

# Comment

## *The bumpy road back into Europe*

Membership of the mainstream denominations in the UK has gone down since 1980 by half-a-million to seven million, and is likely to drop by another half-a-million before 1990. And membership of sects and non-Christian religions in the UK is going up and up.

We would be fools if we ignored the message being given to us by those now well-publicised figures from the latest edition of MARC Europe's *UK Christian Handbook*. On 20 September Cardinal Hume, lecturing in Dublin, spoke of the Pope's call to the European Bishops' Conferences to re-evangelise Europe. The Cardinal thinks that times are more auspicious for evangelising the old continent, for now in Europe there is a 'dawning of a realisation that we are entering a new phase of history'. Europeans are discovering the limits of human reason: 'the age of Enlightenment has evidently run its course'.

However true this is, and there is a lot of truth in it, we cannot therefore assume that shortly the population of the old continent is going to start flowing back into the old churches like sea into empty rock pools on the turn of the tide. Somebody said to us recently: 'You men of the sixties think that tidying-up Christianity, making it "acceptable", "nice", is the answer. You are wrong. It is important to realise that Christianity has many enemies. Most people are not aware how much in their culture that is good is owed to Christianity—because, for so long, Christianity has been booed down. There is a desperate need for evangelisation and for strengthening the voice of the Church so that it can evangelise. As it is, far too much time and word-space gets spent by certain sectors of the Catholic press, including, let's face it, your own publication, campaigning for this or that right within the Church, and far too little on the infinitely more serious business of spreading the Gospel.'

Our friend was not being quite fair. Leaving aside the fact that, of the forty-eight articles we have published in the last year, only five have been on questions of rights or justice in the Church, we would argue that a sharp line cannot be drawn between the spreading of the Gospel outside the Christian community and inside it. In other words, we believe that the promotion of justice and truth and freedom and compassion among the People of God themselves is an integral part of the evangelising process. If Christians want to bring the faith back to Europe they have got to demonstrate the falsity of a charge now being taken to be true by quite a lot of young northern Europeans—the charge that Christianity is

basically a drab and rather unpleasant ideology that in one way or another oppresses its adherents. And how are Christians going to refute this? They can only do it through the witness of their lives and of the life of the church community, not through propaganda. Words can influence, but, as the media experts have shown us, words alone are not enough.

All the same, our friend was saying at least one thing that badly needed saying. Some of the 'men of the sixties' he was attacking *did* fall into thinking that 'being nice', 'just being human', would be enough to get the world crowding in. But Christians will be listened to seriously if they convince people that it is they who are telling the truth about the human condition, and it is part of that truth that 'just being human' is not an option; we must choose between divinisation and sin.

Last month a conference took place at Geneva, 'Nouveaux départs pour un développement solidaire', to mark the twentieth anniversary of the death of the French Dominican Louis-Joseph Lebret. Lebret was one of the principal architects of *Gaudium et Spes*, Vatican II's Constitution on the Church in the Modern World. He was a sociologist and economist, one of the Church's outstanding speakers on the human condition (twice he addressed the United Nations). But, as François Malley has recently pointed out, he was first and foremost a theologian and retreat-giver, and his social ideas were rooted in his belief that man was made in the image of God, and in his conviction that it was possible to read in the world the presence of God and to discover the face of God in human beings living even in the depths of extreme poverty. That was why his words had power.

The people who would play down the high value given to 'the human' in Christianity are Christ's enemies, not his friends. Looking around the Christian world, we can have no doubt about that. But, while saying that, we Christians must never forget that our humanism has its roots in our Christianity, in our response to the seeking God. Not the reverse.

Otherwise we are not going to re-evangelise anybody satisfactorily.

J.O.M.