

Mission in Europe

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I just come to read in an article that Leslie Newbigin stated at several occasions that the Nominal Christians and the Post-Christian West may be the most difficult context for missionary work.¹ If this is true I cannot say but I agree that there are some intricacies which I find impelling for any attempt of a missionary theology. Perhaps, as so often, the attempt to formulate **one** theology is the real problem; at least, it should be attempted to outline the context to which these assumed theologies should answer.

In this paper I will attempt to outline this context for Europe as I understand it. My perspective is the one of a Lutheran and that means in Europe, the one of a traditional mainline church which defines its relation to society along the lines of contracts with the state. The perspective of the Roman Catholic Church is different from the Lutheran but they share some of the problems with the Lutherans because the Roman Catholic Church is related to the state in a similar manner. The so-called free churches – free because without contractual state relations -, e.g. the Baptists, Mennonites, Methodists, Brethren, again, have a different outlook on these questions and consciously a different standing than the majority churches – yet on the level of being organized and legally constituted bodies they share some of the problems of the mainline churches in a post-modern society.

These few indications hopefully convey an impression how I situate my approach. In what follows I will, firstly, give some indications to a recent debate on *mission* and *evangelization* in Europe, and secondly, outline some strong points and shortcomings. Thirdly I wish to take up some challenges which I believe are not taken seriously by this missionary approach and finally outline some ideas to further studies and activities.

1. Terminology and Present Context

1.1. Terminology

1.1.1. The word *mission* in the European context used to refer precisely to the mission to the “heathen” world. So a missionary was a person sent out to another continent, where presumably no church existed and to convert people and to found a church. This conception was formulated classically by Gustav Warneck in the 1880. Let us note in passing that exactly for this reason Warneck expected that mission will be only a period in the life of the church and would come to its end once churches have been planted everywhere. This was his point, not that all human beings would have to become Christians to end the period of mission.

¹ Pierson, Paul E., The New Context of Christian Mission: Challenges and Opportunities, in: Journal of Asian Mission 2002, 145-162.

These missionaries working outside of Europe in the 19th and beginning 20th century were mainly recruited, educated and sent out by one of the many missionary societies founded beyond the realms of the protestant churches: mission never was a mainline concern. A missionary was not a pastor and many of them surviving their service abroad were later not admitted to a ministry in the mainline churches in Europe, particularly in Europe. .

1.1.2. The term evangelisation in the European context referred to a pietistic specific approach to nominally Christians in Europe. This approach was somehow diaconically oriented because it assumed that the people in question were for social reasons so busy to survive that they had no time for religion. The Innere Mission addressed for instances among others those masses which had in the period of industrialisation to leave the country side and mass up in the cities under circumstances which were abominable. The Innere Mission also approached the directors of industrial plants employing these people that they should give time so that their workers could attend services or send their children to school and provided religious education.

1.2. *Present context*

I am not sure whether Warneck would say that the period of mission has come to an end but we do not find a continent where no church exists. Even to identify a single country without a Christian church may be difficult. If, however, we compare the numbers of missionaries sent abroad, we realize that the West Mission has not yet come to an end and that numbers have increased since the 19th century. Also in Europe there exist interdenominational evangelical bodies, societies, or churches which still send considerable numbers of missionaries into the non-Western world. Often enough they do so without any relation to churches which well exist in these countries where they start their work.

The mainline protestant churches in Europe are ambivalent in this regard. On the one hand they subscribe to the widespread ecumenical understanding of mission which speaks since the World Conference on Mission and Evangelization in Mexico 1963 of a Christian Mission in six continents. In that sense they interpret Western Europe as their field for mission. Consequently they send only a few missionaries in cooperation with local churches to the receiving countries and insist that these work there within the structure and in obedience to the local church.

This understanding of mission is framed by the paradigm of the *mission dei*. God himself is the missionary who came into this world to call all men, the church is an instrument. The strong points of this paradigm are:

- Mission is considered to be a dimension of the life of the church and not a specific activity
- *Mission dei* is ecumenically oriented: the call is to God and the body of Christ and not to become a Lutheran, Roman Catholic or Mennonite.

- This concept is today issue centered by which I mean that the quality of the new life in Christ will be experienced in the way Christians are dealing with issues of hunger, injustice, persecution. The challenge is to become as Church meaningful to those who are struck by these threats.

