

# The Lost Continent?

## The Discovery of Europe by American Evangelicals, 1940-1980

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### Introduction

Usually the term the lost continent evokes an image of promise, alluding to the treasures of Atlantis. But this not what the missionaries meant: not a treasure hunt, but a nostalgic tour of a once great civilization gone to pieces. They were more in the mood of Bill Bryson, the Des Moines author who writes about everything. In the year 1989 he published a rather devastating travelogue about the demise of small town America with the title *The Lost Continent*. So the title can refer to hope and to resignation.

I use this term exactly because it has both pessimistic and optimistic connotations. My story begins with the shock of the loss of religion in Europe and it ends with the hope of a joint treasure hunt. It seeks to analyze how American evangelicals discovered the religious constellation in Europe after World War II, their intervention, and the effects.

But let me begin with my own personal story of my exploration. That began in 1988, 24 years ago. I was a graduate student at Leiden University in the Netherlands, where I had exhausted all the courses in American history that my university offered. I was very fortunate to acquire a graduate assistantship at Kent State University in Ohio. That was my first time in the United States, and the beginning of a relationship, in which I learned to cherish especially the Midwest.

During my first Christmas break the Evangelical Student group, Intervarsity had arranged that I could attend a camp at the Upper Peninsula. One of my fellow students gave me a ride to Wheaton, where his parents lived, and found it convenient to drop me off here at the College, where somebody else would pick me up. My professor in Ohio had grown up on Chicago's West side and had arranged a meeting with a colleague, who showed me around in the exhibition on itinerant preachers. Since I had just completed my MA thesis on Moody and Sankey in Europe, I was eager to see it. What began as an illustration to my first steps on the academic stage, developed into a long-term relationship.

Fifteen years later, I recalled Billy Graham Center when I looked for material on the International Christian Leadership Conference, also called "The Family," which hosted Fellowship House in Washington DC. This somewhat overt organization is one of the topics that fascinates Europeans: how do politics and religion mix in a country with such an explicit civil religion and without Christian Democratic Parties. As this group frequently met in the Netherlands in the 1950s and had chosen a former Dutch Queen, Wilhelmina, as its honorary president, my curiosity in international religious relations grew, and I found a treasure trove of information here at the archives. By that time I had become a professional historian at an institute for American history in the Netherlands and was able to turn my personal curiosity about religion in America into a professional inquiry of political and cultural links between our two countries. Though these two countries are very different in size and scope, I found numerous

points of contact also in the religious realm, many more than I anticipated.

So far, I had done research on Dutch immigration in the United States, American inspiration for the Dutch Temperance Movement, and the Marshall Plan, and these lines merged beautifully in the activities of American evangelicals on mainland Europe. At the Archives, I discovered the comprehensive newspaper clipping file documenting Billy Graham's campaign in the Netherlands. Its coverage, it turned out, penetrated into all the corners of the country. The Americans are masters of publicity. I also found that the Dutch-American immigrant community here in Chicago bankrolled Youth for Christ's campaign to Holland in the late 1940s. This illustrated beautifully that religious activities are part of an enduring reciprocal exchange. This turns out to be a common, if little known pattern in Europe. In the process of excavating more evidence of the bilateral relationship, I stumbled on a third treasure in the correspondence file of Corrie ten Boom, a member of the Dutch resistance during World War II, who survived the concentration camps and brought a message of conciliation and inspiration after the war. She proved to be a pivotal early connection between American Evangelicals and European believers, politicians and again Queen Wilhelmina. All these separate seemingly incidental examples must have been part of a bigger chain, a significant link that deserved to be explored.

Inspired by my personal encounter with evangelicals, my first research into what European immigrants brought to America, and the discoveries of individual connections of American evangelicals with Europe, I became intrigued by the dynamics of this transatlantic religious exchange. So I returned in 2007 and last year to mine the resources here at the Billy Graham Center. I must say that the accessibility of the archives via the simple, but effective and updated website, has been invaluable to plan and execute my research. Hail to the staff!

