

Our Confidence is in God—A brotherly rejoinder to David Edwards’ Open letter about Western values

Michael Nai Chiu Poon

Dear David,

I had the good opportunity to meet and entertain you during your Hong Kong and China visit a few years ago. It was your first visit—or the first in many years—to North Asia. I trusted the visit refreshed you and expanded your horizons.

This is why I am puzzled and perplexed by your somewhat buoyant defense of ‘western values’ in your open letter to the archbishops of the Global South. I was not sure whether you are trying to defend the values of ‘Christian England’ (of which you had written extensively), of Europe today, the rationale of North American churches, or that of the Communion.

I am not writing to defend the conduct of the Global South archbishops. Theologians serve and defend the church in a different way. Let us reason together as fellow historians and members of the Communion.

From the outset, the description of Europe as a ‘spiritual desert’ is not new. Philip Jenkins referred to it as the assessment of African Christians on *churches* in Great Britain: churches in Britain seem to be ‘a spiritual desert’ in a ‘green and pagan land’. This burden for the spiritual welfare of Europe and North America underpins the rapidly increasing mission initiatives to the west. (See *The Next Christendom: The Coming of Global Christianity* [Oxford: Oxford UP, 2002], 205.) The archbishops used this already familiar phrase to include Europe, surely not out of disdain, but to pledge their *support*—not intrusively—for the ‘re-evangelization and mission to Europe’ as ‘a top priority of the Church of England’. I cannot see why you would take issue of this.

You however added an adjective ‘barren’ to the archbishops’ description. Does not your phrase ‘barren desert’ betray an unease in you, that the ‘laboratory’ experiments on new morality—by your admission—at your own turf, would turn out ‘barren’? A ‘spiritual desert’ can indeed provide the solitude for the purification of the soul and the mortification of the flesh; however, how frightening the prospects of experiments going horribly wrong, as successive Hollywood blockbusters remind us. This the Global South would not wish to happen to brethren in the Communion, not the least to the west. We owe the gospel to your forebears. You as a historian would remember that the missionaries used to label the Far East as a ‘benighted’ country. Churches in the west still sing those nineteenth century hymns in your churches. Why would you not take issue with that?

I am surprised by your litany on the new morality and ethos of contemporary Europe in your open letter. What has that got to do with the ethos that the Communion should uphold? Or, does not your *apologia* erroneously situate the present conflict in the Communion as a ‘clash of civilisation’? That would be most unfortunate, and is unworthy of you as a respected historian.

I am intrigued by the air of confidence in your exposition of the European society. It does not clarify how the colonialism legacy continues to shape European policies today. You seem to bush aside the recent racial riots and unrest in Europe; and the unease of embracing Turkey into the European Union. Remember how British colonisers established the 'rule of law' in Asia in the eighteenth and nineteenth century, when Europe was still sorting out their societies in the midst of the French Revolution, European wars, and American Civil War. Was not Europe treating India and the Southeast Asia (and as a matter of fact, Africa and *Latin-America*) as laboratories for its new-found ideas? Are you peddling values and solutions that are of only recent histories in Europe, as if they were ancient and well-tried wisdom? Are you prepared then to give a parallel account of the hurts and pains that the non-western world has suffered under Europe?

Please do not misunderstand that I am here championing for the Global South. I suggested elsewhere that—as members of the same Communion—we need to focus on the fundamentals. The values of the west surely belong to the non-essentials. I shall leave it to abler thinkers to critique the liberal values you espouse. (see for example Solzhenitsyn and O'Donovan, in their different ways) And yet, the Church of England is sorely missing the contribution of those in the generation of John Taylor, Max Warren, Andrew Walls, and Maurice Wiles. Their service in the non-Western world not only benefited many developing churches; it became a life-changing experience for them, opening to them 'new' paradigms of understanding. I am not sure that any of them would agree to your assessment of Europe. The Church of England is poorer today because people with such experience are now a rarity. The Global South archbishops, for all their failings and weaknesses, at least have on-ground knowledge of the west. After all, many of them were once poor theological students in your seminaries. Would it be good if North American and British archbishops have on-ground understanding of the non-western world, and hence would be able to understand better the impact of liberal values in the south? The appointment of York is a positive step.

I am keenly aware how weak churches in the south are. As historians and theologians for the catholic Communion, we perhaps can help in our modest ways by offering a truer and more critical account of ourselves. Perhaps historians in the Communion can together produce a more reflective and comprehensive history of our church. We can then help those separated by divides to rediscover the missionary thrusts that had, and still is binding us together. It is by remembering and recording the accounts of how good triumphs over evil, that perhaps would provide us the vision to hold onto the bonds of affections we have in Christ. You would agree that the Communion is not founded on European values. Our confidence is in God, who does not need letters of recommendations from 'European' (and 'Chinese') values. The life-giving Spirit will not make us barren.

With affectionate greetings in Christ,

Michael Nai-Chiu Poon, Singapore
Advent 2, 2005