

# The Idea Of Mission

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## Introduction<sup>i</sup>

Mission is a somewhat tricky subject. Some may interpret it exclusively in terms of physical church growth. Some may find it almost offensive to draw people into the church. I am not in favour of church growth concepts, which, I think, are outdated. But if the church has no missionary presence in society, what relevance would she have? This dilemma was my reason to choose this subject. Perhaps it is not that great a dilemma after all.

The aim of this essay will be to make a journey from Roman times to ours, looking for the way the church has communicated the Gospel to the people. Mission has always been an activity that crossed church boundaries and it is important, I think, to keep a keen eye on the wider perspective of the church's history.

Before starting the actual discours, it might be helpful to illuminate a few concepts. These concepts are: mission and inculturation, history, church history and theology.

*Mission.* A major problem is that in most common church language 'mission' is still perceived in a statical way. This kind of mission is about converting those who have not yet adapted a certain christian message. As a reaction against this there is another approach, which focuses on christian presence in a dialogical way. In both cases there is the implicit assumption of a christian world opposed to a non-christian one. I think such an opposition is no longer helpful. In this essay mission refers to

any faith-based communication between those who do and do not adhere to christian faith, regardless if the focus is on conversion, presence or none of these.

*Inculturation* is, in a (post-)post-modern society, a more useful concept, although it is not always clear what it exactly means. It concerns “the creative and dynamic relationship between the christian message and a culture or cultures”<sup>ii</sup>. Inculturation is a two-way, dynamic process: it urges christian faith to adapt its forms and contents to a living cultural environment, and it makes that culture adopt new, christian, elements. The result of which is the actual expression of christian religion in that particular time and place.

*(Church) history*. In an Anglo-Saxon academic discourses church history is generally seen as a historical discipline. If it does not meet that standard of scholarship, it will usually be regarded as just apologetics. Yet, although we kept at clear distance from apologetics in my Dutch education, we still were supposed to treat church history as a theological discipline. To which some of us gently objected. In this essay I would describe church history as ‘the cultural form by which a church accounts for her past’.<sup>iii</sup> It is the historical story we honestly tell about our religious past.

*Theology*. Once we have told this story, we may go one step further and use it for theological reflection. For me theology is a way of reviewing the praxis of faith, as a second act, and not a formal exercise in systematic theology.

In the next paragraph we will explore the idea of mission throughout the history of the church in Scotland, in relation to the wider church.

In the conclusion we will reflect theologically on the concept of mission in connection to the current situation of the Church of Scotland.

At the end of the essay you will find a bibliography and annotations.

## **Different times, different missions**

### *Roman times*

The church originally emerged as a Jewish variety in the incredibly multicoloured context of the Roman Empire. Within two or three generations it became largely separated from its judaic roots and immersed fully into Hellenistic culture. Just like the Jewish communities from which it originated, from the very beginning the church has been very diverse.

In the early churches mission was not a programme like any Mission Society would run. Whether they were members of a congregation or living in a monastic setting, christians just lived out their faith, in worship, in teaching, in charity, in building community. Especially the way they formed house-based communities and cared for all those who needed help, was a factor that drew others towards the church. Monotheism was another feature that attracted those who had had it with the multitude of ancient gods. Thirdly, the way christians endured persecution granted them respect (although not from emperor Marcus Aurelius, who thought it was just silly to give your life for your religion). Only when people showed interest in joining a church, a more specific programme of teaching, induction and initiation would be offered.

Within the broad context of religion in the Roman Empire, christian faith was just one of many options. It developed itself in reaction to other religions and sects, sometimes by adapting, sometimes by rejecting. Mithraic mystery cults, for example, were particularly popular among soldiers, also in Britain, and the mystery surrounding the celebration of communion can to some extent be understood as a reaction to that. The initiation of new church members during the forty days of Lent, and especially throughout the night of Easter, also showed similarities to Hellenistic mystery religions. Of course the principal denial of anything connected with the gods or sacrifices was a clear statement against polytheism. But 'mission' mainly meant that christians would live their faith, stand for it, and build their communities as good as possible.

Christianity spread across the whole Roman Empire following the crossroads that connected legions and cities as far as the remotest *limes*. It came along with soldiers, merchants and administrators and adapted the organisational form of the Roman *civitas*: hierarchical and city-centered. During the first three centuries the church grew on its own charisma and Roman infrastructure. Although Romans were real empire builders, ancient society was far more dynamic, nomadic and 'interna-

tional' than we often think. The further away from Rome or Byzantium the stronger these effects, and Scotland was at almost maximum distance from Rome. Also outside the Empire there was an extensive and vivid exchange of goods, thoughts and people, all across the seas and rivers of Europe and the Middle East.

Things really changed after emperor Constantine made christianity official and state-related in 314 and after. Church matters and theology became strategic issues for emperors and christian faith was imposed upon all who lived in the Roman Empire. With good reason the Dutch theologian Gerrit Jan Heering has described this change as 'the fall of christianity'.<sup>iv</sup> On a more positive level local churches started to evangelise the rural areas outside the cities, offering pastoral care and charity.

