

Article

Renewing Christian Witness in Europe—A Proposal

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Abstract: The transmission of the Christian faith is severely broken in many western European countries. This does not bode well for the future of Christianity in these regions. In the face of this situation, Christians might be tempted either to “retreat” from the world and foster sectarian communities or to more or less completely “merge” with contemporary society. Both of these options are erroneous and amount to a distortion of what a genuine Christian witness might look like in the coming decades. The present essay attempts to draw some of the contours of what such a Christian witness may look like.

Keywords: witness; Christianity; gospel; secularization; beauty; apologetics

1. Introduction

The decline of Christianity in western countries, especially in western Europe, is impressive in its breadth and rapidity. Ecclesial institutions that looked fairly solid or sturdy several decades ago are now in a fragile—or worse—situation. Surely, this process is not new—it is even possible to trace it over the past centuries—but it appears to have gone into overdrive in the past half century.¹ It is no wonder that many are asking themselves what to do about this. How should churches respond to this situation? Are various churches reflecting together (rather than each one in its own corner) about what is happening before our eyes? Some (regional) churches are so struck by the rapid societal change that they look like a headless chicken running around with no direction, while others are like deer staring with frozen bodies at a headlight that is blinding them. Meanwhile, theologians often go about their usual business, pursuing their exegetical, historical, systematic, ethical, and practical work. We need a wake-up call—urgently. No single person, no single church, will be able to come up with a not-too-inadequate answer to the current situation. *Now* is the time to embark on frank discussions across church traditions, to face the distinct, current challenges that are before us on our various continents or regions, including western Europe. One of the basic attitudes which will be required of us is one that does not shy away from acknowledging the various ways in which Christians themselves, as churches and as persons, have caused so many of our contemporaries to wish to leave Christianity behind as much as possible, as well as the ways in which Christianity itself, in its various instantiations, contains some of the seeds of our secular age.²

2. Two Unhelpful Reactions

What kind of reactions do we see so far in the face of these massive, indeed seismic, shifts? First, we see a reaction that is best described as . . . “reactionary.” We see trends that French-speaking sociologists describe as “*repli identitaire*”: a process of “circling the wagons” within the bounds of one’s ecclesial “identity,” often with an obvious rigidity and fixity and a certain lack of historical consciousness, which usually leads to a lack of awareness concerning the historical particularity of the kind of “identity” one has adopted.³ In other words, in this way certain Protestants erect or elevate particular “markers” of Protestant identity and promulgate such markers as decisive aspects of being Protestant in the 21st century. In certain cases, these markers are not merely Protestant, but more specifically Lutheran, Methodist, Reformed, Baptist, or Pentecostal. This throws us back to



Citation: Chalamet, Christophe. 2023. Renewing Christian Witness in Europe—A Proposal. *Religions* 14: 391. <https://doi.org/10.3390/rel14030391>

Academic Editor: Christine Schliesser

Received: 14 February 2023

Revised: 7 March 2023

Accepted: 9 March 2023

Published: 14 March 2023



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the inner-Protestant debates and polemics of past centuries, i.e., in a time (especially in the 17th century) when many Lutherans thought it was better to be Roman Catholic than to be Reformed (or vice versa). This process of “circling the wagons” seems to be particularly visible among Roman Catholics: reactionary Catholics are easily spotted through their use of Latin in liturgies; special clothing for members of the clergy, as well as for the laity, such as mantillas; and also through their opposition of current societal trends, such as gay marriage. Outward signs of Catholic “identity” abound among them. The goal is to reclaim, as in the days of Christendom, a strong presence in contemporary society to maintain core ethical values, which are seen as immutable and indispensable for the cohesion and health of society.

