1. Conversion and Civilization

1.1. The Voice of Justice

In the Gospel of John, chapter 8, we find the story of Jesus and the adulterous woman. She has been ‘caught in the act’, and she is brought before Jesus by self-righteous men who want to test his orthodoxy. “In the Law Moses commanded us to stone such women. Now what do you say?” (v. 5, NIV). This is, basically, a question of justice, and what is at stake here is Jesus’ reputation as a teacher of the law. Jesus’ response is well known and often quoted: “Let any one of you who is without sin, be the first to throw a stone at her” (v. 7). Then her accusers simply go away. Jesus rebukes her mildly, and lets her go.

Modern people, who read this story, will probably focus on the double standards of morality in those patriarchal cultures. Apparently, Jesus unmasks this hypocrisy and gives the woman a new identity, free from masculine, sexist categories. And this may very well be a dimension of this story. In a sense, it can be read as a story of conversion. Both, the Pharisees and the woman are changed after they have met Jesus.

However, there may be another dimension as well. I think it is very interesting to see how this story was read by some thinkers who stood at the very foundations of our European Christian culture. Church fathers like Ambrose and Augustine read this passage along the lines of other Gospel texts in which Jesus is confronted with questions of jurisdiction – such as the question whether it is permitted to pay taxes to the Roman emperor (Mark 12:13-17). For them it was not an issue that the Pharisees in John 8 had the right to judge this woman, under the prevailing laws. The crucial issue for them was: what would Jesus, as the ‘voice of justice’ (vox iustitiae), do when he would be confronted with human, ‘secular’ law? Seen through their eyes, this text is an encounter between heavenly and earthly justice. It is not just about conversion; it is also a clash of kingdoms.2

Here, two very important options become visible. According to Ambrose (339-397 CE), what Jesus does here is to abolish ordinary human justice in the context of the new covenant. Even within a Christian Empire (Ambrose lived after Constantine’s Edict of Toleration), this earthly justice belongs to the old order of the world that will pass. Only Jesus, and thus only his Church, has the right to judge Christians, regardless of

---

1 Lev. 20:10; Deut. 22:22-24.
2 Ambrose, Ep. 50.
any other kingdom they belong to. Augustine (354-430 CE), on the other hand, read this story of the adulterous woman as an example how the arrival of God’s kingdom transforms earthly justice. Jesus’ words in this chapter must inspire the Church to interfere actively with the secular state, in order to moderate its law-system, to reform it, and give it a more pedagogical character. Only Christ can judge in perfect justice and compassion, and therefore our punishment of crimes must be mild. It must be aimed at the conversion and improvement of sinners, not at their elimination. This is, for example, why Augustine was against capital punishment in practice – even if he endorsed it in theory on the basis of the Old Testament and Romans 13:8.

1.2. To Build a Church and a Culture

Obviously, Augustine’s approach has become the predominant way in which the Church has done her mission in the West. Apart from some ‘Ambrosian’ episodes, Christianity in the West has not only tried to build communities of committed Christians, but has also wanted to influence the world. In 19th century terms we might say that Christian mission has always turned around ‘conversion’ and ‘civilization’. It has built a church and a culture. The exact relationship between these two has shifted all the time. In the early Christianization of Northwestern Europe, ‘civilization’ came first: it was imposed on the Germanic tribes from above, and only after this (often very violent) culture change personal conversion could begin. Usually, it would take generations for Christianity to ‘sink in’. And we may seriously wonder to what extent this happened at all, especially in those areas of Europe which were Christianized late and violently – such as Denmark.

Later, however, other models developed. During the Great Century of Mission (c. 1800-1910) missiologists debated whether the planting of the church (plantatio ecclesiae) should precede or follow the Christianization of culture – with very different answers. Modern Evangelicals usually take a firm individualistic position: culture change will happen through the conversion of individuals. Or, in the words of the International Fellowship of Evangelical Students (IFES): “Change the world, one student at a time”. However, even within Evangelicalism, opinions differ about the necessary depth of initial conversion. Should we aim at mass conversions first, inevitably superficial, and ‘perfect’ those people later (Donald McGavran)? Or should we build committed

---

3 Ambrose, Ep. 75a.
5 One could think of the papacy of Hildebrand (Gregorius VII) or (in a different register) the Anabaptists in the early 16th century. Both aspired after a church that was independent of the world, and visibly opposed to it. In the Investiture Controversy this was played out along the lines of offices and jurisdiction, while it took a more local and communal shape in Anabaptism.
8 Rodney Stark, ‘Efforts to Christianize Europe, 400-2000’, Journal of Contemporary Religion 16.1 (2001), 108: “In the end, it is doubtful that the masses in north-western Europe, and especially in Scandinavia, were ever truly converted”. Italics in the original.
9 Donald A. McGavran, The Bridges of God: A Study in the Strategy of Missions, World Dominion Press:
communities of disciples, one by one, who will influence the world through their holiness and love (Alan Kreider)?

Anyhow, the combination of conversion and civilization has always been the core business of Christian mission. For centuries this resulted in two related approaches. In those parts of the world where Christianity was new, especially since the 19th century, Christians have offered Christianity as a way to a better life and a better society. I do not mean that this was all they had to say. For most of them a personal faith and commitment to Jesus was central. But this personal faith found support somehow in the clearly visible and positive results that conversion had in society. Christianity could present itself in many ways as a superior religion, not just because the West had an immense technological lead on the Rest, but also because Christians brought many things that really helped people. They brought education, human rights, equality of men and women, and health care. Today, we see this dynamic most clearly within the Pentecostal missions in Latin America. If a man becomes a Christian, quits drinking, finds a job, starts to bring his salary home, and begins to take care of his wife and children, this is a very powerful testimony to the truth of the Christian gospel. You do not need many additional arguments if conversion leads to such dramatic life changes. I suppose Richard Dawkins does not lecture too often in Sao Paulo.

In Europe and in other Western countries, conversion usually was sought against the backdrop of a self-evident cultural Christianity. This did not necessarily lead to a deep personal faith in many people. If we look at early modern Europe, it may strike us that Martin Luther (in the heyday of Christendom) declared that “among thousand hardly one Christian can be found”. John Calvin, discussing the semen religionis (‘seed of religion’) in humanity, stated that, although this ‘seed’ is universal, “scarcely one in a hundred is found who cherishes it in his heart, and not one in whom it grows to maturity”. In the 19th century, the founder of the German inner mission, Johann Hinrich Wichern, stated that perhaps 5% of all Lutherans attended church at all in Germany, something which the Dutch pastor Abraham Kuyper confirmed with regard to Reformed church members in Amsterdam.

For all the obvious rhetoric that is involved in such claims, it is a simple fact that most Christian leaders in Europe’s history thought that ‘true’ Christians were always a

London 1955, 13. Cf. p. 38: “Yet, it may safely be said that, as a rule, the peoples of northern Europe came to the Christian faith in group movements, or in socio-religious movements, or in politico-religious movements. First, one tribe would be discipled and then some years or centuries later another tribe would find a Christward movement being born within it. (…) Christendom arose out of People Movements. The only continent where most of the population became even nominally Christian was the continent which was won for Christ in a long series of People Movements!”. Italics in the original.

12 Martin Luther, Von weltlicher Obrigkeit (1523), WA XI, 251, 12-13.
minority, even when virtually every single European was baptized. But this minority was accepted by the ‘baptized pagans’ around them; their faith and commitment were somehow ‘vicarious’ (Grace Davie). They may have been looked at as fools, perhaps even mocked sometimes, but they embodied an ideal that was recognized by the majority. In a sense, people looked at them as we look at artists. We can’t be all artists; they must remain a minority. Often, artists shock us, because they refuse to adapt to common moral, or because they produce work that a majority sees as worthless or obscene. We make jokes about them: go and find a real job like the rest of us. Nevertheless, artists in our societies have an influence that extends the size of their group by far. Most citizens would support government subsidies for museums and music schools, they would respect artists to some extent, and they would generally consider artists as an asset for society. More or less in the same way those converted Christians (‘twice born’) of the European past were seen as the keepers of the deeper sources of society. As long as they did not get too much power (and liberal elites saw to that) they were respected.

1.3. Crisis of Mission
Now, this more or less harmonious situation has come to an end. Today we can speak of a crisis of mission in Europe. With this I do not mean that only few Europeans take Christianity seriously as their own religion. As has been noticed above, this has always been the case, more or less. Despite their loudness in the media, atheists have not become the majority in most Western European societies. By far the largest part of our populations may be called pagans instead. I do not use this term in a moral or derogatory sense, but simply to describe people who believe in a (usually vague and distant) higher power, who cherish rituals in the most important moments of their lives, and for the rest simply accept what works for them. This, I assume, was true for the majority of Europeans in history, it is true for the majority of religious mankind, and it is again true in secularized Europe today – as every social survey demonstrates.

So, as far as I am concerned, the crisis of mission in Europe is not the small number of committed Christians. The problem is, rather, that their faith and life-style make increasingly less sense to the majority of their fellow citizens. In other words, the bond between conversion and civilization has become very thin in our European societies. Perhaps it is already broken. Recently, I spoke with a missionary who had worked in an African country for most of his life. After he returned to the Netherlands, he experienced a crisis of faith. All of his life he had known what to do as a Christian with a missionary heart. But here he just did not have a clue. As he explained to me: “In

---

15 The term ‘baptized pagan’ was a widely used label denoting ‘nominal Christians’, since the 17th century (see Paas, ‘Making’, 56-58). Even before that time the Anabaptists called their fellow citizens outside their communities unrestrictedly ‘pagans’ (Wolfgang Schäufele, Das missionarische Bewußtsein und Wirken der Täufer: Dargestellt nach oberdeutschen Quellen, Neukirchener Verlag: Neukirchen-Vluyn 1966, 48-52).

16 As for the Danes, in 2005 31% indicated to believe in a ‘personal God’, and another 49% believed in a ‘Spirit or life force’ (Eurobarometer 2005). Belief in a personal God has dropped between 1981 and 1991 with 6.4%. On the other hand, belief in a ‘Spirit or life force’ has increased with almost 20% (WVS/EVS).
Africa it was very easy to see the evil that we had to fight. I could preach against it, I could point at it, and I could build structures to restrict it. I could show people that Jesus could make a difference for them. But here, in the West, it is so difficult to see what the actual evil is. There is so little to improve, so little that Jesus can do for us”.

I believe this missionary touched the heart of our missionary crisis in the West. Our societies are post-Christian societies. In a way, our nations are the products of more than a millennium of Christian civilization. Christian mission has been so successful that it has made itself redundant. This has led, paradoxically, to a huge loss of sympathy towards Christianity in our societies, and a huge loss of missionary confidence within the Church. Even the traditional ‘christo-pagan’ does not feel connected to Christianity anymore. Christianity is old stuff. Except for the old, the sick, the dumb and the weak, nobody needs it anymore.

