

‘Secularisation, the World Church and the Future of Mission’

J. Andrew Kirk

Two authors have written recently, from different perspectives, on the relationship between the post-Christian, mission context of the West and the post-Western Church. They both come to the conclusion that the secular view of the future of Christianity is deeply flawed, as a new, unheralded version of the Christian faith is growing fast in the global South. In particular, they argue that the prediction that modernisation will lead inexorably to a decline of religious observance will prove unfounded. Moreover, the view that non-Western Christianity represents an obsolete and primitive faith shows a misunderstanding of history. This study examines the arguments and draws some possible conclusions about the direction of the church’s mission in the unreceptive climate of Western societies.

The Church in the West continues to reflect with some perplexity on the challenge of sharing the Gospel of Jesus Christ with a population increasingly ignorant of and alienated from its Christian heritage, whilst the Church in large parts of the non-Western world appears to know no bounds to its growth and missionary vitality. In this study I wish to introduce and evaluate two recent publications, which from quite different perspectives reflect on the current decline and growth of the Church on different continents. Their observations will, I believe,

help to enlighten the Church as it seeks to understand its calling in a particularly difficult context.

The author of the first book is Grace Davie,¹ an academic in the field of the sociology of religion, teaching in the University of Exeter, England. She has already published a number of other books on “the nature and development of religion in post-war Europe”.² The first of these starts with a survey of religious allegiance in the inner cities of Britain; the second looks at Europe in general. Now, in this third of a series, she moves on to a discussion of the European experience within a global context, attempting to compare what is happening in Europe regarding religious belief and practice with other parts of the world (North America, Latin America, Africa and the Far East).

She begins with the comment that modernization outside Europe has not automatically led to secularisation. Although this statement appears to be more a hypothesis than an empirical judgement, given that she does not supply supporting evidence,³ nevertheless it forms an important ingredient in her argument. On the basis of the assertion, she questions the assumption, much canvassed by other commentators, that Europe will be every other continent’s future, in the sense that increasing economic success, measured by rising levels of education, production, consumption and scientific achievement, and the acceptance of liberal values will eventually displace religion as the guiding principle of social life. On the contrary, it is her opinion that a high level of religious practice can coexist with a technologically sophisticated and materially prosperous society.

The main purpose of the book is to find an explanation of the anomaly – hence the title – that, only on the continent of Europe, religion has declined to a significant degree. Davie believes that the exception can be satisfactorily explained by Europe’s quite distinct historical circumstances and cultural environment. Once one understands the reasons for the differences, it is possible to attempt a reinterpretation of the state of religious belief there.

Consequent upon such an understanding, the Church should be in a better condition to discover how to communicate again the story of Jesus.

The Parameters of Faith in Modern Europe

Her survey adopts both an historical and empirical methodology. Historically, she notes the way in which the relationship between the church and the state has evolved in Europe. This is held to be highly significant: “constitutional connections between Church and State are part of Europe’s history...such is not necessarily the case elsewhere.”⁴ Empirically, Davie mainly uses the *European Values Study* (the most recent statistics coming from 1999/2000). The intention of this study is to “map social and moral values across Europe, relating these to a range of economic and social indicators” (Davie, 2004:3). It looks at both similar and changing patterns of values. With regard to religion, five variables are explored: denominational allegiance, church attendance, attitudes towards the church, indicators of religious belief and subjective religious disposition. From the findings, Davie concludes that Europe is secular only in the sense that the majority of its population does not belong to religious institutions, not in the sense that it does not possess some kind of religious belief: “West Europeans remain, by and large, un-churched populations rather than simply secular” (Davie, 2002:5).