This picture generally applies to Scotland. From 78 CE onward the south of Scotland, and parts of the northeast, were incorporated in the Roman Empire for the span of about a century. Churches have been there, traces of christian religion have been found within and outwith army camps and civil centres, alongside many artefacts of Hellenistic polytheism, indigenous religion or mystery cults. Mission in Scotland will have followed the same pattern as described above, perhaps with a little difference: for the non-Roman population it may have come with the attractive 'extra' of becoming part of Roman culture.

There is one more element of patristic church history that is important to keep in mind: Arianism. This strand of christian faith unfurled in Alexandria, Egypt, halfway the 3<sup>rd</sup> century and, similar to other movements like Gnosticism, Donatism, Montanism or Marcionism, it had a huge impact on the whole of the church. The Arian view on the relations between God, Christ and Spirit - with the Son being created and not 'unbegotten' like the Father, and Christ being of 'similar substance as' but not 'the same in substance with' God - was initially declared heretic by the Council of Nicaea in 325, and finally by the Council of Constantinople in 381. However, between these years the Arian variety of christian faith was adopted by the Gothic people - Celts - living outside the Roman Empire, north of the Danube. As my church history professor, Auke Jelsma, emphasised, it is very likely, particularly in view of the great mobility of the then Celtic and Germanic people, that over the next century or two Arianism has spread all over northwest Europe, and possibly beyond, achieving a kind of coexistence with indigenous religion. This redraws the picture of an enlightened, christian late-Roman Empire over against a darkened heathen world outside its boundaries.<sup>v</sup> This picture could also apply to Scotland.

## *The Celtic church*

The Celtic church established the first successful merge between classical christian faith, as expressed in the language, philosophy and cultural forms of the Roman world, and pagan culture, as alive among the Celtic people of Wales, Ireland, Scotland and England. Christian faith originated from a culture that had died, while the Celtic culture and religion themselves were in a state of substantial change.<sup>vi</sup> The Celtic church was far more than just a blend, but rather a strong malt, well suited to the tasks of time and place, bridging antiquity to middle ages.<sup>vii</sup>

Bede's story about Coifi and king Edwin's chiefs illustrates this in a touching way. 'The old faith does not seem to work anymore,' the priest confesses. 'We know nothing of where we come from and where we go to,' adds one of the chiefs, 'and our lives are like little birds hiding from the storm.' The new faith is welcomed as a convincing 'teaching' that may end 'ignorance' - no revelation, no penance, but a significant move further. Once converted, Coifi performs an almost ritual cleansing of the old places of worship by riding a horse, throwing in the king's spear and burning down the sanctuaries.<sup>viii</sup>

The old gods were renounced and the cultic places destroyed - Boniface was notorious for felling holy oaks and filling up sacred wells - and with these the pagan 'big religion' of myths and rituals disappeared. However, the monasteries that became the centres of Celtic christianity and scholarship happily adopted the pagan tradition of learning, history, laws, poetry and music. What also remained, often disguised, was the 'small religion', including personal devotions, private magic, a sense of holy places and myths, the feasts marking the seasons or local rituals of day and year, which come much closer to the heart of people.

All through the middle ages the church has tried to get rid of these practices. Often that turned out to be impossible and instead they were 'christianised'. The forbidden sacred well re-appeared as 'Willibrord well', the Celtic goddess was merged into one of the christian saints (like Brigid), the calendar of christian feasts adapted somewhat to the seasons, some ancient sacred places became destinations of pilgrims (and many new were added). As late as the 16<sup>th</sup> century people would still go to St. Triduana's Chapel in Restalrig, Edinburgh, 'to mend their e'en'.<sup>ix</sup> When Alexander Carmichael collected his *Carmina Gadelica*, he came across numerous examples of this 'small religion'.<sup>x</sup> Because these were the result of inculturation, and not just a simple redecoration, it has become very difficult to distinguish between 'pagan' and 'christian'.

The Celtic church was very successful in this migration of classic christian faith into a pagan culture. Thus it enabled christian faith to grow strong roots in Celtic and Germanic societies. The Celtic church displayed inculturation in full swing.<sup>xi</sup>

Just as in the first centuries, it was the actual life of christians that made the difference. The rigorous asceticism, the strong emphasis on worship, the adherence to traditions of scholarship and writing, as well as the pastoral care and involvement in society, built the Celtic monasteries into true spiritual centres. Much of this, or maybe even all of it, was tied to that particular social and cultural setting of tribes and clans, but the message remained the same: living the faith was the method of mission - and probably the Celts did not even perceive it as a 'method'.

One of the Celtic church's intriguing features was the *peregrinatio*, or 'lifelong pilgrimage', particularly practiced by the Irish.<sup>xii</sup> But certainly Columba and Aidan walked in the same tradition when they went to Iona and Lindisfarne and travelled all over Scotland. As did all the Scottish saints we barely remember. We should also bear in mind that, as Jacques Le Goff has shown, the whole of European society up till the 11<sup>th</sup> century was very much on the move. Trade contacts extended from Britain to the Mediterranean or the Baltic Sea and many people were still half-nomadic.<sup>xiii</sup> The famous Irish 'Wanderlust' was rather a general feature of European life.

