

FORUM

The Forum is intended to promote dialogue by providing space for shorter pieces of writing including opinions and suggestions, brief responses to papers, reports of research in progress, meditations, and descriptions of pedagogical strategies.

When “*evangelisch*” is not “Evangelical”: Preparing Students for a Different Religious Culture

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Each year in January, a group of students from my college spends four weeks in Germany. They are usually at an intermediate-mid level of language acquisition, and through lectures, discussions, and on-site tours of places ranging from a dairy farm to the German parliament, all conducted in German by local experts, the course presents the students an overview of 20th-century German history and the current social situation. The students stay with host families in three different communities—a rural one on the Dutch border, a small city on the North Sea, and the center of Reformation history, Wittenberg, in the former East Germany.

As a prerequisite for this course, all students must complete a prerequisite language course on campus. Among other educational activities, they spend considerable time mastering the vocabulary and practicing conversation on a wide variety of topics.

As mostly Christian students from a professedly Christian college, one important thing to express should be one’s own Christian identity. Indeed, we do teach the students some phrases that they may choose to use when

describing their Christian faith. However, as I watched my students in January, spoke to my German friends and acquaintances about the topic, and reflected upon the current situation of German Christianity, I concluded that it is equally important that we prepare our students to be curious observers, charitable evaluators, and gracious participants of the religious practices and expressions in the host country.

Our students prepare for explaining their religious commitment by learning such phrases as “Ich bin gläubiger Christ,” (I’m a believing Christian); “Ich nehme meinen christlichen Glauben ernst,” (I take my Christian faith seriously); “Nichts kann mich von der Liebe Gottes trennen,” (Nothing can separate me from the love of God); and “Ich möchte mit meinem Leben Gott dienen,” (I would like to serve God with my life). The students also memorize an abbreviated version of the first question and answer of the Heidelberg Catechism (1563), the catechism of the Reformed denominations with continental roots: “Dass ich mit Leib und Seele, im Leben und im Sterben, nicht mein, sondern meines getreuen Heilands Jesu Christi eigen bin, der für alle meine Sünden vollkommlich bezahlt” (“I am not my own, but belong body and soul, in life and in death, to Jesus Christ, who forgives all my sins.”).

The issue of how one identifies oneself as a practicing Christian, or conversely, how others identify someone else as a practicing Christian, is as old as the religion itself. The biblical book of Acts, in its earliest references, calls this new Jesus religion simply “The Way.” It is in multicultural Antioch where the followers of Jesus are “first called Christians” (Acts 11:26). Even though we’re not quite sure how it was meant—was it a term of derision?—or whether the first Christians used it of themselves, obviously the Antioch label stuck. “Christian” remains the most common and basic designation for a follower of Jesus Christ.

We ourselves struggle with the significance of the term in a culture in which over 80 percent of the population claims to be Christian. We grope for another word to express what we regard as the genuine article—like “evangelical.” But we discover that “evangelical” is freighted with so much theological and, increasingly, political baggage. Dr. Tim Keller, for example, is a Presbyterian minister whose ministry in New York City has grown from about 50 worshippers to 4,400 over the course of 16 years. Keller “shies away from the label evangelical, which is often used to describe theologically conservative Protestant Christians like him, because of the political and fundamentalist connotations that now come with it. He prefers the term orthodox instead” (*NYT*).

Keller is in the business of church planting, which is about attracting

non-Christians to Christ, perhaps encountering Christ in a specific new worshipping body. In a certain sense, Keller's cultural work is similar to what I want my students to do in Germany. Keller believes strongly in embracing the culture in which he finds himself, in his case cosmopolitan urban America, and "delving into the prevailing culture almost as much as into the biblical text" (*NYT*). Unlike Keller, my students are not on an evangelizing mission while in Germany. However, I believe they need, as the Rev. Stephen Um characterizes Keller's method, "to enter into a person's worldview" before they would in any way "challenge that worldview and retell the story based on the Gospel" (*NYT*). Perhaps, even, they would need such an understanding before they would attempt to explain their own faith.

We know the American evangelical scene is theologically and culturally diverse, and this is only a single segment of American Christianity. The German scene is also diverse—and increasingly so, which is an important reality for our students to understand before they attempt to navigate German Christian territory. I confess my own past sins of oversimplification on this score, sweepingly defining German culture for my students as "post-Christian." I have explained (as the facts confirm), that two-thirds of the German populace belong to either the Catholic church or the official Protestant Church of Germany, but that only one-tenth of these member regularly attend worship (*Die Zeit*). I have told my students that this is a long-standing process of secularization: that already in 1846, the candidates entering ministry in the Prussian Protestant Church did not have to affirm the Apostles' Creed, a classic statement of Trinitarian belief of the Western Church (Groh 207), and that in the last decade of the nineteenth century between one and three percent of Berlin residents participated regularly in worship and communion (cf. Hölscher 609; Groh 545; Hope 524). I have quoted my German friend, an ordained minister with 30 years experience in parish ministry and in the administration of the Protestant Church of Germany, who told me in 2000, "In Germany Christianity has never been a matter of personal faith, but a matter of tradition." I have spoken of the thousands of Germans who each year officially remove themselves from the rolls of the church. I have made only cursory mention of the so-called free churches (Methodist, Baptist, and many others), where membership is a matter of choice rather than of generations on membership rolls, and where one makes a personal decision to contribute financially, rather than by government-supervised automatic deductions of church taxes.