Davie’s first intention is to give basic information on religious activity in Europe. The statement that the population is largely un-churched is not controversial, if taken to mean that the vast majority of white indigenous people do not attend church on a regular basis.⁵ However, the added supposition that it is still largely ‘religious’ in some way is a theory that needs to be established, or denied. The next move is to attempt to give some kind of convincing explanation of the accelerating trend towards a lack of commitment to church life in any form. What is it that gives rise to this situation, unique (according to the book’s thesis)

in the history of the world? If we were able to comprehend the causes, we might also be able to predict future trends regarding religious belief and practice – for example, among young people. She sets about the explanatory task by looking at four different reasons that have been given for the present state of affairs.

- i. *The secularisation thesis.* Two major cultural and social forces, unique to European history, have set the populations of Western Europe on the path to a minimal formal religious observance. First came the Reformation, which in its emphasis on individual conscience, an unmediated access to fellowship with God, and an authoritative Bible in the language of the people led to a decline of the Church's authority to interpret and control the faith of the people. From then on, the people (even the humble ploughman, in Tyndale's phrase) had the incentive and the means to decide on their own. Secondly, came the Enlightenment, which with its emphasis on the power of reason, allied to scientific and technological discovery, to solve human problems, made the hypothesis of God progressively redundant. Moreover, the recognition of the supreme religious right of freedom of conscience led to a growing plurality of religious expression, which in turn weakened conviction: "If it is possible to tolerate a variety of religious views within one society, can any of these views be considered an embodiment of the truth? In other words, once more than one 'truth' is permitted, *all* religions necessarily lose their plausibility, not to mention their capacities to discipline the faithful" (Davie, 2002: 15). "Individualism threatened the communal basis of religious belief and behaviour, while rationality removed many of the purposes of religion and rendered many of its beliefs implausible" (Davie, 2002:14).
- ii. *Rational choice theory.* Far from religion losing its plausibility, either because of the hypothesis that God is no longer required, or because the breakdown of official

religion has led to religious toleration and a pluralism of beliefs, the new situation gave rise to the possibility of greater consumer satisfaction in an open market of consumer religious choice. This theory seems to explain the relatively vibrant commitment to religious practice in the USA. In Europe, for the theory to be explanatory, it has to be assumed that the churches there have largely refused to recognise the new situation, by continuing to maintain their adherence to a geographically bound folk church: “If a free-market in European religion were allowed to emerge, there is no reason why the religious institutions in this part of the world should not flourish in the same way as their American counterparts” (Davie, 2002:43).

- iii. *Amnesia thesis*. The decline of formally observed religion is due to a massive collective loss of memory. People are, in general, no longer in touch with the forms of religion that once helped to define their identity. Thus, “modern societies are not less religious because they are increasingly rational, but because they are less and less capable of maintaining the memory which lies at the heart of their religious existence” (Davie, 2002: 18).
- iv. *Loss of shared discourse theory*. The rooting of religion in culture is the result of a population in general agreeing that a particular belief system gives an adequate interpretation of existence. This is dependent on the tacit acceptance of a common definition of a particular language – for example, sin, salvation and eternal life – remaining unchallenged. Up to the 1960s, according to this thesis, this discourse still functioned for large parts of the population across Western Europe. Beliefs were still being carried from generation to generation, largely by women in their primary nurturing role. However, “the dramatic change that took place in the 1960s associated with the revolution in the role of women more generally” meant

that “no longer were women prepared to be carriers of piety on behalf of the nation as a whole” (Davie, 2002:20). Less prosaically, secure means of contraception and the increasing tendency of women to work outside the home were the major factors in accelerating the loss of a shared discourse! ⁶

