

David J Bosch:

## Believing in the future – toward a missiology of Western culture

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S African theologian, died in car crash 1992

Excellent short work (60pp) on theology and mission, incisive and thought-provoking, and packed with all the appropriate references. Best short analysis of task of gospel/culture that I've read.

### 1. *The "Postmodern World"*

We live in a post-everything era. Michael Polanyi first asked for development of a postcritical and postmodern philosophy in 1958. 60s and 70s brought great upsurge of enthusiasm in world and church; all gone now.

West now is a programmed and administered society run by technocrats; comes across as benevolent but is in fact totalitarian. Presuppositions and spinoffs include centralization, bureaucratisation, ecological damage, manipulation/exploitation of human beings, relentless consumerism and chronic unemployment. Permissive society without norms, models, traditions; immediate society without past and often without future; people live in the present and seek instant gratification. At same time we are inundated by deluge of info and entertainment, mainly by TV, which produces pluralism and widespread pollution of the mind.

'All this .. has for millions of people created a gap between vision and reality that, in turn, has precipitated a crisis in their worldview and self-understanding. This has not happened at the level of the individual only, but also in respect of entire communities. And when such a crisis involves the dominant visions of a particular society,... the entire society is prone to massive breakdown. The very scaffolding on which people are standing is collapsing... The church only too frequently responds by digging trenches and preparing for a long seige, hoping against hope that, somehow, the threat will go away.' 3-4

### 2. *The legacy of the Enlightenment*

Enlightenment spawned 7 cardinal convictions, p5:

- Emphasis on reason suggested that the human mind was the point of departure for all knowing
- Reality divided into thinking subjects, and objects to be analysed/exploited
- Cause and effect replaced purpose
- High premium placed on progress, expansion, advance, modernisation
- Assumption that knowledge was factual and value-free; facts were facts and values were choices; religion was a value
- Assumption that all problems were in principle solvable
- People regarded as emancipated, autonomous individuals, no longer under tutelage of superiors

Enlightenment made deep inroads into W theological thinking, and virtually the entire W missionary enterprise was predicated on its assumptions.

Enlightenment was logical consummation of thinking since Greece. Idea from C3 that God known through the 2 books of scripture (revelation) and nature (reason) ultimately led to duality of faith and reason. Enlightenment was inherent in Christian faith itself and its encounter with the world.

Enlightenment thinkers were all Christians.

Enlightenment never went unchallenged. There were always 3 traditions/currents of research, p 11:

1. Organicist tradition, based on Aristotle; dominant metaphor the organism, emphasis on wholeness/interdependence
2. Hermetic-cabalist, occult, alchemical, spiritualist tradition; knowledge only through mystical illumination
3. Mechanist tradition, reviving science and maths of Archimedes with its machine analogies.

All three incorporated religious assumptions about the universe; by end C17th the third had triumphed. Other 2 traditions continued. Organicist one staged comebacks – romanticism. Cabalist one survives as parasciences. Protests against rationalist tradition by Hegel, Marx, Freud, Lyotard and postmodernists.

Enlightenment brought many benefits too; the most fruitful effort ever sustained by the human mind (Polanyi), which has enriched us mentally and morally to extent unrivalled by any previous movement. Newbigin – the light in the Enlightenment

was real light. So it is an oversimplification to juxtapose Enlightenment and Christian faith as foes. Solution does not lie in turning the clock back.

### 3. The Christian faith in a postmodern age

However, the secularisation which followed in wake of Enlightenment has been a permanent thorn in the flesh of the church. More and more people have discovered they can ignore God and the church and be none the worse for it. Catholicism and Orthodoxy have withstood the impact better. He suggests this because medieval Catholic theology is based on a harmonious scheme of nature and supernature in which everything fits, formulated by Aquinas:

Faith (mystery) → grace → Church → theology → the Christian

Reason → nature → state → philosophy → the human

Look at this in the light of Niebuhr's analysis of the relationship between Christ and culture, and it seems Catholic theology falls into category Christ-above-culture, which sees no irresolvable conflict between faith and culture, and therefore faith and reason. Protestantism saw it differently; thomistic thesis abandoned in favour of series of oppositions, a good choice vs a bad choice:

Faith ↔ Reason

Grace ↔ Nature

Church ↔ World

Theology ↔ Philosophy

Christian ↔ Human

This is Niebuhr's Christ-against-culture, and it introduced idea of incompatibility between church and world. Tillich called this the 'Protestant principle'. Virtually all of Prot theology succumbed to the pressures of the Enlightenment to make faith rationally plausible. Schleiermacher defined theology as sth done by professionals for the sake of the believing community. Pastor became a professional on a par with others – doctors, teachers, lawyers. Result was that believers had to commute between different plausibility structures, which led to a dichotomy of 2 unrelated worlds. The new worldview didn't oppose religion, but fostered a private religion that had no function in society as a whole. Religion was relegated to the private sector and the world of values.' In this climate, theology cd only justify its existence in universities if it adopted the same scientific precepts and methods as all the other disciplines that were no longer under the tutelage of the church.. Religion lost the function it had had in an earlier era – that of explaining the world'. 18.

W culture continues to draw parasitically on the Christian faith; the Christian legacy cannot be undone. Many values taken for granted as part of the Enlightenment world are rooted in Christianity; eg the moral commandments of the Decalogue.

Religion has been replaced by other Grand Ideologies – marxism, fascism, nazism. And those by 'soft' ideologies – the American way of life, the free market system; are effectively 'civil religion'.