Only in the past few years have I known to talk about the complexity of the situation in Germany: although 300,000 people are leaving the church each year, 12,000 are joining the Catholic church, and 60,000 are joining or

rejoining the Protestant church (*Die Zeit*). The website of the Willow Creek Association, now a worldwide organization promoting congregational evangelism, lists 319 German congregations as partners. Many of them are “free” church congregations, but others of them are congregations of the national German Protestant denomination. Although I have worshipped on a Sunday morning within the last three years with 15 elderly women from a parish of 2,000 people, I also have worshipped in a Berlin free church with 400 enthusiastic worshippers of all ages. Although I have lived in German Christian families where I never witnessed individual or communal prayer or saw a Bible, this past January I was present at the Friday evening ecumenical prayer gathering in which we broke into small groups and prayed aloud with total strangers.

This prayer meeting occurred in the Luther city of Wittenberg, in the province of Sachsen-Anhalt, which has one of the lowest church membership rates of any German province (*Die Zeit*). Yet the situation in Sachsen-Anhalt merely discloses another reality our students must understand: contemporary Germany (and that includes the religion of contemporary Germany) has two different historical realities. For nearly 50 years the religion of communist East Germany was dialectical materialism, and it cost to have another. Another religious commitment, in the eyes of the state, constituted a divided allegiance—perhaps you were not allowed to study medicine, or maybe you were not promoted from the assembly line. It was no longer assumed that one passed on the tradition of Christianity to the next generation, and for many, there was no real reason to pay any cost. From a Marxist perspective, Christianity really should have disappeared.

Meanwhile, in the Federal Republic, Christianity was assumed. The entire country had suffered greatly under Hitler’s misappropriation of Christian vocabulary and themes, and even today there is seldom a mix of political and religious vernacular, particularly not from public officials. Nevertheless, the government and the church continued to cooperate willingly for church funding and other matters. The assumption of Christianity as the common religion was expressed in the language. Even today one expresses allegiance to Christ or the church not by saying, “I’m a Christian,” (*ich bin Christ*), but by saying “I’m Catholic” (*ich bin katholisch*) or “I’m protestant” (*ich bin evangelisch*). Today three out of four Germans in the Western provinces are baptized. In the former East Germany, only one out of five is baptized (*von Schrötter*). A Christian friend teaches 9- to 19-year-olds in a school in Erfurt, another important Luther city in eastern Germany. Of the 155 students in the school, not one is baptized. Each year my friend takes his students and invites their parents to accompany them to the Catholic cathedral for a celebration and

a tour with the bishop, and considers it a major educational and evangelizing opportunity.

When I asked this same friend what he heard when I said, “I’m a believing Christian,” he said without hesitation, “I would never say that. It is completely redundant. If you say here, ‘I’m a Christian,’ you have said it all. There is nothing else to say.” Interestingly, my friend is Catholic, married to a Protestant woman, but I didn’t know either of those details until long after I knew they were Christians.

My husband asked another East German friend the same question, “What do you hear when I say, ‘I’m a believing Christian,’” This friend began his theological education to be a Protestant pastor while East Germany was still communist, and after history intervened, completed his training, was ordained, and has served a parish in the reunified, capitalist, democratic Germany. It’s an extremely hard job, particularly in his community which is a stronghold of retired former East German military officers, and yet he pursues his work with a strong sense of vocation. His unguided reply was exactly the same as my friend’s in Erfurt: a simple “I am a Christian” means a whole lot, and is sufficient. Such self-designation is unfamiliar and rare—so countercultural that the commitment entailed is understood.

Strangeness of expression is not necessarily a bad thing, whether one says “I am evangelical,” “I am orthodox,” “I am a believing Christian,” or simply “I am a Christian.” Maybe the expression sounds so strange because what it references is so rare (in a European or North American context)—a practiced Christian faith. Perhaps a “huh” (or “Wie, bitte?”) response is not always a bad thing.

What is certainly more crucial is not primarily that the connection is expressed in a finely tuned and culturally appropriate phrase but rather in a person’s life, actions, and values—and that takes time to express and to comprehend. Basic to the Christian ethic is that it’s not all about me, and who I am, but about God and my neighbor. More important than soliciting a robust interest in me, me, me is showing our hosts a genuine interest and curiosity in the things most important to them. Such interest will demand close observation of our new neighbors with open eyes and ears and loving hearts. We are called to investigate from a posture of non-judgmental observation and with gentle questions the complexity and diversity of our hosts and their culture—including their religious culture—and to embrace the often resulting mystery.

One such area of discovery is worship in another culture. Cross-cultural worship experiences provide an experience of the communion of the

saints and a foretaste of heaven. On our academic trip we worshipped in the Sunday gathering of a thriving charismatic congregation in Berlin, and joined the Friday evening ecumenical prayer service in Wittenberg. We also participated in a traditional Protestant service on a Wednesday morning market day, and an ecumenical worship that wrapped up the worldwide week of ecumenical prayer, complete with a strongly evangelistic sermon. I worshipped in Berlin at a bilingual service, conducted in German and Kurdish.

In the future I will do additional preparation with the students. They bring adequate vocabulary to express their spirituality, but I will encourage them to choose whether or not it is appropriate to use in any given situation. I will provide them a more thorough introduction to the history of Christianity in Germany in the last centuries and I also will try more diligently to impress upon my students that this stay is their opportunity to observe without hasty judgment and with gracious charity the diverse manifestations of Christianity (and sometimes lack thereof) in Germany. I will explain in advance the progression of some of our worship services, and encourage the students to realize worship is not limited to a rational, verbal experience. This is, after all, one major reason why we are involved as Christians in foreign language instruction—to empower our students to open themselves to another culture and to convey their faith-shaped lives to those in the other culture.

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