On the other hand the older use of the term is still reflected in the organization of our mainline churches. The former missionary societies have been transformed into mission bodies but they still are quite independent from church organizations and form their own structures like for instance the Association of Protestant Missions (EMW) which has been founded 26 years ago as a common board of missionary organizations and the churches. Equally those organizations which address today the issues of the formerly Innere Mission, e.g. evangelization, have their own bodies and structures but their coordinating committee is a member of the EMW.

On the level of organization, the twin concerns of mission and evangelization are not combined but separated. And what is more: although the mainline Churches and the missionary bodies subscribe to a renewed understanding of mission, the earlier understanding of Mission as Mission of the West is still prevailing. The majority even within the mainline churches will identify mission with this older understanding of mission. Since this majority takes the post-colonial critique of the Mission of the West as granted it will call to suspend mission. Their advocates are convinced that any mission will not escape the colonialist, paternalist and ideological pattern of the allegedly superior West.

Since about 8-10 years we have a renewed debate in Europe within the mainline churches which under the heading of *mission* discusses now the life of the churches *in Europe*.

This debate arises for four reasons, mainly:

- An earlier debate within the churches on the understanding of mission which the missionary bodies have formulated within the EMW. This definition bases itself on the understanding of mission in the horizon of the *missio dei* concept and the concerns of the Churches especially in the South. It was attacked by the evangelicals who had meanwhile organized their own movements. They were convinced that the politics of the mission bodies and the mainline churches were at the same time one-sidedly socially and politically oriented and that they did not stand up to the need of missionary work as the Lausanne movement envisioned it. (To note in passing that today the mainline mission bodies and the Lausanne movement have become closer in their understanding.)
- The second reason and probably the one with the main thrust for the protestant churches in Europe is the fact of the declining membership numbers of the churches. This concern is intricately linked to the
- Issue of the dramatically dwindling finances of the mainline churches.

- and finally the challenge of the situation in the new federal states after the unification in 1989 where in contrast to the western states the churches are a absolute minority.

I wish to underline that the questions of membership and of finances are intricately intertwined. Many members have left the mainline churches because they considered their membership contribution like a tax but one they can avoid. So they opt out after they realized that they can enjoy most of the services of the Churches although they are not members of the church anymore. So a classical situation in a parish may be that in a family the man earning the income is nominally not a member of the church anymore. His wife still is a member but she has no income on her own and so the family contributes only a small nominal fee to the church. Their 3 children have been baptized and are entitled to visit Kindergarden, they attend children's group financed by the church or Sunday school, the family visit services and so on.

On the other hand since our membership fees are linked to the income tax finances have been well as long as our economy was well. Even though more and more people left the church, some for financial reasons, some for reasons of belief, the finances of the main line churches augmented during the seventies and even eighties year by year because of the economic situation in Europe. Now we have the reverse effect: even if no one would leave the church anymore our finances would not recover and will diminish further dramatically because our economy fails. Here we are affected by the same processes of the globalization as other countries and we envision in Europe that we will have to develop new economies, new ways of financing our social systems, new ways to finance the churches. We are still a rich society but we have become a society which considers nowadays the achievements in social security systems primarily as a burden for the liberalized economy.

What is remarkable about this discussion is that it refers to the concept of *mission dei* and at the same moment criticizes it. "If everything is mission then nothing is mission": the church may be a missionary one but somehow it has to organize and realize this dimension. I think that is an important point. The four reasons I mentioned for the renewed debate are really focusing on the context of Europe. Yet what is lacking is the wider concern of those issues which are troubling the Churches in the non-Western world. And it is interesting to note that the mainline churches accuse their own missionary bodies which still lend their voices to these issues of falling prone to the "everything is mission" tenet and to neglect thereby the more specific concerns of the European context.

If we carefully study the documents on mission of the mainline churches we will realize that there where they spell out what *missio dei* in Europe could mean they focus plainly on how to *win back* those who have left the church in order to consolidate the finances of the churches. This entails that mission in these papers is primarily understood as targeting those who have been baptized, experienced religious instruction in school, have been confirmed, married in church, brought their

children to baptism and eventually declined membership to avoid the financial contribution. Actually, it is very often not even a problem to win them to volunteer for a task in a parish. They need no mission but being convinced that it is worthwhile to adhere to an insitutionalized church and exactly that they usually are not willing to consider anymore.

