

Europe's Illegal Faith

Religion is on the move in Europe, but it's heading in the wrong direction for Christians. 

On the one hand, the pilgrim industry is booming. The European Union, local governments and liberal churches are investing millions to modernize and market medieval pilgrim routes. Millions—including a growing number of nonbelievers and charismatic Christians—have set out on holy trails.

On the other hand, campaigns are mounting against Bible-believing Christians who hold on to Jesus as the *only* way. Europeans, even within the churches, perceive biblical persuasions and morals as fundamentalist and anti-democratic. In some cases biblical Christianity is already illegal.

For centuries European emperors and kings imposed their religion of choice upon subjects—and European governments still claim the right to control religion. Authorities increasingly intervene, judging which religious convictions are compatible with the ruling definition of European democracy—which is secular pluralism.

“I fear that the Bible may soon be forbidden in public places like libraries and schools,” Johan Candelin, former executive director of the Religious Liberties Commission of the World Evangelical Alliance, told *Charisma*.

He points to a definitive shift in Europe over the last five years in which Christians commonly have been painted as unreliable and even stupid by mainstream media. Insisting Jesus is the only way to heaven could be considered hate speech—a potentially criminal offense.

Moreover, while some European countries—Austria, Hungary and Germany, as well as most of the formerly communist countries in eastern Europe—have so-called recognized religions that

enjoy certain privileges, the evangelical, Pentecostal and charismatic churches are mostly excluded or listed in lesser categories and often treated as “cults.” In France and Greece it is forbidden to evangelize children, the elderly and the sick. Belgium currently is debating a similar bill.

In Germany and Sweden the going is getting tougher: Parents are being sent to jail and having their children moved to foster homes for raising them according to biblical principles.

Eduard Elscheidt is a living example. He is from the small town of Salzkotten in northwest Germany. There, a group of Christians is battling the local government and the German courts.

“Between us we have so far spent 300 days in prison,” says Elscheidt, a father of four who has been behind bars twice for keeping his elementary school children at home during sex-education classes at school.

Gabriele Eckermann, defense lawyer for the Salzkotten parents, told *Charisma* that ideas now taught at sex-ed classes in elementary school conflict with a German law that sets the legal age for sexual relationships at 14. Eckermann also pointed out that according to both European and German law, parents have a “natural right” to direct the education of their children and educational authorities must respect the “religious and ideological persuasions” of parents.

“The German authorities are not complying with their own laws!” says Elscheidt, who moved to Germany from the former Soviet Union, where family members were routinely in prison, either for illegal youth work or for printing Bibles illegally. “We are fined for each day that each child misses school. Refusing to pay, we are sent to jail.”

☒ Recently the European Human Rights Court ruled that Germany is correct in not tolerating “parallel societies”—another

blow to Christian parenting.

In a similar violation of parental rights, Child Protective Services in the city of Karlstad in Sweden moved Erik and Malin Berglund's (not their real names) children, then ages 2, 5, 7 and 8, to foster homes in June 2010. The parents are allowed only two hours every three weeks with their children, and only under surveillance. What's more, Erik was sentenced to one year in prison and Malin to six months of house arrest.

Their crime? Spanking their kids, and claiming that physical discipline is a biblical concept. Spanking was forbidden by law in Sweden in 1979. The Berglunds have promised not to spank their children anymore. Says Erik: "The authorities say that I must also change my way of thinking, or we won't get our children back."

Mats Tunehag, current World Evangelical Alliance global spokesman for religious liberties, is concerned. "Self censorship among Bible-believing Christians in Europe must end," says Tunehag, who lives in Sweden. "Unless we make use of the freedom of speech, democracy is endangered."

Although only small groups of believers are targeted today, he says it was much the same in the 1930s. "At first Hitler went after a minority—the Jews—and the majority did not care," he explains. "In the end the whole world suffered!"

Tunehag also warned of an ongoing shift from the objective to the subjective in the understanding of laws relevant to religious liberties. The courts no longer base their decisions solely on acts committed but on how things are *perceived*. Swedish gays who *feel* defamed by biblical views on homosexuality can sue, according to the 2002 national bill outlawing hate speech against homosexuals.

On a parallel track, Tunehag pointed out, there is a trend toward "thought policing." There is talk of certain ideas and beliefs deserving punishment. In 2010, for example, a Catholic

media group in Spain was fined heavily for broadcasting TV ads promoting the traditional family. These ads were perceived as “hateful” against homosexuals.

Even as this article is being written, a ban against prayer in public places has been established in Paris, a new school law is forcing church-run preschools to close in Sweden and a new church is emerging across Europe with the explicit ambition to make room for atheists.

“We need Christian leaders and prophets [in Europe] who stand up for the classical, biblical message about sin and grace, the forgiveness of sin, and the danger of our being lost for all eternity,” Candelin stresses.

Instead, many churches fear being branded as “fundamentalist” and “undemocratic” if they even mention sin.

In Candelin’s own Lutheran church in Finland biblical Christianity is losing ground, he says. From 2010 to 2011 its support for affiliated churches in Africa that hold to biblical views was cut by about \$1.5 million.

Warns Candelin: “A church that is silent and cautious dies spiritually from within!”