At the other end of the spectrum, one finds pastors, theologians, and members of the faithful who tend to downplay some of the specifics, as well as some of the (political, social, and cultural) implications of Christian living and Christian faith, keeping it “private” so as not to make too many waves in cultures that are becoming rapidly more secular. Progressive Christians are obviously much more at risk of falling into the trap of this second trend than of the first one. Whereas the camp of “*repli identitaire*” (of “circling the wagons”) does not hesitate to be heard—preferably loudly—and seen to be counter-cultural (since culture is seen as devilish), the second progressive camp is happy not to be noticed too much. Desires of conquest of secular society, on the one hand, or giving up on a clear Christian witness because of modern society’s “conquest” over us, on the other, cannot be the two options at hand⁴.

These two ways of handling rapid and radical change are, for different reasons, equally problematic. The first option is predicated upon fear of change and nostalgia for a (dreamed up) Christian past, an attitude that is forbidden to Christians or, better, that Christians ought to have left behind them for good once they have embraced the gospel, i.e., the work of reconciliation proclaimed and accomplished by Jesus Christ and entrusted to all his disciples gathered as his body, all the way up to our own time (2 Cor. 5-6).⁵ Fear is a bad counselor, as the saying goes. Unless we wish to accelerate the dismantling of Christian churches in the West and elsewhere, it should go without saying that our vision for the church’s witness today should not be grounded upon fear. The second option is not helpful either since it merely accommodates contemporary culture, embarking on a process of preemptive self-secularizing. The salt has lost its taste (Matt 5:13); in some cases, it has been transformed into something sweet. Proponents of the second option have little to say to our world as it is and little to embody within it since, for the most part, they have relinquished the very notion of a Christian “witness” in contemporary culture.

3. In Search of a Third Way

We urgently need to think hard about the possible contours of a third way that steers clear of both the ossifying and the diluting of Christian witness. Thankfully, a number of voices have arisen from various church traditions, searching in this direction. I rely on some of them in what follows.

Here are some of the key characteristics of the third way we might wish to pursue.

3.1. Centered on the Gospel—Not on the Crisis or the Breakdown of Transmission

Those who wish to witness to the gospel in today’s world need to be enduringly concerned with and shaped by the gospel rather than, first and foremost, being concerned with its transmission and the difficulties of that transmission. We live in a world determined and fascinated to a significant extent by quantitative data and a quantitative drive. The mindset of “the more the better” is prevalent in many corners of our world, including within our churches, which are never immune to the world they inhabit (for better and for worse). It is very easy to (wholly or partly) fall into this quantitative trap, but this is a significant mistake, for this means putting the cart before the horse. Everything in this third way, even our (at times, legitimate) concerns with “growth” and “numbers” deserve to be subordinated to the gospel. Nothing should replace the gospel as the focus of it all.

Otherwise, we risk thinking about transmission while forgetting *what* it is we hope—or we believe we are called—to transmit, and our contemporary fascination and obsession with the quantitative aspects of (almost) everything is not confronted with a radical limit when, in fact, it urgently needs to be confronted again and again with such a limit.

My hypothesis is the following one: It is not those who primarily or—worse—exclusively focus on transmission who end up transmitting anything of enduring value. It is a somewhat counter-intuitive hypothesis, I admit, but I do stand by it. It is only those who center their attention, again and again, on the gospel who might—no one can guarantee that they “will” do so, but they “might”—transmit something that lasts, something that (hopefully) is intrinsically related to the gospel.

This point is crucial. Much hinges upon it. It is only if we are rooted in the gospel, as well as shaped by it, that we may reflect something of the radical humanity, the goodness, and the claim that both inhabits it and flows from it. However, being rooted in and shaped by the gospel is a difficult journey, certainly not an easy, superficial path. It means acknowledging and realizing “the breadth and length and height and depth” (Eph 3:18) of God’s love for the world, as well as the judgment of the world that this love entails. It means living out of this treasure while remaining perfectly clear about ourselves and our Christian communities as clay jars (2 Cor 4:7).

One of the great risks of our churches’ witness in the face of the current crisis is to be so concerned with their own survival that all they have to offer to the world is their worries about their future instead of the joy that comes from the gospel and that “is” the gospel. Churches cannot be communities “whose lives seem like Lent without Easter” (Pope Francis 2013, §6).⁶ This, of course, only accelerates and precipitates the decline we are seeing in many western (and perhaps not just western) countries. Such a decline, if it were to be accelerated in this way, would not be something worth lamenting for very long. For these dying churches would have ceased being what they were meant to be all along.

