

- **The Challenge of the Modern World to the Church**
- **Die Herausforderung der modernen Welt für die Gemeinde**
- **Le défi du monde moderne à l'Église**

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## ZUSAMMENFASSUNG

Nach einem kurzen Überblick über die Geschichte der Säkularisierung in dem die Renaissance, die Reformation, die Aufklärung, die industrielle Revolution und der nach dem 2. Weltkrieg erfolgte Durchbruch behandelt werden, wird die Frage gestellt, was Säkularisierung eigentlich sei. Die Antwort auf diese Frage hängt von der Perspektive ab aus der dieses Phänomen betrachtet wird. Gerard Dekker, ein niederländischer Religionssoziologe, erwähnt drei Aspekte: eine Abnahme der religiösen Praxis, eine zunehmende Eingrenzung des Einflßbereiches der Religion und die Anpassung der Religion an die jeweils herrschende Kultur. Gerben Heitink, ein niederländischer Theologe, betrachtet das Phänomen aus der Sicht des Einzelnen und entdeckt drei andere Aspekte: den Verlust eines religiösen Bezugsrahmens, den Verlust der Relevanz und den Verlust der Transzendenz. Beide Beispiele zeigen, daß in Westeuropa ein vollständiger Paradigmenwechsel stattgefunden hat. Säkularisierung findet jedoch nicht in der Isolation statt. Sie ist Teil eines viel größeren Phänomens des Modernisierungsprozesses, der von einer Differenzierung sowohl in der Gesellschaft als ganzer als auch im Leben des Individuums gekennzeichnet ist. Der mündige Mensch (Bonhoeffer) wurde in verschiedene Prozesse miteinbezogen: Demokratisierung, Subjektivierung und Rationalisierung. Dies führte zu einer grundlegenden Pluralisierung der Gesellschaft, die unsere moderne Welt in eine nachchristliche Welt verwandelte. Im allgemeinen haben die Kirchen auf die Säkularisierung auf drei unterschiedliche Weisen reagiert: durch Vorherrschaft (besonders in den römisch-katholischen Ländern), durch Widerstand (kleinere

konservative Gemeinden und kleine inner- und außerkirchliche Gruppierungen) und durch Anpassung (die größeren traditionellen Konfessionen). Eine wesentliche Rolle in diesem Anpassungsprozeß spielte die Art der Verkündigung. 'Ein wahres Evangelium muß verkündbar sein' war das Schlagwort, die führte jedoch zumeist zu einer Verkürzung des Evangeliums (vgl. Bischof Robinsons 'Gott ist anders' und die darauffolgende Auseinandersetzung).

Ist die Lage hoffnungslos? Viele Soziologen waren und bleiben, dem Beispiel Max Webers folgend, pessimistisch. Andere waren und bleiben, dem Beispiel Dürkheims folgend, eher optimistisch. Sowohl Peter Berger (Soziologe) als auch Lesslie Newbigin (Theologe) gehören zur letzteren Gruppe. Sie teilen die Ansicht nicht, Säkularisierung sei ein unausweichliches Schicksal, das zum Aussterben aller Religion führen werde. Die Säkularisierung selbst könnte bald in eine innere Krise geraten. Sogar Harvey Cox sah sich gezwungen, ein neues Buch zu schreiben: 'Göttliche Spiele. Meine Erfahrungen mit den Religionen' 1989; dies stellt in gewisser Weise einen Widerruf seines früheren Werkes 'The Secular City' (1965) dar. Anscheinend ist die Religion doch sehr gesund und munter! Offensichtlich ist der Mensch unheilbar religiös.

Das Evangelium bleibt eine befreiende Botschaft. Der moderne Mensch kann nicht vor den existentiellen Fragen fliehen, die sein eigenes Leben berühren. Bei unserer Verkündigung des Evangeliums brauchen wir nicht nach religiösen Berührungspunkten zu suchen: das Evangelium schafft sich seinen eigenen Landeplatz.

Darüberhinaus ist die christliche Botschaft nicht nur eine Botschaft für den Einzelnen,



sondern für eine ganze Kultur. In diese Kultur möchte sie dadurch eindringen, daß sie sich in ihr verleiht und sie von innen heraus verändert.

Das Evangelium zielt aber noch weiter. Es ist die einzige Botschaft, die eine einheitliche und kohärente Weltanschauung anbietet. Dies wird besonders am Brief an die Kolosser aufgezeigt. Nur das Evangelium bietet eine Antwort auf die Differenzierung, Pluralisierung und

Zersplitterung unserer modernen Kultur. Aber das Evangelium besteht nicht nur aus Worten; es fordert auch zu Taten heraus, zu Taten selbstloser Liebe.

Darin bestand die innere Stärke der Urgemeinde, die in einer vorchristlichen Kultur lebte. Darin besteht auch die 'Antwort' für eine Kirche, die in einer nachchristlichen Kultur lebt.

## RÉSUMÉ

Après un court historique de la sécularisation, traitant brièvement de la Renaissance, de la Réforme, du siècle des lumières, de la Révolution industrielle et de l'expansion qui a suivi la seconde guerre mondiale, la question est posée: 'qu'est la sécularisation?' La réponse dépend de la manière dont on considère le phénomène. Le Hollandais Gerard Dekker, spécialiste de sociologie de la pratique religieuse, mentionne trois aspects: une baisse de la pratique religieuse, une diminution croissante de l'importance du religieux en bien des domaines, et l'accommodation de la religion elle-même à la culture dominante. Le théologien hollandais Gerben Heitink aborde la question du point de vue de l'individu et signale trois autres aspects: la perte d'un cadre de référence religieux, la perte de pertinence et la perte de transcendance. Dans les deux cas, nous constatons qu'il s'est produit un changement complet de valeur de référence en Europe occidentale.

Toutefois, la sécularisation ne s'effectue pas isolément. C'est un aspect du phénomène beaucoup plus vaste qu'est la modernisation, et qui se caractérise par la différenciation dans la société en général et dans la vie des individus. 'L'homme a atteint sa majorité' (Bonhoeffer) et s'est impliqué dans des processus divers: ceux de la démocratisation, de la subjectivisation et de la rationalisation. Tout cela a conduit à une pluralisation profonde de la société, avec pour résultat que notre monde moderne est devenu un monde post-chrétien.

En général, les Églises ont réagi à la sécularisation de trois manières différentes: en exerçant une certaine domination (spécialement dans les pays catholiques), en résistant (Églises conservatrices plus petites et petits groupes à

l'intérieur ou en marge des Églises), ou en s'accommodant (les plus grandes dénominations historiques). Dans ce processus, les ministres du culte ont souvent joué un rôle important. Le slogan est devenu: 'un vrai Évangile doit pouvoir être prêché', mais ceci a souvent mené à un Évangile réduit (cf. *Honest to God* et le débat qui a suivi).

La situation est-elle désespérée? De nombreux sociologues, à la suite de Max Weber, ont eu et ont encore une vision pessimiste. D'autres, suivant Durkheim, ont été et sont plus optimistes. Le sociologue Peter Berger et le théologien Lesslie Newbigin appartiennent tous deux à cette deuxième tendance. Ils croient que la sécularisation n'est pas un destin inéluctable qui conduira à la disparition de toute religion. La sécularisation elle-même peut avoir à faire face bientôt à une crise interne. Même Harvey Cox a dû écrire un nouveau livre, *Religion in the Secular City*, la religion dans la cité séculière' (1984), dans lequel, d'une certaine manière, il se rétracte par rapport à son premier ouvrage *The Secular City*, 'la cité séculière' (1965). La religion fait preuve d'une grande vitalité. Apparemment, l'homme est incurablement religieux.