As for the sympathy (or receptivity) part, many people in our nations no longer believe that there is a necessary link between Christianity and what they value in their culture. Sometimes this forgetfulness is remarkable indeed. Recently, I read an article in a Dutch newspaper. The author claimed that we do not need ‘religion’ to be good; in fact, religion is more a part of the problem than the solution. When he was subsequently challenged by some readers to produce some evidence of his claim that we can remain moral people without religion, he described how he had attended a New Year’s meeting somewhere in Italy. There, a group of people, “not hindered by religious feelings”, had had a good time, and they also had collected money for an orphanage in Haiti. And so he rested his case. Some new responders wryly remarked that this happens every week in almost every church in the country, instead of once a year when everyone is drowsy from wine.

But the point he was making, is widely acclaimed – at least in my country. Even if people recognize that somehow, somewhere our modern liberal ethics of human rights and universal benevolence stems from our Christian past, they do not believe that we need Christianity to carry it further. On the contrary, many people in our societies believe that human rights, equality, environmental care, and tolerance need protection from strong religion. Currently, gay rights may be the corner stone of this belief. Many Christians feel the force of this critique, since Christians have rarely lived up to their own ideals. Many people believe now that they can do a better moral job without Christianity. Charles Taylor puts it this way: we must “measure the humbling degree to which some of the most impressive extensions of a Gospel ethic depended on a breakaway from Christendom”.

Secularized Europe does not cherish warm memories of an age when Christians ran the show. We do not have to be sectarian Christendom-critics to see the truth in this. In a process of missionary transformation it is necessary to

---

17 The impressive account of Charles Taylor, A Secular Age, CUP: Cambridge 2007, explains this process of the “naturalization of grace” in detail. Part of his argument (one that reflects for example David Martin’s) is that Christian attempts to ‘reform’ whole populations (i.e. bring them to a level of commitment and discipline that were previously known to religious elites only) have been so successful that within a few generations people started to lose their consciousness of grace, and believed that they could do it on their own.

affirm this by showing how the Gospel criticizes Christianity as any other religion, and to live lives that witness to this.

The growing gap between conversion and civilization also leads to changes in our culture. One of the most obvious, in my opinion, is our changing attitude towards crime. As I said, Augustine in his time advocated a mild justice system (compared to the standards of his time), because of our solidarity in sin. This emphasis on ‘Christian equity’ (William Perkins) has deeply influenced our European history. People who are convinced of their own sinfulness, their limited powers to lead a good life, and their constant dependence on God’s grace, will have more understanding for the moral weakness of others. However, when humans are seen as principally ‘good’ and ‘improvable’ (by education, discipline, etc.) this attitude will change. Society will morph into a moral meritocracy. In principle, there is no excuse for leading an immoral life. In a society like that, compassion with sinners (‘bad people’) is a form of weakness or moral sloppiness. Why would we be patient with criminals? If they don’t behave, we lock them up and throw the key away.

I do not know how this is in Denmark, but in the Netherlands we see a gradual ‘hardening’ of people’s judgements towards crime and misdemeanour. This may be a surprise for those who believe that morality is up for grabs as soon as people stop going to church. Interestingly, social research shows that the Dutch increasingly think high of themselves and low of ‘others’. Their own lives have improved, morally, whereas ‘society’ is going to the dogs. In fact, post-Christians have raised their moral standards instead of lowered them. An ‘Augustinian’ analysis would say that they have relapsed into a pagan ethics of honour. Our moral life is increasingly driven by pride and a search for status, and not by compassion and love. Because we do not believe in God anymore, our life’s horizon withdraws into the here and now. The fear to be forgotten steers us towards a constant search for recognition. To achieve fame (gloria) we would certainly do good to others, as long as it is seen, because this would build our self-esteem. But we would also have to hide our own failures, and emphasize those of others.

This is Augustine’s constant critique of Roman society. Surely, a moral meritocracy will restrict evil. It will produce lesser crooks (minor turpes), even if it doesn’t produce saints. It will build monumental graveyards with impressive memorials. But it will also lead to a society that punishes criminals harshly (i.e. places evil outside of itself), and has a way of treating conquered peoples (‘barbarians outside the gates’) or perhaps immigrants (‘barbarians inside the gates’) with disdain or even cruelty. And thus, post-Christian nations have killed more people of the ‘uncivilized’ world in the name of human rights and democracy, than any so-called Christian nation before them in the name of orthodoxy and authority. I think that there are clear tendencies towards

---

19 This section depends on my Vrede stichten: Politieke meditaties, Boekencentrum: Zoetermeer 2007, chapter 7.
20 The increasing severity of the justice system in the Netherlands has been noticed by many observers. See my ‘Barmhartig recht’, in: Ronald van Steden et al. (eds.), Anders kijken naar veiligheid: Levensbeschouwelijke visies op hedendaags onbehagen, 2013 (forthcoming).
such a tragic-heroic morality in the post-Christian Netherlands. In most of those European countries where Christmas Eve celebrations are attended by masses of people, the same people who have celebrated that Christ came to the earth as a stranger and a refugee, vote for strongly nationalist parties.

All of this leads to a profound loss of confidence among Christians. Surely, we may believe that some individuals will benefit from conversion. We can still be moved to tears when we hear conversion stories. But deep inside we find it very hard to believe that our societies really need Jesus. This means that we may respond to a missionary call when some troubled individual asks us to tell him more about Jesus. But as Christians and as churches we find it very difficult to undertake a strong effort to re-evangelize our societies. We have accepted the separation of conversion and civilization, and we have decided to settle for privatized conversion – without the self-evident cultural background of Christianization. But historically, this has always been the driving force behind Christian mission: the deep conviction that the world is a better place with Jesus Christ than without him. Our crisis of mission is in its essence a crisis of contextualization: we do not see how Christianity answers the real questions of our society, how it resolves its problems, how it contributes to the good life. Only if we believe that it is better for society (even for non-Christians) when as many people as possible are Christians (even if we know, paradoxically, that true Christians will always be a minority), we will find the motivation for mission again. We need to re-establish the link between conversion and civilization in the West. We need to do it in a new way, from a minority position, without political control or use of force. We need to do it modestly, fully aware of how many things have gone wrong in the past. In a sense, we need to start all over again. But we need to do it nevertheless. It is as simple as that.

1.4. Crisis of Culture

Now, it seems that we are not alone in this desire to reconnect conversion and civilization. Interestingly, there are many commentators who are not Christians themselves, who would support such a reconnection – under certain conditions. They may be the “people of peace” (Luke 10:6) we are looking for in our societies. Inevitably, in a post-Christian society a crisis of Christian mission is also a crisis of culture. This loss of culture concerns many thinkers. For example the French sociologist of religion Danièle Hervieu-Léger. In her book on the loss of Catholic memory in France, she states her concern for Europe. Almost everything that we value in our culture – from our politics to our styles of debate and from our morality to our family life – has been deeply influenced by Christian beliefs. What will be the future of our culture that has grown over a long period, within a historical matrix that has been significantly shaped by Christianity?

secular liberal sensibilities, whereas the art of killing in the name of the secular nation, of democracy, does not?”. Asad especially discusses the issue of ‘Islamophobia’ that currently pervades European nations.

22 For post-Christendom political elements like individual freedom, equality and human rights, and a justice system that is tempered by awareness of sin, cf. e.g. Oliver O’Donovan, The Desire of the Nations: Rediscovering the Roots of Political Theology, CUP: Cambridge 1996; Paas, Vrede stichten.

Jürgen Habermas, the German philosopher, claims that religious traditions are still important for morality in secular societies, even if they must be translated into secular categories. He believes that our modern moral consciousness, including human rights, democracy, individual autonomy and the like, are the heritage of the Jewish ethic of justice and the Christian ethic of love. “To this day there is no alternative to it (…). Everything else is just idle postmodern talk”. 24

Interestingly, this claim is supported from an unexpected corner. Frans de Waal, originally from the Netherlands, who may be the most famous biologist in the world, is often paraded as the champion of the new atheists. After all, he is the man who has shown from his study of primates that we do not need God to explain why we are moral beings. Altruism is simply a product of our social nature and our large brain. But in a long article in the New York Times he writes that this does not mean that we can do without religion. He explicitly distances himself from the new atheists, like Dennett or Hitchens, and writes:

Even the staunchest atheist growing up in Western society cannot avoid having absorbed the basic tenets of Christian morality. Our societies are steeped in it: everything we have accomplished over the centuries, even science, developed either hand in hand with or in opposition to religion, but never separately. It is impossible to know what morality would look like without religion. It would require a visit to a human culture that is not now and never was religious. That such cultures do not exist should give us pause.

De Waal continues: “[W]e do not need God to explain how we got where we are today. On the other hand, what would happen if we were able to excise religion from society? I doubt that science and the naturalistic worldview could fill the void and become an inspiration for the good”. 25

Let me add one final voice, perhaps the most surprising of all. Richard Dawkins is perhaps the most determined enemy of religion in the Western world. His hatred against the “sex-obsessed, vengeful, nasty, cruel” God of the Bible is well known. 26 Far less known is the fact that he wrote an article, titled ‘Atheists for Jesus’. 27 In this article


he expresses his admiration for Jesus, a “charismatic young preacher who advocated generous forgiveness”, and who was a “radical to the point of subversion”. He quotes from the Sermon on the Mount, underlining Jesus’ radical ethics of love. Then Dawkins asks: how is it possible that the cruel, senseless process of evolution produces people like Jesus? How come that “so many individual people are kind, generous, helpful, compassionate, nice: the sort of people of whom we say, ‘She’s a real saint’. Or, ‘He’s a true Good Samaritan’”? Evolutionary biologists can explain, to some extent, why people look after each other. But, says Dawkins, “the sort of super niceness I am talking about in humans goes too far. It is a misfiring, even a perversion of the Darwinian take on niceness (...) From a Darwinian point of view, human super niceness is just plain dumb. And yes, it is the kind of dumb that should be encouraged – which is the purpose of my article”. So, what is Dawkins’ suggestion? How can we increase this minority of super nice humans? Dawkins says, actually we know of only one example in which dumb behaviour spreads as an epidemic – religion.

The existence of religion is evidence that humans eagerly adopt irrational beliefs and spread them, both longitudinally in traditions and horizontally in epidemics of evangelism. Could this susceptibility, this palpable vulnerability to infections of irrationality be put to genuinely good use?

And then Dawkins says: I do not know how to do this. I see that it must be done, but I don’t know how. “The best I can offer is what I hope may be a catchy slogan: Atheists for Jesus”.

Inspite of all his spiteful, aggressive language, Dawkins says something very interesting. He says: I am looking for people who follow Jesus, who want to be like him. And I hope that they will find ways to add others to this crowd. But I do not know how to do it. All I have is a catchy slogan. That is truly an anticlimax. Now, somewhere Dawkins must have missed the fact that there has been such a community all along, trying to do exactly what he asks for. Why did he miss this fact? That may be a question for us to consider.