### **Importance of the topic**

My presentation today connects nicely with the mission interest of earlier lecturers, and the transatlantic connections presented by Uta Balbier and Alan Bearman, who held the podium in the past years. I was tempted to follow their lead by reconstructing Graham's campaign in yet another European country. And it is justified to look at the Netherlands as a small culture in comparison to European heavyweights such as Germany and England. One might consider the unity of Europe from the outside, but once inside, one will notice that the dynamics of religion work differently in each European country, depending on mostly internal power relations within the existing churches. But there is more to it, there is more presence of American evangelicals in Europe than Graham and his organization and there is larger goal than building a catalog of bilateral responses of European countries to him and other evangelists. While it is fully understandable for a European that specific circumstances and agendas in individual countries defined the impact of American religious visitors on each culture, it is harder to see how they all connected to create a separate European evangelical network thanks to American involvement.

This topic has relevance in three discussions: first the nature and trajectories of secularization, as it enters a new phase of comparing Europe and the United States. I refer here to the work of Peter Berger, Grace Davie, and Effie Fokas.<sup>1</sup> I think it helps to not only theorize about these differences, but also look at the actual interaction.

A second debate is the competition between religious progressives and conservatives in dominating American culture. In this debate Martin Marty acknowledged that the evangelicals had won, but historian David Hollinger claimed the opposite in a recent article in the *Journal of American History*.<sup>ii</sup>

A third area of relevance is the recent trend in historical research to examine transnational connections as a correction of the dominance of national narratives, which obscure the developments that transcend national boundaries. Religion is becoming a key field of interest. Can we perhaps see something of a transnational religious identity which replaces national identification and is that a trend that is equally strong in the Western World?<sup>iii</sup>

Actually, there is a fourth use of this research and that is for missiology. This history gives a case study of what happens when missionaries enter an area where there is already a (strong) Christian presence.

What I would like to do is to see when and why Europe got on the map as a target for American Evangelicals after World War II, how this discovery fit into their larger concerns, how they approached Europe, and what they experienced there. Did the discovery of Europe as a mission field by American evangelicals weaken or strengthen transatlantic ties?

## **Discovery**

In the October of 1948, Oswald J. Smith, pastor of the Peoples Church in Toronto, returned from a six-week European trip and admonished his constituency as follows: “Let us pray and let us work that Europe, one of the greatest of all mission fields, may be evangelized before it is forever too late.”<sup>iv</sup> This admonition sounded quite ominous: why too late, and too late for what?

Oswald Smith did not refer to the destruction of church buildings resulting from the war. He was referring to the lack of evangelicals in Europe, where the Catholic and Orthodox churches kept their flock ignorant, and the Protestant churches had succumbed to liberalism. The result was, in his eyes, a weakening of faith which had allowed the Nazis to enlist the church as an instrument for their hideous plans, twelve years of disaster followed by God's judgment. He saw apathy, discouragement, and a misplaced sense of theological superiority. This sentiment was also expressed in the Youth for Christ film of 1951:

“Twenty-two churches were destroyed in Frankfurt in one night. Why would God permit that destruction? One must remember that formerly Higher Criticism prevailed and Modernism was preached in these churches. Could it be that this was retribution for a faithless preaching of the Lord Jesus Christ? What a tragedy.”<sup>v</sup>

The urgency of Smith' call came from the acute Communist threat of Berlin. Germany and Western Europe could soon and easily be overrun by Soviet troops and find themselves closed for the gospel. To Smith this immediate political threat urged him to fortify the believers in Europe by distribution of flyers about conversion. Smith had been to Europe before, so it was not a completely new experience. The difference with previous trips was he and other Protestants had either concentrated their efforts in solidly Catholic countries in Southern Europe, or on

refugees and Jews from Eastern Europe. Now, the western Europeans themselves were their targets. When the Youth for Christ revival crossed the ocean in 1946 and following years, the American evangelists saw that the Europeans were listless, divided, pessimistic, theoretical, many outwardly observing religion but without inner conviction. In one word: the churches in Europe were paralyzed. The Youth for Christ crusades spurred them into action, prodded them to confirm their commitment, and set them up with motivation, models, and materials, and a mission to imitate. The voice over of the film *White Fields in Europe* reveals the urgency: “Christ or Communism. Christ can stay the red tide. These people need the whole armor of God to withstand the evil day. It is well known fact that less has been done to meet the spiritual need of Europe than any other Continent. Europe is the forgotten missionary field. They need your help. That they may the Lord Jesus Christ and find a spiritual security that counts in these days of uncertainty. There is an impending urgency to this need. Will you help now? For I believe this is God's hour for Europe.”<sup>vi</sup>