L'Évangile demeure un message libérateur. L'homme moderne ne peut échapper aux interrogations existentielles qui concernent sa propre vie. Dans notre proclamation de l'Évangile, nous ne devrions pas nous soucier des points de contact religieux: l'Évangile se crée lui-même sa piste d'atterrissage.

En outre, l'Évangile chrétien ne s'adresse pas seulement à l'individu, mais c'est un message qui concerne la culture entière. Il veut pénétrer cette culture en s'y incarnant lui-même et en la transformant de l'intérieur.



*La portée de l'Évangile est même plus vaste. Il est le seul message qui offre une vision du monde unifiée et cohérente. Nous rencontrons cela en particulier dans l'épître aux Colossiens. Seul l'Évangile offre un remède à la différenciation, la pluralisation et la fragmentation de notre culture moderne. Mais*

*l'Évangile ne consiste pas seulement en paroles; il appelle aussi à l'action, une action d'amour généreux. C'était là la force intérieure de l'Église primitive qui vivait dans une culture pré-chrétienne. C'est aussi la 'solution' pour une Église vivant dans une culture post-chrétienne.*

## Introduction

We are living in a secularized world and we all know it. Whether we come from Holland or Great Britain, from Germany or Scandinavia, from France or Spain or Italy, from Hungary or Rumania, we are all surrounded by a secularized world. In many ways it is a strange and unique phenomenon. In the 'Choruses from *The Rock*' T.S. Eliot wrote:

It seems that something has happened that has never happened before: though we know not just when, or why, or how, or where.

Men have left GOD, not for other gods, they say, but for no god; and this has never happened before.

Alan D. Gilbert, who quotes these words, says: 'The possibility that an entire culture, not just elite elements within it, might dispense with religion altogether is uniquely a product of modern Western civilization'.<sup>1</sup> And he rightly adds that this secularized culture is proving exportable, even in a post-colonial age. For however true it may be that the church is growing vigorously in Africa, and also in some Asian countries, such as Indonesia, Korea and China, it is equally true that secularization is making its impact on the youth in many non-Western countries, especially on the young people that flock to the cities.

### 1. A short history of secularization

Even in our Western world secularization did not emerge all of a sudden. Though our generation may have witnessed a tremendous upsurge of secularization, the process itself started many centuries ago. I shall not weary you with a long drawn-out historical survey, but will confine myself to a few facts

and figures. These, I believe, are necessary for arriving at a proper understanding of what is going on in our own day.

At the beginning of the Middle Ages, when the so-called Constantinian era started, the European world embarked upon the road toward *Christianization*. At the height of the Middle Ages this process appeared to have been very successful; at that time one could speak of a Christian culture or civilization in Western Europe. As Gilbert puts it: 'Medieval Europe owed its coherence to the common bonds of a basic Christian consensus' (20).

But hidden under this common Christian culture were forces that would eventually lead to the secularization of this very same culture. As a matter of fact, at the end of the 14th century these forces already presented themselves. In Italy the so-called *Renaissance* started, taking hold of the heritage of the ancient Greek civilization, which was characterized by the centrality and autonomy of man. At first the Renaissance seemed to be a mixture of both Greek and Christian thinking. The same was true of *Humanism* that developed alongside it. Many humanists of the 15th and 16th century (for instance, Desiderius Erasmus) were devout members of the Catholic Church. At the same time they shared with the Renaissance the confidence in the intellectual power of man and they also shared its critical evaluation of ancient traditions and dogmas. Even though the Christian consensus remained largely unquestioned, the acceptance of free inquiry and rational criticism meant that the way toward secularization was opened.

The *Reformation* of the 16th century made its own contribution. To be sure, the



Reformers themselves continued to adhere to the idea of a Christian culture and even maintained a Constantinian view of society ('throne' and 'altar' usually retained their close relationship in countries that were deeply influenced by the Reformation). Yet there were elements in reformational thinking which in the long run could and would promote the process of secularization. I am thinking here, for instance, of Luther's doctrine of the priesthood of all believers. This doctrine not only offered to each individual believer direct access to God but also, in a fundamental way, made him independent of the ecclesiastical offices and authorities. Gilbert mentions three major contributions of the Reformation at this point. 1. It left Europeans with a profound crisis of authority. 2. It re-imposed upon Europeans a distinction between Christianity and culture. 3. It set in motion various social and political forces leading eventually to religious toleration in most European societies (27ff.).

The major source of today's secularization, however, is to be found in the 18th century movement of the *Enlightenment*. Lesslie Newbigin even calls it a 'conversion experience'.<sup>2</sup> The whole outlook on reality and on man's place within reality changed completely. Immanuel Kant, one of the 'fathers' of the Enlightenment formulated it thus: 'Enlightenment is man's exodus from his self-incurred tutelage. Tutelage is the inability to use one's understanding without the guidance of another person ... Dare to know! Have the courage to use your own understanding; this is the motto of the Enlightenment.' By its emphasis on the human 'ratio' as the only way to understand reality and as the only means of arriving at ultimate and absolute truth, the Enlightenment broke the basic Christian consensus that had characterized the Middle Ages and to some extent also the Reformation period. At the same time it provided a new framework or paradigm for a new understanding of reality.

The Enlightenment itself, however, did not yet de-Christianize Europe. It was largely limited to the higher classes and did not yet affect the common people. Nevertheless, it made a profound impact upon Western culture. Gilbert formulates it aptly: 'While it

remained *dominant*, the Christian world-view was no longer *normative*'(36).

Later movements absorbed much of Enlightenment thought and speeded up the process of secularization. I am thinking of the *French Revolution* at the end of that very same century, with its well-known slogan: 'Liberty, equality and fraternity', all ideas derived from the Enlightenment. I am also thinking of the effects of the *Industrial Revolution* in the 18th and 19th century, alienating large parts of the working classes from the Christian faith and the Christian church. The industrial revolution was not only a economic and material transformation of society, but it was also a social and cultural phenomenon that completely changed the existing culture and the lives of people involved in this culture. Gilbert calls it a 'watershed in human experience with which only the Neolithic Revolution of pre-history is comparable'(43).

Still, even the industrial revolution did not yet de-Christianize Western Europe. This happened only *after World War II*, when all of a sudden the dams broke and the river of secularization swept everything along, which stood in its way. Various largely independent and yet interrelated factors combined to bring this about. I can only mention them: increasing prosperity, higher levels of education for all, the increase of free time and of mobility, the impact of the mass media, in particular of television, etc. The result of all these factors together is that the Christian face of Europe changed rapidly. Even worse, this Christian face has already disappeared and has been replaced by a secular face. Western Europe has become a *secular continent*.

