in Zagreb through the Institute for Biblical Studies. This institute works closely with Abilene Christian University in Texas. Churches in the United Kingdom organize a yearly European Christian Workshop on the campus of the University of Lancaster, England.¹⁵ Churches of Christ emphasize church planting, usually through the efforts of teams supported by local congregations. Recent teams have gone to Vienna, Austria and Olomouc, Czech Republic. A growing number of teams supported by local Churches of Christ will be moving to Europe in the near future.¹⁶

THREE CHALLENGES

European churches as well as missionaries or missionary entities are facing three important challenges in Europe. *The first of these is the challenge of a post-Christian Europe.* This fact is apparent in the small number of Europeans who attend church (Poland being a noticeable exception). The number has been estimated at around 10 percent in France, Sweden and the Netherlands but is actually much lower.¹⁷

5. Mark A. Knoll, *Turning Points: Decisive Moments in the History of Christianity* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2001), 190.

6. The Mennonite churches cooperate in various efforts but hold on to a local independent organization of the church with elders, preachers and often a local pastor. Women are often seen praying, reading scriptures or giving testimonies. They will also cooperate with Protestant or Evangelical churches. See <http://www.christ-seul.fr/index2.asp> (accessed August 18, 2009).

7. See <http://www.gemeinde-christi.de/> (accessed August 25, 2009).

8. See <http://globalministries.org/mee/countries/france/> (accessed August 18, 2009).

9. See <http://globalministries.org/mee/countries/germany> (accessed August 18, 2009).

10. Churches of Christ, Independent Christian Churches are also involved at some level in the work of this Institute. See <http://www.institut-urchristentum.org/> (accessed August 25, 2009).

11. <http://cmfi.org/> (accessed August 25, 2009).

12. See <http://www.britishbibleschool.com/index.html> (accessed August 25, 2009).

13. See <http://www.iuvienna.edu> (accessed August 18, 2009).

14. See <http://www.itcm.ru/english> (accessed August 18, 2009).

15. See www.europeanchristianworkshop.com (accessed August 18, 2009).

16. See Missions Resource Network, <http://www.mrnet.org> (accessed August 18, 2009). See also Halbert Institute for Missions at <http://www.acu.edu/academics/cbs/centers-services/him/index.html> (accessed August 26, 2009).

17. “Religion Takes a Back Seat in Western Europe,” *USA Today*, August 10, 2005, http://www.usatoday.com/news/world/2005-08-10-europe-religion-cover_x.htm (accessed August 18, 2009).

A second challenge is the growth of non-institutional Christian movements that have appeared in the United Kingdom and on the Continent in the past decade. Institutional churches themselves are encouraging the emergence of new church models.¹⁸ Many of these new movements are modeling their life and structure on the New Testament. Restoration churches in Europe should closely watch these encouraging signs. There is also significant growth throughout Europe among new independent churches. Part of this is due to the move of Christianity from the South to the North. Thus Philip Jenkins notes over 250 new churches in and around Paris in the recent years.¹⁹ As “Christians are fleeing mainstream churches across the region, evangelical Christianity is booming thanks most recently to flourishing migrant churches . . .”²⁰ Europeans have long been suspicious about the institutional churches, while at the same time they are looking for newer expressions of religiosity, including Christianity. However, modernity remains a challenge for the Christian worldview in Europe. The worldviews of Europeans are still largely molded by modern assumptions about the Enlightenment. The idea that science and modernity have dispelled any reasonable grounds for the Christian faith is still assumed by a majority of Europeans. At the same time, they are gradually becoming free of these assumptions while “now adrift in pluralism and relativism.”²¹

French philosopher Jean-François Lyotard coined the term “postmodern” in his French edition of the book, *The Postmodern Condition*, in which he shows the skepticism of newer generations towards what he calls “meta-narratives.”²² Throughout his works, C.S. Lewis had already reflected on the important shift to postmodernity (without using that term) when “all values become subjective and trivial.”²³ John Morehead describes the new religious quest of Europeans as a “western subjective turn.”²⁴ Restoration churches and movements have a strong anchor in the authority of scripture and the Christian meta-narrative, as well as in the importance of the local congregation in one’s Christian life. Thus in Europe modernity remains a challenge while postmodernity opens up new horizons and presents a new set of challenges. *Globalization is the third challenge* faced by believers and missionaries in the European context. Part of this globalization is the influx of immigrants from Africa, Asia and Arabic countries and the growing presence of Islam.²⁵ Jenkins is of the opinion that the growing presence of Islam in Europe might actually be good news for a post-Christian continent.²⁶ As elsewhere in the world, modern urbanization is part of this challenge. British urbanologist David Clark clarifies many of the issues relative to modern urbanization in his most recent book, *Urban World/Global City*.²⁷

Globalization, especially in the larger cities of Europe, has brought an influx of African Christians to Europe. Thus, the number of Christians from Ghana in Churches of Christ in Italy is now equal to or greater than the Italian membership. Churches in other European countries have also seen their numbers grow through immigration. Restoration churches in Europe are finding in this an opportunity to demonstrate and teach the ethnically and racially integrative nature of the New Testament church.

18. See <http://www.ekklesia.co.uk/cultureandreview/emerginandfresh> (accessed August 18, 2009).

19. Philip Jenkins, *God’s Continent: Christianity, Islam, and Europe’s Religious Crisis* (Oxford: University Press, 2007), 94.

20. “The French Embracing Evangelical Church,” *Washington Times*, November 18, 2008.

21. Diogenes Allen, *Christian Belief in a Postmodern world: The Full Wealth of Conviction* (Westminster/John Knox: Louisville, KY, 1989), 10.