I am not saying that these people can help us how to do mission. But I wanted to show that a wide variety of voices outside the church asks for this mission – plain, simple Christian mission. This plea is often hidden in language full of suspicion, sometimes even hostile. Some of them would criticize us, or attack us. And yet, their greatest fear would be that every memory of Jesus and his movement disappears from the West. I believe that voices like these may encourage Christians. They sound somewhat like a very critical man from Macedonia, the man who called Paul in a dream (Acts 16:9). Perhaps he shouts to us something like this: “Come over and help us, you ignorant fools!” For many Europeans Christianity is simply incredible. They cannot believe in a God who rules the world, and gives it meaning. Yet, they seem to wish that even if they cannot believe it, many other people will believe in Jesus and live his message. Apparently, they hope that at least some people will keep our Christian heritage alive. We may think that this is a hypocritical wish, and perhaps it is.28 But I do

28 Cf. Leszek Kolakowski, Modernity on Endless Trial, Chicago 1990, 6, “There is something alarmingly desperate in the words of intellectuals who have no religious attachment, faith or loyalty proper and who insist on the irreplaceable educational and moral role of religion in our world".
not think that this is a very constructive way of dealing with these voices. Let us just accept that there are more people than we think, outside the church, who believe that followers of Jesus are indispensable for the world. Perhaps they believe in it more than we do.

1.5. A Way Out?
How would this reconnection of conversion and culture look like? I believe there is not just one answer. Our culture is a complex edifice, and Christianity is built into it in many ways. Therefore, we cannot have just one strategy to overcome the crisis of our mission and our culture. In the next sections I will discuss one or two important strategies. But first I will make three general remarks about the conditions of Christian mission in Europe today.

Firstly, our mission is not to restore Christendom. Christianity is no longer the ‘established’ religion of the West, even if some structures still suggest it. In fact, I believe this idea hinders our mission rather than sustain it. This is a very anti-institutional age. For the first time in history, Christians in Europe have to learn to do mission without being in control. That is a very difficult lesson to learn, and probably it will take some generations before we have learnt it. In the meanwhile we have to steer free from nationalistic programmes, underlining the ‘Christian’ character of our nations. Usually, this is done in a static, conservative, and tribal way. It suggests that being a Christian is to be loyal to our nation (cuius regio eius religio), and to our Western culture in the first place. However, Christianity has not entered the world to keep it as it is; it has come to draw it towards the vision of God’s Kingdom. 29 Exactly this has produced much of the culture that we value. It would be a great mistake, and a sin, to now use Christianity to petrify our ‘national values’, and close our doors to strangers and newcomers. That is not what the Church is called to do.

The way forward, as I see it, is that churches in Europe on the one hand give up their historical privileges, such as establishment – everything that suggests that Denmark and the Netherlands are countries ‘for Christians’. On the other hand we must, gracefully and modestly, maintain that the future of our Western culture depends – at least to a great extent – on the vitality of the Christian tradition. We say this, not to require political power, comfortable jobs or money, but simply as a word to be told. We force no one to accept it; we just witness to its truth. It is as Wilbert Shenk says: to do mission in the West, we must become strangers in our own societies again. 30 We do not run this country; we do not decide its course. We are its guests, like Christians have

---

29 One of the problems with conservatism from a Christian perspective is its tendency to keep the Kingdom of God out of the picture. Thus, it requires our allegiance, “not to the universal society of the Kingdom of God (…) but to one particular society among others” (Oliver O’Donovan, The Ways of Judgment: The Bampton Lectures 2003, Eerdmans: Grand Rapids 2005, 181). We might add that conservatism also tends to neglect the Catholicity of the Church. Especially, now that Christianity has ‘moved South’ (i.e., increasingly separates itself from the West), Western Christians must be very careful to distinguish their loyalties.

always been resident aliens. If we do this, rejecting all government support and historical privileges, and yet boldly claim that the story of Jesus cannot be missed in our society, I think we have a powerful message. Only if we become weak, people will be prepared to listen. Only if people do not feel threatened by an institutional grasp for power by Christians, they will feel free to appreciate what Christians have to tell. As for myself, I have lived and worked for six years in Amsterdam, one of the most secular cities in the world. In Amsterdam there are few churches, and only a very small minority will attend church. But in recent years, with the church growing smaller and weaker, we have seen that the local government and other parties in society have grown more sympathetic towards the churches. There is more appreciation of the good work being done, precisely because everyone knows that Amsterdam is not a ‘Christian’ city.

Secondly, reconnecting conversion and civilization in a post-Christian nation means that Christians do not hold the moral high ground. We do not tell our fellow citizens what they do not know already. On the contrary, our post-Christian culture has developed an incomparably radical ethics of benevolence and justice. Today, we believe that these apply for everyone, regardless race, sex, orientation, class, and religion. We believe that no human being (and, increasingly, no higher animal) must be excluded from our respect, care and help. Time and again, Christians will find that their neighbours are more committed to these issues than they are themselves. So, what will be the specific Christian contribution to our culture? What is the ‘conversion’ impulse that we can bring into our civilization?

I would suggest that this lies in clarifying the paradox that is hidden in every moral project. Morality is a dangerous thing: we need it to keep communities together, yet it is one of the things that divide us the most. Morality, after it has suppressed our ‘primitive’ and ‘tribal’ instincts, tends to produce people and cultures that look down on others, on people who are less ‘civilized’, who are ‘bad’, and so on. Thus, a highly successful moral project (such as Western civilization is, in many ways) it breeds new kinds of violence and hatred. Often, the very best of human ethics is the root of the most oppressive regimes. It is like Charles Taylor says: “[P]hilanthropy and solidarity driven by a lofty humanism, just as that which was often driven by high religious ideals, has a Janus face”. If we raise the standards of morality, it is easier to become disappointed by human ignorance, stupidity, selfishness, their lack of progress despite all our efforts. Lofty humanism may easily turn into bitterness, contempt or even hatred, and as a result a regime of benevolence turns into one of inhumane coercion. Modern history has shown many examples of this paradox, but the most horrible one may be Communism.

31 The same is true for the city of Rotterdam, the Netherland’s second largest city. While a city council report at the end of the 1990s stated that the churches in Rotterdam were hardly relevant for the neighborhood, a report from 2007 made it clear that this situation had changed. There were fewer churches, but the remaining churches (some of which had experienced a new start) played “an important role in creating more togetherness and cohesion in the city. Besides, from the churches a large group of volunteers and care-takers takes responsibility for their neighborhoods. Therefore it is important to pay more attention to churches and religious organizations. Recognition of churches and religious organizations, and their active involvement in the cooperation with local governments and non-governmental organizations is an important added value to the city” (Aan de slag met de Wmo in Charlois: Kadernotitie Wet maatschappelijke ondersteuning, June 2007, 17 – my translation).
The same is true for the modern quest for justice. It may be no coincidence that especially those individuals and parties that are most obsessed by a more just world are often filled with anger and hatred against all those who stand in the way of their noble cause. As a right-wing politician in Holland once said: “Social-democrats love mankind, but they hate people”.

So what do we need? For centuries and in many cultures, Christians have presented a morality for the weak. We have become very good at helping poor, primitive and underdeveloped people. Now, we must develop a morality for the strong. In our increasingly pluralistic societies we need a morality that helps people to be good, without using their goodness to look down on others. In Martin Luther’s terms: We must not use the Ten Commandments to create an idol out of our own morality. In this way we forget the heart of morality, which is expressed in the first commandment: to trust God alone, and rely on his goodness alone. This will help us to show moral strength, and yet be full of joy, full of patience with moral ‘underachievers’. Taylor argues that the radical post-Christian ethical drive needs a better articulation in the language of Christian agape. Only when our love for fellow human beings is unconditional, and only when we are deeply aware of the remaining power of sin (in ourselves and others) we can hold high moral ideals without turning into people full of bitterness and contempt. This, I believe, is the challenge in every moral project, and this is the point where Christians can make a difference.

This leads me to my third and final point. Almost two years ago, the Protestant Church in Amsterdam started a project to find out how it could reconnect with young people in the city. They appointed two people, both in their twenties, to lead this project. They set up some ‘expert meetings’ with secular twenty-somethings in the city. Recently, I had a talk with these two young leaders. They told me that in one of the first expert-meetings they asked their non-Christian peers: “What should the church in this city do to make you interested?”. One of them answered: “Well, I’m not that interested in the church, actually. But Jesus, yes he is pretty cool. You know, the church should do something with Jesus! Yea, that would help!”.

Often, when I tell this story to Christians, they smile. This cannot be serious. But in fact, this young man was deadly serious. And all the people in the group were nodding gravely: yes, do something with Jesus. Even if we remember that most of these young people belong to the third dechurched generation (i.e., they are the grandchildren of church-leavers), it is significant that young secular Dutchmen do not associate the church with Jesus. Something similar was suggested in the Dawkins quote above. Well, I think that, if there is a future for the church in Europe, it must regroup around Jesus. If a community of people sets out to live like Jesus, to cross barriers to the have-nots, to connect good and bad people, to challenge selfishness and arrogance, it will find out several things. It will find out that it will be alone and despised. Following Jesus is the best way to become a stranger again. It will find out that there are ‘people of peace’ in the most unexpected places, welcoming them amidst an unwelcoming society. It will

---

find out that its own love and moral strength is highly insufficient, and thus it will rediscover what it means to be sinful. And it will find out that deep in the heart of such an idealistic project, there is our dependence on the mystery of the cross. Instead of preaching doctrinal truths about sin and atonement to our nations, we need in a way to start over again. We need to start the project of rediscovering the cause of Jesus, and in this cause we may find Jesus himself as our teacher and saviour. If anything, this will be the way out of the crisis of mission in the West. As always, Jesus is the way and the door to our future.

2. Conditions of Evangelism

2.1. Conversion

Thus far we have seen how Christian mission has always been a double enterprise of ‘conversion’ and ‘civilization’. Christianity has tried to impact the lives of human beings, but also the structures of society. In Europe this mission has created a group (usually small) of committed Christians, and a large majority of ‘christo-pagans’: people who may or may not define themselves as Christians but will generally be sympathetic towards the church, and feel represented by it. From time to time, and in different places, waves of enthusiasm rolled through this majority, narrowing the gap with the committed minority, and leading more than the average few to cross the gap and become disciples themselves. We may see these revivals as ‘cultural corrections’ in times when it was generally felt that the tension between the minority and the majority had built up to an intolerable degree. Revivals meant the contraction of a population towards the Christian standard that was accepted by virtually everyone. Europe has a history of these revivals, from the Franciscan movement in the 12th century to the Welsh awakening at the start of the 20th century.

I have explained how the crisis of mission in Europe means that this bond between conversion and civilization has eroded to the point of its disappearance. This results on the one hand in a crisis of our Western culture that is separated from the “one great source of its civilization” (Edmund Burke). On the other hand it leads to an increasing isolation of the Christian minority, viz. a lack of meaningful communication between this minority and the people around it. Thus, the church loses to a great extent its capability to influence human lives and to draw new people into its fold. In other words, the minority of committed Christians no longer embodies the idealized centre of society, but it has been pushed towards the margins. The church does no longer represent the active conscience of a ‘Christian’ nation, but rather its repressed memory. And conversion means no longer returning to a standard you implicitly accepted all along, but it is to cross the bridge to a minority standard that is not supported by the culture at large.