## 2. What is secularization?

It is not easy to define or circumscribe the phenomenon of secularization. The original meaning of the term is quite clear. *The Shorter Oxford English Dictionary* gives the following meanings. 1. The conversion of an ecclesiastical or religious institution or its property to secular possession and use. 2. The giving of a secular or non-sacred character or direction to art, studies, etc.; the placing of morals on a secular basis; the



restricting of education to secular subjects (1964, 1828). In a more general sense one can say that secularization today means the process in which society at large and large sections of societal life are being divorced from the impact of the Christian Gospel, without adopting any other form of religion. Owen Chadwick gives the following broad definition: 'The growing tendency in mankind to do without religion, or to try to do without religion.'<sup>3</sup>

The Dutch sociologist of religion Gerard Dekker (Free University, Amsterdam), looking at the phenomenon of secularization from the perspective of *society as a whole*, concludes that we should distinguish at least three aspects. (1) There is a *decrease in religiousness* among the population. An ever larger number of people no longer attends church services, or even leaves the church. (2) There is a *growing restriction of the range or significance of religion*. Religion no longer has a bearing on huge segments of societal life. It is virtually restricted to a person's private life. (3) Religion itself is *accommodating itself* to the new ways of thinking and living which are dominant in society at large. In other words, the ideas and experiences of religious people themselves are changing too. Dekker here speaks of an 'inner' secularization.

The Dutch theologian Gerben Heitink (also teaching in the Free University) has a somewhat different approach. He looks at the phenomenon of secularization from the angle of the *individual person* and notes three other aspects that are characteristic of the dominant secular world-view of our day.<sup>4</sup> (1) The *loss of a religious frame of reference*. The believer is no longer supported by his environment, but is largely left to himself. This easily leads to doubt and to questions such as: Is it still worthwhile to believe and live a Christian life? (2) The *loss of relevance*. People begin to ask themselves: What is the value of belief in a world that has become autonomous, that has excluded God from its centre and that seems to be quite able to manage without Him? (3) The *loss of transcendence*. One of the major aspects of secularization is the restriction of all reality to the universe as we know it and explore it with our telescopes and micro-

scopes, and to the present life as we live it between birth and death. Even theology has at times adapted itself to this way of looking at reality. Although Paul Tillich and John Robinson still wanted to believe in God and did not want to do away with the whole idea of transcendence, in their theology God was no longer seen as the Transcendent One, who is distinct from the world and does not need it, but in a panentheistic way they described Him as the Ground of Being or Being itself.

All these aspects, both the ones mentioned by Dekker and those mentioned by Heitink, show that in the Western-European world a complete *change of paradigm* has been and is taking place. When we compare the new paradigm with the old, we notice that autonomy has taken the place of heteronomy, that a democratic way of thinking has replaced the hierarchical way of transmitting truth and authority, and that the idea of transcendence has given way to that of immanence.<sup>5</sup>

Naturally, we should not make the mistake of thinking that this shift of paradigm is happening everywhere in the same way and to the same extent. Dekker rightly points out that the three forms of secularization which he has mentioned do not simply coincide. There is at this point quite a difference between the *United States* and *Western Europe*. In the former religion has adapted itself to a greater degree to the developments in society at large, while in the latter religion was less adaptable, the result being that the gap between modern society and the church became more pronounced and many people abandoned religion altogether. Gilbert, who also notes the difference between the United States and Britain, mentions another difference. According to him in Britain 'institutional secularization in the wider society has advanced more rapidly than in America, and the residuum of 'religious terminology' and formal Christianity is therefore less conspicuous, less authentic; less seriously regarded'(106). Even within Western Europe there are differences. In my own country, for instance, the results of secularization are in some ways more pronounced than in other Western European countries. While in most



countries secularization leads to a decreasing church attendance, without causing a complete break with the church (the non-church-goers remain nominal members of their church), in my own country we see that many people make a clean break with the church and officially and statistically become non-church members.

So far we have concentrated on the process of secularization on its own. In actual fact, however, secularization does not take place 'on its own'. It is an aspect of a much larger process, the *process of modernization*, which has been going on in Europe for at least some centuries. Here, too, I shall not give a detailed survey of the entire process, but only mention some of its striking characteristics. The most striking is perhaps the *differentiation* that has taken place in society at large. In the past, even up to the second half of the 19th century, society as a whole was still characterized by unity and coherence and the lives of the individual members of society were equally characterized by unity and coherence. Family life and professional life were closely interwoven. Quite often the whole family was engaged in the same trade or profession, which was usually pursued in the building next door. As a result of the industrial revolution and the increase in technology family and trade/profession became two separate worlds, existing side by side, the trade/profession often being practised away from home. Gradually nearly all aspects of life became independent and occupied their own world: the arts, education, medicine, economics, etc. The same also happened to religion: it too became a separate world, confined to the sphere of private life. 'Christian faith became—for most people—a private and domestic matter strictly separated from the public worlds of politics and economics.'<sup>6</sup>

During this same process of modernization the place of man himself within the spectrum of society changed. He became more and more independent, or to put it in the well-known words of Dietrich Bonhoeffer: '*Man came of age*'. In the first place man was allowed, even supposed, to speak his own mind in the various, differentiated spheres of life (the process of *democratization*). In the second place he was allowed, even supposed, to make his

own choice in the world of values and truths (the process of *subjectivization*). In the third place he was expected, even supposed, to plan his own future and to bend this future to his own will (the process of *rationalization*).

All these processes together have lead to a profound *pluralization* of society. Modern society shows little coherence (apart from the fact of modernity itself!), but consists of a great number of competing pluralistic systems, each constituting a small unified world and vying for the interest and support of all members of society.

From the viewpoint of the Christian Gospel we must say that our modern world is a *post-Christian world*, generally characterized by such secular presuppositions as: only scientific knowledge or knowledge of facts is true knowledge; all convictions are equally valuable and legitimate; religious convictions are relegated to private life; sin is an antiquated, at the very most a personal point of view; life itself is restricted to life in this world, that is, to the comparatively short period of time between birth and death.

### 3. An evaluation of secularization

In the fifties quite a few theologians were quite optimistic about the process of secularization. In his book *Verhängnis und Hoffnung der Neuzeit: Die Säkularisierung als theologisches Problem* (1953),<sup>7</sup> the German theologian Friedrich Gogarten distinguished between secularization and secularism. The former is appreciated positively as a fruit of the Christian faith, leading to a de-sacralization of the world and the historicization of human existence. The latter is seen as a negative development, in which the meaning of life is sought and found within the confines of life on earth (ideological secularism) or in which people simply cease to look for the meaning of life (nihilistic secularism).<sup>8</sup> A similar line of thought is pursued by A.T. van Leeuwen in his *Christianity in World History* (1964), supplying many historical illustrations. Other optimistic appreciations of the phenomenon of secularization in those days were found in the books of John A.T. Robinson,<sup>9</sup> Harvey Cox<sup>10</sup> and Ronald Gregor Smith.<sup>11</sup>