A *perigrinatio* was in the first place a personal exercise in trusting God. Monks left the security of the monastery never to return. In this mode they walked on bare feet all across Britain and Europe, or sailed their boats as far north as Iceland.<sup>xiv</sup> Mission was not their initial aim, but nevertheless they founded series of monasteries and effectively did spread the Gospel.<sup>xv</sup> Not before the late 7<sup>th</sup> century mission became the intentional purpose for which Northumbrian and Scottish monks travelled the continent. The Carolingian Renaissance, and its preceding monastic reforms, depended heavily on this inflow of Iroscottish monks. In fact the christianising of north-west Europe was very much a Celtic enterprise.

Inculturation in this context also implied strong links between religious and secular authority. As the Celtic monasteries were fully embedded in the tribal societies of Ireland and Scotland, forming their own 'tribes' as *familiae* of interlinked sanctuaries, likewise the wandering missionaries preferably connected to the local Frankish, Burgundian or Lombardian kings before they would start their activities. Most of what we now would call 'mission' happened without any big plan to 'conquer the pagan world for Christ'. Often mission was linked to certain royal objectives. Much depended on local circumstances and personal charisma. And, as said before, probably the monks found more christianity on their way than we suppose, be it of the

Arian heresy-type. Patrick's famous remark about the 'apostate Scots and Picts',<sup>xvi</sup> could be explained in this way.

### *The middle ages*

After the Viking raids had ceased and the newcomers settled in on Scotland's western and northern shores and islands, the middle ages were a time of both establishment and substantial change. All over Europe society started to settle down. Scotland evolved towards one, independent kingdom and both monarchy and church embodied, supported and defended this. Gradually cathedrals and new Benedictine, Cistercian and other monasteries began to appear in cities or more remote places. Reginald, son of the Viking warlords who became Lords of the Isles, for example, rebuilt the original Columban foundation on Iona as a Benedictine abbey.

The only mission of the medieval church was to build up and maintain this christian society. This mission was an inwardly directed one, extending the structures of church organisation and church law, and gaining a huge impact on everyday life. The medieval perception of the earthly world as a fallen and highly insecure reality, "a guilt-ridden society",<sup>xvii</sup> made it all the more essential to establish and worship a spiritual world which was to save and secure the souls of christians. The daily worship in abbeys and cathedrals, the private prayers and blessings addressed to the saints, and especially to St. Mary, the preaching by the mendicant orders of Black or Grey Friars in the later middle ages, the many pilgrimages people undertook - all was done to fight this constant threat of evil powers and to make baptised people better christians. Taking part in and revering the rituals of the church was the way to do this in a strongly communal and imaginative society.

The church in Scotland also strongly supported the education of clergy and laity by founding universities and colleges. In a way this was part of the same inward mission to establish a christian society. The score was quite remarkable: at least four universities in a small country as Scotland by the end of the middle ages! To the stranger's eye this seems to be something typically Scottish, this obvious tradition of learning. Could it, as Alistair Moffat seems to suggest, be an echo of Celtic oral culture?<sup>xviii</sup> It is also tempting to see it as a kind of, unintended, pioneering for Reformation and Enlightenment.<sup>xix</sup>

Throughout the middle ages it would be really exceptional to think of converting non-christians.<sup>xx</sup> Of course, the non-christian world stayed at a great distance from most people. Although the crusaders made the connection, still what we would consider to be 'mission' was never a point of action. Francis of Assisi's non-violent jour-

ney to sultan Melek-el-Kamel (1219) was an odd exception, treated as such by the church, the crusaders and the sultan, and it did not have any success or follow up either. The common way of encountering non-christians was to use the cross upside down by drawing a sword. In the Holy Land the aim was not to convert muslims, but to secure holy places by establishing a christian kingdom - or to find personal riches. Hence the medieval walls of Jerusalem and Acre and the crusaders' fortresses sprinkled over Syria and Lebanon. If the word can be applied at all, 'mission' basically meant 'attack and defeat'. The point is even emphasised by the Albigensian crusade (1209), which was exclusively set up to eradicate a heresy and restore the king's and the church's authority in southwest France.

At the level of common trade contacts between Europe and the Levant or Africa, the approach seems to have been pragmatic: always be on your guard, stay friends with the rulers, and just do your trade. Perhaps this behaviour is older than we think: peaceful coexistence could be an ancient wisdom.<sup>xxi</sup>

A Scottish story from these times tells us about earl William of St. Clair and good sir James Douglas who travelled to Spain in 1330, reportedly on their way to bury the heart of Robert the Bruce in Jerusalem. The Moors killed them and the heart was buried at Melrose Abbey.<sup>xxii</sup> Another link with the crusades can be found in the Knights Templar, part of whom found refuge in Scotland after the dissolution of their order in 1307. Yet, their aim was never to baptise muslims (nor to become the subject of Da Vinci Code fiction and other conspiracy fun, although the financial benefits of such enterprises would have suited their taste...).

