

Brian Parker  
**European Cultural Change**

I'm going to take you on a train journey. It is not across miles or kilometres, it is across time, years, decades and centuries. As we crossed over from the 20<sup>th</sup> to the 21<sup>st</sup> century, many Christians reflected on the way in which society, especially western society, has gone off the rails with respect to the traditional values of the Christian faith. There was not a sudden change as the new millennium dawned but the closing of one century and the opening of another served as a focus for many Christian thinkers who took the opportunity to assess the role and relevance of the contemporary Christian faith. Our faith always exists in a cultural context, sometimes defining it and sometimes being shaped by it, so, all aboard for a trip on the European Culture Railway.

We leave from Lubbecke and, as the train pulls out, we travel some distance and realise that the scenery is changing; we are going back 1,000 years through time and will catch a glimpse of the relationship between the prevailing culture and the Christian faith with brief stops at nine historic stations.

Our first stop is at **Romanesque**. There are two other trains at the station and they are facing in opposite directions. One is the Eastern Orthodox express and the other the Western Latin inter city. At 1054 they will depart, one for Constantinople the other for Rome. They carry their symbols of faith with them. Holy figures represented to an artistic formula – two dimensional and symbolic. These subjects were too holy to be treated lightly or realistically. Both trains will travel

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<sup>1</sup> The following is the text of an illustrated presentation given by Brian Parker at the Institut für Religion und Frieden in 2013. The accompanying Power Point slides are available on request.

through an age of spiritual piety and political obedience, the church ruling the spiritual and monarchs ruling the worldly aspects of life and ordinary people not daring be out of step with either! There are artistic echoes of the Romanesque period in the iconography of the Orthodox faith today.

Next along the line we stop at **Gothic** station where, in the Latin west, the reality and nature of art has flourished but piety, holiness, respect have greatly diminished. Here we see Mary nursing the child Jesus. The female figure is beautiful, bare breasted and painted for glamour rather than motherhood. The model was Agnes Sorel, mistress to King Charles VII of France. So, somewhere between the stations of Romanesque and Gothic there has been an upward gradient in artistic portrayal but the continent has gone downhill spiritually. Whereas it was not proper to portray holy people realistically at our last stop because they were so revered, it is now acceptable to portray the Virgin Mary, voluptuous, bare breasted with the Son of God on her lap, modelled by the king's mistress.

Proceeding through the cultural countryside of history we come to a station that has just been rebuilt. **Renaissance**, this is Renaissance. There is a re-birth of classical forms of Roman and Greek art and architecture, the development of perspective in painting, of education, of diplomacy, and philosophy. Leonardo Da Vinci and Michelangelo were "Renaissance Men". The reborn intellectual freedoms and the invention of the printing press during the Renaissance had a profound effect on the Christian faith and paved the way for the Reformation, the Protestant break with Rome. We see Martin Luther waiting for the 1517 train to Wittenberg, his 95 theses in his briefcase and thoughts of the Bible in the German language in his head. Henry VIII of England gets off the train from Rome and will board a royal train of his own due to arrive in the station at 1535 whilst John Calvin will wait for the 1536 to Geneva just a minute later as William Tyndale, the great English Bible translator is being bound to a stake to be strangled and burned at a distant station in Belgium.

Our next stop is a very ornate station with exaggerated architecture and flamboyant style. It is called **Baroque**. The churches felt that art, music, architecture, literature, should communicate religious themes appealing to the senses and raising the emotions. It began as a counter to the more sober tastes of the Protestant reformers but soon took on universal appeal. On the station platform we see Bach, Handel, Vivaldi, Pachelbel and Purcel giving an impromptu concert near the ticket office. Here we find Rembrandt, Ruebens, Caravaggio, and Bernini giving the station a fresh coat of paint whilst William Shakespeare, deep in thought, writes, "To be or not to be", in the waiting room. Here our concept of the orchestra, oratorio and opera are born and the Christian faith, on both sides of the Reformation and across the Latin/Orthodox divide, finds beauty and awe in the midst of their religious conflicts.

Our next station gives us a bit of a shock. There are people celebrating something called "**The Enlightenment**" and demonstrating with placards saying "Up with reason, down with faith". We have stopped at the town of Reason. God is rejected, miracles denied, the intellect is praised and the spirit mocked. Nature shows all there is to know and man can form his own theories about existence and the meaning of life. Voltaire is making a speech on the platform, "All good Christians glory in the folly of the Cross. Nothing can be more contrary to religion and the clergy than reason and common sense." This intellectual revolution is accompanied by political revolutions in France and America, an industrial revolution in Great Britain and a military revolution in the whole continent of Europe. We see Napoleon Bonaparte in conversation with the great scientist Pierre-Simon Laplace, "You have written this large book on the system of the universe, and have never even mentioned its Creator." Laplace replied, « Je n'avais pas besoin de cette hypothèse-là. » ("I had no need of that hypothesis." – I do not need God, I can explain it all with mathematics). Napoleon has just got off the 1812 train from Borodino near Moscow looking very depressed. He is waiting for the 1815 Waterloo express which, sadly for him, will crash at full speed

into the buffers of Wellington and Blucher at Waterloo as the Age of Reason comes to an end.