This is an entirely different story in the new federal states. 40 years of socialist instruction and inventing obstacles to the church eventually generated a situation in which younger generations have no idea what Christianity is about. They know almost next to nothing. They form the second group which is considered in the papers on mission and some reflection is done how they could be approached.

2. The Mission of a mainline Church

The issues which the renewed debate addresses have for a long time been recognized and in the mainline churches much has been done to cope with these issues. New ways of living as a church have been developed. For instance, we developed the quality of our worship by giving more importance to education in liturgy and preaching, new forms of music or by educating lay men and women to contribute to worship. We widened our understanding of worship beyond the Sunday services by inventing new forms of prayer meetings, finding new places for services outside the church walls, intensifying work in the media, organizing festivals or discussion events on topics related to our faith.

Here we actually owe much to the partnership with churches in Asia, Africa and Latin America, as well to their liturgy and songs as well to their models of being churches relevant to their context. Their concerns and the results of ecumenical fellowship were also more and more considered within our mainline church contexts and the voices of the churches in the third world were amplified and communicated – and, at least partially, heard.

Also a consciousness was further developed to contextualize the life in the parishes (City churches, parishes, rural, urban areas). This included a response to the more specific needs of groups like those without employment or those who are overloaded with work, or of socially defined groups like impoverished elderly people or those without houses or drug addicts.

This also meant a new awareness for the presence of immigrants in Europe as well for their social needs as well for their religious needs. Many of them are Christians but the majority of them brought their religions to Europe so that today the Muslims, although a minority of perhaps 3 %, are next to the Christians the largest religious community in Europe.

To cope with all these concerns and many others the mainline churches developed also new forms of ministries: to empower all these mentioned above to act and speak on their own, to educate lay men and women and entrust them with ministries of diverse types, to work part time as a pastor or concomitant to a secular job.

So I would sum up that the mainline churches developed a lot to live up to the challenges of the present times. This already has been reflected and a lot has been done. Both the renewed debate on mission in Europe, the partnership with Churches outside Europe and also the link to evangelistic concepts helped us to sharpen our analysis and our repertoire of activity and of means to communicate the Gospel. It is therefore no surprise that all this is mentioned in the papers on mission which the mainline churches have been formulating and publishing. It is therefore probably also no surprise that beyond the concept of communicating the Gospel we find the idea that only a church which nourishes the idea of growing remains truly church. So there is a line of arguing which seems to seduce us to assume that all is a question of membership and of scale: if we raise enough funds, if we invest more in projects and missionary activities, if we remodel our mainline churches here and there and if we intensify all strategies mentioned and invent new ones – then the Church will grow and will win back those who left.

3. Secularisation, Plurality, Dissemination

But there is a second debate, unfortunately more or less independent from this stream which sketches a different picture of the situation of the church in Europe. This debate is informed by sociological insights and insights of the larger ecumenical debate on mission but the debate on mission within Europe fails to recognize its thrust.

To my mind the situation in Europe is no longer one where the rather simplistic perspective works that there are established churches and their membership on the one side and those who left on the other side. There are also those who follow different types of religiosities. These can be close to the convictions of some churches or contradict them. The point is that those people would never join a community or a church and those still within the churches are more and more affected by these trends and tend to loosen their bonds to the churches.

Then there is also the growing presence of immigrants. For more than 30 years especially the cities in Europe have experienced a growing influx of migrants and their families who brought their religions with them. You will find Muslims, Buddhists and even Hindus, you see mosques and Buddhist monasteries with Tibetan monks or even Hindu temples. These non-christian religions – with the exception of the Jewish community – are the religions of the immigrants and only very few Europeans convert either to Islam or to Buddhism.

Yet there is something remarkable: the immigrants bring also different branches of Christianity to Europe. So we have smaller or larger communities of different Christian

traditions like the Mar Thoma Church, different branches of Orthodoxy or Presbyterians or or or. But what is more, we have a growing number of Christian churches which are founded by immigrants of the charismatic type. This does not only mean that we have cross-cultural missionaries from Asia or Africa in Europe, it also tells us that these Christian immigrants do not feel at home at all in the mainline churches!