### *The Reformation*

The Scottish Reformation, like the English, Dutch or German, marked a major shift in society and religion, but at the same time there was far more continuity than much of later history writing shows. In the Highlands the clan based society did not change very much yet, but in the north-eastern, central and southern regions and cities both the guilds and the lairds gained a more influential position. To use a slightly anachronistic picture: society was democratising and individualising. Accompanying this movement were economic changes and recurring dramatic events such as famine, wars and the plague.

From the 17<sup>th</sup> century onward new British colonies in the Caribbean, America and Asia greatly widened horizons and started to change peoples' lives. The Civil War had its impact on Scotland too. Since 1603 having one king unified Scotland, Wales and England and after 1707 the United Kingdom was a fact.

The church's mission changed, regardless if the church chose a protestant or a Roman catholic itinerary. The protestant churches tipped the balance in favour of the w/Word over the rituals. Along with that universities and books became incredibly important. Andrew Melville blew the trail for presbyterianism by reforming the universities in Glasgow and St. Andrews.

It is important to keep in mind that until Jacobitism was finally defeated in 1746 and the clan system successively abolished, the Highlands did not go with the Reformation. And also after that quite some people of the west and the islands chose to remain the catholics they had already become.

The main difference between the protestant church(es) and the medieval church, as opposed to the emerging Roman catholic tradition, was the vision on what 'church' meant. In the protestant view that was all about the congregation of true believers, and for that reason ethics became highly important. The Roman catholic church preserved more continuity with previous centuries by defining 'church' as the institution of God's grace, coming to the people through the sacraments. On the other hand the protestant emphasis on morals and personal conversion created a kind of 'guilt management' that seems to connect more closely to the medieval set of mind, although the calvinistic work ethos was something new.<sup>xxiii</sup>

In any case faith became more a matter of personal life and conviction. The laity emancipated, especially in the protestant churches. The lairds played a prominent role at the start of the Scottish Reformation in 1560 and remained being involved. The figure of the elders, meeting in kirk sessions, presbyteries and general assemblies, was truly a new invention and it embodied the renewed vision on 'church'. But also in Roman catholic circles, where the apostolic succession remained the basis of authority and the clergy held control, there was far more emphasis on personal faith and devotion.

'Mission' was still directed at improving baptised people, meaning to guide them into a social pattern of belief and behaviour. The growing differences between churches also led to fierce debates and great efforts to impose a particular religion upon the whole of the church - with the Covenanters Wars (1639-1650) and the Westminster Confession (1644) as disputably all-time low or high. If there was any intention regarding mission, it became very much tainted by the zeal of proving one's own right. Truth, like God, was absolute and too many knew for sure that they had found this absolute truth. The word 'dialogue' had to be invented yet, but every time somebody tried so, he would get the full flak from all sides. William of Orange,

for example, initially tried to settle things with tolerance, but, like his great-grandfather in The Netherlands, did not quite manage.

A wholly new thing was the encounter with indigenous people in the new colonies. As in the times of the crusades the first reason for such contact was economical: to find gold, to trade spices (and opium), to build plantations. Obviously the encounter was confusing and the colonists called the original inhabitants of their new homelands 'savages'. It took a long time before they found their way with it. In general, baptism meant that someone became part of the European society, and thus changed from 'heathen (object)' into 'christian (brother/sister)'. But, since it was easier to fight, kill, trade or at least keep distance from 'heathens', there was a strong reluctance to baptise indigenous people. Ministers travelled with the fleet and settled in the colonies, but they were always subject to secular authorities, who would let economic and politic arguments prevail over religious or social considerations.

Next to the protestant playground certainly some effort was made to spread christian faith around the world. Jesuits secretly travelled Scotland to support catholics in diaspora and, if possible, work on church growth. Their methods and purposes were not to restore the church as it was in the middle ages, but to renew and reform it in line with the Council of Trent (1545-1563). Supported by the Portuguese colonial authorities they also developed missionary activities among indigenous people in India and China. With very limited succes. In the Spanish colonies in America Jesuits and Dominicans preached the gospel in several vernacular languages, trying to protect baptised Indians from the 'sinful whites'. They were more successful. This shows an early interest in the inculturation of the Gospel in a new situation. But it was all still highly tentative.

### *The Enlightenment*

The Scottish Enlightenment extended and intensified the rational way of dealing with reality as it had emerged since the 16<sup>th</sup> century. Increasingly this also implied secularisation. A positive faith in the power of rationality, scientific research and education was the main characteristic. Thanks to colonialism and capitalism - sorry to say so - wealth increased and included most of the middle class and parts of the lower classes, enabling people to study and read. Scottish cities and estates grew in size and beauty. To summarise curtly: by the combination of rationalism, free will and moral improvement the Enlightenment produced a strong faith in progress as the main scope of culture.

There is an easily overlooked downside. Parallel to, and in reaction against, the predominant rationalism, Romanticism evolved with a strong emphasis on personal emotion and irrational phenomena.<sup>xxiv</sup> The 18<sup>th</sup> century showed a relatively high rate of writing about 'happiness', which even made its way into the American Declaration of Independence.<sup>xxv</sup> For church history this is important to keep in mind. The churches, especially the evangelical parts in and outwith them, put a strong emphasis on personal conversion as a process of the heart and soul, rather than the mind.

