

What Does Europe Believe In?

The Capuchins between Secularization and the Return of Religious Life
Report of Gary J. Wegner

Purpose and Prelude to the Symposium

From November 4 – 8th I was privileged to represent our province in Madrid, Spain for the symposium on secularism and religious life. The title of the symposium was *What Does Europe Believe In? The Capuchins between Secularization and the Return of Religious Life*. As reported in the BICI, the International Capuchin Bulletin,

During the general Chapter of 2006, the Order encouraged the brothers of North-Western Europe to reflect deeply on the phenomenon of secularization. In particular, on the basis of the Capuchin-Franciscan charism, they are called to respond to the phenomenon of a Godless society. The whole Order can learn from their experience and their attempts to answer such situations, because similar processes to those taking place in Europe are also beginning to affect the other continents. A group of Brothers in collaboration with the “Philosophisch-Theologische Hochschule” of Münster and the “Institut Marie-Dominique Chenu” of Berlin, have prepared the Symposium...Without doubt the Churches present the Christian roots of the West; while humanists underline the democratic-secular values of European society and secularist groups assume an agnostic attitude. The Symposium will evaluate the situation in a theological prospective in conferences and seminars through a sociological analysis of the present situation in Europe. They will also try to draw up concrete proposals for a Capuchin-Franciscan spirituality and pastoral action.

Overall, it was a fascinating conference, bringing together about one hundred twenty friars, mostly European as well as several Dominicans and the various invited speakers.

Prior to the symposium, I spent two days taking in some of the sights of Madrid. This in itself, proved to be a valuable prelude to the conference. One of the churches that I visited was the Basilica of St. Francis of Assisi, built on the traditional site where St. Francis stayed prior to his first, failed attempt go among the Muslims of North Africa. The basilica is a beautiful church near the royal palace and cathedral of Madrid. As such, it has been richly endowed with many of gifts from the Spanish kings to the friars in centuries past. Notable among the art treasures of the basilica is a painting of St. Francis by Goya. According to the tour guide, (the church today is more museum than place of worship) the adjacent friary is home to seven friars where it once housed two hundred. While admiring many of the beautiful art pieces in the sacristy I overheard one woman mutter to her companion, “some Franciscan poverty.” While perhaps not entirely fair, it was a good prelude to a conference examining the loss of faith in Europe and elsewhere and what is to be done.

The conference itself was held in the Capuchin Retreat center in “El Pardo.” El Pardo is a village on the outskirts of Madrid that has since been absorbed by the capital.

The palace in El Pardo served since the 16th century as the principle residence of the Spanish royal family. The Capuchin friary was founded in 1612 as the residence for the friars who would serve as chaplains to the Spanish royal family. Located in the Chapel is a famous 17th century image of Christ, *El Cristo de El Pardo*. The dictator Francisco Franco, who used the royal palace in El Pardo as his residence, donated a glass case in which the image now rests. At the beginning of the 20th century, the friary was expanded and became a minor seminary, *Seminario Serafico de Misiones Padres Capuchinos* with about 200 students and in some ways similar to St. Lawrence. The seminary closed six years ago. Today, the friars are opening a retreat and conference center. Work on the building is not complete and I believe that this symposium was actually the first gathering to be hosted by the friars at El Pardo. The friars have also used part of the complex to house immigrants, many from North Africa, who come to Madrid.

The descriptions of the papers that were presented are taken from my notes. I apologize if in taking down these notes I have inadvertently misrepresented the ideas of any of the presenters. Given the complexities of a multilingual symposium, the possibility for misunderstanding is even greater than if everything was in one's native tongue. Nevertheless, I have attempted to give my impressions and recollections of the symposium as best as I can.