In the previous section I have primarily addressed the culture dimension of the crisis: how can Christianity regain its apostolic confidence that Jesus is really the best that can happen to a society? What may be Christianity’s unique contribution to a post-Christian culture? Now I want to proceed with some thoughts about the conversion dimension of the crisis. How can the church re-open its conversation with a population that is increasingly alienated from the Christian message?
2.2. Evangelism

Firstly, let me set out some assumptions. I have used, first, the word ‘conversion’ as a goal-description: Christian mission wants to ‘convert’ people. It wants to influence the lives of people, to reorient them toward Jesus and his Kingdom, and to connect them with others who do the same. So, to me ‘conversion’ is shorthand for ‘changing people’ (as opposed to changing institutions or structures). The corresponding missionary activity here is evangelism, which is perhaps a better word to use. Theologically, evangelism is testifying of what God has done in Jesus Christ, explaining the consequences of this act, and inviting people to respond to this good news.34 Basically, it says to people: “Something great has happened. This affects everything: the future of the planet, the realities of life and death, suffering and justice, politics, love and friendship. You cannot just live on as if this did not happen. This would be unrealistic”. What I am talking about is the conditions of evangelism in our society. How can we make it happen? Is it possible to connect the story of Jesus with the lives of late modern people in our societies?

Secondly, I believe that evangelism is the very core of Christian mission. As I said, it cannot be separated from civilization or culture change, but theologically evangelism is ultimate (even if it is in practice not always the first thing we do).35 As James Scherer puts it, “the heart of mission is always making the gospel known where it would not be known without a special and costly act of boundary-crossing witness”.36 This is what the church lives for, and as soon as she neglects this, she has forgotten her very identity. The church is a missionary, inviting, recruiting church, or she is no church at all.37

And thirdly, apart from all other theological considerations I want to make clear that a church that no longer evangelizes is doomed to die. It is quite simple: the church has only two ways to compensate for her losses because of death and apostasy. She must either have enough children or enough converts. Even so-called liberals, who tend to look down on evangelism, will only keep up their numbers if other churches do the recruitment job. By despising evangelism, they are cutting the branch they are sitting

---

34 Cf. John Dunn, Unity and Diversity in the New Testament: An Inquiry into the Character of Earliest Christianity, SCM: London 1977, 2006, 30-31, on the “common kerygma” of the apostolic preaching in the New Testament (based on Acts, and the letters of Paul and John): (1) “the proclamation of the risen, exalted Jesus”, (2) “the call for faith, for acceptance of the proclamation and commitment to the Jesus proclaimed”, and (3) “the promise held out to faith”. Dunn adds: “Not always so clearly drawn out is the corollary that the relation of faith towards Christ involves a community of faith, and the responsibility of love within (and beyond?) that community”.


36 James A. Scherer, Gospel, Church, & Kingdom: Comparative studies in world mission theology, Wipf and Stock: Eugene 1987, 35.

37 Cf. Karl Barth, CD III/4, 504-5: “The community is alive there, and only there, where she is engaged in recruitment and when she strives for this recruitment especially in the darkest areas of the world: in places where the gospel is still completely unknown or completely rejected, in medio inimicorum. The community is as such a missionary community, or she is not the Christian community”. Quote in John Flett, The Witness of God: The Trinity, Missio Dei, Karl Barth, and the Nature of Christian Community, Eerdmans: Grand Rapids 2010, 31.
on. New Christians are important for the vitality of the church: they bring in new ideas, they help old Christians to remember how it is to be a non-Christian, and they usually have large networks with non-Christian friends and relatives. But even more important, new Christians remind us of the mystery of God’s grace, the very source of life for the church (Acts 15:11). When the prodigal son returns, the whole household is changed.  

2.3. The Crisis of Evangelism in Our Time

There are two huge differences between evangelism in our days and in our European history. They both contribute to the crisis of evangelism in our time. The first one is, of course, a lack of control on the part of the church. Modern societies consider religious liberty as their banner of pride. I will discuss this further below.

The other difference is the lack of a self-evident Christian background culture. The most familiar kind of evangelism, as we know it, was developed in the 18th and 19th century, during the great revivals in Europe and the United States. Great evangelists, like George Wesley, George Whitefield, Jonathan Edwards, and Dwight Moody were known as ‘revivalists’. Basically, conversion in a revivalist setting means the turn from a ‘nominal’ or ‘cultural’ Christianity towards a committed Christianity, via a personal experience of God’s grace for sinners. Its basic message is (or was): you know what you should be, but you do not live up to that. Repent and embrace a new life, based on God’s love and forgiveness. This was the essential Methodist framework which indeed has influenced our thoughts about evangelism. Today we often meet this framework in another, more therapeutic version that leaves out sin and judgment, and underlines unconditional acceptance instead. There is a lot of evangelism nowadays that presents God as a Therapist-at-large, who heals our pain, who will always be with us, and accepts us no matter what we do.

But, regardless whether we do evangelism in a traditional moralist way or in a modern therapeutic way, we assume that someone knows what we mean with words like ‘God’, ‘Jesus’, ‘the cross’, ‘sin’, and ‘love’. We assume that this person more or less knows the biblical story, and moreover accepts the authority of the Bible. We also assume that this person believes in the integrity of the servants of the gospel. The only thing that needs to be done is to take a ‘decision for Christ’ or to ‘really believe that God loves you as you are’. In such a setting, evangelism can be brief and focused, oriented towards a moment of crisis, or a turning point in someone’s life.

All this has changed in our time. Evangelism now is completely different from what it used to be. In what follows I want to highlight some major shifts in our culture, and I want to work out what this means for evangelism.

2.4. Post-Christendom, and the Call for Focus and Quality

Perhaps the most obvious difference between Europe in history and today is the fact of religious liberty. Basically, it means that nowadays you can be a ‘complete’ member of society with full rights, without being a member of the church or even without being religious at all. You don’t have to be a Christian (even better, a Protestant) in order to be

Let me work this out in more details. Post-Christendom starts to take place when evangelism is handed over from the secular government, executing its *ius reformandi*, to the church. Historically, the secular government (especially in Lutheran countries) had the responsibility to bring its subjects into the church of the realm, following the principle *cuius regio eius religio*.

In modernity this has changed. Religion has increasingly become a matter of the church, rather than the state. Thus, Christianity and citizenship are gradually separated. The second stage of post-Christendom includes the disestablishment of the church: increasingly, there is no longer one privileged church in every nation. The national church loses its central position; it becomes a movement like any other religious movement. In the USA this has never been otherwise; in the Netherlands this process is in its end-stage; in Denmark it is now beginning.

These two fundamental building blocks of post-Christendom go together with other developments. For example, in European countries there are no longer any laws regulating church membership or churchgoing. In constitutional monarchies like the Netherlands or Denmark only the King is not free to choose his own religion or no religion at all. But the rest of us may do as we please. Also, ‘post-Christendom’ means the removal of ‘package deals’. In many places in Europe the church was in control of poverty relief (diacony), education, health care, and the like. This meant, very basically, that it was better for you to listen to a sermon, and to be a member of the church. Even today, this is sometimes the case. Some years ago an Italian Protestant pastor told me that it is virtually impossible in Rome to enroll your toddler in a childcare centre if you are not a member of the Catholic Church. Such ‘package deals’ make it difficult to not belong to the dominant church in a certain society. But in most European countries, especially in the North, these package deals have been cut apart: religion belongs to the church. The rest is taken care of by the social-democratic welfare state.

Thus, ‘post-Christendom’ simply means that we have arrived at a stage in our culture where most of these historical bonds between the church and secular power have been made undone. People can lead their private and public lives without any meaningful relationship with the church and its message. We are in many ways ‘after’ Christendom, even if the vestiges of Christendom can be seen everywhere.

What does this mean for evangelism? Obviously, for you and me there is no longer an obligation or need to belong to the church (or any other religious organization), apart from an intrinsic motivation. You go to church only if you want to, and as long as you want to.

---

40 See further Paas, ‘Making’, 52-54.
41 In this respect the United States is still more a Christendom nation than most European countries.
42 Cf. Grace Davie, *The Sociology of Religion*, Sage: London 2007, 96: “In Europe as well as America, a new pattern is gradually emerging: that is a shift away from an understanding of religion as a form of obligation and towards an increasing emphasis on consumption or choice. What until moderately recently was simply imposed (with all the negative connotations of this word), or inherited (a rather more positive spin) becomes instead a matter of personal inclination. I go to church (or to another religious
Churches can no longer expect that people will come anyway. Most of the drivers behind church attendance have disappeared. People will not go to church to enhance their social standing, to further their career, to find a spouse, to receive money, to have an ecstatic experience, or to please their parents. All this can be found outside the church, and usually with fewer strings attached. Today, people will only join the Christian community if they can find something there that cannot be found anywhere else. So, a post-Christendom situation makes us focus on this one question: what is our ‘unique selling point’? Or, to turn the question around: what is it that people look for if they come to church at all? What is it that they can find nowhere else? Our post-Christendom age must lead us to a passionate commitment to the unique core of our Christian faith. This is the single most important question that we must answer: what is it that our neighbours can only find in the Christian community and nowhere else? As simple as the answer may be, it is often not taken seriously enough.

If we have found this ‘pearl of great value’ (Matthew 13:46), it is important to present it in the best way we can. The mystery of faith is encountered through the sacraments, music, community, mission, preaching, good talks, drinking coffee, reading, singing, worshiping, and so forth. In our post-Christendom age all these things must be done with excellence. Here, most churches in Europe still have a long way to go. Behind us are centuries of self-evident cultural Christianity. In my opinion, the criticism of religious market theorists such as Rodney Stark hits the nail on its head. If you have a religious monopoly, and if you are supported by the state, financially and in other ways, it is easy to become lazy – like any monopolist. Whatever you do, no matter how few people you draw, you will get paid. There is no need to mobilize the Christian crowd, since the clergy does not really need their support. And as long as the culture is more or less ‘Christian’, as was the case in Christendom, you do not feel very tempted to win new people for the faith. Somehow you feel that they belong to you anyway. So the taking away of privileges, as is increasingly happening in Denmark as well, will force the church to raise the level of its motivation and the quality of its activities.

2.5. Post-Christianity and the Call for Maturity
Let us now look at a second major problem for evangelism. Classic revivalism could assume that people somehow knew what Christianity was all about, and that they accepted its standards more or less. To be clear, this can still be the case in a post-Christendom society. The United States are an obvious example. There, many people are attracted to Christianity, even if they don’t have to. Somehow, it is still the ‘normal’ thing to do, at least in the South and the Mid-West.

However, that is not the case in Western Europe. It is not just that people have religious freedom now. Christianity itself has become quite incredible for many people...
in these nations. We live in a ‘post-Christian’ culture: a society where strong cultural objections exist against Christianity. This may result in atheism, although committed atheists are still a small minority in most European countries. For most people it will lead to a spiritual interest (after all, there must be ‘something out there’), while keeping their distance from Christianity and the church. They may use certain elements from the Christian tradition (for example, they go on a pilgrimage or they want their wedding ceremony in a church), but they combine them with elements from other traditions (bricolage). The Christian story is no longer the ruling story of our culture. It is just one of many stories, and it can be used and combined in whatever way we want. And, of course, a post-Christian culture does not know the Christian story, since most people do not have an opportunity to become familiar with it. Stuart Murray tells this little story in one of his books:

In a London school a teenager with no church connections hears the Christmas story for the first time. His teacher tells it well and he is fascinated by this amazing story. Risking his friends’ mockery, after the lesson he thanks her for the story. One thing had disturbed him, so he asks: ‘Why did they give the baby a swear word for his name?’

