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Protestants, Catholics, and Re-evangelizing Western Civilization 500 Years after the Reformation



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The first edition of Johnson's *Human Rights: A Christian Primer* (2008) became a standard evangelical resource. The second edition (2016) was jointly published on behalf of the WEA and the Vatican-based *Dignitatis Humanae Institute*. He has written five other books and some two hundred fifty articles, essays, and book chapters, many of which are available on the websites of Martin Bucer Seminary, the World Reformed Fellowship, the International Institute for Religious Freedom, and the World Evangelical Alliance. He has edited 25 books on ethics and issues of religion and society, as well as numerous human rights reports. He lives in Prague with his wife, Leslie P. Johnson. She was the first director of the Christian International School of Prague and is now an educational consultant for the Association of Christian Schools International. They have three grown children as well as several grandchildren.

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**Protestants, Catholics, and Re-evangelizing Western
Civilization 500 Years after the Reformation**

Plenary, General Assembly of the European Evangelical Alliance, Prague, October 2017.

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I. The First Evangelization and European identity	5
II. European identity and the second evangelization	6
III. A new evangelization with Catholics?	9
IV. What we can do now	15

I have taken the liberty of a very small change in title in light of what I have learned in the year since I agreed to give this speech. Of course, a “Great Gulf” was the term used by Karl Barth, a century ago, to describe Protestant-Catholic relations, and it is still a good descriptor. But I want to place this great gulf in the context of the calling which, I believe, God has given to many of us, that of re-evangelizing western civilization. Please forgive me for focusing on the European part of western civilization; we are sitting in Europe right now. I hope that those of you who hail from outside the West will give us westerners some valuable tips from your experience of the dramatic successes of churches in other cultures.

I. The First Evangelization and European identity

I want to start this discussion in what some might take to be an odd place. My starting point is to ask: What makes Europe European? Since antiquity, Europeans have claimed that Europe is distinct from Asia, but the dividing line between them has never been fully clear. The better commentators always acknowledge that if there is a line or border between Europe and Asia, that border is primarily cultural, not physical. And that observation makes a difference when we think about the goal of evangelizing Europe, especially considering that Christian evangelism is part of what created Europe as we know it today, as a culture or family of cultures.

I would suggest that Europe is Europe (and not west Asia) largely because of the first evangelization of the region, which started in southern Europe in the first century and extended across most of Europe between the years 500 and 1300. Though many themes in Christian theology and ethics played a role in creating Europe and the West, it was especially Christian philosophical notions regarding humanity, rationality, and progress that both created Western civilization and caused it to flourish.

In making this statement, I do not intend to deny Greco-Roman contributions to Europe. But even those classical notions were introduced to much of Europe by missional Christian scholars serving in medieval monasteries, cathedral schools, and then Christian universities. Europe is European, and western civilization exists, largely because of the worldview communicated during the first evangelization of Europe. Trust in human dignity, rationality, and progress was the fruit of evangelization.

This worldview-driven development was very practical. The era, once called the Dark Ages by secularists, was really an era of tremendous technological growth. Between 500 and 1300, one saw the widespread application of watermills and windmills, the effective use of horses for agriculture and travel, the development of deep plows that revolutionized farming, and the invention of eye glasses, compasses, and clocks. This technological growth was simultaneous with the Christianization of Europe. Sociologist Rodney Stark commented:

“All of these remarkable developments can be traced to the unique Christian conviction that progress was a God-given obligation, entailed in the gift of reason. That new technologies and techniques would always be forthcoming was a fundamental article of Christian faith. Hence, no bishops or theologians denounced clocks or sailing ships—although both were condemned on religious grounds in various non-Western societies.”¹

This development was also theoretical. The multi-faceted link among Christianity, rationality, and recognizing human dignity became a distinguishing characteristic of European thought as it developed during and after the decline of the Roman Empire. On a theoretical level, this positive link can be observed in thinkers such as Augustine (354-430), Anselm (1033-1109), and Aquinas (1225-1274), who were simultaneously God-fearing believers and also elite philosophers using methods derived from antiquity. The biblical-classical synthesis they represented incorporated selected themes from multiple sources in classical Greek and Roman ethics, metaphysics, and pedagogy, but all of these themes were applied within a biblical framework and a biblical view of the human condition. These principles undergirded European society for a millennium, with some influence across the West yet today.

