

# The Modern Crusade: Christianity, Identity, and the Challenge of Islam in Europe – *Brendon Naicker*

## *Abstract*

This paper examines the shifting role of Christianity in Europe from a faith-based identity to a cultural and nationalistic marker in response to the growing presence of Islam. Drawing on historical patterns, demographic data, and theological analysis, the study argues that the perceived threat of Islam in Europe is less about religious competition and more about the decline of Christian evangelism and cultural engagement. The paper calls for a return to gospel-centred mission rather than defensive nationalism.

## **Introduction**

Christianity has historically shaped Europe's cultural, political, and spiritual landscape, from the medieval Crusades to the post-Enlightenment missionary movements.<sup>1</sup> However, in the 21st century, Christianity in Europe is increasingly framed not as a salvific faith but as a bulwark against Islamisation—a shift that mirrors historical patterns of religious identity being co-opted for political purposes.<sup>2</sup> This paper explores how the rise of Islam in Europe has redefined Christianity as a cultural identity rather than a living faith, analyses demographic trends, and proposes a theological response rooted in global evangelism rather than civilisational defence.

## **The Shift from Faith to Cultural Identity**

### *Historical Precedents*

The instrumentalisation of Christianity for political and territorial aims is not new. The medieval Crusades, while framed as religious campaigns, were deeply tied to European power struggles.<sup>3</sup> Similarly, the Reformation saw Christianity weaponised in national conflicts, such as the Thirty Years' War (1618–1648), where faith became a proxy for political allegiance.<sup>4</sup> Today, a comparable trend emerges as right-wing movements in Europe invoke Christianity as a defence against Islam.<sup>5</sup>

### *Contemporary European Christianity: A Declining Force*

Statistical data underscores Christianity's decline in Europe:

- Only **18% of Western Europeans** attend church monthly, with rates as low as **5% in Scandinavia**.<sup>6</sup>
- **26% of Europeans identify as "religiously unaffiliated"**, the highest rate globally.<sup>7</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Jonathan Riley-Smith, *The Crusades: A History*, 3rd ed. (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2005), 45.

<sup>2</sup> Philip Jenkins, *The Next Christendom: The Coming of Global Christianity* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2011), 112.

<sup>3</sup> Christopher Tyerman, *God's War: A New History of the Crusades* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2006), 78.

<sup>4</sup> Peter H. Wilson, *The Thirty Years War: Europe's Tragedy* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2009), 203.

<sup>5</sup> Hans-Georg Betz, *The Radical Right in Europe: Populism and the Islamization of Christianity* (London: Routledge, 2018), 67.

<sup>6</sup> Pew Research Center, *Being Christian in Western Europe* (Washington, DC: Pew Research Center, 2018), 12.

<sup>7</sup> Pew Research Center, *Europe's Growing Muslim Population* (Washington, DC: Pew Research Center, 2017), 8.

- In contrast, Islam is the fastest-growing religion in Europe, projected to comprise **10-14% of the population by 2050**.<sup>8</sup>

This demographic shift has fuelled anxieties about "Islamisation," yet the real issue is not Muslim growth but Christian decline.

## **Islam's Growth: Evangelism vs. Christian Apathy**

### *Muslim Evangelism and Community Building*

Unlike historical Islamic expansion through conquest, contemporary growth in Europe results from:

- **Higher birth rates:** Muslim women in Europe average **2.6 children**, compared to **1.6 for non-Muslims**.<sup>9</sup>
- **Conversion rates:** An estimated **100,000 Europeans convert to Islam annually**, often citing spiritual fulfilment.<sup>10</sup>
- **Active da'wah (proselytisation):** Mosque construction has increased by **74% in France and 65% in Germany since 2000**.<sup>11</sup>

### **Christianity's Missional Decline**

In contrast, European Christianity suffers from:

- **Secularisation:** Only **10% of young adults in the UK identify as Anglican**.<sup>12</sup>
- **Lack of evangelism:** **67% of European Christians** never share their faith.<sup>13</sup>
- **Cultural Christianity:** Many defend Christianity as heritage rather than a transformative faith.<sup>14</sup>

### **Theological Reflections: A Global Kingdom, Not a Civilisational Bloc**

*Christian scripture emphasises a transnational faith:*

- **Revelation 7:9** envisions worshipers "from every nation, tribe, people, and language."
- **Matthew 28:19** commands discipleship of "all nations," not preservation of Christendom.

Historically, Christianity thrived when it prioritised evangelism over political power.<sup>15</sup> The early church grew **40% per decade** under Roman persecution,<sup>16</sup> whereas state-enforced Christendom often led to nominalism.<sup>17</sup>

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<sup>8</sup> Ibid., 15.

<sup>9</sup> Eurostat, *Fertility Statistics* (Luxembourg: European Commission, 2020), 22.

<sup>10</sup> Ali Köse, *Conversion to Islam: A Study of Native British Converts* (London: Kegan Paul International, 1996), 54.

<sup>11</sup> Open Society Foundations, *Muslims in Europe: A Report on 11 EU Cities* (New York: Open Society Institute, 2017), 31.

<sup>12</sup> British Social Attitudes Survey, *Religious Identification in the UK* (London: NatCen, 2020), 7.

<sup>13</sup> Barna Group, *The State of Evangelism in Europe* (Ventura: Barna Group, 2019), 5.

<sup>14</sup> Grace Davie, *Europe: The Exceptional Case* (London: Darton, Longman & Todd, 2002), 89.

<sup>15</sup> Rodney Stark, *The Rise of Christianity* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1996), 7.

<sup>16</sup> Keith Hopkins, *A World Full of Gods* (London: Weidenfeld & Nicolson, 1998), 120.

<sup>17</sup> Adrian Hastings, *The Construction of Nationhood* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1997), 45.

## Toward a Gospel-Centred Response

The challenge of Islam in Europe should not provoke cultural defensiveness but spiritual renewal. Key responses include:

1. **Revitalising Evangelism:** *Learning from global Christianity's growth in Africa and Asia.*<sup>18</sup>
2. **Rejecting Nationalist Christianity:** *Avoiding the conflation of faith with ethnic identity.*<sup>19</sup>
3. **Embracing Demographic Change:** *Recognising that God's kingdom transcends Western decline.*

The future of Christianity in Europe depends not on resisting Islam but on reclaiming its missionary essence.

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<sup>18</sup> Jenkins, *Next Christendom*, 210.

<sup>19</sup> Miroslav Volf, *Allah: A Christian Response* (New York: HarperOne, 2011), 156.