We all can add many similar stories, I suppose. So, a post-Christian society by and large means this: there is a small group of committed Christians (people who are Christians because they want to and not because they must), a similarly small group of committed unbelievers (people who find religion ridiculous or dangerous), and a large group in the middle that is pressured from both sides, but in general does not find Christianity all that plausible. Moreover, other institutions have developed, such as the media, the arts and the education system that operate on thoroughly secular and libertarian principles, and are often very critical towards religion.

Why is that so? It would take too much space here to go into the roots of unbelief in European culture. Part of the story, of course, is the rationality of the modern world. We have created a world that is largely under our technological control; we have developed instruments that help us to explain virtually everything – from thunder to morality. No longer do we feel threatened by dark forces and evil magic; we have isolated ourselves against this by clear thinking. We can be successful in our daily lives

---

45 Between 1981 and 2000 the percentage of ‘convinced atheists’ in Denmark increased very slightly, from 4.4% to 5% (WVS/EVS).
48 Cf. Martin, *Pentecostalism*, 52: “Throughout the continent [Europe] all religion suffers from the wide dissemination of simple notions of conflict between science and religion, as well as from the propagation in the media of the Left-libertarian modes mandatory since the sixties. As neo-liberalism has conquered in the economic realm, so existential libertarianism had colonized the personal realm, and neither are entirely grateful to Christian norms”.
without religion. This is what Charles Taylor describes as “the Immanent Frame”.\footnote{Taylor, Secular Age, 539-593.} Modern life is increasingly a life under human control. Moreover, many people believe that religion – at least strong religion – is dangerous. It stirs up many violent passions. And even if it is more or less peaceful, it still curbs the human enjoyment of earthly pleasures by its rigid norms. It turns us away from the common human good, and thus makes us an enemy of ordinary human desires (friendship, sex, entertainment, work).

Now, this does not mean that it is impossible to be religious in a modern society. On the contrary, some of the most modern nations on the planet are deeply religious. After all, even in an immanent world we may wonder if this is all there is, we may search for meaning (the ‘why’ behind the ‘what’ and ‘how’), or we may believe that we need God to find the moral energy to sustain this wonderful society. After all, unbelief has created at least as much evil as religion (and perhaps more).\footnote{Cf. for example Michael Burleigh, \textit{Earthly Powers: The Clash of Religion and Politics in Europe, from the French Revolution to the Great War}, Harper Press: London 2005; Idem, \textit{Sacred Causes: The Clash of Religion and Politics, from the Great War to the War on Terror}, Harper Press: London 2006.} So, there is no necessary logic why so many European nations are so resistant against religion. It is more a certain cultural ‘mood’, or as Taylor would have put it, a cultural ‘spin’ that leads so many Europeans to thinking that ‘science has disproved God’ or that ‘religion is a danger to society’.\footnote{Taylor, Secular Age, 548-556.} It is not a well thought-out, knock-down argument that insulates many Europeans against Christianity. It is rather a ‘picture that holds us captive’ (Wittgenstein), a cultural narrative that is made \textit{attractive} rather than convincing. In our culture it is attractive to keep your distance from religion, because it is widely believed that this is a sign of maturity and autonomy. To be religious means to be infantile; it means that we are not mature enough to take life as it is. To grow up, means that we say goodbye to Santa Claus and God. This, says Taylor, is the kind of ‘spin’ that closes the immanent frame for transcendence. Science has not disproved God; that is nonsense. And religion is not any more dangerous than a secular worldview. But many people want to believe it, because it resonates with a deep longing in our hearts to be grown-up, brave and authentic.\footnote{Taylor, Secular Age, 559-566.} Religion is for children. This is why parents expect their children to grow out of religious feelings when they grow up. And this is why most adults are not attracted to serious religion, even if they want to experiment with spirituality now and then.\footnote{In fact, in much contemporary spirituality the immaturity and dependence of churchgoing Christians are underlined, as opposed to the adventurous and autonomous quest of ‘spiritual’ people (see e.g., David Hay, Kate Hunt, \textit{Understanding the Spirituality of People Who Don’t Go to Church: A report on the findings of the Adults’ Spirituality Project at the University of Nottingham}, august 2000. Source: http://www.spiritualjourneys.org.uk/pdf/look_understanding_the_spirituality_of_people.pdf).} Moreover, since there is always an element of immaturity and projection in religious faith, this criticism appeals to many believers, making them insecure, and thus eroding their missionary zeal.

I think we need apologetics. We need clever arguments and sound theology to refute the criticisms that are brought up against Christianity, such as ‘it is impossible to believe in God after the Enlightenment’. We need people who are able to explain Christianity to a crowd that does not know the Bible and does not speak ‘Christianese’.
But all this will not help if we do not understand why people find such criticisms attractive in the first place. Part of our evangelistic mission in the West must be to unravel these deep cultural narratives of autonomy and heroism. Our main missionary and educational problem may be, not that we don’t have any good arguments, but that we don’t have a widely appealing vision of what it means to be a religious adult. Only if people start to believe that a Christian life is an adventurous life, only fit for the brave, they will be prepared to look at arguments defending it. If we are really followers of Jesus, we are disciples of the most mature man that has ever lived. Christianity is not about good people who get rewarded, and the bad being punished. It is not about escaping reality in cosy religious parties sharing comforting fairy tales. It is about following a man who was ultimately good, who was deeply loved by his Father, and yet was called to suffering and death because he loved his people, and he hated the powers that enslaved them. If that is not adventurous and brave, I do not know what is. So, the best apologetic in a post-Christian culture is to have a ‘provocative church’ (Graham Tomlin): a church that means business in following Jesus.54

2.6. Post-Modernity and the Appeal to Full Humanity

Finally, I want to mention a third cultural shift that affects our evangelism. This shift is usually called ‘post-modernism’. It means that our societies have become incredibly pluralistic. There is no single story that gives meaning to our culture. As a consequence, people encounter different life views every day. Of course, this makes us aware of the arbitrariness of our own views. Whatever seemed once ‘natural’ appears to be merely one choice among many others. And this raises questions about how we find our convictions in the first place.

Thus, the way I see it, the word ‘post-modern’ refers first and foremost to a sceptic mood with regard to all firm convictions.55 It refers to an age where people have become aware of the instability of their own life-views (and, consequently, those of others).56 We may think that we have come to our views by applying the right method, by using our rational faculties, and excluding our prejudice. But in fact we are driven by our biological nature, our emotions, deep moral instincts, affections, our social environment, and so forth. So, after all, our beliefs are not very rational at all. They are later rationalizations of views that we have adopted in a much more ‘visceral’ way, instinctively, driven by fear, love, or passion.

What does this mean for evangelism? Traditionally, evangelism tries to change

54 When young people in the West think that the church is obsolete, then this can only change, says Douglas John Hall, “… when the (...) distance between church and world, faith and life, gospel and context is in some real measure overcome, or, speaking positively, only where the church lives unprotectedly in the midst of the world, where faith is a dialogue with life (not only an internal dialogue of the community of faith itself), where the gospel engages and is engaged by context” (The Cross in Our Context: Jesus and the Suffering World, Fortress Press: Minneapolis 2003, 177).
people by focusing on their convictions. You believe that you are good, but in fact you are a sinful person. You may believe that God will let you in his heaven, but if you had read the Bible, you would think otherwise. Or, in a more modern way: you believe that you are a worthless person, but you know: God loves you just as you are. If you only could believe that Jesus died for you, your whole world would change. You would throw away your idols, everything you have put your trust in, and you would embrace your true identity. And so on. This kind of evangelism is not wrong, far from it. But the problem is: it always works from beliefs to life-change. In other words, it starts with ‘worldview’, and it assumes that people will change once they have been taught to accept the rational truths about their lives. In this way, a lot of evangelism looks like a kind of spiritual Rational Emotive Therapy (RET): it assumes that our problems (emotional and spiritual) are caused by irrational and illogical beliefs, and that the best way to help people is to contest these beliefs. In other words, conversion happens primarily through addressing the mind. And so we produce books and websites, or we preach, so that people may be changed.

But is this true? Are we really like that? If there is truth in post-modern insights, we must assume that this is not how conversion usually happens. Faith is not inspired primarily by beliefs, but by emotion and instinct. This may be what the apostle Paul hinted at, when he said that faith works through love (Galatians 5:6). The difference between belief and unbelief is not a matter of rational convictions but a matter of different orientations, or ‘loves’ (Augustine). The Christian faith is not primarily an argument; it is ‘affection’ (Jonathan Edwards). It seems that post-modern insights are not so new after all. All the great theologians of the past knew that our deep decisions for or against Christ (and other decisions as well) are affective and emotional rather than rational. Usually, we develop our rational convictions to explain and justify positions we have taken because they attracted us in the first place. This explains why a certain argument for or against Christianity will be convincing for person A, but utterly unconvincing for person B. This does not mean that A is more (or less) rational than B, but it is because A deep down wants this argument to be true, whereas B does not want it to be true. This is what I meant with unmasking the deep cultural narratives against Christianity in our culture. These narratives do not appeal to our reason in the first place, but they touch our deepest longings and desires. They appeal to the kind of people we want to be.

For evangelism this implies that we need to take humans more seriously. We should not treat them as if they were ‘brains in vats’. Conversion is a process that happens mostly under the waterline of reason. It happens through changes in our affections. How do we fall in love? Not through arguments, that is for sure (even if they play a role in supporting and clarifying our choice). A colleague of mine has recently done research into conversion processes in two Dutch churches. She noticed that music, images, the beauty of the building, smells, temperature, good stories and the general atmosphere, the kind of people that were around, their attitude and friendliness were all

---

important for the conversion of newcomers. All these things are not just nice ‘extras’; they are ‘sacraments’ as it were. These are the ways in which the gospel is embodied in non-rational ways, so that it can touch the whole person rather than just his brain.

All in all, this means that we must be careful with our worldview-driven traditional ways of evangelism. What we need is a more holistic approach that does justice to our humanity. Interestingly, exactly this happened in the Early Church. There, evangelism was not a proclamation aimed at a decision ‘on the spot’. Rather it was a spun-out process that sometimes took several years, and that contained Bible study, one-on-one conversations, worship services, certain rituals, teaching Christian disciplines, coaching and spiritual direction, fasting, and so forth. With this ancient practice in the back of his mind, William Abraham defines evangelism as a “set of intentional activities which is governed by the goal of initiating people into the kingdom of God for the first time”. In short, we need an approach of evangelism that is holistic (not just rational), and process-oriented (people do not come to the faith in one big decision, but in a series of mini-decisions).