22. Jean-Francois Lyotard, *The Postmodern Condition* (Manchester University Press, 1984).

23. C.S. Lewis, *The Abolition of Man* (New York: MacMillan, 1968), 16.

24. John Morehead, “New Religions, Subjective Life Spiritualities, and the Challenge to Missions in the Post-Christian West,” www.lausanneworldpulse.com/themedarticles.php/970/07 (accessed August 18, 2009). See also Gordon Showell-Rogers, “The European Church Today,” <http://www.lausanneworldpulse.com/lausannereports/931/?pg=3> (accessed August 26, 2009).

25. Yann Opsitch, *Four Significant Trends in Europe*, October 3, 2008, <http://yanndialogues.blogspot.com/> (accessed August 18, 2009).

26. Jenkins, *God’s Continent*, 287

27. David Clark, *Urban World/Global City* (London: Routledge Press, 1996). Clark names a population of fifty thousand people or less a town or a village. On the other hand, cities are human agglomerations that have up to 200,000 residents. A metropolitan area has more than two million people, but a megalopolis is an urban region with over five million people.

ECUMENISM

The Disciples of Christ have been actively involved in the ecumenical endeavors of the twentieth century. Disciples helped organize the National and World Councils of Churches.²⁸

Independent Christian Churches work alongside and have no real problem fellowshiping other churches in Europe especially among the evangelicals. Churches of Christ have limited, if any, connections with other Christian groups in Europe. However, this varies depending on different practices of local churches and leadership. There are cases where local preachers and church members have established connections with other churches and participate in various ecumenical efforts. In a number of cases preachers or missionaries in Churches of Christ in France meet monthly with the *pastorales* (groups of pastors who come together from different churches to pray and encourage one another).

DIFFERENCES WITH RESTORATIONISM IN NORTH AMERICA

It is usually the case that the churches and movements that have close ties to North America reflect the practices and views of American churches. In doctrine and liturgy there are clear similarities between American and European churches. Socially speaking, one difference is that Restoration churches in Europe tend to have less credibility for Europeans because they are often seen as American churches or, in some cases, as modern cults. When churches must rely on the leadership of American missionaries, this also gives the impression of an American imported faith. There are, however exceptions to this. Churches in the United Kingdom have their specific history, which is connected to but not dependent on the Restoration Movement in America. Another exception would be the churches in Spain, which have been planted for the most part by Spanish preachers and are led by Spanish Christians, and where the presence of American missionaries is occasional. A second and more recent difference is the ethnic and racial mix that characterizes European churches, as compared to American churches—especially in the Bible belt. Our observation is that the social differences are often more significant for the people of European countries than doctrinal or liturgical matters. An important difference between Christians in North America and Europe is their different historical perspectives. Europeans usually want to understand a religious claim from the larger perspective of their own history, which gives the impression that the Restoration Movement is exclusively the child of nineteenth century North American history. This perception guarantees a loss of credibility towards this movement on the part of Europeans “who frame the discussion of nearly any important social issue in term of its long-term history.”²⁹

THE ROLE OF WOMEN AND PERCEPTIONS OF SOCIAL ROLE

The Christian Church (Disciples of Christ) encourages women to take an active role in all aspects of the life of local churches. This is also the case in the work they do in Europe, usually within historical European churches. Independent Christian Churches and Churches of Christ tend to limit preaching and leadership to the men of the congregations. In many cases this position on the role of women is also shared by Evangelical churches throughout Europe; it is not specifically an American phenomenon. In a growing number of cases, however, women are actively involved in the process of decision making and planning through church committees and general reunions, as well as taking on a greater role in public prayer or the reading of scripture. In several European countries, especially in southern Europe, the number of women who attend church is much larger than the number of men. This tends to place women in positions of leadership due

28. See <http://www.disciples.org/AboutTheDisciples/HistoryoftheDisciples/tabid/69/Default.aspx/> (accessed August 18, 2009).

29. John R. Bowen, *Why the French Don't Like Headscarves: Islam, the State and Public Space* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2008), 5–6.

to the absence of men to fill in those positions. Missionaries or local preachers are often seen as clergy and have to assume leadership in a number of areas such as preaching, teaching or benevolent work. But for many churches there is often no male leadership to be found. In a growing number of cases, educated and capable women in these churches are taking on a more leading role.

Churches that have been planted in Europe often find themselves at the margins of society. This phenomenon is not due to a willful desire on the part of missionaries to cut people off from the surrounding society. The European Christians themselves find it difficult to connect with their post-Christian and often anti-Christian relatives or neighbors, who look upon regular churchgoing folk as mentally deranged or uneducated. There is a sense in which Restoration Christians in Europe go through subtle forms of rejection. It is, however, the conviction of this writer that Christians and churches in Europe can find ways to bridge this gap with their neighbors. This necessitates unique ways to train European Christians, especially the leaders of local churches. Music and art are powerful and effective ways to reach out to post-Christian Europeans. In Europe, it is also important to reflect on the social dimension of church activities. A church committed to spiritual matters, but uninterested in the poor within a community, will not be perceived as credible by Europeans.

CONCLUSION

Restoration churches in Europe have inherited a rich history and have a significant presence on the Continent. The strong attachment to biblical roots of these churches is also part of European church history. American churches and institutions have been actively involved in church planting and Bible teaching for over a century in Europe. European churches face the challenge of constantly connecting their cultural and historical heritage with their biblical and Restoration heritage. This requires a deep spiritual life, theological reflection and wisdom in living out the demands of the gospel. It also requires for Christians of this heritage, independently of race, ethnic background or gender, to discover ways to exercise their priesthood in the Lord's house.

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