But these evangelicals were not the only Americans active in Europe: representatives of the denominations that cooperated in shaping the World Council of Churches and assisted their European sister churches as fraternal workers since the 1840s. One might say that among the Americans in Europe ecumenicals worked at the top to secure a universal structure for human rights, while evangelicals worked at the bottom to promote personal transformation. Mainline Americans took the lead in this effort to open up opportunities to strengthen democracy worldwide by advancing progressive education. Fear for restrictions for this plan in atheistic, Catholic, and Islamic countries, prodded them to let the UN add religious liberty in its public and private expressions to be adopted in the Universal Declaration of Human Rights. And they succeeded.<sup>vii</sup>

At the ground level, the evangelical mission began in Europe with a few former chaplains cooperating with the rapidly spreading Youth for Christ teams that flocked to the capitals of Europe to prod Europe's youth to publicly express their commitment to become a follower of Christ. The positive response to the campaigns surprised American missionaries. The reports in the American evangelical press about the YFC activities were jubilant and proved that the expected global revival really took place.<sup>viii</sup> So, it was not only pessimism about Europe's future, it was also the sense of excitement about a global revival that encouraged American evangelists to cross the Atlantic.

A second round of public preaching in Europe in 1954 and 1955 turned Billy Graham into a celebrity, but also qualified evangelical optimism about a sweeping revival of Europe. Normalcy had returned to the Continent, and European responses fell into two categories: the best responses were in the UK and Germany, where a spiritual revival took place, while France, Switzerland, Holland, and Scandinavia finally woke up. The most lasting result was the revitalization of European clergy.<sup>ix</sup> Southern European countries had not invited Graham or were unable to muster sufficient finances and manpower to host a campaign. So the countries that resembled the US in its low church revival approach and tradition of pietism and activism responded most favorably to the American approach. The stressful Southern European countries that struggled with autocratic regimes received the largest share of the less public evangelical activities.

## **Causes of the American presence in Europe**

While the fear of communism continued to fill the air in the Cold War era, it was not the only motive for American evangelicals to invest time, funds, energy, and staff in Europe. A second and equally powerful motive was the fear for religious liberalism. The rapid emergence of a coordinating organization for evangelicals, the National Association of Evangelicals, looked with great concern to the massive rise of a global ecumenical organization the World Council of Churches. Thanks to the spread of Youth for Christ campaigns Americans discovered who their European partners were. These contacts were individual and often unofficial, and mainland Europeans had difficulty understanding what the term “evangelical” stood for and many were confused by fundamentalist challenges to evangelical plans.

The strictest part of the American evangelical leadership rejected the ecumenical effort as a ploy of the devil to corrupt the true church, others were more pragmatic and feared that evangelicals would be overwhelmed in the new ecumenical organization if they joined. Fundamentalists were quick to announce a counter organization meant to expose the liberal, read Communist, nature of the WCC. They refused admission to their Council of organizations that maintained any link with the NCC or WCC. Since separation was their common solution in conflicts, that is what they expected from their partners. Carl McIntire practiced what he preached: purity at any price.

Most evangelical leaders, however, found the separatist mode counterproductive to the goal of achieving unified action. They fostered hopes to turn the tide of liberalism in America and restore their influence. Moreover, they were aware that many evangelical believers belonged to churches affiliated with the ecumenical movement and they needed their support. Their greatest fear was that the WCC would exclude evangelicals from the international arena. Since many of their affiliates were active in faith mission organizations they wanted to secure access to the mission fields. They approached their kindred spirits in Europe, since many European countries had the authority to allow missionaries to their colonies in Africa and Asia. So the combination of a desire to advance a global revival and to secure access to the mission fields prodded the newly shaped network of evangelicals to seek closer cooperation in Europe.