Beginning of the Symposium and Keynote Address

The symposium began on Wednesday with a welcome by Christophorus Goedereis, Provincial Minister of the Province of Rhineland-Westphalia and the principal organizer of the symposium and our Minister General, Mauro Jöhri. The outline for the symposium was described as a process involving “seeing”, “judging”, and “acting.” English, German, Spanish, French and Italian were the official languages of the symposium and the presentations were all simultaneously translated into each of these languages. Each day included Eucharist and concluded with supper and socializing. I have no idea how or what the “socializing” entailed as I was staying at the Capuchin Parish in central Madrid. The Provincial Minister of the Castilian Province was our “chauffer” and was eager to leave immediately following dessert.

John Allen, the well known commentator on the Vatican for the National Catholic Reporter delivered a generally well received keynote address. In his address, Allen spoke essentially gave a summary of his newest book and advised the assembled friars to be wary of overemphasizing the challenge of secularism especially in light of the global nature of Catholicism. Said Allen,

"Let me offer one practical implication. To the extent we define secularism as our main problem, Catholicism inevitably ends up looking defensive, forever building walls around a tradition we believe to be under assault. When the term of comparison is no longer secularism, however, but rather some forms

of Pentecostalism or Islam, or quasi-magical currents in indigenous belief, that change of context positions Catholicism differently, as an alternative to religious movements that at times veer toward fundamentalism, extremism, or thaumaturgy. The capacity of Catholicism to integrate reason and faith, to uphold tradition while at the same time engaging modernity, emerges with greater clarity." "In other words, given what's actually on offer in today's religious marketplace, Catholicism often seems a balanced, moderate, and sophisticated option. For the record, this is how most people on the planet right now actually see the Catholic Church, in light of what else they see around them."

Throughout the remainder of the symposium, speakers often returned to Allen's remarks either to reinforce a point he made or to question some of his assumptions.

Secularization, "DeChristianization" and "Dechurching" from a Sociological Perspective

Michael Ebertz, a German sociologist gave a fascinating, albeit complicated for the translators, presentation on secularization, "deChristianization" and "dechurching". It was difficult for the translators as Ebertz used technical language and used many neologisms typical of German scholars. He spoke very fast and showed no mercy to the translators who at times simply gave up! Nevertheless, I found those parts that I was able to comprehend fascinating and worthwhile. He began by noting that 100 years ago Madrid was literally the statistical "center of gravity" of the world Christian population. Today, that statistical center is elsewhere. Europe is the only truly secular continent and a religious exception relative to the rest of the world. Ebertz took pains to point out that it is also difficult to speak of "Europe" per se as each country within Europe is a "special case" with its own unique religious history and experience. According to Ebertz, the most secular parts of the continent are eastern Germany and the Czech Republic.

A major difference between the United States and much of Europe is that a religious sensitivity and modernity are not mutually exclusive as they are perceived to be in Europe. In Europe there is a "dechristianization" of the person with 40% of Europeans no longer claiming any religious attachment. At the level of culture, this dechristianization is moving towards becoming total while at the level of social structures there remains a Christian influence in architecture, the calendar, etc. Also, it is impossible to understand virtually the whole of the Prado Museum in Madrid, for example, without and knowing Christianity. The concepts of human dignity, justice and mercy which are valued by Europeans have a Christian origin. In another sense, one can speak less of "dechristianization" and more of "dechurching" a concept which Ebertz explained as "a loss of power of the churches." He pointed out that regarding the body and sexuality, the impact of the Church on young educated women is less and less. Ireland was pointed out as an example of where there has been a catastrophic loss of confidence in the Church. Research suggests that for married Catholics in Europe the prohibition on artificial birth control is not at all persuasive and that celibacy

is a source of personal discomfort for priests. All of this contributes to a basic lack of trust in the Church.

Ebertz went on to assert that for the individual in Europe, the rejection of the binding nature of institutions is obvious on a personal level. People believe less and less in a personal God and a growing number of young people belong to no church, not even nominally. In this context, the meaning of life can only be developed by oneself. In a side comment, he noted that this is true of people in the United States and Brazil as well. While the level of religiosity may vary from country to country, there is in Europe a significant level of anticlericalism due to the historical linkage between religious institutions and the centers of power. Ireland, Poland and Italy are countries where popular religiosity and some identification with the Church have been retained, although recent events in Ireland are challenging Catholic identity on the Emerald Isle. Ebertz proposes that in each country there must be a dialogue on the core content of what does being a Catholic mean. The answer will vary among the nations.