At this point, without endorsing any of these theories, Davie switches to the wider canvass of other continents, in order to attempt a similar analysis of other regions of the world. Her purpose here is to relate two fundamental research questions: a) what is it about European society (particularly the Western part) that makes it distinctive from a religious point of view when compared with most of the modern world? b) why are most Europeans reluctant to admit this distinctiveness, believing that their interpretation of the fate of religion in Europe will, in due course, fit all other situations? Briefly, she comes to three main conclusions. First, the evidence supports the thesis that Europe is an exceptional case. Religion is thriving in most other parts of the world (including advanced, developed countries like the USA and South Korea). Secondly, the reasons for the differences are historical and cultural. There is no necessary connection between modernisation and secularisation, or rather there are different ways in which the modernising processes have affected core beliefs and values: “the assumption that modernising societies are convergent, and the notion of Europe as the lead society in the modernising process (are challenged)” (Davie, 2002: 157). Thirdly, it is quite legitimate to be a thoroughly modern society and take religious factors seriously, in public as well as in private life. Only by doing this do we begin to understand the range of human experience. Thus, “it is as modern to draw from the resources of religion in order to critique the secular as it is to draw from the secular to criticise the religious” (Davie, 2002:161).

Interpreting the 'exceptional' thesis

Before seeking to evaluate Davie's central thesis, it is important to look at the assumptions she makes in her study. Firstly, as we have seen, she believes that modernisation does not necessarily lead to secularisation. In this sense, Europe is not everyone else's future. There is, she believes, already enough evidence elsewhere to disprove this idea – for example, the Gulf States, Saudi Arabia, the USA and South Korea. Secondly, secularisation in Europe does not necessarily breed an irreligious population. Evidence suggests that religion still abounds, but that it is non-institutional; it is post-Christian in both a formal and informal sense. So, Europe is actually much less secular than is popularly conceived. Davie, famously, calls this “believing without belonging.”⁷ Thirdly, religious sensitivity and secular consciousness are opposites. In other words, the secular is defined in the rather narrow terms of the loss of a point of reference beyond the material (Davie, 2002: 5). Fourthly, the exceptional case of Europe is bound up with formal state religion and the hitherto privileged place of the church in national life, contrasted with the purely voluntary nature of religion elsewhere (Davie, 2002:36-37). Religion in other parts, particularly in the USA, and in its exports to Third World nations in the form of neo-Pentecostal churches, has become entrepreneurial. So, Davie believes, “secularisation in Europe is caused by deficiency in supply, not demand” (Davie, 2002:43). Finally, secularisation in Europe becomes for the churches a self-fulfilling prophecy, in that the consciousness of being a minority leads to a reactive (defensive against change) rather than proactive (experimental) response to the situation.

Critical reflections

In my judgement the thesis that modernity has led to a massive secularisation in Europe, but not elsewhere, is open to question. A further doubt is raised by Davie's assertion

that actually Europe may be less secular than is commonly supposed, because religion (or spirituality) is flourishing in non-formal and essentially private ways. It is secular, she argues, only in the sense that the majority of the population see the minority of those who do attend church as performing the civic responsibilities of religion vicariously on their behalf, whilst they experiment with a wide range of esoteric beliefs and practices. So, the question remains: is Europe basically secular, or not?

Davie uses three key terms throughout her study: secularisation, religion and modernisation. It is not clear to me that she is using them with due precision and consistency. On the one hand, she understands secularisation in the case of Europe as the decline in formal religious observance and the weakening of the authority of religious institutions. On the other hand, in the case of the USA, she understands it more in terms of the separation of church and state. Thus, on the European definition, the USA is essentially non-secular (a proposition difficult to accept at face value), whilst on the USA definition parts of Europe are still non-secular (a conclusion which cuts right across the central argument). Davie, therefore, seems to move between two understandings of secular and, therefore, fails to see adequately that the best way of accounting for the evidence of both continents is that it is perfectly possible to be thoroughly secular and 'religious' at the same time. This is possible once one understands that secular is not defined by the rejection of belief (as if that were possible), or by disengagement with religious institutions, but by a cultural commitment to interpreting religion in terms of individual choice in one's private life.

Religion is, of course, notoriously difficult to define. However, again Davie appears to be using the concept differently in the case of Europe in comparison with other geographical regions. In the latter case (i.e., outside Europe), religion refers to the formal adherence to Christian communities; whilst, in the former, it becomes more diffuse – believing (almost

anything) without belonging.⁸ Here, perhaps, her thesis about secularisation is maintained by redefining religion.