Paradoxically the language used in theology and the methods developed by leading evangelicals like Thomas Chalmers had a preference for the rational concepts of philosophy and science. Hence the flow of figures about the numbers of who were 'saved' or 'lost', hence the expansion of systematic theology and historical criticism, hence the never ending stream of tracts and moralistic novels. Faith was perceived as ultimately exempt from rational thinking, but in order to inculturate christian religion into 19<sup>th</sup> and early 20<sup>th</sup> society much was wrapped in (pseudo-)rational language and method. In fact the aggressive evangelical approach of 'the unchurched masses' in the industrialised areas of Scotland, as well as the evangelisation in more remote parts like the Highlands,<sup>xxvi</sup> provide a substantial impulse to the development of social sciences, as Callum Brown explains.

Mission became a major issue. Initially it was organised outside the main churches, but soon the protestant part of them was drawn in by its own evangelical zeal. In mission faith became a strongly personalised concern. The traditional doctrine of original sin was translated into a strictly individual awareness of innate sinfulness. This sin required a constant fight to be redeemed. Women were supposed to be the better party in this struggle, being 'naturally' more pious and angelic. Men, throughout previous centuries seen as the main moral cornerstones of family and society, quite suddenly turned into 'rakes, drunkards, gamblers and abusers',<sup>xxvii</sup> who were in desperate need of good women to convert them and curb their behaviour.<sup>xxviii</sup> Moral improvement - temperance, thrift, sexual 'purity', patriotism - and personal piety - church attendance, conversion, baptism and christian education - became increasingly interwoven. Culture and christianity thoroughly merged and this connection greatly shaped Victorian society. Whatever we feel about it, this actually was the main achievement of an unprecedented evangelical missionary zeal. The 19<sup>th</sup> century Scottish churches managed to inculturate protestant religion into a rationalising and industrialising colonial society.

A new feature was the effort to export this package of western culture and christianity all over the world. At home the 'heathen man' had to be converted, but in all

these new colonies in Africa, Asia and America there were many more people who urgently needed to be converted from their 'pagan fallacies'. David Livingstone, missionary, explorer and linguist, could honestly choose as his motto 'Christianity, Commerce, Civilisation'. But he soon found out how difficult it was to preach a western religion in an African cultural setting.<sup>xxix</sup> Nevertheless, the efforts of Scottish missionaries not only exported western civilisation to Africa<sup>xxx</sup> and Asia, but also laid the foundations for the later decolonisation by educating young people, opposing slave trade and supporting the development of independent indigenous churches. It was a Church of Scotland missionary who decided to have armed escorts on the food convoys in Biafra in 1969 to ensure that the supplies would effectively reach the most needy in the cities.

In summary, the combination of rationalism, evangelical zeal and colonialism succeeded in building a christian society in Britain. It was a deeply dualistic society: spiritual *or* material, natural *or* supernatural, man *or* woman, christian *or* heathen, good *or* evil, truth *or* falsehood, faith *or* reason etc. It was also the time of building impressive churches (about many of which we now sigh), of Sunday schools, of moral imperatives, and of public religion.

However, the popular idea that 'the past' was predominantly a religious time, merely reflects this, historically slightly exceptional, era between 1800 and 1950. The efforts of the Enlightenment completed a lot of what the 16<sup>th</sup> century reformers intended, but could only partially realise. As for the middle ages, we should not forget that religion then was very much the trade of clergy and not as much the business of the majority of lay people, who often had their own personal ways of devotion or magic. In our times, after two World Wars and a Cold War, we seem to be back to normal with a church out of power and a christian faith as just one of many options.

## Conclusion

*Jew, pagan, christian*

Christian faith historically and religiously has three roots: judaic, pagan and christian.<sup>xxx</sup> Neglecting one of these will tip the balance and one knows in advance where that will lead to: nothing good.

Judaic roots connect christians to the God of Israel following the way of rabbi Jesus, and, whether they like it or not, to the actual Jewish people and their faith in this God. The central daily prayer for Jews, the *shema*, expresses the core of faith which christians share with them: 'Hear, Israel, the Lord our God, the Lord is One'.

Pagan roots connect christians to their Germanic and Celtic ancestry and their lost culture. They open up the mystery of places and times, the rituals and myths, but also a tendency towards a warrior-like faith, magic rites and a need for sacrifices. Unlike Jewish faith, paganism has died many centuries ago, but its remains are most persistent. The Dutch theologian Kornelis Heiko Miskotte (1894-1976) emphasised that we first have to *honour* these pagan roots in order to master them. However, that does not imply that we could, or should, revive pagan rites and myths; trying so is merely an echo of 19<sup>th</sup> century Romanticism.<sup>xxxii</sup>

Christian roots are the essential ones, connecting and at the same time criticising paganism and judaism. In fact this leads to a very dynamic balance. Following the way of Jesus, christians choose not to pursue the way of Israel and live the whole of Torah, nor to give in to essentially pagan belief and ritual. Instead, they believe in the God of Israel, as Jesus taught, and resist the temptation of falling back to pagan gods and religion.

