

Twilight of Christian Europe

In Sweden, France and other countries, governments are harassing churches. Believers there could be just a few steps away from serious persecution.

Nearly 400 years have passed since the Pilgrims boarded the Mayflower to flee the religious persecution in England. But European governments from Paris to Moscow to Stockholm to Athens still claim the right to control religion and are only halfheartedly being challenged by the Christian church.

In Western Europe, anti-Christian sentiments are on the rise, and new laws are restricting free speech even in the pulpit. Mats Tunehag, president of the Swedish Evangelical Alliance, urges the church "not to be naive, but to stand up for freedom in Europe, or it may well be lost."

In June, Christians complained before a Council of Europe panel that they had been falsely accused and wrongly incarcerated by members of the European Federation of Centres Research and Information on Sectarianism (FECRIS), which among other duties monitors religious groups. One man said he had been held in a psychiatric hospital for two months after being diagnosed with "religious delusions." Another doctor later said there was nothing wrong with him.

In 2002 the Swedish parliament passed a controversial and now internationally infamous law forbidding "hate speech against homosexuals." In the first case involving the new law, small-town Pentecostal pastor Åke Green was sentenced to a month in jail last year for preaching a Sunday sermon on the sinfulness of homosexuality. The court of appeal acquitted Green, and the case is now in the hands of the Swedish Supreme Court.

The debate over Green's arrest has been, and still is, intense both inside and outside the church. However, many church leaders have focused on questioning Green's theology and his choice of words rather than examining whether a democratic government can criminalize religious beliefs.

"Green's theology is not what this is all about," Tunehag says. "The issue at stake is freedom of speech and opinion."

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He says that if Green had called his congregation to attack homosexuals, he would have been guilty of inciting religious hatred. However, the pastor merely stated his belief. "The district court reasoned that Green's sermon 'might have offended' homosexuals," Tunehag says. "Well, offense is the price we pay for the freedom of debate.

"We don't want the courts to dictate the public exchange of ideas in our countries-and even restrict the freedom of religion-or we will have once again political courts in Europe, like in the days of the Inquisition [the Catholic court that sentenced Jews and non-Catholic Christians to death on the stake during the Middle Ages]."

Campaigns of Fear

Government control over religion in Europe began when Constantine declared Christianity the one and only religion of the Roman Empire in A.D. 312, and it never ceased. In northern Europe some Lutheran churches are still state churches. In Sweden the government, led for many decades in the 20th century by the Socialist Party, appointed all Lutheran bishops until the year 2000.

Today the nation's Lutheran Church, still unashamedly calling itself the "Swedish Church," is structurally separated from the administration but is still governed by elected politicians, most of whom are professing secularists.

The system is well-represented by the current Lutheran archbishop of Sweden, K.G. Hammar. Though no longer a civil servant like his predecessors, Hammar is known in the country for not believing in any Christian fundamentals, not even in the Resurrection, and for being very explicit about his unbelief. Debating homosexuality as well as the Green case, Hammar recommended earlier this year that certain Scriptures be "thrown on the trash dump of history."

In Eastern Europe the new democratic governments are passing laws reinstating the privileged position the Orthodox Church had before communism. Non-Orthodox churches are treated as cults, especially charismatic and Pentecostal ones, which are perceived as "Western" or even "American," meaning they represent a longtime enemy.

Pentecostal pastor Aleksandar Mitrovic from Novi Sad, Serbia (formerly Yugoslavia), told Charisma that the media repeatedly has accused him of being a CIA agent.

In another incident during an evangelistic outreach in Novi Sad a few years ago, a young civil servant watched a street drama performed by visiting charismatic Christians from different countries. After a while he remarked to one of the outreach leaders who happened to be standing next to him: "These people are traitors."

The missionary, who asked not to be named for fear of

reprisal, responded, "Are you referring to the foreigners?"

"Foreigners cannot be traitors to Serbia," the civil servant replied coolly. "I am talking about the Serbs supporting you. They are nationals but not Orthodox, so they are traitors."

"In some ways it was easier for us under Milosevic [the last Socialist dictator]," says veteran Pentecostal pastor Mio Stankovic from the Serbian town of Leskovac. "He was an atheist and not favoring any religion. The new government is Orthodox-and against all other churches."

The system of legally favoring some religions is not unique to Eastern Europe. In Austria and Germany the historical world religions-from Catholicism to Islam-are "governmentally recognized" and enjoy tax privileges, the right to teach religion in schools and more. The evangelical, charismatic and Pentecostal churches remain "unrecognized" and as a result are seen as "sects."

The Catholic and Lutheran churches in Austria and Germany run "sect offices," lumping together all unrecognized religions, from suicide cults to Vineyard churches, and running government-sponsored campaigns to warn the public from getting involved with such groups.

In 1996 Austrian elementary school teacher Christa Raab, a member of a small charismatic church in the provincial town of Wels, was suspended from her job at a public school and later dismissed because officials determined that "members of [this] sect are not suitable for teaching children." Government teachers in Austria were, at the time, employed for life and dismissal was unheard of.

In France, the heartland of secularism, the separation between state and religion is a much-cherished principle. Still, a law was passed in 2001 forbidding religious proselytizing among “the weak.” Those classified as “weak” included children and youth, the sick, the elderly, and drafted military servicemen and women.

“The law can be used to forbid evangelism within a few hundred yards of schools, homes for the elderly, hospitals and military barracks, but it has not yet been implemented,” says Willy Fautré, director of Human Rights Without Frontiers () in Brussels, Belgium, and a leading advocate for religious liberties in Europe.

Fautré said a similar law is under consideration in Belgium. In Greece, proselytism has been outlawed for 30 years. “Anti-sect experts” commonly claim that cults-including charismatic and Pentecostal churches-employ “emotionalism” in a way that endangers the mental health of vulnerable individuals, or promise health and prosperity to “snare” the sick and the poor.