II. European identity and the second evangelization

But meanwhile, because of widespread illiteracy, corruption, power politics, bad theology, and the accretion of traditions, the Christian message became too intertwined with obedience to the visible Church (which in Western Europe meant the Roman Catholic Church), and that church, facing little competition, had veered far off course by medieval times. Mar-

¹Rodney Stark, *The Victory of Reason: How Christianity Led to Freedom, Capitalism, and Western Success* (Random House: Kindle Edition, 2007), locations 896-900.

tin Luther's challenge to that church, 500 years ago, was urgently needed. This led to the second evangelization of Europe, flowing from the Reformation in its multiple forms.

The new Protestants rediscovered grace, justification by faith, the liberty of the gospel, and the power of the Bible. Although it would be unfair and inaccurate to say that Catholics totally rejected the true Christian faith, they responded defensively as an institution (through the Counter-Reformation and Inquisition), with strong opposition to what they considered Protestant heresies.

Nevertheless, in an important way, Europe became more European under the influence of both the Reformation and the Counter-Reformation. With two major, competing versions of Christianity now in existence, both used rationality and education to defend their version of the faith. Thus, faith-driven rationality became even more clearly a distinctive aspect of European society.

This pattern was especially true in the Protestant regions of Europe. The Protestants thought everyone should read the Bible, and this conviction had massive cultural results. The Bible was translated into many European languages, leading to standardized versions of those languages, and then everyone was taught to read. Standardized languages and universal education, including sending girls from poor families to school, was a product of the Reformation. Other major developments in Europe were fueled by the Reformation as well. Indeed, some scholars trace a direct line from justification by faith alone to democracy and many talk about the influence of the Protestant work ethic.

Even when farthest apart, Protestants and Catholics still shared a huge amount religiously: belief in the Trinity, in the Incarnation and Resurrection, and that the Bible is an inspired book from God. Nevertheless, the rivalry between them was too intense, perhaps because of a lack of other competitors. During the sixteenth and early seventeenth centuries, neither Islam nor secularism was competing for the hearts and minds of Europeans; even if not personally walking by faith, most Europeans were culturally Christian. Though the Reformers occasionally talked about Muslims, they rarely had Muslim neighbors, and there was little risk that members of their congregations would convert to Islam. The question was simply whether to be Catholic or Protestant. In this context, the antagonism between Catholics and Protestants remained very high from the sixteenth through the mid- or late- nineteenth century.

I see secularism as beginning around 1650, in the context of over-heated antagonism between Catholics and Protestants. The rise of secularism was partly fueled by the perception that the sixteenth- and seventeenth-century European wars were a product of the Protestant-Catholic rivalry. I think that this perception is one-sided; there were several motives for those wars other than religion, especially power politics mixed with greed. But this perception was and still is one of the drivers of secularism in Europe. In the twenty-first century, while teaching humanities at a major European university, I heard very bright students argue that Protestants and Catholics would restart the wars of religion in our time unless both sides were restrained by totally secular governments.

Although the Enlightenment sowed the seeds of secularism, not all its leading thinkers were atheists. Some were practicing Christians, and some, such as John Locke, quoted the Bible frequently. Generally, the religion of the early Enlightenment was deism, the idea that God was the great watchmaker who set the world in motion but is not currently involved in the world. Deism allowed Europeans and North Americans to keep many of the key convictions that created western civilization, such as a high appraisal of human dignity, rationality, and education, while rejecting both sides in the Protestant-Catholic rivalry. Most deists had no place for the competing doctrines of salvation, sacraments, and spiritual authority; they preferred a vague religiosity without specifically Protestant or Catholic beliefs.

But Enlightenment deism was not stable. Though it was initially grounded in arguments for the existence of God, people raised in a deist culture tended to lose their trust in rationality. In this way, deism led to thinkers such as Marx, Nietzsche, and Freud, key representatives of post-Enlightenment secularism. They were not only atheists and outspoken in their antagonism to Christianity; they also rejected the earlier notions of rationality and human dignity that Christianity had contributed to western culture. Instead, they promoted moral relativism, which had previously been seen as irrational both by classical Protestants and by classical Catholics. In this way, secularism is closely tied to my perception, shared by many others, that some distinctives of western civilization are currently at risk, that the key assumptions that make Europe European and the West western are in question.² Trust in rationality and human dignity arose in Europe as orga-

² Already in 2017 there have been at least two major gatherings in Europe of philosophers and social scientists who are openly worried about the philosophical foundations of democracy and western civilization. "The Prague Appeal for Democratic Renewal," dated May 26, 2017, states in its preamble, "Liberal democracy is under threat, and all who cherish it must come to its defense." In light of

nic parts of the broader Christian worldview. Now, without the specifically theological parts of that worldview, many want to continue trusting in rationality and human dignity, but it is not clear that the cultural fruit can thrive without the theological tree on which it grew. This situation has massive effects on both our evangelistic efforts as well as on everything that happens in the public square. I will give one example from each setting.