Many advocates of such an optimistic



interpretation of secularization appealed to Bonhoeffer's *Letters and Papers from Prison*. In one of these letters he introduces his theory of a world come of age and of a free, autonomous man who has learned to cope with all questions of importance without recourse to God as a working hypothesis.<sup>12</sup> At the same time he rejects every Christian apologetic that attacks the adulthood of the world. Such an apologetic is pointless, ignoble and un-Christian. Yet Bonhoeffer by no means abandons the Christian Gospel. On the contrary, fully accepting this world come of age he is vexed by the question how we can reclaim this world for Christ.<sup>13</sup> Two weeks later he writes to his friend Eberhard Bethge: 'The only way to be honest is to recognize that we have to live in the world *etsi deus non daretur*. And this is just what we do see—before God . . . God is teaching us that we must live as men who can get along very well without him . . . . Before God and with him we live without God. God allows himself to be edged out of the world, and on to the cross. God is weak and powerless in the world, and that is exactly the way, the only way, in which he can be with us and help us.' This is optimism indeed, but not of the kind we find in many later authors. Central in this conception is the God who is weak and powerless, as Christ was on the cross, but who as the suffering God is *with us and helps us*. And in the meantime Bonhoeffer, in his prison, read his Bible and said his prayers and sang the Christian hymns of his Lutheran tradition!<sup>14</sup>

Indeed, there is little reason to be optimistic about this all-embracing process of secularization, in the midst of which we spend our own lives. *Hendrikus Berkhof*, who in the fifties and early sixties was still rather optimistic, afterwards changed his mind and began to speak of the 'eclipse of God'.<sup>15</sup> As a matter of fact, even in his more optimistic days he clearly recognized the ambivalence of the concept and reality of secularization. As early as 1958 he wrote: 'Secularization is the child of the gospel, but a child who sooner or later rises against his mother.'<sup>16</sup> Indeed, he goes back further and sees secularization as the child of OT religion. Especially in the creation stories we see that nature is desacralized (sun and moon, for instance,

are just lamps God suspended from the ceiling of the universe) and that nature thus is made the object of man's exploitation (90). Secularization in itself, therefore, is neither good nor bad. All depends on what direction it takes. Berkhof at that time distinguished between secularization as a *Christian* or an *anti-Christian* phenomenon (91ff.). As the former it is 'conversion projected in culture—the Christianization of life' (91).

Since the seventies Berkhof has become more careful, even to some extent *pessimistic* in his use of the term secularization. He now uses a threefold distinction: *secularism* (a world and a life, entirely without God), *secularization* (also a negative term, indicating the gradual disappearance (eclipse) of God from the 'manageable' world of man) and *emancipation* (a positive term, indicating the independence of man over against a desacralized nature and his task of controlling nature).<sup>17</sup> This emancipation, however, is wholesome and beneficial only when man accepts his freedom as a gift of God. As soon as he uses it for his own purposes, detached from the purposes of the Creator with this world, it becomes secularization. Emancipation and secularization are two movements that are often intertwined and at times even look similar, and yet they are essentially different. Emancipation is in line with Genesis 2, where we read of the divine command to till and keep the garden; secularization is in line with Genesis 3, where we hear the voice of the tempter, promising man that he will be like God, knowing good and evil.

#### 4. The church and secularization

Never before has the church had such a difficult time as in our day; not even in the first centuries of its existence, when it was attacked and persecuted on all sides. In those days there was an enemy who was easily recognized. Today the church is facing an enemy who is disguised in numerous ways. I fully agree with Gilbert, when he writes: 'Secularization is a much deadlier foe than any previous counter-religious force in human experience' (153). And the trouble is that this enemy is present everywhere, though not in the same way and to the same



extent. In *American society* we often encounter a strange mixture of secular values and religious terminology. In 1961 the American sociologist Peter Berger formulated it thus: 'The churches operate with secular values while the secular institutions are permeated with religious terminology.'<sup>18</sup> The result is that at times one can hardly distinguish between church members and those who are 'unchurched'. Both seem to cherish the same values and use similar terminology. 'Usually the most that can be said is that the church members hold the same values as everybody else, but with more emphatic solemnity.' In *Britain* secularization has advanced more rapidly and more radically. There is less left of formal Christianity, and religious terminology has disappeared almost completely from public life. In *continental Europe* secularization has progressed even more radically. Throughout the 19th century the impact of the French Revolution (which was never experienced in Britain!) was felt in many ways and gradually public life was completely divorced from religion and religious impulses. In our day the process has advanced to such an extent that all of Western Europe has become one large mission field! On his return to England Lesslie Newbigin took on a ministry in one of the industrial sections of Birmingham and soon discovered that communicating the Gospel in secularized Birmingham is even more difficult than in multi-religious India!<sup>19</sup> The Western culture, more than any other culture, has become resistant to the Gospel.

How did the churches react? In general there are three possibilities and we see how all three of them are being tried out in our own 20th century.

1. The first one is *dominance*. Some churches have tried and still try to uphold the dominance of the church in the midst of a secularizing culture. This attitude applies in particular to the Roman Catholic Church in predominantly Roman Catholic countries. Although the church authorities were and are well aware of the serious inroads secularization is making into every nook and cranny of society, they nevertheless continue their own work, as if all of society is still under the sway and even tutelage of the church. Similar ideas, I am afraid, are

also behind the pope's recent proposal to re-evangelize Europe. Here secularization is not really taken seriously. Ignoring the reality of secularization the church simply aspires to dominate the national or European culture. There is, however, little reason for optimism, as far as the outcome of this programme of re-evangelization is concerned. In order to succeed it would need a reversal of the overpowering processes of secularization and modernization, a prospect that is highly unlikely.

2. The second possibility is *resistance*. In this case churches or small groups within the churches refuse the modern world, distance themselves from its secular culture, fence for the traditional faith and seek to preserve it from the corrosion of the world outside. This attitude is usually found in the smaller conservative churches or in conservative groups within the larger denominations. Gilbert calls it a 'lonely sectarian road' (133) and mentions as an example the British Baptists (138f.), Evangelicalism (139f.) and Pentecostalism (140f.). Here secularization is taken seriously, but the price to be paid is rather high. Not only is such resistance rarely successful, but it also isolates those who opt for it from the rest of society, the result often being that they find themselves in a cultural backwater.

3. The third possibility is *accommodation*. This was the road usually taken by the larger historical denominations. The spirit of tolerance, characteristic of pluralistic society, also entered the churches and consequently most of the larger churches became pluralistic themselves. The secular way of life became so common and so natural that most church members were not even aware of the fact that their lives were becoming highly secularized. As early as 1900 the President of the Methodist Church in England said in his presidential address: 'You are in the world, brethren, steeped in its affairs, conversant with its ideas and affected by its fashions and maxims to a degree that would have shocked your fathers.'<sup>20</sup> Today there is often little difference between the church member and the non-church member, apart from the fact that the former still attends the worship services, either regularly or once in a while, and the



latter has abandoned this practice. In this situation the term 'worldliness' has become obsolete. 'Churches which once () fulminated against secular novels and frivolous conversation, and pronounced anathema on the card table, dance-hall or theatre, [have] ended up seeing nothing essentially wrong with these things' (Gilbert, 109).