Finding Common Ground With Muslims

Controlling religion to protect citizens from alleged abuse is widely accepted in Europe and is not seen as restrictive of religious freedom. In France and Belgium the governments have established “sect observatories” that also monitor charismatic and Pentecostal churches.

“All French mayors have written instructions from the minister of the interior on how to obstruct sects,” explains Samuel Peterschmitt, pastor of the Open Door, a charismatic church in

Mulhouse, France, that in recent years featured conference speakers such as Foursquare President Jack Hayford and National Association of Evangelicals President Ted Haggard.

Far from targeting religious abuse up front, these instructions deal with issues such as alleged fiscal irregularities or alleged shortcomings in building codes.

Seven years ago Peterschmitt's own church was unexpectedly required to pay a 60 percent tax on its offerings—even retroactively for a few years—in compliance with a pre-World War I law that had not been applied for decades. At the same time the Jehovah's Witnesses in France were targeted and ordered to pay enormous amounts in retroactive taxes. The Witnesses lost their case in the court of appeal and presumably must pay.

"In our case, God intervened with a miracle," Peterschmitt says. "At the crucial moment the French government issued an instruction to the Internal Revenue Service to deal light-handedly with associations whose books were clean, and we have not seen the auditors since."

Peterschmitt says the situation for French Christians has improved "since the fall of the Socialist government" in 2002. Fautré of Human Rights Without Frontiers agrees that the anti-sect movement in central and southern Europe has lost some of its momentum in the last year or two, but he attributes the shift to the war on terrorism and the threat of Islamism.

Though this may seem to be a positive development for the church, Fautré again waves the red flag. "The new anti-terrorist laws target Islamists, and everybody knows it," he says, "but it would be politically incorrect to say so explicitly, and in consequence the legal wording is vaguely

anti-fundamentalist, lumping together terrorists and sects-including, again, charismatics and Pentecostals.”

There is a risk, Fautré cautions, that the anti-terrorist laws will further stir the anti-religious sentiments in Europe, and in the long run harm radical Christians as much as radical Muslims. The Islamists “must [indeed] be combated with vigor,” he says, and their “hate speech against Christians, Jews and the West in general must be prosecuted.” But this can and should be done “by the penal codes already in place.”

Human Rights Without Frontiers promotes religious liberty for all-including Muslims-saying a general fear of Muslims is counterproductive. “As Christians we cannot claim freedom for ourselves and deny it to others,” Fautré reasons. “Restricting the freedom of Muslims in general will only fuel extremism and pave the way for the Islamist priests that recruit followers among Muslim youth in Europe.

“You cannot force people, directly or indirectly, to become Christians,” he adds. “The church must develop spiritually instead, and reach out by spiritual means.”

Jeff Fountain, European director of Youth With A Mission, a worldwide evangelistic movement, agrees. His country of residence, the Netherlands, declared war on terrorism when an Islamist murdered film director Theo van Gogh in 2004.

The response of the evangelical and charismatic churches, Fountain says, has been to “actively engage in dialogue with the Muslims, visiting local mosques, seeking [common] solutions to problems among the city youth, and seeking friendship.”

“Most Muslims believe that Christians are happy with the immorality, or amorality, of the Western world,” Fountain says. “When they discover that there are God-fearing Christians who share their concerns with respect to sexual immorality, homosexuality, euthanasia, etc., they are very open.

“As Bible-believing Christians we have lots of common ground with Muslims. We have got more in common with them than with our secularist neighbors. If, on the other hand, we isolate the Muslims, we only create room for fundamentalist Islam.”

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Finding Hope in the Face of Secularism

Author Jeff Fountain says Christians musn't think Europe is destined to become a secular stronghold.

The developments in modern Europe are like “the withering of the cut flower.” So says Jeff Fountain, European director of Youth With A Mission. “Unless we can re-root the European society back to the biblical values that gave birth to it ... Europe [will keep on] withering,” he says.

In his new book *Living as People of Hope* (), the evangelistic leader challenges the European church to renounce “escapist theology.”

“As Christians we need a huge paradigm shift—from seeing the church as a safe refuge from the world to developing it into

an equipping place for people called to change the world," he says. "If Europe is getting dark, where, then, lies the real problem? Obviously, it is the church not being the light it should be."

The native New Zealander who has lived in the Netherlands since 1975 is a leader of Hope for Europe, a network seeking to impart a new vision for the Old World. "To turn the tide [of de-Christianization] the European Christians must recognize that it is God's will that God's will be done in Europe," Fountain says.

Even in the charismatic renewal, Fountain argues, unfortunate interpretations of biblical prophecy have darkened the European church and, as a result, the European continent. However, he says Europe is not doomed to become an anti-Christian stronghold.

"The fatalistic idea that Europe is destined to go to the dogs anyway is part of the reason why Christians have been apolitical and allowed others to take the middle ground," Fountain says.

In *Living as People of Hope*, Fountain advocates involvement, or "being salt and light" in politics and the various professional arenas shaping society. Fountain hopes the challenge of Islam in Europe will awaken the church to its responsibility. He says secular humanists, especially the French, have tried to impose on Europe their idea that religion should not influence politics but should be kept strictly private.

"Islam won't have that, and its growth in Europe has put the

discussion about the relationship between politics and religion back on the table,” Fountain says. “That is a challenge we as Christians should welcome.”

He also points out that Christians are called to love their neighbors, and even their enemies. The biggest challenge of the next five years is not the anti-Christian sentiment in Europe, but whether or not the European church will “reach out to the continent’s [20 million] Muslims and also to the homosexuals [who are lobbying against Christians] in the love of Christ.”