The next paper was presented by Jean-Louis Schlegel of Paris. He began by stating his personal view that as a result of globalization, the experience of Europe can be applied to the whole world. He defined secularization as a "social process that began three hundred years ago in Europe" with sources in the medieval world and with roots in the Bible itself. According to Schlegel, secularization occurs when government, culture and art are detached from the Church and become autonomous. He warned against confusing secularization which is a process with secularism which is an ideology. Religious people sometimes make the mistake of condemning secularization by using the term secularism and then perceive the process as an enemy of religion which is not necessarily the case. In the process of secularization, there is a separation of Church and state. This separation took place more gently in northern protestant countries whereas in other countries such as France in 1905 it was felt to be a persecution of the Church. Schlegel used the example of Martin Luther, who left questions of divorce to be handled by the civil authorities unlike in mainly Catholic countries.

The process of secularization has led to an increase in individualism and pluralism as well as the growth of new religions in Europe. Schlegel made the comment that individualism in the U.S. has been somewhat modified by American civil religion, yet like Europe the criteria for truth as something received from outside the individual has lost credibility and that to be true to oneself is the only authentic path. Thus what was once a matter of being "true or false" has been replaced by whether something is "good or bad" for me. He used as an example the idea that fidelity in marriage, once maintained for the good of the child has been replaced by the notion that if the marriage doesn't make me happy then one should leave it. Religion, in a culture that is filled with self-help books, becomes useful only in as much as it promotes personal happiness.

The personal decision to remain a believer or not means that believers are now almost all converts in some sense. In this context, there is a widespread ignorance of religion in the culture although there are few true atheists but many agnostics. Thus in our post-modernity, everything is in flux and all differences are permissible. The only thing forbidden is to forbid anything!

In a pluralistic society, such as typifies much of Europe, there is a prevailing relativism and multiculturalism. In this context, one cannot avoid coming up against another's god. This leads to the risk and the possibility of picking and choosing one's beliefs thus reaffirming the primacy of oneself. This can lead to a big problem in determining one's individual and collective identity. In some cases this can lead to the reemergence of visible signs of religion in the public square, most especially in Europe where religion has been increasingly identified by the young with Islam. Some signs of the recognition of the place of religion in European society include a rejection of any discrimination and the right to be different. Thus in a pluralist society, even the religious person has a place, as long as he or she does not cause suffering to others which is not acceptable and promotes human rights which trump religious heritage. The state simply asks that religious people are loyal to the state, in which case some accommodation in the law can be made. A final point that Schlegel made was the rise of so-called "pseudo-religions" such as sports or art leading to a decline in religion because "people have too many other things to do."

Comparing and Contrasting the European and American Experiences

Bob Schreiter, of the Catholic Theological Union at Chicago, spoke on *Secularizations Compared: Europe and the United States*. He began by pointing out that only 16% of Americans do not believe in God, 40% attend services weekly and 69% would not vote for an atheist for president. The United States has retained its religiosity unlike Europe and Canada (which is much more like Europe than the U.S.) for three basic reasons: (1) The U.S. experienced the enlightenment in a different manner from Europe. The French version, which predominates in Europe was more anticlerical and anti religion. The Church was a target. America, on the other hand, was more heavily influenced by the Scottish enlightenment of Locke, Hume and Adam Smith which was more tolerant toward religion and maintained a deist point of view. This was reflected in the framers of our Constitution who proposed that while the state was to make no law establishing a church there was also to be a freedom of religion in which religion operates without state control. Furthermore, the story of British immigration to America had a strong Biblical overtone in notions of the "City on the Hill" and "Manifest Destiny." Thus, Protestantism is woven into the U.S. story and religion does not have an adversarial relationship to the state. (2) Religion in the United States is entrepreneurial. No church could rely on state support; therefore pastors had to