Throughout history this has been an ongoing process, a project in development. Often Jews were abused as conductors and scapegoats for this internal christian conflict. With devastating results for the Jewish people - Rhineland, York, Portugal, Auschwitz etc. - but also for the church, because a lack of orientation on God as Jesus worshipped him easily made christians vulnerable to paganism. As it has happened abundantly all through the middle ages. On the other hand, by neglecting its pagan roots christian faith detaches itself from the culture it entered when christianity came to northwest Europe. Then the remains of that culture and its religion will find their own way out - with nazism as the ultimate excess. Thus the church always had, and has, to focus on following Jesus in bringing the God of Israel into the world of Celts, Germans, Franks, Saxons and Vikings from which we descend.

## *Inculturation*

This is the playground for inculturation: to be(come) a christian, acknowledging a pagan and a judaic component at the heart of christian faith. Throughout history the churches, and christians individually, had to reposition themselves again and again. Roman christianity, the Celtic church, the religious orders of the middle ages, the crusades, the Reformation and the 19<sup>th</sup> century evangelicalism and church development equally illustrate this.

So there is no reason at all to bemoan our times as hopelessly non-christian, or even non-religious. It is rather a matter of restoring the balance. Inculturation implies the need to sort out how christian faith and community can fit in with individualism, globalisation and post-modern thinking. The challenge is huge, but no more than it was for the first christians or the Celts. Historically and theologically we are not alone. We might get inspired, encouraged or challenged by those who lived before us, Jesus being one of them. Our culture is not just the enemy of religion, but at least an incredible source of new ways to find, live and express faith. If only christians dared to dive into today's culture without that inherited, anxious habit to either fight or despise 'the world'...

## *Colonies of heaven*

Ian Bradley brought up the idea of 'colonies of heaven', sanctuaries where christian life and faith can develop and flourish to the benefit of all who come.<sup>xxxiii</sup> Such colonies *could* include places for retreat, for example on a remote Scottish island. But that is certainly not the only, or even the first, option. It would be good to create places of pilgrimage as well. And as Celtic saints would look for the centres of power to found their abbeys, christians should not be afraid of being present in contemporary places of decision-making: companies, stock exchanges, banks, parliaments, universities. Depending on the kind of business they should find ways to connect to that from a spiritual point of view. Not to 'convert' the world of enterprise and politics, but simply to create places of light, hope and insight. And of course, the church needs to create colonies of heaven in those places where the light tends to be most dim: priority areas, conflict zones, disaster regions, hospitals and hospices etc.

It is not necessary to simply copy Bradley's suggestions. But to me it seems essential that christians pick up his general idea with all creativity and care they have got. Beyond the established church with its geographical parish system, beyond the evangelical 'salvation economy',<sup>xxxiv</sup> beyond post-modern hangovers and cynicism,

there may wait another, newer road. Following that, Christians of many different backgrounds could share in the long journey through history that the church has already made and take it further into the future.

### *The church's mission*

What would be the church's mission in the 21<sup>st</sup> century? Any answer to that question will be provisional since all is very much in motion. From history we can derive a perspective, but that too represents a partial view of a very complex reality. Having said that, this is what I think the church's mission should be like.

First of all there is a need to forget about all traditional divisions: Protestant or Catholic, evangelical or liberal, spiritual or secular, nature or supernature. To some extent these still exist, but labels are fading rapidly and social structures change constantly. Perhaps a new idea of unity is needed, one more like that of the early church (and the synagogue) with its great diversity of ways to worship, live and believe. At least any suggestion of uniformity, either in form or in content, should be left behind. This means that mission will be very modest in its objectives. No more 'gaining for Christ', no more veneration of numbers, no urge to convert others to your particular conviction.

But the real mission of the church will be to reinvent Christian faith, as Marcus Borg and others have written recently.<sup>xxxv</sup> Again the faith that came to us from a long tradition needs to be embedded in a new cultural setting. Inculturation once again. How to do that? Probably just by trial and error. Ideas about an emerging church, or colonies from heaven, or rediscovering the treasures of tradition, could all be helpful. It is no longer a matter of adapting the forms of communication, the message itself needs to be rebuilt. In any case the faith of the many different people in the church should be personal, authentic and prophetic. Since mission is the pre-eminent situation where culture and faith meet and engage, the church will need to be a missionary community, or cease to be relevant for Western culture. Again the church is back in the beginning. *Bereshit bara...*<sup>xxxvi</sup>

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NOTE: entries marked \* are references to literature I have read in the past; their relevance here is that they have shaped my understanding of medieval history and the origins of christian religion in Western Europe.