If our last stop was a bit heavy with people taking themselves very seriously (but leaving God out of all their equations) our cultural train now pulls into a very different station. On the platform we see Victor Hugo, Friedrich von Schiller, Alexander Pushkin and William Wordsworth who summed up their approach to life as, “the spontaneous overflow of powerful feelings”. They are waiting for a train at **Romanticism** station but probably do not care very much if the train does not turn up! Meanwhile English artists Constable and Turner take their turn to paint the station. Europe was returning to beauty in art and poetry after the upheaval of revolutions in the Age of Reason and man was reconnecting with his emotional soul. Faith in Christ, which had been relegated by Voltaire to the stables and the kitchen, was brought back to the court and the palace. In England, evangelical revival under John Wesley and the fight to abolish the slave trade by William Wilberforce gave the country a spiritual uplift that we still feel today.

Leaving Romanticism we pass through its lovely landscapes and come eventually to scenery that is harder as flights of imagination give way to reality in everyday life and we pull into a rather depressing station. This is **Realism**. Henrik Ibsen, Norway’s father of modern theatre paces the platform thinking how to open the curtains on the stage of reality so that his audience may see how life really is. Victorian England celebrates its global power but cannot conquer the social deprivation of its working people whilst America goes to war with itself, south against north, over more basic deprived freedoms – all praying to the same God and reading the same bible. Near our station we see a church that has only rich people going in. The church has become separated from the working people in Europe’s industrialised societies who have been shunted into a spiritual siding. Lines of conflict are being drawn between the emerging philosophies of capitalism and communism. The church seems to have no answer to these chal-

lenges or to the man who steps off the 1859 train with a book under his arm – the man, Charles Darwin, the book, “The Origin of Species”.

Realism was built on structures, empires, imposed order, and enforced behaviour. At **Modernism** our next stop, we see Edvard Munch’s response to all this imposed order and the pressures of life. So begins a new self consciousness that breaks with the traditional styles of literature, poetry, theatre, art and music. Vincent van Gogh, working for the railway company, paints sunflowers on the wall of the ticket office and Pablo Picasso, waiting for the 1910 train draws abstract graffiti on the wall, several bystanders commenting that, “This is the Devil’s work”! The classical form and order of Bach, Beethoven and Mozart have to make room for the innovations of Schoenberg, Stravinski and Mahler. Standing on the platform and disdainfully looking at Picasso’s cubic constructions, Pope Pius X declaims the new modernist thinking and demands that his clergy take the “Oath against Modernism” which includes the declaration, “*I declare that I am completely opposed to the error of the modernists who hold that there is nothing divine in sacred tradition...*”. The RC church thus condemned modernist thinking because its desire to make all things new required a rejection of tradition. Protestants viewed the cultural shift with more favour because they had re-asserted the Holy Bible as the prime authority over questionable church traditions and, unnoticed on the platform, Charles Fox Parnham, had departed on the 1901 train to Kansas speaking in tongues as he boarded commencing the modern Pentecostal movement.

We see Ernest Hemingway returning wounded from the Italian front waiting for the 1918 departure to Illinois with thoughts of a book “A Farewell to Arms” to occupy his journey. The First World War reinforced for him that such a catastrophe could only be brought about by old, traditional concepts of nationalism and power. If he had waited for the 1933 train to Berlin his opinions would have received a fiery confirmation as his books are publicly burned by the rising Nazi party.

Having begun with a scream, Modernism struggles on to the swinging sixties but ends having been overwhelmed by two world wars. Science, secularism and sociology now suppress religion and the church is in steep decline.

For the first time in our 1,000 year journey, the weather is bad and we cannot see where we are or where we are going. The train slows down and, rubbing the mist from the window, we can just make out the station sign as we come to a halt. It says **Postmodernism**. The station announcer calls, "All Change, this train terminates here, or then again it may not". We must get off the train. On the platform we overhear some of the chatter. At all of our previous stops we have found people believing that truth exists and, in their own ways, searching for it. Here the people appear to reject the very notion that anything can be true or false, right or wrong, moral or immoral, real or unreal. All is relative and subjective. Opinion and intuition rather than research, hypothesis and policy are the rather abstract guides on life's journey. So, the values and precepts observed on our cultural train ride have been rejected and ejected. The art, architecture, music, drama, religion, culture, civilisation and science that we saw are pointless and insignificant. Religion, as with everything else, is a matter of opinion with no concept either of authority or truth. So we leave the station finding with some surprise that we are back at Lubbecke in the year 2013.