Lurking in the background is a third understanding of secularisation – some kind of radical, humanist naturalism, for which the God-thesis is dead (Nietzsche). In other words, on this definition, material existence is all there is; there is no other objective reality beyond what, in principle, is open to the senses. With regard to this understanding of the secular, there is, I believe, much ambivalence among the population. Do people accept what popular science seems to prescribe, that humans are basically superior monkeys, a chronologically later stage of evolution achieved through a completely random process of mutations? Or, do they still think in terms of some kind of providential ordering of life by a relatively benign, and probably personal, spiritual presence? Does the answer to this question actually affect whether one characterises a person (or population) as secular, or not? My own observation is that Europeans are largely confused: when life is relatively untroubled they will settle, pragmatically, for a materialist interpretation; when, however, things go wrong they are inclined to hedge their bets!⁹ In this dual response to the possible existence of a supreme Being, there is, I believe, a cultural gulf fixed between Europeans and people who live elsewhere (for example, surveys suggest that in the USA some 50% of the population reject the theory of evolution), which no amount of free-market in religion and entrepreneurial wizardry on the part of the churches can hope to bridge. Meanwhile, it is not inconceivable that religion (or more probably spirituality – an even more elastic concept) can be reinterpreted as an exploration of the transcendence of inner consciousness in such a way that it becomes quite compatible with philosophical naturalism.

Finally, it is not entirely clear what Davie means by modernisation. She seems to identify it with the changing structures and relationships in society caused by technological advance, wealth creation, access to secondary education, democratic accountability, a general

rise in the standard of living, increased consumer choice and the rule of law. Understood thus, the USA is the most modern nation in the world, closely followed by Japan. In this sense, her thesis that modernisation does not automatically bring irreligion might be shown to be demonstrated (Japan is also a very (multi-)religious society). However, many of these indicators are absent, where Christian faith is growing fastest – Africa, Latin America, the Philippines and rural China. In this sense her survey does not demonstrate the thesis, for one cannot say that religious fervour and modernisation exist side by side in these places. Indeed, it would be possible to argue for the thesis that the growth of religion is caused, in part, by the failure of modernisation to deliver the goods for the majority of the population and that, therefore, religion is characterised as compensation for disappointed expectations. Moreover, where modernity is most prominent in the Third World, among the wealthy elite, formal religion appears to be the most absent. If this could be demonstrated empirically, then the theory that Europe is every other nation's future could still be probable.

I suspect that the correlation between religious belief and modernisation has to be given more of a historical dimension. This is largely missing from Davie's study. Might it be, for example, that only when modernisation reaches a particular stage of development (i.e. when a basic, state-supported, economic security is affordable), reached in Western Europe in the 1960s onwards, does religion begin to decline. That stage has certainly not been reached in the majority world. If this is the case, then, within the parameters of Christian faith, the USA, not Europe, is the exceptional case!¹⁰

The Gospel beyond the West

The second book I will review is by Lamin Sanneh.¹¹ He was born in the Gambia in West Africa, and grew up as a Muslim, until he turned to Christ as a young man. He is now the Professor of Missions and World Christianity at Yale Divinity School. He is the author of

several books dealing with the relationship between the West and Africa, particularly in the context of the missionary movement.

The core theme of the book is the encounter between the *post-Christian West* and *post-Western Christianity*. As he says, echoing the thesis of Davie, “the contemporary confidence in the secular destiny of the West as an elevated stage of human civilization is matched by the contrasting evidence of the resurgence of Christianity as a world religion; they are like two streams flowing in opposite directions” (Sanneh, 2003:3). The purpose of the book is to show that the growth of the Christian faith in Africa, Latin America and parts of Asia is a new factor in world history that counters Western societies’ confidence in the spread of the secular creed throughout the world. The book is set out as a dialogue between the author and an imaginary, critical interrogator, taking the form of provocative questions and careful responses. This use of searching, critical questions is intended to demonstrate the significance of the resurgence of Christianity and its challenge to the claimed superiority of Western experience and culture. The questions, although cast in his own words, are largely ones that Sanneh has heard as objections put to the notion that the resurgence of Christianity should be interpreted as good news.