In the modern public square, without the biblical creation account, people have terrible difficulties saying where human rights come from, and therefore they end up with all sorts of competing ideas about what rights people have. Communists say one has whatever rights the state gives; post-modernists say, in a certain sense, that rights come from the self, based on his/her interests.

An example from evangelism: I know a European woman who came to faith as an adult after being educated in a communist school. At first it seemed impossible for her to fathom why Jesus was significant, since her life was a cosmic accident as a part of blind evolution and religion was the opiate of the people. After she started to accept that she might be created in the image of God, she could imagine why Jesus and salvation might be significant. She had to be convinced of human dignity before she could believe in Jesus. Then she trusted Jesus and was baptized. For her, coming to believe in the image of God was part of being evangelized. Can trust in human dignity and rationality continue without the Christian tree on which it grew?

III. A new evangelization with Catholics?

Against this cultural backdrop, which arose from parts of the Christian worldview but which perceives its own secularization as partly arising from Protestant-Catholic rivalry, we have to take up the question of Protestant-Catholic relations when we promote a new evangelization of the West.

a global retreat of democracy and the growth of authoritarianism, “Democracy’s supporters must unite to halt the retreat and to organize a new coalition for its moral, intellectual, and political renewal.” Also in May, 2017, a group of scholars and intellectuals met in Paris to draft “The Paris Statement: A Europe We Can Believe in.” Their concern is that, “The true Europe is in jeopardy. The achievements of popular sovereignty, resistance to empire, cosmopolitanism capable of civic love, the Christian legacy of humane and dignified life, a living engagement with our Classical inheritance—all this is slipping away.” In their press release they added, “Through delusion and self-deception and ideological distortion, Europe is dissipating her great civilizational inheritance.”

The competition with both Islam and secularism make the differences between Protestants and Catholics seem less glaring, and the value of collaboration seems greater.

Of course, as historic Protestants, that doesn't mean we ignore theological differences or call people Christians unless they profess Jesus as Savior. But it does mean looking harder for ways to build bridges to and collaborate with an organization that maintains the sanctity of every human life, the value of Christian marriage, the centrality of Jesus Christ to all of life, and a great determination to oppose the persecution of Christians worldwide.

The nature of the global Catholic Church

Sociologically, there is a huge difference between Protestants and Catholics. We have splintered into a thousand denominations; the Catholics have remained under one extremely big tent. That doesn't mean that Catholics are any more united religiously or theologically than Protestants are; it just means that there is a great variety in flavors of Catholics within one organization.

We have a Catholic Church with a conservative wing, a liberal wing, and an evangelical wing. We have charismatic Catholics who are virtually indistinguishable from Pentecostals except that they attend mass and say the Ave Maria. Some Catholics sound almost like me, quoting Martin Luther about the relationship between God's moral law and the gospel, but there are also Catholics who deny the Virgin Birth and Catholics who worship statues.

Because of the history of Protestant-Catholic conflict, we must avoid the strong, condemning language that Protestants once used about Catholics. We should not call the Pope the antichrist, even if one or two popes might have qualified. We should not call the Catholic Church the "Whore of Babylon." Both of those terms were, I believe, a result of heated conflict, not the result of careful biblical exegesis. But we should know that some Catholics use very strong theological language to condemn others in the Catholic Church. Some Catholics think many other

Catholics are either not Christians at all, or at least not very good Christians. I was surprised the first time a prominent Catholic leader told me privately he thought the Catholic Church is largely apostate and made up

mostly of Sadducees and Pharisees; I will not be surprised the next time. Yet at the same time, this man may fear for my salvation, since he thinks there might be no salvation outside the Catholic Church.

Some Catholics still sound as if they believe in works salvation; others speak as if members of other religions will be saved. There are Catholics who would like to return to using more Latin but also Catholics who would like their church to endorse gay and lesbian marriage. There are Catholics who love Evangelicals, but others sound as if they are afraid of us.

Thirty-five years ago, I heard Richard Lovelace, a good Evangelical theologian of revivals, describe the Catholic Church as a nine-ring circus in which most of the performers do not know what is happening in the other eight rings — or if they do know, they probably do not like what is happening in the other rings. When I studied Catholic theology under a liberal priest at a secular university, he seemed to present the entirely different types of Catholic theology as if they were equivalent meals on offer at a buffet, like different types of spiritual meat, even though they were contradictory. But in this confusing church situation, there are also hundreds of millions of dear Catholics who look to Jesus for their salvation and love their Bibles. Some, even Pope Francis, preach justification by faith alone. They are our brothers and sisters in Christ.