## **Reception**

Apart from a broad and permanent curiosity about the sensational aspects of American religious expressions, there were three reasons why Europeans paid attention to American evangelicals. Firstly, Americans were clearly the moral and material victors of World War II. Europe admired American culture, technology, and leaders, who put pressure on securing space for religious liberty in autocratic regimes. Secondly, these Americans could provide financial assistance to rebuild damaged institutions. Thirdly, the war had deeply shaken Europe's moral fabric and the churches had allowed this disaster to happen. The young generation especially was disappointed about their parents and longed for new ideals, fresh approaches, and promising scenarios for a better future. High birthrates put them in a strong position. In the Protestant part of Europe, a large group of teenagers had been raised religiously, but in a strict hierarchy. The egalitarian and improvised nature of the American youth leaders and the familiarity of their message warmed them to this new phenomenon. Civic authorities were often glad to see the youth workers organize events for the wild youngsters of the post war years.<sup>x</sup>

Moreover, it was not the first time that a wave of Anglo-American inspiration had energized Europe. Moody and Sankey had drawn hundreds of European ministers in the 1875 campaign in the UK, simultaneously with holiness preachers who had alluded to higher levels of spirituality. This legacy had survived in the many revival songs that had been translated and served in unofficial church meetings. These expressed the feelings of the faithful in a more emotional way. In the twentieth century Frank Buchman's Moral Rearmament movement had also drawn thousands of Europeans on the mainland with promises of harmony and progress through virtue.

Now Billy Graham, Beverly Shea and scores of other teams once again fulfilled the expectation of renewal from the West. Their action-driven agenda and practical approach that transcended church walls attracted a new generation of young believers. The quick, dynamic, efficient, sparkling and simple presentation of the traditional gospel to the masses, followed by personal attention for those who wanted to explore the value of the Christian faith, attracted those who had been wandering. This positive reception was strongest in the first post-war decade. But there was opposition too: from strict Calvinists who rejected Graham's Arminianism, denying human free will, from public church officials who saw these Americans undermine church authority, and from civic servants who feared the harmful effects of cultic excesses.

### **Goals and Obstacles**

American evangelicals worked on two fronts, local and regional. In the slipstream of their evangelism and church planting campaigns in various countries they followed in the footsteps of their ecumenical brethren, by setting up a world evangelical fellowship. Woudschoten, a conference site close to Zeist, about 20 miles south of Amsterdam, was the venue for its founding in 1951. The organization had to prove its legitimacy over and against the World Council of Churches, to foil the biting attacks from the Fundamentalist International Council of Christian Churches, and to reactivate the respectable but dormant century-old Evangelical Alliance, that continued its activities out of the UK.

A number of European evangelicals, mainly in the UK and Germany, feared that the Americans would dominate the WEF and burden the organization with their fierce debates about the inerrancy of the Bible and rejection of soft evangelicals who searched for possibilities to engage with ecumenicals. In the 1960s the EEA joined the WEF after it had ensured that it did not have to follow the American terminology of being a pure evangelical, and would still be considered reliable.

### **Effects**

The 1952 missionary reports and prayer letters began to include Europe for the first time as a separate category. The largest concentration of these new missions were in Italy, Belgium and France, Portugal, Spain, and Austria, with minor ones in Britain, Holland, and Norway.<sup>xi</sup> American mission agencies soon made a division of labor between North and Southern Europe. The ministries of American evangelicals in Northern European countries targeted youth and mobilized Christians, while in the South they tried to plant new churches and distribute literature.<sup>xii</sup> At central locations they founded Bible schools, a new type of education in Protestant Europe.

The number of missionaries from North America to Western Europe increased from 250 or 1 per cent of all American missionaries in 1952 to 475 in 1962 to 1714 or 6 per cent in 1972 and on to ten per cent in the 1980s (3700). Even though that was only one percent of all European clergy, their symbolic value, their founding of evangelical churches, especially in Southern Europe, and their efforts to pool evangelical resources together for one global network, and their contribution to more pluralism, added up to a significant contribution to religion in Europe.

This growth had various causes: some missionaries were kicked out of the colonies and relocated in the colonizing countries since they spoke that language, others found a European post less demanding on their family and languages easier to learn. The Bible schools churned out ever more graduates and missionary newsletters began to draw attention to Europe's religious condition in the 1950s. The authoritarian regimes in the Catholic Southern tier of countries in Europe frustrated the freedom of religion for Protestants and were attacked in a broad range of journals and newspapers. The strength of the Communist Parties in France and Italy was ominous. Meanwhile, calculations of numbers of Christians according to evangelical standards, like having a conversion experience and showing good moral behavior, were shockingly low. Some authors believed that 75% of Europe was pagan, others could only find 1 per cent evangelicals in Europe. They blamed the church and the incomplete Reformation, which had changed the heads, but not the heart of the Europeans. Negative assessments of religion in Europe accumulated: it was pleasure seeking, looking for the occult, suffered under Catholic or Communist yokes, or suffocated under the cloak of tradition.