Of course, there is more to say. For example, the deep-rooted skepticism of post-modernity is an important issue for evangelism. This works out in two ways: some churches will offer very clear answers and role patterns to religious seekers. These churches are usually strongly family-oriented, and they help people to find direction in an extremely fuzzy culture. It is important that there are churches like that, as long as they work with integrity. But many religious seekers, especially those who are young, will not feel at home in churches where there is little place for doubt and criticism. For post-modern people it is very difficult to believe anything with the same innocence as their ancestors. Their commitments will always be somewhat ‘ironic’. So we need churches that give room for doubt and exploration, churches that hold their people ‘lightly’. Paradoxically, this requires strong convictions and a solid theological framework. If the church has no convictions, it will not offer an environment for doubt. So it is important to be clear about what you believe, and yet to be genuinely understanding towards skepticism with regard to religion. A lot of this will depend on

58 Miranda Klaver, This Is My Desire: A Semiotic Perspective on Conversion in an Evangelical Seeker Church and a Pentecostal Church in the Netherlands, Pallas Publications: Amsterdam 2011.
59 See William Harmless, Augustine and the Catechumenate, Pueblo Book: Collegeville 1995; Paas, Werkers, esp. 187-203.
61 Part of post-modernity’s predicament is that church-life is much more diverse than it used to be, even in traditionally Protestant monocultures, such as Denmark. Apart from all newer religious forms (emerging, monastic, liquid, etc.), even ‘classic’ institutional Christianity may have a life in a post-modern, post-Christendom, and post-Christian society. Cf. Paul Heelas, Linda Woodhead, The Spiritual Revolution: Why Religion is Giving Way to Spirituality, Oxford 2005, 141-147, who distinguish three types of institutional (and reasonably successful) Christianity in our days: (a) ‘national’ religion: the type of Christianity that is present at royal weddings, national catastrophes, and war memorial services; (b) ‘cathedral’ religion: historical storehouses of liturgy, spirituality, and aesthetical-religious experiences for subjectivised individuals, who want to be in touch with their traditions (as consumers) without being controlled by them; (c) ‘family’ religion: offering orientation and legitimation to people who want to resist (extreme) subjectivation, esp. in the area of the family. For example, research in the UK shows that cathedrals and evangelical family churches are growing in attendance, whereas most other churches are in decline. Apparently, they cater to the most urgent spiritual needs in a post-modern society.
the spiritual maturity of the leaders.

2.7. Conclusion
To summarize, I will repeat the main question of this section. What are the conditions for evangelism in our age? I have mentioned three major cultural shifts that make evangelism stranger than it used to be. Out of this six conditions follow:

1. We need to focus on our core business. What is it that makes us unique? What is the pearl of great value that can be found nowhere else? If we don’t know our unique selling point, we have a huge problem.

2. We must leave behind a monopolist attitude, and be serious about the quality of our programmes, and the level of motivation of our members. This will become very urgent, as the state increasingly cuts the ties with the church.

3. We need good theology and apologetics. It is important that theology is done on the market place, that it goes ‘public’ again.

4. We need a convincing picture of Christian adulthood. Christianity must become an adventure again, a challenge for the brave.

5. Evangelism must be holistic: we must take seriously that human beings are primarily driven by instincts and affections rather than by reason. Therefore we need a great variety of approaches, and especially those approaches that target the emotions and affections of people. For Protestants, who are so afraid of emotions and the senses, this is a huge challenge. Here, we could learn a lot from shopping malls or sport events. How do they produce ‘convincing experiences’? How do they attract people and change them?

6. Evangelism is a process of discovery, a quest rather than a momentary decision. Very often, it will take years for someone in Europe to become a Christian. And even then, we must always keep in mind that a Christian has never arrived. As post-modern people we remain confused and sceptical about much of what we believe. For many people in our culture, their conversion is a period or a ‘phase’ they go through (just as unbelief is seldom a completely closed position). As churches we must be flexible enough to understand that, and to remain in contact

\footnote{In my own country, this is definitely true for Muslims who become Christians. Many of them ‘fall back’ (whatever this may mean for them, personally). However, I wonder how this relates to another phenomenon that is increasingly seen in late modern Western societies: experimenting with religion (cf. the influential novel \textit{The Life of Pi}, by Yann Martel). Personally, I know several stories of people who were ‘converted’ (or were they?) somewhere in their life, attended church services for a while, and were sometimes even baptized, but who are currently not involved in a church. Technically, they may count as ‘church leavers’. However, their own perspective is different: they consider themselves as religious ‘seekers’, who have entered a ‘new stage’ of their spiritual path. The church was important to them, for some time, but now they have ‘moved on’. I also know quite a few people who are involved in house groups or mission activities of the church, but who would never attend a worship service or become a church member. It is difficult to categorize such people along the lines of ‘churched’ and ‘unchurched’ or even along those of ‘Christian’ or not. Especially in our institution-wary age, people may be very reluctant to call themselves ‘Christians’, even if they pray, read the Bible, attend a home group, and help the poor. Of course, all this depends very much on your theology. If you believe that Christians are only those people who have had a conversion experience and are actively involved in church, then these people are obviously no Christians. But I tend to believe that we may need ‘subtler languages’ than this to speak about religion and conversion in our post-Christian culture.}
with people even when they lose sight of us for a while.

All this will require a great deal from our churches. A key point in this article is that we have real choices to make. The church is not a passive victim of anonymous processes in the world. The church consists of human beings, who are players in these processes, inspired by their faith in the God of all ages. The church can make choices about its institutional life, its commitments, and its core values, and all this can greatly affect its appeal.\textsuperscript{64} That will be the subject of the next section.

3. Church Planting and Church Renewal

3.1. Turning the Tide?

The point of departure for this article may be summarized as follows. In Western Europe a gap has grown between Christianity and the general culture. This is what we usually call ‘secularization’. It results in the marginalization of the church, repression of the Christian narrative, an increasing alienation of our culture from its Christian past, and a great deal of timidity within the church. We are facing a crisis of mission in Europe.

From this point the challenge begins. Many Europeans think that secularization is irreversible. However, it is not. Secularization is not a natural law. Neither is it an unavoidable historical destiny. Secularization is related to “particular historical and social conditions, which can be countered or utilized by human ingenuity and imagination”.\textsuperscript{65} History shows that traditions, especially religious traditions, are resilient, and may recover in new forms when conditions change.

Of course, there are no guarantees that this will happen, and it certainly will not happen automatically. Thus far, I have tried to set out what must be done. As Christians we must increasingly learn to live and work in a free market of religion. This is what our post-Christendom condition entails. We must learn to live adventurously as followers of Jesus, refuting the post-Christian narrative that ‘religion’ is for the weak and dumb. And finally, in a post-modern culture we must learn to do evangelism in a more holistic and creative way. All this requires a renewal of the church. I believe that the future of Christianity in our societies will depend, humanly speaking, on a network of mostly small, vital, local communities that show how Jesus is good news for our culture, and that invite people to join them in the service of the Kingdom.

So, basically, I have tried to do two things. First, I have set out the problem, as I see it: our crisis of mission. Second, I have presented some hints or rough sketches of our future: the kind of reinvention we need. The third question, then, follows logically: how can this be achieved? What must be our strategy, as far as any human strategy goes? In this final section I will begin with some thoughts about renewal. What do we mean by this word? After this, I will spend the remainder of this article on the issue of


church planting – or Christian community formation, as a way to go. Why is church planting so important? And how should it be done, given the fact that there are so many sad examples of sectarian, arrogant, and divisive church planting?

3.2. Adaptation and Innovation
Ever since the process of secularization started to take its toll, church leaders and theologians have called for the renewal of the church in Europe. To give just one Protestant example: in 1916 Gerhard Hilbert, a German professor of theology in Rostock, declared that Germany had become a “mission field” (Missionsfeld). He observed that only 2-3% of all baptized Lutherans would attend church at all. Besides, more than 300,000 Germans were “self-declared modern pagans”. Ten times bigger was the number of people of cultural Christians: belongers without belief. And finally, the majority of the population was a “mass of indifferents”. They did not care at all about Christianity and church.

Why had this happened? According to Hilbert, the church had failed to do its job properly. Germany was a baptized nation, and this had led the church into the false belief that mission was not needed anymore. The Lutheran church was only concerned with its most loyal adult members (its ‘inner circle’). It was completely inward-focused. No wonder, said Hilbert, that people with a “burning interest” in religious questions would look elsewhere for answers. A complete restructuring of the church was required. The Lutheran church should change into a missionary church (Missionskirche), not just for a while but permanently. Evangelizing the German people (Volksmission) was to be its core task, since there would always be unbelievers, and believers would always need further conversion.

I think there are lessons to be learnt from this. Hilberts plea was essentially a call for adaptation. The Volkskirche had to do a better job. The church must ‘restructure’ itself: it must be more effective in its outreach to the population under its responsibility. In a sense, Hilbert still thought within the framework of a Christian nation in which the church had to operate. It was sad enough that the church did not function well, but the Christendom framework was still self-evident. Here lies the crucial difference with our situation today. Even in Denmark, with its strong state-church tradition, we can no longer expect that the entire population somehow ‘belongs’ to the church. Our situation does not just require a more efficient structure, in order to reach the capillaries of society. Our situation asks for renewal, or innovation.

There is an important difference between adaptation and innovation. Adaptation leads to questions like: how can we change the morning worship service to make it more welcoming to teenagers? Innovation asks: why do we have morning worship services in the first place? Adaptation asks: how can pastors preach more effectively? Innovation leads to questions like: is a public monologue really the best way to minister the Word in our culture? Today many people realize that the Christian tradition in Western Europe will have to do more than ‘adapt’. On a weblog by Boele Ytsma, a Dutch writer about emerging church, I read that (for example) making changes in

---

Sunday morning worship, to attract teenagers, is like ‘pimping a walker’. Regardless how nicely the instrument is made, no teenager wants to be seen with it. What we need are innovations: changes that go beyond adaptations. Innovation is about ‘deep change’.

To be clear about this: adaptations are necessary. Naturally, every organization that is alive will be restructuring constantly. But adaptations assume that our environment is essentially the same, and that the challenges of today are more or less those of yesterday. Adaptations deal with what is predictable and under our control. Nothing is wrong with that, as long as the situation is indeed as we assume. But when our context begins to change rapidly, as is the case now, adaptation will not help us. We must no longer find better answers to old questions; we must find better questions. This is what innovation is about. The Christian tradition must, once again, be reformed.

3.3. A closer look at ecclesial innovation

There is a paradox here, as has often been remarked. It is impossible to plan real innovation. As soon as you can make a project out of it, with clear outcomes, the whole thing will probably not be very innovative. This is one of the reasons why hierarchical and bureaucratic organizations, such as many churches in the West, find it so difficult to be really creative. They know how to adapt (to some extent, that is), but they are unable to look behind the horizon – the very place where innovation is found. We are looking for new answers, rather than answers that we can see from where we stand. Whoever wants to be in control, will have no innovation. It is as simple as that.

So, how does innovation take place? Only by not concentrating on results but on the arrangement of stimulating processes. Radical renewal will only happen when people can escape the power of existing structures, the tendency to conform that is present in every organization. Renewal comes from the margin, and not from the centre. So, in a sense we must create our own critical margin. This is what local governments do, for example, in our big cities. They create environments for creative people, because they know how important such places are for cultural innovation. In innovation theory three of such environments are usually distinguished: free havens, laboratories, and incubators.