So we find in Europe the whole range of religions and of Christianity. This does not only tell us that plurality and a diversification have taken place – it affects, that is my contention the status of faith and church itself. Eventually all these diversified ways of believing disseminate religion and dissolve it into religiosity and into the private realm. In the realm of public religion should not be heard, and churches should not be subjects of discourse in the public realm.

I draw 4 conclusions from that:

- I interpret these facts on a first level as indications to the impact of globalization which affects already heavily the European society. Europe as an industrialized country is an agent of globalization and at the same moment a victim of its own aspirations - not only on the economic level but also on the cultural and religious level.
- I further interpret these observations as indications of a new quality of secularization. The numbers of member of the institutionalized churches diminish but on the whole the number of religious communities grows and is diversified.
- Furthermore there is a tendency from religion to religiosity which means that outside but also *within* these bodies and groups and churches a multiplicity of attitudes, beliefs and convictions coexists. That a set of confessions constitute the center of the church is probably true only for the professionals of the mainline churches or those churches which we earlier considered to be sects.
- Ultimately faith is restricted to the realm of private convictions and individually held persuasions. The quality of being church beyond the assembly of believers is threatened.

4. Consequences

This affects less the numbers but dramatically our understanding what it means to be church. Therefore the strategies outlined by the mainline churches in their papers on mission somehow miss the issues at stake. In the new federal states of Germany, former GDR, they say: “people left the Churches in masses and will have to be won back individually.” I think: Those who have left the churches *will not be won back* because they feel they have moved beyond. But where they dwell the mainline churches cannot easily follow because the being of the church itself will be affected. I believe that here we are stunned by the glaring light of a secularity which just has started to be understood.

- We will have to face new ways of being convinced without believing.
- We will have to face new ways of belonging for people who are affected but do not wish to join formally.

- We will have to deal with groups or persons who are committed to the same cause and even for the same reasons as we are.

All this we just have begun to discover and to explore or to understand and it may well end up to turn our present structures up side down.

I am also convinced that the Pentecostal charismatic movement is, for Europe, only part of the answer. Only few who are fed up with the stiff reasonability and the political correctness of the mainline churches find a new home in one of the German Pentecostal churches. I find it striking that whereas in 1800 only 1 % of evangelicals lived outside of Europe in 2000 2/3 of the pentecostal-charismatic Christians live in Latin America, Africa and Asia.² What is more, the German Pentecostals suffer the same sort as the mainline churches regarding the immigrants: Pentecostal minded Africans never would join a German Pentecostal church but start their own. If there is a growth of Pentecostal churches in Europe it is mainly due to immigrant churches.

Possible reactions to my mind are

- To intensify our consciousness of being called to live as churches according to the gospel of salvation, freedom, justice and peace for all mankind
- To develop ecumenical fellowship seriously from friendly relations of neighboring parishes to a deeper joint commitment to the world.
- To face the new challenges and to become as churches an alternative globalization and address the questions of the future of humanity.
- This includes a new understanding of mission which does not deny to win members and yet does not reduce interreligious dialogues or interfaith relations to a strategy or an impediment to a mission to the world.
- To have a double strategy: to be close to persons in their sufferings and joys, their fears and hopes. And at the same time transcend by a symbolic communication the personal relationships and also the differences and distinctions of different Church traditions without destroying the diversity.

If I compare these insights to the classical profile of a mainline church of the confessional type I readily admit that they have some problems to cope with these challenges because of their design. Especially in the southern hemisphere of our globe churches of these types are clearly exceeded by churches of the interdenominational and pentecostal-charismatic type. Yet I am also convinced that the confessional type of church still has strong points to it.

- Their set of confession and symbols and their structures provide instruments for a transmission of faith from one generation to the next
- They have developed a highly differentiated knowledge how to explain, promote and transmit the faith in postmodern societies
- Their more detached way of believing and belonging allows for a whole set of relationships. This permits to individuals a more intense relation at one period in

² Pierson, Paul E., The New Context of Christian Mission: Challenges and Opportunities, in: Journal of Asian Mission 2002, 145-162. He quotes this from Philip Jenkins, The Next Christendom: The Coming of Global Christianity (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2002), 58-59.

their life and a more detached relation in other periods without the doubt to have become shallow and lean in faith.

- Since they do not rely so heavily on charismatic leadership they are less suspect of splitting and fighting on faith issues