The pivotal figure of the American Evangelical presence in Europe was Bob Evans. He was the prototype of the American missionary: child of missionaries himself, educated here at Wheaton, navy chaplain struck by the dismal situation in Europe. In 1949 he founded the European Bible Institute in Paris and he remained the key evangelical contact in Europe as coordinator of the Greater Europe Mission (GEM) that evolved from this operation in 1952. Four years later the GEM employed 51 workers, mostly in France and Germany, who were mainly involved in teaching Evangelical theology and the practice of evangelism.<sup>xiii</sup>

It was in the 1960s more than in the 1940s that American evangelicals defined Europe as the lost continent, from which true Christianity had all but disappeared. When the great exodus from the traditional churches became visible in the 1960s, the American evangelicals reconsidered the status of the European churches. Initially, they had come to organize campaigns for the churches, but now they had come to the conclusion that the established churches were part of the problem, not of the solution. So they focused on training individual believers to evangelize.

In sheer numbers the evangelical rebound was a great success: the majority of missionaries identified themselves as evangelicals. It was more than a numerical victory, it was also a result of the pioneering phase: the initial phase was always one of preaching the gospel, followed by establishing educational and medical institutions. The next phase of consolidation prepared the receiving peoples for assuming the responsibility for the work. Meanwhile the scope of activities expanded as the social needs asked for action. A sign of this new orientation were the informal meetings between ecumenical and evangelical Americans at Malone College which took place behind the scenes of the fierce and mutual rhetorical rejection. So in fact the pattern of the evangelical missionary involvement followed the earlier organizational path that mainline

missions had traveled before. They secured access to the newly independent and former colonized states, creating space for the legitimacy of social issues, and cutting back on American dominance.

## **Results**

Did all these men and women succeed in reChristianizing Europe? The optimistic missionary workers had to admit that it was hard work, they often ran out of steam. But, even if they did not achieve their goal, they did succeed in creating an evangelical presence in Catholic countries, where none or very weak ones had been struggling, and united the scattered evangelicals in the protestant areas. They collected both groups in fruitful networks and gave them new strength through their resources and reassurance. The most visible legacy were the Bible schools that Americans and Europeans founded using American models. Thus the missionaries connected the American with an emerging European-wide evangelical subculture in the 1970s, built a bridge between two continents and in doing so they created a European outlet for American evangelical literature, and a shared heritage.<sup>xiv</sup>

The older churches in Europe frequently talked about the crisis in European Christendom, but mustered very little concerted action. Evangelicals acted first and reflected on their approach later. One of the first political results was an increased pressure to secure freedom of religion in Southern Europe. In the process the presence of so many American missionaries in the old continent continued to draw attention to the transatlantic links. In the Protestant North, they helped European traditional believers to once again concentrate on the core of their faith and to more effectively communicate these beliefs to their own offspring. The quick action by American evangelicals after the war enabled Europeans to break through national and ecclesiastical walls that had separated them.

And what did the Americans receive in return? First the European experience changed their approach: mass evangelistic events proved not the best way to reach non-believers, especially not on the mainland. With the exception of the UK, where revival meetings were a tradition, cultural adaptation was necessary. Some missionaries realized that they needed to become more intellectual to reach a European audience, and others learned that the European church tradition, even the Catholic Church, had valuable things to offer. The European connection which emphasized the comprehensive nature of the church strengthened the shift to incorporate a structural place of social justice in their mission, which brought them closer to their European fellow believers.<sup>xv</sup>

In the same process Americans tuned down their sense of superiority in the beginning as not to scare the Europeans away and yet, my impression is that the European experience did not fundamentally change the missionary views on themselves, on America. Some were trained in sending messages, and had a hard time receiving. Others became truly transnational and learned to discover the weaknesses of evangelicalism in America. And perhaps the tables will be turned again and the wave of dynamic activism will give way to a renewed interest in tradition. Signs of that are visible in the emerging church and the Orthodox revival.

