The Need in Belgium (and Europe) [1]

Submitted by Wessel on Tuesday, 15 March 2016 - 00:05

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Shortly before I left for Belgium [2], Guillaume Bignon [3] wrote a tweet [4] in which he quoted a "French [Roman] Catholic analytical philosopher", who had said to him in an email,

> "As you know, in France, atheism isn't something you argue for, it's taken to be obvious."

While I wasn't travelling to France, this quote stayed in the back of my mind, as I knew that the city in which I would be in—Brussels—is mostly French speaking (even though it is supposed to be bilingual). The entire country of Belgium is largely split into two parts: the northern Flemish part (where various dialects of Dutch are spoken), and the Wallonian south (where French dialects are spoken). Historically, these very different regions were united by their common faith, Roman Catholocism. Unlike their northern neighbour the Netherlands, Protestantism never really took much hold1. Today, however, there is little left of Roman Catholic piety. "The churches there do not feel like churches," a friend of mine who had visited Flanders years before had told me, "they feel like monuments, not like places of worship which are to be revered and respected."

And so it was with this bleak prospect that I journeyed to Belgium. I say bleak, because I would know that, by and large, the faces that I would look into during my stay would unlikely stand beside me in the Kingdom of heaven. The prospect is so bleak, that Africa is sending missionaries there. I should know: my cousin is one of them. Yet the reality would only hit me once I saw the faithful in Belgium.

Brussels

Before I arrived, my cousin had told me about the International Baptist Church [1] (IBC) in Brussels. I arrived in the country on a Saturday and, being limited in what I could do or go see by my location, ignorance and lack of transport, I decided to walk the healthy distance from my hotel to IBC. I made it just in time for the service2. I was heartened by seeing about 300 faithful there, although most of these were international people and not native Belgians. There was much excitement when they found out I was from South Africa, as there were many South Africans in the congregation. Even the pastor was South African and was formerly at a church which was very close to place where I had lived previously and once visited.

One of the interesting things that happened at the church was an interview with a couple who would soon be leaving to go do missionary work in Africa. Although there is a need for doing gospel work in Belgium itself, they have specialised skills, linguistics and healthcare, that can be applied in the extremely rural parts of the continent where there is not yet a written language and, as such, no Bible. This brought and interesting perspective on how the Spirit can use a bi-directional flow of missionaries to reach all peoples for the Kingdom.

I left the church3 heartened at the good fellowship which I had encountered. But I was also haunted by the honest prayers which had been prayed for the salvation of the people of Belgium, as the foreigners living there knew even better than I how dire the situation is.

For the rest of my stay in Brussels, the only other faithfuls whom I saw were Muslim. Brussels is awash with immigrants and one could be forgiven for thinking that Islam is or should actually be the

national religion.

Roeslare

Far away from Brussels (relatively speaking), deep in Flanders lies the small town of Roeslare with a population of about 60,000 people. This is the town where my cousin lives. I travelled there the following weekend and was eager to see also the church which he attended. There service began when around fifty souls had filled a small room inside an unremarkable building tightly packed between other people's homes. While I could understand the Flemish that the people spoke fairly well, the sermon was given by a man speaking a strange language that I could not place, while a younger man beside the preacher translated into Dutch.

Afterwards I learned from my cousin that the man was speaking Iranian (more properly, Farsi), and the people in the room with a slightly darker complexion where part of the Iranian congregation in Roeselare. They shared the building for worship with the evangelical congregation and sometimes they combined their services.

That means that in the entire town there were less than 50 evangelical Christians: maybe only two dozen. The realisation hit me hard. It was encouraging to see Christians from two essentially very different congregations coming together and worshipping in harmony in such a manner. But as we stepped out of the building and walked through the mostly empty streets of the town, I knew that all the other inhabitants were lazily nestled inside their homes on that cold spring morning, ignorant not only of the purpose of our freezing excursion, but fundamentally of their need of God's love and salvation.

As we were walking back to my cousin's home, we passed a large crucifix with an inscription at the bottom. My cousin pointed at the inscription and told me that it said that a Roman Catholic bishop had declared some time ago that anyone who performed their Hail Marys in front of that crucifix, would have a certain amount of their time in purgatory reduced. There was no gospel, only hollow religiosity.

Back at the house, I was also told that a sociologist had estimated that, given the number of people in France and the number of evangelical churches in France, the probability that the average Frenchman would even *meet* an evangelical Christian in their lives was one-in-three. That came on top of an estimate which I had heard earlier that the average time it takes for a Frenchman to become Christian (from when they are first confronted with the gospel), is ten years.

Conclusion

The need in Western Europe is great. Missionary organisations usually put the faces of Africans or Asians on the covers of their publications. It may well be time to start featuring the faces of the European youths glued to the screens of their smartphones, or with vacant stares on the bus, or smiling in school, where the "obvious fact" that God does not exist is reinforced. They need to be taught that belief in God is not irrational, and Christianity needs to be decoupled from the empty rituals and church with which they associate it. Doing this will be immensely challenging, as I do not believe there is much in Belgium in the way of good old fashioned community. Without community, there is no sharing of ideas, only the ingestion of what their secular media feeds them. In my opinion, reaching Belgium should start in the universities, where there is still a measure of community and which is exactly the kind of places where ideas and worldviews should be challenged.

Send help.

- 1. Although there were some influences and milestones of the Reformation in what is today Belgium; for example, Francisco de Enzinas' Spanish translation of the Bible was published in Antwerp.

- 2. Google Maps' walking directions had confused left and right on the last turn.
- 3. It was shortly after I had left the church, just as I started the long journey back to my hotel, that I received the news of my father's passing.

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