A free haven is an unregulated, countercultural place of mild anarchy. This may happen where a group of artists, for example, takes hold of an abandoned building in a city (‘new ideas need old buildings’ – Jane Jacobs). Usually, in places like these there is a large distance from the centre of power. All emphasis lies on the free production of art, not hindered by laws or external control. The closest parallel within the Christian tradition may be the sect. Take for example the early Anabaptists in Switzerland and Germany. Within a Christianized Europe they rejected infant baptism; they declared all Europeans ‘pagans’; they wished to return to the ‘pure’ church of the New Testament;

---

and they embraced Jesus’ Great Commission, even though all leading theologians thought that this Commission had been fulfilled. As a consequence they were severely persecuted, to the point of extinction. Today we may think of extreme charismatic groups. Sects are always rejected by those in the centre, and they reject them back. Mutual rejection belongs to the very definition of sects. But despite all the suspicion, and despite all the objections we can have, it must be said that sects are often sources of radical innovation. Today, the Anabaptist tradition is one of the great sources of missionary reflection and practice. It seems that in this particular tradition the art of living in the margins has been kept as a treasure for the entire church. So, while it is difficult for the church to embrace sects (after all, they do not want to be embraced), this may be a good historical reminder for more ‘established’ churches to be not too judgmental.

Laboratories are environments where creative people from different backgrounds work together to solve shared problems. Often these initiatives are partly subsidized by the government, and sometimes they work within a framework that has been set by an organization or by the government. The basic idea is that innovation is born out of unexpected encounters, not just between professionals from the arts of the world of business, but also between these professionals and people from the neighborhood. Again, innovation cannot be planned, but it can be stimulated by cross-fertilization between very different people who share some values, and who recognize each other as partners in a common quest. An interesting historical example is the birth of mission organizations at the end of the 18th century. The great missionary movement of those days did not start in the church, and it was not led by theologians or church leaders. It started when lay people from different churches joined together, because they felt challenged by the fate of millions who had never heard of Jesus. Together they worked out inspiring, pragmatic solutions to this problem.

Today I see the same thing happen in many new Christian communities in Europe. They are environments for people with a burning missionary heart, and often places of great creativity. A friend of mine in Amsterdam has started a theatre workshop in which Christians and non-Christians work together to produce a performance around a shared theme – like ‘peace’ or ‘suffering’. As he explains in an interview with one of my students:

The people I work with will only get convinced when they get in there themselves. It’s a different way of doing church. (…) They think church is a place where you know things and try to convince people [who don’t know things]. I try to create a workplace where people can explore what Christianity means. I didn’t think the church would be a

---

70 For example, John Howard Yoder, Stanley Hauerwas, Alan Kreider, and (on a more popular level) Stuart Murray. See also www.anabaptistnetwork.com.
72 Eric Pickerill, unpublished paper.
safe environment to do it. They always feel that they are outsiders.

So, the cross-fertilization here is one between believers and people outside the church. In order to create a safe place of freedom and a sense of ‘ownership’, he has decided to start a new context altogether, removed from what many people would easily recognize as a church. In this context there is no self-evident one-way communication, and some of you may wonder what is ‘missionary’ about a project like this. To be clear, he wants it to be missionary: he wants the project to impact people, to change them with the gospel. His role is that of the ‘gospel-bringer’; in every shared project he gives input from the gospel. But he wants to let this happen in a completely equal, non-threatening, authentic setting.

It has to be the story itself and not my ideas about what the story means (…). We are both looking from different perspectives, but neither of us is inside the story. I am following Jesus and I am quite sure I don’t understand everything about him. So I try and bring people into contact to help me understand what Jesus is.

This is extremely challenging. He has brought himself into a situation where none of the old answers and old definitions seem to work – with the inclusion of our definitions of ‘church’. He is not so sure anymore what a church is:

It’s a community around Jesus. People I work with are not believers, but they are looking into it. I am trying to find a place for communion and baptism. I don’t want an inner circle for Christians and an outer circle for non-believers. If people don’t think it’s a church, then don’t let it be a church. On the other hand, I am a church planter.

So far this example of a ‘laboratory’ church (or is it?). It may be a little daring for most of us, but it gives a good impression what it may mean to go the path of missionary innovation – without knowing what will happen next. It also shows why this is difficult to do this in the more balanced, stable setting of an ‘ordinary’ church.

Incubators, finally, are usually more dependent on support by ‘mother firms’ and external finance. They are the closest thing to what ‘programmed innovation’ would look like if it existed. Incubators are organized and supported by the centre in order to create innovation. This will happen, for example, when creative people are brought together in a separate unit within the organization, or when they are encouraged to start a new organization. A good example in the context of a national church is the Fresh Expressions Initiative in the Church of England. According to the ‘official’ definition, a “fresh expression is a form of church for our changing culture established primarily for the benefit of people who are not yet members of any church”. Here, the basic idea is – in the words of the Archbishop of Canterbury – “a principled and careful loosening of structures”. This means, among other things, an expansion of the variety of church forms to complement the ancient territorial parish system. It means, perhaps, a new approach of membership: what does it mean to ‘belong’ to the church? It certainly

---

74 Joint definition by Anglicans and Methodists, May 2006.
means different leadership structures: working in teams for example. Only a “mixed economy of church” will be able to reach out to the huge variety of groups and subcultures in our modern society.

Let me summarize this. Innovation cannot be organized or programmed. But it can be stimulated. How? First, by creating distance from the centre. This can be done by giving independence to a new initiative. Also it is important to minimize control systems. Do not try to create innovation as a project, with annual reports and fixed targets. It is better to select people whom you trust, and give them free rein, rather than to control them too much. Trust creates spaces of freedom. A second condition of innovation is unexpected encounters. If you want innovation to happen, you must bring together a variety of people. These people must share some basic values and attitudes, but they must not be too much of the same kind. Only a mixture of gifts, characters and theologies will help to start up innovation. So, always think in teams (like Jesus did, and the apostle Paul). And a third condition is: support these people in terms of training, money, research, and good networks. In a late modern missionary context we must maintain the catholicity of the church by having good mutual relations of support and accountability.\(^75\)

### 3.4. Church Planting

Can this be done in an established church setting? Well, yes and no. The Fresh Expressions initiative shows that some real innovation can happen within the bedding of a national church that is willing to create its own messy margins. Most of this depends on the degree to which those in control are prepared to relax their hold on new initiatives. Of course, this is intimately connected with your theology. For example, if you believe that the local church is always based on a territorial principle, you will find it very hard to accept an initiative that aims for a specific social group (immigrants, teenagers, business people, young urban professionals, homosexuals, etc.).\(^76\) Or, if you accept it, you will never accept that it gains independence, or becomes a church of its own. And therefore, this initiative will never become very innovative; it must give new (but hopefully not too new) answers to the same old questions.

I do not want to choose between renewal of established churches and church planting. It is not a matter of either-or, as far as I am concerned. I believe that both must be done. Besides, I don’t think that church planting in itself is a secure path to renewal.

---

\(^75\) The Arbeitsgemeinschaft Missionarische Dienste (AMD) of the Protestant Church in Germany (EKD) has adopted the Fresh Expression model (a brief description of the project can be found on http://www.a-m-d.de/gemeindepflanzen/doc2009/Evaluation_Kurzfassung.pdf). The AMD has selected ten ‘models’ of church plants, and publishes reports on a regular basis. For the most recent update, see Erfolgreiche Gemeindepflanzungen in der EKD’ (2011), on http://www.a-m-d.de/gemeindepflanzen/download/Forschungsbericht%20final%20mit%20Umfrage_Mai2011.pdf.

\(^76\) Here, I do not suggest that ‘target group churches’ are what we need. However, to start a new mission in our complex society, it is unavoidable that we are selective. Even our choice of language excludes people, let alone other choices we make (Bible translation, building, musical styles, etc.). What is a low threshold for one group can be quite high for others! Every new initiative must have a long-term goal of connecting different kinds of people, if it wants to be true to the gospel. However, the way to start with this is often through reaching out to one kind of people. More on this in Stefan Paas, ‘Ecclesiology in Context: Urban Church Planting in the Netherlands’, in: Kees van der Kooi et al. (eds.), *Evangelical Theology in Transition*, VU University Press: Amsterdam 2012, 131-147.
There is far too much church planting that is merely a copy-pasting of old models. This happens when denominations find their own expansion more important than a common witness to the Kingdom of God – regardless all the missionary talk that seeks to justify such ‘church planting’. But having said this, I believe that church planting is sometimes the only strategy left to us. Moreover, church planting can teach us two very important lessons about mission. First, church planting helps the church to be there where people are. And second, church planting points to the connection between the church and mission. I will now discuss these lessons separately.

3.5. Be Where the People Are
Readers of this article may have heard the famous slogan of the American church growth apostle Peter Wagner: “The single most effective evangelistic methodology under heaven is planting new churches”.77 Many people believe that church planting helps the church to grow. The reasons can be found in almost every handbook on church planting.78

For a starter, new churches want to grow. If they do not draw new people, they will not survive. So, a new church will usually go to great lengths to connect with new people. It will do research in the neighbourhood, it will evangelize, it will make itself accessible, and so on. Also, new churches usually are more flexible and informal, so they have fewer barriers for newcomers. Moreover, new churches have fewer differences in status between long-term members and newcomers. In other words, newcomers have more possibilities to influence the church, and therefore they will feel more empowered. Yet another reason is that planting new churches will extend the range of options for religiously interested people. In our complex society there is a wide range of spiritual interests, and we need many different churches to meet those interests. Or, to put it differently: you cannot be high church and low church at the same time. I think that this is of importance to a people’s church (Folkekirken, Volkskirche): if you really want everyone to have access to the church, it is important to know how pluralistic this ‘everyone’ has become in our days. A true people’s church must expand its range of options today. It must have many welcoming faces.

As far as I can tell, there are indeed some indications that young churches generally receive more converts – new members with a non-Christian or a nominal Christian background. I must underline, though, that there is little good research in this area, and a lot of missionary rhetoric. For example, most American literature on church growth and church planting is almost completely dependent on baptism figures of Baptist congregations – rendering them quite useless from a perspective of evangelistic growth.79 But if my own Dutch Christian Reformed denomination (ca. 180 local congregations) may serve as an illustration: about half of the converts we receive

---

77 C. Peter Wagner, Church Planting for a Greater Harvest, Regal: Ventura 1990, 11.
79 These churches do not make a distinction between new converts and people with a history in other churches, and therefore they tend to count every candidate for baptism as a new convert to Christianity.
annually are newcomers in only five or six congregations. All these local churches were planted in the last decade. Also new research in the Netherlands demonstrates that church plants receive on the average 20-30 times as many new Christians as older churches.  

Empirical data suggest that location may be even more important than age. At both sides of the Atlantic growing churches are mostly inner city churches, immigrant churches and suburban churches. In suburbia this growth can be explained from new housing projects. As for the cities, it is interesting to see that the most declining and the most flourishing churches can be found there. But some churches, younger as well as older ones, seem to profit from the renewed attractiveness of the cities for young professionals. What this says, is that it is important for churches to be responsive to demographic shifts. Church planting helps the church to be flexible; to renew its presence where it is needed. This is, I think, another reason for a national church to take church planting seriously.