A major role in this process of accommodation was usually played by the *ministry* of the church. Of course, they did not mean to introduce secularization into the church. As a matter of fact, they started from the other end. Their question was: how can we still reach people who are living in this secular world of ours with the Gospel? Thus at the beginning of this century the German theologian Friedrich Niebergall wrote his three volume work: *Wie predigen wir dem modernen Menschen?* (How do we preach the Gospel to modern man?)<sup>21</sup> In England Reginald W. Thompson, chairman of the Congregational Union of England and Wales in 1938, said in an official address: 'We have abandoned doctrines once thought essential: physical hell; total depravity; endless punishment for sins committed in this moment of life; Christ punished by God for others' sins; the predestination of some to eternal woe. . . . All these dogmas were () abandoned () because the working minister found they simply could not be told as Good News to the people. *A true Gospel must be preachable*' (Gilbert, 119). In our own life time we have seen similar adaptations of the Gospel in many theologies, eventually leading even to the death of God theology. But whatever the shape of the theology may be, this so-called 'preachable' Gospel always appears to be a *reduced* Gospel and in the long run it promotes secularization rather than diminishing it. Gilbert points out that 'the appearance of *Honest to God* was a vital event in the making of post-Christian Britain. It precipitated attitudes towards religion which had long remained in suspension—vague, inchoate, undecided . . . . It is impossible () not to conclude that the publication hastened the decline of British Christianity and actually increased the estrangement from the secular culture of that waning religious tradition which the Bishop sought to make more preachable' (121/2). Many

ordinary church people, especially those who had little personal relation to the church, concluded: 'Well, if a bishop of the church says that it is enough to lead decent lives and be kind to others, why in the world should we still go to church?' Thus the secularization of theology passed the point beyond which there is simply no powerful ideological reason for calling people out of the 'world' into a denominational 'Church' (123).

## 5. Is the situation hopeless?

Having come so far, there seems to be only one conclusion left: the situation is hopeless. There appears to be no escape from secularization. It seems to be an irreversible fate that hangs over our heads as an immovable and threatening thunderstorm.

As a matter of fact many sociologists are very *pessimistic* about the future of religion in our secular society. Max Weber, who was one of the first to give serious attention to the process of secularization, was of the opinion that there would no longer be a place for socially operative forms of religion in a fully secularized society. Many others have followed him on this path. With regard to the German National Churches A. Kuphal once used the picture of a tree in autumn. In the years 1933–1945 National Socialism functioned as the strong wind that shook the leaves down. Today we live in a period in which the leaves simply fall down, while there is no air stirring.<sup>22</sup> S. S. Aquaviva closes his book on *The Decline of the Sacred in Industrial Society* with the picture of humanity entering a long night, which will become increasingly darker as the generations move on, a night of which we cannot yet see the end. It is a night in which there seems to be no place for the idea of God or for the concept of the sacred and in which the traditional way of giving meaning to life or of facing life and death are increasingly becoming untenable.<sup>23</sup>

Others are more *optimistic*. In the wake of Durkheim's approach they believe that even in an almost completely secularized world there will be elements of Christian values in secular institutions (Parsons) or forms of civil religion (Bellah). Peter Berger is one of those who reject the theory that 'modernity



is intrinsically and irreversibly antagonistic to religion'.<sup>24</sup> Already in earlier publications he had maintained that religion will survive in the secularized world, because man cannot fail to seek answers to the fundamental questions of the whence, the whither and the why of his life. He calls the 'secular' answers to these questions 'banal'. They will lead only to the all-pervasive tedium of a world without gods.<sup>25</sup> In an article of 1982 he points out that secularity as a world-view, including the myth of progress, has been severely shaken in modern times. 'While modernization brings promises and tangible benefits, it also produces tensions and discontents both institutionally and psychologically' (15). It is therefore no wonder that in recent years several vigorous counter-secular and counterpluralistic 'resistance movements' have come into existence. Besides the upsurge of religious movements in the Third World and the revival of religion in the Soviet Union he mentions the rise of the so-called counterculture and the resurgence of Evangelical Protestantism in the United States (16ff.). Berger even considers the possibility that society (in America!) will become less secular. This may happen when 'the symbolic center of the society would move to the right religiously' (21). He already sees signs pointing in this direction.

In *The Other Side of 1984* Lesslie Newbigin follows a similar line. He agrees with the philosopher Michael Polanyi that the critical movement which started in the Renaissance and which has enriched us mentally and morally to an extent unrivalled by any period of similar duration, is gradually coming to its end. 'Its incandescence has fed on the combustion of the Christian heritage in the oxygen of Greek rationalism.' But now the fuel is exhausted and the critical framework itself has burnt away (21). What we now need is a new 'post-critical philosophy'. Newbigin believes that the Christian Gospel is able to provide a new paradigm. It must be 'based unashamedly on the revelation of God made in Jesus Christ and attested in scripture and the tradition of the Church' and must be offered 'as a fresh starting point for the exploration of the mystery of human existence and for coping

with its practical tasks not only in the private and domestic life of the believers but also in the public life of the citizen' (27).

Naturally Berger and Newbigin cannot offer 'hard' evidence for their thesis that the process of secularization is coming to a dead end. But they do give us indications that something like this is actually happening. To these indications we may add the fact that the prediction of many scholars in the sixties that religion would gradually fade out of society has not come true. In 1965, for instance, Harvey Cox wrote his best-seller *The Secular City*, in which he predicted the demise of religion, at least of transcendent religion, in the secular city of our time. He then quoted with approval Amos Wilder's words: 'If we are to have any transcendence today, even Christian, it must be in and through the secular. . . . If we are to find Grace it is to be found in the world and not overhead. The sublime firmament of overhead reality that provided a spiritual home for the souls of men until the end of the eighteenth century has collapsed' (261). But in 1984, in his new book *Religion in the Secular City*, he had to retract many of his previous notions and predictions. He had to admit that there had been new developments, indicating that religion is by no means dead. In this later book he mentioned among others the revival of fundamentalism, the resurgence of evangelicalism, the rise of liberation theology and the coming into being of the more radical Christian base communities, not only in Latin America but also in the United States and Western Europe. Admitting all this, Cox himself remained an unrepentant modernist. Throughout his book he still presented the primary goal of modern theology as the need to adapt religion to the modern world.

But whatever our evaluation of Cox's own theology may be, one thing is very clear: religion is by no means dead, but it is still very much *alive and kicking*. It may not always be the Christian religion, as we understand it, but it is religion nevertheless. The same is true of the New Age movement which is so popular in our day. We may wholeheartedly disagree with its religious content, for instance, its pantheism, its belief in reincarnation or its deep interest in



matters occult, but it cannot be denied that the movement is religious through and through.

Apparently man is 'incurably religious'. Or as J. Blauw says it: 'A man without "religion" is a contradiction in itself. In his "religion" man gives account of his relation to God. His religion is reaction upon (the real or pretended) revelation of God. Man is 'incurably religious', because his relation to God belongs to the very essence of man himself. Man is only man as man-before-God.'<sup>26</sup> This is also the reason why modernization and secularization are unable to fulfil the deepest human needs. They leave man alone with his most essential personal questions, such as: Whence do I come? Whither am I going? What is the meaning of life? How do I cope with illness, bereavement, loneliness and death?

There is therefore no reason whatever to let the whole process of secularization happen to us, as if it were a fatal disease for which no cure exists. The Gospel as it has been given to us in Jesus Christ most certainly is just as much a liberating message for our modern, secular world and for secular men and women in this modern world as it was for pagan men and women in the declining years of the Roman Empire. But it is a *liberating* message only when we preach the *full* Gospel. An accommodated Gospel is a cul-de-sac. Only a message that contains the full richness of the Christian Gospel will do.

This may mean that as evangelicals we will have to accept a kind of 'sectarian' position or that others will regard us as a kind of antiquated religious subculture, because we refuse to accept certain cultural and moral developments in the modern world. But this sacrifice is small, compared with the result: a community of new people who are bound to Christ as their Saviour and Lord and who are guided by the Holy Spirit.