motivate people to join or risk losing their pulpit. This led churches to be more sensitive to the needs of people. If a church has to depend on membership then pastors will seek out rather than wait for people to come to them as in Europe. (3) Religious faith in the United States has been regularly renewed by “Great Awakenings” – 1730’s Methodism leading to the Revolution; 1840’s and apocalypticism which was sharpened by the split on the Civil War; 1930’s and the Great Depression; and in the 1990’s some posit the “mega church” movement to be another so-called awakening. (4) A constant renewal of religious faith through immigration has also typified the American experience. The first generation finds religion to be a thread of continuity and connection between the country of origin and the new country. By the second or third generation this high level of religious practice declines, but a new wave of immigration renews the religious impulse. (5) American social values have remained more conservative or stable than those of Europe which have shifted considerably since the 1980’s. Thus, religion and social values shape the U.S. to be friendlier to religion. The American experience can thus be summed up as one of renewal, revival and a set of stable values.

Catholicism in the U.S. has been shaped by its history. Roman Catholics constitute the largest single denomination in the U.S. with 24% of the population. The Church is rooted in U.S. history, although only Maryland was majority Roman Catholic in the colonial era, while Catholicism was tolerated in Pennsylvania and Rhode Island. After the hostility in the 19th century to Irish immigrants, from 1924 to 1965 there was a substantial change in the social status of Catholics, largely as a result of the GI Bill in which the sons and daughters of immigrants received a high level of education and the 1960 election of John F. Kennedy. Today, Catholics in the U.S. have the highest level of income and education among all groups. As a result of the experience of anti-Catholicism, there has been a strong Catholic identity. Furthermore, the U.S. Catholic school system has led to 230 Catholic colleges and universities as well as a significant system of socialization.

Schreiter proposed the following lessons for Europe from the United States:

1. Atmosphere in larger culture most important factor, thus Pope Benedict XVI desire to work for a change in cultural attitudes.
2. We are shaped by the narratives of who we were and who we are now. In a post-secular society, religion has to be understood as part of culture.
3. Proactive ministry among immigrants.
4. Religion practiced in non-institutional forms is most effective in reaching especially the young in their religion of choice.

5. Conservative forms which provide identity will attract more than progressive forms of religious faith. Religion becomes more a way of life than a view of life.
6. Religion that appeals to emotions is more vibrant but risks being more ephemeral.

Secularization in Ireland and its Consequences

While there were supposed to be two opportunities to participate in workshops on the situation in specific countries, the length of presentations left time for only one workshop. I chose to go to the Irish workshop. It was sad, in many ways as the Irish are suffering through the consequences of the abuse crisis. Sr. Denise Boyle, currently the executive director of Franciscans International, led the session and explained that secularization in Ireland is a process that has led to religion having less influence over Irish society. There has been a decline in religion as “institution”, more of a focus on “this world”, a move to personal religion and a shift to the scientific and the rational. As a result of various historical factors including wide scale emigration in which those who left brought influences back, the joining of the European Union in the 1970’s and the growth of tertiary (university) education, Ireland underwent fairly rapid secularization. By 1999, only 21% Irish Catholics followed the Church’s moral teaching and 78% their own conscience. This rises to 92% among those 18 – 34 years old. Today 50% of Catholics in Ireland disagree with the church on divorce, contraception and priestly celibacy.

Boyle believes that as a result of the horrors of the abuse crisis, the Church in Ireland today is in a “Kairos” moment. It is creating a far more humble, penitent and honest church. It is or must be a servant church that walks with the people and listens to the People of God for answers. It is a Church that to survive and thrive must be Spirit-led. One older Irish friar recounted how he was at the wedding of the grandson of a classmate. His friend’s wife commented that today “we are not afraid of you anymore” meaning that whereas the clergy once held almost quasi governmental power, today the church is virtually powerless and for many this is a liberation. The Irish provincial told me that at present, a nun in a habit in Dublin is for many a “figure of hate” and likely to be spat upon or cursed. At the time of the symposium, they were waiting for the Ryan Report on the Dublin Archdiocese to be released. As anticipated, the report has been devastating and further diminished the moral authority of the Church. Prior to the report, however, church attendance in Ireland was once again beginning to rise, perhaps as a result of the economic crisis. One wonders what church attendance has been since the horrific revelations of the Ryan Report became public.