Sanneh’s motives for writing the book are twofold: a) to counter the assumption that secular beliefs will one day prevail in all societies (again close to Davie’s argument), and b) to refute the assumption that the resurgence of Christian faith and practice implies a new form of divisive, militant and authoritarian religion similar to the Christendom version of Christianity.

Interpreting the discussion

In advancing his arguments, Sanneh makes a number of important observations. He believes, firstly, that there is a serious divergence between a secular view of current world

history and the religious resurgence in the non-Western world. This discrepancy operates at several different levels. On the level of the *interpretation* of phenomena, Western critics see resurgence as an historical aberration. For them, secularisation is an irreversible process: religion will never again come to dominate the reigning convictions of a society. The resurgence, therefore, represents an anachronism, a curious throw-back to a more primitive past. On the level of *moral values*, resurgence represents the danger of overturning gains made by the notions of tolerance, inclusiveness and cultural sensitivity. On the level of *political and social practice*, resurgence threatens liberal, democratic institutions, not least the Western liberal consensus that global capitalism is the best hope for raising standards of living everywhere.

Secondly, Sanneh believes that most of the secular reaction to resurgence is a misunderstanding, based on the mistaken belief that Christianity has logically to assume a Constantinian attitude to faith and society. The best way to counter the false allegation is by telling the story of what is happening, and in the telling showing that post-Western Christianity is a different kind of faith.

Thirdly, the historical movement of this version of Christianity means that it has remained outside of a history shaped internally by both Christendom and by its adversary, the Enlightenment. This means that the West (including sections of the Church) has to think of Christianity in a new way, for the latter no longer has to defend itself against the criticism of promoting imperial designs, nor to respond to a narrow interpretation of reality (i.e. the supposed impossibility of direct divine intervention). These understandings of Christianity spring directly from a specific history and cannot, therefore, be superimposed upon quite distinct histories elsewhere.

Fourthly, the Western and non-Western explanations for the resurgence diverge according to the corresponding intellectual presuppositions adopted. For Western observers it

is necessary to look first for sociological and political reasons: for example, despair in the face of deteriorating economic prospects and disenchantment with the collapse of post-colonial dreams. For African interpreters, however, the reasons are largely theological: for example, the success of indigenous evangelism¹², the immediate power of God to transform lives and heal, excluded people gaining a real identity and dignity through the supernatural gifts of the Spirit.

Fifthly, the main agency for the transformation of Christianity has been Bible translation into the vernacular.¹³ As Sanneh says: “Christianity is the religion of over 2,000 different language groups in the world;” “Christianity is no longer Christendom, a religion of one cultural mandate...The language of Christianity is the language of the people, what they happen to be” (Sanneh, 2003:69). Christianity is, above all, a translated language, having no revealed (or sacred) language of its own. Unlike other religions, Christianity alone was transmitted without the language of its founder,¹⁴ for the New Testament Gospels present an already translated version of Jesus’ message.“ Thus, “there is nothing that God wanted to say that could not be said in simple, everyday language,” “languages have intrinsic merit for communicating the divine message,” “Bible translation into the mother tongue has opened the way for the world-wide Christian renewal and for the diverse cultural expressions that have become the vintage-mark of the religion as a global phenomenon” (Sanneh, 2003:106). The corollary to this phenomenon of translation is that no one version of Christianity can ever again become dominant, for translation always, everywhere, presupposes a plurality of interaction between the written and heard text: an English translation, for example, is no more normative than one in, say, Polish, Yoruba, Quechua or Mandarin.