## 6. How to communicate this liberating Gospel to others?

My first comment is: we should start at the point *where people really are*! As evangelicals we are often inclined to bring the message in the same way as we ourselves have heard it

in our own evangelical tradition. So we start with an attempt to convince people of their sinfulness and their guilt vis-à-vis God and then go on to speak of the cross of Jesus as the means of expiation and reconciliation.

But is this really the correct way to communicate the Gospel in a secular world? It may be the right method of communication within the church itself, because there people to a large extent share a common frame of reference, which includes the conviction that in the face of God we are all sinners. But the problem in our modern world is that secular man does not know this feeling of guilt, because he has no inner, personal relationship with God. In fact, he is generally a well-meaning person, who tries to make the best of his life and is willing to help his fellow-humans in the best way he can. I know many secular men and women who, as far as their morality is concerned, have a higher standard and better record than many church people I know!

But is it really necessary always to begin with our own traditional understanding of the Gospel? In my reading of the *New Testament*, I am struck time and again by the fact that the apostles proclaimed the Gospel in *many different ways*. Peter, for instance, as pictured in Acts, usually preaches the Gospel to a *Jewish audience*. And he does start at the point where these people are. He addresses them as the covenant people who are acquainted with their holy Scriptures. When he speaks of Jesus, he puts Him in the context of these Scriptures and tells them that in Jesus the prophecies of old have been fulfilled. He calls Jesus the Messiah, a term that is familiar to his audience. He further emphasizes again and again that they have crucified and killed this God-given Messiah (Acts 2:23; 3:15; 4:10), but that God has raised Him from the dead, thereby confirming Him as Lord and Christ (2:36). In Peter's sermons the concept of salvation plays a central role (forgiveness of sins, 2:38; turning everyone from his wickedness, 3:26; salvation, 4:12) and every time he calls his hearers to repentance (a well-known concept in Old Testament religion), in order that they may share in the messianic salvation.

When *Paul* proclaims the Gospel to a



*pagan audience*, his approach is quite different. We see this clearly in Acts 17, when he speaks to Epicurean and Stoic philosophers at the Areopagus. Again Paul starts at the point where his listeners are. He speaks of the altar to the unknown God and he quotes from some of their own poets: 'In him we live and move and have our being'; and 'We are indeed his offspring'. Taking his cue from these facts he speaks of the God who created the world and everything in it, who also gave all nations and all individuals their particular place on earth and who hopes that they will feel after Him and find Him. So far it looks as if Paul has no new message for these people. But in actual fact it is brand new, for Paul preaches the one God who is the Creator of the universe and of everything in it and who is so great that he cannot be represented by anything on earth. He does not leave it at this, but goes on to call these people to repentance and to point to Jesus Christ, who will be the judge of all history, as God clearly indicated by raising Him from the dead. In his commentary on Acts F. F. Bruce calls this 'an introductory lesson in Christianity for cultured pagans'. The first lesson starts with their self-confessed ignorance of the divine nature and with a statement of the truth about God, in creation, providence and judgment, ending by introducing the Man of God's appointment. Undoubtedly the second lesson would start with this Man and his resurrection.

So we see how Paul interprets the message in the *language and thought-forms of the culture* of his listeners. Newbigin points out that this is always a 'risky business'.<sup>27</sup> Too often the figure of Jesus has been represented in other cultures as 'merely an image of [their] own ideal'. And yet this approach is unavoidable. We have to start there, where people find themselves, that is, in our case in the *secular culture* of Western Europe. This case, of course, is particularly difficult. Secular men and women of our day and age seem to be completely a-religious. They do not have any altar at all, and most certainly not one dedicated to 'an unknown God'. There does not seem to be any 'point of contact' (Anknüpfungspunkt) between modern secular man and the Christian message of a

transcendent God who has revealed Himself in Jesus Christ. Is this not a hopeless situation? Where then to start?

Again I say: we have to start at the point *where these people are*: in a secular world. It may be a world characterized by the loss of a frame of reference, a loss of relevance and a loss of transcendence, but this does not alter the fact that they are human beings and that as human beings they cannot escape from *existential questions* that touch their own lives: Whence do I come? Whither am I going? What is the meaning of my life? How can I cope with such existential problems as illness, bereavement, loneliness and death? I would not be surprised if Paul, supposing he could address an audience in our present Western European world, would start with these questions. Modern man may have lost all sense of transcendence, yet he cannot fail to ask these questions, which, perhaps in a negative way, point in the direction of transcendence. And I would not be surprised at all if Paul in such a case would again point his secular listeners to the message of the God who created this whole world and who also called his listeners personally into being and who wants to take them along into his future. And if modern man would ask Paul how he knows all this, the apostle would undoubtedly again point to Jesus Christ, who after his suffering and death on the cross was raised by God from the dead, not to return to this life and to this history, but to enter into the new, eternal Kingdom which God has promised.

No doubt in our day, too, many of the people who would hear this message of resurrection would mock, as some of the Athenians did, but others might say: 'That is interesting; we would like to hear you again about this'. I firmly believe that we should not worry too much about the fact that there is hardly any point of contact between secular man and the Gospel, if any at all. Man's religiousness is no more a point of contact for the Gospel than modern man's irreligion. As a matter of fact, man's religiousness may be the greatest obstacle to the Gospel, because he believes that he knows God already in and through his own religion (cf. Karl Barth's statement: 'Religion is unbelief!'). Or he may incorporate Jesus



Christ into his own religion as an image of the ideal of this religion. The Gospel does not really need our religious points of contact. It *creates* its own point of contact or, if you wish, its own landing place. And it does this because it is an instrument in the hands of the *Holy Spirit*. Jesus did not only bequeath to us the Gospel of his cross and resurrection, but He also sent the Holy Spirit to be his witness (John 15:26). 'The Spirit is the one whose witness makes possible the witness of the Church (John 15:18–27). The Spirit is [also] the prosecutor who brings the fundamental axioms of a culture under judgment (John 16:7–11).'<sup>28</sup>

## 7. The broad sweep of the Christian Gospel

The Christian Gospel, however, is not just a personal message for individual human beings living within a certain culture, either a religious or a secular culture. It is a message for the entire culture and it wants to enter into that culture. This it does, not by accommodating itself to that culture, so that the culture itself remains unchanged, but by *incarnating itself* in this culture and changing it from within. This is a very complicated process that can hardly be described. The Gospel enters into our culture, shows the features of this culture and at the same time criticizes this culture. The Christian faith is always to a great extent qualified by the culture in which it is at work, and at the same time is a *critical* factor towards this culture. There is always a strongly *dialectical* relationship between every culture and the Gospel. Without the incarnation of the Gospel in a certain culture, this culture could not be reached, nor could it be criticized in its own terms. The Gospel is a voice that challenges a culture in its own cultural language and style.

Of course, this, too, is a risky business. The Gospel might be 'domesticated' by the culture into which it enters. As a matter of fact, every culture (including our own Western European culture!) tries to do this. Looking at the history of our own Western European culture, we may sometimes become nostalgic and look back longingly on the Christian culture of the Middle Ages and of

the Reformation period. But was this truly a 'Christian' culture, or was it little more than a synthesis of a Christian world-view and remnants of a pagan culture? However this may be, the experiment of the 'incarnation' of the Gospel in every culture, also our own culture, must be risked, for it is the only way to 'redeem' a culture.