3.2. *The Beauty of the Gospel*

At the core of the gospel, there is a certain paradoxical beauty, which is like a core of pure energy waiting to irradiate the world. The beauty of Jesus’ parables, of the kinds of gestures that are being placed front and center as images of genuine human living (e.g., some of the most celebrated parables in the gospels, such as the Good Samaritan or the Prodigal Son in Luke 10 and 15, respectively), are an illustration of this. There is an astonishing beauty in the way Jesus encounters people, especially “sinners.” Do we ever overcome the shock of realizing that the people Jesus seeks contact with are not the elite, the well-to-do, or the scholars, but prostitutes, tax collectors, and lepers—people who are seen as despicable by the majority of society. All of this expresses the counter-intuitive and surprising but real beauty of the gospel. This beauty of the gospel, of Jesus’ acts and words, is a witness to God’s own beauty, as manifested in the gracious, prevenient embrace of a father to his estranged son who has returned (an embrace famously and beautifully rendered by Rembrandt) or in the gesture of compassion of the Samaritan to the wounded person on the side of the road.⁷ It is a beauty, moreover, that finds paradoxical, scandalous expression in the figure of a crucified human being, i.e., under its contrary (*sub contrario*).

How can Christian churches today testify to this surprising beauty? How might they reflect even the smallest amount of it or somehow exemplify it? Churches with rich traditions of aestheticism in their worship services and liturgies might wish to remember the great simplicity to which the gospel calls us. We do not need to “overdo” it; we *should* not overdo it, even as differing sensibilities might lead to a variety of aesthetic options, some more baroque, others more austere and restrained. Other churches, who seemingly pay little attention to the beauty of the liturgy or of spaces in which worship occurs, should start paying attention without relinquishing simplicity if this is part of their tradition. Combining beauty with simplicity might be a fruitful way to move forward.

Rather than positing an intrinsic link between Christian apologetics and languages—as if we could single-handedly produce faith in others through our discourses—should we

not expand our way of thinking so that apologetics no longer is seen as a propositional affair? Returning to the two extraordinary parables in Luke's gospel, should we not realize that both the Samaritan and the father of the prodigal son do not make long, impressive speeches but, instead, simply show compassion through their acts and, thus, through their bodies to the one who is urgently in need of it.

Thinking on and considering the beauty of the gospel may help us gain a broader understanding of what is expected of us: not just words, not just homilies, even though these remain indispensable and require great attention, but the kind of life-changing human contact that Jesus practiced throughout his brief ministry. The best type of apologetics may occur through simple human gestures that manifest the kind of friendship and care that characterize God's own relationship to the world.

The gospel presents us with a beauty that is so astonishing, so powerful that we sense it does not quite come from a worldly source. The gospel's beauty, even as it encounters us, is transcendent. Should churches seek not to hopelessly capture, but to reflect some of that beauty? Should they seek, as best they can, to let this beauty radiate with the least artificiality possible? How may they begin doing this?

It seems to me that we need a sort of contest and most certainly an ongoing dialogue across churches as we try to answer these questions. Some of us have seen various models of witnessing to the beauty of the gospel. Without a doubt, some of these models impact our way of thinking about this. The danger of an agenda such as "renewing Christian witness" has to do with the refusal to envision a (selective) plurality of approaches that need to be allowed to unfold in order to be tested. At the same time, some approaches have been tested for several decades now and offer very important insights into the fecundity (or lack thereof) of these approaches. We have seen academic Christian theologies that seek to cancel or subordinate all others around them. This was a recurring feature of 20th-century Christian theology. Shall we repeat this error in the field of witnessing and imagine that there is one single way of witnessing to the gospel in our own time?