Enlightenment rationalism is fanatically intolerant of any convictions which dispute the orthodoxy of the scientific world view; the aim is to arrive at a residue of knowledge which is completely determined by objectively true evidence. But with this dogmatic scientism comes relativism – because there are no universal norms, only individually held values, people may live as they please (this is postmodernism defined by Lyotard as 'incredulity toward metanarratives'. Result of both is oppression. Both celebrate freedom, but because people have no point of reference beyond themselves they can be subjugated by other people, typical of the modern world that people can be used as objects. Guardini on Nazism:

*all these terrible things surely did not just fall from heaven or, more precisely, rise up from hell! All the incomprehensible systems of degradation and destruction were not just invented after everything had been in order previously. Such monstrosities surely cannot just be ascribed to degenerated individuals or small groups; they derive from perversions and contaminations that have been at work for a very long time. Whatever may be termed moral norm, responsibility, honor, alertness of conscience, cannot just disappear from the totality of life, unless it has been corrupted long ago already. p22-23*

The illusion that human hopes for freedom, justice, and true progress can be realized by relying on reason or human resolve alone, or by the mechanics of economic, technological, or political development, has finally exploded.

### 4. Contours of a missiology of western culture

Africans and Asians find it impossible to distinguish between theology and missiology. In West it different, because we are the heirs of Christendom, which operated on the basis of a kind of symbiosis between church and society, and in which there were officially no non-believers. Neill: 'vision of a typical English village of not more than 400 inhabitants, where all are baptized Christians, compelled to live more or less Christian lives under the brooding eye of parson and squire', 28; context in which evangelisation has no meaning. In this paradigm, theology has no interest in the world outside the church, except in

so far as chunks of the world might be grabbed and incorporated into the church. This was how foreign mission was first understood! Mission meant abroad; evangelism meant reconversion at home. First usually thought more important than second. Few use 'mission' to refer to situation in the West. Mission in fact refers to a permanent and intrinsic dimension of the church's life; not secondary to the church's being. Brunner: 'the Church exists by mission, just as fire exists by burning'. Mission isn't recruiting people to our brand of religion; it is alerting people to the universal reign of God. In respect of their relationship to society, Christians have always been tempted to follow one of 2 ways; both must be excluded:

- To undertake the establishment of a Christian society – Christendom. Problem is that it makes a missionary stance towards society impossible.
- To withdraw from public life altogether. Tempting to concentrate on the religious aspect of life and leave the rest to the secular powers, not least because that's what they want.

'It belongs to our missionary mandate to ask questions about the use of power in our societies, to unmask those that destroy life, to show concern for the victims of society while at the same time calling to repentance those who have turned them into victims, and to articulate God's active wrath against all that distorts and diminishes human beings and all that exploits, squanders, and disfigures the world for selfishness, greed, and self-centred power.' Wolterstorff: Christianity is not an avertive religion but a world-formative religion. We must help people answer the q, 'what do we have to become Christians *for*?' We can't build God's kingdom on earth; it isn't ours to inaugurate. But we can help make it more visible, more tangible. Can't ignore the 3<sup>rd</sup> world either; solidarity is indivisible. The present world economic system is one that presupposes the subjugation of other nations, and seems set on maximising wealth and power regardless of the cost to society or the environment. Made worse by 3<sup>rd</sup> world's own corruption and maladministration. But nonetheless, much of its misery comes from policies emanating from the West.

God stated to be dead prematurely; the human being is *homo religiosus*. Subcutaneous spirituality persists. No nonreligious society has ever been found anywhere in the world; the modern nonbeliever is the aberration, not the believer.

'But by and large the revival of religion is not evident in the mainline churches and their Sunday services. It manifests itself outside Christianity or in groups outside the historical churches. Frequently our churches are empty not because the Christian faith is unacceptable to the modern world, but because of the 'counter-witness of believers and Christian communities failing to follow the model of Christ'. 45.

## 5. The Impossibility of not believing

Doubt has become the received view; idea that we should keep our minds empty rather than allow any but irrefutable truths to take possession of them. Most disciplines today concede that there is no such thing as complete objectivity. But the man in the street hasn't cottoned onto this yet; part of our mission must be to tell him. We must demonstrate the role that plausibility structures / worldviews play in people's lives. 'Worldviews are integrative and interpretive frameworks by which order and disorder are judged; they are the standards by which reality is managed and pursued, sets of hinges on which all our everyday thinking and doing turns' 49. They are shaped by lots of factors, inc context, social status, emotional health – both theory and practice, revelation and experience. A worldview is both a sketch of and a blueprint for reality. 49 The position the believer adopts is thus not irrational but eminently reasonable, and the only possible approach to life. It follows that theology can only be pursued from the basis of a faith commitment.

## 6. Conclusion

Other ingredients of a missiology of W culture must be:

- It must include an ecological dimension – W global economic structure has smashed up the environment, and the earth can't survive if we don't change
- It must be countercultural – W culture is hedonist, and the prosperity gospel is an expression of this. We need to rediscover sacrifice, asceticism, modesty, self-discipline. We must challenge the hedonism around us.
- It will have to be ecumenical – denominationalism is the religious aspect of secularisation; it is the form that religion takes in a culture controlled by the ideology of the Enlightenment
- It must be contextual; maybe we've lost it in the W because it never was
- It must be primarily a ministry of the laity – only way to bring together private and public
- It must flow from a local, worshipping community