Sanneh then defends Bible translation against various accusations: that it is dishonest, in that the primary motive is to seek to gain converts; that it violates the rights of people not to have their language and cultures tampered with by missionaries; that it destroys indigenous

values by introducing a foreign religion, a weapon of spiritual colonialism; that it is divisive in the context of other religions, which do not emphasize translation (especially Islam); that it impedes national unity by helping to preserve and enhance a multiplicity of languages (in Papua New Guinea, for example). His response to these criticisms is practical, rather than theoretical, pointing out the actual advantages in real life brought by translation. Thus, for example, creating written languages out of spoken ones, strengthens and enriches cultures. By giving an impulse to literacy for all, it promotes education. It creates dignity for those often excluded in society – women and children – by giving them an equal access to the text and its message. It allows for an un-coerced faith, in that the text can only present a message; it cannot force a person to believe. Finally, the message of the text speaks of diversity as a foundation for unity, as is the case of the one, universal Christian community made up of many local varieties.

Critical reflections

The audience that Sanneh is addressing is composed of Western sceptics, who wish that Christianity would disappear from the world stage, or at least remain anonymous, so that the Enlightenment agenda of liberal values and rational human choices could prevail unchallenged by bigoted, religious dogmas: “The Enlightenment agenda,” says the questioner, “I like and would like to see spread all over the world...that’s the kind of mission I support” (Sanneh, 2003:116). Associated with them, are Western liberal Christians, who believe that mission as an invitation to conversion to Jesus Christ is arrogant and inappropriate in a pluralist and multi-cultural world. According to this view, mission can only be saved by engaging, throughout the world, in the promotion of the Western liberal views of individual human rights, democracy and personal freedoms: “Christians could sign on (for the

Enlightenment agenda) as theologians of the hermeneutics of suspicion or liberation” (Sanneh, 2003:116).

Sanneh argues that such people are commenting on world Christianity from a defective and prejudiced starting-point: defective, because its standard of assessment is the limited horizon of Western historical experience; prejudiced, because it is blind to the limitations of the Enlightenment – in the following quote on this theme, Sanneh is being distinctly ironic, “the West, viewed broadly as a cultural system of ethics, images, music, literature as well as science and technology, has reduced the mystery of God to a cultural filibuster. Truth cannot be known with certainty, and one can be certain about that, and about the related confident cultural relativism that postpones indefinitely questions of finality...The West cannot live by bread alone, or by reason alone...So, a Gnostic religious faith continues to be widespread in the West, in spite of demands for the primacy of reason” (Sanneh, 2003: 62-63).

So, does he make his case? Sanneh counterpoises the new vitality of non-Western Christianity to post-Enlightenment critical stereotypes of Christianity. He does so, not only to show empirically that not all Christianity is the same (his argument from translation), but that the new Christian phenomenon challenges (as does Islam in a different way) the intellectual and cultural hegemony of the West. The West, he says, had better wake up to a new reality in the world.

He implies that the Western intellectual tradition is close to bankruptcy, because of its tendency to reduce the richness of human life and experience to materialist considerations: “the secular account of the end and purpose of human life gives a misleading view of our human potential” (Sanneh, 2003:81); “people have given their hearts to materialism and individualism” (Sanneh, 2003:83). Non-Western Christianity demonstrates another reality at

work; it is a force for good and for change of which the cynical West knows nothing, because it dismisses it *a priori* as superstition, syncretism, fundamentalism and fanaticism.

So far, in my opinion, his case is impressive. However, his view of non-Western Christianity may be too uncritical. Here I cite two phenomena, which he does not deal with, and which, in my judgement, modify his thesis somewhat. First, there is the disturbing fact of the Church's apparent silence during some of the most brutal episodes in the recent history of Africa and Latin America: for example, attempts at ethnic cleansing in Ruanda, mass killing in Liberia, Sierra Leone and the Democratic Republic of the Congo, and the elimination of political opponents in the 'dirty wars' of Argentina, Chile and Bolivia.¹⁵ Granted the intense intimidation, and the lack of any restraint on brutality (in some cases, young children and pregnant women being routinely dismembered), nevertheless the question remains how nations with such a high percentage of Christians in the population could experience such atrocities. Was there a lack of Christian engagement with the political public square? And if so, does not this point to a serious weakness in this new, non-Constantinian version of Christianity?