This immense variety within the Catholic Church is mediated to evangelicals by widely different church-state relations and by widely different demographics. For example, there are regions in several countries where Catholicism dominates local social life, leaving Evangelicals marginalized, perhaps facing discrimination. On the other hand, I have heard reports of Evangelical pastors and Catholic priests becoming prayer partners while in prison together under communism. In several countries, it has become normal for Catholics and Protestants to work together in all sorts of social, political, and educational activities, usually without blurring the religious identity or church membership of the individuals involved. As just one example, I have met Protestants who are teaching in Catholic schools, and Catholics teaching in Evangelical schools, usually without reports of tension.

The nature of the Catholic Church's understanding of authority, as it has evolved over time, raises one important problem, the implications of which we must fully grasp. The Catholic Church cannot repudiate its previous statements as easily as we Protestants can. They cannot undo the Council of Trent or other statements, even if they would like to. To understand

individual Catholics with integrity, therefore, one must listen carefully to what they say, not simply associate them with everything their church has ever said. Many Catholics have not considered what is in their historical documents, just as some Protestants have not yet studied the Westminster Larger Catechism. Even Catholic leaders say things in their sermons that seem to be different from traditional Catholicism.

Principles of cooperation

As Protestants, we need criteria for cooperation. With regard to evangelization, the key criterion is the same for Catholics as for any people. If we hear them confess Christ clearly, we can *consider* evangelizing alongside them; if we do not hear them confess Christ, we should evangelize them!³

If we take Scripture seriously, we must observe a principle clearly articulated in 1 John 4:2, 3: “This is how you can recognize the Spirit of God: Every spirit that acknowledges that Jesus Christ has come in the flesh is from God, but every spirit that does not acknowledge Jesus is not from God. This is the spirit of the antichrist, which you have heard is coming and even now is already in the world.” On this basis I recognize many Catholics as fellow Christians.

If we apply that principle to our current situation and ask how we should act toward the Catholic Church and its members, I think we will come to this conclusion: “yes” to joint Protestant-Catholic efforts to re-evangelize the West when that means representing the Bible, the Christian worldview, and Christian ethics, but “no” to joint church planting or sacramental worship, let alone ecclesial unity.

This path of seeking to understand Catholics, affirming their genuine faith in Christ where we find it, and looking for areas of potential cooperation without minimizing the theological differences that keep us institutionally separate, is one that Evangelicals have followed for at least the last 40 years. In 1977, John R. W. Stott led a team of Evangelicals in the Evan-

³ Sometimes our witness about Christ occurs in an entirely unplanned social situation, such as drinking coffee after a business meeting. You and a Catholic work colleague might find yourselves both telling your agnostic colleague that the way to God is through Jesus, even if you did not previously know your Catholic colleague. That is not the occasion to accuse the Catholic of worshipping Mary. When our evangelism is planned we will want to take serious efforts to get to know the people alongside of whom we are evangelizing. There are some Protestants alongside of whom I would not choose to work, though I have met one Catholic priest with whom I might want to work in evangelism. I think his preaching may be very close to that of the Reformation, whereas some sermons from Protestants today show little contact with either the Bible or the Reformation.



In Prague, my speech title was "The Reformation and the Future of Christianity." We are just now publishing it in Czech.



The drug rehabilitation center is in the mountains in the far north of Vietnam. The church is caring for people from the large cities, especially Hanoi, many of whom have failed in previous rehabilitation attempts in state-run drug centers. The Lord is granting healing for many of these people.



Pope Francis is very eager to hear our testimony to God's grace.

gical-Roman Catholic Dialogue on Mission, leading to a publication under this title in 1986. In our interactions representing the World Evangelical Alliance to senior Roman Catholics, we have followed, to the very best of our abilities, the principles articulated at that time. I encourage you to find the text online and study it. The headings from that text indicate that the participants discussed possibilities for common witness in several areas:

- Bible translation and publishing
- Use of media
- Community service
- Social thought and action
- Dialogue
- Worship
- Evangelism

The participants in this dialogue carefully discussed the problems of joint Evangelical-Catholic worship. Together, the Evangelical and Catholic teams strongly encouraged Christians of both varieties to join in prayer and Bible study in each other's homes, and they affirmed the practice of occasionally visiting each other's worship services, especially for special occasions. But they recognized that differences regarding the sacraments make it impossible for Evangelicals and Roman Catholics to join each other in sacramental worship.