We have made our journey and now have an idea of how we arrived culturally and spiritually where we are. These cultures merge and overlap and none of them cancels out the others; we live under the influence of all of them. However, at each station on our journey one culture was dominant, so in our times we must consider the effects of the dominant cultural thinking on our Christian walk and witness in the 21<sup>st</sup> Century. I have suggested that it is Postmodernism. However, a mindset whose ground level response to a question of any depth is, "Whatever", cannot survive for long in a world where real questions of life and death now impinge on our everyday lives. Postmodernism has been sustained by the uncontrollable nature of the internet where

ignorance and excess have equal billing with wisdom and genius. I suggest that this sub-culture can exist only as a parasite feeding off the established structures of societies that it despises. Its tools of cynicism, scepticism, doubt and irony are good only for deconstruction and not construction. Think about this; a sub-culture that tells us that there is no such thing as truth cannot expect to be believed, not for long anyway!

It has been severely damaged by some global realities. So, having considered how we got here, let us now think in a little more detail about what shapes the backdrop to our Christian lives today.

*The fall of an atheist empire in Europe* – Glasnost (openness) and Perestroika (restructuring) gathered a momentum that Mikhail Gorbachev had not intended. The foundations of communism crumbled and the building began to fall. In three years of revolution, mainly by civil resistance, the political map of Europe changed and 20 countries tied to the Soviet Union broke free. Even in Gori, Georgia Stalin's hometown his statue is not displayed with public prominence but has been relegated to a museum.

*The rise of militant Islam* – Although terrorism has, historically, left its scars on societies worldwide, the rise of militant Islam reached a summit with the unprecedented horror of the attack on the twin towers in 2001. It precipitated a military and ideological conflict that has seen a dramatic rise in asymmetric warfare prosecuted across borders but not primarily between states. The damage to international cohesion has been immense, the continuing attrition in lives tragic, and the economic effects devastating. From their beginnings in Afghanistan and Pakistan Islamist incursions are now taking place over the whole Arab world turning the so called Arab Spring into a very hot summer for them and a cold winter for their native Christian populations. French military action in Mali is today attempting to push back this Islamic tide.

The motivation is fanatically religious, the philosophy is not new and was expressed well in this summary by Sayyid Qutb an Egyptian aca-

demic and leading member of the Egyptian Muslim Brotherhood - until hanged for plotting the assassination of the president Gamal Abdel Nasser in 1966.

*Aggressive Secularism* – In politics, education, sociology, law and science aggressive secularism has attacked many of the assumptions and moral standards of two Christian millenia. The “Atheist Bus Campaign” in the UK in 2008 backed by the British Humanist Association and atheist professor Richard Dawkins drew some interesting responses ...

*The Continuing Economic Crisis* - Investment and commercial banks made massive, speculative and unsecured gambles with borrowed money. National and international regulating bodies neither recognized nor moderated this fatally flawed finance which was centered on short term individual gain and devoid of personal integrity or long term collective altruism. The present generation, having bailed out the banking system, is now mortgaged to this mixture of recklessness and incompetence.

*Global Warming*- The decade has seen increasing foreboding regarding worldwide climate change and a high incidence of natural disasters that are thought to be linked to human activity. The debate rages but I think a quote from Tony Blair when he was the UK Prime Minister puts a perceptive perspective on global warming, “If we take all this actions and if it turns out not be true, we have reduced pollution and have better ways to live, the downside is very small. The other way around, and we don’t act, and it turns out to be true, then we have betrayed future generations and we don’t have the right to do that.”

*World Population* – Martin Luther King said, “Unlike plagues of the dark ages or contemporary diseases we do not understand, the modern plague of overpopulation is soluble by means we have discovered and with resources we possess. What is lacking is not sufficient knowledge of the solution but universal consciousness of the gravity of the

problem and education of the billions who are its victim.” Whether you are optimistic or pessimistic about world population, it forms a highly significant part of the backdrop to the 21<sup>st</sup> century. The blue line represents actual growth, red, yellow and green show the UN high, medium and low projections through to the 22<sup>nd</sup> century.

*Information Technology* – Star Trek had its beginnings in 1966. Those of us that can remember that far back thought it miraculous that Captain James T Kirk of the Starship Enterprise could communicate with his vessel from a remote location with a small mobile device. Although we cannot yet beam up to space from the surface of the planet who knows, perhaps one day we will! My grandchildren, 8 and 5 are now comfortable with mobile phones and e mail.

By 2015 there will be nearly 3 billion Internet users, more than 40 percent of the world's projected population and nearly 15 billion network connections via computers, tablets, mobile phones, connected appliances and other smart machines devices, enough for two connections for each of the seven billion persons on earth.

We have seen, at least in summary, how we got here in terms of history, culture and Christianity. This is where we are – 21<sup>st</sup> century, the beginning of the third Christian millennium. In many ways we are out of step with the cultural influences of our time. This weekend we hope to make sure that we are still in step with Jesus Christ who is the same, yesterday, today and for ever.