In fact, we find some splendid *examples* of this 'experiment' in the *New Testament* itself. Over against but also in relation to incipient Gnosticism, the apostle Paul in his *first letter to the Corinthians* does not hesitate to use the terminology of this Gnostic thinking. Again and again he uses their familiar terms, such as '*sophia*' and '*mysterion*'. But he fills them with a new content, the content of the Gospel of Jesus Christ. 'Since in the wisdom of God, the world did not know God through wisdom, it pleased God through the folly of what we preach to save those who believe. For Jews demand signs and Greeks seek wisdom, but we preach Christ crucified, a stumbling block to Jews and folly to Greeks, but to those who are called, both Jews and Greeks, Christ the power of God and *wisdom of God*' (1:21–24). God Himself made Jesus Christ the *wisdom* of the believers (1:30). For this reason Paul's message to the Corinthians was 'not in plausible words of wisdom, but in demonstration of the Spirit and power, that their faith might not rest in the wisdom of men but in the power of God': (2:4, 5). And yet his message is also a message of wisdom, namely the '*secret and hidden wisdom of God*, which God decreed before the ages for our glorification' (2:6, 7). It is evident that this Gospel is very critical of the culture of wisdom. Paul does not mind saying that 'the wisdom of the world is folly with God' (3:19). And then he opens the panorama of the wisdom of the Gospel: 'All things are yours, whether Paul or Apollos or Cephas or the world or life or death or the present or the future, all are yours; and you are Christ's and Christ is God's' (3:21–23).

The most beautiful and encouraging example of the communication of the Gospel in and to a particular culture is undoubtedly the *Gospel of John*. Lesslie Newbigin has pointed out that here the language and the thought-forms of the Hellenistic world are employed in such a way that Gnostics in all



ages have thought that the book was written especially for them.<sup>29</sup> 'And yet nowhere in Scripture is the absolute contradiction between the word of God and human culture stated with more terrible clarity.' The Gospel starts with a prologue (1:1–18) that resembles the opening theme of a symphony. In this prologue most of the fundamental ideas are unfolded.<sup>30</sup> The Gospel itself consists largely of three parts. (a) 1:19–12:50 describes the public ministry of Jesus, where He shows Himself to his own people as the revelation of God, but his own people reject Him. (b) The second part, running from 13:1 to 16:33 contains the farewell discourses, 'in which Jesus himself is the radiating center of light and love, and all circumstances and future history are illuminated and made meaningful by that light and love' (Newbigin, 53). (3) The last part, 17:1–20:31 (with the later addition of chapter 21) tells the story of Jesus' 'glorification' in his passion and death on the cross, in his resurrection and in his bestowal of the Holy Spirit. The whole purpose of the Gospel is summarized in 20:31—'that you may believe that Jesus is the Son of God, and that believing you may have life in his name.'

In this proclamation human culture, both contemporary Jewish and Greek-Hellenistic culture, is penetrated by the Gospel of Jesus Christ in a sublime and at the same time critical, even devastatingly critical way. Terms which belonged to the common religious and cultural heritage of that time, such as *logos*, *phoos*, *kosmos*, *aletheia*, *zoe*, *ginooskoo*, *marturia*, etc., are freely used, but at the same time they are filled to the brim with the new revelation that has taken place in Jesus of Nazareth. It is a wonderful story, but it is also a tragic story. 'The true light that enlightens every man was coming into the world. He was in the world, and the world was made through him, yet the world knew him not. He came to his own [home], and his own people received him not' (1:9–11). A tragic story indeed! But also a wonderful story, for 'all who received him, who believed in his name, he gave power to become children of God; who were born not of blood nor of the will of the flesh nor of the will of man, but of God' (1:12, 13).

For people in John's own day this Gospel

must have sounded attractive, because it spoke a language with which they, be they Jews or Hellenists, were familiar. And yet it must have been strange too, for it prized all familiar terms open and filled them with a new, unusual and dazzling content. I believe we, Christians of today, have to do the same when we encounter those who are under the spell of New Age thinking or of Eastern mysticism. Why not speak the Gospel to them in their own language and thought-forms, showing that we find the true union with God only in Jesus Christ? I admit that this is a risky method indeed. If we are not very careful, the Gospel may be lost in the process of translating it into this language and these thought-forms. Yet the risk has to be taken. And it can be taken, so long as we hold on to the essential features of the Gospel: that Jesus is both the self-revelation of God and the prototype of the new humanity, God's new creation.

## 8. A Christian world-view

The sweep of the Gospel, however, is still wider. It is the only message that offers a *unified, coherent world-view*, in which every aspect of created reality has its own place. There are at least four passages in the New Testament, belonging to three different authors, that link Jesus Christ with the divine act of *creation*: John 1:2—all things were made through Him (the Logos); 1 Cor. 8:6—Jesus Christ, through whom are all things; Col. 1:15ff.—in Him all things were created and in Him all things hold together; Heb. 1:2—a Son, through whom He also created the world. In all four passages Jesus Christ, who died on the cross and who rose again, is connected with the very act of creation. According to many contemporary theologians we should not read these expressions as indicating the pre-existence of Jesus Christ and therefore his real 'involvement' in creation. These passages speak from the perspective of redemption and use an extrapolating mode of speaking, in which the risen Christ is related to the primeval act of creation. Hendrikus Berkhof, who does not believe in the pre-existence of Christ, explains the statement as saying: 'the world was created *in view of Jesus Christ*; God



would not have created the world if not in connection with his coming and exaltation'.<sup>31</sup>

It is debatable, however, whether this interpretation does justice to the meaning of these passages. Classical and evangelical theology always interpreted them as speaking of the presence and activity of Jesus Christ, as the *Logos incarnandus*, in the act of creation. F. F. Bruce speaks for this tradition, when in his commentary on *The Epistle to the Colossians* (1957) he interprets Col. 1:15–17 as declaring 'our Lord's divine essence, pre-existence, and creative agency' (192). 'Here () Christ is presented as the agent of God in the whole range of His gracious purpose towards men, from the primaeval work of creation through the redemption accomplished as history's midpoint on to the new creation in which God's purpose will be consummated' (193). When Paul calls Christ 'the firstborn of all creation', this expression should not be interpreted in an Arian fashion as indicating that Christ was the first and foremost of God's creatures, as a declaration that He was present when creation began, and that it was *for* Him as well as *through* Him that the whole work was done (194). In Him, as in a 'sphere', the work of creation took place. But He was not only the *mediator* of creation, but also its *goal* ('unto him'). Yes, in Him all things *cohere or hold together*. This Stoic term (*sunesteeken*) is used by Paul to signify that the inner unity of the entire creation is found in Jesus Christ. Apart from Him the various aspects of the creation disintegrate and fall back into chaos. Only in relation to Him do they have a coherent and meaningful relationship with each other.