The many missionary organizations and the Graham campaigns have enriched Europe's religious



market with a comprehensive evangelical network to which approximately 15 million souls belong.<sup>xvi</sup> They have created their own institutional framework which sustains this community through training programs and mass meetings.

American evangelicals accomplished their priority, namely to break the monopolistic power of the WCC, but their higher end, namely to Re-Christianize Europe, proved to be much more difficult to achieve. Yet, their drive, dollars, devices, and daring concepts, introduced or strengthened American religious pluralism in European societies, and created a transnational community. By helping European evangelicals to find one another, they prepared the stage for a global evangelical network. So perhaps I should change the title of my talk into “The Rediscovered Continent.” Eventually Europe might be closer to the original Atlantis than many missionaries realized. After a temporary distance between Americans and Europeans, American evangelicals succeeded in creating a transnational community of believers.

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<sup>i</sup> Peter Berger, Grace Davie, and Effie Fokas, *Religious America, Secular Europe? A Theme and Variations* (Aldershot/Burlington VT: Ashgate, 2008).

<sup>ii</sup> David A. Hollinger, “After Cloven Tongues of Fire: Ecumenical Protestantism and the Modern American Encounter with Diversity,” *Journal of American History* 98.1 (June 2011): 21-48.

<sup>iii</sup> Robert Wuthnow and Stephen Offutt, “Transnational Religious Connections,” *Sociology of Religion* 69.2 (2009): 209-232.

<sup>iv</sup> Oswald Smith, “The Miracle of Youth for Christ in Europe,” *People's Magazine*, first quarter 1949, 21. in Col 48, box 16, folder 21 YFC Europe, 1949-50. See also W.W. White, “Europe's Challenge Today: A Survey of its Religious Conditions,” *Alliance Weekly*, February 1949, p. 88, 92, 104, 107.

<sup>v</sup> *White Fields in Europe* (Missionary Films: 1951).

<sup>vi</sup> *White Fields in Europe* (Missionary Films: 1951).

<sup>vii</sup> John Nurser, *For All Peoples and All Nations: Christian Churches and Human Rights* (Geneva: WCC Publications, 2005), 49-92.

<sup>viii</sup> See the issues of *Youth for Christ Magazine* and United Evangelical Action.

<sup>ix</sup> George Burnham, *Billy Graham: A Mission Accomplished* (Westwood, NJ: Fleming H. Revell Company, 1955), 151-2.

<sup>x</sup> Hans Krabbendam, “The American Influence on Dutch Religion,” in Hans Krabbendam, Cornelis A. van Minnen and Giles Scott-Smith, eds., *Four Centuries of Dutch-American Relations, 1609-2009* (Amsterdam/New York: Boom/State University of New York Press, 2009), 1027-1038.

<sup>xi</sup> R. Pierce Beaver, “Distribution of the American Protestant Foreign Missionary Force in 1952,” *Missionary Research Library, Occasional Bulletin* 4.10 (13 July 1953), 1 and Beaver, “The Expansion of American Foreign Missionary Activities Since 1945,” *Missionary Research Library, Occasional Bulletin* 5.7 (4 June 1954): 5-6.

<sup>xii</sup> See for the seven main activities, church planting, personal evangelism, mass evangelism, literature distribution, broadcasting, theological education, support of national churches: William L. Wagner, *North American Protestant Missionaries in Western Europe: A Critical Appraisal* (Bonn: Verlag für Kultur und Wissenschaft, 1993), 41-50.

<sup>xiii</sup> Robert P. Evans, Newsletter, 28 October 1947. Billy Graham Center Archives col. 20 box 72 folder 4. Letter Robert P. Evans to J.O Percy of the IFMA, 22 November 1956. BGCA 352, IFMA, box 7, file 2.

<sup>xiv</sup> Occasionally, American financiers withdrew from European educational institutions when they did not live up to the more strict evangelical rules. See William L. Wagner, “The Case of Rueschlikon: The Background of the Controversy between the Southern Baptists and the European Baptist Federation” *Bibel und Gemeinde* 105 (April-Juni 2005).

<sup>xv</sup> Though the main impulse for this change came from non-Western Christians.

<sup>xvi</sup> According to the EEA's website: < <http://www.europeanea.org/> > visited 4 September 2012.