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## **Annotations**

*Please turn over for the annotations.*

- i I have done my best to produce a proper English text, but I do apologise for any funny grammar that may have survived the spelling and grammar check, and also for a more continental use of capital letters.
- ii SHORTER, AYLWARD, *Toward A Theology Of Inculturation*; Maryknoll (NY): Orbis, 1989, p11.
- iii This is an adaptation of the Dutch medievalist JOHAN HUIZINGA's (1872-1945) general definition of history: 'history is the cultural form by which a society accounts for its past' (cf. *De wetenschap der geschiedenis*; Haarlem: Tjeenk Willink, 1937). With that he meant the story we tell about our past, based on the facts as we can find and interpret them, but not the neutral and objective analysis as it was claimed for by the 19th century German tradition (cf. LEOPOLD VON RANKE: '...bloß zu zeigen, wie es eigentlich gewesen'). I think Huizinga's definition is still very useful.
- iv HEERING, GERRIT JAN, *De zondeval van het christendom. Een studie over christendom, staat en oorlog*; Arnhem: Van Loghum Slaterus, 1928. [English translation: *The Fall Of Christianity. A Study of Christianity, the State and War*; London: Allen & Unwin, 1930]
- v Prof.dr. AUKE J. JELSMA taught at the Theological University of the Reformed Churches in The Netherlands, in Kampen. He came to this conclusion by re-examining the historical sources concerning Willibrord and Boniface. His point was that both preachers did not as much bring a totally new christian message to ignorant pagans, but rather turned Arian heretics into orthodox christians. This makes the picture of christianisation much more dynamic and multicoloured, as opposed to the traditional 'paganism conquest' topos.
- vi This theme has been elaborated in extenso by LUDWIG BIELER half a century ago, but was recently taken up again by THOMAS CAHILL (convincingly, but without mentioning Bieler, of course). See bibliography.
- vii There are long discussions among historians about the balance or opposition between bishops and abbots in the Celtic church, starting with Patrick himself. I tend to go with DAVID DUMVILLE and KATHLEEN HUGHES, and also IAN BRADLEY (see bibliography), who say that there was no strong competition between the two, but that the Celtic churches were in a dynamic situation in which both bishops and abbots had their roles, depending on the circumstances. Neither was there a clear opposition between 'the Celtic churches' in Scotland and 'the Roman churches' in England.
- viii BEDE, *Historia ecclesiastica gentis anglorum*, II.14. FARMER (1990) p14f.
- ix Quoted in PAGAN (1988) p33.

Until the 1970s farmers in Zuid-Beveland, a region notoriously known as part of the Dutch 'bible belt', would draw water from a St. Mary Well to cure infected wounds! She survived the 16<sup>th</sup> century Reformation, the 17<sup>th</sup> century Further Reformation, the 18<sup>th</sup> century Enlightenment and French Revolution, the 19<sup>th</sup> century disruptions and the Second World War, as well as a number of floods, finally to be erased by an agricultural land consolidation. In the end rationalism won...

- x Cf. CARMICHAEL, ALEXANDER, *Carmina Gadelica*. 5 Vols.; Edinburgh: Oliver & Boyd, 1928ff.
- xi For the Germanic people this was researched by GERRIT NOORT (see bibliography). Although the book is available in the British Library, unfortunately it is still in Dutch.
- In my opinion, the influence of Celtic and Germanic culture went much further than just adding some features to christian faith. The contents of faith itself were strongly (re)shaped during the process of inculturation. Just a few examples. The celebration of communion very much replaced pagan sacrifices, but by that became more sacrificial itself and a cult of the dead - as you can still picture from the remains of the multi-chapeled crypt at St. Augustine's Abbey, Canterbury. Thus it moved away from its original roots in the early church, which persistently opposed anything like sacrifices. The doctrine of atonement, as formulated by Anselm in the 11<sup>th</sup> century, was strongly influenced by the legal thinking of a feudal, Norman society. The pictures of Christ as *victor* and *pantocrator*, in art and theology, seem to reflect quite something of the Saxon prince that Jesus became in a 9<sup>th</sup> century Gospel redaction like the *Heliand*. Cf. MURPHY, G. RONALD (ed.), *The Heliand*. The Saxon Gospel. Translation and Commentary; Oxford: Oxford University Press; 1992. Finally, the way we still look at God, Jesus and the Spirit and their relationships might contain more Arian features than we are aware of. This theme goes beyond the scope of this essay, but it is relevant to a theological reflection on what mission in our time should be about.
- xii The Irish *immrama* ('row arounds'), great stories about heroic sea voyages to mythical places like the Island of the Women - we now know it can be found just between Mull and Iona - show another example of inculturation. The discussions are lengthy, and undecided, whether the christian *perigrinatio* relied on the Celtic *immrama*, or the other way around. Clearly there has been synchronicity between both for some time.
- xiii LE GOFF (1984).
- xiv TIM SEVERIN (*The Brendan Voyage*; London: Hutchinson, 1978) has advanced the hypothesis that Irish monks even reached North America. By reconstructing a medieval curragh on the basis of the description in the *Navigatio Sancti Brendani abbatis* and sailing it all the way across the mighty Atlantic, Severin successfully explored the possibility of Iroscottish navigation that far. His hypothesis may be correct, but no archeological proof has been found yet reaching any further west than Iceland. Regarding Greenland some arguments may be found in Viking sagas.
- xv The reasons given in *vitae* for leaving on a *peregrinatio* were personal: 'for the sake of Christ', 'for the love of God', 'to find the place of my death', 'for the salvation of my soul'. The bible texts most quoted were Genesis 12:1 and Matthew 16:24 or 19:29, which, in accordance with the three classic *abrenuntiationes* as described by JOHN CASSIAN (*Conlationes patrum* III, 6), expressed the wish to leave behind the world, former life and family, to take up the cross of *ascesis* and to follow Christ.
- xvi ...*socii Scottorum atque Pictorum apostatarum*... ('...apostate Scottish and Pictish associates...') in: *Epistola Sancti Patricii ad Christianos Corotici Tyranni subditos* (ed.