3.3. *The Gospel as Both Gift and Claim*

The beauty of the gospel is not merely aesthetic and leisurely "enjoyment": it calls us to the task of justice. Justice itself is part and parcel of the beauty of the gospel. One could say that the beauty (as well as the joy) of the gospel is found in relations that have been restored or revived. These relations may still bear the marks of the previous breakdown, but they are now healed.

A key dimension of the gospel is the co-inherence within it of gift and claim (the German language speaks of both "*Zuspruch*," the affirmation, and "*Anspruch*," the claim)—in that order. Encountering and receiving the gift, if the gift is indeed the gospel, cannot occur without sensing a claim that is directed at us: the claim to somehow live according to the gift as best as we humanly can. The fact that the gospel is not merely a gift but also a claim means that it is not simply given for our leisurely enjoyment. It is given so that we may live from it and so that we may "live it out" in our daily existence.

Some churches are very good at emphasizing the "gift" side of the gospel while being wary of mentioning the "claim" side. This is true especially of historical or mainline churches—those whose proclivity is to adjust quite a bit to society at large. Other churches are fond of stressing the "claim" part at the risk of downplaying the fundamental "gift" dimension. To them, being a Christian means quite specific things about how to dress, how to take part in the weekly life of the congregation, how to read and meditate on Scripture with regularity, and so forth. We are back to the two ways that I mentioned at the beginning, and we are, in fact, touching on a feature of the Scriptures themselves, which at times stress the promissory nature of God's intention for God's creation (cf. Gen 9 and the narrative of the covenant in that chapter) and that, elsewhere, make sure to express the obligations that God's gift of freedom entails for God's people (cf. Lev 26 for a stunning, even shocking, imprecation or warning addressed by God to the Israelites). Elsewhere still, we see a sort of

balance between God's covenantal declaration or promise, on the one hand, and the claim that falls upon the people of Israel as God's people.⁸

The search for a "third way" beyond the impasse must include a combination of both the "gift" side and the "claim" side of the gospel. It is because the gospel is a "gift" that it also includes a "claim" on us: not merely on us individually, but on us as a Christian community. What does this mean specifically or concretely? It is impossible to answer this question in a general manner. Rather, the point is to ponder, as congregations or church communities, the kinds of commitments that we may be called to take on in light of God's commitment to justice rather than chaos, God's commitment to service rather than domination or coercion.

In their witness to contemporary culture, churches should not proclaim a truncated gospel, either a word of affirmation or a word claiming people. They should testify and embody, as the clay jars that they are, the whole gospel.

3.4. *The Surprise of the Gospel*

Many people in western countries imagine they know Christianity. They assume that they are familiar with it. This is perhaps one of the great chances with regard to churches' "cultural witness" today—despite the fact that it is because people think they know Christianity that they look elsewhere for "meaning," especially religious meaning or meaning for their own lives. Why might this be a chance? Because so many people only have a very superficial view of Christianity. What they think they know is, in fact, often a caricature of Christianity. If they are led to discover the living core of Christianity, namely Jesus Christ, his message, his deeds, and his presence through memory and liturgical celebration, will they not be astonished—as we too are—by what they discover?

The problem is that churches' cultural witness often confirms the superficial prejudices of so many people today. It too rarely calls these prejudices into question. We need sharpness and acuity here, we need salt, and yet what is offered is all too often dullness and sweetness. How did we manage to transform the subversive force of the gospel into something so inoffensive and harmless, into something so boring and dumb? Why is the church's proclamation of the gospel, given the radical surprise that the gospel brings forth, so void of surprise(s)? I do not have a good answer to this question, except perhaps by returning to the "clay jar" metaphor, but one striking feature of church life as I know it where I live might help us understand why the situation is dire.

