

Europe: A Christian Continent? A New Study Resoundingly Says “NO”.

For many, Christian missions is often a vision of the light of the gospel being carried to unreached people in the non-Western world. This is a perspective that reflects a long and noble tradition begun by William Carrey (missionary to India) and Hudson Taylor (missionary to China) and continued into the current era by heroes of the faith such as Jim Elliot (missionary to South American tribes). This picture of missions is usually perpetuated in missions literature which feature tan and brown faces representing the “lost”. Is this still true?

Consider the most recent numbers from the World Christian Database¹:

- China, 8.5% Christian
- India, 6.2% Christian
- Africa, 13.3% Christian²
- Latin America, 18.2% Christian²

A recent study, the European Spiritual Estimate, indicates that while 72.7% of Europeans would be culturally affiliated with Christianity, only **4.2% of Europeans** would claim to follow Jesus Christ as Lord and Savior. Europe, the veritable home of Christian faith for dozens of centuries, is now the least Christian geography in the world today.

At the core of this paradox about Europe is this continent’s unique historical and cultural context vis-à-vis Christianity. Many nations of Europe have state churches which may be Roman Catholic, Orthodox, or Protestant. Culturally speaking, it is important for Europeans to affiliate with the church in general so that they have a place to enter their society (via baptism), marry, and depart (via funeral). For most Europeans, church is an issue of cultural affiliation and not about belief.

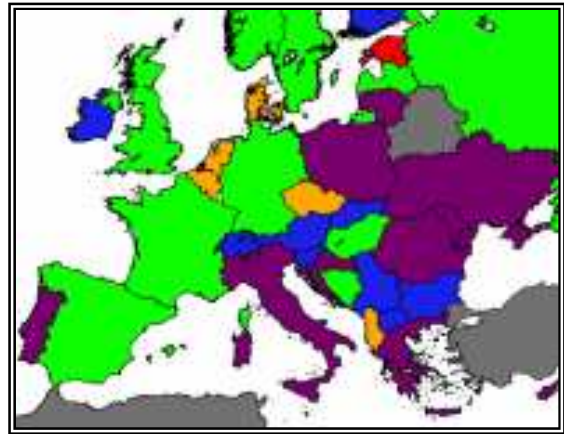
Consider the following two maps generated from the data of the recently completed European Spiritual Estimate. On the first map, “Cultural Affiliation to Christianity”, purple represents nations where more than 80% of the population are affiliated with Christianity, blue more than 60%, and green more than 40% of the population.

¹ (<http://worldchristiandatabase.org>)

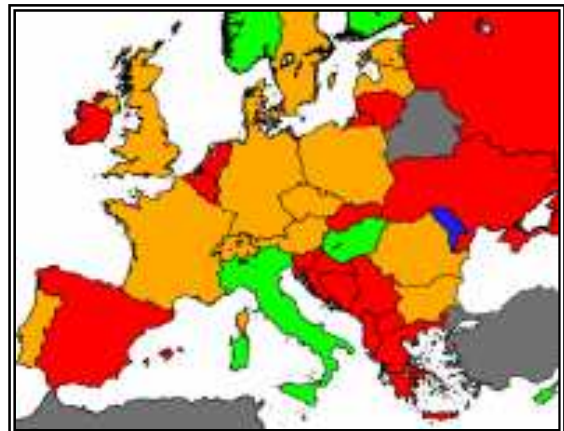
² Counting only Protestant and Independents.

The next map, “Gospel-Oriented Christians”, measures the percent of the population that follows Jesus Christ and is actively concerned about the spiritual condition of the people around them. On this map, green represents nations where less than 9% of the population would be Gospel-Oriented Christians, orange less than 6%, and red less than 3% of the population. It is interesting to compare these two maps noting that sometimes the most culturally pious nations have the fewest followers of Jesus Christ: Ukraine, Lithuania, and Croatia to name just a few.

CULTURAL AFFILIATION TO CHRISTIANITY



GOSPEL-ORIENTED CHRISTIANS

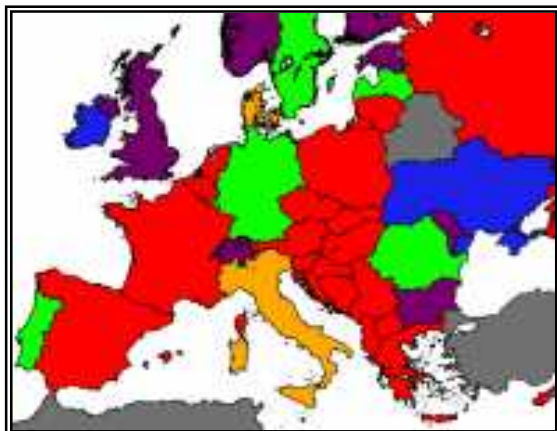


The European Spiritual Estimate has revealed the true spiritual condition of Europe by asking questions that ignore denominational and cultural affiliation, “How many people would indicate that they follow Jesus Christ and also be actively concerned about the people in their community and their relationship with Jesus Christ?”. Europe is shown to be the least Christian continent in that it has fewer followers of Jesus Christ than any other place in the world today. The absence of the

church from Europe only confirms this point. There is no doubt that Europe probably has more Christian buildings than any other place on earth: the Cathedral has become an icon of European civilization itself. Yet while the intent of these structures was for Christian worship, today many of them serve as tourists venues instead of a place of worship for a community of people following Jesus Christ.

Using the data from the World Christian Database cited above, if we assume that a typical church in India or China has 150 members, there is one church for every 1766 people in China and one for every 2413 people in India. According to the European Spiritual Estimate, there is on average only one Gospel-Oriented church³ for every 27749 people on the continent. The orange areas on the map below show nations where there is less than one church for more than 30000 people while the red areas are nations where there is less than one church for every 40000 people.

GOSPEL-ORIENTED CHURCHES



Current research like the European Spiritual Estimate is beginning to dispel the notion of Europe being a Christian continent. Perhaps the missions literature of tomorrow should feature faces of the goth-punk from Berlin, the university student in Tallin, or the banker in Rome when we talk about those who do not yet know Jesus Christ.

- S. Scott Friderich

³ A fellowship of people following Jesus Christ who are actively concerned about the people in their community and their relationship with Jesus Christ.

THE PROBLEMS OF COUNTING CHRISTIANS

A key issue that emerges from this article and the European Spiritual Estimate is how to actually count Christians. This is a challenge that is exacerbated in Europe's post-Christian context. Look for my follow-up article on this complicated issue on February 24.



THE EUROPEAN SPIRITUAL ESTIMATE

The European Spiritual Estimate (ESE) is a survey that I administered for the European Missions Research Group (emRG) from August 1 to December 12, 2005. The general purpose of the survey is to provide a reasonable estimate of the "Christianess" of Europe.

It is my hope that the ESE is the beginning of intelligent discussion of this issue based on objective and timely data. Furthermore, I hope that this information will better inform intentional prayer and the allocation of resources for the weighty gospel challenge that Europe presents to followers of Jesus in today's world.

Details about the study can be found at <http://emrg.friderich.net>. A full report will be issued March 2006.

THE EUROPEAN MISSIONS RESEARCH GROUP: emRG

The European Missions Research Group (emRG), is an open-door network focusing on research for church multiplication in Europe. Our next meeting will be in Barcelona, Spain from April 3rd to 5th. In addition to gathering key research minds from across Europe, we will be discussing how to integrate various forms of research into a common and useful platform.

Please contact Andreas Wolf (andreas@dawneurope.net) for details about emRG and this spring meeting in Spain.