Secondly, one cannot but help raise the suspicion that personal, material gain is a major motivation in the growth of neo-Pentecostal churches in the last 25 years. It is well documented that the churches that are growing fastest are those which emphasize God's material blessings on the faithful – so-called 'health and wealth' teaching. Granted that the extreme poverty of many believers might attract them to a preacher who promises that God will provide them with material comfort, nevertheless one wonders whether this brand of faith is really the significant challenge to Western materialism that Sanneh thinks it could be. Perhaps, this kind of challenge actually comes best from Western Christians who, in their lifestyle, are learning to distinguish between what is good and what is surplus, and learning to

challenge more effectively in their own lives the notion that possessions necessarily enhance human well-being.

Conclusions

It is remarkable how these two authors, writing from diverse perspectives and with different intentions, come to the same conclusions on the central point of the future of Christian faith in world history. As far as is known, neither is aware of the work of the other; or, at least, neither quotes the other. Both believe that the analysis of the place of religion in society, that springs from a secular mind-set, is flawed because it has prejudged the issue before looking at the evidence.

In a sense, both authors are attempting a kind of grand narrative interpretation of complex and varied phenomena. Their conclusions, therefore, tend also to be on the grand scale, not allowing properly for discrepancies or evidence that does not fit. In the course of the discussions, a number of valid points are made, but not evaluated rigorously enough. For example, Davie's interpretation of secularity in Europe, 'believing but not belonging', does not investigate very thoroughly the nature of the believing – Sanneh calls the same kind of phenomena an adherence to Gnostic religion. She assumes, therefore, that any believing is a sign of spiritual longing, which the churches, if they were not so distanced culturally from the societies in which they are set, ought to capitalise on. She does not discuss, however, the problem for evangelism that, even in an age of intense individualism and private belief, the nature of Gospel believing remains community living. Believing, in any remotely Christian sense, without belonging is not possible within a Christian understanding of salvation. It is of the essence of the Gospel that we are formed in our discipleship within an imperfect community, where we learn to forgive and be forgiven. I wonder whether, in her enthusiasm for a free-market in religious goods and services, she has underestimated the cost and

discipline of belonging to a flawed community. If it does not work well, unlike material commodities, we cannot send it back, or even exchange it for a faultless specimen! Perhaps, we need to catch the sense of reality, irony and humour, which prompted a church to place a large notice outside the main door of its' building: 'only sinners welcomed here!'

Both Davie and Sanneh emphasise the power, in other parts of the world church, of a welcoming and caring community for promoting growth. There, it is precisely by belonging that the excluded of society feel included; those whose lives count for nothing experience a new significance. What do these two very different realities tell us about the church in mission? The churches in the majority world thrive, apparently, on building including communities. The churches in Europe, on the other hand, find it extremely hard to attract people on a committed, long-term basis. To what extent do the two sets of churches reflect disparate self-images, and to what extent are the vastly different social conditions influential? It is a fact that those joining the churches in such numbers in Africa and Latin America and parts of Asia are, by and large, from the lowest social strata of society. In Latin America, it is said, ironically, that the Catholic church has taken a preferential option for the poor, but the poor have opted for the Pentecostal churches. Many of the members are amongst the most vulnerable people in society. They find in the local church a place of support, sharing and understanding. Above all they find a recognition that they are real people with gifts and talents to share with others in the community.

In Europe, the vulnerable people are largely absent from the churches. If they – the homeless, drug and alcohol abusers, single parents, the long-term unemployed, ex-prisoners, the physically and emotionally abused, minority ethnic communities – were present, Church members would probably feel uncomfortable. The demand on their time, in attending to their various problems, would be too great. They would then see themselves as the vulnerable people. To be honest, many Christians probably use the ministries of the church in part to

seek some kind of security in a competitive and uncertain world. Having to welcome and serve people on the margins of society might be too costly.