3.5. *Leaving Theology Behind?*

In his recent book, *Churches and the Crisis of Decline: A Hopeful, Practical Ecclesiology for a Secular Age*, Andrew Root lucidly points out a characteristic of contemporary church life that finds a clear confirmation also in western Europe. He writes the following:

Resources, not the Holy Spirit, have been imagined as the source of life. In this drive for resources, pastors and congregational leaders have been happy to shed dogmatic language, creedal commitments, and theological visions so they might be light enough to move fast, chasing down resources and therefore (presumably) life. As much as dogmatic statements have felt disconnected from the life of congregations, congregational leaders have been happy to throw off the concepts, commitments, and cumbersome vocabularies of the dogmatic in order to go fast in harvesting resources and assuring themselves of life. (Root 2002, p. 16)

This is a perceptive diagnosis. Christians themselves have, to a certain extent, given up on the very language that has been in use for centuries in order to proclaim the Christian message. Why did they do this? Probably because they started noticing that the traditional themes of Christian promulgation were falling on deaf ears. Indeed, some Christians have been and are still searching for a new language, one that does not repulse people who stand far away from Christianity and church life. On this question, there is a stark divide between various options, some that maintain traditional language (including the word "God"), and others that replace even key terms with others ("the Source of all that is").

We see lurking here the situation with which I opened above: on the one hand, we see people who tend to continue to use, more or less massively, the “traditional” language of Christianity. On the other end of the spectrum, there are those who are working hard to avoid using this language for the sake of new formulations that, far from rebutting people, may help them see what is vital in Christianity.

Regardless of what we choose (and it could well be that both of these options, as I am presenting them, are problematic), leaving theology behind is a terrible mistake. I am not thinking here of the kind of academic theology—which is a good chunk of it, and a legitimate one at that—that thrives on erudition and that is mostly concerned with speaking to its peers. I am thinking, rather, of the kind of academic theology that is interested above all in interpreting what is vital about the Christian message, its real “treasure.” Theology in the 21st century, as in past centuries, is an indispensable ally in the work of realizing what kind of treasure the gospel is, as well as what kinds of surprises and challenges it contains. Conversely, Christian theologians should be exploring among themselves the possible contours of Christianity and the church in the coming decades, i.e., in an age in which all things institutional, especially with regard to religion (but also with regard to politics), are often viewed with suspicion.

3.6. *A Culture of Listening—And Then Acting*

What seems to not work at all, at least in today’s western culture, is the kind of crude proselytism most of us have encountered in our life. It is not merely by publicly preaching a watered-down version of the message on a street corner that people become Christians—although that may happen, of course. Nor is it by seeking “a slavish and unholy submission to earthly power” that Christians render witness to God’s reconciliation (Orthodox Ecumenical Patriarchate 2020, “For the Life of the World”, §13).

Anyone interested in the renewal of Christian witness may need to consider the importance of *listening* rather than proclaiming or talking. In a marvelous little book that is as accessible as it is deep, Rowan Williams (2014, p. 21) suggested that the Christian life is “a listening life.” The difficulty here lies in part in what or whom we should listen to. Certainly, the Christian life entails listening to God’s Word. I would say this is the first allegiance, as well as the one enduring allegiance, for Christians. However, listening, if it is a genuinely Christian act, must be twofold: it must also include a listening to the world as it is. Not only that, but the two kinds of listening must stand in close correlation. This is the real challenge: maintaining these two acts of listening together, letting the one permeate the other and vice versa, without losing sight of the ultimate criterion or normativity we find in God’s Word over the world.

If we consider again the first two types of “presence” to contemporary society that I alluded to at the beginning, we see a first type that is so focused on listening to God’s Word (or to a certain understanding of God’s Word) that it stands in direct opposition to the contemporary world, which is seen as the enemy. Listening to God’s Word implies a “no” to the world, purely and simply. We then see a second type of “presence,” one that is so interested in what the world looks like today that the ways in which the gospel shed its own light on this world no longer are a real concern.⁹ In other words, it does not suffice to “listen” *either* to God’s Word *or* to the contemporary world. The two must be articulated, without forfeiting the normativity of God’s Word over the views that abound and dominate in this world. A genuine Christian witness to the gospel in our contemporary situation might need to rely on the kind of twin-listening act I am suggesting.