So, this could be the lesson of church planting for the churches in Denmark. Accept that this country has become a mission field. Define carefully with which groups the church has lost contact, and think of the kind of community that could reach them again. Find out where the people are moving, and ask yourself whether there are any vital churches there to reach out to them. If not, send out apostolic pioneer teams to represent the church to these people, and build up new communities among them.

3.6. The connection between church and mission
In the previous section I recalled how evangelism in our cultures was often inspired by the revivalist heritage. Evangelism meant to address someone with a brief message, and to invite him or her to become a Christian. In doing this, it was assumed that this person had a general knowledge of the Bible, and some basic belief in the God of the Bible. Once we found out that this approach of evangelism did not work anymore in the Netherlands, we changed gear. Evangelism 2.0 entailed a more extended period of communication, usually through a course. For example, the Alpha Course was introduced in my country in 1996. Many others followed, such as Christianity Explored and Emmaus, as well as some home-grown examples. But already early in this

80 Alrik Vos, Hoop: Een onderzoek naar de missionaire effectiviteit van kerkplantingen binnen de NGK, CGK en GKV in Nederland, MA Thesis VU University, August 2012. Vos also shows how little reliable research has been done into the claims of church growth advocates, in Europe as well as the USA. This is an interesting issue in itself, given the wide-spread belief that church planting produces church growth. In fact, as far as I know, Vos’ thesis is the first methodologically sound research project into the relation between church planting and church growth in Europe.

81 It is important to note that not every church plant grows, nor does every young church perform better in terms of evangelism compared with older churches.

millennium we recognized that something went wrong. Although many people went through these courses (approximately 30% of them were non-churched people), only very few found their way to the church. Personally, I have known quite a lot of people who found Jesus, but did not get involved in a local congregation. It appeared that new Christians were not very willing to become a member in a church; they preferred to remain in the group where they started. The most natural consequence of evangelism, it seemed, was the formation of a new community – to acknowledge that we must not separate what the Lord has joined together. So, the problem we encountered was this: as soon as you start with evangelism, you will encounter the question of the church. For me this was one of the most important reasons to start thinking seriously about church planting.

This was not a new discovery, even if every generation has to find it anew. According to many writers church planting can help us to see the indispensable role of the church in the mission of God (missio Dei). This is important, because this role has often been denied. Traditionally, evangelicals tended to focus on individual conversions, while neglecting the church. Ecumenicals, or mainline Protestants, have also relativized the place of the church in mission to a great extent. God is working his mission in and through the dynamics of the world, transforming it in the direction of his kingdom. As far as the church plays a part in this, its role is to witness to this work, and support it wherever it can. Church planting sends a wrong message; it suggests that the church rather than the world is central in God’s mission. By drawing people within its community the church emphasizes the gaps within humanity, and it distracts people from the real task of transforming the world in a place of justice and peace.

Against this Tim Chester points to the eschatological character of the church in the New Testament. Across barriers of race, sex and class, Christians are united in Christ (Galatians 3:28). The unity of the church is a foretaste of God’s purposes for all creation (Ephesians 1:9-10, etc.). The church is the place where God reigns in peace and justice. If these Biblical notions have any authority for us, we should not be ashamed to make the church the heart of mission. Initiating people into the church is not drawing them away from service in the kingdom of God. On the contrary, the church is the community of the kingdom, and everyone who is initiated into the church must be initiated in the service of the kingdom. Stuart Murray says that programmes that anticipate the coming of the kingdom of God through social transformation should “consider how such transformation can occur, or be sustained, without communities of the kingdom to model alternative ways of living”.

Of course, we should not turn this argument around by saying that the essential place of the church in God’s mission proves that mission always must lead to church planting. It merely says that church planting, whatever we think of it, reminds us of the importance of the church in God’s purposes.

---

83 I have reflected on this more elaborately in Werkers.
86 One could disagree with this on the ground that the empirical church hardly qualifies as a place of peace and justice, and that outside the church far better examples of a kingdom life can be found. This
Second, in post-War missiology the missionary nature of the church has been rediscovered. There is a widespread consensus that the church is not there for itself but for God and his mission in the world. Church planting, if it is to be more than simple reproduction of existing models (as is most often the case), can be an opportunity for churches to think through their identity as a people called for mission.\textsuperscript{87} When a denomination commits itself to church planting it is continually forced to consider profound questions of ecclesiology, mission, and contextualization. This is especially important on ‘old’ ground, since, according to Tim Chester the church tends to accommodate to a culture when it has settled there long enough.

Through mission the church is able to break free from external conformity to culture and internal conformity to tradition and rediscover the vitality of the gospel. Church planting is vital for the health of the wider church. Good church planting forces us to re-ask questions about the gospel and church.\textsuperscript{88}

Of course, one can contest this by saying that this church does not need to do church planting to recover its true identity as a church that is sent by God in the world. Designing a more inclusive worship service or opening a shelter for the homeless might have the same effect. It might, but at least church planting puts on the agenda the important issue of the continuing reformation (\textit{semper reformanda}) of the church.

A third argument pertains to size. When churches attract new members they tend to accept without further consideration that they will grow bigger. However, by an increase of size the internal dynamics of church life will change. In most social contexts this process will begin already when communities have more than 50 members. Relationships will be stretched, because many members will not know each other. This will make it more difficult to maintain naturally New Testament directions for church life, such as mutual love, comfort, correction, forgiveness, and so forth. Leadership will become more distant, formal and bureaucratic. It will be more difficult to apply church discipline in a loving, personal atmosphere. Large churches tend to be run by a relatively small percentage of its members, thus turning the majority into more or less passive consumers. Of course, there are advantages to size, such as the capability to offer more programs, while small churches are more susceptible to sectarianism and suffocating relationships. But generally small churches are able to reflect the communal life of the New Testament church much more naturally. It is remarkable that theological questions are seldom asked when churches grow, but that they abound when churches reproduce. Would it not be a wiser course to split the church when it grows, and create two smaller human-scale communities instead of one large congregation? Without turning this into a new law, I believe that there is good theological ‘circumstantial evidence’ to advocate church planting as a strategy for growing churches.\textsuperscript{89}

\textsuperscript{87} Murray, \textit{Church Planting}, 48-53.
\textsuperscript{88} Chester, ‘Church Planting’, 26.
\textsuperscript{89} Or course, there are several models to put this into practice. One model that tries to combine the

Finally, a good theological defence of church planting can be found in reconsidering the relationship between evangelism and church formation. One could ask whether evangelism does not normally presuppose the existence of a Christian community. Let us remember that neither Jesus nor the apostles used to go to people alone. Jesus sent out his disciples in pairs (Luke 10). Paul used to travel together with companions. The idea of the solo evangelist, so deeply rooted in our modern Western history, is not an image that we find very often in the New Testament. It is interesting that the first evangelization of Europe also happened by two different ‘models’. Those who were sent by the Church of Rome would present the Christian message, invite pagans to believe in Christ, and would then welcome them into the Christian community. A different model was practiced however by the monks from Ireland. They would first establish a community that accepted everyone who was interested. Within this fellowship people could see the gospel ‘work’ in conversations, ministry, prayer and worship. In this way they would hear a message that was much more complete (or ‘incarnate’) than just a verbal address. The life of the community, together with (spontaneous) verbal invitations, would move them into a decision for or against Christ. This practice remembers us of the famous dictum by Lesslie Newbigin, that the congregation is the ‘hermeneutic of the gospel’.

How is it possible that the gospel should be credible, that people should come to believe that the power which has the last word in human affairs is represented by a man hanging on a cross? I am suggesting that the only answer, the only hermeneutic of the gospel, is a congregation of men and women who believe it and live by it.

This is especially true in a late-modern, post-Christian Western society where people think they know what Christianity is all about. Many writers, reflecting on Christian mission in the West, echo Newbigin’s claim. “Our Bible is open to public examination”, says Jim Wallis, “so is the church’s life. (…) The gulf between them has created an enormous credibility gap”. According to him, “[t]he power of evangelism today is tested by the question, What do we have to explain to the world about the way we live?”.

Again, all this does not mean that church planting is the only course to take. Existing churches are addressed as well by this call for reformation. But whenever we try to find ways into new groups or locations in our pluralistic societies, it may not be


90 Of course, there are some exceptions, as in John 4:1-26 and Acts 8:26-40.
the best course to send a ‘talking head’. For theological and contextual reasons the formation of a community of Christians committed to live out what they preach should be the first step to undertake.

3.7. What Next?
Finally, what must be done if we want to give church planting the place it deserves? I want to conclude with a brief list of recommendations, based on my own experience in the Netherlands.94

Find leaders. As I have said before, it is better to select people whom you trust, than to rely on institutional control mechanisms. How do you find these people? In my experience, some of them may be found in seminaries. But usually, apostolic pioneer types do not have the patience to be in an academic environment for years and years, nor do they have the reflective attitude that this environment requires. So, it is important to have different recruitment mechanisms. In our situation, a semi-annual assessment for missionary pioneer ministry has helped us a lot. This helps us to find the people with the proper spirituality, experience, and attitude to be sent out in church planting.

Relax structures. My own denomination, which normally requires its pastors to follow a six years academic training, has opened the possibility for missionary pioneers to be recognized as a pastor, even if they do not have the right diplomas. Basically, if you have proven that you can start a church, evangelize people, disciple them, and be a pastor to them, you have proven enough. It does not mean that you are done learning – far from it, but it certainly means that you have the right qualifications to start.

Training and mentoring. It is important to have different types of training. In my experience, academic education is important, especially for those apostolic pioneers who have come in a more reflective stage of their ministry. However, we also need shorter training, more practically oriented, to help people get started. Connecting beginning pioneers with more experienced people in a mentorship has also appeared to be very helpful.

Networking. In small countries, such as Denmark and the Netherlands, it is not so difficult for pioneers all over the country to know each other and to meet each other on a regular basis. That is what we do, and we use those encounters for intervision and peer review. They are wonderful stages for training and reflection. To these networks we add denominational representatives, academic professors, and mission board members. It is important to keep people in conversation, as much as possible. Only if people learn to trust each other, they will resist the temptations of sectarianism or conservatism.

Research. Finally, you need research. In a challenging missionary context like Western Europe, you need people who look deeper into missionary initiatives, and ask what can be learnt from them. Usually, the people who produce innovations, are the last to talk about them. Often, they are simply not aware of the fact that they have produced innovations! Much true renewal remains in innovative projects, as ‘tacit knowledge’.

---

94 See for example the chapters on leadership in Gerrit Noort et al., Als een kerk opnieuw begint: Handboek voor missionaire gemeenschapsvorming, Boekencentrum: Zoetermeer 2008.
Researchers must find this knowledge and make it accessible for the wider church.

For centuries Christianity has been a change agent, a radical and subversive teaching from the margins. Then it became the central ideology of our Western nations, and it lost much of its innovative power. Christianity became implicated in all the politics and power plays of human social life. Now, after a thousand years of Christendom, Christianity may reveal “within itself sources of criticism which can infiltrate the social order just as two hundred years ago the philosophers of the Enlightenment infiltrated the social order of France”.95 I pray that we will live to see it.