- Whitley Stokes, 1887). Text: [www.ucc.ie/celt/published/L201061/index.html](http://www.ucc.ie/celt/published/L201061/index.html).
- xvii YEOMAN (1999) p13; cf. SUMPTION (1975).
- xviii MOFFAT (2002) p9ff.
- xix Cf. BEVERIDGE & TURNBULL (1997).
- xx A funny echo of this can be found - if you want - in the wonderfully anachronistic movie *Robin Hood, Prince Of Thieves* (1991). Robin of Locksley (Kevin Costner) returns from the third crusade with his muslim friend Azeem (Morgan Freeman). Conversion is not an issue throughout the film. Favourite quotes:
- [Azeem:] "The hospitality in this country is as warm as the weather."
- [Azeem:] "Salaam, little one." — [Little Girl:] "Did God paint you?" — [Azeem:] "Did God paint me?" [laughs] — [Azeem:] "For certain." — [Little Girl:] "Why?" — [Azeem:] "Because Allah loves wondrous varieties."
- xxi Perhaps the Robin of Locksley - Azeem link, after all, is not that unhistorical? About trade contacts with the muslim world, cf. SUMPTION (1975).
- xxii EARL OF ROSSLYN (1997).
- xxiii Cf. WEBER, MAX, *Die protestantische Ethik und der Geist des Kapitalismus*. Herausgegeben und eingeleitet von Dirk Käsler; München: Beck, 2006, 2nd ed. [English translation: *The Protestant Ethic And The Spirit Of Capitalism*. New introduction and translation by Stephen Kalberg; Oxford: Blackwell, 2002]
- xxiv For example David Hume, Immanuel Kant, Adam Smith, Isaac Newton and G.W.F. Hegel on the rationalistic side, or F.D.E. Schleiermacher, William Blake, Friedrich Wilhelm Nietzsche and Richard Wagner on the opposite.
- xxv This was, of course, adapted from the French *Déclaration des droits de l'homme et du citoyen*, which is ironic, to say the least, in view of all the violence following the French Revolution and the American War of Independence.
- xxvi For example the work of Norman and John MacLeod in Morvern, father and son, spanning a whole century of church growth and church building. Cf. FERGUSON (2001) p24-29.
- xxvii BROWN (2001) p88.
- xxviii Judging by the current problems Amsterdam police and city council experience with large numbers of young Britons in the red light district, often described as 'male vertical alcohol problems', the project at least partially failed. As it did for large numbers of young Dutchmen prowling around Spanish holiday resorts...
- xxix Livingstone encountered the topic of inculturation as soon as he started to work in Africa. As a linguist he found that the Setswana language had only one word for both 'brotherly love' and 'sexual intercourse', no word for 'soul', and no adequate word for 'sin' (which caused a major problem for Victorian christians). He also realised that polygamy was too much part of the fabric of African society to be simply forbidden. His one and only convert initially - and bravely - sent away all his wives except one,

but took back another some years later. Cf. JEAL, TIM, Livingstone; Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1985, 2nd ed.

- xxx In the 1980s some people in Malawi were so accustomed to hearing Scots English that they had trouble understanding Americans and Dutch speaking their varieties of the same language. Anecdote told by Rev. Graeme K. Bell.
- xxxi This theme was originally introduced by K.H. MISKOTTE (Edda en Thora. Een vergelijking van germaansche en israëlitische religie; Nijkerk: Callenbach, 1939 [3rd ed. 1983]), and was recently taken up again by HENDRIK VREEKAMP (Zwijgen bij volle maan. Veluwse verkenningen van Edda, Evangelie en Tora; Zoetermeer: Boeken-centrum, 2003). Unfortunately it is all in Dutch, however, the first book is available in the British Library.
- xxxii In regard of non-christian people around the world: from a christian perspective they could be called 'pagan' as well, but that would obscure the existence of christian paganism. As a result of that non-christian people could end up the same way as Jews often did: as conductors and scapegoats for a neglected or denied side of christianity. Slavery, colonialism and imperialism were fruits of this misconception. For long the church has defended these abuses, although especially missionaries have pointed in the opposite direction.
- xxxiii BRADLEY (2000).
- xxxiv BROWN (2001) p36f.
- xxxv I forgot where exactly. It may have been in *The Heart Of Christianity* (2003). Similar ideas I have picked up from Dutch theologians as HARRY M. KUITERT (in English: *Jesus: The Legacy Of Christianity*; 1997) and CEES J. DEN HEIJER (in English: *Jesus And The Doctrine Of The Atonement*; 1998), the latter having been my professor in New Testament.
- xxxvi Gen. 1:1.