What, then, about “acting”? Does it come as an addition to the listening part? In some cases, probably—even though listening clearly already is an act. It seems to me that the most significant acting may, in some important cases, resemble the listening dimension in its twofold attention (vs. God *and* the world). What I mean is this: Christian “acting” is at times particularly “significant” (i.e., etymologically speaking, pointing toward something) when it is visibly connected to a liturgical setting. Here, the “acting” is not merely a possible implication of the double act of “listening”: it is part and parcel of that act. The Christian

community, as it celebrates its liturgy, is at once a community seeking to listen to God, as well as, at some other level, to the world, and thus seeking to act in a certain way—acting not just during the liturgy, but also on its way out from the liturgy into daily life (of which the liturgy is a part, such as other moments we set apart in our lives). All of this to say that the kind of Christian speaking that we see, especially in western churches, is usually *not* compelling to people of our time who know Christianity culturally. People know what to expect, and they (unfortunately) usually receive what they expect . . . People know that Christians make speeches and proclaim a particular message. Can Christians surprise these people by not talking to them but by listening in front of them (to God’s Word, as well as to the world), by praying but by singing also?

3.7. A Christian “Style”

Christians should pursue a distinct style or—better—a distinct set of styles, away from morosity, away from artificial or forced (inauthentic) joy (such as the one we see in pictures of certain televangelists or pastors . . .). Without mimicking Jesus of Nazareth, but instead by being shaped by his Word, their calling is to be open to encounters with others, including with “very different” others, on behalf of their Lord.

The church itself should be a gathering of people who are very different from one another and, yet, who know they are gathered by a message and a Lord who binds them together.¹⁰

Bonhoeffer’s (1998, pp. 281–82) insights remain important:

If we now ask about where faith ‘experiences the church’ most purely, then the answer is that this certainly does not happen in communities that are based on romantic feelings of solidarity between kindred spirits. It rather takes place where there is no other link between the individuals than that of the community that exists within the church [kirchliche Gemeinschaft]; where Jew and Greek, pietist and liberal, come into conflict, and nevertheless in unity confess their faith, come together to the Lord’s Table, and intercede for one another in prayer. It is precisely in the context of everyday life that church is believed and experienced. The reality of the church is understood not in moments of spiritual exaltation, but within the routine and pains of daily life, and within the context of ordinary worship. Everything else merely obscures the actual state of affairs. [. . .] Our age is not short on experiences, but on *faith*.¹¹

Bonhoeffer’s words are striking and sobering in a context in which, especially among anglophone Protestants, as well as in many other corners of worldwide Christianity, “spiritual exaltation” has become an end in itself. Elsewhere in his dissertation (written at the tender age of 21!), Bonhoeffer denounces churches that spend much of their energy “lament[ing] about the world’s indifference” (ibid., p. 252).¹²

The set of styles that Christians may wish (or may be called) to adopt might well be centered on the coming of God. The Christian life is indeed “a listening life,” but it is also—and this is certainly related to the “listening” part—an expectant life. Not in the sense that it “expects” certain things, as if these things were merited or guaranteed to come, but rather in the sense that the Christian community awaits her Lord and, with him, justice and peace for all creation (“your kingdom *come!*”). It is because the Christian community awaits the Lord who brings justice and peace that it is dedicated, already now, in the face of deep rifts and conflicts among human beings, as well as between human beings and creation, to the quest of justice and peace. The vision of what is to come determines not only the kind of hope that Christians harbor, but also the kinds of actions that they enact and promote.

Certainly, Christians have repeatedly pursued certain styles of life that directly contradict this vision. To this day, we see Christians, including some with major ecclesial responsibilities, betraying the picture we find in the Beatitudes, for instance, concerning the “peacemakers.” The history of Christianity is filled with betrayals, big and small, of the gospel. There are some good reasons why much of the west has turned its back on

Christianity and its institutions in these past two or three centuries. It is important to say this, for it may help us steer clear of any nostalgia.