When we work with Catholics, we must disabuse ourselves of the simplistic notion that if these people really knew the gospel, they would come out of the Catholic Church. The situation is not the same as in Muslim countries, where converts to Christianity risk being imprisoned or killed by a revenge mob. But there are similarities. Catholic believers have family, community, and cultural ties that may make it personally difficult, risky, or not strategic for them to withdraw from the Catholic Church. Moreover, many of them, if well connected within the evangelical wing of the Catholic Church, may be experiencing great fellowship and spiritual growth where they are.

We appreciate that making common cause with Catholics is a sensitive issue for many Protestants, especially in Europe. Some have ancestors who were persecuted by Catholics. Some of you may still face Catholic opposition in a few areas. Some of you may have left the Catholic Church after making a personal commitment to Jesus Christ because you did not hear

the gospel in the Catholic Church; you may react negatively to any effort that may seem to acknowledge Catholics as fellow believers. We understand your concerns and welcome your input. It helps to keep us on course theologically. We would ask only that you take the time to become well informed and not base your public comments on speculation or misinformation. Though I cannot present statistical proof of this belief, I believe that a return to the Bible is occurring in the Catholic Church today, and I am sure that the liberal wing of Catholicism is in sharp decline.

IV. What we can do now

1. We must practice visible Christian love toward Roman Catholics, especially in areas where there is persecution of Christians or where there is a history of conflict between Protestants and Catholics.

In John 13:34, 35 Jesus said, “A new command I give you: Love one another. As I have loved you, so you must love one another. By this everyone will know that you are my disciples, if you love one another.” Francis Schaeffer was right, I believe, to say that Jesus has given the watching world the right to evaluate our claim to be disciples on the basis of our observable love for other Christians. I believe this to be true even if those other Christians happen to be Catholics. Therefore, it is necessary to look for ways for Evangelicals and Catholics to practice visible love from the top to the local level, to confirm our discipleship. And such love should acknowledge and address the history of Protestant-Catholic conflicts. Visible love, from both sides, must replace the overheated Protestant-Catholic rivalry that both was and is a driver of secularism and a broad resistance to the Christian message in the West.

Not all of us can imitate Thomas Schirrmacher and take our coffee breaks with the Pope, but many of us can have lunch with a Catholic priest or other Catholic activist or educator. This should lead to constructive conversations. I am not afraid that many of us will become Catholics, nor do I expect many Catholic priests or activists to become Protestants. The goal should simply be visible love that documents our honest discipleship.

2. We need a broad-ranging Evangelical-Catholic joint effort to articulate the philosophical foundations of society, not only within Western civilization, but also on behalf of the persecuted churches outside the West.

At the end of the 2015 Tirana consultation on discrimination, persecution, and martyrdom of Christians, the participants, who included representatives from the Vatican, the World Evangelical Alliance, the World Council of Churches, and the Pentecostal World Fellowship, along with other Christians, issued a statement. This statement included a very serious “to do” list, articulating what Christians need to do in response to the extraordinary persecution of Christians in our time. In one line we called on all educational institutions to “develop opportunities and tools to teach young people in particular about human rights, religious tolerance, healing of memories and hostilities of the past, and peaceful means of conflict resolution and reconciliation.”

This task is largely unfulfilled. It is urgent, I believe, that we develop large-scale joint Protestant–Catholic publishing and educational programs to articulate the philosophical principles that created Western civilization. Such an effort would require no changes in theology and no joint participation in the sacraments. Such efforts should have three goals:

- a. In a pre-evangelistic manner, promote the credibility of the Christian worldview;
- b. Strengthen the foundations of Western civilization, hopefully securing our freedoms into the future; and
- c. Change the situation for persecuted Christians in some situations, especially where the results of such Protestant–Catholic educational cooperation can extend beyond the West.

To reach its full potential, such an educational program would have to be implemented in more languages than European languages. Right now I am thinking of Arabic, Mandarin, Russian, and Vietnamese. Those possibilities make it worth a serious investment of time, talent, and treasure.

As a baby step in this direction, two of my recent books, both dealing with human rights, were jointly published for the World Evangelical Alliance and a Vatican-based think tank. I see this as a proof of concept, demonstrating that such efforts are possible. But these books are only in English so far, and this is not 1% of what should be done. Beyond baby steps, we need to run an ultramarathon and do so in several major languages.

We must be somewhat cautious in our expectations for cooperation with Catholics. I would be very surprised if the Vatican calls next week and applies to join the European Evangelical Alliance or the World Evangelical Alliance. But there seem to be many millions of dear Christian brothers and sisters in the Catholic Church. Many share our basic worldview, even if we have theological differences. We should seek real fellowship and see what we can do together toward re-evangelizing the West.



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