The Theological Reflections and the Next Step

Much of the rest of the symposium was devoted to theological examinations of the topic. By this time, I was also suffering from a bad cold. My notes at this point are admittedly sketchier. Some things I took away from this point was German Capuchin Nikilaus Koster's assertion that Francis often lived as if God did not exist and sought meaning in places outside of official churches. Thus, as friars we ought to seek non ecclesiastical work and minister out of a model of Christian friendship. There were some objections to his presentation as well as to the summary by Thomas Diesenberg that seemed to focus on clericalism as the major issue to be addressed. I was later told by Professor Schlegel that the friars in Germany are struggling greatly with the role of lay brothers versus priests, which accounts for this somewhat surprising conclusion. On Friday, all of the members of the symposium were bused to the Reina Sophia Museum to view Picasso's *Guernica*. It was noted that in some ways, museums have replaced churches as the place where people come for experiences of transcendence and meaning.

The final day included an opportunity for personal remarks by selected friars, such as the Dutch Provincial Minister, who reminded us that his province had faced the choice of dying as "grumbly old men" or "happy old men" after trying and failing to find new ways to grow in the Dutch context, they have chosen to die as "happy old men." The final points made by the members of the symposium were the need for:

1. Deeper discussion of the topic of secularization
2. How can we take this experience forward?
3. Development of a Franciscan Theology of Secularization
4. More discussion among one another on the topic
5. The development of a culture of communication which permits honest and open dialogue.

Closing Thoughts and Questions

Below are some questions that I have thought about since returning from the Symposium:

1. Spain is in the process of unifying four provinces into one province. Germany is uniting it's two provinces into one. The Order is dying in the Netherlands and France. Given the secularization of Europe and the strong current of secularism on the continent, what will it mean for us to belong to an Order

- that outside of the United States may have many fewer European members and be predominantly located in the developing world?
2. Religion in the United States has been entrepreneurial. How do we continue to “market” our ministries and our fraternity while remaining prophetic?
 3. How much are the young in America drawn to traditional forms of religious life and “institutional” ministries and how much are they drawn to less “institutional” forms of ministry? How then do we resolve the tension between our traditional and “institutional” ministerial presence and appeal to the young who if they are more drawn to less “institutional” forms?
 4. How strongly are we as friars influenced by individualism, personal happiness and the authority of the self and what tensions does that create within the province and between the friars and church authority? How do we resolve or live in a life-giving way with these tensions?
 5. It has been said that elites within the United States share many of the characteristics of the European form of secularism. How much are we as Capuchins affected by the “dechristianization” and “dechurching” that may be present in our reality?

While attending the symposium, I stayed at the Capuchin friary of Jesus de Medinaceli. During the Spanish Civil War, seven friars from that community were executed by the Republican forces. In the church there is a statue of Jesus that is an object of much popular devotion. On Friday, there were hundreds of people lined up around the block for the opportunity to reverence the sacred image. Across the street from the church were many others gathered outside the headquarters of the Communist Party of Spain. I rather enjoyed watching the spectacle of Catholics and Communists each gathered outside their respective places of devotion. Somewhere in there is a metaphor for the divisions between the sacred and the secular that characterize Spain and much of the West in our day.

I want to thank the province for the opportunity to participate in the assembly. Merely being with friars from all over the world was a fraternal experience that I will not soon forget. Whether this symposium will have any lasting impact on the Order, particularly in Europe, remains to be seen. As an opportunity to listen to substantive presentations and engage in stimulating conversations it was unsurpassed.

Friars interested in reading some of the reports (in the original languages) and viewing some videos and pictures of the Symposium may go to the official website at: <http://symposium2009.wordpress.com>.