What we need today is not particularly heroic individual figures, i.e., figures who tend to make us forget the “clay jars” that they too are, but communities who are aware of having been gathered by Jesus Christ, not for the sake of feeling good among themselves (even though that is permitted), but for the sake of living according to God’s Word and, in this way, witnessing together to God’s life-transforming message. How exactly is this message life-transforming? In what ways and in which directions does it transform human existence? This should become clear to people who come into contact with these communities, despite these communities’ intrinsic weaknesses and frailty. The gospel’s *humanizing* force should become more readily visible as people look at Christian communities. Unfortunately, it is too often the opposite that people see.

4. Final Remarks

Where does this leave us? It leaves us with a clear calling. The contours, as well as the depths, of the Christian calling are always worth pondering anew. First of all, there is a “good news” that wakes up those who hear it and place their trust in it (“Sleeper, awake!” one reads in Eph 5:14). How can the good news be presented in such a way that, even (and, I would say, preferably) without too many spoken words, it effects this “waking up”? Our liturgies much too often put people to sleep rather than wake them up! They offer cheap, superficial, “automated” consolation rather than a real word of forgiveness that also challenges us for the days ahead.

How are we going to “jump start” the transmission of the faith, a transmission that is utterly broken in many western European countries? I actually doubt that it is possible to “jump start” it. The crisis is very deep indeed. What then can we do? The only answer I see is this: we need to foster communities of faith, even small ones, that know how to draw their main resources from the gospel and that center on the meditation on and the study of God’s Word, on fellowship, and on communal prayer with persevering fervor and a joyful earnestness, without severing themselves from society but looking for ways to be in close contact with today’s world. Far from grandiose plans, let us begin locally, and let us share experiences from various local communities that are trying to live from the wellsprings of the Christian faith without leaving civil society behind. The aim of these communities may not primarily be the *transmission* of the faith; it may instead be the actual *living* of the faith in deep humility. It may be these communities that, eventually, become places where the joyful, communal attempt to live the Christian faith leads others to be attracted by it.¹³

In his book on the Sabbath, Abraham Heschel (1951, p. 96) wrote these words:

The historian [Leopold von] Ranke claimed that every age is equally near to God. Yet Jewish tradition claims that there is a hierarchy of moments within time, that all ages are not alike. Man may pray to God equally at all places, but God does not speak to man equally at all times. At a certain moment, for example, the spirit of prophecy departed from Israel.

Has “the spirit of prophecy departed” from contemporary Christianity? Certainly not, if one looks at the situation, even within western Europe, although some important theological voices have claimed during this past half century that, indeed, God has ceased speaking to the world and that it is the duty of Christians to forcefully voice their protest to God in order to compel God to speak again (Ellul 1973).¹⁴ I am not convinced by this thesis. Be that as it may, ecclesial institutions, especially in western Europe, are at pains to embody the “spirit of prophecy.” I suspect the situation will become more difficult in these coming years before it “gets better” (if at all). The present paper argues that “retreat” from the world in order to foster an “antagonistic” counter-model is just as unhelpful as the kind of diluting of Christian identities and self-censorship that we see among more liberal Christians (here, some cleaning before our own doors is in order within modern Christian theology).

Christians have “talked” a lot, throughout their history, often on the basis of a deep listening of God’s Word. It could be that their “talking” should become briefer, more concentrated on what is most vital and essential about the gospel, and always grounded in not just a personal but a communal listening to God’s Word. This should not preclude the kind of “boldness” of speech that is recommended in the New Testament (e.g., Acts 4:13 and 4:31; 2 Cor 3:12), but let us remember that Jesus too was a man of relatively few words during his ministry. Let us search together for creative, surprising ways to render witness to the joy-filled, life-giving message of God in our contemporary world!

Funding: This research received no external funding.

Institutional Review Board Statement: Not applicable.

Informed Consent Statement: Not applicable.

Data Availability Statement: Not applicable.

Conflicts of Interest: The author declares no conflict of interest.