I believe that here we find one of the most significant messages of the Christian Gospel for our modern world. If one thing is lacking in our modern world it is coherence. The *differentiation* that started after the industrial revolution is still continuing and both society as a whole and the life of the individual seem increasingly to become *fragmented*. Likewise *pluralism* is threatening both the unity of society at large and the life of every individual member of society. Modern society is not only characterized by political, social and religious pluralism, but increasingly also by moral pluralism, which

threatens the very existence of society. For 'it is difficult to see how a society can survive without a basic moral consensus'.<sup>32</sup> The individual member of modern society also suffers from a similar pluralism. Since his life has become more and more compartmentalized (it is subdivided in different spheres—family, work, leisure, church—, each often with their own set of morals), he is also in danger of losing the coherence of his life. Only the Gospel of Jesus Christ offers a framework in which the unity of reality, both in the societal and individual sphere of life, is rediscovered and regained. To me one of the great challenges of the modern world to the church is that it should stimulate the church to bring a Gospel that does not restrict itself to personal salvation only, but that is full-orbed, offering our fragmented world a new perspective of unity and coherence: 'Jesus Christ in whom all things hold together' (Col. 1:17).

## 9. Word and deed

The Christian Gospel, however, does not only offer a message of personal salvation and a unified world-view, but also calls for *action*. Christians are called to perform good works by which they praise their Lord and serve their fellow human beings and creation as a whole. The New Testament is full of promptings on this score.

It is interesting to note that even in our secularized world we constantly encounter people who, though fully secular in their philosophy of life, still retain many of the Christian values that for many centuries have been part and parcel of our Western European culture. In spite of their philosophy of moral autonomy, they still adhere to many of the moral values they inherited from their parents, their schools, the societies of which they are members etc. This explains to a large extent why, in spite of the ongoing process of secularization, there was so much interest in the peace movement in the sixties and seventies and why today so many people join the green movement. Likewise, when an appeal is made for those who die of hunger in Africa, many secularized and religionless people are willing to make generous donations.



Christians, who know the Pauline exhortation: 'As we have opportunity, let us do good to all men, and especially to those who are of the household of faith' (Gal. 6:10), should emulate their secular neighbours in all such activities. And they should join them in the struggle for justice and equality in a world, in which there is still so much injustice, inequality, intolerance, discrimination, racism, etc. They should show in their actions that they are prompted by an *unselfish love*, which has its origin in the self-giving love of Jesus Christ, who told his disciples that He did not come to be served but to serve, and to give his life as a ransom for many (Mark 10:45). Following his example was the inner and outer strength of the early church. Undoubtedly these early Christians formed a kind of subculture in the society of their day. They were a repressed and persecuted majority and lived as 'strangers' in a pagan world. But they excelled in Christian love. The church historian Henry Chadwick writes of this minority church: 'The practical application of charity was probably the most potent single cause of Christian success. The pagan comment: 'See how these Christians love one another' (reported by Tertullian) was not irony. Christian charity expressed itself in care for the poor, for widows and orphans, in visits to brethren in prison or condemned to the living death in the mines, and in social action in time of calamity like famine, earthquake, pestilence or war.'<sup>33</sup>

If all this is true, why should we be pessimistic? Who would have expected that, two thousand years ago, an insignificant, primarily Jewish cult might succeed in turning the great classical world upside down? And yet this happened! To be sure, our situation is different. They lived in a pre-Christian culture; we are living in a post-Christian culture that seems to be inoculated against the Christian faith. But we still have the same wonderful and potent Gospel and our Lord is still the One in whom not only all aspects of creation cohere, but to whom as the exalted One has been given all authority in heaven and on earth!

1 Alan D. Gilbert, *The Making of Post-Christian Britain. A History of the Secularization of Modern Society*, 1980, XII.

- 2 Lesslie Newbigin, *Foolishness to the Greeks. The Gospel and Western Culture*, 1986, 23. Cf. also his *The Other Side of 1984. Questions for the Churches*, 1983, 6ff.
- 3 O. Chadwick, *The Secularisation of the European Mind in the Nineteenth Century* (The Gifford Lectures for 1973/4), 1975, 17.
- 4 G. Heitink, 'Secularisatie en het individuele geloofsleven', in G. Dekker en K.U. Gäbler (eds), *Secularisatie in theologisch perspectief*, n.d., 164ff.
- 5 Cf. Gerard Dekker, *op. cit.*, 48ff.
- 6 Lesslie Newbigin, *The Other Side of 1984*, 22.
- 7 E.T. *Despair and Hope for Our Time*, 1970.
- 8 In subsequent publications (especially in his posthumous *Die Frage nach Gott* (1968) Gogarten strongly emphasized the negative tendency in secularism: without God autonomous man falls back into a new slavery. Cf. Hendrikus Berkhof, *Christian Faith*, 1979, 517.
- 9 John A. T. Robinson, *Honest to God*, 1963.
- 10 Harvey A. Cox, *The Secular City*, 1965.
- 11 Ronald Gregor Smith, *Secular Christianity*, 1965.
- 12 Letter of June 8th 1944.
- 13 Letter June 30th 1944.
- 14 Cf. also his 'Prayers for fellow prisoners', which are added to the letters.
- 15 This is the translation of a term borrowed from Martin Buber: *Gottesfinsternis*.
- 16 Hendrikus Berkhof, *Christ the Meaning of History*, 1966, 92.
- 17 H. Berkhof, 'Emancipatie, secularisatie en de zending van de kerk', in *Ibid.*, *Bruggen en bruggehoofden*, 1981, 176ff.
- 18 Peter Berger, *The Noise of Solemn Assemblies*, 1961, 41.
- 19 Lesslie Newbigin, 'Verder dan 1984' (= Beyond 1984), in Martien E. Brinkman and Herman Noordegraaf (eds), *Het evangelie in het Westen*, 23.
- 20 Gilbert, *op. cit.*, 107.
- 21 The three volumes were published in 1902, 1906 and 1921 respectively.
- 22 A. Kuphal, *Abschied von der Kirche. Traditionsabbruch in der Volkskirche*, 19179, 472.
- 23 *Op. cit.*, 1979, 201/2.
- 24 P. Berger, 'From the Crisis of Religion to the Crisis of Secularity', in Mary Douglas and Steven Tipton (eds.) *Religion in America. Spiritual Life in a Secular Age*, 1972, 14-24.
- 25 P. Berger, *Facing up to Modernity*, 1979, chapter 13. Cf. also P. Berger, *Rumor of Angels. Signals of Transcendence in the Modern World*, 1969 and Andrew M. Greeley, *Unsecular Man*, 1972.
- 26 J. Blauw, 'The Biblical View of Man in



his Religion', in H. G. Anderson (ed.), *The Theology of the Christian Mission*, 1961, 32.

27 Lesslie Newbigin, *The Other Side of 1984*, 53.

28 Newbigin, *loc. cit.*

29 Lesslie Newbigin, *Foolishness to the Greeks*, 53. By quoting this statement of Newbigin we do not mean to say that Gnosticism itself was already a full-grown plant in the first century. But incipient Gnosticism or pre-Gnostic forms of thinking, at least in the shape of docetic thinking, were very likely present. On the other hand, there is considerable agreement today that this Gospel is essentially Semitic and has a primarily Jewish background.

30 Cf. I. H. Marshall, 'Johannine Theology', in *The International Standard Bible Encyclopedia*, Vol. II, 1982, 1082.

31 Berkhof, *Christian Faith*, 167. Berkhof follows here Barth's line of thinking. In his CD III 1 Barth made two interrelated propositions: creation is the external basis of the covenant—the covenant is the internal basis of creation.

32 Peter Berger, *art. cit.*, 23.

33 Henry Chadwick, *The Early Church* (Penguin Church History), 1967, 56.