

Believing and Belonging in Europe in the 21st Century

KEYNOTE TALK

by **Dr Helena Vilaça** of the University of Portugal

Summarised by Kit Harbottle

Dr Vilaça is a respected academic who researches the sociology of religion. She is also a local preacher in the Methodist Church in Portugal. Her passion for religious pluralism is rooted in her experience of being in a minority and seeing other children who did not share the predominant Catholic faith also experiencing discrimination.

Dr Vilaça pointed out that the recent British census results are part of a Europe wide trend of decline in religious affiliation. Since the Second World War churches across Europe have declined. There has been a shift from a position in which most people were raised in a Christian social context and there was a social system embracing religion,

politics, law, science, culture, arts and work. Now they are all in different "bubbles". Even religious believers often do not make



decisions in other aspects of their life based on their faith.

Europe has a strong Christian cultural heritage, and there are memories of the historical power of state churches, which was not always used well. Now secular elites, such as those who control the media, are on the rise. Sociologists disagree as to how far Europe can still be said to be Christian.

The position does vary across Europe. Dr Vilaça showed some interesting maps (Source: European Values Study website) of measures of believing and belonging in different countries. Belief in a personal God remains very high in some countries such as Poland, Italy, Ireland and Portugal. She noted that Spain, in contrast to Portugal, is becoming very secular. In Nordic countries people still think they belong to a church (the historical national church, i.e. Lutheran) but rarely attend and Christian core beliefs are very low (believing without belonging), whereas in Poland 75% of the population still attend at least monthly.

Dr Vilaça cited the work of the academic Grace Davie. The model of "vicarious religion" through historical churches is appearing in both Protestant and Catholic countries. (This sees churches as a "public utility" where a core number in a parish who do go to church are seen by others as worshipping and believing "for them"). There is a shift from obligation to consumption as a free choice, although not yet a "religious market" in Europe.

Dr Vilaça disagrees with secular sociologists who say the trend is to a secularised continent. Christianity has a lot of vitality in other parts of the world, and some Christian groups are now increasing within Europe. Inside some denominations are both

dying and growing congregations. The key is that the latter know how to communicate the gospel to the modern world.

The new Europe is one of mobility, migration and diversity, with people free to choose as to religion. This is not an easy context but should be seen as an opportunity for Christians. Society still has prejudice against churches because of past connection to political power. Churches have internalised the secular model of the world and accept decline as normal. But Europe is exceptional within the world picture of growing churches. It is possible to have modernity without religious decline. Religion need not be in conflict with science and development.

The challenges of the 21st century are not so different from those facing first century Christians. In an unsympathetic context, they shared everything and modelled love. They also had the courage to say what they believed and to share the gospel, competing with other beliefs. Social projects by churches may not stop decline if they do not also communicate their message. Paul engaged in public debate. In democratic countries religion must be accepted in the public sphere. British Christians must have the courage to speak out and not to let the gospel message be confined to the private sphere.

The talk was followed by a lively question session where topics included examples of churches compromised by political power, learning from the growing confidence of other faiths in communicating, and lessons from vital congregations such as lay involvement, small groups and worship adapted to the context.

Europe and the Struggle for Global Justice

KEYNOTE TALK

The Bishop of Derby,
Alastair Redfern

Summarised by John Pritchard

What is Europe?

A geographical area, a political/ economic entity, the birthplace and graveyard of the nation state? A case could be made for each of these, but I argue that Europe is a particular kind of spiritual reality. Its DNA is derived from India, where nascent Hinduism saw everything as connected; from Persian culture, differentiating strongly between good and evil; from the Jewish concern with chastity and food – appetites which need cleansing and renewing; from the Greek culture, which saw things not in terms of light and dark but graduated shades; and from the Roman world, which boasted of many peoples and languages but one institutional framework – the Empire.

These different components of Europe's DNA have been in contention/negotiation through history. Three stages of negotiation can be discerned: *Discussion*, which uncovers Difference, and once people acknowledge their *Differences*, they can move on to *Develop* together. The post-1945 emergence of the EU provides an example: In 1950 Robert Schumann called for Europe to become a supranational community, because "justice is bigger than nation states". He recognised that justice is wider than Europe's frontiers too – and today Europe is the world's largest donor of overseas development aid, although via so many agencies that its delivery is incoherent and its effects dissipated.

I mention four particular issues:

Tax Justice: Companies which avoid paying tax harm the economy, and this is particularly harmful in producer countries. An Accra brewery with a turnover of £28 million paid less tax in four years than the woman selling beer at the stall by the gate! Yet most countries operate scrupulously within the law; the problem lies with taxation policies. We need to challenge governments to be more transparent and robust, and stand up to corporate executives – and this will require countries to act together, not singly.

Inequality: 75% of those classified as "poor" live in middle-income countries; a high proportion are women and girls. Inequality is increasing, not declining. The rhetoric of human rights encourages us to think things are improving; but although people may now theoretically have more rights, they do not have more opportunities and exploitation persists.

Climate Change: There has been no progress since the 2009 Copenhagen conference – there is a lot of "lethargy about energy"! Effective action depends on abandoning the life-styles that are glorified in glossy magazines.

HIV/AIDS: The price of patented drugs denies medication to millions. Proven drugs could be made and marketed much more cheaply. The issue is nowadays below the media's radar and needs to be highlighted.



What can local groups do?

Now is the time to engage with the European and General Elections of 2014 and 2015, before party manifestos are finalised. Political parties have lost much credibility and have a greatly depleted membership; the churches are the best organised and most focused local groups in the land. Many people in Derby, from a 15-year-old rapper to the head of Toyota UK, identified with church-organised public hearings looking at how to sustain quality of life for all as funding collapses.

Finally:

The churches only exist to make a difference in God's world. Theological and political discourse are the same things. The Kingdom (Jesus) and the Body (Paul) are political concepts. To be a Christian is to be a political animal.