These are conclusions that one might draw from these two studies, though not particularly emphasised by either author. If they are legitimate, one implication would be that the flight into esoteric spiritualities, whether Christian or pagan, is no measure of the costly faithfulness to Jesus Christ, which has to be the response of forgiven sinners: “from those to whom much is given, much will be required.” Perhaps, the social conditions in the West, more than the secular culture, are what make the growth of Christian communities so difficult. Our populations have come to expect a certain level of experiences in order to find a fulfilled life. Gaining these experiences, and earning the money to make them possible, leaves people without time to reflect on the purpose of it all, or to meet regularly with others who claim to know some of the answers. As yet, the alleged problem of time remains unresolved. Christian community is both the result of the Gospel, part of the Gospel and an invitation to consider the Gospel. However, without a serious amount of time spent together, authentic Christian community is impossible. So, how is this dilemma to be solved in our kinds of society? Should we, perhaps, be shifting our focus in mission away from those invited to the banquet, towards “the poor, the crippled, the blind and the lame?” The first group have their properties, businesses and leisure activities to attend to and make their excuses to stay away or await a more opportune moment to heed the summons to participate; the second group have scarcely anything. Are the latter not, in many respects, closer to entering the kingdom of God?

¹ (Davie, 2002)

² (Davie, 1994); (Davie, 2000).

³ The little evidence that is cited seems to tell against her conclusion. Thus, in the case of Latin America, she quotes Venezuela and Uruguay, the most secular nations, as being resistant to Pentecostalism (Davie, 2002:58).

⁴ The situation in Latin America and the Philippines, however, although offering a clearly distinctive set of historical circumstances, does afford parallels.

⁵ The recent report of the Church of England (Cray, 2004) makes a distinction between un-churched (having never had any contact with the church) and de-churched (having had some formal relationship in the past).

⁶ (Brown, 2001).

⁷ Survey statistics, provided by Ivana Noble for the Czech Republic, seem to bear out Davie's contention. One of her conclusions is that "believers in something (some kind of supra-human spirit or power of life) are increasing fast," another that "atheism seems to have already peaked" (Lecture Notes, International Baptist Theological Seminary, Prague, September, 2004).

⁸ It is interesting that in the Czech survey (see note 7), the greatest percentage increase in standard religious belief is in life after death. However, this is matched by belief in reincarnation. The two may be seen by many as coterminous. By far and away the greatest percentage for any belief in a supra-human reality was for telepathy. Pim Volkenberg (2004: 989), following Vroom (2003), suggests that "in the West, *multiple religious belonging* seems to prevail in the religious identity of many persons (my emphasis)." The reason for this may be that "this religious identity has become more and more an individual affair, a personal configuration of a number of basic insights and beliefs that is no longer guided by any religious authority. Thus New Age spirituality borrows from hermetic traditions and Celtic religion."

⁹ This interpretation would account for the high percentage of people who claim to believe in 'God' and to pray.

¹⁰ "I still do not have any plausible explanations for what appears to be the enormous and growing gulf between the United States and Europe in terms of religious adherence. By all rights, and all sociological theory, the United States should be secularising rapidly, which it evidently is not," Philip Jenkins (2004:22).

¹¹ (Sanneh, 2003).

¹² Growth began seriously only when Western missionaries were no longer prominent in the churches.

¹³ Here, Sanneh retakes the thesis that he made prominent in his book, (1989).

¹⁴ For Islam it is Arabic, for Hinduism it is Sanskrit and for Buddhism, Pali.

¹⁵ These incidents are also mentioned by Davie (2002:104).

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J. Andrew Kirk has recently retired from full-time teaching. His last post was in the Center for Missiology and World Christianity of the University of Birmingham, England. He is the author of thirteen books, including What is Mission? Theological Explorations.