Notes

- ¹ The literature on this global and complex phenomenon is vast. Among the best studies, taking the long view and avoiding superficial interpretations, is Charles Taylor’s (2007). I cannot engage the literature on this topic in the present article.
- ² See, in this regard, Friedrich Gogarten’s study (Gogarten 1953). For a recent analysis, see Volker Leppin, “Friedrich Gogarten’s Theology of Secularization,” in Stievermann and Zachman (2018).
- ³ See, e.g., Pouliot and Fortin (2013), as well as the works of French sociologist Danielle Hervieu-Léger (Hervieu-Léger 1993).
- ⁴ David Novak (2005, p. 195), the well-known North American Jewish scholar and rabbi, raises the “question of how faithful Jews and faithful Christians can enter into civil society and survive there intact, let alone flourish, without, however, either conquering civil society or being conquered by it.” For a recent sociological account of contemporary evangelical desires (and plans) for the conquest of power, see (Gonzalez 2014). One of the key documents from the June 2016 (nearly Pan-)Orthodox Council of Crete explicitly rejected these kinds of compromises of the church in service of the State. See “For the Life of the World” (Orthodox Ecumenical Patriarchate 2020), § 13: “It is, in fact, very much in the interest of the Church that the institutional association of Christianity with the interests of the state be as tenuous as possible, not because the Church seeks to withdraw from society at large, but because it is called to proclaim the Gospel to the world and to serve God in all things, uncompromised by alliance with worldly ambitions. The Orthodox Church, then, should be thankful that God has providentially allowed for the reduction of the Church’s political enfranchisement in most of the lands of ancient Christendom, so that it may more faithfully conduct and promote her mission to all nations and persons.” It is a huge catastrophe for our common Christian witness (not just for Orthodox Christians worldwide) to see Patriarch Kirill’s blind endorsement of Vladimir Putin’s foolish war of aggression.
- ⁵ For the theme of “reconciliation” as the “sum” of the gospel and the heart of the Christian faith, see Karl Barth’s (1956), as well as, more recently and on the basis of insights from Dietrich Bonhoeffer among others, de Gruchy (2002).
- ⁶ Pope Francis (2013, §10) later states: “[. . .] an evangelizer must never look like someone who has just come back from a funeral!”.
- ⁷ Among the most interesting studies on beauty in relation to theology, see this book: Zeindler (1993).
- ⁸ For a concise and detailed study of the three types of covenant formulas (1. “I will be your God”; 2. “you will be my people”; 3. “I will be your God, and you will be my people”) that are present in the Hebrew Bible and their interpretation, see (Rendtorff 1998).
- ⁹ Or, to put it like Pope Francis (2013, §79): “many pastoral workers [. . .] conceal their Christian identity and convictions.” This is quite pervasive in my own region (French-speaking Switzerland), where Roman Catholic hospital chaplains, for instance, prefer not to show their identity as priests (in certain cases) and prefer to be referred to as “spiritual care” specialists (“*accompagnants spirituels*”) rather than as “chaplains.”
- ¹⁰ Among recent voices who have emphasized Jesus’ practice of radical hospitality (his “*sainteté hospitalière*”) as an important element of theology today, see (Theobald 2007, especially I:59–69, 101–2, 104) (for the expression “*sainteté hospitalière*”).
- ¹¹ Bonhoeffer’s emphasis. The original German version is as follows: (Bonhoeffer 2005, p. 192).
- ¹² In the German edition, p. 173.
- ¹³ There is a well-known Christian community in western Europe that has defied all odds, as far as I can see, with regard to the transmission of the Christian faith. This place is the Taizé community in Burgundy (France). The entire present article is informed by a friendship with this community, whose pastoral work since the 1950s and, especially, since the 1960s has been simply extraordinary, without any intention during the first decades of its existence (since the mid-1940s) to become such an important “lighthouse” for so many people all around the world. Have theologians and other people interested in the transmission of the faith paid sufficient attention to the ways in which the faith is “presented” and lived out in Taizé? I am convinced theologians have not yet performed this work in any adequate manner.

- ¹⁴ The original French title is as follows: (Ellul 1973). Ellul's bold thesis was criticized by another distinguished French Protestant theologian, André Dumas, who wondered how Ellul could speak in such a way about God's silence. Cf. Elisabetta Ribet's (2018) unpublished PhD dissertation.

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