

Men without conviction, churches without people

Europe's wholesale abandonment of its Christian faith is often explained as the inevitable by-product of modern social, economic and political life. But there is far more to the story of Euro-secularization than that, as three ecclesiastics, a Presbyterian minister and two Italian priests, demonstrated this past Christmas.

The minister in question was the Moderator of the Church of Scotland, the Rt. Rev. Dr. Derek Browning. In his Yuletide message to his disappearing flock, Dr. Browning confessed that in his "darker moments," he sometimes wondered whether "...the world have been a better place without [Jesus]. If there was no Jesus, and therefore no Christianity, would there have been no Crusades? Would there have been no Spanish Inquisition?" (Dr. Browning didn't contemplate the possibility that, without Jesus, there would have been no iconoclastic destruction of Scotland's ancient and beautiful Catholic churches, or no mass burnings of "witches" by his forebears in the kirk; but that, perhaps, would have been cutting a bit too close to the bone.)

Then there was Father Fredo Olivero of the Church of San Rocco di Torino in the Archdiocese of Turin. At Christmas midnight Mass, Don Fredo substituted the syrupy Italian pop-religious tune, *Dolce sentire*, for the Creed, explaining, "Do you know why I do not say the Creed? Because I do not believe it....after many years I understood that it was something I did not understand and that I could not accept. So let's sing something else that says the essential things of life..."

Which, evidently, do not include the confession of faith that Jesus is Lord and Savior.

Not to be outdone by those uppity Piedmontese in Turin, a priest of Genoa, Father Paolo Farinella, announced in the leftist Italian newspaper, *La Repubblica*, that he had canceled his parish Masses for January 1 (the Octave of Christmas and the Solemnity of Mary, Mother of God) and January 6 (the Epiphany). Why? Because, according to Don Paolo, Christmas is now "a fairy tale from the nativity scene with lullabies and bagpipes, the exclusive support of a capitalist and consumerist economy, transforming the whole of Christianity into civil religion."

So there. No Mass.

These three episodes illustrate a larger point: “secularization” is not something that just happened *to* western Europe, like the Black Death. The radical secularization that has transformed Christianity’s heartland into the most religiously arid half-continent on the planet has at least as much to do with the craven surrender of ministers of the Gospel to theological and political fads, and their consequent loss of faith, as it does with the impact of urbanization, mass education, and the industrial revolution on Europeans’ understanding of themselves.

If the Gospel is not preached with conviction – the convictions that humanity is in need of salvation and that Jesus is the Savior who liberates us into the fullness of our humanity and gives us eternal life – then the Gospel will not be believed.

If ministers of the Gospel indulge in gratuitous virtue-signaling by promoting the worst of black legends, as if the sum total of Christianity’s impact on world history is embodied by “the Crusades and the Spanish Inquisition,” why would anyone come to their churches or listen to whatever’s being offered there by way of I’m-OK-You’re-OK therapeutic balm?

If ministers of the Gospel cannot challenge the world’s distortions of the Gospel with the truth of the Gospel, but fall back instead on penny-ante pseudo-Marxist clichés, is it any wonder that their church pews are empty?

Christianity is dying in western Europe. There are many reasons for that, including the complicity of many churchmen in the ideological awfulness that turned mid-20th century Europe into a slaughterhouse. But the Gospel has power, and those who believe that, and preach it in the conviction that it can transform and ennoble lives, can still get a hearing. Indeed, as post-modernity decomposes into ever more bizarre forms of irrationality, the cleansing, liberating truth of the Gospel and the vision of life well-lived found in the Beatitudes ought to be a compelling offer.

But the offer must be made. And it won’t be made by churchmen who wonder aloud whether the world wouldn’t have been better off without Jesus, or who substitute treacle for the Creed, or who throw public hissy-fits rather than celebrating the Eucharist.

